

The Common Core: Ignoring Education's Real Problems

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In this paper, I will not discuss the Common Core standards themselves in any detail. My suspicion is that the standards were made unreasonably hard on purpose. As Susan Ohanian has noted, the language arts standards appear to be designed for English majors (Ohanian, 2012) and feature tasks that are far too difficult and, in fact, unreasonable, e.g. requiring students to ignore context in discussing texts.

We have been regularly encouraged to comment on the content of the standards. Those who accept the invitation to discuss the content of the standards will have the impression they have a seat at the table. In reality, invitations to discuss the standards appear to be simply a means of control, diverting attention from the real issues:

"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum ... That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate" (Chomsky, 2002, p. 42).

This is a weapon of mass distraction: We are invited to debate issues such as whether 10th graders should be required to write 40% of their essays as arguments, 40% as informational, and 20% narrative, and we may even win a few concessions. But the "presuppositions of the system" are dead wrong.

Are our schools broken?

The Common Core State Standards (sometimes referred to as the CCSS, for reasons that will become clear later), are based on the presupposition, widely discussed in the media, that our schools are broken, and that only a system of rigorous standards and tests will improve things. But published studies conclude that our schools are not broken. The reason for our unspectacular international test scores is our high rate of child poverty: When researchers control for the effect of poverty, American scores are near the top of the world (e.g. Payne and Biddle, 1999; Carnoy and Rothstein, 2012).

Complaints about progress made by English learners are also popular in the media. We are told, for example that most English learners "languish" in ESL and bilingual programs for years, and never acquire enough English to join the mainstream. A look at the data, however, shows that in general, English learners make acceptable progress (Krashen and McQuillan, 1995).

The silliest complaint about English learners is the observation that most of them score below the "proficient" level on tests of English reading. In other words, the complaint is that English learners are English learners. If they scored at the proficient level on English tests, they would not be English learners.

The real problem: poverty

The Common Core ignores the problem of poverty. Poverty means many things, all of which negatively impact school performance. Among them are food deprivation, lack of health care, and lack of access to books (Krashen, 1997; Berliner, 2009).

The best teaching in the world will not help if students are hungry, ill, and have little or nothing to read. Child poverty in the US is a huge 23%, second highest among all high-income countries (Adamson, 2013), and English learners have an even higher rate of poverty, estimated to be double that of the national average (Betalova, 2006).

The power of poverty has been demonstrated by many studies, including studies showing a strong negative correlation between levels of poverty and rates of reclassification as proficient in English among English learners (Krashen, 1996).

Access to books

The lack of access to books among high-poverty English learners makes it nearly impossible to for them to make significant progress.

Access to books in the first language is very helpful for early literacy development in English. We know that building literacy in the first language is a shortcut to second language literacy, but this requires books for read-alouds and books for free voluntary pleasure reading (Krashen, 2003). Massive pleasure reading in English is necessary for the full development of English literacy, including vocabularly, grammar and writing ability (Krashen, 2004).

We (Krashen and Williams, 2012) recently described a case of an English language learner who not only acquired English well but who became an author of books in English, two novels and an autobiography. Reyne Grande developed basic literacy in Spanish before she immigrated to the US at age nine, and "successfully completed the ESL program and got rid of my status as an ESL student" at the end of seventh grade (Grande, 2012, p. 240) thanks to her English reading habit.

Grande became a pleasure reader in English when she was a seventh grader, and in grade eight she was a regular visitor to the local public library, borrowing the maximum allowed of ten books every week. Midway through grade eight she described her English as "almost as good as the native speakers," except for her accent (p. 242).

Free reading remains important later on: Self-selected reading in our area of interest is responsible for our development of academic language (Krashen, 2012a): Reyna Grande kept reading, and expanded her choice of books, thanks to her English teacher at

Pasadena City College, Diana Savas, who introduced her to Latino literature and encouraged her writing.

Also, continued reading in the heritage language is a powerful means of maintaining and developing the heritage language after we leave school, which results in economic and cognitive advantages (Tse, 2001).

The testing boodoggle

The Common Core movement does nothing to protect children from the effects of poverty. Instead of investing in food programs, health care, and libraries, we will be spending unbelievable amounts of money on tests required by the Common Core. Even though research tells us that more testing does not produce higher achievement (Nichols, Glass, and Berliner, 2006), the Common Core will require about 20 times more testing than No Child Left Behind: we will have summative tests, interim tests and possibly pretests in all subjects, at all grade levels, from preschool to grade 12 (Krashen, 2012b).

By far the most expensive (and profitable) part of the Common Core testing plan is the requirement that the tests must be administered online. My suspicion is that the entire standards movement had this as its goal from the beginning, because of the huge potential for profit (Krashen and Ohanian, 2011).

Universal on-line testing requires that all students have up-to-date computers: 50 million students will each require a new computer every three years. It will also require a massive infrastructure that requires constant repair, and constant replacement as "progress" is made in technology.

The US Department of Education has guaranteed that substantial repairs and updates will be necessary, all providing a steady stream of profits to the computer industry while frustrating students and teachers. In the National Education Technology Plan, the US Department of Education insists that we introduce massive new technology into the schools immediately, because of "the pressing need to transform American education ...", even if this means doing it imperfectly. Repairs can be done later: "... we do not have the luxury of time: We must act now and commit to fine-tuning and midcourse corrections as we go." (From: US Department of Education, 2010, Executive Summary).

Studies on the spread of innovation (Rogers, 2003) show that very early first-wave adoption of innovations is not a good strategy. The best strategy is to be part of the second wave: The first wave will be imperfect and expensive; the problems of the first wave will be solved in the second wave and the new devices will be cheaper. The US Department of Education is insisting that American educators be very early adopters.

While the fundamental needs of English Learners are ignored, every spare dollar will go into the Common Core standards and tests, accurately described by Susan Ohanian (2013) as a "a radical untried curriculum overhaul and ... nonstop national testing."

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