

Section Excerpted from *Professional Learning Redefined: An Evidence Based Guide*
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How might we partner with our curriculum?

As showcased above, a component of content based professional learning and a conceptual input could include the curricular materials that teachers teach with every day. As we consider situating experiences in teachers' own contexts, curricular materials are an important consideration. Many of us have been in professional learning sessions where we are learning new teaching techniques or strategies only to know that we would have difficulty enacting them in our classrooms where mandated curricular materials do not support those new practices.

When we consider professional learning at scale, we must consider the role of curricular materials. Inherently, materials are already a part of the routine of school and have a central role in the instructional system (Ball & Cohen, 1996). Yet current practice often separates “what we teach” (curriculum) from “how we teach” (professional learning) which undermine the effectiveness of both (Weiner & Pimentel, 2017). As we consider content-specific professional learning, we must consider the tools that teachers have at their disposal every day.

A key component of professional learning is to support teachers in envisioning new instructional models, strategies and techniques. As we revisit adult learning theory, we know that teachers need to see immediate utility in what they are learning and build from their own experiences. Linking professional learning to the materials that teachers use every day can support them in envisioning a different kind of instruction and scaffolding their attempts with their students (Gallagher, 2016).

Often, curriculum materials are part of a process to improve instruction, but the “adoption of new materials is rarely seen as one component of a systemic approach to professional development” (Ball & Cohen, 1996 p.7). When the materials adopted are of high-quality and seek to serve in an educative role, they can serve as a tool for changed practice when combined with professional learning. High-quality instructional materials serves as that rich thoughtful content that research has proven to be critical to supporting teacher change.

While there is conflicting information about whether or not curriculum is a change agent in itself, we know that when paired with professional learning, curriculum can serve as a powerful tool for teacher change. Several studies have shown that teachers who receive high-quality curricular materials have lower student achievement than those who have both the curricular materials and professional learning that supported their attempts at new ways to facilitate student learning (Doppelt et al., 2009; Kleickmann et al., 2016). Even more significant

is the suggestion that students have a better outcome if their teachers do not attempt a new curriculum without the accompanying professional learning to support them (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

While processes to support the marriage of curricular materials and professional learning will be explored deeply in Chapter Four, we know that the conversation about how to use high-quality curricular materials as conceptual inputs for professional learning is important. Stephanie Hirsch, director of Learning Forward, recently published a column (Hirsch, 2018) that outlines the understanding of curricular materials as partners in professional learning. “The place where that comes together in schools is through grade-level, subject-specific professional learning communities that enable teachers to plan, execute, and assess how a district or school curriculum is working for students over the course of a year.” Using high-quality curricular materials as conceptual inputs supports teacher learning in many ways, the first of which is increasing their content knowledge. High-quality curricula include a level of transparency around the content knowledge teachers need to successfully teach a particular subject. For example, in a unit on making inferences, the curriculum developer added this in the teacher materials:

Not everything communicated by a text is directly stated. Good readers use their prior knowledge and the information in a text to understand implied meanings. Making inference helps readers move beyond the literal to a deeper understanding of texts. In Making Meaning grade 4, the students make inferences to think more deeply about both narrative and expository texts. (Center for the Collaborative Classroom, 2015).

The curriculum developers want to help teachers understand why readers infer and how it deepens comprehension. This support, at the point of need for teachers, helps them increase their content knowledge within the materials they use everyday.

You may have noticed that we use the term “high-quality” when describing the curricular materials used as a conceptual input in professional learning. This is not by accident. While some curricular materials are designed to be “teacher-proof,” others are designed to support teachers’ thinking and learning while implementing an innovation or change. The design of “educative curricula” is in many ways the actualization of professional learning. The example above showcases one part of an educative curriculum. It supports teachers content knowledge of the material they are teaching. Educative curriculum support teacher learning in others ways, too. Consider the following case study:

A medium sized suburban school district had been analyzing teacher observation data and noticed that many teachers needed support in asking open ended questions. Understanding that professional learning must be content focused, the district tasked content-

area specialists to design professional learning that supported this instructional strategy, but situated it specifically in the content arena that teachers would be expected to use it. Jason, an ELA specialist, consider a series of modified lesson study experiences that would focus directly on using open ended questions during interactive read alouds and discussing text. The district had recently purchased an educative reading comprehension curriculum to support teachers in deepening their knowledge of comprehension strategy instruction and Jason knew that open-ended questions were a big part of that instructional design.

He began working with grade level teams at a single school. The modified lesson study he designed used the curricular materials as a basis for learning. As a frame for the experience, he expected to engage teachers in a discussion of how the intended instructional strategy had been going, then move into planning a lesson collaboratively using the instructional materials focusing on the open-ended questions, then he would teach the lesson as planned by the team and finally debrief the experience together. After this initial experience, the team would meet twice more during the school year and teachers would take on the teaching of the modeled lessons themselves. Jason planned this series of experiences so that they could dig deeply into open-ended questioning techniques while recognizing the power of the educative curriculum as a resource for supporting their own learning.

He began by asking the teachers to consider how class discussions had been going for the past few weeks. Teachers remarked that the students were engaged in the discussions, but it felt more like a “back and forth” between the teacher and the students rather than a deep discussion between the students themselves. Jason asked the teachers to reflect on the reasons why that might be the case.

Olga: I think the kids don't have the language necessary to really engage in a real discussion. They just use 1 or 2 word answers to my question.

Sal: I agree with Olga. I think we're expecting too much of 4th graders.

Kizzie: I've actually noticed something a little different. Sometimes, it seems like the discussions go really well and the kids feel like they have a lot to say, but other times I feel like I have to really fill in a lot of gaps in the conversation or do a lot of telling.

Jason: Kizzie, have you noticed what makes it go better sometimes rather than others?

Kizzie: Not exactly, but I think I've realized that sometimes I ask a question that doesn't really lead to the kind of discussion that I want the kids to have. I'm wondering if the way I ask the question is what's determining their level of engagement or access to the discussion?

Jason: Let's build off of what Kizzie just said. When you're asking questions during the

interactive read aloud portion of the lesson, how are the kids responding?

Olga: Those seem to go a bit better than the discussions. I think the kids are really engaged with the read aloud, so they seem to be better able to answer them.

Kizzie: I agree with Olga, but I also think that sometimes the kids think they're just supposed to "answer" the question and not really discuss it.

Sal: Yes, I think the kids wait for me to say that they're right and there's really no exploration. I know the curriculum asks us to probe, but sometime I don't even know what to probe for!

Based on the initial reflections, Jason led the teachers into the materials for the lesson that was to be taught that day. The teachers and Jason together broke each section of the lesson down and discussed what students were expected to know and do in that part of the lesson and how each section led to the next. Jason and the teachers planned for how they would respond to students if misconceptions arose and how they would frame each part of the lesson. The team paid particular attention to the questions that were posed during an interactive reading of the text and the discussion.

Jason: What do you notice about the way the questions are posed in this part of the lesson?

Sal: They're very open ended, so there's no "right" answer.

Olga: I think sometimes the way the questions are written in the manual are too confusing for the kids, so I change it a bit?

Jason: Can you say more about that?

Olga: Sure, look at this one. The question says, "Is the setting an important part of this story? Why do you think so?" I think that's a lot of words, so I would just say, "What is the setting?" and after a few kids answered, I would say "Is the setting important to the story?"

Kizzie: Well, if you change the questions like that, it really changes how kids will answer it.

Olga: How? The most important thing to know is setting and if it's important.

Kizzie: I think that the way the question is worded in the manual allows for kids to explore the "why" behind their thinking. If we just ask them about the setting and then if it's important, we never really get to their thinking. I'm realizing now how the open-ended nature of the questions allows for more than one opinion and really helps kids develop the conversation deeper.

Jason allowed the discussion to evolve for a bit and the teachers began to understand how their

own intentional or unintentional rephrasing of the questions from open to closed was hindering the students discussion. They agreed in their planning that Jason, as the model teacher today, would ask the questions exactly as written. The teachers, as the observers for today's lesson, would collect data on the students' responses.

Jason taught the lesson as collaboratively planned and the teachers collected data on student responses after the open-ended questions were posed. They came back together to analyze their data and debrief the experience.

Kizzie: I had a total aha moment while I was watching the lesson. Remember when I said that sometimes the discussions go better when I pose the questions during the read aloud rather than after the reading? Well, I think that's because I'm more careful with my language during the read aloud and I kind of "wing it" for the discussion after the reading.

Jason: Say more about that, Kizzie.

Kizzie: Well, I often write the questions right out of the manual and put them on a sticky note in my book during an interactive read aloud. I think I'm actually copying the question as written. When I do the discussions after the reading though, I think I just get the gist of the question and then go for it. I'm realizing that I'm not as precise with my words so the kids don't really know what or how to discuss it.

Olga: I was really blown away by the quality of the kids responses. Listening to Kizzie, I'm thinking that because I kind of "dumb down" the language, I'm actually changing the trajectory of the conversations. I was really surprised that they were able to say so much during the discussion. I really thought that if Jason asked the questions as they were written, they were going to be too hard. I think I really need to change some of my expectations.

Sal: Once again, I agree with Olga. I don't think I realized that many times I'm changing the questions from open-ended to closed. I think out of force of habit, I'm actually asking a ton of questions that could really just be answered with a "yes" or "no" and we know that doesn't lead to deep thinking!

Jason wrapped up these reflections with a call to action. He asked the team to consider asking the questions exactly as written for the next full unit. In their next experience, they would debrief the student responses during that unit and consider next steps. Jason was hopeful that this experience was the beginning of shifting the teacher language around questioning.

As we unpack the case study we just read, we can see illustrated the power of the conceptual input, an educative curriculum, in moving professional learning deeper. Because Jason had a resource at the ready that incorporated the teaching technique he wanted to

promote, he was able to not only use that during a professional learning experience, but the materials themselves serve as ongoing professional learning that the teachers are learning from as they engage in the next unit. As Michael Fullen says, “Implementation is professional learning” (2015, p. 3). In addition, Jason was able to situate the teachers’ learning in the content area that they were responsible for using it. Consider an alternative situation where an external person came and delivered a session on the importance of open-ended questions and then had teacher practice writing them in various subject areas. Unfortunately, that is the scenario in many places. Jason knew that if he really wanted teachers’ instruction to change, he needed to provide them with an experience that built off their own existing knowledge, using materials they already had and with their own students.

Consider the following chart as a guide for planning professional learning alongside curricular resources. Notice how salient features present in the curriculum can serve as the basis of experiences for teachers to build from. You also might see how the design of the professional learning experiences are particularly supportive for the element addressed and that a single experience is never the breadth of the work. A tool like this can be helpful in considering whether or not you can use your curricular tool for ongoing support.

Curricular Resource Planning Tool

Instructional Strategy	Does the curriculum address this strategy? If not, how will it be added?	How the Curriculum Addresses the Strategy	Possible Misconceptions/ Areas of Growth	Professional Learning Experiences	Ongoing Learning
Chunking content	Y	Each lesson builds upon the next. Consider the arc of a week of instruction and a unit.	Teachers might pick and choose lessons because they don’t understand how the content develops across time.	Collaborative planning sessions. Support teachers understanding of the unit/week/day design.	Teachers will engage in collaborative planning sessions every 5 weeks over the course of the school year.
Student-Student Interaction	Y	Time for collaborative conversations are built into every lesson every day.	Teachers sometimes feel as though they don’t have time for this. They could skip the collaborative parts.	Lesson Study experiences- Teachers can attempt building in the collaborative time and analyzing the time spent.	3 lesson study cycles per year focused on varying aspects of student-student interactions.
Probing misconceptions	N - Teachers need support in language that will probe misconceptions while allowing the student to retain ownership of the learning.		Teacher language used to probe misconceptions is not allowing students to do the thinking.	Shared video analysis. Teachers consider the language used and how to add that to their discussions.	This aspect of learning will be added to the collaborative planning sessions above.

This planning tool can help guide your thinking around how to use the curricular materials at hand to support teacher learning. It also helps you consider if the materials you have are meeting your goals for teaching and learning. When the gap between the materials given to support teachers and students and the instruction we want them experience is wide, teachers have to invent their own pathways and most of the time, they do that alone (Ball & Cohen, 1996). When quality materials are used to support teacher learning in collaborative contexts, we are ensuring that they find coherence among their tools. Additionally, planning for such learning maximizes resources (both human and material) and allows for a more cohesive learning experience.

Appendix 1

Curricular Resource Planning Tool

Use this tool to support your thinking about how to use curricular resources in planning for professional learning. Consider the coherence between the materials teachers have and the desired instructional strategies.

Instructional Strategy	Does the curriculum address this strategy? If not, how will it be added?	How the Curriculum Addresses the Strategy	Possible Misconceptions/ Areas of Growth	Professional Learning Experiences	Ongoing Learning