

District Policy and Beginning Teachers: Where the Twain Shall Meet

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ABSTRACT

This analysis considers what role district policy environments play in the lives of beginning teachers. As part of a longitudinal study of teacher learning in the language arts, the authors followed 10 teachers from their final year of teacher education into their first three years of teaching. In this paper, they examined the role that policies concerning curriculum, professional development, and mentoring in two reform-active districts played in shaping the experiences and concerns of three first-year language arts teachers. The questions asked in the study locate it at the intersection of two distinct literatures—the literature on beginning teachers and the literature on the relationship of policy and practice. Whereas other studies on beginning teacher concerns have taken a psychological perspective, focusing on the individual teacher as the explanatory factor, this study employs a more sociocultural view, looking at the broader contexts in which individual teachers work. The authors found that the two districts served powerful roles as teacher educators. The tasks the districts assigned the teachers, the resources they provided, the learning environments they created, the assessments they designed and the conversations they provoked proved to be consequential for what the teachers came to learn about language arts teaching and teaching in general.

INTRODUCTION

As new teachers enter the classroom, some research suggests that they suffer from myopia, focusing primarily on concerns about their own competency as teachers and the immediacy of classroom management (Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992). Their vision is fixed, understandably, on contexts closest to hand. From this perspective, the district looms distantly on the horizon, barely in focus once the ink has dried on the new teacher's contract. Yet data from our longitudinal study of beginning teachers suggest that districts can and do play a key role in focusing and shaping the concerns of new teachers and in providing opportunities for professional learning. Directly and indirectly, district policies teach beginning teachers what to worry about and how to get help. In this sense district policy functions as a curriculum for teacher learning, helping to shape what and how beginning teachers learn about teaching.

In this analysis we focus on the experiences of three first-year teachers to see what role the policies of two medium-sized, Washington State suburban districts may have played in shaping the concerns they had as new teachers. Both of the districts we studied could be considered reform-active districts in that they are actively trying to promote changes aimed at the classroom. At the time of our study, both districts also were influenced by state reforms, which include a set of curriculum frameworks, state-wide assessments at grades 4, 7, and 10 designed to determine whether students are meeting standards, and, in 2008, an accountability measure that will tie high school graduation to passing scores on the state assessments. Despite these commonalities, the districts differed in their policies regarding curriculum, professional development, and mentoring, differences that ultimately affected the experiences of the new teachers we followed.

Our study set out to examine the role that policy environments play in the lives of beginning teachers. How do policies at the district level affect first year teachers' instructional and curricular decisions and classroom practice? What role do district policies play in shaping the learning opportunities for beginning teachers? The questions driving this study locate it at the intersection of two distinct literatures—the literature on beginning teachers and the literature on the relationship of policy and practice. These literatures generally have different units of analysis (the classroom teacher vs. the policy environment) and different theoretical lenses. Increasingly, however, studies of policy and practice are looking at the interplay between the policy environment and classrooms (e.g. Cohen, 1990; Spillane & Jennings, 1997).

Literature on beginning teachers documents the challenges they face as they embark upon their professional careers (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Veenman, 1984). New teachers struggle with constructing approaches to classroom management, images of the self as teacher, ideas about students, and ways of teaching specific subject matter (cf. Borko & Putnam, 1996). Beginning teachers also struggle with their knowledge of the subjects they teach and their ability to take that knowledge and represent it in ways that are comprehensible to students (e.g. Borko & Putnam, 1996; McDiarmid, Ball, & Anderson, 1989; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987). In addition to discovering what it means to teach their subject matter, beginning teachers face other difficulties as they enter the classroom. Fuller (1969) concluded that new teachers were initially concerned about issues related to themselves and their own adequacy. In particular, these teachers worried about classroom control, their own competence as teachers, and how they might fit into the overall school structure. In an early review of the literature, Veenman (1984) surveyed the problems experienced by new teachers and found concerns about classroom management to be most prevalent.

Much of this research has focused on individual teachers—their knowledge, beliefs, preparation, and dispositions. Relatively little attention has focused on the contexts in which these beginning teachers work and how these contexts shape their beliefs, concerns, practice, and their opportunities for learning. Teachers work in multiple, embedded contexts—including state, district, school, and departmental contexts—that affect their work (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). Because these contexts interact, some researchers have begun to focus less on individual policies and more on the larger policy environment, which includes an assortment of policies initiated in different contexts (Knapp & McLaughlin, 1999). Teachers may experience the impact of these policies as an array more than as distinct, individual policies. Moreover, as policies converge on teachers' working lives, it is possible they will interact with one another in ways that are consequential for teachers' practice, sometimes mutually reinforcing one another, other times frustrating one another (Knapp, Bamberg, Ferguson, & Hill, 1998). Working within the context of a large number of teaching-related policies introduces enormous challenges, particularly for beginning teachers.

Our study focuses particularly on the district's role in this policy environment. While studies of educational change have largely ignored districts—seen as the problem rather than as a lever for reform—a number of researchers believe that districts can play a pivotal role in facilitating the implementation of state policies (Knapp & McLaughlin, 1999; Spillane, 1994). Districts can interpret state and district policy for teachers and provide opportunities for teachers to learn about and enact such policies. Fullan (1994) illustrates the importance of two-way interactions in which top-down mandates are coordinated with bottom-up initiatives. The district, he argues, can play an important role in this process of coordination. Other researchers have documented the powerful impact district administrators can have on the way policy is both interpreted and implemented at the local level (Knapp, Shields, & Padilla, 1995; Spillane, 1994). If policy itself is a curriculum that must be learned, opportunities for learning new policies must be a part of the process of policy enactment (Cohen & Barnes, 1993). The school district provides one site where opportunities for learning about new policies might exist. In fact, reformers are paying more attention to the importance of educating district leaders about new policies as part of any reform effort (Nelson, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

Our study is also located in the context of a specific subject matter—the language arts. We believe that subject matter represents a critical variable in looking at the relationship of policy and practice, yet few studies directly address subject matter or explore how subject matter may influence policy enactment (McDiarmid, 1999; Valencia & Wixson, in press). While most policies regarding teaching are implicitly generic, all policies aimed at classroom teaching get played out in the crucible of specific subject matters. The field of language arts represents a messy and complex subject area, encompassing a number of distinct disciplines in a marriage of convenience (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994). Because of historical disagreements over the very definition of the subject matter (Applebee, 1974; Elbow, 1990; Scholes, 1998), policies directed at the language arts may unwittingly find themselves in the midst of an internecine warfare; policies that address which literature should be included in the curriculum or how writing should be taught enter a pre-existing battle over the very definition of the subject. In order to understand the intersection of policy and practice, the subject matters (Stodolsky, 1988).

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

As part of a longitudinal study of teacher learning in the language arts, we have been following 10 teachers from their last year of teacher education into their first three years of teaching. The teachers in our study graduated from the same master's level teacher education program and volunteered to participate in this study. Five teach elementary school, two teach middle school, and three teach high school. For four years, we interviewed these teachers about their teaching. During their year of teacher education, we interviewed them, both individually and in groups, on at least five occasions and observed them at least three times during their student teaching experiences. We also interviewed their cooperating teachers, supervisors, and the instructors of their language arts methods classes.

When these teachers entered the workplace, we went with them. We continued to interview them five times a year during their first two years of teaching and observed them teaching in their classrooms at least five times a year. We also interviewed the teachers' principals, mentor teachers, and department chairs. During their first year of teaching, we extended our investigation to include in-depth study of the district policies teachers' encountered in four of the eight districts in which our teachers worked. These districts represented interesting contrasts in terms of their approach to reform, curriculum, and professional development, yet they all were considered "reform-oriented." In these districts, we interviewed language arts coordinators, district administrators who oversaw professional development and mentoring programs, and, ultimately, the assistant superintendents and superintendents as well. In this paper, we focus specifically on three secondary teachers and their first year of teaching in two different districts.

The study employs a theoretical framework informed by sociocultural theory, in general, and by activity theory, in particular (Engestrom, 1999; Lave, 1993; Wertsch, 1981)¹. From this perspective, our unit of analysis is neither the individual teachers nor the individual districts. We focus on individuals acting in particular settings, which themselves have been shaped by historical forces. It is impossible from this perspective to divorce individuals from the contexts in which they work. Activity theory focuses our attention on various tools available in different settings. For our purposes, these tools include both material objects such as curriculum guides or textbooks, as well as language and concepts used to talk about teaching.

Using the perspective of sociocultural theory is powerful, in part, because it allows for a view of both the district as a whole as well as of the experiences of individual teachers. Our analysis looks up from the classroom and down from the district level. Our look at the district policy environment as a whole illuminates the various policies, both explicit and implicit, with which these beginning teachers interact as they learn to teach English. Our simultaneous look at the individual teacher's perspectives allows us to explore how the larger policy environment shapes new teachers' understanding of the teaching of language arts.

The Settings and the Teachers: A Snapshot

Before we describe the experiences of the teachers in their districts, we provide a brief overview of state context, the districts—their main concerns and characteristics—and an introduction of the teachers (see Table 1). Like most other states, Washington has embraced standards-based reform. Broad curriculum frameworks known as Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) indicate what students should know and be able to do in core subject areas, with specific benchmarks having been developed for reading, writing, communication and math,

for grades 4, 7, and 10. At these grade levels, students take the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), a statewide assessment aligned with the EALRs. School scores on the WASL are published in local newspapers, generating a great deal of attention and discussion. Although there are not yet sanctions attached to student performance on these tests, the plan is to tie graduation to 10th grade test performance in 2008. The impending pressure of graduation requirements together with high visibility of test results at the earlier grades has made state standards and assessment a focus of discussion in many school districts. At the time of this study, the 4th grade language arts assessment had been in place for several years, and the 7th grade assessment, although still voluntary, was being administered in most of the districts throughout the state.

Both districts in this study administered the WASL in language arts. Both also had a commitment to site-based management in the past decade, but were in the process of moving toward greater centralization. The districts were increasingly taking back areas that used to be left to the individual schools, such as decisions about mentoring and curriculum. The snapshots of the districts that follow capture a great deal of this flux, both in regard to issues of centralization and in regard to state reforms.²

Table 1: District Contexts

	Prospect Harbor	Waterside
Demographics	10,000 students 11 elementary, 2 middle, 2 high schools 76% Caucasian 25% Students of color	15,000 students 16 elementary, 8 middle, 2 high schools 71% Caucasian 29% Students of color
Policy environment	Curriculum alignment and adoption of new curriculum	Creating district frameworks and addressing state reform
Participants	Nancy: 10 th & 11 th grade language arts Frank: 7 th grade language arts, social studies, and foreign language	Allison: 7 th grade language arts

Prospect Harbor: Frank and Nancy

Prospect Harbor serves 15,000 students in 16 elementary schools, eight middle schools, and six high schools. At the time of our study, Prospect Harbor was most definitely a district in transition. In recent years, the district had become increasingly culturally diverse, and its mission statement explicitly confirmed the district's commitment to meeting the individual learning needs of a diverse student population. A new superintendent had arrived a few years before, and his charismatic personality, combined with the changes he initiated, made him a strongly felt presence in the district. Under the auspices of this new superintendent, and in keeping with the district's move from site-based management to more centralized decision making, Prospect Harbor was in the midst of a major effort to adopt new materials and align curriculum across schools and grades.

Frank was a middle school teacher in Prospect Harbor. He was hired because he was able to teach both foreign language and language arts; his first-year teaching schedule included these two subjects as well as social studies, an elective in creative

writing for the first half of the year, and a newspaper class for the second half. Frank's decision to teach language arts grew out of his own interest in writing. As a student in elementary and high school, he loved writing and wrote long science fiction and fantasy stories. In college, he majored in creative writing and avoided literature classes to the extent he was able. Frank saw language as a powerful tool, and one of his main goals in teaching was to help students learn to understand and appreciate language, its power, and different ways to use it.

With an undergraduate major in English and a minor in psychology, Nancy was hired to teach both of those subjects at a high school in Prospect Harbor. During her first year of teaching, she taught three sections of 10th grade English (a class that focused primarily on writing), an American literature class, and a psychology class. As a high school student, Nancy had several teachers who played an important role in developing her positive attitude about learning and about English in particular. As a result, she believed it was essential to establish personal connections and good relationships with her students in order for learning to really happen. Nancy became involved in several extra-curricular activities at the school and, in general, showed a great deal of commitment to her students.

Prospect Harbor was in the midst of a new curriculum adoption and alignment process when Frank and Nancy were hired. Consequently, while both teachers entered situations in which they were left almost entirely to their own devices in terms of what to teach, there was a great deal of talk about both the lack of curriculum and the impending arrival of mandated curricular resources and guidelines.

Waterside: Allison

Waterside has 10,000 students in 11 elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. The district's stated mission is to engage all students in learning the academic and work-life skills needed to achieve their individual potential. At the time of our study, this district was also in transition, a transition motivated in large part by the state reform. The Waterside district was actively trying to help teachers learn how to connect their own curriculum and instruction to the state standards and assessments. The district was also becoming more centralized. For example, a "district assessment team" was created several years earlier; they received training around assessment issues in general and around the WASL in particular. They were then responsible for training others in the district.

Allison was primarily a seventh-grade language arts teacher, although she also taught a section of foreign language. In college, her main interest was writing, and although she started out majoring in journalism she eventually switched to English. Allison's background and interest in writing fit well with Waterside's focus on writing. She had good rapport with her students and very much wanted language arts to be fun and interesting for them.

The Waterside district invested tremendous resources in creating its own version of the state standards. This involved teachers from the district working together to rewrite and, in the process, make more specific the state standards. All over the district, people worked hard to make sense of what they heard from the state; in particular, they tried to understand what the state-level assessments meant for students, teachers, and classroom practice. Allison's department chair was actively engaged in the process of rewriting the district standards. In spite of the district's shift toward greater centralization, the district continued to leave curricular decisions and implementation in the hands of schools and teachers.

VIEWS FROM THE CLASSROOM: WHAT TEACHERS EXPERIENCED

In this section, we analyze the experiences of these three teachers and the challenges they faced in their first year of teaching. In a later section, we will look at what the district offered, in terms of policies about curriculum, mentoring, and professional development and the types of learning opportunities these policies created.

Finding Curriculum

One of the first dilemmas the beginning teachers faced was deciding what to teach and how to structure their curriculum, hardly a trivial task in the language arts. These teachers encountered different resources and guidelines for curriculum. Frank, in a Prospect Harbor middle school, felt a great deal of anxiety about what he should be teaching in his language arts classes. He commented about his language arts/social studies block:

And the language arts/social studies is very loose. It sort of has some guidelines you need to sort of touch on this kind of stuff, but otherwise it's very nebulous, which is sort of creative freedom from the point of view of a teacher and also very hard from the point of view of a new teacher who doesn't have anything to sort of step into and pick up and use.

Here Frank articulates the dilemma the "looseness" of the curriculum presented; on one hand, he saw the potential for creativity, but as a new teacher he felt unable to take advantage of this freedom. Instead, he commented, "I've been thrashing around trying to find out what I'm doing all the time," and adds, "We're not given a lockstep syllabus or curriculum, we aren't given a textbook which we have to teach, nothing of that sort." In seeking curricular guidance, Frank indicated that there were goals for students' writing, "set by the school, rather than the district." He also knew of three school-wide events in which his students would participate—Readers Theater, the Night of the Notables, and the Fiesta Day. Other than preparing his students for these events, he seemed to have little sense of what he should be teaching.

Because Frank had so little guidance in terms of language arts and because he was also responsible for teaching social studies to his students, he allowed social studies to become the driving force behind his language arts/social studies curriculum. This was due in part to the fact that the social studies department was further along than the language arts department in the process of adopting new curriculum materials, and Frank liked the social studies textbook they were piloting. Furthermore, Frank drew on his own international experiences and other resources he knew of when considering curriculum for his social studies classes. "I like doing the culture stuff, and I feel that I seem to be good at putting together the different components, making it more than a text-based curriculum." He was able to find guest speakers from different countries, bring in items from groceries that specialized in the food of the countries his students were studying, and call on the Ethnic Heritage Council for support. Frank found no such comparable resources for language arts. In comparing teaching social studies and foreign languages to teaching language arts, he commented, "Language arts has got to be one of the most difficult subjects to teach." Because the middle school was organized into teams rather than subject-matter departments, Frank did not have colleagues close by with whom to consult about language arts.

Teaching in the same district but at a high school, Nancy also experienced frustration as she tried to decide what to teach. She believed that the American literature curriculum presented great challenges because it was "an open-ended curriculum." She commented further on the difficulties the lack of specific curriculum presented:

They say teach American lit., these are the novels we usually teach, go for it, and you have no idea where to start. You have no reference to look back on, especially if you didn't do anything like that in your student teaching experience, so you just feel overwhelmed and not quite sure where to start. It's very frustrating.

Nancy added, "It would have been nice if the English department as a whole had a set curriculum so you knew what you were supposed to be teaching." Nancy looked for departmental leadership and the assistance of colleagues for guidance in determining what the curriculum should be. Yet, when describing her own goals for literature instruction, Nancy openly acknowledged that her goals were also "vague."

Nancy's three English 10 sections had a series of mandatory "core assignments." Two teachers in Nancy's department, with the intention of building and assessing 10th grade students' writing abilities, developed these assignments, which included a memory paper, a research paper, and a writer's notebook. While the assignments were built into the English 10 curricular mandates, Nancy found them problematic for several reasons. First, she did not agree with the "formulaic" nature of the assignments and described them as "putting kids in a box." In addition, despite the clarity in assignments, Nancy found the curriculum, with its focus on specific writing projects, quite frustrating. She said: "The curriculum is based around these projects and that's just what you do. The curriculum does not list goals and objectives for a class, a curriculum just lists projects that you do."

Under the leadership of a new superintendent, the Prospect Harbor School District sought to align the curriculum content across all schools. As it pertained to secondary English, such an alignment would mandate the same course content and core texts across the district. Despite her desire for curricular guidance, Nancy had problems with the proposed changes. "They want us to dump Cisneros's House on Mango Street for The Scarlet Letter." She believed a prescribed curriculum of "dead white guys" would least benefit the minority population at her school—that district-wide decisions about texts were not appropriate. Her students, she believed, would not read the prescribed works because "they want to read people they can associate with, they can understand."

Allison's experience with curriculum in Waterside was markedly different from that of Frank and Nancy in Prospect Harbor. Allison taught seventh grade in the Waterside district, and the language arts curriculum at her school was, like Frank and Nancy's, quite open-ended. However, unlike Frank and Nancy, Allison relished the freedom to create her own curriculum. There was a set of textbooks available to her and a range of novels "articulated" for seventh grade by the district, but there was no formal curriculum she needed to teach. Drawing on resources from the school, department members, resource books, and the Internet, Allison developed a number of curriculum units in her first year. She shared these units with other members of her department and also borrowed units from colleagues and elaborated upon them for her own purposes. She remarked:

We have a folder of grammar things, we have a folder for each novel that we teach at seventh and eighth grade, and we're trying to just put all of our stuff together too so that we can have a compilation put together for any new teachers who come in.

There was an atmosphere of collaboration in the department, as well as a desire to provide new teachers with the curricular resources they often so desperately need.

While Allison had a great deal of freedom in terms of curricular choices—a freedom she appreciated—she did recognize that it was incumbent upon her to teach toward the district and state curriculum frameworks. She commented on her experience working in the Waterside district and on her increased awareness of the importance of the state reforms. "The important stuff though didn't really come through as much until I started working here because this building really directs everything around the essential learnings, the curriculum is all built around the essential learnings." In fact, one of Allison's major concerns in developing her own curriculum was meeting the district and state frameworks.

Addressing State Reform Efforts

All of these first-year teachers were aware, to some degree, of the state frameworks for student learning. Their first encounter with these documents was during their teacher education program, where they read and discussed them in their coursework. Yet the degree to which these frameworks figured in their lives varied once they began their first year of teaching.

Allison talked at some length about her role in addressing the Essential Academic Learning Requirements in her classroom. As mentioned above, she was acutely aware not only of the state reform efforts but also of her district's investment in those efforts. And, while she enjoyed her curricular freedom, she also realized that there were larger goals and objectives, primarily the Essential Learnings, that must guide her curriculum. The importance she attached to these goals and objectives came from her district rather than from the state. Her district chose to rewrite the state standards for the district, making them more specific and appropriate for their own needs, weaving in references to specific district curriculum, and filling in specific benchmarks for each grade. Allison remarked that "everyone is always talking about the [district version of the state standards] now, and how they look as compared with the state Essential Learnings."

The district's focus was not just on the necessary link between teachers' curriculum and the state standards for student learning, but also on issues of assessment. Allison had in her possession a variety of documents from the state that addressed the relationship between several different policy pieces including the EALRs (curriculum standards) and samples of the state level assessments (WASL). Allison was as familiar with the state assessment test as she was with the learning standards. Toward the end of her first year of teaching, Allison described the emphasis on the test and teachers' work with it. "It seemed like we were just WASL'ed out, we were constantly talking about the WASL and pulling out our WASL notebooks and doing practice tests in our staff meetings and familiarizing ourselves with the WASL, and it was just WASL WASL WASL for six months."

Based on her student teaching experience in Waterside, Nancy also considered herself, "quite fluent" with the EALRs. Despite this self-described fluency, Nancy believed that the state frameworks did not affect what she did in the classroom during her first year in the Prospect Harbor district. She believed that Prospect Harbor was at least two years behind Waterside in designing a curriculum that addressed the state frameworks. She said, "I don't think half the teachers know what they are." She did, however, believe the EALRs would eventually influence what she does in the classroom simply because of the nature of reform in her district.

Of the three teachers, Frank was the most vague about what the state reform might mean for his classroom. We happened to interview him during the time that the seventh-grade WASL test was being administered. It was clear that preparing students for it had not been a big priority for Frank. He said that "somewhere along the line" someone had handed him some overheads of sample questions, and he had briefly looked at them with his students. But, he willingly acknowledged that the test and the learning standards were some of the furthest things from his mind. When asked about the standards, he replied, "Yeah, I know they're there. I'll look at those in the summer. When we get there. Whatever."

Frank believed that his difficult schedule and the lack of curriculum forced him to make certain sacrifices. Although he knew that it was important for him to become more informed about the WASL, he just was unable to find the time or energy. "It's the sort of thing that if I had the time that I wanted and was a good teacher, I would look it over and professionally assess it as being relevant or accurate and all that, but I haven't even read the questions. I don't know what the kids are answering. And I'm not gonna!" Foremost in Frank's mind were the absence of curriculum and his search for curriculum materials, rather than the presence of state reform and accompanying standards and assessments.

While Frank himself chose to assign low priority to the WASL, he also indicated that he did not feel any pressure from the school or district to emphasize the WASL or the EALRs. He acknowledged that there was a sense that teachers should "try and keep those test scores up" but said that, "they don't lean on us or anything like that." He recollected no workshops, meetings, or structured efforts to familiarize teachers with the state standards and assessment. This lack of explicit focus on the state reform allowed the reform to recede into the background for Frank.

Getting Help

As first-year teachers, there was much that these teachers needed to learn and relatively little time in which to learn it. As a result, they became strategic about getting help, using the resources available to them to get the help they perceived needing the most.

Allison had a supportive department and department chair and a designated mentor teacher within the department. As part of Waterside's mentoring program, Allison and her mentor went to a district-wide meeting at the beginning of the year. At that time, they were introduced to, among other things, the district curriculum frameworks and the predictable ups and downs of the first year of teaching. Although Allison and her mentor did not share a common planning period, making it difficult to meet on a regular basis, Allison did borrow materials and ideas from her mentor. For example, her mentor had tried literature circles with her eighth-grade class, a strategy Allison subsequently adapted for her classroom. Allison's department chair also played an active role in her life. She sent Allison to a number of district workshops, including workshops on the 6-Traits writing assessments,³ which Allison used extensively in her classroom. Throughout her first year, Allison spoke frequently of the exchanging of materials that occurred in her department. When Allison had a question or concern about teaching language arts, help was close at hand.

Frank, in contrast, often felt lost in seeking the curricular help he desperately wanted. The lack of curriculum or any firm guidelines about what he should be teaching was certainly the most prominent problem he faced. Frank, however, had trouble finding other teachers to whom he could turn for advice about curriculum. His school was organized into cross-subject, grade-level teams rather than subject

matter departments, in accordance with middle school philosophy. As a result, he was more likely to come in contact with other seventh-grade teachers than with other language arts teachers. Other circumstances conspired against Frank as well. Most of the language arts teachers in his school were also new, and Frank did not see them as potential resources.

In fact, Frank was eager and willing to have a mentor but because the district was just in the process of starting a new system for mentoring, Frank had no formal mentor until November. Early on, he lamented the lack of a mentor and longed for the mentoring system the school had previously used, which would have allowed him to develop a mentoring relationship with a good language arts teacher in his building. Needless to say, Frank was delighted when the program finally did get up and running, and he developed a good relationship with the mentor assigned to him. He saw her once every few weeks and found her "really easy to talk to, very supportive, laid back. Personality-wise we click great." He looked to her for help in finding curriculum resources and as a supportive person with whom he could voice his frustrations. Unfortunately, his mentor teacher was not a language arts teacher. Under the district's new system, she was responsible for mentoring all of the new middle school teachers in the district, across all subject areas. As a result, she was not able to give him the kind of help on curriculum that he sought.

As was true of Frank, Nancy was also assigned a grade-level mentor several months into the school year. A former math teacher, Henry Tracy occasionally visited and observed Nancy and another first-year teacher in her department. He held meetings with the district-wide cohort of new teachers every three weeks. These meetings were informal in nature and were often held over drinks. Nancy noted how the mentor did not come to visit her school very often because he believed she and her colleague were "doing fine." While Nancy described him as "supportive," she also acknowledged that conversations with Henry centered on classroom management and not subject matter issues. For Nancy, the mentoring relationship constituted a safe-haven to vent and share frustrations regarding the politics of teaching. As in Frank's case, her mentor was not necessarily able to help her with the curriculum dilemmas she faced in language arts.

VIEWS FROM THE DISTRICT: WHAT THE DISTRICT PROVIDED

We now turn to a view from the top and consider what the districts provided in terms of curricular policy and learning opportunities for first-year teachers. These districts varied in terms of formal policies regarding curriculum, their response to state reform, and policies for professional development and mentoring. The districts also differed in terms of how these policies were enacted and how they were communicated to teachers.

Curriculum Policy

The districts varied in the degree to which they had well-specified curriculum materials for language arts. During the past decade, operating under site-based management, both districts left specific curricular decisions largely to the individual schools and departments. However, when Prospect Harbor hired a new superintendent, he was dismayed to discover the lack of coordination of curriculum across the district. He made it one of his first goals to implement a district-wide curriculum for all subjects and grade levels. One of his favorite comments, according to our participants, was, "We will tell you what to teach, but not how to teach it." In the past, Prospect Harbor had had a number of curriculum specialists, but with site-based management, most of those positions were eliminated. As part of his focus on curriculum, the superintendent hired many new curriculum specialists whose job it was to talk with teachers and oversee the process of curriculum adoption. In language arts, the superintendent hired a certificated teacher from outside of the district. Her job was to assist in the development of a district-wide language arts curriculum for grades 6 through 12.

Nancy and Frank began teaching in Prospect Harbor in the midst of this transition. There was a great deal of discussion and debate district wide about the current lack of curriculum and the advent of the new curriculum. During Frank's first year of teaching, teachers were piloting a new social studies textbook with the aim of making a district-wide purchase at the end of the year. At both the middle school and high school level, district language arts committees met with the curriculum developer to decide on common course titles, course sequences, and required and recommended textbooks and novels to be taught at each grade level.

In contrast, Waterside, Allison's district still left specific curricular decisions up to the school. They focused on developing a specific district-version of the state's Essential Learning Requirements and benchmarks at each grade level intended to guide teachers' curriculum decisions. They also had a district policy of articulation of texts for language arts; a district committee recommended certain texts for specific grade levels, to prevent teachers at different grade levels from assigning texts students had already read. Teachers could submit new texts for articulation at any point. The district had also invested in two programs for the elementary and middle school: 6 + 1 Traits and First Steps. The 6 + 1 Traits is an analytic writing system that provides criteria and rubrics for assessing writing and thinking about instruction.⁴ First Steps provides teachers with a developmental continuum to guide their assessment and instructional decisions about what to teach.⁵ The district had provided professional development in both these programs for teachers. Within this set of rather broad frameworks, language arts teachers were able to develop their own classroom curriculum.

Interpreting State Policy: Addressing State Reform Efforts

The districts also varied in their response to state reform efforts. The three different administrators whom we interviewed in Waterside each stated that the district's main priority was the state reform. In describing his job, the K-12 language arts specialist said that for him, a priority was to take the state "gobbledygook" and put it into "kid-talk." He felt strongly about eliminating the mystery from the reform documents and making the content accessible to everyone in the district. He also noted that one of the primary roles of the prior language arts specialist had been to align the local curriculum frameworks with the state essential learnings. Finally, he mentioned the fact that certain district positions were devoted to issues related to state reform. For example, in the building where he taught part time, the principal was assigned a 1.2 FTE position that he divided among six individuals, all of whom were called "Essential Learning Coordinators," with each focusing on one particular area of the state reform (e.g., math or science).

The Waterside district's staff development specialist also saw his job as one of helping teachers make sense of the state reform. He indicated that the state reform changed the focus of staff development and that his job was to create opportunities that would facilitate mastery of the state reform by all teachers. One of his main goals was to bring everything into "better alignment" and to have everything be more focused toward the district's priorities. There was striking unanimity among the people we interviewed both at the district and school levels about Waterside's priorities. People working in this district saw it as their job to come to know, and to help others understand, the state reform.

Waterside was responding to, and in some ways being shaped by, the state reform. Issues of alignment and assessment came to the forefront, and the district made concerted efforts to help teachers make sense of the state reform and to address the state curriculum frameworks in their classrooms.

Unlike the language arts specialist in Waterside, the Prospect Harbor language arts curriculum developer did not see her job as particularly related to the state reform. As her job title implied, she was hired for the purpose of developing a K-12 language arts curriculum.

For the most part, the administrators in Prospect Harbor talked hypothetically about the state reform and what it might mean for them. The language arts curriculum developer, in repeating the superintendent's refrain that "we will tell you what to teach, but not how to teach it," commented that to ensure greater connection between classroom practice and the state assessment the assessments might actually necessitate changing how one teaches. The staff development specialist spoke in similarly tentative terms, saying that for language arts teachers, the state Essential Learnings might be helpful in giving them a sense of what language arts is. However, she quickly pointed out that in her district, the state reform had not been at the center of their efforts.

Providing Help: Policies for Professional Development and Mentoring

Waterside had a long-standing commitment to professional development. A letter at the beginning of the staff development handbook included the following statement: "Staff development is the single most important key to improving the performance of a school district and to increasing job confidence and satisfaction." The district approached staff development from several angles. A program manager

for assessment and staff development, a district-level administrative position, was responsible for creating and coordinating district-wide opportunities. He saw one of his primary goals as helping teachers master the state reform efforts and incorporate the frameworks into their teaching. Historically, the professional development opportunities at the district level had been more of the one-shot inservice variety; but, with the state reform and an influx of new teachers, this was beginning to change.

The other facet of staff development in Waterside was the "teacher development center." Run by a former teacher, the goal of the center was to help teachers in their pursuit of deeper, self-directed professional development goals. Groups of teachers came to the center with requests for support for particular activities, and the director helped them, either by finding appropriate resources or by facilitating opportunities himself. With the help of the teacher development center, a local university, and two other school districts, Waterside was also piloting an intensive mentoring program for new teachers. This program was in addition to the building-based, subject-specific mentoring program in which Allison participated.

The combination of these two opportunities, as well as others, shows Waterside's commitment to providing new teachers with a great deal of support. The K-12 language arts specialist echoed this sentiment. He felt there was a general expectation that new teachers would be treated differently from the way many veterans were treated at the beginning of their careers, when they were wished good luck by colleagues who then disappeared into their own classrooms. In particular, he saw the department head as an important figure, a leader rather than an evaluator, there "not to impose, but to offer assistance where it is needed." In Allison's school, the department chair clearly saw part of her job as mentoring new teachers, and Allison described her as providing numerous resources to new teachers and also arranging for them to attend a number of professional development opportunities offered by the district.

In Prospect Harbor, attention to professional development had been overshadowed by the district's emphasis on curriculum alignment and adoption. The staff development specialist's position was only a half-time position (as opposed to the two full positions devoted to that area in Waterside). Although teachers were expected to buy into and use the new curriculum materials, initially there was little staff development. While the district staff development specialist believed that teacher collaboration was important and that the district needed to commit to collaboration, time for this had not yet appeared on the calendar.⁶ Meanwhile, the staff development specialist was responsible for offering workshops on topics that the teachers indicated they wanted and needed. She made suggestions to both schools and to the district about what should be done and tried to respond to teachers' requests for particular kinds of professional development opportunities.

Prospect Harbor did put a great deal of effort into one aspect of professional development—the mentoring of new teachers. After seven-to-eight years of a building-based program, they moved to a district-wide program. The new program included three full-time mentors (former teachers in the district), known as Consulting Peer Educators (CPEs). There was one CPE for all new elementary teachers, one for all new middle school teachers, and one for all new high school teachers. These mentors worked with anywhere from 15-25 new teachers during the school year across a range of subject areas. They were also responsible for working with teachers who were experiencing difficulties.

WHERE THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: DISTRICT POLICIES AND NEW TEACHERS

Shaping Concerns

Looking up from the classroom, we can see the ways in which these districts shaped the concerns of beginning teachers. Working in a district that directed its attention largely toward state and district standards and assessment, Allison worried about the state assessment. Working in a district and school that were "living the WASL," Allison spent more time than any of the other teachers talking about the impact of the state curriculum frameworks and the WASL, while Frank, who taught the same grade level, had to be prompted to discuss either one. Coming into a district that was abuzz with talk about the lack of curriculum and the impending required curriculum, Frank and Nancy worried about curriculum. Much of their talk focused on the lack of guidance they received regarding what to teach. In contrast, Allison, who had a similarly unspecified curriculum, relished the opportunity to construct her own curriculum.

Much of the literature on the concerns of beginning teachers has taken a psychological perspective looking to the individual as the explanatory factor (Berliner, 1986; Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992). Our cases, however, suggest a more sociocultural perspective. The contexts in which teachers work, including the district context, help focus the attention of beginning teachers on certain issues. Districts provide lenses, focusing teachers' attention through direct policies, such as Prospect Harbor's new curriculum policy or Waterside's policy of developing a district version of state frameworks, and through implicit policies and the kinds of learning opportunities they provide for new teachers. Allison was introduced to issues of state reform at her initial orientation to the district. In fact, she was hired, in part, because she already knew something about the reforms and the role of assessment in informing instruction. Many of her professional development opportunities were linked, directly or indirectly, to preparing students for the WASL and to incorporating the curriculum frameworks into her teaching. In contrast, Frank and Nancy heard their superintendent's almost single-minded focus on curriculum loud and clear. They were both concerned not only about the curriculum they currently did not have, but for Nancy, the curriculum that was to come. Together district policies are a set of lenses through which teachers develop particular views of and concerns about teaching.

While district policies provided a lens to focus teacher concerns, we also need to look at the degree of magnification afforded by the lens to more fully understand the guidance it provided beginning teachers. In most of these instances, the lens provided by the district was relatively weak, focusing primarily on surface issues of language arts instruction. For example, the EALRs did not seem to provide much support for Allison in thinking hard about how best to engage students in authentic reading and writing activities. Rather, she saw the EALRs as more or less commonsensical:

When I read it [EALRs] now, I feel like "duh," you know, it seems so commonsensical, and I wonder if that's just because that's how—these are the things I would think were important to teach anyway or if it's because I've been so inundated with these, that they're so ingrained in my mind, after hearing them so much, I think, of course I would do that. So I don't know which came first.

Yet in using the EALRs as a lens to examine language arts instruction, there is nothing to distinguish among more or less effective ways of, for example, engaging students in the writing process. One of the primary EALRs for language arts states that "students will learn to use the writing process;" the framework goes on to list five stages from prewriting through editing. Allison ended up adopting a formulaic unit plan on writing that did indeed lead students through all of the steps of the writing process in a lockstep fashion; however, the plan allowed for very little student ownership for the writing, nor did it provide a meaningful context for student writing. Using the EALRs as a lens for looking at writing instruction does not necessarily focus teachers' attention on this issue of their classroom practice. Similarly, the EALRs do not provide conceptual definitions of the various stages of writing, such as prewriting or revising, nor how these stages might be recursive rather than linear. The unit plan that Allison adopted provided a worksheet for peer editing, for example, that asked students to count the number of words and sentences in each paragraph; the worksheet barely attended to issues of the audience or the author's purposes for writing. None of the questions directly addressed the content of the papers. Yet nothing in the state curriculum frameworks would focus Allison's attention on *how* the processes of writing were represented to students. The frameworks were so broad ("students will learn to use the writing process") that they could not necessarily help new teachers understand key issues and dilemmas in the teaching of writing. The unit plan Allison adopted embodied a tension between structure and ownership in the teaching of writing (Grossman, Valencia, Evans, Martin, Place, Thompson, 2000) that was all but invisible to her, just as it is invisible in the EALRs.

Similarly, Prospect Harbor's focus on curriculum addressed only what books to teach, not how to teach them. In fact, the superintendent's mantra—"we'll tell you what to teach, but not how to teach it"—seems to suggest that a common set of texts would standardize what students learn, ignoring the enormous range of pedagogical approaches or possible understandings that could be the focus of instruction with the same novel. What does it mean for student learning that all 11th graders would read The Scarlet Letter rather than The House on Mango Street? From the perspective of curriculum enactment, *how* either book is taught makes all the difference in what students learn. This lens on the curriculum does not focus on either tasks for students or classroom discourse, two concepts identified by Spillane and Jennings (1997) as critical to looking at curriculum implementation. The district's decision to focus on core texts, absent a framework for thinking about goals for student understanding in literature and how instruction could support such goals again provided a weak lens on classroom practice. Nancy initially resisted the school and district's equation of literary texts with curriculum, but by the end of her first year, she too talked primarily about the texts the district had mandated.

While district policy can serve as a lens to focus new teachers' concerns, teaching them, in effect, what to worry about, the lenses provided in these two districts focused teachers' attention on more superficial aspects of practice. A higher degree of magnification would have been required to help new teachers learn in more depth about the writing process or the teaching of literature.

For example, in another one of our cases, one of the beginning teachers was assigned to teach the Pacesetter curriculum, a curriculum designed as a capstone course in language arts for high school seniors. The decision to adopt the Pacesetter curriculum in this teacher's high school provided a stronger lens for looking at the teaching of language arts. Described as an "integrated program of standards, instruction, professional development, and assessments," the Pacesetter curriculum addresses a broader array of issues, including what to teach, how to teach it, and why one would even teach such a curriculum in the first place. Unlike the 6 Traits for writing, or First Steps adopted by the two districts we studied, which specify little

about instruction and leave instructional decision making almost entirely up to teachers' discretion, the Pacesetter curriculum comes with ample professional development opportunities that focus very specifically on its curriculum. Pacesetter focuses teachers' attention on more specific aspects of teaching—curriculum, instruction, assessment, and purposes for teaching language arts—and provides greater depth in its learning opportunities (Cohen & Ball, 1996).

Channels for Subject-Specific Learning

These districts also differed in important ways in the extent to which they provided opportunities for first-year teachers to learn about issues directly related to the language arts. While Allison had ample opportunities to get the curricular and instructional help she wanted for teaching language arts, Frank, with greater need, had much less opportunity. The difference in learning opportunities reflects structures within these districts that channeled or thwarted subject-specific conversation.

In Waterside, everyone we interviewed had a relatively consistent version of what good language arts instruction involved. The language arts coordinator (a former department chair himself) saw his job as working closely with department chairs in the schools, providing information about district activities and gathering information about teachers' concerns and needs. Mentoring, in this district, was both subject and site-specific. Allison had a mentor in her subject matter at her school site. This mentor provided Allison with curriculum resources and a ready ear. When Allison struggled with teaching prepositional phrases, she knew where to go. The department chair of Allison's school, in turn, played an important role in both contributing to the district's work on standards for language arts and in bridging between the district and the school. Because she had worked on the district curriculum frameworks for language arts, she served as a school-based resource for questions about district standards. She also provided informal mentoring for Allison and made sure that she attended workshops in the teaching of writing. The department as a whole was a supportive environment in which the sharing of materials and ideas was strongly encouraged.

Frank's situation provides a stark contrast. After eliminating curriculum specialists in support of site-based management, Prospect Harbor tried to resurrect the role of language arts curriculum developer. The first person they hired had difficulty working with classroom teachers and lasted only a year in this role. She did not see the district as having a consistent philosophy on language arts; in fact, she felt that there was a generational split in the district regarding visions of language arts. For example, some older teachers believed strongly in the separation of writing and literature instruction, while younger teachers believed in the integration of language arts instruction. While department chairs might have been informal leaders in their schools, the district did not intentionally designate chairs to serve as instructional leaders. Mentoring was a generic, rather than a subject-specific function in this district. Frank was assigned a mentor by grade level, rather than by subject matter. While his mentor tried hard to provide help and support, the curricular help Frank so desperately needed for teaching language arts was beyond her scope. Although she tried to connect him with people who might have language arts units he could borrow, she ultimately felt she could not give him the kind of support he needed. Because Frank's middle school was organized into cross-subject matter teams, rather than by department, Frank did not share Allison's ready access to colleagues in language arts. Even the school's physical structure worked against him, as he worked on a hall populated primarily by social studies teachers. By the end of his first year of teaching, Frank was ready to abandon language arts for social studies, even though his college major had been in creative writing.

The cases of these first-year teachers indicate that their access to resources for teaching language arts was dependent, in large part, on both school and district structures that channeled opportunities for learning to teach language arts. Waterside had a cohesive policy environment around the language arts; administrators were generally in agreement about a broad vision for the language arts, and professional development opportunities generally focused on frameworks for the teaching of reading and writing that were consistent with this larger vision. Curriculum specialists were teachers, located in schools. From this context, they had an immediate sense of the needs of classroom teachers, as well as the kinds of resources available. The curriculum specialist in language arts, a former department chair himself, met regularly with the department chairs, providing another channel for information to flow both ways. Finally, at Allison's school, the department chair was seen as an instructional leader. She participated directly in the district's efforts to rewrite the state standards for the district, bringing this knowledge and experience back to her department. She also played a central role in sending all first-year teachers to particular professional development opportunities in the language arts, ensuring a common language for talking about teaching the language arts.

The channels in Prospect Harbor were less clearly organized around subject matter. In part, because of its strong history of site-based management, curriculum specialists were only recently being hired once again. During Frank and Nancy's first year of teaching, the language arts curriculum developer did not have a strong connection to the schools or to the district,⁷ and, in fact, her primary task was to work with teachers to adopt a common curriculum. The middle school in which Frank worked did not even seem to have a functioning language arts department through which he might have received support. Even at the high school level, Nancy's department chair felt her position was a nominal one only. The district did not invest in department chairs as instructional leaders, and chairs were only loosely connected to district activities. Finally, the structure of generic mentoring did not support a subject-specific conversation about teaching and learning the language arts. As both Nancy's and Frank's experiences illustrate, the emphasis of the mentoring program was more on issues of classroom management and general support than on curriculum and instruction. Although this picture of generic professional development in Prospect Harbor is markedly different from that in Waterside, the situation may be more the norm than the exception. In fact, even when the amount of money allocated to professional development increases significantly, there is some indication that neither the supply nor the demand for content-specific professional development seems to grow (Columbia Group, 1997; McDiarmid, 1999).

Channels in Waterside flowed along subject-specific routes, from district through language arts coordinator, through department chairs to teachers. Just as importantly, these channels flowed both ways; the department chair and language arts coordinator were able to communicate subject-specific concerns of teachers back to the district. In contrast, the channels for subject-specific conversations in Prospect Harbor were continually deflected. Channels did not flow along subject-specific routes. In fact, few intermediate structures such as department chair or subject-matter specialists were in place to promote the flow of such a conversation. The channel that did exist flowed only one way—downstream—from the central office to the schools.

The District as Teacher Educator

The role of districts in focusing teachers' concerns may be particularly powerful for beginning teachers. These teachers, unlike many of those studied in policy research (Cohen, 1990; Spillane & Jennings, 1997), are not experienced teachers trying to reconstruct their practice; they are still very much in the beginning stages of

constructing their understandings and practice of teaching language arts. The policy problem differs, in this respect, from the problems of attempting to change the knowledge, beliefs, or practice of very experienced teachers.

In this sense, districts can serve a powerful role as teacher educator, even if first-year teachers are only dimly aware of formal district policies. The tasks they assign to new teachers, the resources they provide, the learning environments they create, the assessments they design, and the conversations they provoke have consequences for what these first year teachers come to learn about teaching the language arts, and about teaching more generally. For example, one of the primary tasks set for teachers in Waterside was to become familiar with state and district curriculum frameworks. Much of teachers' professional development time was devoted to understanding and use of these frameworks. Both through her own engagement in these efforts and the sustained involvement of her department chair, Allison developed a clear understanding of the district frameworks and incorporated them into her classroom curriculum. Prospect Harbor did not engage teachers in such a task. Instead, they engaged teachers in discussions of a common curriculum, a conversation that both heightened these beginning teachers' concerns about the lack of existing curriculum and suggested that "curriculum" meant a common set of texts or textbooks. In both of these instances, the tasks assigned by the districts taught teachers a way to look at teaching.

The structures that districts create also have consequences for the nature of teachers' conversation about teaching and learning. The differences in the mentoring programs in Waterside and Prospect Harbor, for example, led to quite different conversations between these beginning teachers and their mentors. While Allison and her mentor report a conversation deeply grounded in subject matter, Frank and Nancy and their mentors report a much more generic conversation that skirted issues of curriculum and instruction in the language arts. Similarly, the role of curriculum specialist was structured differently in these two districts. Our analysis suggests that district structures, intentional or otherwise, can either support or deflect opportunities for continued learning within a subject matter, while the strength of the lenses provided by curriculum policies, in particular, helps determine the depth and breadth of what teachers learn about teaching language arts.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999 for full description of the theoretical framework of the larger study.
- ² These snapshots focus on the school year 1997-98. Several of these districts underwent substantive changes in the following year or two, which we have not tried to portray in this paper.
- ³ 6 Traits was developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Although initially developed as an analytic scoring system for writing, it has been expanded to include strategies for instruction (see <http://www.nwrel.org>).
- ⁴ 6 + 1 Traits is an expanded version of 6-Traits (see footnote 3). To the original 6 analytic traits of writing, it adds presentation (see <http://www.nwrel.org>).
- ⁵ First Steps is a commercially published program (Heinemann). It includes developmental continua and activities in reading, writing, spelling and oral language, and professional development courses. For more information on First Steps see <http://www.first-steps.com>.
- ⁶ Two years later, the superintendent is actively trying to find more time in the workday for teachers to work and learn together. This demonstrates again the flux in which these districts are operating. What is true one year is not necessarily true the next. However, we have bounded our analysis to our participants' first year of teaching, the school year 1997-98.
- ⁷ This situation has changed since the year of this study. New curriculum developers were hired who have a strong relationship to teachers and schools. However, the department chairs still do not play a significant role in district reforms.

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