



Investigating the Role of Curriculum Materials and Connected Support in Learning Project-Based Instruction

A collaboration with Susanna Farmer and Deborah Ball from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor

Learning to use project-based approaches to instruction often involves significant shifts in teachers' practice, including changes in how teachers plan and carry out lessons. Curriculum materials, which offer resources for both of these elements of teachers' work, are positioned to play a unique role in equipping teachers to make these changes. Still, there are limits to the role curriculum materials can play. Because curriculum materials cannot be tailored to specific classrooms, the guidance they offer for instruction is inherently incomplete. Furthermore, their influence on instruction always depends upon the ways in which they are interpreted and used (or not) by teachers. With these realities in mind, then, "What is the nature of the role curriculum materials might play in supporting teachers in learning and beginning to use project-based approaches to instruction?"

In this study, Susanna Farmer seeks to gain insight into this question by investigating the ways in which teachers work with the instructional resources offered to them in a particular set of project-based curriculum materials. Specifically, she is examining the instruction of six second-grade teachers who are teaching project-based social studies and content-area literacy units for the first time. Farmer is conducting this study in conjunction with Project PLACE, a study led by Nell Duke and Anne-Lise Halvorsen that investigates the impact of project-based social studies and content-area literacy instruction on second-grade students' learning. Teachers who are participating in the Project PLACE intervention have agreed to implement the set of highly detailed unit plans designed by Duke, Halvorsen, and their team; this provides an interesting site in which to examine the kinds of contributions curriculum materials make to the ways instruction plays out in different classrooms.

To investigate this question, Farmer is collecting observational, interview, and survey data from six teachers who are teaching the Project PLACE units. She is observing each teacher 10 to 12 times throughout the school year to collect video records from a variety of Project PLACE lessons. She uses the following set of questions to analyze individual lessons:

1. What from the curriculum materials seems to "show up" in instruction?
2. How are Project PLACE lesson recommendations enacted in instruction? How do teachers carry out the recommendations (that they follow)?
3. What do teachers say and do during the lesson that does not seem connected to (or guided by) any of the recommendations from the curriculum materials?

4. How do students (their behaviors, comments, etc.) seem to influence the way the lesson plays out?
5. How does the school environment (e.g., school policies, initiatives) seem to influence the way the lesson plays out (if at all)?
6. What from the curriculum materials doesn't show up (and why)?

After analyzing individual lessons, Farmer looks across lessons to identify patterns in the ways curriculum materials do (and do not) contribute to the instructional interactions that play out. She also codes interview and survey data to examine the contributions curriculum materials make to the work of unit and lesson planning.

The goal of this analysis is to better understand which elements of instruction tend to be more (or less) influenced by curriculum materials. These findings will have implications for those who are interested in designing resources to support teachers' use of complex instructional approaches, such as project-based learning, that involve significant shifts in practice.