



## Relating Policy to Research and Practice: The Common Core Standards

*Randy Bomer and Beth Maloch*

Readers of *Language Arts*, with relatively few exceptions, are probably familiar with the 2010 Common Core Standards, even if they didn't follow the story of their development and adoption. That's because, as of this writing, 42 states, plus Washington DC and the US Virgin Islands—representing around 86% of the students in the US—have adopted the Common Core Standards as either the “core” of their state standards or the entirety of those standards. (By the time you read this, it's possible that some of the other eight states will have changed their positions, if new federal funding regulations require it.) Most teachers are therefore aware that these new standards have made a substantial difference in what they are supposed to teach and what students are supposed to know and be able to do by the end of each grade level. Indeed, the adoption of these standards has brought about the most sweeping nationalization of the K–12 curriculum in US history. In raw terms of *what gets taught* in American schools, no single national policy event has ever had as much significance as the adoption of these standards. Of course, for primary teachers, the Reading First program, and especially the authoritarian implementation practices that accompanied it, often impacted classroom practices, but Reading First did not apply to all grades in all schools, imposing a logic of development that shaped the whole of the curriculum from kindergarten through high school.

In this *Language Arts* column on policy and research, we will often review research on a particular topic and then help educators consider how they might marshal that research toward advocating policies and practices at a local level. At other

times, including this one, we will analyze policy trends and ask what role research is playing—or might play—in the development of (or resistance to, or compensation for) those trends. Through that approach, we hope to be of some help to teachers finding space for professional decision making, advocacy, and ultimately, the highest quality teaching moments with children. It is sometimes the case that policy has nothing to do with research. Instead, policymakers, whether explicitly or not, are making an argument about what is valuable and what should occupy people's attention (Biesta, 2010; Cuban, 2010; Oakley, 2002). These arguments, whether or not we agree with them, aren't about evidence; they're about values. Professionals should be able to name that kind of argument, perhaps in order to answer it, and to counter claims that a particular policy is “evidence based” when it's not.

In this issue of *Language Arts* with its focus on early literacy, we take a look at the Common Core Standards and the ways they are presently shaping the curriculum offered to young children in school. How are young children and their literacy practices represented in these standards, and how are those constructs addressed by research and expert practice in our field? By what process and with what kinds of evidence were those constructs developed? What, if anything, might teachers keep in mind about the limitations of these standards? A thorough investigation would take more space than we have here, so we will focus on what is new and different about these standards from what has typically come before.

Although you might think that something so influential on the nation's schools as the Common Core State Standards (CCS) would take an act of the

US Congress to become required, the federal legislature has in fact had no say whatsoever in their creation or adoption. These standards have their origins in the American Diploma Project, a collaboration between Achieve, Inc., and the National Governors' Association. The project's pronounced intention was to assure that a high school diploma across state lines could be interpreted as having similar educational value. Moreover, during implementation of NCLB in the first decade of the 21st century, business and political leaders became frustrated that states had differing standards for proficiency. When the Obama administration came into power well after the deadline for NCLB's reauthorization, the consensus in the political culture was that the varied standards were an obstacle to determining "what works," a prerequisite for placing states in competition with one another and for making decisions about which initiatives warranted large-scale funding based on their likelihood of success. The CCS project received a huge boost when US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan determined that states competing for Race to the Top funds, part of the economic stimulus package, would earn points for a collection of criteria, including adoption of these standards (Lewin, 2010). After five presidential administrations (all of them since Ronald Reagan) called for some form of national core, and although the US has no official national standards, the CCS have, in effect, become national standards by this rather indirect process. This is not just the latest round of revisions to your state's standards. We are living through a historic, national event.

In order to better understand what's behind the grade-level standards on which most teachers necessarily focus, it's useful to back up a bit and examine a couple of the assumptions in the project overall. The K–12 standards are based upon what they call Anchor Standards, which are College and Career Readiness standards. These standards have many assumptions buried in them—far too many to discuss here—so we will focus on just a few.

First, the standards assume that diverse regional and ideological perspectives can be reconciled under a universalized, rationalized curriculum framework. They hope to hold under a single umbrella

perspectives that may in some ways compete: the behavioristic emphasis on phonics that dominates recommendations like those of the National Reading Panel; a near classical emphasis on core content from humanities, such as myths and legends; a rhetorical approach to writing; and an emphasis on meaning and thinking across the texts that readers read. The standards' authors hope to reconcile all these competing ideas within a very limited number of standards, arguing repeatedly that good national standards are high, clear, and few. Like all standards projects, this is primarily a political task, an effort to keep one's critics from being too many or too loud, and although some may admire the good nature of the eager-to-please efforts behind it, a project built upon irreconcilable assumptions about what is important in a good education may be fated to fail.

Perhaps most assertively, the CCS argue that the purpose of education is readiness to participate in college and careers. Many of these standards focus rather narrowly on students' ability to participate in a university classroom that would have seemed normal in the 1950s; there is, in fact, next to no substantial focus on "career." Whatever Anchor Standard is supposedly getting students ready for this college experience is then stretched back through the grades all the way to kindergarten. Mainly, the standards' authors expect students in college to be asked to write about texts—to give analytic reasoning about texts, arguing something with textual evidence to support their claims. This, as we will see, is a form of literacy that receives attention in early childhood as well.

There are probably few primary teachers who think of themselves as directly preparing their children for college and career. Most likely, they believe that supporting children in their curiosity about their world, the people around them, and the

*The standards assume that diverse regional and ideological perspectives can be reconciled under a universalized, rationalized curriculum framework. They hope to hold under a single umbrella perspectives that may in some ways compete.*

language in which they are continually bathed is a good preparation for later schooling, college, and career, not to mention for life more generally and everything that's in it. But that's not the theory of growth or curriculum that is encoded in the CCS. Though the standards claim to "lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century" (p. 3), no standards address functions of literacy such as reflection, personal growth, civic participation, social change, the creation of literary art, or the formulation of public identities in environments like the Internet. Instead, these standards argue that students go to school in order to learn how to go to school some more.

How did a project focusing on high school graduation and the meaning of a diploma come to have something to say about kindergarten? After all, the discipline of early childhood education has usually attempted to be developmental, grounded in recognizing a child's way of making sense and then building upon that sense toward ever-awakening wonder, knowledge, and capacity. In an era of accountability, however, teachers of young children have had to respond to wave after wave of what Hatch has called the "accountability shovedown" (Hatch, 2002). The apparatus of accountability—high-stakes forms of assessment even in Head Start contexts—has increasingly put early childhood educators in the position of having to look away from

a child's developmental trajectory and toward an abstracted goal that may not have anything to do with the present practices in which the child engages (Brown, 2009, 2010; Goldstein, 2007). In the content of early childhood literacy, the main contribution of the CCS, the dimension that is new

*The main contribution of the CCS, the dimension that is new in them, is the shoving down—all the way through the grades to kindergarten—of a restricted image of college or academic literacy.*

in them, is the shoving down—all the way through the grades to kindergarten—of a restricted image of college or academic literacy, especially in writing.

In many of the Reading Standards, the CCS accomplish this pushdown of academic literacy in

a familiar way, since the standards are built largely upon the assumptions in the National Reading Panel. These assumptions have been thoroughly examined and their narrowness critiqued over the past ten years in a number of places (Allington, 2002; Coles, 2003; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2001). In another reading standard, we see that in Grade 2, a curious emphasis on fables and folktales begins (an effort to satisfy the core content advocates like E. D. Hirsch [2010]). But these arguable reading standards represent, for many elementary educators, a return to well-worn pathways, however many tensions they contain.

Perhaps the newest contribution to the standards world from the CCS—the shoved-down college literacy we mentioned above—is the emphasis on textual argument as a value in both reading and writing across all the grades. Anchor Standard #1 (of 10) for Writing, first among the so-called College and Career Readiness standards, asks that students "[w]rite arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence." And the very first standard for Reading in the Anchor Standards is this: "Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text." This standard names a particular kind of reading that accompanies the corresponding specific form of writing. Clearly, a certain kind of literacy practice is being valued: a person is expected to read a text and then produce an original text that makes one or more references to the first textual object under discussion. It's a text about a text, a sign about a sign. The language being produced is twice removed from concrete experience, with the first thoughts coming from a text and then new thoughts about those initial thoughts being represented in a text. The writer is expected to formulate a judgment, response, or arguable point in response to a text, then to articulate that perspective with reasons and evidence.

There are plenty of reasons why early childhood educators might be concerned about such a curriculum. Working in traditions drawn from thinkers like

Dewey (1902), Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), Montessori (1965), and El'konin (1971), many teachers of young children have tended to value children living through concrete experiences that they can then represent in signs, and that tradition has been supported by much research across many disciplines. Here, however, is Kindergarten Writing Standard #1: "Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book (e.g., *My favorite book is . . .*)." And here is First Grade Writing Standard #1: "Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure." In these standards for primary grades, the Common Core Standards in fact ask young children to engage in essentially the same literacy practice as the one that is "college ready," albeit in a way that makes sense with the ways young children compose—with drawings and oral language, as well as writing. That is, they are asked to make a text about a text and provide evidence from the first text for what they claim in the second.

It's reasonable to ask whether such an expectation provides the best curriculum for young children. For example, if this is difficult for some children, should they be asked to do it again and again until they catch on? How much of a writing curriculum, after all, should focus on this literacy practice, named here as Standard #1? How does this kind of writing interact with writing about concrete experiences? How does this kind of writing interact with writing in the same form as the texts they commonly read (since, after all, approximately zero children's books are written in the genre described in this standard)? Secondary literacy educators, such as those in NCTE leadership, have worked for much of English discipline's history to *prevent* so much of the writing curriculum being focused on writing about literature (Applebee, 1996). If a focus on this kind of narrowly academic or school-like writing isn't a persuasive curriculum for high school, how convinced should primary teachers be that they should spend much attention on it?

Such questions bring us back to wonder about the relationship of research to policy. Can research help with the question of whether written arguments about read texts should be a focus in primary writing? Not that much. We know from some research on children's writing that even at a young age, writers can focus on the needs of an audience and their purposes with respect to that audience (Rowe, 2008; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001) and that they are able to take on a wide range of genres and textual practices (Chapman, 1999; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Kamberelis, 1999). They can also, in writing, take on arguable issues and make normative claims (e.g., Vasquez, 2004). But no research that we know of examines young children's complex processes of reading, thinking about the text as a text, coming to a judgment about that text, and writing that judgment with reasons. Certainly no research demonstrates that teaching evidence-based argument in very early schooling contributes to students being able to do it in college. One might imagine that it might, but one might imagine many things. For instance, it's just as possible that spending time instead on talking over observations at a sand table, blocks, or a terrarium, making predictions about outcomes of particular actions, and then discussing the outcome of those actions would be a way of participating in a culture of argument, evidence, and reasoning, and that it might in fact be a richer way of building these habits of mind. Or perhaps reading and discussing books with enlarged print and images would be a better context for such conversations. Perhaps a wider scope of choice about how to write in response to reading (rather than making a case and providing evidence) would be more productive of habits of responsiveness that would add up to such competencies. The point is, the people who wrote, publicized, adopted, and imposed the Common Core Standards have no idea.

*Secondary literacy educators, such as those in NCTE leadership, have worked for much of English discipline's history to prevent so much of the writing curriculum being focused on writing about literature.*

In terms of evidence, the Common Core Standards can be challenged in several ways. They make a claim that the outcomes they describe in the Anchor Standards will do students some good in college and career. They cite some studies from SAT and ACT that suggest that their lists of testable skills correlate to items chosen by college faculty on certain surveys of needed skills for college. However, they present no substantive evidence that the skills in the standards are in fact contributive to college success, to career, or certainly to “what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century” (p. 3). For them to be evidence-based, these standards would also need to legitimate the relationships among the grade levels, as we explored

***They present no substantive evidence that the skills in the standards are in fact contributive to college success, to career, or certainly to “what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century.”***

in our questions above about evidence-based textual arguments in primary grades. What is the evidence that doing a particular thing during a specific year in schooling leads toward actual students learning those things at that rate in that sequence? Just because a complex behavior, like Writing Standard #1, can be “aligned” in such a narrative, where Writing Standard #1 is repeated across all the grades from K through 12, it does not mean there is evidence that it is thus developed in a linear fashion in actual people. Furthermore, an evidence basis for such standards would have to consider several factors: whether students are motivated to engage with such practices; the likelihood that they’ll construct understandings that are qualitatively near to the goal; and the costs of directly pursuing those standards instead of other, potentially more valuable pursuits in a curriculum. There is, of course, no evidence for any of these things. As Larry Cuban has written:

Policymakers . . . use evidence . . . to argue that their hunch (“common core” standards) about solving a pressing problem . . . is both logical and compelling. Evidence that contradicts the policy is tossed aside. In short, facts or the totality of available evidence do not determine policy. Evidence is made, not found. Evi-

dence is used to fit the hunch, arguments, and logic of a policy aimed at solving a problem. (2010)

Ironically, the word “evidence” is used 136 times in the Common Core Standards, and in 133 of those instances, it is something that students are expected to provide. For the writers of the standards, not so much.

Perhaps that is as it should be. Perhaps the constant calls for evidence-based everything (Oakley, 2002) are only attempts to summon authority to particular arguments about values, and that scientific thinking needs to defer to other forms of reasoning about our hopes for children’s growth and our image of a good life. But teachers should not be overly confident about the knowledge base behind these very important standards, and as part of their response when teaching in Common Core Standards states, they should continue to use evidence from what they know about young children’s learning and composing to fill in the substantial gaps in the vision of the Common Core Standards.

## References

- Achieve, Inc. (2010). About achieve. Washington, DC: Achieve. Retrieved from <http://www.achieve.org/files/AboutAchieve.pdf>.
- Allington, R. (2002). *Big brother and the national reading curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Applebee, A. (1996). *Curriculum as conversation: Transforming traditions of teaching and learning*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). Why “what works” still won’t work: From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 29*, 491–503.
- Brown, C. P. (2009). Pivoting a pre-kindergarten program off the child or the standard? A case study of integrating the practices of early childhood education into elementary school. *Elementary School Journal, 110*, 202–227.
- Brown, C. P. (2010). Balancing the readiness equation in early childhood education reform. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 8*, 133–160.
- Chapman, M. L. (1999). Situated, social, active: Rewriting genre in the elementary classroom. *Written Communication, 16*, 469–490.
- Coles, G. (2003). *Reading the naked truth: Literacy, legislation, and lies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010). *Common core state standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Retrieved February 1, 2011, from [http://corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf).
- Cuban, L. (2010, July 25). *Common core standards: Hardly an evidence-based policy*. Retrieved from <http://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2010/07/25/common-core-standards-hardly-an-evidence-based-policy/>.
- Cunningham, J. W. (2001). The national reading panel report. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 326–335.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- El'konin, D. B. (1971). Toward the problem of stages in the mental development of children. *Soviet Psychology*, 1971(4), 6–20.
- Garan, E. M. (2001). Beyond the smoke and mirrors: A critique of the national reading panel report on phonics. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82, 500–506.
- Goldstein, L. S. (2007). Embracing pedagogical multiplicity: Examining two teachers' instructional responses to the changing expectations for kindergarten in U.S. public school. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 21, 388–400.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). Accountability shovedown: Resisting the standards movement in education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, 457–463.
- Hirsch, E. D. (2010, April 6). *E. D. Hirsch Jr.: Common core standards could revolutionize reading instruction*. Retrieved January 29, 2011, from <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/guest-bloggers/ed-hirsch-jr-common-core-stand.html>.
- Kamberelis, G. (1999). Genre development and learning: Children writing stories, science reports, and poems. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 33, 403–460.
- Lewin, T. (2010, July 21). Many states adopt national standards for their schools. *The New York Times*, p. A1. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/education/21standards.html>.
- Montessori, M. (1965). *The advanced Montessori method: Spontaneous activity in education* (Vol. 1). New York: Schocken.
- Oakley, A. (2002). Social science and evidence-based everything: The case of education. *Educational Review*, 54, 277–286.
- Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1969/2000). *The psychology of the child*. (H. Weaver, Trans.). New York: Basic Books.
- Purcell-Gates, V., Duke, N. K., & Martineau, J. A. (2007). Learning to read and write genre-specific text: Roles of authentic experience and explicit teaching. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42, 8–45.
- Rowe, D. W. (2008). Social contracts for writing: Negotiating shared understandings about text in the preschool years. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43, 66–95.
- Vasquez, V. (2004). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. New York: Routledge.
- Wollman-Bonilla, J. E. (2001). Can first-grade writers demonstrate audience awareness? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 184–201.

**Randy Bomer** is an associate professor at the University of Texas, Austin, and can be reached at [rbomer@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:rbomer@mail.utexas.edu). **Beth Maloch** is an associate professor at the University of Texas, Austin, and can be reached at [bmaloch@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:bmaloch@mail.utexas.edu).

---

## 2011 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE's 2011 elections, Secondary Section member **Ernest Morrell**, incoming director of the Institute for Urban Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, was chosen vice president. Morrell will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November. Elected to a two-year term as Elementary Representative-at-Large was **Franki Sibberson**, Dublin City Schools, Ohio.

The Elementary Section also elected new members. Elected to the 2011–2012 Nominating Committee were **Jane Bean-Folkes**, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York, chair; **Katie DiCesare**, Dublin City Schools, Ohio; and **Daniel Feigelson**, New York City Department of Education, New York, New York.

On the NCTE website, see additional 2011 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2012 elections (<http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections>).

---