

to address the substantive gaps in the fragmented curriculum they had experienced.

### THE SKILLS-BASED CURRICULUM IN ARKANSAS

The use of language arts skill sets as the curriculum is a tenet of educational formalism, which E. D. Hirsch describes as “the . . . principle that specific information is irrelevant to ‘language arts skills.’”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to explain: “Educational formalism holds that reading and writing are like baseball and skating; formalism conceives of literacy as a set of techniques that can be developed by proper coaching and practice.”<sup>3</sup> While students are learning to read, practicing skills makes sense. But once students start reading to learn (usually by grade 3 or 4) and practicing those skills on texts that increase in difficulty with each grade level, the baseball analogy Hirsch talks about changes the game.

Arkansas students don’t know how to swing at any text because its own standards do not delineate particular texts (or choices of texts) on which to practice those skills. And because Arkansas’s standards are devoid of guidelines to specific *content* on which students might practice their “language arts skills,” there is usually little coherence in the group of texts teachers choose for any grade level, and no coherent sequencing across grade levels. As a result, from each grade level students bring myriad kinds of background knowledge to the educational party at the next grade level. Hirsch said it well in *The Knowledge Deficit* when he defended teachers:

so-called low teacher quality is not an innate characteristic of American teachers; it is the consequence of the training they have received and of the vague, incoherent curricula they are given to teach, both of which result from an ed school de-emphasis on specific, cumulative content. No teacher, however capable, can efficiently cope with the huge differences in academic preparation among the students in a typical American classroom—differences that grow with each successive grade.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Arkansas teachers have been expected to create specific classroom curricula based on Arkansas’s “standards,” or skill sets, which amounts to creating something out of nothing. They have therefore be-

come territorial about what they’re teaching, which manifests itself to an outsider as resistance to change or to new ideas. It isn’t. Because these teachers have invested so much time and energy hacking a path through the jungle of content choices to teach to these standards, their burden has been unnecessarily increased and, as a result, they are tired. The thought of having to go through that process again is exhausting.

Is it any wonder why there are jokes about teachers who laminate their lesson plans? Who would want to constantly create and recreate something out of nothing? And how can teachers be the “keepers of knowledge” if they don’t know what knowledge they’re supposed to keep?

About ten years ago the Fayetteville Public Schools attempted to align courses of study in each subject both horizontally and vertically by having teachers meet in content-specific groups for one or two days each year to plan and sequence. At first, vertical subject area teams included teachers who taught Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in the subject, but those groups were disbanded over five years ago. The process had turned territorial and little progress was made.

Frustrated teachers ended up going back to their classrooms and doing what they had always done, saying “this too shall pass.” Increasing their frustration were questions from new teachers like: “What texts do I teach?” and “How do I know where to start with my students if I don’t know what they’ve read?” When terms like “intellectual property” were bandied about, how would anyone know what he or she could use and what was “hands off?”

Students have regularly come to grade 8 English each year with scattered background knowledge. When I was a new teacher, I too didn’t know where to start. Some students had not read Robert Frost in grade 7; others had never heard of Tom Sawyer; and one student referred to Benjamin Franklin as “the kite guy.” When I expressed horror that students could not come up with any other information about one of this country’s founders other than that he was “the kite guy,” an administrator said: “At least he knew that.”

What can be done about the bigger issue at stake here—that students do not have a firm cultural foundation upon which to build the rest of their education? No wonder that curricula continue to be revised and dumbed down in an attempt to find a common place from which to start. What is also ironic in this age of No Child Left Behind is that each year more and