

Reform and Control: An Analysis of SB 2042

By Christine Sleeter

California, the most culturally diverse state in the United States, leads the nation in developing a comprehensive system of content standards and assessment. In the 1990s, very detailed curriculum standards were developed, and in 2001, legislation created a seamless web of curriculum standards specifying subject matter content in every discipline for K-12 and university subject matter coursework, and standards for teacher credentialing and teacher induction. Teacher preparation programs had been publicly cast as “abysmal,” “so the state decided to do for its [87] teacher programs what it did for K-12 instruction: construct a framework of standards that lay out what teachers must know and do” (Hardy, 2001).

There are indeed crises facing California schools. I will argue, however, that California’s current reform effort has serious deficiencies that exacerbate some problems and simply ignore others. A caveat is in order. I do not believe that standards in and of themselves are necessarily bad. Strongly encouraging schools to set challenging academic standards for historically underserved children is very important; broad standards that serve as benchmarks can help do that. Problems arise, however, when standards become exceedingly prescriptive, and when testing is used as the main tool of school improvement. This article will focus specifically on four problems with California’s reforms as pertaining to teacher education: silencing

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of debates about multicultural curriculum, promoting anti-intellectualism, creating a hierarchy of authority that locates communities at the bottom, and substituting an ideology of individual responsibility for addressing structural inequities.

Silencing Debates about Whose Knowledge Is Most Worth Teaching in a Multicultural Society

The last 35 years have witnessed vibrant debates about whose knowledge should be in the curriculum, beginning with the ethnic studies movement of the 1960s, followed by the women's studies movement, the disability studies movement, and exciting work in various other critical cultural studies. These movements challenged the dominant epistemology that assumes that knowledge produced scientifically is universal and has no particular location in lived experience. This assumption has produced the "view from nowhere" that proclaims itself to be true everywhere (Code, 1993). Dominant narratives in curriculum historically distorted, ignored, or undermined oppressed groups; scholars from marginalized communities have critiqued the embedded interests and worldview in those narratives (e.g., Said, 1994), constructed counter-narratives, and proposed various frameworks, models, and materials for reconstructed curricula (Banks & Banks, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 2003).

Now, in an abrupt turn away from these debates and the fruits of this recent scholarship, California's new standards have taken debates over what to teach off the table. During the 1990s, the state adopted content standards and frameworks in the following areas: reading/language arts, history and social science, mathematics, natural science, and visual and performing arts. Under SB 2042, the new standards for teacher preparation and teacher induction make clear repeatedly that the role of teacher education is to prepare teachers to teach the state-adopted content standards using state adopted materials, and that teachers will be evaluated based on their demonstration of competence in delivering this curriculum.

The phrase "State-adopted academic content standards" appears 34 times in California's new Professional Teacher Preparation document, and 26 times in its new Professional Teacher Induction Program document. In the Multiple Subject Subject Matter Standards, the term "state content standards" appears only 11 times, but 29 of the document's 60 pages outline what they are. By contrast, the phrases "culturally relevant", "multicultural," or "justice" appear in neither the Professional Teacher Preparation document nor the Professional Teacher Induction Program document. "Bilingual" appears only once in a footnote, and "culture" appears only nine times total in both combined. This is one indicator of the extent to which debates about whose knowledge should be taught have been silenced.

Since the state-adopted content standards now drive the K-12 curriculum, teachers' undergraduate subject matter preparation, and the focus of credential and induction preparation, it is important to examine them critically. Elsewhere, I have examined the *History-Social Science Framework and Standards for California*

Public Schools in relationship to seven analytic constructs found in ethnic studies, women's studies, and other critical studies (Sleeter, in press). They include: centering narratives, social construction of theory, colonialism, liberation from subjugation, social construction of identities, voice through the arts, and strengths of oppressed communities.

My conclusion was that despite a surface appearance of being multicultural, the *History-Social Science Framework and Standards for California Public Schools* is organized in a way that strongly prioritizes experiences and perspectives of traditional white, mostly male Americans, and that obscures historic and contemporary processes of U.S. and European colonialism and institutionalized racism. Its purpose is to attempt to detach young people from their racial and ethnic cultural moorings and connect them to a national and state identity that is decidedly rooted in European culture, and that champions individuality and the expansion of capitalism. In agreement with Symcox (2002), I found this set of academic content standards to reflect a highly assimilationist ideology, despite a veneer of pluralism. I have not analyzed content standards in the other subject areas for whose knowledge they champion. I am outraged, however, that after 35 years of research, debate, and political agitation to rethink knowledge from multicultural, ethnic, gender, and other critical perspectives, the state has simply announced that there is now consensus around what young people should know. Further, I am outraged that the state, through SB 2042, has configured the role of teachers and teacher educators as deliverers of that knowledge.

Promoting Anti-Intellectualism

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) argue that the best curricula aim toward deep understanding of rich ideas. Such curricula help students to “uncover” ideas rather than cover content; such curricula promote intellectual engagement of both teachers and students. They argue that the curriculum planning process should begin with teachers identifying the most enduring and rich ideas in a given subject area, and complex thinking that students might learn to engage in, in the context of those ideas. Similarly, using the term “generative topic” to refer to enduring ideas, Wiske (1998) argues that the most enduring and rich ideas around which to build curriculum share four characteristics. Generative topics are:

- ◆ “Central to a domain or discipline. Curriculum built around generative topics engages students in developing understandings that provide a foundation for more sophisticated work in the domain or discipline. . . .
- ◆ “Accessible and interesting to students. Generative topics are related to students’ experiences and concerns. . . .
- ◆ “Interesting to the teacher. . . . A teacher’s passion, curiosity, and wonder serve as a model of intellectual engagement for students who are just learning how to explore unfamiliar and complex terrain with open-ended questions.

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- ◆ “Connectable. Generative topics are readily linked to students’ previous experiences (both in and out of school) and to important ideas within and across disciplines. They often have a bottomless quality, in that inquiry into the topic leads to deeper questions.”

Planning curriculum around generative topics or enduring ideas, if taken seriously, treats teachers, teacher educators, and students as thoughtful intellectuals. The teacher is framed as an intellectual guide who is at the same time an active learner, driven by her or his own curiosity and passions. Students are framed as curious and purposeful learners whose inquiries begin with their own interests and questions. The curriculum is a meeting ground for intellectual exploration within and across established disciplines and intellectual work of scholarly forbears.

Now contrast this vision of curriculum as intellectual pursuit with examples from the new SB 2042 Induction Standards. Five of the standards specify the content of a two-year induction program, detailing 38 program elements that describe what a teacher completing induction should be able to demonstrate. Some of the elements are fairly focused practical skills, such as:

- 18(b) Each participating teacher implements accident prevention strategies within the classroom and the school site.

Others are packed with connected and layered complex skills and understandings. Consider these two examples:

- 17(a) Each participating teacher develops knowledge and understanding of the background experiences, languages, skills, and abilities of his/her students and applies appropriate pedagogical practices that provide equitable access to the core curriculum and enable all students to meet the state adopted academic content standards and performance levels for students.

- 20(f) Each participating teacher demonstrates recognition and assessment of the strengths of students with disabilities and of students who are gifted and talented, as well as their social and academic needs, and how to plan instructional and/or social activities to further develop these strengths.

One could design an entire graduate-level course around each of these two elements, with each course “uncovering” several generative topics embedded within each element. But there are 38 elements, leading teacher educators toward a content coverage model rather than “uncoverage,” and toward curriculum planning as juggling elements in the standards rather than as identifying central ideas for intellectual exploration.

At California State University, Monterey Bay, we are in the process of wrestling with dilemmas posed by the Induction Standards in relationship to the Master of Arts in Education program. Do we attempt to interface our existing MA in Education program with the Induction Standards in order to make it an attractive program to teachers? If so, do we incorporate all 38 elements into the program? How

can we do that without having the Induction Standards take over the substance of the program? One preliminary draft attempted to cluster the 38 elements into three new graduate courses: a course focusing on collaboration with professionals and community, a course focusing on assessment, and a course focusing on equity pedagogy in diverse classrooms. The latter course was assigned 18 elements, two of which are 17(a) and 20(f) above. In the same course, which the Induction Standards specify as focusing mainly on strategies for delivering the state-adopted curriculum using adopted-curriculum materials, teachers would also be expected to

17(d) includes appropriately in classroom instruction the history and traditions of the major cultural and ethnic groups in California society.

and

17(e) examines his/her beliefs, attitudes, and expectations related to gender and sexual orientation, and creates gender-fair, bias-free learning environments.

The biggest dilemma is how to help teachers complete certification, and at the same time retain space for intellectual pursuits that are not defined by the state, but rather stem from interests and questions of teachers and ourselves as teacher educators.

In an analysis of teacher credentialing standards in Wisconsin, Popkewitz (1991) showed how the language of regulation extends state control over teaching, through four mechanisms. First, the more regulations proliferate over multiple aspects of a teacher education program, the less autonomy teachers, teacher educators, university faculty, and school administrators have to make decisions for themselves. Second, politically-constructed state standards themselves represent an amalgam of different concerns, beliefs, and ideals. Rhetorically the standards lend themselves to multiple interpretations, reflecting ideals cherished by a variety of constituencies, which leads very diverse constituencies to accept them. But third, real differences in values and visions that are embedded in the standards' language are cast as administrative procedures for everyone to follow rather than as deep differences in values and viewpoints. And fourth, the regulations are so packed with specifics that they crowd out many important debates about diversity, justice, and human learning, while filling teacher education programs with a presumed universal prescription about what it means to teach.

What we are experiencing is intellectual de-skilling. Apple (1993) explains that when complex work is broken into atomistic elements, workers lose control over and sight of the larger complexities and the whole of their work. Educators are de-skilled when the wisdom and judgment that they acquire through experience and study is sidelined, as they are forced into implementing a plethora of specific requirements developed by someone else. In a brilliant analysis of a teacher's experience with a scripted reading program, for example, Meyer (2002) portrays the struggle a highly experienced reading teacher faced when her knowledge and experience was replaced by a district-mandated reading program. As a university

faculty member, over the past twenty years I have experienced thoughtful discussions among teacher education faculty about how to prepare teachers being replaced by procedural discussions about how to meet state regulations. Intellectual deskilling takes the form of curriculum planning based on examining and drawing on one's own professional experience, knowledge, and research, replaced by cutting and pasting detailed standards, which leave fairly little room for rich intellectual engagement.

I now have a vision — or a nightmare — of teachers of the future experiencing their entire education, from kindergarten through graduate school, as having been defined by state standards, and their studies chosen for them, and framed more in terms of content coverage than uncovering rich ideas. And, in the most diverse state in the nation, all teachers will have been dipped into the same narrow and shallow well of knowledge. It is possible that teachers of the future will not even envision curriculum as intellectual engagement, but rather as test preparation.

Hierarchy of Authority, with Communities at the Bottom

Children who historically have tended to be least well served by schools are children of color and children from economically poor communities. Scholars from such communities have developed rich bodies of research examining issues and problems in schooling, and successful teaching in specific historically underserved communities. Ladson-Billings' (1994) study of eight successful teachers of African American children is particularly helpful, since it synthesizes key elements of the teachers' pedagogy that the teachers saw as central to their work. Their relationship with the children's parents and the African American community was central to their pedagogy. Although most of the teachers were African American, all of them were committed to the community's aspirations for its children, were able to make their teaching practice culturally relevant to the children. They also were able to interpret problems parents faced in their own lives through a socio-political lens rather than a cultural deficit lens.

Although educators generally advocate forming partnerships with parents, strong and collaborative partnerships between schools and parents of color or parents who are poor are the exception rather than the rule. Many educators believe that such partnerships are rare because the parents are not capable of making decisions about education and may not value schooling.

However, placing control over education decision-making in the hands of a largely white middle-class body of professionals reproduces exclusion of insights and knowledge of communities of color and poor communities. Consider Delpit's (1995) advice in her discussion of preparing teachers to teach "other people's" children:

I propose that a part of teacher education include bringing parents and community members into the university classroom to tell prospective teachers (and their teacher educators) what their concerns about education are, what they feel schools are doing well or poorly for their children, and how they would like to see schooling changed. I would also like to see teacher initiates and their educators go out to community gatherings to acquire such firsthand knowledge. It is unreasonable to expect that teachers will automatically value the knowledge that parents and community members bring to the education of diverse children if valuing such knowledge has not been modelled for them by those from whom they learn to teach. (p. 179)

Despite the rapidly growing diversity of children in the schools, teachers and those entering the teaching profession continue to be disproportionately white. In California, in academic year 2000-2001, 43 percent of children in the schools were Latino, 36 percent were white, 8 percent were African American, and 8 percent were Asian. At the same time, only 13 percent of teachers were Latino, 74 percent were white, 5 percent were African American, and 4 percent were Asian (Educational Demographics Office, 2001). The teaching profession reflects and is peopled by white communities, very disproportionately.

Surveys of preservice students repeatedly and consistently report that a large proportion of white preservice students bring to their teaching very little cross-cultural background, knowledge and experience, and bring stereotypic beliefs about children and communities of color (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Gilbert, 1995; Larke, 1990; Law & Lane, 1987; McIntyre, 1997; Schultz, Neyhart & Reck, 1996; Smith, Moallem & Sherrill, 1997; Su, 1996, 1997; Valli, 1995). Preservice students of color tend to bring a richer multicultural knowledge base to teacher education than white students, and more commitment to multicultural teaching, social justice, and providing children of color with an academically challenging curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1991; Rios & Montecinos, 1999; Su, 1996, 1997). Thus, if California intends to build a teaching force that places strong relationships with children's parents and communities central to pedagogy, intense work is needed to both recruit a more diverse teaching force, and prepare all teachers to build community relationships cross-culturally.

Research on how best to prepare preservice teachers to do this is fragmented and fairly inconclusive. However, community-based learning appears to make more of a difference than any other kind of intervention (Sleeter, 2001). When white educators have described their own process of learning to teach cross-culturally, they have described community-based learning as crucial, in some cases much more important than their formal teacher education program (Merryfield, 2000; Sleeter, 1996; Smith, 1998; Weiner, 1993; Yeo, 1997). When carefully-structured, intense, community-based immersion experiences have been studied, researchers have reported a powerful impact on participants, both white and of color (Aguilar & Pohan, 1998; Canning, 1995; Cooper, Beare & Thorman, 1990; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990; Mahan & Stachowski, 1993-4; Marxen & Rudney, 1999;

Melnick & Zeichner, 1996; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Stachowski & Mahan, 1998). In a particularly relevant study, Noordhoff and Kleinfeld (1993) documented the impact of Teachers for Alaska on preservice students' teaching practice. They videotaped students teaching short lessons three times during the program, and found students to shift very strongly from teaching as telling, to teaching as engaging students with subject matter, using culturally relevant knowledge.

The new teacher preparation and induction standards recognize students' families and communities, but in only a limited fashion. Teachers are expected to learn to communicate with students' families and communities, particularly about student academic progress. Teachers are also supposed to include cultural traditions and community values in the classroom. At the same time, the preservice program is so short and packed that is very difficult to structure substantive community-based learning into it. Not only is community-based learning not a required part of teacher preparation or induction, it simply does not fit very well in an already crowded curriculum.

Further, the standards documents do not mention the community as a collaborator in planning teacher education at the preservice or induction levels. At the preservice preparation level, the university is expected to collaborate with the local educational authorities (such as county offices of education and school districts) and subject matter specialists. At the induction level, the teacher education team is required to know content standards, expected performance levels for students, and teacher development; the team does not need deep familiarity with the children's communities.

Thus, the role of children's communities as partners in decision-making, and as a context for teacher professional learning, has been circumscribed. Teachers are encouraged to look to the state, to subject matter professionals, and to "scientifically-based research" for guidance on teaching.

Substituting an Ideology of Individual Responsibility for Addressing Structural Inequities

Schools exist in a social context. California, as a state context for education, is highly stratified economically and politically, with gaps between "haves" and "have nots" growing rapidly. Between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, poverty rates in California grew dramatically, in contrast to the rest of the U.S. While the U.S. poverty rate was 12 percent in 1979 and about 13 percent in 1997, in California it was about 10 percent in 1979 and 16 percent in 1997. Most impoverished families were working poor, and an immigrant headed almost half of the impoverished households (Johnson & Tafoya, 2000). In the U.S. at large in 1976, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population owned 19 percent of the wealth of the country; by 1997, they owned 40 percent of the wealth (Collins, Hartman, & Sklar, 1999).

These growing inequalities impact on schools in a variety of ways; an obvious

way is in the inadequate funding California schools have been receiving since passage of Proposition 13. Preparing young people for society must include advocacy for building a fair society for everyone.

Racial and class stratification permeates schooling itself, in general. The *Williams v. California* court case, which was filed in May 2000, is attempting to challenge the worst of these discrepancies. Organizations such as Justice Matters, the Applied Research Center, and California Tomorrow have documented institutional racism in California's schools, and repeatedly call for structural and systemic reforms to address the following: access of students of color to college preparatory courses and the upper track curriculum; ending racially unjust disciplinary and expulsion policies; staffing schools with well-qualified teachers who have high academic expectations for students of color and students from economically poor backgrounds; reducing class size; building school improvement plans around equity audits that disaggregate data by race, sex, and social class; and using authentic assessment that can richly capture students' capabilities.

SB 2042, however, is built on a school reform model that champions individual responsibility over structural reforms that address equality. We can all describe the model. Curriculum is standardized and all children across California are to be taught the same curriculum for their grade level, then tested on their mastery of it. Teachers are to be taught that curriculum, then trained how to deliver it to diverse student populations, and also tested on their mastery. Test scores are to be reported by school, then schools rank-ordered based on how much improvement they show relative to other schools that are similar in socio-economic status. The scores are publicized, and low-performing schools targeted for remediation. In addition, graduation from high school will be connected to exit exam test scores starting in 2003-2004. Funding is channeled into testing programs, and to the extent that it is available, into incentives for raising test scores and assistance for low-scoring schools.

This reform model ignores many significant issues, such as overall funding for schools, racism in expectations for learning, cultural mismatches between teachers and students, the reduction of curriculum to test preparation, and so forth. It also plays into forms of institutional discrimination that are external to schools. For example, I have been told informally more than once by home-seekers that realtors show housing to professional class families based partially on the API of schools. To the extent that neighborhoods are already segregated by class and race, API serves as an indicator of so-called "desirable" and "undesirable" neighborhoods.

The new standards specifically build their definition of institutional discrimination on AB 537. This assembly bill defines discrimination in individual terms, making it a crime for "a person, whether or not acting under color of law, to willfully injure, intimidate, interfere with, oppress, or threaten any other person." As long as discrimination as seen in purely individual terms, institutional discrimination need not be addressed.

Within this context, then, school reform supports an ideology of individual

responsibility that ignores other structural and contextual issues. It is the responsibility of individual teachers and individual schools to raise student achievement *within* funding systems, teacher recruitment and preparation systems, tracking systems, and systems of home-school relations that already exist. The main elements of these systems that have been changed are the content to be taught, and the use of high-stakes testing.

Conclusion

I am challenging California's school and teacher preparation reforms because I care about education, and particularly about quality education for students from historically underserved communities. Many who support the current reforms also care, but I believe that their analysis of what the problems are, and what needs to be done, falls short. It is my hope that this analysis will catalyze dialog and action.

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