Introducing the Parallel Curriculum Model in the Classroom

Carol Ann Tomlinson and Sandra N. Kaplan

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Parallel Curriculum Model in the Classroom is published in two books. The first book presents five essays that are intended to clarify and expand upon the key ideas presented in *The Parallel Curriculum* (Tomlinson et al., 2002; see the Introduction to Book 1 for more detail). This second book contains eight units that apply the Parallel Curriculum Model (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.

In Book 2, we have made a special effort to link the PCM information and guidelines in Book 1 with the creation of exemplary units. The following introduction to the units offers the rationale, methods, and resources that are important to consider while reading the eight PCM curriculum units and applying the concepts and principles gained therein to a reader's own curriculum and instruction.

The Units

Book 2 presents curriculum units developed by using the PCM. We were fortunate to have many high-quality educators volunteer to create units for the book. In fact, ultimately we had to eliminate several useful units because of space limitations. The units included in this book represent primary, elementary, middle school, and high school levels of instruction. They represent several disciplines as well: social studies, science, art, math, and language arts. Some were written by PCM authors, and some were written by classroom teachers. Some of the units include all of the model's parallels, and some do not. In other words, we have selected units that reflect a variety of applications of the PCM.

Each unit has three key components. First, background material provides readers with a "big picture" of the unit, grade level and subject, goals, and standards incorporated in the unit. Second, the unit is "unpacked" or explained step-by-step in a left-hand column. Third, the unit developer's reasoning about her work is provided in a right-hand column. We elected to retain the voices of the units' authors, so you will "hear" the thinking of a number of curriculum developers about how and why they crafted the units based on the PCM, the requirements of their teaching context, and the needs of the students they teach. In some cases, the book editors modified units to ensure that the collection of units offered here corresponds to a variety of the key ideas and applications of the PCM. Application of PCM principles is shaped—as it always is with crafting thoughtful curriculum—by the author's own journey as a human being and as a professional. One PCM author notes that the units all reflect the essential elements of PCM, but those elements "rotate" somewhat like the elements in a kaleidoscope, depending on who holds the kaleidoscope and at what angle.

As the editors began compiling units that would appear in the book, we asked ourselves the question, "What *is* necessary in the design of a Parallel Curriculum unit?" There are many characteristics we would like to see in effective curricula. For the purposes of this book and this model, we concentrated on these essential traits. We believe that the units included here (1) explicitly lead to a conceptual understanding of the topics and disciplines on which they are based, (2) persistently honor the intent of the parallel(s) they represent, (3) appropriately utilize and extend the questions designated in the original PCM book as critical to achieving the goals of a particular parallel, (4) use the essential components of curriculum as a framework for ensuring coherence in the units, and (5) apply Ascending Intellectual Demand in a way that escalates students toward expertise.

We debated—and continue to debate—whether every PCM unit must reflect all four of the model's parallels. We have not yet reached unanimity about that issue. Certainly a key contribution of the PCM is insistence that learners profit from examining the world they study through a varied set of high-quality lenses. Thus all of us *do* agree that through the course of a year—and over the course of a number of years—PCM units should challenge students to examine topics and issues through the curricular perspectives of Core, Connections, Practice, and Identity. To do less is to shortchange students and to raise the question of why one "buys" interchangeable lenses if not to examine the world more richly. At the same time, it may be useful for students at some points to concentrate in a more focused way on perspectives provided by one of the lenses—or two, or three—rather than making imperative the use of all four lenses on each "learning excursion." Further, it may be useful to teachers to craft some units that require their extended attention to the nature and goals of one of the parallels—especially in early explorations and applications of the model. It is on the issue of whether *all* parallels must be used in *all* units in order to address the intent of the model about which the authors of the PCM continue to have vigorous debates.

Our solution is to offer some units that probe (for both teacher and students) the possibilities of one parallel, some that enlist the possibilities of two or three, and some that draw on all four parallels. Were we given the opportunity to present a

full year of curriculum for any subject, we would unanimously concur that all four parallels would need to be utilized over the course of the year in ways that serve the learning goals of the various units, the learning needs of students, and the growth of teachers. In any case, our experience leads us to offer the caution that transitory, shallow, or surface applications of a parallel neither represent the possibilities of the parallel nor extend the possibilities of students. In other words, we would not suggest that a lesson is an example of the Curriculum of Practice just because a student looked at a slide through a microscope and drew what he or she saw. We would not claim that a lesson represents the Curriculum of Identity just because a student wrote an opinion about a current event. In neither case does the activity address core concepts and principles of the discipline. In neither case does the activity address the deep intent of any of the parallels.

We do not envision the units included in this book as off-the-shelf selections a teacher would pick up and teach. Rather, we see them as professional development tools helpful to any educator who wants to reflect on the process of creating thoughtful curriculum—particularly, thoughtful curriculum based on the PCM. We hope you find your experiences with this book to be a positive catalyst in your own development as an educator.

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.

- Study the PCM (see *The Parallel Curriculum,* Tomlinson et al., 2002), as well as the PCM essays in Book 1, 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.

• Develop a plan for disseminating the newly designed curriculum that includes ample opportunity for teachers who will use the curriculum to understand the PCM and the intent of the authors. Teachers also need ample opportunity to ask questions about implementation at various stages of teacher comfort with using the unit.

• Develop a plan to ensure that a wide range of stakeholders understands the model and benefits of using it with a wide range of learners. Helping teachers, administrators, parents, and community members understand and appreciate the goals and potential benefits of the model is paramount to application and efficacy of the model and curriculum developed using the model.

There is an unfortunate tendency in educators to revise or reconstruct a new model or approach so that it fits their previous practices rather than adopting the model in a way that honors the "nonnegotiables" of the model. Effective professional development plans with the PCM—or any other worthwhile educational approach—will challenge educators to understand the approach and support them in using the approach so that its integrity is paramount in their thinking and practice.

We wish you well on your journey of discovery, reflection, exploration, and refinement of the PCM in your own schools and classrooms.