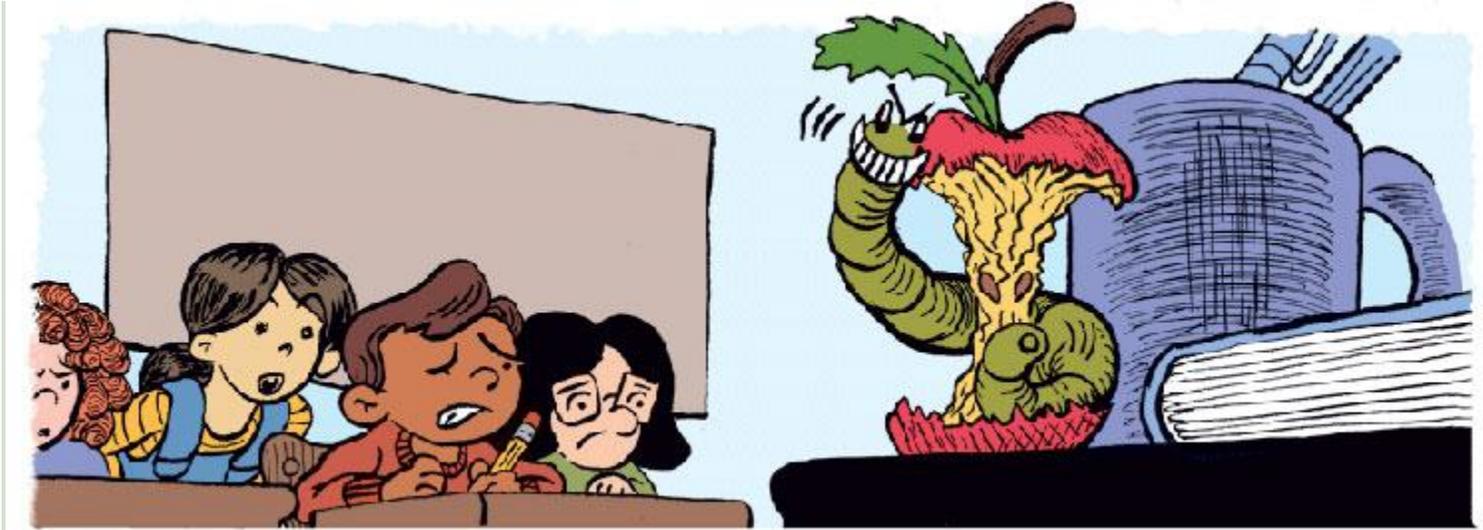


The Trouble with the Common Core

BY THE EDITORS OF RETHINKING SCHOOLS



Ethan Heitner

It isn't easy to find common ground on the Common Core. Already hailed as the “next big thing” in education reform, the Common Core State Standards are being rushed into classrooms in nearly every district in the country. Although these “world-class” standards raise substantive questions about curriculum choices and instructional practices, such educational concerns are likely to prove less significant than the role the Common Core is playing in the larger landscape of our polarized education reform politics.

We know there have been many positive claims made for the Common Core:

- That it represents a tighter set of smarter standards focused on developing critical learning skills instead of mastering fragmented bits of knowledge.
- That it requires more progressive, student-centered teaching with strong elements of collaborative and reflective learning.
- That it equalizes the playing field by raising expectations for all children, especially those suffering the worst effects of the “drill and kill” test prep norms of the recent past.

We also know that many creative, heroic teachers are seeking ways to use this latest reform wave to serve their students well. Especially in the current interim between the rollout of the standards and the arrival of the tests, some teachers have embraced the Common Core as an alternative to the scripted

commercial formulas of recent experience, and are trying to use the space opened up by the Common Core transition to do positive things in their classrooms.

We'd like to believe these claims and efforts can trump the more political uses of the Common Core project. But we can't.

For starters, the misnamed "Common Core State Standards" are not state standards. They're national standards, created by Gates-funded consultants for the National Governors Association (NGA). They were designed, in part, to circumvent federal restrictions on the adoption of a national curriculum, hence the insertion of the word "state" in the brand name. States were coerced into adopting the Common Core by requirements attached to the federal Race to the Top grants and, later, the No Child Left Behind waivers. (This is one reason many conservative groups opposed to any federal role in education policy oppose the Common Core.)

Written mostly by academics and assessment experts—many with ties to testing companies—the Common Core standards have never been fully implemented and tested in real schools anywhere. Of the 135 members on the official Common Core review panels convened by Achieve Inc., the consulting firm that has directed the Common Core project for the NGA, few were classroom teachers or current administrators. Parents were entirely missing. K–12 educators were mostly brought in after the fact to tweak and endorse the standards—and lend legitimacy to the results.

The standards are tied to assessments that are still in development and that must be given on computers many schools don't have. So far, there is no research or experience to justify the extravagant claims being made for the ability of these standards to ensure that every child will graduate from high school "college and career ready." By all accounts, the new Common Core tests will be considerably harder than current state assessments, leading to sharp drops in scores and proficiency rates.

We have seen this show before. The entire country just finished a decade-long experiment in standards-based, test-driven school reform called No Child Left Behind. NCLB required states to adopt "rigorous" curriculum standards and test students annually to gauge progress towards reaching them. Under threat of losing federal funds, all 50 states adopted or revised their standards and began testing every student, every year in every grade from 3–8 and again in high school. (Before NCLB, only 19 states tested all kids every year, after NCLB all 50 did.)

By any measure, NCLB was a dismal failure in both raising academic performance and narrowing gaps in opportunity and outcomes. But by very publicly measuring the test results against benchmarks no real schools have ever met, NCLB did succeed in creating a narrative of failure that shaped a decade of attempts to "fix" schools while blaming those who work in them. By the time the first decade of NCLB was over, more than half the schools in the nation were on the lists of "failing schools" and the rest were poised to follow.

In reality, NCLB's test scores reflected the inequality that exists all around our schools. The disaggregated scores put the spotlight on longstanding gaps in outcomes and opportunity among student subgroups. But NCLB used these gaps to label schools as failures without providing the resources or support needed to eliminate them.

The tests showed that millions of students were not meeting existing standards. Yet the conclusion drawn by sponsors of the Common Core was that the solution was "more challenging" ones. This conclusion is simply wrong. NCLB proved that the test and punish approach to education reform doesn't work, not that we need a new, tougher version of it. Instead of targeting the inequalities of race, class, and educational opportunity reflected in the test scores, the Common Core project threatens to reproduce the narrative of public school failure that has led to a decade of bad policy in the name of reform.

The engine for this potential disaster, as it was for NCLB, will be the tests, in this case the “next generation” Common Core tests being developed by two federally funded, multi-state consortia at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars. Although reasonable people, including many thoughtful educators we respect, have found things of value in the Common Core standards, there is no credible defense to be made of the high-stakes uses planned for these new tests.

The same heavy-handed, top-down policies that forced adoption of the standards require use of the Common Core tests to evaluate educators. This inaccurate and unreliable practice will distort the assessments before they're even in place and make Common Core implementation part of the assault on the teaching profession instead of a renewal of it. The costs of the tests, which have multiple pieces throughout the year plus the computer platforms needed to administer and score them, will be enormous and will come at the expense of more important things. The plunging scores will be used as an excuse to close more public schools and open more privatized charters and voucher schools, especially in poor communities of color. If, as proposed, the Common Core's “college and career ready” performance level becomes the standard for high school graduation, it will push more kids out of high school than it will prepare for college.

This is not just cynical speculation. It is a reasonable projection based on the history of the NCLB decade, the dismantling of public education in the nation's urban centers, and the appalling growth of the inequality and concentrated poverty that remains the central problem in public education.

Nor are we exaggerating the potential for disaster. Consider this description from Charlotte Danielson, a highly regarded mainstream authority on teacher evaluation and a strong supporter of the Common Core:

I do worry somewhat about the assessments—I'm concerned that we may be headed for a train wreck there. The test items I've seen that have been released so far are extremely challenging. If I had to take a test that was entirely comprised of items like that, I'm not sure that I would pass it—and I've got a bunch of degrees. So I do worry that in some schools we'll have 80 percent or some large number of students failing. That's what I mean by train wreck.

Reports from the first wave of Common Core testing are already confirming these fears. This spring students, parents, and teachers in New York schools responded to administration of new Common Core tests developed by Pearson Inc. with a general outcry against their length, difficulty, and inappropriate content. Pearson included corporate logos and promotional material in reading passages. Students reported feeling overstressed and underprepared—meeting the tests with shock, anger, tears, and anxiety. Administrators requested guidelines for handling tests students had vomited on. Teachers and principals complained about the disruptive nature of the testing process and many parents encouraged their children to opt out.

Common Core has become part of the corporate reform project now stalking our schools. Unless we dismantle and defeat this larger effort, Common Core implementation will become another stage in the demise of public education. As schools struggle with these new mandates, we should defend our students, our schools, our communities, and ourselves by telling the truth about the Common Core. This means pushing back against implementation timelines and plans that set schools up to fail, resisting the stakes and priority attached to the tests, and exposing the truth about the commercial and political interests shaping and benefiting from this false panacea for the problems our schools face.

Rethinking Schools has always been skeptical of standards imposed from above. Too many standards projects have been efforts to move decisions about teaching and learning away from classrooms, educators, and school communities, only to put them in the hands of distant bureaucracies. Standards have often codified sanitized versions of history, politics, and culture that reinforce official myths while leaving out the voices, concerns, and realities of our students and communities. Whatever positive role standards might play in truly collaborative conversations about what our schools should teach and children should learn has been repeatedly undermined by bad process, suspect political agendas, and commercial interests.

Unfortunately there's been too little honest conversation and too little democracy in the development of the Common Core. We see consultants and corporate entrepreneurs where there should be parents and

teachers, and more high-stakes testing where there should be none. Until that changes, it will be hard to distinguish the “next big thing” from the last one. |

More of artist Ethan Heitner's work can be seen at freedomfunnies.wordpress.com

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The Problems with the Common Core

BY STAN KARP

This is a revised version of a talk on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) delivered in Portland, Oregon, Sept. 20, 2013. The CCSS have been adopted by 46 states and are currently being implemented in school districts throughout the United States.



MICHAEL DUFFY

The trouble with the Common Core is not primarily what is in these standards or what's been left out, although that's certainly at issue. The bigger problem is the role the

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are playing in the larger dynamics of current school reform and education politics.

Today everything about the Common Core, even the brand name—the Common Core *State* Standards—is contested because these standards were created as an instrument of contested policy. They have become part of a larger political project to remake public education in ways that go well beyond slogans about making sure every student graduates “college and career ready,” however that may be defined this year. We’re talking about implementing new national standards and tests for every school and district in the country in the wake of dramatic changes in the national and state context for education reform. These changes include:

- A 10-year experiment in the use of federally mandated standards and tests called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that has been almost universally acknowledged as a failure.
- The adoption of test-based teacher evaluation frameworks in dozens of states, largely as a result of federal mandates.
- Multiple rounds of budget cuts and layoffs that have left 34 of the 50 states providing less funding for education than they did five years ago, and the elimination of more than 300,000 teaching positions.
- A wave of privatization that has increased the number of publicly funded but privately run charter schools by 50 percent, while nearly 4,000 public schools have been closed in the same period.
- An appalling increase in the inequality and child poverty surrounding our schools, categories in which the United States leads the world and that tell us far more about the source of our educational problems than the uneven quality of state curriculum standards.
- A dramatic increase in the cost and debt burden of college access.
- A massively well-financed campaign of billionaires and politically powerful advocacy organizations that seeks to replace our current system of public education—which, for all its many flaws, is probably the most democratic institution we have and one that has done far more to address inequality, offer hope, and provide opportunity than the country’s financial, economic, political, and media institutions—with a market-based, non-unionized, privately managed system.

I think many supporters of the Common Core don’t sufficiently take into account how these larger forces define the context in which the standards are being introduced, and how much that context is shaping implementation. As teacher-blogger Jose Vilson put it:

People who advocate for the CCSS miss the bigger picture that people on the ground don’t: The CCSS came as a package deal with the new teacher evaluations, higher stakes testing, and austerity measures, including mass school closings. Often, it seems like the leaders are talking out of both sides of their mouths when they say they want to improve education but need to defund our schools. . . . It makes no sense for us to have high expectations of our students when we don’t have high expectations for our school system.

My own first experience with standards-based reform was in New Jersey, where I taught English and journalism to high school students for many years in one of the state’s poorest cities. In the 1990s, curriculum standards became a central issue in the state’s long-running funding equity case, *Abbott v. Burke*. The case began by documenting how lower levels of resources in poor urban districts produced unequal educational opportunities in the form of worse facilities, poorer curriculum materials, less experienced teachers, and fewer support services. At a key point in the case, in an early example of arguments that today are painfully familiar, then-Gov. Christine Whitman declared that, instead of funding equity, what we really needed were curriculum standards and a shift from focusing on dollars to focusing on what those dollars should be spent on. If all students were taught to meet “core content curriculum standards,” Whitman argued, then everyone would receive an equitable and adequate education.

At the time, the New Jersey Supreme Court was an unusually progressive and foresighted court, and it responded to the state's proposal for standards with a series of landmark decisions that speak to some of the same issues raised today by the Common Core. The court agreed that standards for what schools should teach and students should learn seemed like a good idea. But standards don't deliver themselves. They require well-prepared and supported professional staff, improved instructional resources, safe and well-equipped facilities, reasonable class sizes, and—especially if they are supposed to help schools compensate for the inequality that exists all around them—a host of supplemental services like high quality preschools, expanded summer and after-school programs, health and social services, and more. In effect, the court said adopting “high expectations” curriculum standards was like passing out a menu from a fine restaurant. Not everyone who gets a menu can pay for the meal. So the court tied New Jersey's core curriculum standards to the most equitable school funding mandates in the country.

And though it's been a constant struggle to sustain and implement New Jersey's funding equity mandates, a central problem with the Common Core is the complete absence of any similar credible plan to provide—or even to determine—the resources necessary to make every student “college and career ready” as defined by the CCSS.

Funding is far from the only concern, but it is a threshold credibility issue. If you're proposing a dramatic increase in outcomes and performance to reach social and academic goals that have never been reached before, and your primary investments are standards and tests that serve mostly to document how far you are from reaching those goals, you either don't have a very good plan or you're planning something else. The Common Core, like NCLB before it, is failing the funding credibility test before it's even out of the gate.

The Lure of the Common Core

Last winter, the Rethinking Schools editorial board held a discussion about the Common Core; we were trying to decide how to address this latest trend in the all-too-trendy world of education reform. Rethinking Schools has always been skeptical of standards imposed from above. Too many standards projects have been efforts to move decisions about teaching and learning away from educators and schools, and put them in the hands of distant bureaucracies and politicians. Standards have often codified sanitized versions of history, politics, and culture that reinforce official myths while leaving out the voices and concerns of our students and communities. Whatever potentially positive role standards might play in truly collaborative conversations about what schools should teach and children should learn has repeatedly been undermined by bad process, suspect political agendas, and commercial interests.

Although all these concerns were raised, we also found that teachers in different districts and states were having very different experiences with the Common Core. There were teachers in Milwaukee who had endured years of scripted curriculum and mandated textbooks. For them, the CCSS seemed like an opening to develop better curriculum and, compared to what they'd been struggling under, seemed more flexible and student-centered. For many teachers, especially in the interim between the rollout of the standards and the arrival of the tests—a lot of the Common Core's appeal is based on claims that:

- It represents a tighter set of smarter standards focused on developing critical learning skills instead of mastering fragmented bits of knowledge.
- It requires more progressive, student-centered teaching with strong elements of collaborative and reflective learning.
- It will help equalize the playing field by raising expectations for all children, especially those suffering the worst effects of “drill and kill” test prep.

Viewed in isolation, the debate over the Common Core can be confusing; who doesn't want all students to have good preparation for life after high school? But, seen in the full context of the politics and history that produced it—and the tests that are just around the bend—the implications of the Common Core project look quite different.

Emerging from the Wreckage of No Child Left Behind

The CCSS emerged from the wreckage of NCLB. In 2002, NCLB was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support and presented as a way to close long-standing gaps in academic performance. NCLB marked a dramatic change in federal education policy—away from its historic role as a promoter of access and equity through support for things like school integration, extra funding for high-poverty schools, and services for students with special needs, to a much less equitable set of mandates around standards and testing, closing or “reconstituting” schools, and replacing school staff.

NCLB required states to adopt curriculum standards and to test students annually to gauge progress toward reaching them. Under threat of losing federal funds, all 50 states adopted or revised their standards and began testing every student, every year, in every grade from 3–8 and again in high school. The professed goal was to make sure every student was on grade level in math and language arts by requiring schools to reach 100 percent passing rates on state tests for every student in 10 subgroups. By any measure, NCLB was a failure in raising academic performance and narrowing gaps in opportunity and outcomes. But by very publicly measuring the test results against arbitrary benchmarks that no real schools have ever met, NCLB succeeded in creating a narrative of failure that shaped a decade of attempts to “fix” schools while blaming those who work in them. The disaggregated scores put the spotlight on gaps among student groups, but the law used these gaps to label schools as failures without providing the resources or supports needed to eliminate them.

By the time the first decade of NCLB was over, more than half the schools in the nation were on the lists of “failing schools” and the rest were poised to follow. In Massachusetts, which is generally considered to have the toughest state standards in the nation—arguably more demanding than the Common Core—80 percent of the schools were facing NCLB sanctions. This is when the NCLB “waivers” appeared. As the number of schools facing sanctions and intervention grew well beyond the poor communities of color where NCLB had made “disruptive reform” the norm and began to reach into more middle-class and suburban districts, the pressure to revise NCLB's unworkable accountability system increased. But the bipartisan coalition that passed NCLB had collapsed and gridlock in Congress made revising it impossible. So U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, with dubious legal justification, made up a process to grant NCLB waivers to states that agreed to certain conditions.

Forty states were granted conditional waivers from NCLB: If they agreed to tighten the screws on the most struggling schools serving the highest needs students, they could ease up on the rest, *provided* they also agreed to use test scores to evaluate all their teachers, expand the reach of charter schools, and adopt “college and career ready” curriculum standards. These same requirements were part of the Race to the Top program, which turned federal education funds into competitive grants and promoted the same policies, even though they have no track record of success as school improvement strategies.

Who Created the Common Core?

Because federal law prohibits the federal government from creating national standards and tests, the Common Core project was ostensibly designed as a state effort led by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, a private consulting firm. The Gates Foundation provided more than \$160 million in funding, without which Common Core would not exist.

The standards were drafted largely behind closed doors by academics and assessment “experts,” many with ties to testing companies. *Education Week* blogger and science teacher Anthony Cody found that, of the 25 individuals in the work groups charged with drafting the standards, six were associated with the test makers from the College Board, five with the test publishers at ACT, and four with Achieve. Zero teachers were in the work groups. The feedback groups had 35 participants, almost all of whom were university professors. Cody found one classroom teacher involved in the entire process. According to teacher educator Nancy Carlsson-Paige: “In all, there were 135 people on the review panels for the Common Core. Not a single one of them was a K–3 classroom teacher or early childhood professional.” Parents were entirely missing. K–12 educators were mostly brought in after the fact to tweak and endorse the standards—and lend legitimacy to the results.

College- and Career-Ready Standards?

The substance of the standards themselves is also, in a sense, top down. To arrive at “college- and career-ready standards,” the Common Core developers began by defining the “skills and abilities” they claim are needed to succeed in a four-year college. The CCSS tests being developed by two federally funded multistate consortia, at a cost of about \$350 million, are designed to assess these skills. One of these consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, claims that students who earn a “college ready” designation by scoring a level 4 on these still-under-construction tests will have a 75 percent chance of getting a C or better in their freshman composition course. But there is no actual evidence connecting scores on any of these new experimental tests with future college success.

And it will take far more than standards and tests to make college affordable, accessible, and attainable for all. When I went to college many years ago, “college for all” meant open admissions, free tuition, and race, class, and gender studies. Today, it means cutthroat competition to get in, mountains of debt to stay, and often bleak prospects when you leave. Yet “college readiness” is about to become the new AYP (adequate yearly progress) by which schools will be ranked.

The idea that by next year Common Core tests will start labeling kids in the 3rd grade as on track or not for college is absurd and offensive.

Substantive questions have been raised about the Common Core's tendency to push difficult academic skills to lower grades, about the appropriateness of the early childhood standards, about the sequencing of the math standards, about the mix and type of mandated readings, and about the priority Common Core puts on the close reading of texts in ways that devalue student experience and prior knowledge.

A decade of NCLB tests showed that millions of students were not meeting existing standards, but the sponsors of the Common Core decided that the solution was tougher ones. And this time, instead of each state developing its own standards, the Common Core seeks to create national tests that are comparable across states and districts, and that can produce results that can be plugged into the data-driven crisis machine that is the engine of corporate reform.

Educational Plan or Marketing Campaign?

The way the standards are being rushed into classrooms across the country is further undercutting their credibility. These standards have never been fully implemented in real schools anywhere. They're more or less abstract descriptions of academic abilities organized into sequences by people who have never taught at all or who have not taught this particular set of standards. To have any impact, the standards must be translated into curriculum, instructional plans, classroom materials, and valid assessments. A reasonable approach to implementing new standards would include a few multi-year pilot programs that provided time, resources, opportunities for collaboration, and transparent evaluation plans.

Instead we're getting an overhyped all-state implementation drive that seems more like a marketing campaign than an educational plan. And I use the word marketing advisedly, because another defining characteristic of the Common Core project is rampant profiteering.

Joanne Weiss, Duncan's former chief of staff and head of the Race to the Top grant program, which effectively made adoption of the Common Core a condition for federal grants, described how it is opening up huge new markets for commercial exploitation:

The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.

Who Controls Public Education?

Having financed the creation of the standards, the Gates Foundation has entered into a partnership with Pearson to produce a full set of K–12 courses aligned with the Common Core that will be marketed to schools across the country. Nearly every educational product now comes wrapped in the Common Core brand name.

The curriculum and assessments our schools and students need will not emerge from this process. Instead, the top-down, bureaucratic rollout of the Common Core has put schools in the middle of a multilayered political struggle over who will control education policy—corporate power and private wealth or public institutions managed, however imperfectly, by citizens in a democratic process.

The web-based news service *Politico* recently described what it called “the Common Core money war,” reporting that “tens of millions of dollars are pouring into the battle over the Common Core. . . . The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation already has pumped more than \$160 million into developing and promoting the Common Core, including \$10 million just in the past few months, and it's getting set to announce up to \$4 million in new grants to keep the advocacy cranking. Corporate sponsors are pitching in, too. Dozens of the nation's top CEOs will meet to set the plans for a national advertising blitz that may include TV, radio, and print.”

At the same time, opposing the Common Core is “an array of organizations with multimillion-dollar budgets of their own and much experience in mobilizing crowds and lobbying lawmakers, including the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, the Pioneer Institute, FreedomWorks, and the Koch Bros.” These groups are feeding a growing right-wing opposition to the Common Core that combines hostility to all federal education initiatives and anything supported by the Obama administration with more populist sentiments.

Tests, Tests, Tests

But while this larger political battle rages, the most immediate threat for educators and schools remains the new wave of high-stakes Common Core tests.

Duncan, who once said “The best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina” and who called *Waiting for Superman* “a Rosa Parks moment,” now tells us, “I am convinced that this new generation of state assessments will be an absolute game-changer in public education.”

The problem is that this game, like the last one, is rigged. Although reasonable people have found things of value in the Common Core standards, there is no credible defense to be made of the high-stakes uses planned for these new tests. Instead, the Common Core project threatens to reproduce the narrative of public school failure that just led to a decade of bad policy in the name of reform.

Reports from the first wave of Common Core testing provide evidence for these fears. Last spring, students, parents, and teachers in New York schools responded to new Common Core tests developed by Pearson with outcries against their length, difficulty, and inappropriate content. Pearson included corporate logos and promotional material in reading passages. Students reported feeling overstressed and underprepared—meeting the tests with shock, anger, tears, and anxiety. Administrators requested guidelines for handling tests students had vomited on. Teachers and principals complained about the disruptive nature of the testing process and many parents encouraged their children to opt out.

Only about 30 percent of students were deemed “proficient” based on arbitrary cut scores designed to create new categories of failure. The achievement gaps Common Core is supposed to narrow grew larger. Less than 4 percent of students who are English language learners passed. The number of students identified by the tests for “academic intervention” skyrocketed to 70 percent, far beyond the capacity of districts to meet.

The tests are on track to squeeze out whatever positive potential exists in the Common Core:

- The arrival of the tests will pre-empt the already too short period teachers and schools have to review the standards and develop appropriate curriculum responses before that space is filled by the assessments themselves.
- Instead of reversing the mania for over-testing, the new assessments will extend it with pre-tests, interim tests, post-tests, and computer-based “performance assessments.” It’s the difference between giving a patient a blood test and draining the patient’s blood.
- The scores will be plugged into data systems that will generate value-added measures, student growth percentiles, and other imaginary numbers for what I call psychometric astrology. The inaccurate and unreliable practice of using test scores for teacher evaluation will distort the assessments before they’re even in place, and has the potential to make Common Core implementation part of the assault on the teaching profession instead of a renewal of it.
- If the Common Core’s college- and career-ready performance levels become the standard for high school graduation, it will push more kids out of high school than it will prepare for college. The most vulnerable students will be the most at risk. As FairTest put it: “If a child struggles to clear the high bar at 5 feet, she will not become a ‘world-class’ jumper because someone raised the bar to 6 feet and yelled ‘jump higher,’ or if her ‘poor’ performance is used to punish her coach.”
- The costs of the tests, which have multiple pieces throughout the year and must be given on computers many schools don’t have, will be enormous and will come at the expense of more important things. The plunging scores will be used as an excuse to close more public schools and open more privatized charters and voucher schools, especially in poor communities of color.

This is not just cynical speculation. It is a reasonable projection based on the history of the NCLB decade, the dismantling of public education in the nation’s urban centers, and the appalling growth of the inequality and concentrated poverty that remains the central problem in public education.

Fighting Back

Common Core has become part of the corporate reform project now stalking our schools. As schools struggle with these new mandates, we should defend our students, our schools, and ourselves by pushing back against implementation timelines, resisting the stakes and priority attached to the tests, and exposing the truth about the commercial and political interests shaping this false panacea for the problems our schools face.

There are encouraging signs that the movement we need is growing. Last year in Seattle, teachers led a boycott of district testing that drew national support and won a partial rollback of the testing. In New York this fall, parents sent score reports on new Common Core tests back to the state commissioner of education with a letter declaring “This year’s test scores are invalid and provide NO useful information about student learning.” Opt-out efforts are growing daily. Even some supporters of the CCSS have endorsed a call for the moratorium on the use of tests to make policy decisions. It’s not enough, but it’s a start.

It took nearly a decade for NCLB’s counterfeit “accountability system” to bog down in the face of its many contradictions and near universal rejection. The Common Core meltdown may not take that long. Many of Common Core’s myths and claims have already lost credibility with large numbers of educators and citizens. We have more than a decade of experience with the negative and unpopular results of imposing increasing numbers of standardized tests on children and classrooms. Whether this growing resistance will lead to better, more democratic efforts to sustain and improve public education, or be overwhelmed by the massive testing apparatus that NCLB left behind and that the Common Core seeks to expand, will depend on the organizing and advocacy efforts of those with the most at stake: parents, educators, and

students. As usual, organizing and activism are the only things that will save us, and remain our best hope for the future of public education and the democracy that depends on it. █

Core Connection

The administrators
stuffed in suits strut
through our school clenching
clipboards, nod plastic smiles|
Speak words like “common core,”
like “standards” & “benchmarks”.
But those of us who live in these rooms, who know each other's
stories & share apples and granola bars because there was no food in
the house after dad was arrested—
We nod & smile back—
Our secret knowing:
Core is community
Core is complex
Core is connection.
After bullshit banter,
The suits slip out, sip
bad coffee, fill out rubrics
on clipboards.
We close classroom doors,
Proceed to spin magic
uncommonly connected
at the core.

– Maureen Geraghty

Maureen Geraghty teaches at Reynolds Learning Academy in Fairview, Oregon. She wrote this poem during a visit to her class by slam poet Mosley Wotta.

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Wrong Answer to the Wrong Question

Why we need critical teacher education, not standardization

BY BARBARA MADELONI AND JULIE GORLEWSKI



Michael Duffy

Teacher education matters. Many future teachers enter preparation programs with deep-seated and unquestioned ideas about teaching and learning. At a moment when the children in our classrooms reflect the growing diversity of our population but our teaching force remains essentially white and middle class, we need our schools of education to ask pre-service teachers to wrestle with identity and race, to explore the historical/cultural contexts of school, and to frame teaching as the political work that it is. After all, teaching always asks us to imagine the kind of society we want to live in.

Teacher education (like K–12) is under attack by those seeking to exploit the public good and privatize education. Teacher educators find ourselves on the defensive, compelled to answer questions about efficacy and accountability that do not reflect our understandings of our work, questions that do not address the most pressing concerns of critical multicultural educators: making schools sites for social justice and advocating for education as liberation.

Into this moment comes edTPA, promoted as an answer to the perceived shortcomings of teacher education. EdTPA is a 40-plus-page document featuring Pearson's logo. The final product is submitted to a “calibrated scorer,” whose evaluation reduces student work to a number. As such, it is the wrong answer to the question of how teacher education should be improved.

EdTPA supporters wrongly link the weaknesses of teacher education to a lack of national performance standards, when the real struggle for teacher education is to equip prospective teachers to serve their students and the larger society as public intellectuals and to enable them to teach powerfully about things that matter.

This is a difficult story to tell. Promoters of edTPA say that they are trying to protect and professionalize teaching and teacher education. Their response to attacks on our profession is to develop a system to measure and prove our worth through a standardized certification assessment. We understand the impulses to protect. However, we do not understand how, in the effort to support the profession, so many of its voices are left out. EdTPA has been imposed on teacher education—an imposition that pushes aside work that matters deeply to education scholars. It narrows the possibilities of teaching and learning, distracts us from critical multicultural education, is an invitation for corporate encroachment, and restricts academic freedom.

Narrowing Teaching and Learning

What does teaching look like? We recall moments from our own teaching: plays are performed, songs are sung, students silently write and pass their writing around in a circle, someone asks why there are no black students in the honors class, someone else asks why we are going to war against Iraq, someone gets angry and walks out, someone makes a joke and we can't stop laughing. What in these interactions represents quality teaching? For teachers, that question remains compelling and uncertain. Grounded in their knowledge of content, pedagogy, and relationships with learners, teachers maintain a questioning

stance. Much of the work of educating new teachers involves providing the theoretical, practical, and personal support to embrace the ongoing uncertainty of teaching.

EdTPA devalues the uncertainties of teaching; instead it requires a performance of teaching as definitive—a performance that becomes central to the student teaching experience. When the precursor to the edTPA was piloted at her university, Barbara experienced profound changes in the student teaching seminar. Class time became consumed with questions about evidence for rubrics and scoring. The implicit message of edTPA, that teaching can be measured, was contrary to the developmental conversations Barbara and her students were having. Students were frustrated and confused by the contrast. At the end of the semester, one student wrote, “It seems you should either focus on the TPA or ignore it, but I don't see how we can do the TPA and have those other conversations.”

Distracting from Social Justice Education

There is a growing disconnect between the primarily white, middle-class students who are becoming teachers and the mostly black and brown children who are entering K-12 schools. Teacher educators must demonstrate powerful and imaginative teaching practices, and must help prospective teachers become creators of effective curriculum. But teaching strategies are not enough to resolve the work of the heart required for developing consciousness of racism, classism, and injustice. Strategies alone cannot foster the courage to combat oppression. We must spend time with students questioning the social context of schools, understanding our identities, negotiating painful psychological terrain, and exploring how school can reproduce inequities.

The student teachers with whom we work struggle to acknowledge racism and injustice. As a student recently wrote to Barbara, “[The course] opened my eyes and made me examine myself in ways that forever changed my perceptions of my social identity and challenged my understanding of what education is and means.” Teacher educators are constantly balancing a commitment to critical consciousness and students' calls for practical solutions. Indeed, part of our work is to explore the ideologies and values hidden in the “practical” aspects of teaching by examining underlying assumptions about learning, motivation, and the purpose of schooling.

EdTPA invades this experience. Students tend to focus on meeting the requirements at the expense of realizing when they are making value-based ideological choices. As long as they follow the rubrics, which operate in the land of “value-free” language, they can score well. The edTPA's detailed instructions and rubrics communicate that teaching requires following rules and *can be* reduced to a number. Because edTPA is high-stakes, students lock in on it. Class time is taken over by anxious questions about evidence and scoring. What will be left out? Time to reflect on the emotional experience of teaching? Questions about how our identities impact how we see students and they see us? Considering connections between classroom “management” and the school-to-prison pipeline?

One of the undergraduate students in Julie's Introduction to Curriculum and Assessment course, which is taken a year prior to student teaching, came to her with a problem. Visibly distressed, he told Julie that the teacher to whom he had been assigned for fieldwork had invited him to student teach with her. Because he had tremendous respect and admiration for this teacher, he was thrilled. But he was reluctant to accept her offer—he was apprehensive about completing the edTPA in this setting. He had forged relationships with the young people in this urban school populated with many challenging students, but anticipating the judgment of an “objective” distant scorer—one who might not understand why the classroom was not filled with compliant, well-behaved learners—made him hesitate to accept the invitation. The edTPA has already intruded on the relationship between this candidate and his future students.

Student teachers describe edTPA as a constraint on meaningful reflection. Celia Oyler, professor of education at Teachers College, wrote to us recently that a meeting with students who had piloted the edTPA “was the most wrenching, heartbreaking hour of my professional career as a teacher educator.” The Teachers College student teachers, who understood they were part of a pilot and that the assessment was not high-stakes for them, still felt that they had “to fabricate and backtrack and lie to

make their teaching fit into a coherent narrative.” Although edTPA includes questions connecting learning to the community beyond the classroom, the rubrics get in the way of meaningful reflection. As one student teacher wrote to Barbara: “I tried to add some reflection to these questions, but they're just such bad questions that. . . it still felt like a performance of sorts. It was like a chance to show how flawless my teaching is, rather than to stop and question it.”

Valuing the impersonal above the relational is contrary to social justice education, and to teaching as humanizing practice. As one student from another university wrote to Barbara, “I find it annoying and offensive that the powers that be think it is even possible to standardize a field so subjective as teaching! I thought I had a co-operating teacher and supervisor for a reason! They observe and interact with me daily and weekly. Does their opinion count for nothing now?”

Standardization erases relationships, which are the fabric of teaching, and substitutes mechanization. Teaching becomes technical, nuts-and-bolts work vulnerable to review and control by corporations like Pearson.

Corporatizing Teacher Education

EdTPA is a welcome mat for Pearson Inc. to enter teacher education, reap huge profits, exploit the privacy of students and teacher candidates, and outsource teacher educators' labor. The edTPA marketing campaign denies the significance of Pearson's involvement, claiming that Pearson is only necessary for national distribution and scoring. In denying the import of Pearson's role in edTPA, its promoters ignore the international social and political context: The public sphere is under assault. Pearson has infiltrated every level of education, treating this public good as a market to be exploited. It profits from testing and curriculum at all levels, monopolizing the content and process of teaching and learning worldwide.

Although trust is essential in student teacher development, trust in Pearson is misguided. Recently, Pearson scoring mistakes mislabeled more than 2,700 students in New York as ineligible for gifted and talented programs. Given the high stakes of edTPA, the ramifications of scoring errors are serious; they could affect certification. Teaching is not reducible to a number and accuracy in measurement is a dangerous pretense. But belief in numerical data is central to corporate education “reforms.” Pearson's involvement reveals how edTPA, designed to answer questions posed by corporate education reformers instead of the questions of teacher educators, leads us dangerously astray.

In most teacher education programs the decision about credentialing is currently made within a working group that includes the student, cooperating teacher, supervisor, and college faculty. Under edTPA, this decision will be made by an anonymous person hired by Pearson on a piecework basis (\$75 per test). This scorer will work with neither a long-term contract nor job protections. Thus, the edTPA dilutes the influence and expertise of educators and reinforces the ranks of casual, temporary, outsourced labor. Pearson's involvement also raises privacy concerns that must not be taken lightly. Promoters of edTPA tell us that it was created by a team from Stanford, which maintains ownership of it. But the bottom line is that Pearson profits from, and keeps possession of, student work—including the videos of K–12 classrooms. During its pilot in Massachusetts, parents and administrators of four school districts refused to send videos of children to Pearson. After edTPA was adopted in New York, regulations were changed to require that schools allow credential candidates to record their practice and send the recordings to a third party. It is not clear how parents will be informed and given the opportunity to decide whether they want their child's likeness sent to Pearson.

Restricting Academic Freedom

One of the most ominous parts of the edTPA story is the way voices of dissent have been silenced by intimidation and job loss. Since she received a letter of nonrenewal after supporting student teachers who refused to participate in last year's field test of the TPA at the University of Massachusetts (see “Stanford/Pearson Test for New Teachers Draws Fire,” winter 2012–13), Barbara regularly receives emails such as this one from Monica Urbanik at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse:

I am finding myself in hot water regarding my resistance to our School of Education's adoption of the edTPA. I refused to sign a Pearson/Stanford nondisclosure agreement last week and was asked to leave an edTPA training session. . . . I am considering this latest obstruction as a sign, pushing me into early retirement.

She later wrote: "I decided to leave my position and retire from the state system. I will not return to this insanity in the fall."

Faculty approach Barbara through email and at conferences saying that they wish they could voice their concerns about edTPA but are fearful of the consequences. In April 2012, when comments in an online forum on the Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium shifted from implementation of the test to questioning it as an instrument, the posts were immediately removed. We have led workshops in which teacher educators who had used the earliest iteration of the edTPA, the Performance Assessment for California Teachers, said they found themselves estranged from students as class conversations focused more and more on how to write to the rubrics. These educators choked back tears describing the shame they carry for their silence in the face of mandates that are stealing the soul of their work and preventing them from modeling the kind of critical pedagogy that they hope will inspire teacher candidates.

While critics are being silenced, promoters engage in the hard sell. EdTPA experts from the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, and Pearson Inc. toured the country last fall to meet with teacher educators. They arrived with PowerPoints of purchase plans and implementation schedules that moved from "introductory" to "exploratory," "scaling up," and "implementation." Each level was offered as a package with separate "benefits," "key features," "terms of agreement," and "membership recommendations." They came, not to ask what we know about new teacher readiness, but to promote a product.

In promoting edTPA, developers suggest that edTPA was created by teacher educators. Like all good marketing, this claim includes a kernel of truth; however, it implies that teacher educators clamored for, and now universally endorse, edTPA. This claim disregards how edTPA restricts academic voice and freedom, includes mandatory nondisclosure agreements, and perpetuates a culture of coercion.

Conclusion

These are treacherous times for public education. Schools and colleges are under unprecedented attack by those who seek to undermine public education. While we try to defend ourselves, we must also work to create education that is challenging, creative, joyful, deeply engaging, and liberatory.

How we resist is as critical as that we resist, for within our resistance we create new spaces for imagination. We do not need more technocratic efficiency, simulated objectivity, or corporate incursions. The troubles of teacher education are human troubles, requiring human answers: conversations, time, space for conflict, space for appreciation and love, space for humor and uncertainty. Teacher educators, like all teachers, must be free to disagree and develop questions that are not standardized. Teacher education can create possibilities for radical imagination in which we rehumanize the classroom and develop the theory and heart to practice education as freedom. Let's make our voices heard. Let's reclaim the conversation. █

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Martin Luther King Jr. and the Common Core

A critical reading of “close reading”

BY DANIEL E. FERGUSON



BEC YOUNG

Proponents of the Common Core have likened the struggle to implement it to the Civil Rights Movement.¹ As we reflect on the 50th anniversary of the height of that movement, we must consider how these standards and the related testing are threatening students' rights to education, not upholding them. As one critical example, the Common Core's strict interpretation of “close reading of a text” dismisses the notion that students' own thoughts and experiences, and how they connect to a text, are integral to reading. Rather, student voices are silenced in their own classrooms, and literacy is reduced to the ability to navigate standardized tests.

April 16th of this year marked the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail."² King, calling Birmingham "probably the most thoroughly segregated city in America," helped organize a nonviolent campaign there in early 1963 to address the segregation policies of downtown businesses. While jailed after a demonstration, King responded to an open letter by a group of white Alabama clergymen who expressed disapproval of the Birmingham demonstrations. In King's response, he outlined a moral justification for civil disobedience. Although the *New York Times* initially chose not to publish the letter, it has become one of the most iconic and widely published texts of the era. A replica of the letter is on permanent display next to King's jail cell at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, a place I visited many times as a student and as a teacher in Birmingham.

Last year, David Coleman, chief author of the Common Core standards and now president of the College Board, created a video of himself explaining how he would teach a "close reading" of "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The video, along with commentary videos by Coleman, Kate Gerson of the Regents Research Fund, and New York State Education Commissioner John King, were all published through EngageNY, a project of the New York State Department of Education.³ Coleman's performance is reminiscent of former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett's nationally televised lesson on *The Federalist Papers* to a high school class, but Coleman delivers his lesson to teachers charged with implementing his new standards to teach close reading.

A Critical Reading of Close Reading

Close reading, as it appears in the Common Core, requires readers to emphasize "what lies within the four corners of the text" and de-emphasize their own perspective, background, and biases in order to uncover the author's meaning in the text.

Critical reading, in contrast, concerns itself with those very differences between what does and does not appear in the text. Critical reading includes close reading; critical reading is close reading of both what lies *within* and *outside* of the text. For Paulo Freire, critical reading means that "reading the *world* always precedes reading the *word*, and reading the *word* implies continually reading the *world*."⁴

King's letter—in which he confronts the clergymen's accusations that the demonstrations in Birmingham were "unwise and untimely" by recontextualizing their meanings according to his worldview—is a paragon of critical reading. Early in the letter he says:

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

King proceeds to include the clergymen in a deep discussion of the imperatives and strategic approach of nonviolent direct action—tying it to a common text, the Bible; the experience of African Americans in Birmingham and throughout the South; and philosophers ranging from Socrates to Paul Tillich.

In the video, Coleman reads the above paragraph from King aloud and then dives into his own play-by-play analysis of King's argumentation. He asserts that reading instruction has overemphasized personal connections to texts at the expense of understanding the author's meaning, assuming the two are diametrically opposed: "We cannot hear King if we jump too quickly to 'What do you think?' . . . It's so tempting to go beyond the letter, but first we must honor and revere the letter." To be clear, no one is arguing against trying to hear an author, simply that reading devoid of one's own thoughts and realities—or the broader social context—is impossible. Understanding what you read and your own world are, to borrow from King, "caught within an inescapable network of mutuality." A curriculum that de-emphasizes students' *worlds* is one that obstructs their making sense of the *word*. For Freire, such obstruction is an act of oppression.

What would happen, I wondered, if I were to attempt a close reading of Coleman's video? Would it be possible to dismiss my own thoughts from the four corners of the text? How would the attempt affect my "reading" of his lesson? How can I see David Coleman speaking about instruction and not be reminded that he represents both the Common Core and the College Board, positions of power in national curriculum and standardized assessment? How can I forget that he was a founding board member of StudentsFirst with Michelle Rhee, who advocates the use of standardized tests to judge teacher quality? As he grins at the camera, how can I forget him saying, "People really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think" in regard to student personal narrative writing? How can I dismiss the fact that Coleman had a former career as a business consultant, but he has never been a teacher? Although these connections from outside the frame should not overshadow the picture itself, do we understand Coleman's text at all without understanding its context?

"What's at stake here," Coleman argues, "in this kind of patient teaching is letting kids [who] have a very wide range of ability into the hard work of reading a text closely, carefully, and well." A close reading of Coleman here would acknowledge his argument for more careful, text-based analysis of writing. A critical reading of Coleman, however, would also ask who is producing the text, the voices that are left out, and the power dynamics established by those exclusions. Coleman says his lesson is "one model in alignment with the [Common Core] standards in literacy; there can and should be several others." But then he immediately moves to "attacking the three most popular ways" of introducing a reading lesson, including building background and context: "What about letting King establish the agenda of what he thinks is important . . . as opposed to our own prefatory judgments?" But it is Coleman who, distrustful of teachers and students, is casting judgment. It is Coleman's solo voice in the video, positioning himself as the arbiter of curricular decisions in classrooms.

A Straight Line to Testing

Paragraph by paragraph, Coleman argues how King's letter should be read and what questions a teacher may ask students. Although there is an illusion that these questions may arise and be discussed organically—"What question might you ask about this first paragraph?"—Coleman asks and answers his own questions definitively, insisting that discussion questions be "text-dependent." Coleman claims that, according to his own research, 80 percent of questions students are asked are answerable without direct reference to the text. In a previous speech, he elaborates: "Think about it, right? You're reading a text and you talk about the background of the text, or what it reminds you of, or what you think about it, or all sorts of surrounding issues—kids are genius at this—because anything to avoid confronting the difficult words before them is money."⁵

Text-dependent questions, for Coleman, hold everyone accountable to what's within the four corners of the text. What he does not say, however, is that they also make for better standardized test questions. Coleman has made it clear that, as president of the College Board, he intends to align the SAT and AP tests to Common Core standards. He also stated explicitly in recommendations to curriculum publishers that because "80 to 90 percent of the reading standards require text-dependent analysis, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text-dependent questions."⁶

To force a discussion of King's letter to remain "text dependent" may make it easier to test, but it also forces out its entire social and historical context. Imagine students reading King's letter and not talking about how Jim Crow functioned in Birmingham, or how children their age, two weeks after the letter was written, skipped school to participate in the Children's Crusade, leading to an agreement to desegregate downtown businesses and giving momentum to the rest of the Civil Rights Movement. Imagine not addressing how, 50 years later, some schools are no less segregated now than they were then. For the sake of testing students on comprehension in the narrowest sense, what understandings about the world we live in are being forced out of the classroom? In his "model" lesson, Coleman reveals no interest, no curiosity, about the specific social conditions of Birmingham or the strategic choices facing civil rights leaders at the time—choices that students need to learn about to locate "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in context and thus better understand the issues of race and power today.

Insiders and Outsiders

The story beyond the four corners of Coleman's video is one of a man whose agenda is served by teachers following a curriculum that requires students to read in a way assessable through standardized tests he oversees and profits from. This unprecedented level of power within U.S. public education, while not mentioned in his video, cannot and should not be ignored. The ultimate hypocrisy lies in how Coleman uses King's letter to prop up his own message—anathema to the very ideals King promoted. King's letter, written in the margins of newspapers and on scraps of toilet paper while he was in jail for exercising his freedom of speech, is a demand that the voices of demonstrators no longer be marginalized:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. . . . We have waited more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.”

King's critical response to being called an untimely extremist, the extent to which he does not stay within the four corners of the clergymen's text, is precisely what makes his letter so powerful.

“Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say ‘Wait,’” King suggests. Why must students postpone the chance to have their voices included in the curriculum?

Student voices and the stuff of their lives are already being silenced by mandated scripts and high-stakes tests. Too many students in schools today already feel what King describes as “a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness.’” If not so intent on close reading, Coleman might connect the sense of isolation students experience in school today to King's impassioned explanation for why the demonstrators “find it difficult to wait.” Instead, Coleman asks, “Why not let King set the agenda?” as if allowing students space to make connections to the text is somehow against King. In fact, Coleman's agenda most resembles King's description of “the white moderate . . . more devoted to order than justice.” King did “set the agenda,” and the agenda is racial equality and social justice, not a model for test-friendly reading instruction. There is a grand irony in the last few minutes of the video when Coleman praises King for not just responding to what was in the clergymen's letter, “but pointing out how critical is what's not in the letter.”

Why then, is it problematic to let students do the same, to let their world inform their reading? It was at this point that I wondered: What if King had done only a close reading of the letter from the Southern clergymen he was addressing? What if he did not allow his own reading of the world to inform his understanding of the white clergymen's words? What leadership and wisdom would have been lost? Would he have been more sympathetic to their concern about “outside agitators” meddling with Birmingham's affairs? It was King's understanding of the world that led him to state, “Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”

Critical literacy argues that students' sense of their own realities should never be treated as outside the meaning of a text. To do so is to infringe on their rights to literacy. In other words, literacy is a civil and human right; having your own experiences, knowledge, and opinions valued is a right as well. Despite praise for King's rhetoric, Coleman promotes a system that creates outsiders of students in their own classrooms. █

Footnotes

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