

Perceptions of Fourth-Grade Social Studies Teachers
on Curriculum and the Transition to Standards-Based Education

by

Jean A. Lukesh

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Jean A. Lukesh, Ed.D.

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Advisor: Dr. L. James Walter

Abstract

From 2000-2008, Nebraska teachers had the responsibility to prepare local assessments that matched state standards in the social studies. Teachers in benchmark grades (4th, 8th, and 11/12th) wrote and administered assessments, and later reported student scores locally in core curriculum areas, reading/writing, math, science, and social studies. They used Nebraska's unique STAR (Standards That Are Reported) and STARS (School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System) standards and assessment system. As the last curriculum area to receive standards, social studies assessment and reporting was still in transition.

An instrumental case study was used to survey and interview 6 purposefully-selected, Nebraska fourth-grade social studies teachers, all of whom were master teachers, to explore their perceptions regarding how standards and assessments changed their curricula. In their own words, these veteran teachers described initial problems they experienced, and how they eventually became more comfortable with using standards as a basis for their curriculum. Participants discussed benefits and problems of using standards. They noted the change from a teacher-driven curriculum to standards/assessment-driven curriculum. They detailed how unprepared

they had been to teach Nebraska Studies at first, but how they now loved teaching that fourth-grade subject and believed it was important in the curriculum. They discussed the importance of good resources and materials. Although still stressed by time and workload, they seemed comfortable with the standards, despite having to give up many of their “pet projects.” One thing concerned them: the possibility of losing control through the adoption of a test. Five of the six were against the idea of Nebraska mandating a statewide examination, as used by many states.

As this study concluded, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB 1157, a law designed to mandate statewide tests in reading, mathematics, and science, but not social studies. This study was a snapshot of that fourth-grade social studies transition period up to the passage of that legislation.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, educators in local school districts, in collaboration with school board members, decided what was taught in classrooms and what students needed to know to succeed in classes. However, in the last few decades, policymakers established curriculum standards at the national and state levels to mandate what is taught, learned, and tested in classrooms across the country. Regarding that school reform and approach, Pat Roschewski (2002), Director of Statewide Assessment for the Nebraska Department of Education, said, “The Nebraska Department of Education also knew this approach would force change upon school districts through the use of standards, assessment, and accountability as the vehicle for school improvement.” In her doctoral dissertation on the development of the Nebraska standards, she continued,

To build quality local assessment systems that are... ‘instructionally supportive’ and usable for public accountability, local school districts are forced to examine outcomes and the process of schooling. Teachers and administrators, through this process, find themselves learning on the job, learning in context, and practicing one of the most promising strategies... that of learning communities. This strategy... is the most promising strategy for sustained school improvement. Districts must work collaboratively and internally. Districts are challenged to examine what is taught, when it is

taught, how it is measured and whether or not learning is measured reliably and fairly. (p. 17)

Gary B. Nash (2000), who co-authored the national curriculum standards, said the standards movement developed partly as an equity issue to establish common educational goals and standards and to provide equal education for all students in the core curriculum areas. Those core areas consist of reading/writing (sometimes called reading/language arts), math, science, and social studies. In 2003, social studies became the most recent of those subjects to be standardized and mandated in Nebraska (Nebraska Department of Education, 2003). Social studies assessment was then mandated, but assessment implementation has continually been delayed, especially the assessment reporting to the state (*STARS and AYP: School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting Schedule, 2007-2012*. 2007). This study described what selected, fourth-grade Nebraska social studies teachers perceived about their curriculum and those evolving standards, up to the passage of Legislative Bill (LB) 1157. As such, this study became a snapshot taken at a time of great change.

Problem Statement

Although social studies is a core curriculum, it is unlike the other core curriculum areas of reading/writing, math, and science. Very broad in scope, social studies is a curricular field that contains many sub-disciplines, including history, geography, civics, and economics. Up to now, social studies teachers were not always subject to the same expectations as the teachers of those other core

curriculum areas. Recently those expectations changed, as state social studies content standards became mandated (*Nebraska Social Studies/History Standards: Grades K-12*, 2003).

Those mandates clearly signal a move to more uniform curriculum and learning expectations, established by the state and national government. Teachers have less control of curriculum decisions and must conform to the standards and assessment expectations. How do experienced, local educators react to having state level policymakers dictate the content standards and assessments? Will the curriculum they created over many years of successful teaching survive? The problem explored by this study described the reactions of master teachers to this potential change in control and loss of teacher autonomy—especially, the standardization of the fourth-grade social studies curriculum.

Policymakers expect public school teachers, including social studies educators, to attempt to meet state standards (*School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System: A Summary*, 2006, p. 8). However, not all teachers are required to assess and report their students' scores. Standards testing and local assessment reporting was originally scheduled to take place only in those core subjects at or near the fourth, eighth, and eleventh or twelfth grades. Testing was set at those grade levels for alignment purposes, to establish benchmarks for improvement and to assess student achievement. Select standards at those grades came to be called STAR standards or STARs. That acronym stands for "Standards That Are Reported to and by the state" (*STAR (Standards That Are Reported)*

Social Studies/History Standards. (2003)). The confusingly similar and related acronym STARS refers to the “School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System” that goes with the STAR standards (*School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System: A Summary*, 2006). Because the two acronyms are so similar and also related, educators often use them interchangeably.

At the time of this study, the fourth-grade STAR standards originally served as the material to be tested for the elementary level. Teachers in that grade assessed their students locally in most of the core areas and reported some of those core subject assessment scores to the state. However, Nebraska used no particular standardized tests for social studies or other core subjects (P. K. Roschewski, personal communication, June 13, 2007; Roschewski, 2002, pp. 9-10). At that time in Nebraska, teachers could choose which test to use or could create their own tests to evaluate student progress; however those tests were subject to certain guidelines and to state and district approval (*School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System: A Summary*, 2006, p. 5). Nebraska was the only state with that “local control” option. However, pending legislation to establish a system of statewide tests may soon change that (Reutter, 2008). During this study, fourth-grade teachers in Nebraska spent much of their time teaching, testing, and assessing student performance against the standards. Originally, social studies testing and reporting was scheduled to begin in the 2006-2007 school year. However, that deadline was repeatedly pushed back to 2008-09, as a result of repeated policy

changes with the standards (*STARS and AYP: School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting Schedule, 2007-2012, 2007*).

Another element complicated the implementation of fourth-grade social studies standards. The standards at that level, *and only at the fourth-grade level*, in Nebraska, mandated the teaching of a course called Nebraska Studies. That course was an important part of the social studies curriculum. Although state standards for the course were numerous, the timetable for teaching Nebraska Studies varied greatly from one school to another. The Nebraska Studies course made up all, most, or just part of the fourth-grade social studies curriculum in those schools, and the course could be taught for a quarter, a semester, or an entire school year. More discussion approaches to curriculum organization will follow in Chapter Four. Although social studies standards were mandated, the implementation of social studies assessment and reporting in Nebraska was delayed, especially the assessment reporting to the state level. All those factors complicated the fourth-grade social studies standards and assessment program.

Over the last two decades, educators and researchers noticed similar problems with state standards and testing in other states. Some of those researchers conducted studies to describe or explore the impact of voluntary or mandatory standards in their schools (Chandler, 1998; Cooley, 2002; Donahoe, 2001; Hall, 1999). The timing seemed right to ask fourth-grade Nebraska social studies teachers what they perceived to be happening with the curriculum in their classrooms at a

time when the standards were mandated, but while their exact structure was still evolving.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe what certain purposefully-selected fourth-grade teachers, all of whom were master teachers, perceived to be happening with curriculum and standards in their fourth-grade social studies classrooms across Nebraska. This study was also an effort to give voice to a sampling of Nebraska social studies teachers who were making the change to standards and assessment. Through surveys and individual interviews, these master teachers described why they teach and how they teach their curriculum. They told how the standards and testing mandate has affected their curriculum. They shared what worked and discussed how they perceived their curriculum and the new state standards and testing overall. This dissertation is an examination of their perceptions.

Theoretical Perspective

The introduction of core curriculum areas organized around standards and assessment represents one particular theoretical perspective. As Posner (1995) noted in his book, *Analyzing the Curriculum*,

Every curriculum represents a choice as to how to approach the education of students.

The approach chosen depends on the beliefs and assumptions often termed “philosophies” or “perspectives” of the people who develop the curriculum. (p. 44)

Posner identified five theoretical perspectives on curriculum. One of those he labeled as behavioral, saying it was based on the works of Ralph Tyler (p. 61).

Tyler (1949) said, “Education is a process of changing the behavior patterns of people” (pp. 5-6). “The Tyler Rationale,” for planning a curriculum, features a four-step process of questioning, to design a course of study, paraphrased as follows:

1. What are the purposes or objectives?
2. What educational experiences can be used to reach those goals?
3. How can those experiences be organized most effectively?
4. How can the educator evaluate the learning to see if the goals have been reached?

(Posner, 1995, pp. 13-14; Tanner & Tanner, 2007, pp. 134-135).

Tyler (1949) believed that “the process of evaluation begins with the objectives of the educational program” (p. 110). He thought curriculum designers needed to start with the objectives in mind and build from there. Educators sometimes call that approach outcomes-based learning, or product-based learning. It is a strategy often associated with the standards (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

In business and industry that learning or teaching method is called an input-output plan to produce a product (Posner, 1995, p. 16; Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 105). Regarding such a plan, business book author Stephen Covey (1989) wrote,

To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction. (p. 98)

In a product-based business system, such a philosophy often leads to success. However, in education, process and product both have importance. Therefore, that analogy between the two plans, business/industry and learning/teaching, has sometimes led to negative connotations for the standards-based curriculum. In their book on curriculum development, Tanner and Tanner (2007) said

The business-industrial production model of schooling has been dominant in school administration for over a century, and has been promoted as a model of accountability and production efficiency for the public schools to this day. This view has survived and prevailed regardless of evidence showing that the school curriculum cannot simply be constructed as a production process and measured as products analogous to the business world. (pp. 105-106)

Tanner and Tanner (2007) noted major arguments against outcomes-based learning or product-based learning as follows: It stresses product over process, leads to narrowing the curriculum, and leads to teaching to the test. The Tanners said, "Further impetus was given to teaching to the test as a result of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (p. 105). They implied that a narrowed curriculum might

allow the students to pass the assessment, but retention and future application of knowledge and skills might be sacrificed, saying,

One of the persistent problems of education is failure to recognize that the extent to which learning outcomes are more and more narrowly specified and restricted for measurement, the lower the capability of the learner to generalize and apply knowledge to new or unforeseen situations or emergent conditions. (p. 105)

Passing the test is a goal in education. However, the long-term goal is to make sure the process part of the lesson is well understood. If students understand the concept and can transfer that learning to other situations, then they can apply that knowledge to solve real life problems throughout their lives. That is the real or ultimate objective of teaching, not just to pass the test in class.

In a recent article, Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) addressed related issues and said,

One of the arguments against highstakes assessment systems is that they focus on easily measured material leaving out less easily tested but possibly more important skills. They may also focus on lower level thinking and discourage creative activities. Recent studies have shown that while testing may result in score gains these gains are rarely lasting and are confined to the limited material being tested. (p. 147)

Dappen and Isernhagen then offered a possible solution to some of those problems related to high-stakes testing. They cited:

Madaus (1988) [who] suggested that teacher-designed assessments and a focus on important student outcomes as identified by teachers may overcome the aforementioned assessment concerns. This system would give teachers opportunities to think through objectives and identify explicit types of evidence that would demonstrate that the objectives had been met. (p. 147)

In other words, well-crafted, teacher-created assessments might lead to better lesson planning and student skill-building. That point has implications to Nebraska and its current teacher-designed assessment system. In their report, Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) also seem to imply that teacher-designed assessments, such as those used in Nebraska, may lead to less narrowing of the curriculum and less teaching to the test. Narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test are two major criticisms of outcome-based education.

Outcomes-based education and state standards often go together. However, educators still need to monitor student learning, so that students not only pass the standards assessment, but are somehow prepared to retain the knowledge and skills they learn in school. In that way, they may be able to apply those skills to future situations. Teachers in this study will have philosophies or perspectives of their own, regarding outcomes-based education and how it works with their students and curriculum. They will definitely have perspectives on the standards. They will also have beliefs and opinions about their social studies curriculum and how it may have changed as a result of the standards.

Research Questions

For purposes of this study, the grand tour question of this research is as follows: What do selected, experienced master teachers of fourth-grade social studies perceive about the curriculum at a time when state policymakers have implemented content standards and assessment? Sub-questions of that grand tour question include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How do fourth-grade teachers in Nebraska believe the new state standards for social studies impact their curriculum and their teaching?
- What do they see as benefits or problems resulting from the change to standards?
- What do they believe to be important curriculum for them to teach and for their students to learn?

This study uses demographic and informational survey questions and interview questions to uncover the perceptions of the participants (see Appendices A and B). As a result, the questions and their answers become the issues and topics in a qualitative instrumental case study, also called a collective case study.

Boundaries

This study was clearly bounded. It was teacher-specific, grade-specific, state-specific, and subject-specific. It was timely. This study took place in Winter/Spring 2007-2008, shortly after the state social studies standards were mandated and when assessment reporting was first scheduled to start at the state level. Much has changed during that short time, including grade level expectations,

testing procedures, and legislation. This study was a unique “snapshot” of teachers’ thinking at a time of dynamic change in Nebraska school districts. This study not only explored and described selected teachers’ perceptions during a time of transition to the STARS and STARS form of standards and assessment, but that system and the study may have both concluded at nearly the same time. As this study ended, LB 1157 passed into law, potentially eliminating or greatly modifying the STAR and STARS form of standards and assessment in Nebraska, and very likely leading to the adoption of a single standardized test for assessment purposes (see Appendix E).

Most specifically, the interviews for this study were bounded in space by the classroom or school of each of the interviewees and by the collective experiences of those teachers. The study was bounded, too, by the respondents and the gate-keepers who agreed to take part in or who allowed this study to take place in their buildings. This researcher’s own experiences and perceptions as an educator of 30 years’ tenure also bounded the study, because the investigator took the role of interviewer and reporter to collect and describe the participants’ perceptions. The role of researcher will be addressed more in Chapter Three.

Significance of Study

Graff (1999) did a nationwide study on voluntary social studies standards. Other researchers studied aspects of social studies standards in other states, for example, voluntary standards in Nevada (Hall, 1999) and Washington (Chandler, 1998) and mandatory standards in Kansas (Cooley, 2002), Florida (Dewey, 2005),

and Virginia (Donahoe, 2001). The fact that so many studies took place in different states indicates that educators do see significance in studying this topic, and there are many aspects and avenues to explore. Some of those studies focused on the standards and teachers, others explored how textbooks and other resources worked with the standards. Still others focused on the standards' impact on curriculum. Therefore, a place existed for a Nebraska study, one that could contribute to the knowledge base on standards and assessment implementation.

This study took place in Nebraska just a few years after state social studies standards were first mandated and at a time when assessments were first starting. Prior to that time, there was little standardization for the teaching of fourth-grade social studies across the state, especially in the area of Nebraska studies (Young, 2001; Nebraska Humanities Council, 1998; Stoner, 1998; J. Stoner, personal communication, 2001). During this study, Nebraska used its own unique STAR Standards (specific grade level standards to be tested) and the STARS assessment system. When this study started, fourth grade was the first level where state social studies standards were both mandated and scheduled for assessment—during the span of this study, testing spread to other grades as well and assessment dates were postponed. As this study concluded, LB 1157 passed into law, possibly negating Nebraska's STAR Standards and STARS assessment system and initiating changes to a standardized testing system, as used in other states. As a result, this study is a snapshot of that short span of time from implementation to the passage of LB 1157, a

time of big changes in the standards. This study gave voice to some of the teachers going through those big changes.

This study of purposefully-selected, fourth-grade social studies teachers allowed teachers in one grade and subject to voice their perceptions on the impact of state standards in their social studies classrooms. In his quantitative study of Nebraska teachers, Beran (2003) chose to study fourth-grade Nebraska teachers because of Nebraska's unique "state standards model," and because, in Nebraska, "most fourth-grade teachers teach all subject areas and therefore must report in four curriculum areas" (p. 3). This researcher had those same reasons in mind; however, she chose to dig deeper amidst the population of teachers and select only teachers who specifically taught social studies. Through this research, the participants shared their concerns, suggestions, and ideas on making changes in the classroom. As such, their words offered important validation for conducting this study.

There is still much to learn about using standards and assessment, and the best way to learn is by dialoging. As Cooley (2002) said when he gave his reason for studying the state social studies standards in Kansas,

At various meetings around the state, teachers, local school boards and community members have discussed these standards and it is apparent that everyone involved will need help and guidance, as well as cooperation amongst varying groups in understanding and implementing the new standards. (pp. 1-2)

The audience for a similar Nebraska research study could include the following: teachers of social studies, school board members, and community members; other educators and administrators caught up in the switch to state standards; curriculum theorists studying educational change; legislators; and possibly even concerned parents. A secondary audience for this study may be students and educators of the future who might compare the findings in this study to those in other states, as standards-based social studies education continues to evolve.

Chapter Two

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The review of relevant literature on this topic is organized into two major parts. One part gave a historical context of the standards movement, while the other described related research studies. Both were broad in scope, dealing not only with what has happened in Nebraska, but also in other states across the country. A summary closes the chapter.

Historical Context of Standards Movement

National Context. Many educators recognize *A Nation At Risk* and the *Goals 2000* project as the starting points for the standards movement in education ("Content knowledge," 2007; Cooley, 2002, p. 1). Then, in early 1991, President George H. W. Bush introduced his educational strategy program, *America 2000*. Later endorsed by succeeding Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, that program called "for a national system of examinations through American achievement tests in the . . . core areas that, obviously, define the school curriculum, or the curriculum that really 'counts'" (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 105). In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) set major guidelines for all areas of education, including accountability and assessment programs that affect education in every classroom in the country (Public Law 107-110, 2002). NCLB programs were at the center of policy changes occurring in education in Nebraska at the time