

CASE 14

The Mandated Curriculum Meeting the Needs of Teachers and Their Favored Practices

Prereading Focus Points: Teachers experience frustration when a curriculum, even a high-quality curriculum, is forced upon them by well-intentioned administrators. Here we examine a teacher's frustration as well as the ideas she develops to work with mandates so they can meet her individual needs and allow her to do what she knows is in the best interests of her students.

Level: Elementary

Content Area: Language arts

Setting: Suburban

Spotlight on . . .

- a) Mandated curriculum;
- b) Teacher autonomy; and
- c) Accountability.

Key Terms: Favored practices; looping; teacher autonomy

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE TEACHER

Brandie has been teaching in some capacity for 8 years. She began as a substitute working in eight districts in the Midwest (grades K–8, all subjects) and eventually became a Title I tutor at a facility that housed children with behavioral disorders. There, she worked for 2 years with neglected and delinquent minors who were unable to attend mainstream, public schooling. From there, Brandie ventured out to a public middle school and spent 2 years teaching

eighth-grade reading. Her adventurous spirit, as she likes to say, took her to a sixth-grade classroom at a public elementary school in the Spanish Harlem section of New York City. She explains that 1 year there was more than enough—Brandie is now at a public middle school back in the Midwest teaching seventh-grade language arts (with one world history class) and, for the most part, is loving it. This is also her first year as the Reading Curriculum Leader at her school.

Brandie's curiosity and need for finances led her to explore Quantum Learning Network's (QLN's) SuperCamp last summer. The training she received at the 10-day academic camp helped shape the teacher that Brandie is today. She has always tried to be creative and have fun with her lessons. QLN, according to Brandie, taught her various memory techniques to use with her students as well as strategies to "captivate their brains" and keep them attentive. Using music in the classroom for "state changes" as well as for increasing the effectiveness of the learning environment is just one example.

We've all heard of "best practice" or what research and experience tell us is effective in our teaching. The title of this case study uses the phrase "favored practice" to refer to what we are most comfortable using even if it does or does not improve learning in our classroom.

Brandie works on a three-person team at a middle school (grades 6–8) of about 1,500 students. Her team is small; therefore, her class size averages 24 students. Brandie's classroom offers a colorful, welcoming environment with a full wall of windows that look out to a courtyard. She also has 10 computers for student use. The desks are set up in what she calls "runway" style so that each student can see the others and Brandie can see them all as well. She varies her instruction within the 55-minute class and throughout the week. The students work individually, in ever-changing small groups, and as a whole class.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

Brandie's school district aims to teach her state's published standards and benchmarks. She and her colleagues are also told to incorporate district goals, such as thinking globally and using technology. The district's curriculum director introduced middle school language arts teachers to a different approach for the teaching of reading and writing toward the end of the last school year: Nancie Atwell's (1998) reading/writing workshop.

Atwell's workshop is not a new concept; she has been teaching in this way, conducting seminars, and writing books on this topic since 1987. The basis of

the idea is to create an environment that, according to Atwell (1998, p. 4), "invites and supports writing and reading so that when my students arrive they'll find what they need to begin to act as writers and readers: time, materials and texts, space, and ways for them, and for me, to monitor our activity, organize our work, and think about what writers and readers in a workshop might do."

The students read self-selected books from a classroom library and answer weekly journal prompts. Students' journal entries are written in the form of a letter to the teacher and are a reflection of their readings. The teacher then responds to each entry and offers feedback, thoughts, answers, and questions. This journal becomes a one-on-one, private conversation between teacher and student.

During the silent reading time, the students may also be working on a type of writing to which they have been previously introduced, such as expository. The students submit copies to the teacher for publication. Spelling words and mechanics are individualized based on student writing level of ability. Poetry plays a huge role in the first few weeks as the children create their "heart map" and discover their "writing territories." They are required to publish a certain number of works per term, and the opportunity for sharing is frequent.

Brandie has just begun to implement only the reading portion in this last quarter of school. Currently, the average day in her classroom starts out with reading workshop for 15–20 minutes depending on the class level. The remaining class time is dedicated to a major writing assignment, a mini lesson, and independent writing and/or conferencing time.

PROBLEM

Brandie considers herself to be open when it comes to trying new things. When she was first introduced to the reading/writing workshop approach, Brandie immediately saw problems with it. There were time issues as well as implementation and content concerns. She also felt the mandate to change to this model ("strong suggestion," as it was worded) interfered with her own ideologies about teaching.

In Brandie's school, teachers and students are on a schedule that allots 55 minutes per class period. The students have four academic courses and two electives, such as band or art. One of the academics is a combined reading and writing course: language arts. In their state, seventh graders are tested in reading, writing, and mathematics. This means that, as a language arts teacher, Brandie has 55 minutes a day to prepare students for two state tests, the same

Following a group of students for 2 or more years is often referred to as "looping" or "continuity of caring."

amount of time teachers in other subject areas have to prepare for one. This creates the time constraint that concerned her about the workshop method. Nancie Atwell's school in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, is on a block schedule format.

This means teachers there have somewhere around an hour and 30 minutes per day to conduct a workshop. And because Brandie has her students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, she also thought the students might get bored with this way of learning after 3 straight years of it!

Brandie was immediately concerned with the workload involved with this type of teaching strategy as it would cause her to completely change the way she has always taught. The district's curriculum director, who had taught this way in his previous position, spoke frequently of the enormous amount of grading and preparation time spent outside of the classroom. Brandie's personal time is something that she tries to protect, trying to get most of her work done at school to allow her evenings to be free for family and friends. This new model would not allow for that. Not only did the classroom need to be completely reworked, but each teacher was given four Atwell books to read. The objective was for the language arts teachers to be able to understand and implement her strategies effectively.

What disturbed Brandie the most about this way of teaching was its ability to prepare her students for the state achievement tests. As previously mentioned, her state tests seventh graders on both reading and writing skills. There are very specific skills that the students need to understand and perform to pass this test. Parts of speech, vocabulary, essay writing, and tracking down information from a reading selection are only a few. Brandie felt that the reading/writing workshop did not address all the content standards. She, like most educators in this era of accountability, constantly worries about her students passing high-stakes tests. Brandie and many of her colleagues feel students need direct instruction and practice with these skills in order to pass these tests.

Brandie's final concern with the reading/writing workshop is that it was pushed on her and her colleagues from above. The curriculum director was enthusiastic and confident that every language arts teacher in the district would

Teacher autonomy is a hot topic in the age of accountability. Do teachers have academic freedom when they are mandated to teach a certain curriculum?

join the reading and writing workshop bandwagon. Brandie likes the way she teaches and doesn't see any major concerns with the way she conducts her classroom and lessons. Her school's seventh graders produced an 85% passage rate on the writing test last year and came close to passing reading. Brandie says, "If it ain't broke, why fix it?"

REFERENCE

Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understanding about writing, reading, and learning (workshop series)*. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Cuban, L. (2001). *How can I fix it? Finding solutions and managing dilemmas: An educator's road map*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Reeves, D. B. (2002). *Making standards work: How to implement standards-based assessments in the classroom, school, and district* (3rd ed., paperback). Denver, CO: Advanced Learning Centers.
- Reeves, D. B. (2004). *Accountability for learning: How teachers and school leaders can take charge*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.