"Laying Bare of Questions Which Have Been Hidden by Answers": The English Language Arts Standards of the Common Core, K-5

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ABSTRACT

The authors question the answer the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) claims. The questions center on the validity of the new standardized tests based on the CCSS and teachers' evaluations being tied to student test scores on flawed tests. The proposed tests on the CCSS will position children as deficient, and will not recognize the Funds of Knowledge children and their families bring to the educational transaction. The developers of the proposed new tests seem particularly uninformed on much research of how children learn new vocabulary.

The authors question the literary theory (New Criticism) and learning theory (information processing) that undergird the CCSS, which exclude theories and research (transactional theory, critical literacy, Funds of Knowledge, arts-based research) that could be beneficial, especially to children of color and the poor. The authors question the validity of dictating percentages of informational and literary texts, and the lack of emphasis on the emotional lives of children (the word *analysis* appears 94 times in the CCSS). They question whether the CCSS are truly internationally benchmarked when children are not biologically nor developmentally capable of some of the demands in the early grades, and impose standards not shared by Finland and China that may make American students less competitive, not more.

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James Baldwin once said "the greatest achievement of art is the 'laying bare of questions which have been hidden by answers'" (as cited in Leafgren, 2009, p. 110). Although Baldwin is not included in text exemplars of Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) because Chinua Achebe, Maya Angelou, Jim Haskins and other Black authors of Baldwin's stature are included in the recommended secondary readings, presumably he—and questions—would not be objectionable to the authors and promoters of the Common Core State

Standards (CCSS). In this article, we seek to lay bare questions of the almost-national answer the CCSS claim to be. Those questions are: How valid are the new standardized tests based on the CCSS and, indeed, how valid is any standardized test, especially when teachers' evaluations will now be based, in part, on their students' scores? Is the amount of money being spent on new tests worthwhile, or might the money be better spent elsewhere? What kind of reading stance—aesthetic and efferent—does the CCSS foster? How do the CCSS construct children? Questions are also asked about the CCSS text exemplars and the roles of close reading and of arts-based literacy.

Standardized tests have become doubly-high stakes with Race to the Top (RTTT) and the CCSS. In those states that receive RTTT money, at least part of teachers' evaluations will be based on their students' test scores. In a move that could, and already has, affected teachers' careers, it would seem that the standards by which they are measured would be valid, reliable, and lock tight. But are they? Consider the New York State Testing Program ELA Common Core Sample Questions for grade 3. Retrieved from Project Gutenberg, where no royalties have to be paid, the story on the test is "The Gray Hare" by Leo Tolstoy. It is about a hare who must cross a road to find food. He must wait for peasants to pass, a dog chases him, and he stops to play with fellow hares along the way. Eventually he finds oats in the granary to eat, then returns home. Perhaps even Tolstoy would suggest this almost plot-less story was not his best work and not likely to interest anyone besides Tolstoy scholars. Bolded are the words: hare, vapor, threshing-floor, runners, caftans, jostled, hoarfrost, granary, kiln, and lair. Proctors of the test are told they may tell third graders what these words mean. It is assumed that all third graders in New York state will know without being told: glistened, squeaking, sleighs, moustaches (note the archaic spelling), snow-drifts, companions, wintergreen, snow-covered, wicker, glimmering, and ravine.

I (Jane) gave this test to my undergraduates in a literacy course in the education program at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York, in the fall of 2012. Nineteen and 20 year old students struggled with it; for some, it was anxiety-producing: they turned red and their hands trembled. At the test's end, they asked, of course, if they had had so much trouble with it, how would third graders do? One young woman wisely said it was wrong to teach new vocabulary when being assessed. And anyone who has studied vocabulary knows children do not learn a new word by hearing the word one time, especially on the day of the test (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2003). Undergraduates answers also differed on this multiple-choice question:

> In which scene does the hare reach his goal for the day?
>
> A. when he watches peasants on the road
> B. when he plays with other hares in the field
> C. when he eats on the threshing-floor
> D. when he outruns the dog

The answer, according to the New York State Testing Program, is *C*. Some students argued, however, that the answer was *B*; perhaps the hare's goal for the day changed when he had the fun of playing with his with friends. That argument, based on close reading of complex text, seemed logical.

From a critical literacy perspective, Luke and Freebody (1999) insist that being code breakers, meaning makers, and text users is not enough. Readers must also be text critics, which Freebody and Luke define as being able to "critically analyze and transform texts by acting on

knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral—that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people's ideas" (para. 1). It would be wise for the state of New York to take this stance. While telling children the meaning of new words one time on test is clearly bad practice—in this case, 10 new words—who is privileged and who is silenced by words all third graders across the state of New York are expected to know? *Glistened, squeaking, sleighs, moustaches, snow-drifts, companions, wintergreen, snow-covered, wicker, glimmering,* and *ravine* seem to favor those who live in the country or those who have the means to travel to the country during the winter. What is a newly-arrived eight year old from the Caribbean living in an urban area to do? Despite years of claiming to become free of cultural bias, test-makers never have, and never will, be able to write tests free of cultural bias. We have had 20 years of standardized testing; reports from the National Academies National Research Council and the National Center on Education and the Economy conclude standards-based learning and the accompanying tests have accomplished little-to-nothing (Bloomfield, 2011). To impose more standardized tests is an example of doing the same thing expecting to get different results, which is a costly experiment to carry out on the nation's children. We are reminded of Wendell Berry's (2009) commencement speech to the College of the Atlantic:

> Understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility. We are not smart enough or conscious enough or alert enough to work responsibly on a gigantic scale. In making things always bigger and more centralized, we make them both more vulnerable in themselves and more dangerous to everything else. Learn, therefore, to prefer small-scale elegance and generosity to large-scale greed, crudity, and glamour (n.p.).

To administer a test on a story by Tolstoy (or anyone) to every child across the state of New York (or all states) is simply not responsible. We must learn to evaluate teachers and students on the local level, acknowledging the resources of the community. Luis Moll's (2010) Funds of Knowledge research could help us here. Moll and his colleagues show in their work teachers who make connections with children's families and communities, with teachers becoming learners about families' expertise. Funds of Knowledge defines "working-class families as possessing valuable cultural resources for instruction, challenging any perception that they would be lacking in such assets, while helping teachers establish relationships of trust with parents on which to base their pedagogy" (Moll & Cammarota, 2010, p. 289). Funds of Knowledge pushes against the deficit views many of us hold about children of color, the working-class, and the poor. When children are cast as "deficient," they know it, and it impedes their learning. In the Tolstoy story, children who do not know *glistened, squeaking, sleighs, moustaches, snow-drifts, companions, wintergreen, snow-covered, wicker, glimmering,* and *ravine* will be cast as deficient.

The interrogation of Tolstoy's story ("In which scene does the hare reach his goal for the day?") leads to another question. What kinds of literacy experiences does the CCSS want for children? Louise Rosenblatt (1991) explains that readers take a stance along a continuum between the efferent and the aesthetic. In efferent reading, the purpose is to "'carry away'" information (p. 444), like when one is reading directions to a new cell phone. Rosenblatt writes "we can, if we wish, shift gears and pay attention to what we are thinking and feeling as we read"; Rosenblatt calls this an "aesthetic stance" (p. 444). This is not an either/or; readers may have both aesthetic and efferent experiences reading the same text. It is also not genre-specific.

Some children may find aesthetic experiences in informational texts, others in poetry, novels, and drama. Rosenblatt explains:

> The reader brings to the text a reservoir of past experiences with language and the world. If the signs on the page are linked to elements in that reservoir, these linkages rise into consciousness. The reader recognizes them as words in a language; the child is often slowly making such connections. All readers must draw on past experiences to make the new meanings produced in the transactions with the text (p. 445).

From a critical literacy perspective, the CCSS seems to privilege efferent experience, for example, in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies Science, and Technical Subjects, grade 1 students will "ask and answer questions about key details in a text" (p. 11). This standard, and others, lead to primarily efferent readings of text; in fact, the word *aesthetic* does not appear in the CCSS until grades 11-12:

> Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e. g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact (p. 38).

Even here, the focus is not on the student's aesthetic response. Middle and upper class parents will be able to attain aesthetic experiences for their children outside of school; working class and poor parents may be less able to provide such experiences. And, if efferent reading is the goal of all in-school reading, how likely are students to be motivated to want to read?

By privileging efferent reading and marginalizing aesthetic reading, how do the CCSS construct children? Beach (2011) says the CCSS manifest a cognitive-processing model (p. 1). The authors might have chosen from any number of other models to construct children: situated cognition would be our preference for the most productive approaches to literacy (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1968; Gee, 2010; Lave & Wagner, 1991).

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is to be praised for its insistence on adding the "11th" standard before adopting the CCSS, such as in this standard in the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Arts & Literacy for grade 4 students to “recognize, interpret and make connections in narratives, poetry, and drama to other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, personal events and situations" and a "self-select text based upon personal preferences” (p. 19). This addition will make aesthetic experiences more possible in New York state, at least, and it is aesthetic experiences that make it more likely children will want to continue to read.

So will self-selection. The CCSS claims to be internationally benchmarked but does not say which nations. The city of Shenzen, China, a city of 15 million people, emphasizes free and pleasure reading and has the highest university pass rate in the country. The Chinese government is wisely encouraging the rest of China to follow Shenzen's lead. Patsy Aldana (n. d.) writes that Shenzen “incorporates free reading, real books instead of text books, no testing on reading or teaching to the tests, classroom book clubs, excellent libraries, parental involvement, and 7 percent of school budgets for reading promotion mandated for all schools” (n. p.).

If we were to follow Shenzen's lead, we would have to question the CCSS's "special emphasis on informational text" (p. 4). It may be that in the course of self-selection many

students do emphasize informational text. Others, however, may not. In his book *Evoking Genocide: Scholars and Activists Describe the Works That Shaped Their Lives*, Adam Jones (2009) asked 57 genocide scholars and human rights activists to "describe the works that shaped their lives"; for them it was 75% literary and artistic works and 25% informational texts that "evoked" them to their life's work. To write the article "Childhood Readers of the Classics: A Narrative and Biographical Account," I (Jane) read 40 biographies and autobiographies of writers to learn the texts that were most meaningful to them when they were children; for 40 writers, it was 90% literary texts that evoked them to their life's work (Gangi, 2006). Albert Einstein (as cited in M. Taylor, 2012) would say fairy tales are more likely than any other genre to make students college and career ready; Charles Darwin would recommend poetry and music. Darwin wrote:

> My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive…If I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature (as cited in Sloan, 1983, p. 220).

We don't have standard children; we only have children who are unique and have unique passions and interests. It is those we must nurture, which may mean varying our expectations of genre.

To their credit, Sue Pimental and David Coleman, "architects" of the English Language Arts CCSS, recently published a clarifying web log comment on the informational and literary texts. They write:

> By high school, the Standards require that 70 percent of what students read be informational text, but the bulk of that percentage will be carried by non-ELA disciplines that do not study fictional texts. Said plainly, stories, drama, poetry, and other literature account for the majority of reading that students will do in the high school ELA classroom (n. p.).

What questions to that answer might there be? Nine years ago, my (Jane's) daughter allowed me to publish her experience with fiction in a social studies class:

> [Her] consistent C grade in social studies throughout her elementary years zoomed to an A grade the semester her teacher used *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt to teach the Civil War. When the teacher went back to the-student-as-empty-bucket method of read-the-chapter-answer-the-questions-at-the-end-of-the-chapter, her grade went back to C. For her to care about the Civil War, she had to connect with real human beings. She had to feel the internal conflicts, which Hunt brilliantly depicts in a family nearly torn apart by the War. Two brothers choose to fight for the North; another brother, although he despises slavery, chooses to fight for the South, in part because he sees the hypocrisy of the North, who had its own brand of slavery in factories. In addition to learning factual

> knowledge about the Civil War, readers of *Across Five Aprils* vicariously experience the heart-rending pain that surrounded the war (Gangi, 2004, p. 185).

For many children, for them to want to learn, their emotions must be engaged; only then will they care about facts. The CCSS primarily focuses on children's heads, not their hearts and minds. The word *analysis* appears 94 times in the CCSS; the word *feelings* eight times, the word *emotion* twice in a clinical sort of way, and the word *affect* not at all. We do not want to overreach here but wonder, if school-shooters had not been brought up during No Child Left Behind, which positioned children as numbers, not people, if more attention had been paid to their thoughts, feelings, emotions, voices, and unique interests and passions, would we have seen such an increase in violence? What can the leaders of the CCSS do to prevent another Newtown? Walter Mathis (2011) calls the CCSS "No Child Left Behind on steroids" (n.p.); children, and now their teachers, are increasingly seen as digits.

John Dewey, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, once said "knowledge is a small cup of water floating on a sea of emotion" (as cited in Fishman & McCarthy, 1998, p. 21). Although he was probably overstating his case to make a point, neuroscience seems to bear out his intuition: mind, body, and emotion are intimately connected (Caine & Caine, 1991; Damasio, 1994; Hardiman, 2003). On the CCSS, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2011) writes, "of particular concern was the absence of social and emotional development and approaches to learning, although the lack of attention to the whole child was generally noted" (p. 3).

Are kindergartners' little bodies and minds able to attain these standards, as demanded by the CCSS?

> Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.
>
> A. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page
> B. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters
> C. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print
> D. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet

and

> Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).
>
> A. Recognize and produce rhyming words
> B. Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words
> C. Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words
> D. Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words.* (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /r/, or /x/.)
> E. Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words (CCSS, 2010, p. 15).

Finland, to whom we are internationally compared, thinks not; they do not begin to teach children to read until they are seven. Some children's little five-year-old eyes are not developed enough to recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet. Word study expert Kathy Ganske (2000) puts Emergent from Pre-K to 1; Letter Name from grades 1-2; Within Word Pattern from grades 2-3; Syllable Juncture from grades 3-8; and Derivational

constancy from grades 5-8+. Although there will be some kindergarteners who can meet the CCSS expectations for kindergarten, many will not. In their blog comment, "How ed policy is hurting early childhood education," Carlsson-Paige (Carlsson-Paige is Matt Damon's mother), Levin, and McLaughlin (2012) write "Children develop at individual rates, learn in unique ways, and come from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds. It is not possible to teach skills in isolation or to mandate what any young child will understand at any particular time" (n. p.). The teaching of skills in isolation cuts off children from essential processes in reading: syntax and meaning-making (Clay, 1991). Summarizing Halpern, NAEYC (2011) asserts that the CCSS "poses threats to the central ideas in early education as the K-12 system exerts a downward pressure of increased academic focus and more narrowed instructional approaches" (p. 4). What is gained by asking--and testing--children on more than they are capable of? Teaching children to read should be a joyful experience. The word *joy* appears once in the CCSS:

> Children at the kindergarten and grade 1 levels should be expected to read texts independently that have been specifically written to correlate to their reading level and their word knowledge. Many of the titles listed above are meant to supplement carefully structured independent reading with books to read along with a teacher or that are read aloud to students to build knowledge and cultivate a joy in reading (CCSS, 2010, p. 32).

Of the 40 books recommend to cultivate joy, there are four multicultural books, and only one ethnic author, Grace Lin; her *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* is recommended for grades 4-5.

To their credit, the authors of the CCSS have recognized the default to Whiteness in the CCSS text exemplars; in November 2012, Student Achievement Partners came to Newburgh, New York, to meet with members of Mount Saint Mary College's Collaborative for Equity in Literacy Learning (CELL) to develop an expanded list of multicultural text exemplars for Appendix B. On the front page of *The New York Times*, Sue Pimental was quoted, "'we have really taken a careful look, and really think there is a problem…We are determined to make this right'" (Rich, 2012, p. 1). Meanwhile, because teachers' evaluations are soon to be tied to their students' scores on CCSS tests, the currently recommended CCSS texts are flying off the shelves in bookstores and Amazon (www.amazon.com). Teachers of literacy and language arts must be mindful that the the CCSS is now shifting its emphasis to more multicultural texts. (Please see free resources for multicultural texts from the Connecticut Reading Association at www.ctreading.org/journal/resources, and search Mary Ann Reilly's blog at www.maryannreilly.blogspot.com.) Children must see themselves in books. The proficient reader research shows that, to become proficient readers, children must make text-to-self connections (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Mantione & Smead; 2003; Miller, 2002).

When we leave out children of color and the poor, in addition to reducing their ability to make the connections they need to make to become proficient readers, we are telling them they do not matter. The CCSS ELA standards' text exemplars privilege class. Less than 7% of the exemplars represent working class people and the poor—at a time when the majority of children are working class or poor (Gangi, 2010); the Annie E. Casey foundation (2011) finds that 22% of children in America are poor. This translates to about 16.5 million children, with poverty being defined as a family of four living on less than $22,000 a year.

We might also ask about the kinds of pedagogies that would best help children of color and the poor. The CCSS answer is *close reading* for all children, all 12 years; this approach seems to be grounded in the New Criticism of the 1920s and 1930s (Reilly, 2010). It is one way to read text, but not the only way. There is, as already mentioned, reader response, or transactional reading, informed by Rosenblatt and the critical literacy described by Luke and Freebody. We would add to that arts-based literacy and wonder if the authors of the CCSS would expand their definition of *close reading* to include multiple entries to text—performing, enacting, drawing, and digitally creating. The arts enhance literacy in many ways; we argue that, by staying in the verbal-linguistic system, children learn less than when they are allowed to compose meaning across symbol-systems. In my (Mary Ann's) work, middle-school English Language Learners used Art Conversations, in which learners conduct non-verbal conversation with paint as the medium (Reilly, 2008). These students' scores on the state tests had historically been zero; after Art Conversations and ways of deepening literacy learning, not test prep, their scores went from zero to a 50% pass rate. Perhaps Art Conversations could be tied to both close reading and the CCSS's encouragement of illustration of text.

Music is mentioned once and song is mentioned once in the CCSS. Sanacore (2004), in an article called "Genuine Caring and Literacy Learning for African American Children," describes how chants and song enhance the literacy learning of Black children, and it is well-known among experts on phonological and phonemic awareness how powerful music can be (Cunningham & Allington, 2011). In the Common Core, *acting out* is recommended for vocabulary words: "Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general action (e.g., walk, march, strut, prance) by acting out the meanings" (p. 27). When do the children taking the test on Tolstoy get to act out *jostled*, *squeaking*, and *wintergreen*? Drama has many more potentialities; in fact, Robert Marzano (2003) says that dramatic enactment is more powerful than telling or pictures:

> [S]tudents require about four exposures to content to adequately integrate it into their existing knowledge base…The types of experiences students have with content should be varied from exposure to exposure. In fact, it seems to be the case that some types of experiences produce more effective learning than others…The most striking aspect of the findings reported…is the impact of dramatic instruction. It has the effect size of 1.12 immediately after instruction and an effect size of .80 twelve months after instruction. The other two types of experiences, although effective, do not approach this level. Verbal instruction [.74 and .64] involves telling students about content or having them read about it; visual instruction [.90 and .74] involves using pictures and other forms of visual representations. Dramatic instruction involves students being engaged in or observing some dramatic representation of content (p. 113).

Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland (2000) reviewed 11,000 studies on the arts and academic achievement, and are able to make this claim:

> Based on 80 reports…a causal link was found between classroom drama (enacting texts) and a variety of verbal areas. Most were of medium size (oral understanding/recall of stories, reading readiness, oral language, writing), one was large (written understanding/recall of stories), and one was small and could not be

> generalized to new studies (vocabulary). In all cases, students who enacted texts were compared to students who read the same texts but did not enact them. Drama not only helped children's verbal skills with respect to the texts enacted; it also helped children's verbal skills when applied to new, non-enacted texts. Thus drama helps to build verbal skills that transfer to new materials. Such an effect has great value for education; verbal skill is highly valued, adding such drama techniques costs little in terms of effort or expense, and a high proportion of students are influenced by such curricular changes (n. p.).

Storytelling is not mentioned in the common core, yet has limitless potential to develop the oral language required to be able to read (Brand, 2006; Cowen, 2003; Loban, 1963; Morrow & O'Connor, 1995; Trostle & Hicks, 1998). Educators of color have also recommended storytelling as an engaging literacy practice for Latino/Latina students (Barrera, Liguori, & Sales, 1993; Castellano, 2004), African American students (Ford, 2002; Flowers & Flowers, 2008), and American Indian students (Hoffman, 1992; Klug & Whitfield, 2003).

The CCSS asks us to rethink what constitutes important content in American public schools. What question might be asked about this answer? When American students in low-poverty school districts are compared internationally, the United States has the highest rate on the Programme for International Student Assessment, higher than Finland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and Canada (Riddle, 2010). How is it that practice at these schools and quality living conditions that typify these children's lives are not our national priorities? Rather we seek to circumvent the issues of equity through standardization. Baldwin understood that engagements with the arts help us to lay bare questions to answers that the CCSS cannot suitably address.

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