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# "Signifying Nothing": Identifying Conceptions of Youth Civic Identity in the English Language Arts *Common Core State Standards* and the National Assessment of Educational Progress' *Reading Framework*

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**Abstract**

*This manuscript examines how national reading policies in the United States shape specific kinds of civic identities for K–12 students. We engage in a thematic discourse analysis of two contemporary national policy documents—the* Common Core State Standards (CCSS) *and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* Reading Framework—*to understand the ways citizenship is defined and constructed at the national level. By reading these documents for how they conceptualize civic-based educational outcomes, we interrogate the disconnects between this language and the civic contexts—and potential outlets for civic action—that young people are navigating in the United States today. We examine how seemingly benign policy documents define citizenship in increasingly narrow visions of individualist passivity, and how such definitions run counter to the expansive visions necessary to honor the lived experiences of young citizens of color. Our analysis highlights how these policy documents structure literacy practices, including the variety of texts that students encounter, opportunities to analyze those texts, and specific forms of engagement with media and messages found in society, in ways that stymie a Freirian reading of the word and the world. Ultimately, we suggest how educators might work within the limited pedagogical spaces of these policies toward liberatory ends.*

*Keywords*: reading, literacy, citizenship, U.S. education policy

"To instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties . . . in [primary schools] should be taught reading [and] writing."
<div align="right">- Thomas Jefferson,  1818</div>

"Education is still the foundation of [American] opportunity. And the most basic building block that holds the foundation together is still reading."
<div align="right">- Barack Obama, 2005</div>

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Literacy and citizenship have long been inextricably linked in political and educational discourse. At its most fundamental level, the connection seems obvious—reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills are necessary to participate in almost every facet of public life, from addressing neighborhood challenges to researching candidates for elected office (Flower, 2008). Yet in practice, the relationship between these two concepts is much more complex and fraught. When Jefferson spoke to the commissioners of the University of Virginia, both literacy and citizenship were largely restricted to property-owning white men in the United States. Nearly 200 years later, when then-Senator Barack Obama spoke to the American Library Association, debates over what literacy education should look like and who should enjoy the benefits of citizenship continued to rage.

In this article, we examine the complexities that lurk beneath the surface of normative educational policy and rhetoric around literacy and citizenship. We find that despite surface-level rhetorical linkages between the two, policy documents that guide literacy instruction in public education across the United States continue to advance a depoliticized, neoliberal vision of reading that avoids meaningful engagement with the competencies students need to advocate for themselves and their communities in an increasingly contentious and polarized country. We find that this depoliticized vision serves to marginalize the literacy practices of students from non-dominant communities and perpetuate structural inequity. Our excavation aims to push both disciplines to imagine a new relationship between the two concepts that can provide a foundation upon which young people can forge equitable and thriving social futures.

We begin by exploring how literacy is operationalized in educational policy writ large to focus on isolated cognitive skills and a vision of civic life that is reduced to economic readiness and personal responsibility. We then present a critique of this conceptualization of literacy—grounded in sociocultural and critical theory—and discuss literacy as it can contribute to more robust forms of democratic life when defined as an expansive set of social practices. We use this framework to engage in a critical thematic discourse analysis of two major literacy policy documents: the *Common Core State Standards* (*CCSS*) in literacy (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGACBP], 2010) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) *Reading Framework* (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008), to tease out their implications for civic engagement. We conclude with recommendations for a new theory and practice of critical civic literacy.

## What We Mean by Civic

Though the term civic encompasses many different definitions and ideologies, we use the term to point not solely to legal citizenship and formal political participation. Rather, civic refers to the full participation in robust forms of community life around shared interests and concerns (Dewey, 1916; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Hinck, 2019). The lessons of civic education concern how young people learn to participate in these social spaces and understand how their actions shape community life.

A growing body of research on inequality of opportunities for civic engagement scholarship converges on the point that historically marginalized youth receive fewer opportunities to learn or practice forms of civic participation, both within and out of schools (e.g., Galston, 2003; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Further adding to the context of how schools, educational policies, and educators shape the civic lives of young people is

existing research on the sociopolitical nature of youth and the United States' longstanding educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite the resiliency of an American Dream-driven "school grammar" (Atkins & Hart, 2003, p. 159), Atkins and Hart highlight how low-income, urban youth develop alternate civic identities; the effects of poverty, fewer adults modeling civic behaviors, and less apparent civic resources offer their own set of civic lessons for these youth. Similarly, in identifying a "civic opportunity gap," Kahne and Middaugh (2008) note that this gap is "exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice" (p. 18).

A previous analysis of existing literature on civic education indicates nine characteristics that typically define civic identity for youth, including "voting," "volunteering," and "reading newspapers at least once a week" (Mirra & Garcia, 2017, p. 140). Although these traditional definitions of civic participation suggest a communal nature of civics and civic life in ways that provide a contour for how schools and teachers can shape classrooms for preparing youth for the public sphere, they do not necessarily reflect how political participation is frequently manifested outside of schools today.

In considering how policy documents frame the civic purposes of reading implicitly and explicitly, we have identified contemporary shifts from civic engagement and participation to how some scholarship and methodologies are engaging in youth-based civic "interrogation" and "innovation" (Mirra & Garcia, 2017, p. 152). Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, and Rogowski (2012) describe "participatory politics" as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (p. vi). Similarly, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) delineate different kinds of civic learning opportunities in schools that point to varied enactments of what citizenship looks like and how it unfolds. A justice-oriented vision of citizenship, for example, would push for analyzing and addressing root causes of inequality, such as poverty, rather than primarily focusing on surface-level approaches, such as participating in food drives or national elections. Little research addresses the role that standards and national policy documents play in shaping the learning experiences of youth and the civic possibilities of reading.

Our current historical moment demands a more explicit consideration of civic-oriented literacy as, once again, literacy is being wielded to alienate and marginalize citizens. Our society is experiencing heightened levels of polarization, making it difficult to find the common ground needed to sustain a diverse democracy (Pew Research Center, 2017), with such polarization being fueled by the proliferation of fake news and media echo chambers that employ literacy as a means of division rather than communication (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Surveys of families reveal a desire for schools to prepare students for democratic life (Strauss, 2016), particularly within the current context of increased stress, trauma, and hostility in the Trump era (Garcia & Dutro, 2018; Rogers et al., 2017).

This demand for schools to be sources of civic preparation requires system-wide soul-searching about what literacy means at a time of civic turmoil and amidst continued systemic inequities in multiple areas of public life for members of minoritized communities. These tasks must be undertaken at multiple levels (e.g., within classrooms, community spaces, and teacher preparation programs), and—as we focus on in this piece—in policy conversations. Literacy educators are managing multiple competing priorities for their work at any given moment as they are also tasked with preparing

students for college and career readiness. With multiple classroom demands, policy documents containing standards and frameworks act as sources of guidance and direction. And yet, when teachers look to these documents, they are not finding a vision of literacy that supports education for civic engagement or transformation. Rather, as we define and explore below, normative implementations of literacy policies and practices divorce how young people learn to communicate and deliberate with the civic demands of life in the United States today.

## Review of Literature

### Unpacking Normative Conceptualizations of Literacy in an Era of Neoliberalism

The relationship between literacy and citizenship in the United States has always been simultaneously transparent and muddled. Although elected officials, business leaders, and community organizers consistently highlight the necessity of a literate citizenry for the successful maintenance of democratic life (Flower, 2008), a look underneath the surface of this rhetoric reveals major conflicts about the definition of literacy and the connection between it and engaged citizenship. For example, literacy practices have been leveraged to suppress civic participation; during the early- to mid-20th century, many Southern states administered literacy tests that purported to assess the skills needed to vote but, in reality, represented a thinly veiled attempt to disenfranchise Black voters by weaponizing literacy against them. A glance at items on these tests reveals isolated reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks that reduce literacy to a set of rules and conventions (Woodward, 2001). This practice exposed how literacy could be presented as a neutral collection of cognitive skills but actually serve as a means of exerting power through privileging the resources of the dominant community.

Yet, when literacy is wielded to oppress, others rise to leverage its emancipatory power. During the Civil Rights Movement, Freedom Schools across the South connected literacy instruction to freedom and amplified the cultural wealth of the Black community to combat oppression. These schools rejected a view of literacy as an isolated set of skills and instead embraced a vision of creative and purposeful expression in language for the purposes of civic engagement and uplift (Hale, 2016). Of course, these schools operated outside of the formal U.S. public education system.

Policymakers and educators alike have strained to determine what it means to teach literacy in ways that prepare students to become engaged citizens even as they express a desire to do so (Banks, 2007). In exploring the role that national reading policies play in shaping civic identity in U.S. public schools, we define key concepts illustrating what literacy and reading mean in today's global and digital landscape. From complex online textual engagement to transnational reading that spans thousands of miles and multiple continents, reading today encompasses a wide swath of activities, only some of which resemble the book-based activities of schooling's past. Though there are varied definitions of reading that shape teachers' instruction today, we start first with a "simple" view that "reading comprehension is the product of an individual's ability to read words and to understand texts that are presented aurally" (Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015, pp. 151–152). Kintgen, Kroll, and Rose (1988) suggested that the divide between reading and writing is, perhaps, a socioeconomic one, noting that "[t]he ability to read is obviously more important for economic survival than the ability to write, simply because more jobs require more reading than writing" (p. xvii). Though three

decades old, this framing of literacy continues to shape how particular forms of academic comprehension are taught.

Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega (2016) have pointed to students' general inability to discern fake news in online sources and thus made a deliberate argument that student literacy skills are tied to the ability to participate civically in today's digitally mediated society. Perhaps just as striking, Caulfield (2017) suggested that reading *laterally* in online spaces—opening multiple windows and using internet search engines rather than diving into the substance of texts—is an important kind of reading practice for today's sociopolitical world that simply was not necessary in the context of traditional, print-based reading pedagogy. Reading skills fundamentally change across virtual and physical worlds that young people inhabit today.

Reading for learning and engagement has not simply expanded via digital contexts. The transnational contexts of young people navigating a globalized economy, too, reshapes what reading means. Lam and Warriner (2012), for example, emphasized that "examining literacy across social and geographical spaces is especially relevant to the practices of people of migrant backgrounds as they develop and maintain relationships that often spread across territorial boundaries" (p. 191). Research by Rubinstein-Avila (2007) illustrated the shifting topology of understanding reading when working with youth in contexts that may be "characterized by disruption of traditional social orders, maintenance of the heritage language and cultural practices, incorporation of new values, and linguistic and cultural practices of the adoptive community, some of which may contradict the norms of the home community" (p. 71). Particularly as this study's analysis explores the language of educational policy within the current sociopolitical landscape, what reading means in the context of global power must be re-interrogated (e.g., Mirra & Garcia, 2017).

**Schools and civic learning in an era of neoliberalism.** The varied perspectives of literacy instruction above frame how school-based lessons shape what civics means for students today. Considering the "globally competitive" (NGACBP, 2010, p. 3) drive at the heart of standards documents like the *Common Core*, it is necessary to recognize that efforts to shape classrooms and educational processes are grounded in neoliberal expectations of schools to produce youth who contribute to thriving capitalist processes (Giroux, 2001). According to neoliberal ideology, the world that educators must prepare students for is one in which the free market reigns and individual civic duty is fulfilled through consumer choice (Brown, 2015). The dividing line between public and private institutions has faded as economic policies promoting competition, deregulation, and capitalism have superseded democracy as our guiding ethos (Harvey, 2007). Educational scholars have connected the change in language and mission among public and post-secondary education institutions toward an economic imperative for schooling to the primacy of neoliberal thought (Hursh, 2007; Torres, 2011). Scholars of civic education have noted the push toward individual and apolitical visions of citizenship as a consequence of this economic paradigm (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This intersection between civics and literacy grounds how we understand these terms within systems of schooling.

Reviewing the role that educational reform has played over a century of public education, Tyack and Cuban (1995) detailed how schools have been historically seen as the bastion for a utopian vision of U.S. citizenry: "For over a century and a half, Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for

educational reform" (p. 1). As we explored how reading instruction frames neoliberal educational outcomes, our analysis focused on the links between labor-driven perspectives of literacy education and broader conceits about civic life today. The narrowed neoliberal vision of civic participation as "personally responsible" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240) does not fully encompass the civic literacy possibilities that are demonstrated online, in the streets, and in broader democratic forums of organizing and political participation.

## A Vision of Literacy Responsive to Today's Civic Challenges

As we describe, simple views of reading have framed classroom instructional practices that affect the civic lives of today's students. Yet, it is important to consider how contemporary civic engagement expands significantly beyond the print-based texts that were centered in reading research in the past. From multimodal political activism, such as mobilization through hashtags (Tufekci, 2017), to forms of fandom and civic participation (Hinck, 2019; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016), digital tools have expanded local and global participation in civic life. The dimensions of reading have significantly expanded, as new literacies and multiliteracies research has revealed over more than two decades (e.g., Garcia, Luke, & Seglem, 2018; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; The New London Group, 1996).

Clearly, the dizzying scope of what counts as reading far exceeds the simple view with which we began this review (Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015). We echo Leu et al.'s (2015) question, "How can adequate theory be developed when the object that we seek to study is itself ephemeral, continuously being redefined by a changing context?" (p. 38). Just as we consider how theory must catch up to the possibilities of literacy, we also consider the damage that can be done if practitioners cling to narrow, functional visions (Kintgen et al., 1988). Hall (2006) argued that reading researchers must reevaluate how teachers understand reading instruction broadly and not simply as just "what to teach and how to teach it" (p. 426). Such arguments emphasize the purposes underlying why reading matters and what kinds of reading are valued within classrooms. Understanding what falls beneath the umbrella of reading is broad, and cultivating the connections between reading and identity are crucial (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Rather than seeking a substantive theory of literacy here, we instead looked at how the assumptions of reading and learning in national policy shape the day-to-day civic experiences of youth in U.S. classrooms. Arguing for the need to further research the intersections of identity and literacy, Moje and Luke (2009) noted that there is an interchange between the "multiple and shifting" (p. 432) identities that are produced through interactions between individuals, society, and texts. In our understanding of reading policies, such as the *CCSS* and the NAEP *Reading Framework*, we take this argument as a mandate to consider policy as both a text and as a paradigm for how U.S. social fabric is pedagogically woven in schools one lesson at a time.

## Conceptual Framework: A Sociocultural Approach to Interpreting Educational Policy

A sociocultural framework guided our analyses of the national education policies and their conceptions of civic identity. Building on foundational sociocultural and cultural-

historical theories, our analysis centers the mutually constitutive manner in which people construct culture and adhere to existing cultural practices (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In building our analysis, we examined the texts and presentation of these two policy documents, recognizing that they both shape and are shaped by culture. Policies—as artifacts that mediate and shape the United States' enactment of schooling and instruction—are what Cole and Levitin (2000) refer to as "constituents of culture" (p. 70). These objects are "*simultaneously* material and ideal. . . . They are ideal in that their form has evolved to achieve pre-scribed means to pre-scribed goals" (emphasis in original; Cole & Levitin, 2000, p. 70). Even as policy documents may be taken up in educational contexts as objective statements about the needs of students, a cultural-historical framework reminds readers that "humanity and subjectivity are always present" (O'Connor, Peck, & Cafarella, 2015, p. 178).

In framing our analysis from this stance, we intentionally acknowledge how the cultural contexts of specific times and settings can be overlooked. As Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) explain, "ruling out discussions of cultural variation has often meant that the cultural practices of the dominant group are taken as the norm" (p. 19). Likewise, Nasir and Kirshner (2003) explore how culturally grounded understanding of youth moral development in various cultural contexts can lose their complexity when generalized. Identity is enacted not only within specific settings but developed across them. This movement allowed us to consider how cultural artifacts help shape identities within specific contexts and over time. Further, our framework intentionally linked the actions, thoughts, and beliefs of society in the past to actions, thoughts, and beliefs maintained in the present day (Cole, Goncu, & Vadeboncoeur, 2015). Our sociocultural framework explored how these policies guide peer and school-based engagement. The sociocultural processes of youth development emphasize the importance of local, collaborative meaning-making in the development of youth civic identities (Vygotsky, 1986).

Finally, though cultural-historical analyses of understanding learning and contexts of educational engagement have often focused on approaches "to organize new forms of educational activity for children" (Cole, 1998, p. 291), we guided our analysis based on previous work that has also utilized sociocultural approaches to analyzing literacy and discourse practices (e.g., Garcia, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2008; Mirra, 2018). By grounding our analytical framework in a sociocultural tradition, we situate our perspectives of citizenship in a stance that resists neoliberal conceptions of citizenship (Levinson, 2012); instead, by reading these documents as cultural artifacts, we considered how new models of civic "innovation" (Mirra & Garcia, 2017, p. 152) are stifled by the enactment of these policies.

### Research Questions

Recognizing that the civic purposes of education are framed by how instruction, readiness, and academic content—such as reading—are defined in national policies, the research question that guides our exploration is: What are the stated and unstated civic implications of how literacy is defined in policy documents guiding primary language arts instruction in the United States? From limiting who civics is for to framing reading as a passive activity, we explore how current national policies are part of a larger neoliberal legacy of maintaining docility through educational policies.

# Methodology

## Policy Selection

The scope of educational policy in the United States is vast. This study took into account two interrelated policy documents released near the end of the first decade of the 21st century: (a) the *CCSS*'s English Language Arts Standards (2010) and (b) the NAEP *Reading Framework* (2008), both developed to guide specific kinds of learning in classrooms. The *CCSS* has directly impacted how teachers make instructional decisions and serves as the backbone for educational decision-making in 42 states at the time of this research; the NAEP *Reading Framework* directly informs the design and articulation of these standards, as noted in the *CCSS* introduction. The NAEP *Reading Framework*, then, is a deliberate, sweeping articulation of K–12 reading and student engagement that guides how district policies shape classroom instruction. Further, these standards were developed with a recognition of the limitations on how accountability was outlined in existing national policies such as No Child Left Behind (2002) and Race to the Top (2011). Although the role of assessment in classrooms is not the focus of this paper, it undergirds the rationale for why these documents were developed.

The introduction to the *Reading Framework* explains that the purpose of NAEP is to explore student progress in specific contexts of academic learning in the United States:

> Since 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been an ongoing national indicator of what American students know and can do in major academic subjects, including reading in English. NAEP reading assessments have been administered on a regular schedule to students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), NAEP will assess reading in grades 4 and 8 every 2 years. NAEP will also measure reading in grade 12 every 4 years. (p. 1)

In our analysis, we explored how the NAEP *Reading Framework* and the *CCSS* reference and rely on one another to shape a cohesive vision of youth reading and writing today. Although numerous factors shape classroom life, the nexus of these documents offers a vision of a national effort articulating what youth in the public education system should be prepared to do, think, and believe as a result of their civic preparation. From a sociocultural framework, we expect these documents to contribute to the cultural understanding of teaching today.

## Thematic Discourse Analysis

We focused on a thematic discourse analysis of how language was taken up by these documents' authors, as utilized by Philip, Way, Garcia, Schuler-Brown, and Navarro (2013) and Wetherell and Potter (1992). Like these previous approaches to discourse analysis, we looked at the specific use of language—and its absence—and "what is achieved by [language] use and the nature of the interpretative resources that allow that achievement" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, pp. 90–91). This meant considering how words like *civic* and phrases like *global competitiveness* shaped the construction of standards and frameworks, and how they functioned within these documents. These emergent themes allowed us to explore how these reading- and writing-focused policy documents signaled particular contexts for communication. A document's use of *global*

*competitiveness*, for example, suggested links to intended neoliberal outcomes for U.S. education and linked reading and writing practices to these outcomes.

As Philip et al. (2013) emphasized, this is a cyclical process of analysis. Rather than singular readings of these documents, we returned to the language repeatedly to seek counterexamples of how language is used and to confirm patterns both within and across the documents (Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

Further, our analysis considered how broader, non-linguistic choices shaped meaning-making for the consuming audience. We rely on Genette's (1997) framing of the "paratext" (p. 1) of print-based texts to analyze the materials within these documents that help shape the broader language patterns and arguments. As Genette notes, "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (p. 1). Expanding on this explanation, Genette explained that

> [t]ext is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations . . . they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world. (p. 1)

Recognizably, paratexts of digital documents that we have reviewed do not have all of the same elements as a book, such as a spine or a physical cover. Additionally, digital elements such as file names and digitally searchable text suggest that these paratexts are expansive in their opportunity for analysis. Recent scholarship on digital forms of paratexts (e.g., Gross & Latham, 2017; Rockenberger, 2014) has further emphasized how non-textual features reinforce the intent and purpose of these cultural artifacts. For our study, the paratextual analysis included consideration of such seemingly mundane decisions as the font and layout of these documents as well as the broader design decisions of how to present more than 60 pages of standards. Though not the primary aspect of our analysis, we were intentional in considering how the presentation of language constructs meaning (Edelman, 1988).

Close rhetorical discourse analysis is indebted to the traditions of literary analysis, upon which reading and literacy instruction are built (Appleman, 2015), and our analysis builds from a particular interpretation of the language in these documents. Although we analyzed the language and paratextual features across documents, we were selective in presenting findings that most specifically related to how these documents both implicitly and explicitly construct civic assumptions about reading; this included what was left out of documents, the instructional practices described, the stated purposes, and the outcomes of enacting these policy documents. Although neither document states that it is specifically about civic learning, the written—and unwritten—values of reading and writing framed our analysis of these assumptions and of what civic education means in U.S. educational policy. Ultimately, we engaged in a continual process of reading, reanalyzing, and comparing the documents in this study to consider what might be linguistic tics and flourishes, and what might function as persistent and intentional phrasing of civic markers that can influence instructional decisions in classrooms.

## Findings

Our findings begin with a focus on the *Common Core*'s framing of civic education and an exploration of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards, which are a focal portion of the *CCSS* document. We followed this analysis by considering how similar civic perspectives shaped the NAEP *Reading Framework*. Recognizing how these documents cross-reference one another and speak to larger legacies of policies—such as NCLB (2002) and Race to the Top (2011)—our interrogation pointed toward the false separation of literacy and civics.

### *Common Core* and an Anchored Vision of Reading, Writing, and Civics

In a press release announcing Obama-era efforts to fix aspects of NCLB, the White House (2015) emphasized a "new set of college- and career-ready standards" that help "ensure that every student" (para. 6) leaves public schools prepared for life beyond the classroom. Built on language from the *CCSS*'s Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association, the announcement emphasized how students are *ready* for the increasingly global, competitive society. Echoing this emphasis, the six-paragraph introduction to the *CCSS* for English Language Arts and Literacy lists *college and career readiness* as a primary goal for public education six times, and the words *college* and *career* appear dozens of times throughout the 66-page document. In comparison, the word *citizenship* appears exactly once.

This stark contrast in semantics is the first indication of the attention paid to civic learning. Nonetheless, our analysis continued to parse the vision of a young citizen that emerges from this document because of the way that the *CCSS* conflates college and career readiness with civic life. This conflation became apparent when the authors posited that students who are ready for college and careers are, by extension, prepared to "demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic" (p. 3). Such an assumption fits neatly into the paradigm of neoliberal citizenship discussed earlier, in which individuals manifest good citizenship by working hard, holding down a job, and conforming to the needs of the global economy (e.g., Levine & Lopez, 2002; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Tellingly, this is the only time the word *citizenship,* or any word containing *citizen,* appears within the document; we will explore additional absences of key civic language below. Upon further probing, we saw more examples of democratic framing through the description of the process involved in drafting the standards and the skills that students are expected to possess.

**Content.** The *CCSS* provides a direct description of citizenship as a "portrait of students who meet the standards set out in this document" (p. 7). This section offered a general overview of the dispositions of a college-, career-, and—by extension—civically ready young person. The descriptors used on this page include "independent," "engaged," "open-minded," and "thoughtful" (p. 7). This apolitical portrait conceives of civic actors as individuals engaging with evidence and respectfully contributing to a civil exchange of ideas. The authors make a nod to diversity by stating, "students appreciate that the twenty-first century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together" (p. 7). Again, only classrooms and workplaces are identified as sites of diversity—public commons are conspicuously absent—and even if we assume

that such a civic space stands alongside workplaces and classrooms, the response to diversity remains passive and vague. The word choice values a conflict-free coexistence above all else and does not consider how issues of power, privilege, and inequity influence the interactions necessary to promote equity and justice in a polarized 21st-century context.

How, for instance, might the young citizen—as conceived by the *CCSS*—react to the civil disobedience and creative expressions of dissent that the young leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement have voiced? Or to the athletes participating in anthem protests by taking a knee? Or to the DREAMer activists? A vision of civic life that values calm and measured voices at all times—instead of encouraging reasoned dialogue—tips into promoting complacency and frames the conflict sometimes needed to advance the rights of minorities in democracy as disruptive or inappropriate.

Political theorist Nancy Fraser (1990) rejected the notion that reasoned dialogue has the power to break down barriers of class or race that separate citizens. Fraser explained that even as formal barriers to inclusive deliberation on the basis of race, class, and gender have fallen away, "informal impediments to participatory parity," (p. 81) such as political protocols, remain and—if not addressed directly—become re-entrenched and continue to marginalize the voices of those who suffer from the effects of structural inequality. As long as societal inequality exists, she concluded, "deliberative processes in public spheres will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates" (p. 84). For Fraser, deliberative democracy perpetuates inequality by adhering to the illusion of a single cohesive citizenry that shares equal voice despite inequalities in other aspects of life. Instead, Fraser took a more radical stance, explaining that within a stratified society, democratic goals would be best served by the proliferation of multiple interest groups that engage in conflict to advocate for the interests of more specific subordinated social constituencies.

Fraser's vision of productive conflict is not evident in the standards; indeed, they seem crafted to minimize the potential for any conflict to arise at all. *CCSS*'s first Anchor Standard for speaking and listening (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1) reads: "Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (p. 48). Although the nature of *effectiveness* might seem broad enough to account for various contexts, a closer analysis of the 11th- and 12th-grade instructional standards reveals that the term is used to signal evidence-based discussions that "resolve contradictions when possible" through an appeal to "civil, democratic discussions" (p. 50). Even though "divergent and creative" (p. 50) perspectives are welcome, the overall message involves respecting all sides in any debate. Drawing upon Fraser's theory, we question the appropriateness of considering all evidence-based perspectives on challenging issues as equally valid at a time when the nature of evidence—indeed, the nature of fact itself—is increasingly split along partisan lines when issues involve commenting on the very humanity of groups of people.

**Process.** The introduction to the *CCSS* utilizes a third-person objective point of view that removes any trace of the thoughts, opinions, or beliefs of the individuals who composed it, bolstering a sense of authority (e.g., Adrey, 2009). *The Standards* are the subject of each sentence, and any reference to the authors remains scrupulously vague. Describing who was included, the document notes that *The Standards* draw on "input from numerous sources, including state departments of education, scholars, assessment

developers, professional organizations, educators from kindergarten through college, and parents, students, and other members of the public" (p. 3). This sentence assures readers that a multiplicity of voices deliberated on and developed the *CCSS*. However, there is no indication of the extent of the role that each of these stakeholder groups played. Reporting during the development and implementation of the standards contends that those closest to classrooms (i.e., teachers, parents, and students) had little input compared to the outsized influence of consultants and experts (Strauss, 2013).

Indeed, notably absent from the list of contributors were business leaders, though the role of corporate interests in the development of the standards was well reported throughout the process. In an article in *Fortune*, journalist Peter Elkind (2015) detailed how executives from Exxon Mobil, General Electric, Intel, and others provided information to the NGA about the skills they needed future workers to possess, which the authors used as the roadmap for defining the skills named in the *CCSS*. The introduction employs a collectivity of authors and masks the neoliberal nature of the group that crafted the standards. The prominent role played by the business community—hinted at in the phrase *college and career readiness*—is never fully acknowledged. Instead, the language collapses academic, civic, and economic rationales into a vague educational imperative. This rhetorical strategy is a hallmark of neoliberal ideology, conflating the public and private spheres and the positioning of a good citizen as little more than a productive worker.

**Defining readiness.** In contextualizing *college and career readiness*, the introduction notes that the document is actually "an extension of a prior initiative led by Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and NGA (2010) to develop College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language as well as in mathematics" (p. 3). Explaining that the previous work served as the "backbone" for the standards, the introduction notes that it was "released in draft form in September 2009" (p. 3). As with our analysis of the NAEP *Reading Framework* below, the introduction builds its legitimacy and rationale for conceptualizing CCR from in-progress policy documents. Though there can be synergy in simultaneously building interrelated documents, we also see these efforts as obfuscating authoritative ownership of the final document. In our analysis, defining CCR became a circuitous process of referring from one policy document to another.

Beyond the introductory page, the document invests two pages in explaining the "Key Design Considerations" (NGACBP, 2010, pp. 4–5). Although the framing of CCR points to other policy documents, much of this section weaved together analysis from the 2009 NAEP *Reading Framework* (National Assessment Governing Board [NAGB], 2008) and the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework (NAGB, 2010). Though adding argumentative legitimacy to the design considerations taken up in these standards, these referent documents, again, occlude actual authorship and build a larger network of interlocking policy documents to sustain a vision of classroom learning in English Language Arts and content-area instruction.

Also adding to the patina of literacy instruction is a brief paragraph explaining the document's focus on "results rather than on means" (NGACBP, 2010, p. 4). However, although the header for this paragraph seems like a powerful guide for delineating enactments of CCR, the actual content does little to address the topic. Rather, this section explains why there is so little hands-on support for guiding teachers through their use of the standards. It explains that this document does not "mandate such things as a particular

writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning" (p. 4). Readers—from teachers to policymakers—can interpret this language as aligning powerfully with a "hybridizing model of instructional reform" that Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggested "a teacher may adapt to improve instruction" (p. 138). By giving teachers the freedom to use "whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards" (NGACBP, 2010, p. 4), the introduction slips out of defining expectations for instructional approaches, leaving educators beholden to the otherwise vague articulation of meeting the CCR goals. Undefined policy statements ground the anchor standards' purpose for CCR; these vague descriptions are then left to teachers and districts to translate into meaningful practice.

Page seven of the introduction offers a "portrait of students who meet the standards" (NGACBP, 2010) in terms of college and career readiness. Key signifiers of youth civic identity are found both explicitly and implicitly in these descriptions, including the need for students exhibiting "independence," responding to "varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline," and utilizing digital tools "strategically and capably" (p. 7). Understandably, this language does not point to specific tools and tasks that may continue to become obsolete in a changing, globalized society. However, the document illustrates a picture of students exhibiting a productive and independent nimbleness. Further, the document's depiction of, and emphasis on, independence does not account for leadership or the value of collaboration. In this section, the descriptions of learning and instruction focus on how students become "self-directed learners" (p. 7). While the standards value independence in some contexts, they are also at odds with principles of collaboration, organizing, and democratic deliberation that remain central to how youth civic engagement and learning are sustained and supported (Anyon, 2009; Westheimer, 2015). These perspectives of learning were absent in our analysis of the standards. Although this does not explicitly preclude teachers from implementing democratic processes of participation and learning within their classrooms, our analysis of how these standards position learning found them focused on students independently receiving and following instructions from authority.

Finally, the description of college- and career-ready students ends with a short paragraph describing how students develop understanding of other cultures:

> Students appreciate that the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own. (NGACBP, 2010, p. 7)

The wording in this paragraph is vague and passive. "Come to understand," like definitions of CCR, slips away from placing responsibility on any specific instructor. Likewise, this paragraph describes CCR expectations of understanding cultures and

perspectives as devoid of empathy or collaboration. Diverse cultures and practices are kept at a distance from these 21st-century learners. Instead of driving toward meaningful engagement, participation, and civic connection, the standards depict different cultures as exotic and "vicarious" from the traditional, Western cultures of classrooms primarily taught by white, middle-class teachers (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). As language framing the macrosystem of students' lives, the *CCSS* introduction eschews specificity and creates a porous set of civic boundaries. This description, too, adheres to research in child and young adult literature that multicultural texts can act as windows through which to peer at othered identities (e.g., Bishop, 1990; Larrick, 1965; Sciurba, 2015). We analyzed this invocation of multiculturalism as it related to the civic framing of literacy instruction in the text, particularly within the construct of literacy tied to *readiness*. Although presumably framed to support the values of understanding "experiences much different than their own" (p. 7), these differences hew to neoliberal civic implications within U.S. reading policy.

**Notable absences.** Just as we detail the broader rhetorical approaches and language used to define literacy and civic engagement, our analysis of how the *CCSS* constructs citizenship and youth civic identities must acknowledge what is not present within the standards document. It is notable that the word *civic* does not appear anywhere within the actual *CCSS* document. Recognizing the authoring committee's focus on instruction and "results" (NGACBP, 2010, p. 4), the absence of *civics* emphasizes the contemporary articulation of literacies as a separate, discrete activity from the broader world of interaction, engagement, and change. Such a move is striking when considering the anchoring of these standards in college and career—both ostensible spaces for adult civic engagement, growth, and participation.

To be clear, we do not see civic identity as wholly tied to a single word. However, broadening our search, *civil* appears only once in the document. In 11th and 12th grade, one speaking and listening standard (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11–12.1.B) delineates "[w]ork[ing] with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making" (p. 50). Such a sentence would be incredibly powerful were it not disassociated from context or support of what civil, democratic discussions entail. Further, these two foundational terms within civic engagement literature appear to describe that classroom discussion should be docile, polite, and nice. This is in tension with histories of U.S. political engagement (e.g., the mid-20th-century Civil Rights Movement) that are based on interpretations of civil and democratic forms of participation that look far different from the kinds of discussions the standards seem to suggest in this sentence. We note this particular and singular use of *civil* to illustrate that our findings not only show limited explanations of how English Language Arts may undergird youth civic learning but to suggest that the few linguistic markers of civic engagement are softened to deflate actual political meaning.

Similarly, within the document, *democratic* appears only one other time and in the same sentence as the only instance of *citizenship*. The final paragraph of the *CCSS* introduction is a sweeping vision of what "Students who meet the Standards" (NGACBP, 2010, p. 3) can do. The seven sentences of this paragraph are the primary location in which the standards zoom beyond granular instructional goals to broader expectations about what effect the standards might have. The paragraph opens, "As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century"

(p. 3). What follows is a list of four parallel sentences. The fourth states that students who meet the standards "reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic" (p. 3). Like the singular use of *civil*, the sentence frames the content in all of the remaining sentences of the 66-page document. As a keyword for understanding processes of participation and engagement in civic life, the document uses *democratic* as a synonym for *United States*. This reference to the political processes of engagement is both abstract and easily dismissed by educators and administrators who may engage and utilize the document to support teacher learning and classroom instruction. Further, "responsible citizenship" (p. 3) is at the heart of what guides youth toward *college and career readiness.* However, rather than defining what *responsible citizenship* means, it is used without clear articulation.

When considering decades of contested identities of undocumented youth within U.S. classrooms and policies, such as the DREAM Act (2010), the vague framing of responsible citizenship is not simply an unclear depiction of the purpose of schooling, it also reads as potentially exclusionary of specific kinds of students. The subtle reach of the singular use of *citizenship* within the document highlights the absence of histories, literature, and ideas in what we see as core to the education of students in the United States.

**Analyzing NAEP Reading Framework**

As defined in the opening pages of the *Reading Framework*, the NAEP measures the growth and "academic achievement of U.S. elementary and secondary students" (NAGB, 2008, p. 2). The description explains, "By collecting and reporting information on student performance at the national, state, and local levels, NAEP is an integral part of our nation's evaluation of the condition and progress of education" (p. 2). The organization tasked to "formulate policy for NAEP" (p. 2)—the NAGB—functions similarly to the authoring organizations of the *CCSS*. Looking at the list of names and titles of the 24 board members, we saw a parallel emphasis on the role of businesses in shaping the framework. At the same time, we noted that the document lists three teachers and two principals as members of the 2007–2008 board. We also noted the absence of elementary, secondary, and post-secondary students on the board. In designing the framework, current research epistemologies emphasize content-area and pedagogical expertise and ignore the tacit knowledge of contemporary youth cultural experiences (e.g., Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Morrell, 2008).

As an additional paratextual aspect of this work, the *Reading Framework* concludes with seven pages of bibliographic references, which act as a record of cultural artifacts that mediate the meaning of reading within this document. The bibliography speaks to the document's authority and its solidified value within a particular cultural paradigm. Though we note below that this text is written for a broader audience than typical policy documents, these opening and closing discursive efforts emphasize authority that is beyond the questioning of the individuals who read these texts.

**The reading cover.** In addition to establishing authority, the opening pages of paratextual material orient readers toward the kinds of reading practices that NAEP values. In particular, as shown in Figure 1, the cover of the framework functions discursively. As a guide to prepare readers for the material inside, it encapsulates the NAGB's primary values.

　　The cover of the NAEP *Reading Framework* is a collage of six photos of individuals and groups of up to three scrutinizing pages of books. It features a diverse range of ages, genders, and ethnicities. In the only photo that suggests the role of a teacher, a white woman points to something on the page in front of a young boy. In two other images, young women are pictured individually peering into books near bookshelves, perhaps nestled in a library as we see in one photo of a young woman sitting on the floor with stacks of texts sprawled around her. Though an innocuous collection of images, the *Reading Framework*'s cover sets the muted tone of the framework and—more importantly—gets immediately to the heart of how reading is defined and conceptualized within the text. Reading, based on interpretation of this cover, is an entirely print- and text-based endeavor. Digital tools, multimodal interpretation, and communal contexts of literacies are not forefronted in this image, and—despite these being brought up within the text itself—it is important to consider the orientation of reading based on this initial presentation.
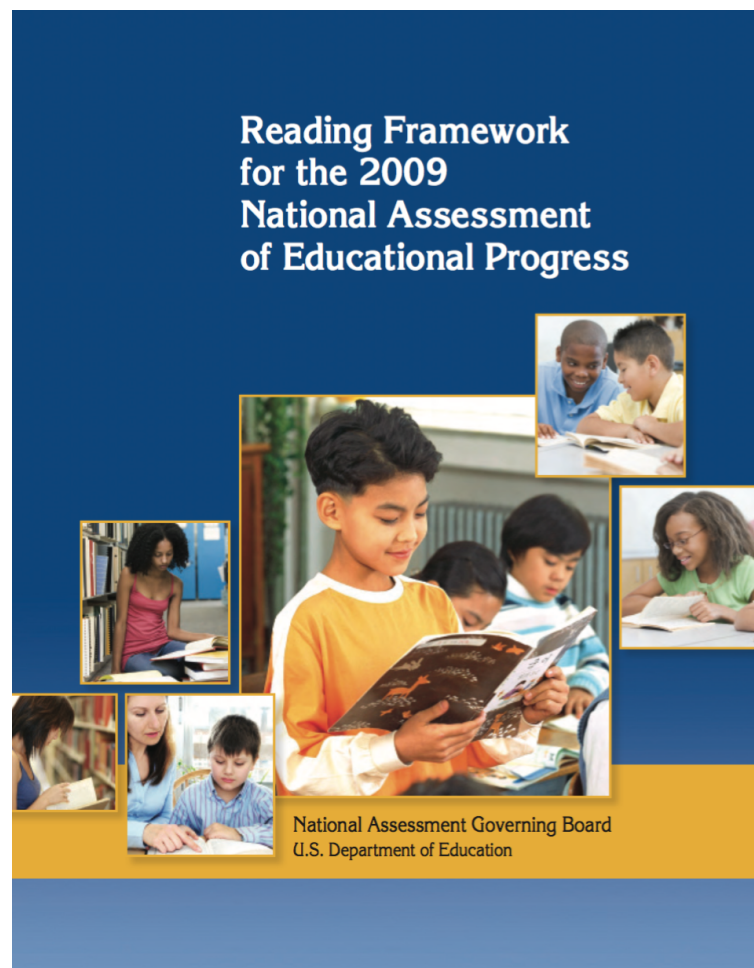


*Figure 1.* The cover of the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework.

**Defining reading.** Moving past the cover, the opening pages of the *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) articulate the target audience. As a document that "presents the conceptual base for, and discusses the content of, the [NAEP] assessment," the *Reading Framework* is "intended for a broad audience" (p. iii). Though policy documents such as this framework are not often placed in the hands of practitioners, parents, and students, who are at the core for how reading pedagogies are enacted, the document's stated "broad audience" (p. iii) guided how we interpreted the meaning and intent of the reading definitions. Despite the imposing bibliographic references at the end of the document, the language that defines reading is precise and clearly stated.

In the opening overview of the framework—after 17 pages that include a preface and other paratextual material—the authors offer a guiding definition that reading is comprised of three components: (a) understanding written text; (b) developing and interpreting meaning; and (c) using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation. Importantly, this definition "reflects scientific research, draws on multiple sources, and conceptualizes reading as a dynamic cognitive process," and notes that reading is "an active and complex process" (NAGB, 2008, p. 2). Focused on the process and outcomes of reading, we find that the descriptions provide an inference that ties reading to civic identities. Though still focused on reading as an interior, cognitive process, the sense that it is "active and complex" (p. 2) suggests momentum of reading in situ, potentially embodied as part of the actions of everyday civic life. However, this is not a specific outcome. Rather, by noting that "readers read for different purposes" (p. 8), the framework spends the majority of the text describing the different kinds of objects that students read. In doing so, the authors imply that reading is a singular process for the consumption of texts.

In contrast, reading—as understood from a sociocultural perspective—can emphasize the active role of readers, and that readers endow texts with meaning. Such active processes are not only foundational to contemporary literary analysis (e.g., Barthes, 1994) but also frequently utilized in secondary English Language Arts classrooms (Appleman, 2015). Our analysis suggests that though the NAEP framework emphasizes these singular perspectives of reading, large swaths of social theory, educational theory, and literary theory emphasize the role of texts in social practice, deliberation, and collaboration. Considering the cultural-historical role of reading, the positioning of reading as an individual process pushes forward specific cultural values.

By placing reading in the minds of individuals that receive and interpret meaning from authors, the framework delineates participation with the outside world—as represented by texts selected by educators—as one of passivity. Even as "active" (NAGB, 2008, p. 2) readers, the framework subtly implies that participation with reading-based ephemera is a docile approach of comprehension. We recognize that the NAEP's Writing Framework (NAGB, 2010) can be seen by some as a more likely place to see the active engagement around text that we highlight as absent here. However, the stance that the *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) takes regarding readers' relationships to texts is significant. By framing reading this way, the meaning of text is limited. Further, this restricts what text looks like and represents vis-à-vis the civic possibilities of youth in today's classrooms.

Similar to the limited definitions of reading, the kinds of texts that the NAEP *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) notes and measures constrict the construction of youth civic identities. The framework differentiates between two kinds of texts, "literary

text" (p. 16) and "informational text" (p. 21). Within each of these, the framework offers three kinds of subgenres of texts encountered in classrooms. Literary texts include fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry. To demonstrate the types of informational texts, Table 1 lists the three types of texts that NAEP assesses, as well as the forms that these texts may take in classrooms.

Table 1
*Informational Text Types and Examples in the NAEP Reading Framework*

| Informational text types | | |
|---|---|---|
| Exposition | Argumentation and persuasive text | Procedural texts and documents |
| Informational trade book | Informational trade book | Embedded in text: |
| Textbook | Journal | Directions |
| News article | Speech | Map |
| Feature article | Simple persuasive essay | Timeline |
| Encyclopedia entry | Letter to the editor | Graph |
| Book review | Argumentative essay | Table |
| Historical document | More complex | Chart |
| Essay (e.g., Informational, | persuasive essay | Recipe |
| persuasive, analytical) | Editorial | Schedule |
| Research report | Essay (e.g., political, social) | |
| Essay (e.g., political, social, | Historical account | Stand-alone material: |
| historical, scientific, natural | Position paper (e.g., | Application |
| history) | persuasive brochure, | Manual |
| Literary analysi**s** | campaign literature, | Product support material |
| | advertisements) | Contract |

   Although the table and descriptions of literary texts suggest ample contexts of reading in classrooms, the lists also point to specific orientations of literature. For example, in looking at how the framework portrays poetry, we largely see it described as a form of specificity and economy of words: "Understanding a poet's choices also aids in understanding poetry. Language choice is of particular importance because the meaning in poetry is distilled in as few words as possible" (NAGB, 2008, p. 21). Although we acknowledge that the emphasis on word choice and the "range of rhetorical structures and figurative language" (p. 21) in poems is important, the framework gives preference to such pedagogical choices over, for example, considering the role that reading and understanding poetry can play in shaping youth civic identity (Mirra, 2018). Rather than arguing that reading must be framed for specific purposes of civic identity, our analysis noted that the framework takes an inherently subjective stance on literacy development and conceptualizes the purpose of poetry, and of reading more broadly as specific to how the authors envisioned youths' relationships to language and words primarily on the printed page. This analysis is not leveled solely at literary texts, as NAEP's description of informational texts is equally limited in its definition of reading in relation to the

responsibilities of youth in today's society. Although the framework explains that, "The primary goals of expository text for school-age readers are to communicate information and to advance learning" (NAGB, 2008, p. 23), such goals focus on individualistic texts and place readers in the role of receiving rather than dialoguing alongside texts.

Across matrices for the different types of text in the *Reading Framework*, the NAEP assessment details the kinds of texts that are assessed, the features of these texts, and "aspects of [the] author's craft" (NAGB, 2008, p. 16). Though the genres are varied, they generally represent textual choices that individual authors have made. For example, the framework's depiction of reading as an individual and book-based activity suggests that individuals write texts in classrooms, but very little explains the historical and cultural foundations that shape authors, their language and rhetorical practices, and the ways that broader market and socioeconomic forces may shape texts (Share, Thoman, & Jolls, 2005).

Similarly, although the framework explains that the NAEP assessment focuses "on words that characterize the vocabulary of mature language users and characterize written rather than oral language" (NAGB, 2008, p. 34), the role of spoken language in genres such as drama, poetry, and formal speeches is profound. We return to the cover of the framework and the emphasis on reading as a discrete and largely book-based act.

As with the *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010), we conclude our analysis of the NAEP *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) by considering what is absent in these definitions. In searching for key phrases that likely shape reading for today's *college and career ready* students, we found few considerations of how digital literacies (e.g., Avila & Pandya, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) affect definitions and instruction of reading. For example, the only inclusion of the word *multimedia* points to the possibilities of complex, multimodal learning in various texts. In describing the types of texts encountered on the NAEP assessment, the framework explains that, "Documents include graphical representations, often as multimedia elements that require readers to draw on information presented as short continuous prose and also as columns, matrices, or other formats" (NAGB, 2008, p. 10). Though a preview of how multimedia guides contemporary reading, the statement is incongruent with the current lived literacy practices of youth in both in- and out-of-school environments (e.g., Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; Hinchman & Appleman, 2017). Further, in the few instances that the document notes digital tools, they are divorced from meaningful opportunities for learning and participation in today's society: "Documents and procedural texts are indeed common in our society; for example, we interpret bus schedules, assemble simple devices, order goods from a catalog, or follow directions to set the VCR clock" (NAGB, 2008, p. 27).

Ultimately, the NAEP *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) offers clear definitions of reading as text-based and individualistic. Through design, authorship, research evidence, and myriad tables, the document conveys these definitions authoritatively while ignoring other competing conceptions of reading. Instances of readers as in dialogue with authors, or of digital contexts of reading changing the possibilities in classrooms, not only occur daily but also guide how texts shape society beyond schools.

### Discussion: Toward Critical Civic Literacy

In exploring the civic constructions of literacy instruction in these two policy documents, we ground our discussion in this study's fundamental premise: Reading is a

civic action. Texts historically function as beacons for guiding the development of civic identities (McLuhan, 2011). Simple frameworks of reading as understanding the meaning of texts (Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015), as well as sociocritical perspectives of reading both "the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35), demonstrate how individuals make meaning of the symbols around them to influence their civic and political identities (Kintgen et al., 1988).

The policies analyzed in this study offer deliberate articulations of literacy as passively connected to civic life and as primarily a means toward labor-based, neoliberal readiness. The world that young people are stepping into today requires strong forms of civic leadership, interrogation, and innovation (Mirra & Garcia, 2017). Whereas traditional perspectives of literacy learning—reflected within these documents and depicted in Figure 2—imagine literacy practices guiding *readiness* for the civic world that students are entering, such perspectives limit teacher, student, and societal understandings of the fundamental ways that these practices are interwoven. Rather—in light of the civic passions and severe challenges facing historically marginalized communities in the United States today—we call for recognition of critical civic literacies that intentionally conceptualize civic learning as inextricably tied to literacy (see Figure 3). We see English Language Arts classrooms, which have historically been the focus of policies like the *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010) and NAEP (NAGB, 2008), as powerful sites for exploring intersectional demands for democratic life in the United States.
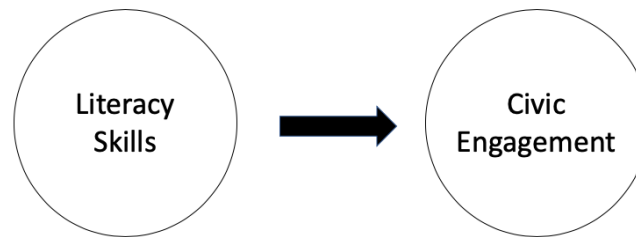


*Figure 2.* Traditional perspectives of literacy and civic engagement.



*Figure 3.* Classroom instruction inextricably links literacy and civic instruction.

**Constructing Contemporary Citizenship**

Both policy documents in this study guide classroom instruction to emphasize individual passivity as a civic disposition. This is a deliberate force found within the macrosystem of youth civic development in the United States. Though the *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010) document is rife with examples of spaces for collaboration and production, and though the NAEP *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) offers powerful texts for students to explore, these activities guide students toward individual actions and to receive texts for understanding and reflection. Implicit in this consistent framing of youth reading is an instructional ushering toward specific forms of civic positionality.

Considering how the NAEP framework (NAGB, 2008) supports the *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010) and the foundational role that the CCR Anchor Standards play, we are struck by the lack of clarity around the term *readiness*. Though the standards make clear that the concept of *college and career readiness* is fundamental for guiding the instructional and learning objectives in U.S. schools, the standards themselves do not offer a clear definition of what CCR means. Instead, these are principles that guide students to be *ready*, but ready for what is not delineated clearly within the document. Instead, the analysis we offer regarding this term—and the way this is situated in the NAEP *Reading Framework*—leaves a muddied picture of what U.S. students matriculating from schools are ready for. Rather than explaining to teachers and parents what CCR means, readers of these documents are left to reverse engineer the meaning of CCR—even though it anchors the *CCSS*. Though there may be a cloudy understanding of CCR by administrators, teachers, parents, and students, an actual definition is not provided. The language in these policies, though precise and collectively authored, ultimately signifies few actual civic, academic, or career outcomes. CCR functions as a vague marker for why certain policies are enacted and utilized in classrooms. It appears as a neutral label on which a reasonable rationale for education can be placed. However, in considering our analysis of deliberate efforts to emphasize individual forms of learning, reading, and civic participation, the language in these documents intentionally orients forms of youth identity for students.

Though the CCR standards emphasize the need for students to acquire "the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success" (NGACBP, 2010, p. 10), we see the language across the anchor standards, the *CCSS*, and the NAEP *Reading Framework* (NAGB, 2008) as limiting the civic conceptions of youth and, as a result, limiting what future success looks like for students. By funneling individualistic perspectives through these documents, teachers, students, and parents are ultimately oriented toward definitions of democracy, agency, and civic participation that guide amenable individualism.

**Fixed Identity, Fixed Readiness**

Reviewing the timeline that led to the release of the *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010), the English Language Arts and CCR standards were developed, given feedback, and shared publicly within less than a year and a half. The new policy document, like the NAEP frameworks updated every several years, was released and enacted quickly. Although these documents could suggest fast-moving progress for a changing world, these documents further entrench U.S. policies in the lasting history of neoliberalism and

individualism that were previously used in documents like *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Across both documents, technology's role shifts in social spaces, and technological interactions are almost entirely ignored. Considering the robust, connected environment in which young people learn and socialize, and considering the digitally mediated world in which texts, images, and sounds shape how individuals make meaning of and participate in civic society (Garcia, 2017; Garcia et al., 2015; Ito et al., 2013), the processes of reading are changing. These new contexts for reading and participation are, in our review of civic-education literature, absent from the definition of CCR.

Considering that the NAEP *Reading Framework* has emphasized the "active and complex" (NAGB, 2008, p. 2) processes of reading, it is striking to see that analysis across both documents positions reading as largely fixed. Little in the NAEP framework highlights what reading actually means two decades into the 21st century. Considering the centrality of communication in localized civic movements from the right-wing Tea Party to youth-led efforts like #BlackLivesMatter, a fixed perspective of what counts as reading blinds youth to the powerful work that currently guides public life throughout the United States.

### Conclusion

"It is a tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."
                                      - *Macbeth,* Act V, Scene II, William Shakespeare

Our analysis underscores the epistemological and civic assumptions made by the collective authors of these documents. Though NAEP (NAGB, 2008) and *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010) claim to be focused on academics, they derive their framing from a neoliberal stance of competitiveness. By positioning literacy as tied to careers and global competition, these documents define American civic identity for students in ways that emphasize individualism over collective action, print over multimodality, and historically fixed frames of democracy over the ebb and flow of everyday civic life. As we conducted this analysis in the months following the 2016 presidential election, we were struck by how these orientations emphasized docility in the public sphere.

Yet, as these frames orient certain civic dispositions, the outpouring of protest amidst the presidential inauguration highlighted that civic lessons are learned in myriad ways. Despite the coded language of the CCR as a vague marker of limited definitions of reading and engagement with English Language Arts, youth continue to interrogate and innovate civically. In reviewing these documents, we highlight that many alternatives exist. Parents have alternatives to placing their students in schools guided by the conceptions of reading and *readiness* captured in these documents. However, the parents who can advocate and place their children in private schools and charter systems are often privileged socioeconomically.

Further, there are alternative ways that standards have framed learning and civic identity. As widespread as the NAEP (NAGB, 2008) and *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010) frameworks are in their reach in American schools, other standards persist. *The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards* (NBPTS, 2016), for example, takes the relationship among collaborating students and beyond the classrooms intentionally: "As participants of a larger world, the students of accomplished teachers recognize the effect

that their actions have outside the classroom" (p. 16). Likewise, in emphasizing that classrooms function within communities, the *NBPTS* highlights the systemic forms of analysis and collaboration absent in NAEP and *CCSS*:

> Teachers also explore the concept of culture within their communities and its influence on children and young adults. Accomplished educators encourage students to appreciate linguistic traditions and ethnic contributions, to study social influences on their expectations and aspirations, and to discuss the effects that economic conditions can have on political views and outlooks. Although careful attention to diversity may challenge teachers, learning about a wealth of cultures can help them work meaningfully with students. (p. 39)

We share these alternate standards not to spotlight one set of policy guidelines as better than another but to reinforce the fact that neutrality in these standards is a façade. In comparing the language from one set of standards that are co-authored by teachers with those of the *CCSS*, it is clear that choices in where knowledge is centered and whose voices are valued are intentional and ultimately limit definitions of knowledge, learning, and civic identity. Like the literacy tests that shaped voter suppression in the American South, standards are an enactment of policy presented as neutral that intentionally project youth identities toward specific outcomes.

Considering the pervasive role that NAEP (NAGB, 2008) and *CCSS* (NGACBP, 2010) play in contemporary classrooms, we are encouraged by the possibilities that teachers, parents, and students can realize both within and beyond these documents. As vague as some content may be, such as the definition of *college and career ready*, there are spaces for reinvention in these unclear crevices. Though much of the linguistic bluster may signify nothing, student and teacher agency ultimately fill the void between what is voiced and what is embodied in classrooms. As we seek new possible enactments of civic identities, we remain hopeful about the narratives that are co-constructed with students and parents about youth civic life.

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