DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 652 CS 511 389

AUTHOR	Dutro, Elizabeth; Fisk, Maria Chesley; Koch, Richard; Roop, Laura J.; Wixson, Karen
TITLE	When State Policies Meet Local District Contexts: Standards-Based Professional Development as a Means to Individual Agency and Collective Ownership. CIERA Report.
INSTITUTION	Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, Ann Arbor.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	CIERA-3-022
PUB DATE	2002-06-13
NOTE	28p.
CONTRACT	R305R70004
AVAILABLE FROM	CIERA/University of Michigan, 610 E. University Ave., 1600 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259. Tel: 734-647-6940; Fax: 734-763-1229; Web site: http://www.ciera.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Standards; *Educational Change; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Faculty Development; *Language Arts; Program Implementation; Reading Habits; State Programs; State School District Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	Michigan English Language Arts Framework

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how a statewide reform initiative, when envisioned as a professional development opportunity, affected teachers' capacities to become change-agents in their classrooms and districts, and how individual district contexts shaped the development of those capacities. The interview and artifactual data used for this study were gathered from teachers and administrators in four demonstration districts that were involved in a standards-based professional development initiative within the federally-funded Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) project. These data reveal that teachers experienced changes in their personal literacy practices and views of themselves as learners, and felt an increased ability to evince change in a variety of educational contexts, including their classrooms, buildings, and districts. Across these changes in teachers' practices, district patterns emerged that spoke to the individual districts' capabilities to support teacher growth and foster reform. These differences suggest that the changes that took place were a function of many factors, including the size and structure of the district, the district's "readiness" for change, and the source of language arts leadership within the district. One implication is that particular histories and competing forces on both the individual and district level help shape the implementation of new policy. (Contains 23 references.) (PM)

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When State Policies Meet Local District Contexts: Standards-Based Professional Development as a Means to Individual Agency and Collective Ownership

CIERA REPORT #3-022

Elizabeth Dutro, University of Washington
Maria Chesley Fisk, University of Michigan
Richard Koch, Adrian College
Laura J. Roop, University of Michigan
Karen Wixson, University of Michigan

CIERA Inquiry 3: Policy and Profession
How does a statewide reform initiative, when envisioned as a professional development opportunity, affect teachers' capacity to become change-agents in their classrooms and districts? How do individual district contexts shape the development of those capacities?

This article focuses on how a statewide reform initiative, when envisioned as a professional development opportunity, affected teachers' capacities to become change-agents in their classrooms and districts, and how individual district contexts shaped the development of those capacities. The interview and artifactual data used for this study were gathered from teachers and administrators in four demonstration districts that were involved in a standards-based professional development initiative within the federally-funded Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) project. These data reveal that teachers experienced changes in their personal literacy practices and views of themselves as learners, and felt an increased ability to evince change in a variety of educational contexts, including their classrooms, buildings, and districts. Across these changes in teachers' practices, district patterns emerged that spoke to the individual districts' capacities to support

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University of Michigan School of Education

610 E University Ave., Rm. 1600 SEB
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259

734.647.6940 voice
734.615.4858 fax
ciera@umich.edu

www.ciera.org

This paper is currently in press at the *Teachers' College Record*.

Note: The authors contributed in various ways to the development of this paper and the professional development project that it considers. Karen Wixson, Laura Roop, and Richard Koch designed the professional development effort; Laura and Richard were key players in facilitating the sessions. Elizabeth Dutro and Maria Chesley Fisk joined the project at the data analysis stage, after the professional development phase was complete. All authors participated in analyzing the data that were collected over the course of the project and contributed to the written manuscript. Authorship is listed alphabetically.

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This research was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R305R70004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. However, the comments do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute of Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment or the National Institute on Early Childhood Development, or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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Executive Summary

In the early 1990s, in an effort to promote standards-based reform through Goals 2000, the U.S. Department of Education made competitive awards available to states to develop curriculum frameworks in the core subject areas. One of those awards resulted in the Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) project, a 3-year grant (1993–1996) to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in collaboration with the University of Michigan. Collaborators on the project included MDE personnel, university researchers, professional development experts, and English language arts teachers and administrators from four diverse Michigan districts.

This article focuses on how a statewide reform initiative, when envisioned as a professional development opportunity, affected teachers' capacities to become change-agents in their classrooms and districts, and how individual district contexts shaped the development of those capacities. The interview and artifactual data used for this study were gathered from teachers and administrators in four "demonstration" districts that were involved in a standards-based professional development initiative within the MELAF project. Our guiding research questions were: How did teachers' encounters with standards-based professional development affect their visions of themselves as instigators of reform, both within their classrooms and in the wider context of the district? And what is the relationship between district context

and teachers' views of themselves as change-agents within and beyond their classrooms?

Method

The four demonstration districts were selected to represent the range of Michigan districts. District A is a small, rural district, serving approximately 2,500 racially homogeneous but socioeconomically diverse students. District B serves a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse population of close to 10,000 students in a large metropolitan area. District C is located in a predominantly white, lower-middle-class, suburban community and was the largest of the four, serving more than 10,000 students. District D serves a predominantly white, working-class community of approximately 7,000 students.

Two categories of data were examined for this study: (1) artifacts and documents generated throughout the project's 4-year history (e.g., materials from professional development meetings, teacher questionnaires, district curriculum documents, teacher and student writings, conference papers, and scholarly publications); and (2) individual and focus group interviews conducted with MELAF participants from the four districts at the project's completion. After initial thematic analyses, we developed a coding scheme that focused on teachers' reports of their increased capacity in numerous arenas, as well as their perceptions of increases in district capacity. We conducted analyses of the personal change reported by teachers (the units of analysis embedded within each district) and then considered the patterns that emerged within each district. We explored teachers' increased capacity through the multiple data sources listed above, triangulating the results of our analyses.

Findings

Our analysis of the data from participants across the four districts reveals that teachers experienced changes in their personal literacy practices and views of themselves as learners, and felt an increased ability to evince change in a variety of educational contexts, including their classrooms, buildings, and districts. Teachers consistently spoke of increases in their capacity in the following areas as a result of MELAF: personal growth as learners; ability to model literacy to their students; increased reflective practice; mentoring colleagues; working for change within and outside their district; professional publishing; and working as advocates in district and state political institutions.

Although the themes above appeared across teacher interviews, patterns emerged that spoke to the individual districts' capacities to support teacher growth and foster reform. There is evidence of change at many levels within each district; however, the nature of the change differs from one district to another. For example, in one district the MELAF project provided individual teacher-leaders with the state sanctions needed to expand their curriculum and instruction improvement efforts to the district level. This contrasted with another district, in which the most significant developments were seen

at the level of individual teachers refining their practice through close attention to standards and benchmarks.

The following factors appear to be related to the nature and impact of policy implementation: district size; degree of investment in reforms by district administration; districts' histories with curricular projects/reforms; role of subject area experts (i.e., language arts coordinators) within district; and the presence and roles of teacher leaders. These factors were at play within and across the four districts that participated in MELAF.

Implications

Standards must make sense to committed, strong practitioners if they are to become practice. Many research studies describe policy's relative lack of impact on practice. In this project, we experienced a more positive outcome. To the extent that this is so, it may be due to the great respect that we paid to the "need" to help teachers "make sense" of standards. Our stance regarded individuals and teams not as "servants" of standards, nor as technicians implementing externally-developed policies, but as partners in the construction of policy and research-based practice.

One conclusion that we have drawn from our experience is that there may well be optimal points in a school system's development when large sums of money should be invested in professional development. A related implication is that it may be strategically effective to invest resources in districts that have a core community of teacher leaders, who are willing to share their learning with others and assume critical leadership roles.

State educational policies may have a greater impact if the related professional learning opportunities are focused simultaneously on more than one level of change (i.e., classroom *and* building, or classroom *and* district). By attending to both individual and district practice, MELAF appears to have helped many of the participants redefine their roles.

Finally, policymakers might note that state policies exist in conversation with local contexts and individuals. Districts are not blank slates; rather, they are places with particular histories and arrays of competing forces, which will shape the implementation of any new policy. When state policies are understood and supported by district teachers and administrators, they may be used to "sanction" grass-roots efforts aimed in the same direction. This appears to increase the effect of actual policy implementation, and to increase the influence of grass-roots initiatives.

When State Policies Meet Local District Contexts

In the early 1990s, in an effort to promote standards-based reform through Goals 2000, the U.S. Department of Education made competitive awards available to states. The states were to develop curriculum frameworks in the core subject areas. One of those awards resulted in the Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) project, a 3-year grant (1993–1996) to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in collaboration with the University of Michigan. Collaborators on the project included MDE personnel, university researchers, professional development experts, and English language arts teachers and administrators from four diverse Michigan districts. The primary objectives of MELAF were to develop state goals and objectives in English language arts that would provide the basis for a curriculum framework that (1) integrated curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) promoted systemic change; and (3) had an impact on schools, classrooms, individual teachers and students.

This report focuses on how a statewide reform initiative, when envisioned as a professional development opportunity, affected teachers' capacities to become change-agents in their classrooms and districts, and how individual district contexts shaped the development of those capacities. The interview and artifactual data used for this study were gathered from teachers and administrators in four "demonstration" districts that were involved in a standards-based professional development initiative within the MELAF project. The guiding research questions for this study were: How did teachers' encounters with standards-based professional development affect their visions of themselves as instigators of reform, both within their classrooms and in the wider context of the district? What is the relationship between district context and teachers' views of themselves as change-agents within and beyond their classrooms?

Moving From Policy to Practice: The Role of Professional Development and District Context

As national and state policy efforts have attempted to elevate student achievement via standards, a gap has been observed between policy and practice, which threatens the success of these efforts (cf. Cohen & Ball, 1990a; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). Therefore, those of us who served as MELAF leaders made the critical assumption that in-depth, sustained professional development lay at the heart of reform (cf. Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Lieberman, 1995; Lieberman & Miller 1991; Little, 1993). In conjunction with the development of standards, MELAF incorporated an extended professional development initiative designed to support teachers and districts as they studied and piloted the content standards. As Cohen and Ball (1990b) emphasize, teachers are both the targets and the agents of reform. The MELAF professional development initiative attempted to use a policy occasion (the development of state standards in English Language Arts) to create a network of four disparate district learning communities, so

that individual teachers could grapple with the implications of standards for their own classroom practice, and districts could strategize about the potential role of standards in local education reform. At the same time, the professional development initiative was conceived as an argument for the sort of professional learning that the standards would require.

While designing this professional development initiative, we attempted to consider three of the major facets to educational change enumerated by Fullan (1996): networking, reculturing, and restructuring. Like other researchers interested in professional networks (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996), Fullan ascribes significant success to networking—linking individuals and groups within and across school systems in a supportive community. However, he argues that greater success can occur within districts and schools using reculturing strategies that set in motion "the process of developing new values, beliefs, and norms" (p. 422). Further, he argues for restructuring—a process "that concerns changes in the roles, structures, and other mechanisms that enable new cultures to thrive" (p. 422). Within and across districts, the MELAF professional development effort is intended to encourage and support networking, reculturing, and restructuring.

One external network in particular influenced our design of MELAF professional development: the National Writing Project, a federally-funded network of 168 university-school collaborations which offer literacy-related professional development influenced by constructivist and developmental educational theories (Dewey, 1990; Vygotsky, 1965). Consistent with this conceptual base, the MELAF professional development program attempted to enact the following principles: First, educator-participants must "be" what we want them to help students become—that is, they must experience the kind of teaching and learning that students are to experience in classrooms. Second, participants must adopt habits of study (reading, writing, discussion, reflection) and inquiry. Third, a community of educators must work collaboratively over time to achieve substantive change in schooling. Fourth, expert mentoring, grass-roots development, and administrative support are all necessary parts of the process. Fifth, professional learning occasions must offer multiple invitations or support structures for learning: intensive summer workshops or institutes, school-year classroom implementation, and followup problem-solving. Finally, all parties involved must be conscious of the fact that the roles of individuals and groups within the community will evolve, and that this movement will itself be an important part of the larger process of change.

MELAF, like other types of networks, was designed to serve as a bridge across boundaries within and among districts. Still, teachers would bring their district experiences to the professional development setting. Recent research has begun to explore the role that school districts play as contexts of reform (see, for example, Spillane, 1996; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). We know that districts vary in the attention they give to reforms. If state-led reforms are not consistent with the district's prevailing philosophies about instruction, accountability, and authority, then even educators who understand the reforms may not undertake them.

Districts will always interpret state reforms differently. The consistency of district and state notions of appropriate instruction, for example, is likely to influence how districts interpret and operationalize state policies (Spillane, 1996). Districts also differ in their abilities to facilitate change in instruc-

tional practice. As Little (1993) suggests, instructional change is dependent on teachers' opportunities to learn about new ideas and adapt them to local conditions (McLaughlin, 1987; Standerford, 1997); districts have a large hand in determining the nature, frequency, and effectiveness of these learning opportunities.

Method and Data Collection

The Program and Participants

The four districts serving as demonstration sites were selected to represent the range of Michigan districts. District A is a small, rural district, serving approximately 2,500 racially homogeneous but socioeconomically diverse students. District B serves a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse population of close to 10,000 students in a large metropolitan area. District C is located in a predominantly white, lower-middle-class, suburban community and was the largest of the four participating districts, serving more than 10,000 students. District D serves a predominantly white, working-class community of approximately 7,000 students.

In addition to demographic characteristics, the selection criteria for districts included previous experiences with professional development activities related to K–12 English language arts (ELA) curriculum. This criterion was used to increase the likelihood that participating districts would be able to provide other districts and teachers with places to observe best practices in operation at the project's end. Although each of the districts had some experience with ELA reform, they differed with regard to the nature of the reforms and the involvement of their leadership.

Each district selected two administrators and 10 teachers (two early elementary, two later elementary, three middle school, and three high school) for participation in MELAF. Each district also identified one or two of its participants as internal facilitators. These facilitators worked closely with an external facilitator (supported by MELAF) on the planning of within-district meetings and the coordination of the demonstration district's activities with other components of the larger project. Notably, not all of the MELAF participants had been involved in the ELA reform efforts in their districts. Some individuals were quite knowledgeable about pedagogical issues in literacy, but at the outset of MELAF the group's members varied in their professional development experiences, years of teaching, and instructional philosophies.

Participating teachers and administrators attended two week-long, cross-district sessions, held in the summers of 1994 and 1995. There were also 4 days of cross-district meetings, as well as monthly within-district meetings throughout each of the 2 academic years of the project. During Year 1, these sessions focused on in-depth study of the content standards, examination of current teaching practices in light of the standards, and teacher research on the standards in action. The focus in Year 2 was on developing district-level

curriculum and documenting student performance and growth. The professional development component culminated in the summer of 1996 with a workshop on standards-based, district-level systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Demonstration project teachers served as facilitators for 40 district-level teams from around the state, who attended a conference designed to initiate professional development efforts similar to those developed by MELAF.

Data and analysis

We examined two categories of data for this study: (1) artifacts and documents generated throughout the project's 4-year history; and, (2) interviews conducted by an outside agency after the project's completion. The artifacts reviewed for this study included written plans and agendas for professional development meetings, questionnaires completed by the teachers at the outset of the project, materials used during professional development activities, district curriculum documents, teacher and student writings, conference presentations, and scholarly publications. Additional data included open-ended interviews with 34 of the 48 MELAF participants from the four districts, as well as followup focus groups with those who had been interviewed individually. We also interviewed small numbers of administrators and teachers from each district, who had not participated in MELAF.

Our analyses focused particularly on the open-ended interview data. During the interviews, teachers were asked to reflect upon their professional development experiences and assess the project's impact. After initial thematic analyses, we developed a coding scheme that focused on teachers' reports of their increased capacity in numerous arenas, as well as on their perceptions of increases in district capacity. We conducted analyses of the personal change reported by teachers, as the units of analysis embedded within each district, and then considered the patterns that emerged from these reports within each district (Yin, 1994). We explored teachers' increased capacity through the multiple data sources listed above, triangulating the results of our analyses.

Professional Development Design

Through a variety of professional development opportunities over the course of 2 1/2 years, participants were invited to consciously juxtapose their personal understandings of language arts content and pedagogy with the state standards, and the state standards with other already-developed principles and models. For instance, through readings, discussion, and experimentation, participants studied the framework constructed by Newman and Wehlage (1993), a framework selected by the Michigan Department of Education for cross-referencing with standards in each discipline. We also considered other frameworks, including Central Park East Secondary School's Habits of Mind (Meier, 1995), Brian Cambourne's Conditions for Language Learning (1995), and the Prospect School's Descriptive Review of the Child (Kanevsky, 1992). Participants were also asked to reflect on any

other concepts or guidelines which they had been using for their teaching and curriculum work, once again with an eye toward discovering correspondences and discrepancies with the state standards.

Sessions also provided extended time for professional reading, as well as opportunities for discussion in K–12 district groups, cross-district grade-level-specific groups, and cross-district, cross-level groups. We asked each participant to write multiple reflective journal entries, some of which were turned in to us. We also expected and guided participants to plan for changes in individual teaching practice, changes in school and district professional development strategies, and finally, changes in district curriculum efforts.

We also arranged for demonstration site participants to present workshop sessions for one another. A fifth-grade teacher from District C whose practice was recognized by all as exemplary conducted a work session, and followed up with many conversations with upper elementary teachers. Two National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)-certified middle school teachers from District B presented on the NBPTS certification requirements and their implications for and intersections with the state standards professional development effort. Two high school teachers from District A presented on a secondary-level ELA class which had been set up as Directed Independent Reading. They later gave a variation of this presentation at the spring conference of the Michigan Reading Association.

Those of us who were professional development leaders facilitated whole- and small-group sessions, offered guidance in selecting materials for study, and scheduled presentations such as those described above. We also modeled various approaches to conducting discussion, assisted with planning, and demonstrated uses of more integrated forms of assessment.

Participants in the demonstration site teams served as a primary review board for the benchmarks that had been written to accompany the standards. A careful study of the drafted benchmarks, including freewheeling conversation among the demonstration district team members, was followed by a substantive conversation with the drafters of the benchmarks, after which significant revisions were made. This type of activity embodies the constructivist nature of the professional development experience.

The culminating statewide conference, which was led by members of the demonstration district teams, offered evidence of the project's commitment to role shifts. The expectation that individual teachers, their classroom practices, and their districts' approaches to curriculum, assessment, and professional development would change in response to our work together was made explicit through multiple invitations to write for publication, to speak as representatives of MELAF at State Board of Education meetings, to experiment with classroom practice, and to design new curriculum plans. As we will argue in the rest of the paper, teachers' visions of themselves changed in a number of ways over the course of MELAF. The particular nature of their shifting visions of themselves, however, was influenced by the district context in which they taught.

In the next section, we present the themes that appeared across the interview data. Following that, we provide evidence for how these patterns break out when district context is taken into account.

Teachers' Visions of Themselves as Instigators of Reform

Our analysis of the data from participants across the four districts reveals that teachers experienced changes in their personal literacy practices and views of themselves as learners, and felt an increased ability to evince change in a variety of educational contexts, including their classroom, buildings, and districts. Although the project was not without its share of challenges (Borman & Cusick, 1998), teachers agreed that their participation changed their understandings, both of themselves as professionals and of the field of education.

Certainly, teachers experienced MELAF and were affected by it, personally and professionally, in different ways. One teacher explained, "I think we're all on some sort of a continuum in terms of practice and blending theory and practice and I think that it matters where you come in on that continuum as to what you get out of the different experiences." Not every teacher participant was fully prepared to embrace the study and teaching experiments called for by the MELAF professional development leadership. One position on the District A team was filled by four different individuals before a member was found who was willing to persevere. Two members of the District B team were new to workshop teaching and spent much of their study time and classroom change effort moving toward a basic workshop classroom. One member of District C informally dropped out at the end of the second year, after failing to complete certification requirements in a timely fashion. Despite individual differences, however, we can see clear patterns in the data.

Teachers as learners. All but two of the teachers who were interviewed credit MELAF with changing the way they view themselves as individuals and approach living their lives. Many of the teachers spoke of an increased consciousness of themselves as learners. In the initial stages of the project, many participants focused inward, and emphasized leading what they called a "literate life" (Routman, 1994). As a District A teacher explained,

> I came in contact with books that I never would have come in contact with before. It would take me a lot longer and it would have been a lot harder. So I've read hundreds of professional books and I can tell you that before I'd never read any professional books to speak of.

Several teachers emphasized that they had come to think of themselves as "lifelong learners." A teacher from District B explained that she came to think of her literacy learning and professional growth as "a lifelong pursuit."

Others who considered themselves readers and writers before MELAF began were encouraged by their participation to find more time for developing their literacy. Critical to several of these individuals was the realization that thoughtful engagement in personal literacy is enhanced by involvement with other adult readers and writers.

> As a human being, I am a better writer today than I was five years ago. I am a better reader. I read more. I read more professional stuff for myself and I read more children's literature, period. And that is

> just from being part of a group who is fired up about reading and writing, who are just excited about sharing books.

Teachers as literacy models. Though some teachers had realized the critical connection between their own reading and writing and their effectiveness as teachers of children's literacy, many fully embraced this notion for the first time during professional development. Teachers began to recognize the need to develop their own literacies, and to model their literacy practices for their students. As one teacher said,

> I'm always sharing my writing with [my students] and my poetry and I do write in front of the class, too. And I think that the whole involvement with MELAF and with the writing project has encouraged me to take that risk in front of my kids.

Teachers as more reflective practitioners. As modeled in MELAF, many teachers began to use reading and writing as reflective tools for learning from their classroom practice. One teacher explained how MELAF encouraged her growth as a reflective practitioner:

> We don't have time to reflect in teaching. We just are so busy running from one thing to the next. I force myself to be really reflective. What's pushed my own thinking and being reflective is the journal, and the journal really came from MELAF.... It's a habit now, and it is with me all the time.

Another describes how becoming more reflective herself led her to include student reflection in her teaching.

> What I learned from that process is the importance of the reflection process in terms of personal growth... because it helped me to grow and to realize my weaknesses and my strengths....Then in turn it helped me to buy more into having my students reflect on their learning.

Mentors in the Making

Teachers spoke of MELAF as having provided an opportunity to articulate and refine their philosophies of learning and pedagogy, and support for more purposefully executing these philosophies in their classroom practice. Even the teachers who were most sophisticated in their practice at the outset asserted that MELAF activities helped them refine and focus their practice further. Many participants explained that the language arts standards provide a structure for reflection and analysis, allowing them to be "more intentional" about their teaching. Their words suggest that they feel confident that they can teach in ways that are consistent with the standards. One teacher, for example, said,

> I did Writers' Workshop and I did the journaling and those types of things before I was even involved in MELAF, but since I've been on with this [group], all that's just fine-tuned... I can see things clearer. It was there, but now it's really there, and it's there because I put it there.

Others suggested that MELAF served as an umbrella, under which they could see the connections between their beliefs and practices. One teacher explained, for example, that engagement in MELAF helped her realize that the different roles she held as teacher, informal consultant, and professional developer were unified by the standards and the philosophy undergirding them. "Everything filters through [MELAF]," she stated.

The development and reinforcement of classroom practices and philosophies of teaching and learning probably contributed to teachers' newfound or enhanced perceptions of themselves as mentors. Some mentioned that they were now "on the cutting edge." One reported,

> I was able to go back to my grad classes and talk about some of the things that we had discussed at MELAF or read about... Some of the professors were really taken aback that somebody could be sitting in their class and know a little bit more about something than they did and I think I intimidated a couple of them.

The prestige that fellow educators accorded to MELAF may also have influenced the teachers' views of themselves as professionals. Participants, in general, felt that their participation in MELAF provided them with a certain legitimacy that was recognized by other teachers and administrators. As one elementary teacher expressed it:

> ... we had tried already [before MELAF] to bring theory and practice back to other people in our building. So we had already stuck our feet in the water and found it was kind of cold. So MELAF kind of gave us another vehicle and also it gave us another stamp of approval... MELAF validated me... for other practitioners. It gave me almost like another letter behind my name and another degree saying, "Oh, okay, well if people in a university and at the state level say she knows what she's talking about, then we'll give her another chance to tell us or another chance to talk to us. We'll look at her work and her practice from a different point of view.

Change agents within and outside the district. At the school level, MELAF teachers opened their classrooms and invited others in to observe and participate—a new experience for several. One teacher described how she and another MELAF colleague became "backdoor people," or people who subtly evoke change:

> There was another gal and myself that were in this building and so we were kind of like the backdoor people. We don't like to say "hey do this, this is what you should do and this is what we're doing." They're sort of like "hey you know, we're trying this are you interested in looking at what we're trying," and if people were interested then we would share it. So then we started having a little more involvement by the other people in the building itself.

In addition to their roles as informal advocates, many teachers became formal facilitators of professional development opportunities, often for the first time. As a result of their MELAF affiliation, several participants were asked or volunteered to conduct in-services, provide readings, and serve as resources for various department and school activities. Across these venues, teachers

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sought to become change agents. Teachers spoke of building networks within and outside of their own buildings and districts:

> It made me think more about the content standards and what I wanted to do and I discussed it with many other people, colleagues within this building, colleagues that were not in this building, you know, within the district. But outside my district also, people that I would meet at conferences. We'd discuss them and I'd kind of get a feel for what they thought about the content standards and then where I was coming from and so we'd share those ideas.

Publishing. Teachers from all four districts published articles in two different publications which were sponsored by MELAF, MDE, and the Michigan Reading Association and distributed statewide. Before the MELAF demonstration site work, few participants had published articles or writings of any kind, even at the local level. The fifth-grade teacher from District C who presented to the demonstration site teams has subsequently published two articles in national journals, as has an NBPTS-certified teacher from District B. Neither of them had done anything like this before. Ten teachers, representing all four districts, wrote case studies which were then joined with companion essays by two of the MELAF professional development leaders into a book manuscript that has been submitted for publication.

Advocacy in district and state political institutions. Several teachers also became active in state-level debates about the content standards. Some teachers attended meetings of the State Board of Education and spoke out in support of their standards. For some, this was the first time they had become actively involved in the political arena:

> I mean I've gone to the State Board of Education and spoken on behalf of the content standards and benchmarks. I mean when would you think a little first-grade teacher from [District A] would ever have anything to say about what happens on a state level? Yet, through MELAF and my knowledge of what's going on in the state and my passion for what I believe is right for children, I went up there and I spoke... It was like a whole new thing for me. I never dreamed I could do that. And I know that it had some impact.

In each of the educational arenas described above, MELAF teachers engaged in new activities and took on new roles. As a result, curricula were developed that integrated the content standards into teaching and learning within classrooms, and the overall practices within buildings came to reflect a more social-constructivist approach. In addition, teachers began seeing themselves as active reformers. Many began to take ownership of the standards reform initiative and, in so doing, changed their perceptions of themselves as professionals and of their ability to contribute to educational reform.

Teachers' Views in Relation to District Context

As we examined changes in teacher's views, critical differences between districts emerged.

District A

District A's involvement with MELAF was characterized by active involvement and strong support from its superintendent, and the established working relationship of the participant teachers with their top administrator. District A was long known as conservative and traditional in its teaching practice and professional development philosophy. However, since the hiring of a new superintendent in 1988, the district had worked to establish workshop methods for teaching language arts throughout the district.

It was in the context of these efforts that the teachers and superintendent in District A began their work in the MELAF project. Up to this point the district's workshop approach had been rather insular—apart from the active involvement of one language-arts consultant, neither individual teachers nor the district as a whole often engaged in workshops outside the district. This insularity, coupled with the district's small size, helped to create a sense of unity among involved teachers and the superintendent. Unlike the superintendents from any of our other districts, District A's superintendent was a full participant in his MELAF team. Furthermore, almost every teacher on District A's MELAF team was committed to integration of the language arts, having taken summer courses and actively worked to improve teaching practice.

This is not to say that adoption of the practices advocated in MELAF did not pose challenges for this group. As one teacher said, "I remember how overwhelmed we were the first year and how confusing it was." However, the teachers' recent work for change at the district level, backed by the support of the superintendent, positioned them to quickly and enthusiastically embrace the philosophies of MELAF and consider how they might impact the district. As one high school teacher explained, "MELAF... has allowed us to refine and hone those practices that we had already committed ourselves to." Another later wrote,

> When [District A] joined MELAF as a demonstration site, the discussions and reflections on content standards and best practice ideas were like a vitamin megadose intensifying the power of the instructional strategies and curriculum work we had been crafting as a district. (Bell, 1995)

The teachers used this energy to continue their work toward workshop methods, as well as to build new projects through MELAF.

By the end of MELAF, all of District A's teacher participants had also taken on new roles as professional developers. Some were informal advocates for change in their buildings. In the district's high school, for example, a wood shop teacher who did not participate in MELAF reported that MELAF teachers helped him to include writing in his instruction: "[It is] an offshoot of the MELAF project. Because of the enthusiasm of a lot of these different folks that are very involved, you're seeing [writing] in places, I guess, that you wouldn't even expect to...." Most of the District A participants took on formal roles as well. As one teacher explained, "it's gone full circle.... Instead of being inserviced, we're inservicing now." Another followed with this comment, "We just believe in it so strongly that we're willing to do that on top of our own and whatever professional commitments we have in our regular

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teaching jobs. And it's exciting." Several District A teachers conducted multiple-week summer institutes on the teaching of reading and writing workshops for a nearby school district, over a 4-year period. District A also developed a brochure, a plan, and a protocol encouraging teachers from other districts to visit in order to observe and discuss how District A was "demonstrating" its commitment to both best practices in ELA and the state standards. Teachers and administrators from various districts, some more than an hour away, visited District A in teams. These guest teams visited classes from different grade levels and held end-of-visit debriefings with District A staff.

Most District A participants also took on new roles at the district, state, or national level. In the district, MELAF teachers were heavily involved in the creation of a new English Language Arts curriculum. In addition to their efforts within the district, several teachers have done presentations throughout the state or at national meetings. Others have become more engaged in the politics of schooling—some have written to school board members or presented to the State Board of Education. Also, unlike their peers in any other district, *all* of the District A teachers published articles in a state literacy journal. The abovementioned first-grade teacher who spoke out at the state board meeting has now become the district's language arts coordinator. One of the two high school teachers who presented on Directed Independent Reading took a one-year sabbatical to work toward her Ph.D. at a state university. She has since returned to a new appointment as the district's curriculum director.

Supported by their superintendent and his concern for language arts practice in the district, MELAF teachers grew in their individual practice and as change agents in their school, district, and beyond. Their combination of bottom-up and top-down efforts for change makes them unique among the four participating districts. At the end of the MELAF project, teachers in District A expressed their intention to continue a bottom-up quest for change, and to benefit from top-down support for their efforts. As one said,

> Once you begin to get a critical mass of people thinking similarly and caring about something and trying things and finding that they work, [it is essential] to be able to then go to administrators and say, "Look, this is what we're studying. This is what we're doing. This is what we're seeing. Come see."

In District A, the top administrator responded actively and positively to those overtures.

District B

District B's central administration was neither directly involved nor personally invested in MELAF. Rather, this district's administrators limited their participation to passive support for those teachers who agreed to become a part of the training program, and later for those efforts that evolved from the MELAF experience. At the time of our study, the district did not have strong district-level language arts leadership; perhaps because of this, District B's teacher participation in MELAF was characterized by teacher-led efforts to

reform literacy practice. In a clear case of bottom-up reform, MELAF participants from District B took ownership of the MELAF principles, transforming them into a district-wide framework. Indeed, District B's implementation of the MELAF reforms appears to be the most bottom-up approach of all of the four districts.

The initial teacher participants of MELAF were approached by an administrator who asked that they become a part of the initiative. According to one teacher who was not initially involved, it was natural for an administrator to feel that these particular teachers should be involved; they had a reputation for progressive thinking and educational authority: "They are the gurus, the experts, and I know a lot of teachers in our building go to them for advice or materials." These teachers became the primary instigators of reform in the district.

One participant had a history of encouraging colleagues to participate in professional development programs. Before coming to District B, she had actively participated in other programs and had recently been certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. A strong proponent of lifelong teacher education, she had experience—as both participant and presenter—in many professional development contexts. She had convinced a fellow teacher to join her in a recently completed writing workshop with the enticement, "You'll never teach the same again." She was especially enthusiastic about joining MELAF. In her words, "It sounded right down my alley because I like new educational adventures. I am one for always wanting to learn something new and something different."

The few other teachers whom she asked to join her in MELAF were all "people who had an interest in doing this type of thing." Throughout the MELAF training, their participation remained voluntary. The group initially included 12 teachers, representing the elementary, middle, and high school levels. These teachers varied widely in interest and experience. From the onset, the aforementioned teacher leader remained the group's visionary, openly discussing her aim to "reculture" the district.

By the end of the 3-year MELAF commitment, the group of participant teachers had become a powerful force in the district. In their interviews, they consistently attributed district reforms to the actions of teachers rather than district administrators:

> This group has gone out and talked to their administrators and found other teachers in buildings and within the district that seem to be willing to take risks, wanted to learn...And so this thing is growing and mushrooming, and it's an exciting time.

Another teacher said that "district administrators were interested in what it is we were doing." The teachers perceive their influence on the administration rather than the other way around.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the influence of MELAF is the District B English Language Arts Team, a framework that translated the principles of MELAF into a locally-developed professional development opportunity. Describing this effort as a "spinoff" or "outgrowth" of MELAF, the MELAF participant teachers invested their time, energy, and expertise in developing

and then implementing this initiative. As one participant notes, "This MELAF group in District B became influential in terms of curriculum development."

Administrative support for these efforts, however, was hard-won. In order to promote the English Language Arts Team in District B, teachers approached other teachers, building administrators, and district personnel, requesting their participation in this districtwide professional development effort. The teachers met with resistance from the district administration. As one teacher said, "These educators were trying to work up a nice document and... came up against these political constraints." Although the administration never supplied the support necessary to implement the intensive professional development effort envisioned by the teachers, it did eventually approve the teachers' plan. Some teachers noted that the administrators' support of the initiative seemed to be based on the program's association with MELAF: "The administration was impressed with how we operated as learners [in MELAF]."

The grass-roots nature of reform in District B did seem to encourage the district's MELAF participants to emphasize their roles as change-agents at both the classroom and district levels. All of the teachers spoke about specific changes they were making in classroom practice, but a few also spoke of their grant-writing efforts to fund district professional development initiatives, and of their roles as facilitators of those district-level efforts. Ultimately, 40 teachers from the district attended the professional development event that the MELAF participants had designed from the MELAF model. Although this represents a victory of sorts—in that a small group of teachers managed to fund and facilitate a professional development program—the small percentage of district teachers who benefited from those efforts points to the difficulties faced by the organizing teachers as they attempted to implement reforms without active administrative support.

Reform continues in District B. The NBPTS-certified middle school teacher has become the districtwide language arts consultant. A reform-minded assistant superintendent has been hired to guide the district's restructuring of its high schools to include small schools and career-based academies utilizing project-based teaching and integrated assessments. MELAF participants remain a part of this planning team and provide staff development for their colleagues throughout the district.

District C

District C's involvement with MELAF reforms was the most top-down in nature. District C employed two language arts coordinators who actively sought and implemented standards-based reforms. They also had the longest history of substantive, long-term professional development efforts. The presence of strong leaders at the district level meant that the district's teachers were not required to organize and implement district-level change. Because of this, the MELAF-inspired growth in District C was strongest at the level of individual teachers working to improve their classroom practice. In their interviews, all of the participants in this district emphasized changes in their classroom practice, but only one teacher spoke of implementing change at the building level, and none refer to their involvement in working for change

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in professional contexts within or beyond the district. The interviews also show that teachers credited the changes in their district to the efforts of the language arts coordinators. For instance, after the MELAF project had formally ended, one teacher remarked that it was the language arts coordinators who had kept MELAF going.

Through the efforts of these coordinators, District C's teachers had participated in previous professional development activities that prepared them to quite quickly begin weaving the content standards into their practice. One important experience of this type, which the district supported prior to MELAF, had centered on thematic instruction. Key to the District C teachers' MELAF experience was their decision to use MELAF as an opportunity to design and implement thematic units that integrated the content standards. This focus served to further direct the districts' teachers toward implementing change at the level of individual classroom practice, rather than in contexts beyond the classroom. In their interviews, District C's teachers often talked about their work toward change in the context of curriculum units, and their efforts to implement them. As one teacher wrote,

> A monumental task we faced was the development, implementation, evaluation and refinement of standards-based thematic units. It was critical to develop them early in the year in order to provide time to build student enablers and gather needed resources... Planning was slow and intentional as we attempted to incorporate the English language arts standards, district outcomes, and course- and grade-level curriculum based on broad conceptual themes.

Another teacher also wrote about the process of developing her unit. As part of this process, she collaborated with one of the District C language arts coordinators to talk about her unit and discover "how the content standards could be or were addressed within the unit."

To understand the level of individual change experienced by participant teachers as a result of MELAF, it is important to understand how the standards impacted their district as a whole. Of the four participating districts (and, again, through the efforts of their language arts coordinators), District C was the most actively involved in implementing the standards. The coordinators constructed district-level curricula and content standards in conjunction with the MELAF content standards. In many instances, District C ELA standards are closely aligned with the MELAF standards. For example, District C's vision statement and opening statements for grades K–12 are identical to those of the state content standards. In other instances, District C used the MELAF content standards as a starting point, from which they then developed district-specific content standards and curricula. Unlike teachers in Districts A and B, District C's teachers were not involved in the initial stages of constructing their district's curricula and content standards. Teachers were given an opportunity to examine the documents after they were drafted, and revisions were made in light of teacher input. Here again, however, the emphasis was on leadership providing tools that teachers could use to implement change in their individual classrooms. The teachers themselves were only tangentially involved in conceptualizing district-level change. Still, District C's curriculum revision coordinated all subjects through key principles underlying the state language arts standards; the resulting curriculum documents were the most thorough and thoughtful to emerge from the demonstration project sites.

Subsequent to MELAF, two teachers from the District C team have become building principals, and two others have become districtwide literacy consultants. The strong fifth-grade teacher "retired" to co-direct a National Writing Project site, consult, and write for publication. One of the lead consultants also "retired" to become a consultant, who was popular throughout the state. Another teacher from District C was asked to participate in developing the state's proficiency test. When asked about her role, she replied, "I think I'm going to have an important role in being able to influence the direction of that test, because it is based on the standards and benchmarks." So, here again, despite the team's reliance on two lead consultants during MELAF, role-shifts are occurring.

District C's focus on the standards is apparent in the extent to which teachers made specific reference to the standards and benchmarks in their interviews and writings. When asked about their experiences in the MELAF project, many District C teachers talked about the role of the standards and benchmarks. In other districts, teachers were more likely to reference the activities in which they engaged—for instance, conversations, reading, and writing—and less likely to speak explicitly about the standards and benchmarks themselves. In contrast, the District C teachers often speak explicitly about the standards' impact on their teaching. For instance, as one District C teacher explained "The content standards and benchmarks give you examples of how to [be your best] in the classroom." Another teacher said, "The project had us go through our work and look at the standards. And that has just broadened, mushroomed my teaching."

Both the strong language arts leadership and previous professional development experiences appear to have influenced the MELAF experiences of District C's teachers. These two related factors resulted in teachers who experienced MELAF in the context of directed, concentrated attention to the direct application of standards to their practice, and whose views of themselves as change-agents focused almost exclusively on the classroom.

District D

Like District A, District D's MELAF participants were strongly supported by the district's administration, particularly the assistant superintendent. One reason why District D was selected to participate in MELAF was its history of support for teachers' professional development—specifically, providing funds for teachers to attend conferences and workshops, and purchasing materials for teachers' use.

The district leadership also was invested in the language arts practices advocated in MELAF. Constructivist practices were already part of a districtwide push by the assistant superintendent. She, along with two elementary reading consultants, had an active interest in reforming language arts teaching, and they viewed MELAF as an opportunity to further encourage constructivist practices in language arts classrooms.

After the initial months of MELAF, the teacher participants from District D decided to make community-building the focus of their MELAF experiences. They saw MELAF as an opportunity to build community both among teach-

ers in the district and among students within classrooms. As a group, the District D teachers did not arrive at MELAF with the camaraderie of District A's participants, nor did they experience the grass-roots organizing of District B's teachers. Like the dynamic in District C, the influence within their district was primarily top-down. However, unlike their peers in District C, they did not come to the project with a common, focused, goal. Several of the District D teachers emphasized the sense of community that developed over the course of their participation in the MELAF project. One teacher said, "I think, basically, [MELAF] has proven that, given the time, that even as teachers we can become a community of learners." Another says, "I'm thinking about community within the classroom, but that was only modeled by the community feelings that I felt within the district. During [MELAF] I felt like I had such a safety zone and a net around me." The teachers speak of their MELAF colleagues as a "support group," as "validating each other," and as "continuing to meet" through a "desire to be together." They indicate that this sense of community developed as a result of their participation in MELAF.

The teachers in District D emphasized their increased confidence in themselves as change-agents in their classrooms. As one teacher said, "MELAF just gave me the push that I needed and the confidence that I needed." Elaborating on some of the changes in her practice, she said, "I no longer teach in tidy little packages, and little bits and pieces, or in very tiny little subject groupings.... The skills kind of flow from one subject to the other or the subject flows from one subject to the other." Other teachers talked about their growth as reflective teachers, increased intent in their teaching, and increased collaboration among students in their classrooms.

Most recently, District D served as a demonstration site for a national conference. Teachers opened their classroom doors and modeled their interpretations of best practices for language arts educators from across the country. District D teachers were among those noted above who, prior to the MELAF professional development project, would not have considered themselves "expert" enough to serve as models for other educators.

Although the teachers spoke of their roles as change-agents in the classroom, they often credited the district administration with facilitating that role. For instance, one teacher said, "I think as teachers we realized how many opportunities that we've been given here in District D that other districts have not had." Another teacher explicitly credited a top-down approach for facilitating change: "It needs to come from the top down, professional development does.... I don't think [change] would have happened if we hadn't been given the impetus from above." Another teacher said,

> I think District D has been wonderful about offering opportunities prior to MELAF for us to learn and to engage in discussions...After twenty-seven years I can honestly say that there hasn't been a year that I haven't been offered an opportunity to learn something new or work on some specific area...

Other teachers specifically referenced district or language arts leaders when they discussed their own increased ability to bring change to the classroom or district. For instance, one teacher said, "It has helped to have [the assistant superintendent] have a true vision of what should happen here and we have been able to sort of focus on that vision." She further stated, "Our

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superintendent has also created a climate for us to be able to [move in new directions]."

The teachers in District D clearly see themselves as change agents in their own classrooms, but only two teachers referred to changes they were attempting to make beyond the classroom. Much of the teachers' focus was on the increased sense of community among their MELAF team. Although this spirit appeared to be energizing, the potential changes that might occur as a result of that increased sense of community are primarily focused on individual practice. The teachers did not express active interest or involvement in changing district practice. Perhaps they did not perceive a need for change in their district. Rather, they credited the district with facilitating their own professional growth. On the other hand, District D has formed a permanent K–12 English Language Arts Committee that actively shapes district and building policies and professional learning opportunities.

Discussion

In summary, District A joined MELAF at the same time that their superintendent was encouraging a writing and reading workshop approach to language arts instruction. As a result, MELAF appeared to help District A teachers take this approach to new levels, with closer attention to documentation of student work and judgments about the quality of student work. At the same time, teacher learning resulted in districtwide efforts to revise curricula and implement portfolio assessment.

In District B, the MELAF project provided individual teacher leaders, as opposed to administrators, with the state sanctions that they needed in order to expand their efforts to the district level. MELAF helped these teachers refine their individual practices. Most significant, in this case, was the way that the project enabled language arts to become the focus of districtwide professional development, and the MELAF teachers to become leaders in this effort.

In contrast to the experience of District B, the most significant developments in District C were seen at the level of individual teachers refining their practice through close attention to standards and benchmarks. At the same time, the two strong language arts coordinators who led the MELAF effort in District C were able to help develop the district curriculum in ways that both supported and advanced the teachers' work.

Like their colleagues in District A, the teachers in District D enjoyed active support from district leadership for their MELAF activities. Perhaps due to the administration's involvement in and support of the project, the teachers often credit district-level change to the district leadership. The administration also led the teachers' efforts to focus their project involvement around a central issue: community-building. The teachers' comments on their own roles as change-agents are largely focused on this issue, citing their success in building community in their own classrooms, and with colleagues across developmental levels in their district.

There is evidence of change at many levels in each of these districts. The nature of the change, however, differs from district to district. These differences suggest that the changes that took place were a function of many factors, including the size and structure of the district, the district's "readiness" for change (i.e., previous history with regard to the subject area at hand), and the source of language arts leadership within the district.

Implications

Standards must make sense to committed, strong practitioners, or they may never become practice. Many research studies suggest that policy's relative lack of impact of on practice. In this standards project, we experienced a different and more positive outcome. To the extent that this was so, it may have been due to the great respect paid to the "need" to help teachers "make sense" of standards. That sense-making effort included relatively long-term professional development plans, expectation of experiments with practice, invitations to present and publish, and anticipation and facilitation of role-shifts by participants—which one member of the leadership team describes as "apprenticing ourselves to one another." Our stance regarded individuals and teams not as "servants" of the standards, nor as technicians implementing externally-developed policies, but instead as partners in the construction of policy and research-based practice.

One implication of our experience is that there may well be strategic points in a school system's development for investing large sums of money in professional development. The MELAF sites were selected because these districts were already actively engaged in reform efforts, and the federal resources invested in these districts allowed them to continue their successful construction of local learning opportunities, identification and support of teacher leaders, and their proactive approach to state policy.

A related implication is that it may be strategically effective to invest resources in districts with a core community of teacher-leaders who are willing to share their learning with others, and to invest more heavily in these teachers' professional learning. By strengthening effective teachers, helping them create local communities with other strong teachers, and giving them time to reflect on district or school conditions and their colleagues' learning, we may enable these individuals to assume critical leadership roles. They can then become effective disseminators of reforms, particularly if they have the active support of district administrators.

It is crucial that administrators buy into these reform efforts. It is equally crucial, however, that teachers perceive themselves as active agents in the district's push to implement reforms. If teachers perceive the administration as the primary instigator of reform, then they may feel less invested in working toward district-level change. They may also show less leadership in beyond-district initiatives.

Another implication is that state educational policies may have a greater impact if related professional learning opportunities are focused simultaneously on more than one level of change (i.e., classroom and building, or

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classroom and district). By attending to both individual and district practice, MELAF appears to have helped many of the participants redefine their roles. In districts where there was a perceived need for teacher involvement at the district level—either due to administrative support or lack of it—those roles included the active seeking and implementation of reforms at the district level. Many teachers began to see that multiple classrooms were serving the same students over the course of a K–12 education, and that it would be necessary to imagine a single classroom as part of a larger system if the standards were actually going to be implemented.

Finally, policymakers might note that state policies come into conversation with local contexts and individuals. Districts are not blank slates, but rather places with particular histories and competing forces that shape the implementation of any new policy. These stories also suggest that the interactions between new and old understandings can be orchestrated through long-term professional learning. Change can occur, but policymakers must be strategic about how to develop district capacity and strategically use extant resources to leverage more change.

Through the MELAF project, state policymakers were perceived to have "given permission" to local districts to use any of a variety of strategies that seemed to fit their local contexts, in order to achieve the vision implicit in the standards documents. That "permission" allowed local districts to take ownership of the vision. Because individual districts made the content standards and benchmarks their own, and had opportunities to determine the steps their districts could take while listening to conversations and decisions in other districts, what had initially seemed like externally-imposed mandates became parts of the districts' own aims, either at the behest of administrators, or the teachers, or both. When state policies are understood and supported by district teachers and administrators, they may be used to "sanction" grass-roots efforts that are aimed in the same directions. This appears to increase the potential of actual policy implementation, and to increase the potential influence of grass-roots initiatives.

Author Note

Elizabeth Dutro is Assistant Professor of Language, Literacy and Culture at the University of Washington, Seattle. Her research interests include standards-based reforms in literacy education and literacy as gendered practice.

Maria Chesley Fisk is a doctoral candidate in educational administration and policy at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include school leadership and connections between policy and classroom instruction.

Richard Koch is Professor of English at Adrian College, where he teaches writing and the teaching of writing. His research interests include the relationships between classroom literacy pedagogy, assessment, and social justice. He recently co-authored *The portfolio guidebook: Implementing quality in an age of standards* (Christopher-Gordon, 2000) with Jean Schwartz-Petterson.

Laura Roop is an outreach project manager at the University of Michigan School of Education, where she directs the Oakland Writing Project, a National Writing Project site. She studies models of professional development, systemic reform, and university/school collaboration. In January 2001 her essay "Surprising ourselves: Toward truly democratic literacies and methodologies" appeared in *English Education*.

Karen K. Wixson is Professor of Education and Dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in literacy education. She has recently published two articles in collaboration with Sheila Valencia, from the University of Washington: "Inside English language arts standards: What's in a grade?," which appeared in *Reading Research Quarterly*, and "Literacy policy and policy research that make a difference," forthcoming in the 2001 *National Reading Conference Yearbook*.

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