
Negotiating the Slippery Slope: School Change and Literacy Achievement

Newspaper headlines from across the United States reflect the turmoil in public education today, with some states protesting federal requirements for testing, some states lowering proficiency requirements, other states raising proficiency requirements, and even kindergarten and preschool children facing higher academic expectations. These headlines, reflecting the accountability pressures of higher standards and high-stakes tests, are having predictable effects upon educators in schools. My home state of Hawaii is no exception. "Teachers say they're the ones being left behind," stated a headline in the *Honolulu Advertiser*, while the line below read, "Morale low, frustration high among many" (DePledge, 2004).

I believe that we, as literacy researchers, can make valuable contributions by working alongside educators in schools during what appears to be a critical point for public education in the United States. My purpose here is to discuss my experiences with school change in response to higher standards: how I became involved in this work and the insights I have gained about working at the school level, scaling up the change process, levels of implementation, and student results. Those of us involved with change efforts know that we are negotiating a slippery slope, a precarious situation in which schools, especially those serving high numbers of students living in poverty, may be labeled as failures to be rescued through the privatization of education. For example, the Hawaii State Board of Education awarded \$7.9 million in contracts to three private companies to undertake restructuring efforts at 20 schools that failed to meet targets for improved test scores under federal guidelines (Hurley, 2005).

My research has centered on issues of literacy instruction for students of diverse backgrounds, those who differ from the mainstream in terms of ethnicity, social class, and primary language. Specifically, I have studied

culturally responsive and constructivist forms of teaching (Au, 1997b). A theme running through my work has been the importance of giving students of diverse backgrounds opportunities to engage in higher level thinking with text and to develop ownership of literacy (Au, 1997a). I spend time in Hawaii schools nearly every week, and it has been a humbling and distressing experience to observe the rapidly diminishing opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds to experience constructivist forms of teaching. As in other states, many schools in low-income communities in Hawaii have chosen, or have been required to adopt, packaged programs as a panacea for low test scores (Dillon, 2003).

Still, I see signs of hope. My school change project in Hawaii is one of five in the Consortium for Responsible School Change in Literacy, based at the Reading Research Center at the University of Minnesota. These projects follow the same principles of support for organizational change, support for individual change, and a focus on balanced, challenging instruction to improve literacy achievement (Taylor, 2005). The success of these projects indicates that many schools may be ready, willing, and able to engage with approaches that invest in the professional development of teachers, rather than buy yet another packaged program. Literacy researchers have an important role in helping these schools engage in long-term change processes that will enable them to bring all students, including those of diverse backgrounds, to high levels of literacy.

I believe this interest in long-term change, centered on the professional development of teachers, is occurring as a result of what Darling-Hammond (2003) calls midcourse corrections to the standards movement. While the shadow of high-stakes testing looms large, many educators in the United States seem to be realizing that quick-fix remedies, such as intensive test preparation or curriculum narrowing, have only a small effect on test scores and rob students of a high-quality education.

My optimism about the possibilities for change in schools comes from work in progress with an approach called the Standards-Based Change Process (SBC Process), developed in collaboration with educators in Hawaii. The SBC Process guides a school to create a system for improving student achievement through standards, by focusing on a nine-item To Do List (Au, 2005). The To Do List involves teachers in discussing their philosophical beliefs, setting clear benchmarks for student learning aligned with state standards, assessing

evidence to monitor students' progress toward meeting the benchmarks, and making instructional improvements on the basis of an analysis of this evidence. To date, many elementary schools in Hawaii have experienced success with the SBC Process, both in terms of students' literacy achievement and teachers' professional development, and my discussion draws on work with these schools. Plans for engaging teachers in middle and high schools with the SBC Process are currently being refined.

Engaging in work with school change has brought about significant shifts in my thinking as a literacy researcher. I have been fascinated by issues of school change since reading Sarason's (1971) classic book, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*. For many years, however, I saw my role as helping classroom teachers to improve their literacy instruction rather than bringing about change in the culture of the school. My research on the literacy learning of Native Hawaiian students showed me the importance of the community of learners, central to the success of the readers' and writers' workshop (Carroll, Wilson, & Au, 1996). Gradually, my thinking evolved to the point where I made the connections to teachers' learning and realized that my work should focus on guiding teachers in a school to form a community of learners, or what DuFour (2004) has called a professional learning community. In keeping with constructivist principles, teachers would develop their own literacy curricula, including goals for student learning, assessments, and instruction, in a manner that would build their ownership of the change process.

Beginning the Work in School Change

My involvement with issues of school change began as a service to schools, not because of a conscious intention to launch a new line of research. Still, I can see in retrospect that this work, aimed at developing professional learning communities in schools, was a logical extension of my earlier interest in developing classrooms as literate communities. In 1997 I received a call from Kitty Aihara, the Title I coordinator at Kipapa Elementary School in Mililani, a suburban community on the island of Oahu. (Title I of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act allocates funds to schools serving students from low-income backgrounds.) Kitty asked if I would help her school with its reading curriculum. She explained that, while work on this curriculum had been underway for nearly three years, no consensus had been reached about its details and, perhaps more seriously, teacher buy-in remained an issue.

Kitty's invitation provided me with the opportunity to try a new approach to curriculum development. I had seen that classroom teachers, especially in Title I schools, almost always saw curriculum as something imposed by experts—who might either be outsiders, such as university professors, or specialists in their own school or district. Teachers often did not develop ownership of the curriculum because they had not had a part in creating it. What would happen if the Kipapa teachers were given the opportunity to construct their own reading curriculum?

I had intended to begin with just a handful of volunteers, but Kitty insisted that all the teachers in the school should be involved in the process from the outset. "We're ready for it," she assured me. Of course, Kitty knew the Kipapa teachers better than I did. In the years that followed, remarkable progress occurred at Kipapa. What came to be known as the Standards-Based Change Process evolved from analyzing what worked at Kipapa to bring the teachers together as a professional learning community and move curriculum development forward.

One of the first lessons I learned was that school change must involve all teachers in the school from the very start. My earlier thought had been to "go with the goers," the logic being that interested teachers will readily make innovative procedures part of their practice, and their success will inspire other teachers to follow suit. I understood after working at Kipapa that attempting to introduce change by working with just a handful of "goers" virtually guarantees that the effort will fail to spread through the whole school. One reason is that the faculty is divided into participants and nonparticipants from the start, creating an attitude of distance on the part of nonparticipants that is difficult to overcome. Additionally, and more significantly, "going with the goers" often signals that the school's leaders have failed to confront issues that may be dividing the faculty. These issues need to be addressed and agreements about common ground for moving forward reached before substantial change can take place. Improvements in students' literacy achievement of the magnitude needed to raise test scores cannot be made by a handful of classroom teachers who work with students for just a year. Students have the best chance of reaching high levels of literacy when all teachers at a school, at every grade level and department, make a strong commitment to the change process and improved instruction.

A second lesson I learned early on is that a school that successfully negotiates the change process must have a Kitty Aihara: an on-site curriculum leader

with deep knowledge of the school and its faculty. Now when I begin work with a new school on the SBC Process, one of the first questions I ask is “Who is your Kitty Aihara?” As Fullan (interviewed by Sparks, 2003) reminds us, change in schools is “technically simple and socially complex” (p. 5). I can offer a new school technical expertise in the form of my knowledge of the SBC Process and my experience with its implementation at other schools, as well as background about the literature on school change. However, I don’t have knowledge of the social complexities, such as the relationship between the administration and the faculty or the relationships among teachers, that can determine the success or failure of a change effort. Planning SBC Process workshops with the school’s Kitty Aihara helps me address concerns that may be troubling teachers and correctly gauge the timing of moving teachers forward to the next step.

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the importance of the principal in leading school change efforts (e.g., Portin, 2004). Certainly, principals must be curriculum leaders. In my experience, however, principals are too busy with administrative responsibilities to manage the details of implementing the SBC Process or similar approaches to school change, which are likely to require numerous meetings with teachers, visits to their classrooms, reviewing of products such as rubrics and student anchor pieces, and planning of professional development sessions. This important work is best assumed by a curriculum coordinator or resource teacher who can provide the diligent leadership needed on a daily basis to keep the change process moving forward. This does not mean that the school’s Kitty Aihara works alone; schools successful with the SBC Process often have a team or committee assigned to lead this effort.

With few exceptions, I work with the teachers at a particular school only one or two days during the academic year. Interestingly, my absence seems to help the school as much as my presence. Although details of implementing the SBC Process need to be tailored to each school, the overall pattern of a school’s movement through the SBC Process is clearly defined by the To Do List and the four levels, discussed below. I can easily advise a school about what its next steps should be—that is, provide technical expertise—through email messages and phone calls. The main challenge at a school does not lie in figuring out the next steps in the change process but in managing the social complexities. Staff members know that they have more knowledge of these complexities than I do, and they learn to rely on each other and increase

their own capacity for moving the SBC Process forward. The SBC Process appears to have staying power because it is managed by a school's own staff, not by an outsider.

Spread of the School Change Process in Hawaii

One reason for my optimism about the possibilities for change in schools stems from the fact that news of the success of the SBC Process in Hawaii spread entirely by word of mouth, suggesting openness to a new approach for improving students' literacy achievement. When an approach works well, it generates interest in neighboring schools. From a single school, Kipapa, the SBC Process spread to other schools on the island of Oahu, and then to all but one public school on the island of Hawaii and to two schools on the island of Maui. As of now, teams of teacher leaders in over 100 schools in our state have received four or more days of professional development in the SBC Process.

About 50, or slightly fewer than half of all Hawaii schools involved with the SBC Process, have shown the ability to sustain the change process beyond a year or two. These successful schools are members of the Standards Network of Hawaii, directed by my colleague Sharyn Hirata. The network brings curriculum leaders from the various schools together for quarterly meetings at which they receive research updates, learn of progress with the SBC Process at each school, and share solutions to common obstacles, such as finding adequate time for grade levels to meet.

What about the other schools? Almost all the schools that discontinued the SBC Process, or that failed to make steady progress, began participating through projects aimed at bringing about change in clusters of 6 to 42 schools. The problem with working with schools in a cluster, usually as part of a district initiative, is that individual schools are in different places with respect to their readiness for change. Often, district initiatives do not take these differences into account. Some of these schools might have chosen on their own to participate in the SBC Process, while others would have preferred another avenue. However, all schools ended up participating in the same professional development sessions.

A lesson I learned from these larger-scale efforts is that the SBC Process is definitely not the solution for improving literacy achievement at every school. At some schools, staff members hold to the belief that the answer to improving

literacy achievement lies somewhere out there—that someone, somewhere, has developed just the right program. In contrast, schools successful with the SBC Process realize that the answer to improving literacy achievement must come from within.

Another lesson I learned, which again bolstered my optimism, is that the success of the SBC Process has nothing to do with the reading program already in place at the school. I had assumed that the SBC Process would have the best chance for success at schools where teachers were working with constructivist language arts curricula. This assumption was reinforced by the fact that Kipapa and Holomua, the first two schools to use the SBC Process, have home-grown, literature-based reading curricula. What I found instead is that schools can experience success with the SBC Process while using packaged programs, including basals and highly scripted approaches that, at least on paper, allow teachers little room for instructional decision making.

I have learned that I can and should work with schools interested in the SBC Process, regardless of the reading program in place, because schools' ability to manage change and improve instruction seems quite independent of reading program. I have observed in Hawaii that the same packaged program may lead to improved test scores in one school but fail to yield the same positive results in another school serving a comparable population of students. What accounts for the difference? It is the culture of the school, not the particular reading program, that has the greater effect on teachers' professional development and student achievement (cf. Mosenthal, Lipson, Sortino, Russ, & Mekkelsen, 2002).

My decision to work on change in schools having all kinds of reading programs came about through necessity. I knew the SBC Process would have limited impact, especially on the literacy instruction of students of diverse backgrounds, if its application were limited only to schools with a constructivist philosophy of instruction. As a researcher, I have studied and found positive effects for constructivist forms of teaching (Au & Carroll, 1997), and I know that the readers' and writers' workshops offer rich opportunities to build the literacy proficiency and ownership of students of diverse backgrounds (Carroll et al., 1996). But I realize as well that conducting these workshops requires high levels of teacher expertise and that many teachers have neither the opportunities for professional development nor the ongoing support needed to reach such levels of expertise.

To guide a school through the SBC Process, I find that I cannot start with the goal of imposing on teachers my own views about literacy instruction, however cherished and validated by research. Instead, I find that change is better promoted if I encourage the teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school's present reading program, and to find ways of compensating for the weaknesses. This is not difficult. Usually, the reading program has been in place for at least two years, and the teachers already know its strengths and weaknesses. For example, teachers at schools using scripted programs typically identify two problems: Students cannot comprehend text beyond the literal level, and they lack the motivation to read. The teachers' analysis creates the opportunity for me to suggest ideas to promote students' comprehension strategies (Raphael & Au, in press) and voluntary reading. Teachers are receptive to these ideas because they have been presented in response to needs for improved instruction that they themselves identified. In this roundabout way, I find myself returning to issues of higher level thinking with text and ownership of literacy.

Scaling Up the SBC Process

In 2002, five years after its start in Hawaii, the SBC Process was implemented in 10 schools in Chicago, under the auspices of Partnership READ, funded by the Chicago Community Trust and directed by Taffy Raphael at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Obviously, Hawaii and Chicago provide widely differing contexts for school change to improve literacy achievement. The Hawaii State Department of Education, the only statewide school district, is the tenth largest in the United States, with about 180,000 students and 13,000 teachers. The average poverty level in Hawaii's public schools is 50% (based on the number of students qualifying for free or reduced-cost lunch under federal guidelines). The Chicago Public Schools is the third largest district in the United States, with about 427,000 students and 41,000 teachers—a system two to three times as large as that of Hawaii. The average poverty level in Chicago's public schools, 85%, is much higher than in Hawaii. Chicago has provided a stern test of the SBC Process, but the good news is that the approach seems to be working there, as it has in Hawaii.

The spread of the SBC Process to schools in Hawaii, and then to Chicago, raises issues of scaling up, a key concern with school change efforts (Coburn, 2003). Earlier, I indicated that many of the schools unsuccessful in the SBC Process were part of change efforts involving clusters of schools. I believe the

SBC Process can be an effective framework for change projects involving clusters of schools, but certain conditions must be in place to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

A first condition is that the SBC Process cannot be mandated; each school must have a chance to learn about the SBC Process and to decide for itself whether this approach provides a good match to its situation. For example, the curriculum coordinator at a high-poverty school told me that each grade level had been working to improve writing instruction, but they were having difficulty pulling their efforts into a writing curriculum coordinated across the whole school. She saw the SBC Process as a way to help her school build a coherent or staircase curriculum in writing, and her judgment proved correct. To take a contrasting example, a group of teacher leaders told me that they knew their school could not work successfully with the SBC Process. This school did not have anyone on site to help support the change process and work with teachers in an ongoing manner. There had been a position available, but the faculty decided to hire a music resource teacher to provide the students with extra instruction. This decision may have been important in enhancing arts education in their school, but it meant that work with the SBC Process would flounder from lack of leadership. This example illustrates the kind of decisions made in a school not yet ready to come together as a professional learning community, where the administration and teachers work together toward common goals. These school leaders decided, wisely, that their school should not attempt to implement the SBC Process.

A second condition is that provisions must be in place to provide continuing external support for each school. In Hawaii, a trainer of trainers model—in which teacher leaders are provided professional development on the SBC Process and expected to guide implementation at their school—has had only limited success. Teachers do not want to be seen as telling other teachers what to do. Change proceeds more smoothly when an external facilitator, such as a district resource teacher or university professor, works with the curriculum coordinator to introduce teachers in a school to the SBC Process. Teacher leaders can then assist their grade levels or departments with various tasks, such as creating benchmarks or classroom-based assessments, which their background in the SBC Process has prepared them to address.

A third condition is that support must be customized to match conditions in each school. In my experience, one-size-fits-all thinking has been one of the

downfalls of SBC Process projects involving clusters of schools. For example, a project-wide SBC Process session might address the topic of collaborative assessment conferences that provide teachers the opportunity closely to analyze student work (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999). Collaborative assessment conferences can be one of the most valuable professional development activities in the SBC Process. However, how collaborative assessment conferences are introduced, and the timing of their introduction, almost always needs to be handled differently at different schools. For example, at a school where teachers have experience scoring student work according to their own rubrics, events similar to collaborative assessment conferences are already taking place. In this case, the conferences can simply be introduced as a refinement to teachers' existing practices. In contrast, it may be necessary to delay the introduction of collaborative assessment conferences at a school where teachers have not yet begun the systematic collection of evidence tied to benchmarks. In short, when all three conditions are in place, the SBC Process is likely to be an effective basis for literacy improvement projects involving clusters of schools.

Work with the SBC Process in schools in Hawaii and Chicago suggests that it can address several knotty problems of practice (Au, Hirata, & Raphael, in press). The SBC Process can help schools view change as recursive rather than a one-time event. It can lead schools to make the shift from viewing accountability for student learning as an imposition by external institutions, such as the federal government, to a responsibility valued for internal, ethical reasons. It can facilitate development of a coherent curriculum, leading to the vision of the excellent reader or writer who graduates from the school. Finally, the SBC Process addresses the need for focused professional development. Curriculum coordinators in Hawaii report that teachers need about eight days per year to work on tasks related to the SBC Process, and they plan accordingly.

Coburn (2003) proposes a sophisticated view of scaling up that goes beyond an increase in the number of schools involved in a change effort. She conceptualizes scaling up in terms of four related dimensions: (1) depth, or the extent to which the change effort affects classroom instruction; (2) sustainability, or the length of time a change effort can be maintained at a school; (3) spread, or the adopting of new norms and instructional principles within classrooms and schools; and (4) a shift in the ownership of reform from external to internal. Documentation efforts underway in Hawaii and Chicago—including

interviews with educators, videotapes of professional development sessions, photographs of classrooms, and field notes—are providing preliminary indications that the SBC Process can be scaled up in a manner consistent with these four dimensions.

Four Levels of Implementation

Charting the progress of Kipapa and Holomua allowed me to see that the SBC Process moves through four levels of implementation at successful schools: (1) initial implementation, (2) three-times-per-year reporting of results, (3) curriculum guides, and (4) student portfolios. I discuss the first three levels below, as these are well understood. The fourth level, student portfolios, is the subject of ongoing study, as it is just being implemented schoolwide by Kipapa and Holomua elementary schools.

Level 1: Initial Implementation

The first phase involves teachers in gaining an initial understanding of the components needed to implement a complete system for improving student achievement through standards. When I started working with Kipapa and Holomua, I viewed the change process in four parts: goals for student learning, assessment related to monitoring students' progress toward meeting those goals, analysis and presentation of assessment evidence, and implementation of any needed instructional improvements.

These steps built upon earlier work with teachers in the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP, Au & Carroll, 1997). I had learned from this work that one of the keys to improving students' literacy achievement was teachers' clarity about end-of-year learning goals or grade-level benchmarks. We found in KEEP that if experienced teachers in high-poverty schools knew the grade-level benchmarks, they could provide instruction allowing approximately two-thirds of their students to meet these targets, as indicated by classroom-based assessments of literacy (Asam et al., 1994). Before the grade-level benchmarks were introduced, only one-third of the students in these same schools had attained comparable levels of performance as readers and writers.

As I worked at Kipapa and Holomua, and then with 14 neighboring schools, I found that I needed to be more specific when explaining the components of the system to teachers. For example, teachers found it helpful when I divided goals for student learning into grade-level benchmarks written in teachers' professional language and "I Can" statements written in language understandable to

students. I found that teachers needed to understand the distinction between identifying the kinds of evidence they would use to monitor students' progress, such as written responses to literature, and the procedures to be followed in collecting that evidence, such as the amount of time students would be given to complete the task.

In the fall of 2002, through this evolution, I had arrived at a set of nine items. One day I met with a group of resource teachers to plan a district-wide initiative involving a series of five professional development workshops on the SBC Process for teacher leaders from over 40 schools. Sharon Nakagawa, the district administrator and former principal leading the initiative, pointed to the nine items I had written on the whiteboard and asked if that was what I wanted the schools to accomplish. When I nodded yes, she said, "Then call it the To Do List."

As a researcher, I cringed at the linear and directive connotations of the phrase "To Do List," but I learned over time that Sharon's intuition was correct. Principals, curriculum coordinators, and classroom teachers had grown weary of devoting long hours to strategic plans, vision and mission statements, performance indicators, and other activities related to standards-based education. They had started to resent standards-based education because they found that all of their hard work was contributing neither to improvements in students' achievement nor to a sense of professional accomplishment. I knew that the SBC Process could lead schools to a system for improving student achievement through standards, where teachers' efforts would finally amount to something. Yet I was unwittingly presenting the SBC Process in a manner that did not make its full potential evident to schools.

As a literacy researcher, I had a tendency to emphasize the flexible and nuanced nature of the system. Sharon recognized that this emphasis could lead educators in the schools to perceive the system as vague and complicated. Now when I introduce the SBC Process at a school, I describe the nine items in the To Do List, as shown in Figure 1, and I ask the teachers to discuss in grade levels which items they already have in place and which items they need to develop. Teachers still work through the To Do List in a flexible way, according to their own judgment about next steps, and I can explain the nuances as they move along. But teacher buy-in to the change process is made more certain because I have learned to present the SBC Process in a clear and straightforward manner centering on the To Do List.

Level 2: Three-Times-Per-Year Reporting of Results

The second phase in the SBC Process occurs when teachers arrive at a regular schedule of collecting evidence of students' progress toward meeting benchmarks and reporting their results to the whole school. In the SBC Process teachers collect evidence at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Schools generally establish one- or two-week windows when every teacher will collect evidence for the pretest, midyear check, and posttest. Schools working with the SBC Process are given a template that teachers can follow in preparing their presentations. This template includes all the items in the To Do List so that teachers can share their grade-level benchmarks, procedures for collecting evidence, rubrics, and anchor pieces.

Sharing this information provides a detailed picture of the expectations of the teachers at all grades and promotes the school's building of a staircase curriculum, as inconsistencies are identified and remedied. For example, teachers at one grade level will remark to those at another, "We didn't know you were teaching that, but now that we do, we can build on what you've started." Teachers present bar graphs based on the scoring of evidence by rubrics, indicating the number of students who are working on, meeting, or exceeding the grade-level benchmarks. They discuss their analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses and the instructional improvements they plan to implement. Often, they conclude their presentations with reflections on their grade level's progress with the SBC Process, including current issues, such as the need to refine a rubric or develop comprehension strategy lessons. For a school's leadership team as well as for me, these presentations provide information valuable to the tailoring of future professional development on the SBC Process for these teachers.

Many schools enter Level 1 but fail to arrive at Level 2. In my experience, Level 2 represents a turning point because it requires a school to focus on teaching to students' needs as literacy learners, as indicated by the assessment evidence teachers have collected. A substantial number of schools can neither develop nor sustain such a focus. The term "Christmas tree" is used to characterize a school glittering with an over-abundance of shiny new initiatives that fragment teachers' time and attention and, in the end, fail to yield improved student learning (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). While the term "Christmas tree school" originated in Chicago, Hawaii has many such schools as well. Often, the leaders of these schools tell me they cannot afford

to set aside the time needed for teachers to work with the SBC Process and to arrive at three-times-per-year reporting of reading or writing results because “our math scores are low so we have to work on math,” “science is coming up and we have to work on that too,” “we’re starting a new tutoring program,” and so on. When I make it clear that it takes a concerted effort over two to three years to see the effects of the SBC Process on student progress, the leaders at these schools tell me that the SBC Process is “too slow” and “we don’t have that kind of time.” I have concluded that schools unwilling to take the time to arrive at three-times-per-year reporting of results, that lack the discipline to stay the course and focus on what Schmoker (2004) calls “small wins,” will almost certainly fail to improve students’ literacy achievement.

Level 3: Curriculum Guides

The third level centers on teachers’ development of curriculum guides. Although I saw the importance of teachers building the literacy curriculum, I did not foresee teachers actually creating their own curriculum guides as a phase in the SBC Process. I had developed curriculum guides with input from teachers while at KEEP, but I had always thought that classroom teachers would see the organization and writing of the guides as too time-consuming and laborious, given their already busy schedules. Events proved me wrong.

One day, after Kipapa had been in the SBC Process for three years, a small group of teachers went to a meeting with representatives of the three other elementary schools in the area. The other teachers were discussing the reading programs in use at their schools, including basal reading programs and a primary-grade program developed in Australia. They turned to the Kipapa teachers and asked, “What reading program do you use?” This simple question filled the Kipapa teachers with dismay because they did not have a quick phrase to describe their own home-grown, literature-based approach. Kipapa is the only Title I school in this suburban community, and this fact may have contributed to the teachers’ self-doubt. Perhaps, they thought, we should adopt a program at our school.

Kipapa is a close-knit school, and word spread quickly that some teachers had doubts about continuing with the home-grown approach to reading developed through the SBC Process. Rumors circulated that some teachers wanted to adopt a basal reading program. Certain circumstances contributed to the atmosphere of uneasiness. The principal, a steady force behind the SBC Process, was on medical leave. Kitty Aihara had just retired, to be replaced as the

school's curriculum coordinator by Corinne Kalilikane, an experienced and respected classroom teacher at Kipapa but new to this leadership position.

Corinne alerted me to the situation, and together we worked out a plan to address the situation. In two tense meetings, first with the primary teachers and then with the upper grade teachers, we directly addressed concerns about the direction Kipapa was taking in developing its own reading curriculum. The turning point of the first meeting occurred when one of the teachers spoke up. She said that she had just discussed the situation with the teacher seated beside her, and that they had no idea why the other teachers were concerned. "We like what we're doing in reading," she declared. Discussion flowed freely after that. The primary teachers noted that their discomfort stemmed largely from uncertainty about what label to give the new approach to reading. In fact, they too favored the home-grown approach to reading and wanted to continue with it. "We'll call it the Kipapa Reading Curriculum," I said. "The next time somebody asks what reading program you use, you say, 'We use the Kipapa Reading Curriculum.'" The primary teachers agreed that each grade level would develop its own reading curriculum guide, and we discussed how each guide would have sections for goals for student learning, instructional strategies, instructional materials, and assessment, in keeping with Tyler's (1950) classic principles of curriculum. So far, so good.

After school, I conducted a similar meeting with the upper grade teachers. Soon, these teachers were deep in discussion, weighing the pros and cons of adopting a program versus continuing with their home-grown effort. From my vantage point at the front of the school library, where I stood to guide the discussion, I watched as one by one, the primary teachers silently lined up along the bookcases to see what the upper grade teachers would decide. In the end, these teachers also agreed to stay the course and to develop their own reading curriculum guides.

That day at Kipapa taught me that a long-term school change effort must do more than involve teachers in a process. The SBC Process must also lead teachers to a product, a curriculum guide that will give them something concrete to show for all their hard work. Those who have seen the literacy curriculum guides created by the teachers at Kipapa, Holomua, and other SBC Process schools are usually amazed by the thought and effort reflected in this work. Teachers who create curriculum guides spend hours and hours on this task and accept the notion that the guides will always be under revision.

Development of the guides proceeds quite smoothly because, by following the To Do List, teachers have already prepared many of the materials they need.

When drafts of the curriculum guides are ready, a carousel is held, usually lasting about one hour. Guides for each grade level are placed on a table in the school library. Each grade level has 10 minutes to look at the guides prepared by one of the other grade levels. For example, the kindergarten teachers spend this time examining the guides of the first-grade teachers. During the following 10 minutes, they move on to the guides prepared by the second-grade teachers, and so on. Teachers have some familiarity with the work of other grade levels due to the three-times-per-year presentations of results, and this knowledge increases greatly once the curriculum guides have been drafted. Together, the sharing of these presentations and the guides contribute to the development of a coherent, staircase curriculum across the entire school. The close coordination of assessment and instruction across the grade levels appears to be one of the factors contributing to improved literacy achievement at schools working with the SBC Process.

Results for Students: Preliminary Findings

The SBC Process aims to improve students' literacy achievement through professional development that empowers teachers to develop their own curricula. The goals of this process are to improve the quality of the educational experience for students and teachers alike. So far, I have referred to evidence of classroom-based assessments, which almost invariably shows growth in students' literacy performance, in areas such as summarization, over the course of a school year. However, given the prominence of scores on high-stakes tests as measures of accountability, it is important to ask if the SBC Process might also have an effect on these results.

Case examples suggest that some elementary schools with a strong commitment to the SBC Process, such as Kipapa in Hawaii and South Loop in Chicago, can see a dramatic rise in test scores (Au et al., in press). In terms of large-scale analyses, test results for one cohort of students in Hawaii, fifth graders in spring 2004, have been analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). These preliminary findings indicate that the SBC Process has a small positive effect on Grade 5 state reading test scores in high-poverty elementary schools. Test results increase by 2.79 scale score points for every 1-point increase in level of implementation, after accounting for Grade 3 state reading test scores ($p = .03$). High-poverty schools

are defined as those with a higher percentage of students from low-income backgrounds than the state mean of 50%. Of the 90 schools in this category, 33 had participated in the SBC Process; both SBC Process and non-SBC Process schools had mean poverty levels of 59%. The finding of higher test scores was related to the level the school had reached in the SBC Process, as described above (i.e., initial implementation, three-times-per-year reporting, curriculum guides). Years in the SBC Process approached but did not reach significance, suggesting that schools must make definite moves forward in the change process before reading scores improve. While these preliminary results are promising, analyses of scores for additional cohorts will be required before firm conclusions can be drawn about the effects of the SBC Process on results for large-scale reading tests.

Conclusion

Since that eventful day of meetings in the library, the Kipapa teachers and I have discussed how three years of hard work on school change was almost lost in an instant. I have come to see this moment at Kipapa as another kind of slippery slope. Figure 2 illustrates the journey of a school such as Kipapa through the change process, depicted as climbing up a mountain. Before the journey begins, the school stands, with the majority of other schools serving many students of diverse backgrounds, on the plain of failure where poor literacy achievement is the norm. As the school progresses through the change process, it steadily makes its way toward the peak of success, the point at which it can see significant improvement in students' literacy achievement. Danger looms, though, because just before the peak of success lies the slippery slope, the time at which self-doubt is likely to set in. Self-doubt does not occur earlier, because schools lower on the mountain, or at an early level of change, are not yet operating in ways very different from most other schools.

Things are different once the school has made significant progress and nears the peak of success. Suddenly, when asked an innocent question—such as, “What reading program do you use?”—teachers may realize, perhaps for the first time, just how very different things are at their school. They look down at the plain, which they have forgotten was a place of failure, and become aware of their high altitude on the mountain or distance from the norm. Thus, at the very time when the school is closer to the peak of success than ever before, it runs the risk of sliding all the way back down to the bottom.

Fortunately, the Kipapa teachers managed to overcome the slippery slope. During one of our discussions, a teacher extended the metaphor. She explained her insight in words to this effect:

When we reach the first peak, we're going to say, 'What about that peak over there?' And then we'll be climbing to the top of a new mountain. And there'll always be other mountains to climb. We're never going to be satisfied.

The other teachers agreed that she was correct. This willingness to take on new challenges is the hallmark of schools successful in the SBC Process.

I began with the notion that literacy researchers working on schools change are negotiating a slippery slope. I would like to close by referring to the meaning assigned to the phrase "slippery slope" by philosophers. In the causal version of the slippery slope, it is asserted that if A happens, then by a series of small steps, eventually Z will happen. If Z is a drastic outcome, one that should never be allowed to occur, then A should never be allowed to happen either. Sometimes I allowed myself to slide down this type of logical (or illogical) slippery slope, fearing the worst for a school because it had adopted a certain packaged program. Now I have learned to have faith that, given the opportunity, teachers will see the weaknesses in their instruction and act decisively to make corrections.

Two weeks ago I attended a meeting for teacher leaders at nine schools in the SBC Process. First on the agenda was a presentation by teachers from a school that has used a scripted reading program for a number of years. These teachers had found that the program helped their students learn to decode but did little to advance comprehension and motivation to read. They had compensated for these weaknesses with activities such as reading books aloud in class, highlighting a principal's book of the month that was featured in all classrooms, and teaching lessons on how to prepare a written response to literature including interpretations supported with evidence from text. I had been at the school four months earlier to get the teachers started with curriculum guides in writing, the focus of the SBC Process in these nine schools. In their presentation, the teachers shared their writing curriculum guides. The first teacher explained that the guides were "a road map of what we're going to teach." The second teacher stated that, before creating the curriculum guides, she had experienced the feeling that she was working hard but not accomplishing anything. The third teacher described the opportunity to create the guides

as “a rewarding accomplishment” and central to the school’s development as a professional learning community. All praised their principal for her leadership and for giving grade levels time to work on the guides. The enthusiasm of these teachers for moving their school forward and improving students’ literacy achievement radiated through the room. I could see the light in their eyes.

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