Recently, a group of first graders was asked to compose and illustrate their own folk and tall tales as part of a unit of study focused on National Heritage. The three teachers had been instructed to integrate writing as much as they could in various disciplines such as science and social studies. In this unit, the teachers were required to include the folk and tall tales of Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Annie Oakley, John Henry, and Davy Crockett, since these figures comprise part of the mandated Standards for first-grade social studies on historical understandings.

The teachers read aloud stories of these “larger than life” figures and facilitated discussions of tall-tale and folktale elements and how these figures characterize the national heritage of the USA. From these activities, the students were then asked to create their own oral versions of tall tales, drawing on their shared knowledge of what it meant to include story elements and exaggerate a character’s traits. Later they were to write these stories. While the focus of the unit was on national heritage, the teachers also wished to bring in folktales that more closely represented the students’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds, stories such as Why Mosquitos Buzz in People’s Ears (Aardema, 1978), Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti (McDermott, 1987), or The People Could Fly (Hamilton, 2004). Yet, there was never enough time to incorporate these culturally relevant texts and discussions that could have built a more relevant curriculum.

Districts throughout the country, located in large urban cities and small rural towns, have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in language arts and mathematics. These new Standards come at a time when budgets for education are tight; cutbacks are required in subjects such as drama, art, and music; and there is little professional development to help teachers fully deliberate the implications of the Standards on their practice. As illustrated in the above example, the result is that teachers often find themselves creating lessons that don’t meet the developmental needs of the students in their classrooms. And they are not alone. Around the country, state-level educators have developed curriculum pacing guides and frameworks intended to help teachers implement the Standards effectively and students to achieve predetermined goals outlined in the new CCSS initiative.

The CCSS initiative is part of the Race to the Top federal policy that the Obama administration put into place following No Child Left Behind. At the time of this writing, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted CCSS and have revised their curricula to align with this set of Standards. Involved in writing and disseminating these Standards across the country are corporations and organizations that seek market-based reform efforts for public schools (McDermott, 2013; Shannon, 2013; Zancanella & Moore [this issue, p. 273]). McDermott’s analysis, in particular, has uncovered a network of connections among corporations, organizations, foundations, and individuals who have been instrumental in the design and dissemination of these Standards. She has constructed a visual map to show how entangled the connections are among the various stakeholders and corporations,
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This investment, however, is being challenged by educators and politicians who claim that the CCSS represent an overreaching of federal influence on education (e.g., Heritage Foundation, Badass Teachers Association, and Pioneer Institute, to name a few). Many—including leading educational historian Diane Ravitch and NCTE Past President JoAnn Yatvin—fear that the federal government is controlling the national agenda for education, establishing intrusive student data tracking systems, overemphasizing assessment, and de-professionalizing the teaching force.

While there are vigorous debates in legislative hearings and meetings, parents (of the children affected by this reform effort) and community members are asking what the Standards are all about and if CCSS will really make a difference in closing our most pressing issue—the achievement gap between poor and not-poor students, and between white and non-white students. According to the latest PDK/Gallup poll on the public’s attitude toward public education (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013), 62% of Americans have never heard of the Common Core State Standards, and of those who have heard of the CCSS, only 40% believe that the Standards will actually make education in the United States more competitive globally.

Many believe that implementation is only successful if there are accountability and assessment measures in place to evaluate the teaching and learning of these standards (Shannon, Whitney, & Wilson, “Conversation Currents,” this issue, p. 295). Currently, two consortiums, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness in College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium, have created computer-based student assessment systems to align with the CCSS. Seventeen states have adopted PARCC; another 25 have signed on with Smarter Balance. After originally signing on with one of the consortiums, a handful of states have pulled out (e.g., Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Utah, Oklahoma) or have put the assessments on “pause” (e.g., Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania). These states are creating their own assessment systems to determine student achievement.

States cite cost as a contributing factor to this decision, as well as limited flexibility and technical concerns. A recent report from the Pioneer Institute (AccountabilityWorks, 2012), a public policy research firm, notes that the ongoing costs for participating in one of the two consortia will reach approximately $177.2 million per year, with a seven-year total of $1.2 billion. The majority of these costs are related to the infrastructure necessary to administer computer-based assessments, including hardware and software upgrades, increased bandwidth, and technical support and training. Even with states reconsidering their involvement in the assessment consortia, state-level educators and districts continue to implement and monitor curricular frameworks that align with the adopted CCSS.

Perhaps the CCSS make it difficult to disrupt the status quo by dictating that all learners must strive to achieve the same goals. Administrators, teachers, and students at the school level feel these pressures of ongoing alignment and monitoring of the CCSS. Effective implementation of curricula, improved student-learning outcomes, and increased college- and career-readiness indicators are the stated goals of the CCSS. Perhaps this is why the first-grade teachers in our opening example didn’t have a chance to explore other more culturally relevant and meaningful folktales that represent the diversity of National Heritage. Perhaps, the teachers also did not have time or opportunity to take on a more critical perspective and challenge the commonplace assumptions that these historical figures embody positive character traits. Perhaps the CCSS make it difficult to disrupt the status quo by dictating that all learners must strive to achieve the same goals (Flint & Laman, 2014; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

In this issue of Language Arts, we take a look at the impact of the CCSS on the teaching profession, on English language arts curricula, and on students’ abilities to advocate and take a critical stance on issues most pressing in their lives. Stergios

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The third article in this issue is by Katherine Grindon, “Advocacy at the Core: Agitation and Empowerment in the time of Common Core State Standards.” In this piece, Grindon shares her journey of using the CCSS in student-generated advocacy projects. Grindon explains how she has participated in statewide committees to deconstruct the Standards. She then considers ways of implementing the CCSS in the classroom that reach beyond the surface level, thus encouraging her students to adopt critical perspectives as they develop their own advocacy projects on socially significant and local issues. By sharing her process with readers, Grindon brings to life an authentic and meaningful approach to implementing the CCSS in English language arts classrooms.

For the first time, Language Arts has included a new feature entitled “Commentaries” written by LA readers. . . . We think of the commentaries as a way to take the pulse of the field on a given topic.

Botzakis, Leslie Burns, and Leigh Hall’s article “Literacy Reform and Common Core State Standards: Recycling the Autonomous Model” offers a historical tracing of how the CCSS embrace a simplistic view of the literacy process and are virtually inadequate for the intended goals of participating in reading and writing in the 21st century. They provide a thought-provoking description of how the CCSS have embraced the autonomous model of literacy development wherein the focus is on standardization rather than student learning. Botzakis et al. argue that one of the CCSS’s exemplars, teaching “The Gettysburg Address,” requires six days of “close reading.” They note how the exemplar assumes that all students would be motivated to engage in the repeated close readings, which further highlights the point of standardization for standardization’s sake.

In contrast, the ideological model views reading and writing as a socially complex practice that “cannot be isolated or treated as ‘neutral’ or merely ‘technical’” (p. 228). These authors go on to argue for a balanced perspective that emphasizes literacy learning as both a technical and a contextual endeavor.

Following the discussion on the broader positioning of literacy in the CCSS is Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey’s article about ELA Anchor Standard 10 that focuses on range, quality, and text complexity. Fisher and Frey define text complexity as a “set of quantitative and qualitative attributes that collectively describe the features of a text” (p. 237), and they offer a description of these attributes as a way to begin to know which attributes will stretch readers. These authors then put these descriptions into practice in their work with 380 teachers. Teachers used a rubric to examine texts for complexity and used this information to plan curriculum. Fisher and Frey write, “To teach reading comprehension well, teachers can determine which factors contributed to the complexity of the text and then make instructional decisions about how to support students’ understanding of each factor such that they can apply that knowledge to new texts that they read” (p. 248). This rubric will be a helpful tool to teachers around the country as they seek ways to increase students’ knowledge of more complex texts in the classroom setting.

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We hope that you begin to consider the impact of CCSS on your own teaching and look to submit a commentary and/or manuscript for our follow-up themed issue.

to encourage adoption and implementation of the CCSS. The Professional Book Reviews highlight a number of professional resources that support teachers as they navigate the terrain of implementing CCSS in their classrooms. The books offer important insights for teachers to regain their professional voice and invite a critical and rigorous curriculum that draws on the strengths and knowledge of the students they teach. Finally, the Children’s Literature Reviews (guest-authored by NCTE’s Children’s Literature Assembly) feature the award winners for the 2013 Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts.

We hope this issue on the Common Core State Standards sparks conversation, discussion, challenges, inquiry, and a further look into the development, implementation, and alignment of CCSS. We also hope that you begin to consider the impact of CCSS on your own teaching and look to submit a commentary and/or manuscript for our follow-up themed issue: Common Core, Rotten Core—Part II (March 2016; submission deadline is November 2014). And please join the conversation about CCSS by offering your own comments on our Facebook page: Language Arts Journal.

References