Introducing the Parallel Curriculum Model in the Classroom

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When *The Parallel Curriculum: A Design to Develop High Potential and Challenge High-Ability Learners* was published (Tomlinson et al., 2002), the six of us who had authored it already knew *we* found the ideas in the model to be both interesting and challenging. We already knew *we* were more effective as educators and as individuals as a result of the collaboration that had led to the model and its publication. What we did not know was the degree to which others might share these opinions.

Since the initial book was released, we've discovered at least two things. First, we were not finished with the Parallel Curriculum Model (PCM); we were just beginning. Second, the collaboration we were about to begin with other educators would be far more multifaceted and fulfilling even than the collaboration we had shared among ourselves.

In the three years since the model's initial publication, we have provided professional development opportunities on the model for hundreds of educators in locations around the country. We have talked with educators from other countries about using the model in their schools. We have taught university courses on the model. We have worked with excellent professionals as they developed units based on the model. We have established a Web site on the model (www.nagc.org/pcmlearning/pcmindex.html). We have provided initial distance learning opportunities on the model. We have developed a brief video. In general, our days in those intervening three years have been permeated with thoughts about the PCM. Most of our thinking has been fueled by the opportunity to share ideas about the model with other educators. As is always the case in education, whenever we set out to be teachers, we learned from those we hoped to teach. This book is an extension of the conversations we have shared—individually and as a group—with educators who made *us* proud to be educators.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Parallel Curriculum Model in the Classroom is published in two books. This first book includes five essays by the authors of the PCM that are intended to clarify and expand upon the model. The second book contains eight units that apply the PCM in varied subjects and at varied grade levels. The two books can stand alone, but they are designed to work in tandem to extend a reader's understanding of the PCM and to illustrate some ways in which the model can be used in classrooms.

The Essays

The essays in Book 1 are designed to further develop key ideas from *The Parallel Curriculum* (Tomlinson et al., 2002). First, Deborah Burns has developed a thoughtful, experience-based guide to writing units using the framework of the model. It is valuable for its clarity, but more so because it is derived from the journey of a stellar group of educators who have worked over a period of months to develop units based on the PCM. The PCM is a heuristic, not an algorithm. That is, the model provides guidelines for developing rich curriculum—it does not pretend to be a recipe or fill-in-the-template approach to curriculum design. For that reason, developing units with the PCM is a journey of thought—often nonlinear, recursive, reflective, and self-corrective.

To read about the experiences—insights and brick walls—of a group of high-quality educators as they applied the model is something like looking into our own minds through a mirror of shared experience. "I've done that," we say. "I got hung up there too." "Oh, now I see how I can tackle that issue." The PCM authors share the common belief that curriculum design and curriculum writing are as much about shaping the teacher as about shaping students for whom the curriculum is intended. Burns's essay demonstrates the power of that shaping process—and provides reassurance about the process as well.

Second, Jann Leppien writes about the potency of the questions that are a part of each of the model's four parallels. The four sets of focusing questions define the intent of the parallels in important ways. They provide curriculum developers with a reliable way to ensure that discussions, activities, presentations, products, and assessments achieve direction, meaning, and challenge. They are heuristics or guides that enable teachers to modify existing curriculum in ways that are likely to deepen its relevance for students and evoke new levels of thought in students. Leppien's essay is important in articulating the potency of the questions as educational tools.

Third, Sandra Kaplan takes us back to a critical premise of the model by discussing the importance of ensuring that students have substantial opportunities to work in all four of the model's parallels. The PCM is something like a camera with interchangeable lenses. The advantage of such a camera is that it allows both the photographer and the viewer of photographs to see the world reflected in a variety of ways. There would be little reason to purchase such a camera unless the photographer intended over time to change lenses as need and opportunity suggest. Similarly, the PCM offers teachers and students four ways to look at the world they study. Much of the model's power comes from its capacity to help students learn

from multiple perspectives. Kaplan's case for using all the camera's lenses is a reminder of that potential for implementers of the model.

Fourth, Jeanne Purcell's essay expands our understanding of the most unique of the model's four parallels—the Curriculum of Identity. She reminds us that the best teaching has a payoff for the teacher as well as for the student. She also does vital work in delineating what the Curriculum of Identity is and what it is not. She makes clear that this parallel is not career guidance, an exploration of learning style, or an examination of general likes and dislikes. Rather, it asks students to examine the work of those deeply invested in the discipline and to learn about the nature of the discipline as well as what the work of experts reveals about the students' own dreams, values, modes of working, willingness to take risks or to contribute, and so on. Alternatively, the Curriculum of Identity asks students to study core concepts and principles central to a topic and to reflect on the power of those concepts and principles to uncover meaning in their lives. To achieve the intent of the Curriculum of Identity, Purcell reminds us, we must be clear on what the parallel intends and what it does not.

Last, Carol Tomlinson, Sandra Kaplan, and Kelly Hedrick write about the concept of Ascending Intellectual Demand (AID). Another unique contribution of the PCM model, AID is a heuristic or guide for thinking about what it means to provide continually escalating challenges for learners—including those who readily surpass our expectations in the classroom. This chapter expands on routes to AID. For example, AID reflects the nature and intent of the parallel(s) in which it is incorporated. That is, when students are engaging in study via the Curriculum of Connections, for instance, and need challenge beyond the parameters of the baseline curriculum, AID would be used to help students explore connections more rigorously. To that end, each of the four parallels offers questions designed to foster AID in that parallel. Those questions are valuable as ready mechanisms to help teachers provide challenge. They also serve as models for teachers who want to develop additional questions likely to evoke challenge.

Another route to AID can be envisioned as a progression toward expertise. This chapter provides general descriptions of how that progression may evolve as well as descriptions of movement toward expertise in math, science, language arts, and social studies—again giving teachers a useful starting point for thinking about this key element of the model, which cuts across all four parallels.

The Units

Book 2 presents eight curriculum units that were designed using the PCM. We have made a special effort to link the PCM information and guidelines in Book 1 with the creation of the exemplary units. However, we do not envision the units as off-the-shelf selections a teacher would pick up and teach. Rather, we believe that they will facilitate educators to better prepare effective, quality units of their own, especially those incorporating the PCM. A more detailed explanation of the rationale, methods, and resources used in the development of this PCM curriculum material is given in the Introduction to Book 2.

USING THE MODEL AND UNITS
FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To maximize the usefulness of the PCM and the units and essays included in Book 1 and Book 2, we suggest the following guidelines for professional development based on the model. The guidelines should help you ensure the integrity of the model and maximize the likelihood that work produced using the model addresses the intellectual needs of the students the model was designed to serve. We include the following points here, as well as in the second book, so that readers of Book 1 may begin immediately to contemplate what we consider the important steps in organizing classroom curriculum according to the PCM:

- Study the PCM (see *The Parallel Curriculum,* Tomlinson et al., 2002) to ensure that educators understand its philosophy and intent.

- Examine this model in comparison with other curriculum models. It is often through such a comparison that the value of a particular design becomes clear.

- Discuss the relationship between the PCM and current issues in both general and gifted education. Among those issues might be the changing nature of student populations, the evolving and expanding understanding of intelligence, the need to have many students exposed to high-quality curriculum, the possibility that high-quality curriculum can be a catalyst for both identifying and developing potential in learners, the need to balance equity and excellence in our schools, and the need to develop standards-based curriculum that honors our best knowledge about dynamic teaching and learning.

- Demonstrate learning experiences based on the PCM as a preface to using the model to develop curriculum for larger groups of students. Observing the model in practice is likely to be far more powerful than only reading or hearing about it.

- Propose a set of criteria to ensure that the integrity of the model is maintained as curriculum is developed. Such a list should help curriculum implementers make sure that their work is synchronized with the intent of the various parallels and the model as a whole. Just as stages of review accompany the process of writing for publication, reviews in the curriculum writing and implementation process need to precede "publication" for one or many groups of students.

- Field test units developed with the PCM. For example, two teachers might design a unit together. They may then try out the unit with their students and compare responses of students during the unit as well as examine student products from the unit. It is then possible for the two teachers to engage in a grounded discussion about the degree to which the unit seemed to facilitate student attainment of goals reflected in the unit and the model.

- Create a systematic plan to review PCM-based work in a school or district. This is likely to be most useful if done intermittently throughout the year so that in-process adjustments are possible.