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# The Standards Project for English Language Arts A Diary, A Warning, An Update

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**MAY 15, 1993.** John Logan is excited. He sends me a videotape of the tele-conference he organized along with Al Farstrup, Janet Emig, and David Pearson. The tape shows John, Janet, David, and some teachers discussing the effort to develop national language standards. The panel discusses, debates, explains, takes questions from across the nation, and we hear that standards will be written by July, 1994.

**DECEMBER 12, 1993.** It's 8:15 a.m. and Al Farstrup, Executive Director of the International Reading Association, is the keynote speaker at this Sunday morning general session at the ARF conference. Speaking to a group of about 50 in the Sundial room, he tells how the standards project is an attempt to describe what students should know and be able to do so as to live literate lives in the 21st century. As one of the project leaders he tells how this three-year collaborative effort by the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English is funded by the U. S. Department of Education with additional resources from IRA, NCTE, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Al explains the project and passes out literature that stresses how the process of setting standards for the learning and teaching of English language arts will promote both equality of educational opportunity and higher educational achievement for all students. In order to achieve this purpose, Al says that this project intends to develop standards that differ from past reform efforts in ambition, scope, and

grounding. It will draw on the best theory, research, and practice in English language arts and it will honor diversity in class, gender, ethnicity, and language. The standards will be flexible so that teachers, administrators, educational policy makers, curriculum planners, parents, and all others interested in promoting literacy, can adapt them to fit their local communities. Al also stresses that the standards will also be used to encourage local schools, communities, and the nation to provide the resources necessary for students and teachers to meet them. He says that the time line for these standards is to have them written by July of 1994, reviewed and revised for about a year and published in 1995.

In addition to showing a sample standard, Al explains how the project is governed by a 25 member national board made up of language arts professionals, business leaders, authors, elected public officials, and representatives of the general public. Ex-officio board members from major national language research centers and from the executive boards of IRA and NCTE are also involved. He tells us that three task forces, one each for grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12, with eight members each, are preparing the actual standards. The three groups are meeting twice yearly in week-long sessions to draft and revise documents. In order to meet the 1995 publication date he tells how a six-member management team, consisting of the chair of the national board, three members representing the Center for the Study of Reading, IRA, and NCTE, and two individuals who will be presidents of IRA and NCTE in 1995, is coordinating the day-to-day project activities. Jean Osborn, at the Center for the Study of Reading (CSR) at the University of Illinois is the official project coordinator.

Al wraps up his presentation, tells us that the project directors are looking for input and some grass-roots involvement and distributes brochures describing the project and forms with names and addresses of people to contact at IRA, NCTE, and CSR. As the sessions ends at 9:15 a.m. ARF conferees gather to talk with Al, others mingle near the coffee pot in the hallway outside the Sundial room, and several of us wander outside by the pool. Although there is a cool breeze off the Gulf, the sun feels good so I go back to my room, and after eating some cereal and a banana I change into my swim suit and return to the main building where I buy Sunday's thick *Miami Herald*.

**DECEMBER 12, 1993.** It's 10:10 a.m., pool-side. A few tanning. Nobody's swimming. The Sunday *Miami Herald* on my lap offers some protection from the breeze. I am looking at Al Farstrup's handouts, and jotting some ideas on a pad of Sundial notepaper. I remember yearbook editor, Kaybeth Camperell, saying we need more reaction papers. I recall Gary Moorman's comment that Al's metaphors

bothered him. I'm bothered by something too. Maybe I'll write a reaction paper for the yearbook on The Standards Project for English Language Arts that Al Farstrup just presented.

I think about Al's words. National standards are a "coherent vision of what it means to be literate". He says, "We must do it or others will do it for [to] us." He says, "We must do it because there are too many inequities in schooling. Every student deserves a chance, an opportunity to become literate." The standards will be "models for local schools to use and writing local standards will be voluntary."

There is a definite sound of serious urgency in Al's voice. He spends most of his time telling how IRA and NCTE are working together [and this is no easy accomplishment] to do this in only two years. He points out how other groups, like the mathematics people, took eight years. He shares drafts of frameworks and models that show how the committees' products will be formatted:

The Standard
An Elaboration
A Vignette
An Interpretation and Commentary

Al shares a sample of a draft of one standard, no hard copy, just a visual on the overhead. He gives us a form where we can give him feedback and even get involved by sharing our ideas, references, issues, and addresses/e-mail/fax, etc.

Overall, he does a fine job of explaining what is going on. I make a special note of project director Jean Osborn's phone number in Champaign. I fantasize calling her when I return to Illinois. Do I really want to get involved? Is it personal? Maybe I'm jealous about not being a part of this project. Is it professional? Am I peeved because the project sounds like the old R&D model where the experts make a product that is scientifically sound? Is it me? Is my concern based on fear? Do national language arts standards mean national literacy curriculum? Will it "...at once promote an equality of educational opportunity and higher academic achievement for all students."[????]

As I jot away sketching out my thoughts and feelings, a young mother balances her infant in a car seat on a lounge close to the pool edge and my stomach flips. I imagine the weight tipping the baby into the pool. This concern stops my jotting about Al's presentation and I decide to read the Sunday *Miami Herald*.

Miami is fighting back. Articles and editorials telling how it is not the dangerous place portrayed on network TV or in other papers. Lots of ads for Christmas shopping fall out on the pool deck and the "last to be printed" sports section looks inviting. I wade into the four pounds of newsprint thinking about language standards, babies falling into the pool, and I come to section M titled viewpoints.

I see a picture of Toni Morrison receiving the Nobel Prize for literature from the Swedish King imbedded in an excerpt of her acceptance speech subtitled *In Language Lies Human Liberation*. I read on. I think about national language standards. Over the top of the paper I see the mother move the baby away from the pool. I recall my delight and respect in reading Morrison's book *Jazz*. I wonder what she might say about professors and teachers writing language standards. So I read on. Suddenly, her messages leap and jump from the paper. I can hardly read carefully. It's an amazing experience. Intending to relax and reflect and enjoy a Sunday paper in the sun beside the pool, instead I am now listening as a powerful, poetic writer warns me about language standards!

My mind swirls. It's uncanny. Is she talking to me in her powerful voice about my own concerns with national language standards, or is it too much sun and too little breakfast? I read on.

[Morrison] thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences. [She] thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by effort of the will. p. 5M.

Her concern [and mine] is not with the form or the content of language, but with how language is used. I think of standards as agency, as language acts with consequences. What consequences? Morrison says:

...a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and uncensoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has not desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance. p. 5M.

It is the policing duties function of language that hit me the hardest. Although AI had said the application and use of standards were to be voluntary, I think about what stops them from becoming licenses for the language police. Armed with these standards we could have what Morrison calls "the language of surveillance disguised as research." And "underneath the eloquence, the glamour, the scholarly associations,... the heart of such language is languishing, or perhaps not beating...." Just like when I read her book *Jazz* I stop, reread, savor her rich yet obscure metaphors. Am I misinterpreting her? Do her words really apply to AI's presentation? I read on:

The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would be reached. Whose heaven,...and what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post life. p. 5M.

The Bible reference jolts me. The language standards project is not unlike a gathering of language bishops intent on writing a monolithic catechism of standards. What for? Protection? Preservation? Surveillance? Equality? Will the standards be used to spy on schools and on teachers in an attempt to ensure equality in language learning? Is language learning equality possible? The underlying message is that surveillance standards will yield opportunities for children to reach their full literacy potential. But will it? Perhaps the ancient concern of too many languages is still the concern today. The conventional wisdom in the Tower of Babel story is that too many language differences is the problem. Isn't the conventional wisdom of national standards just another version of this ancient story? Today we consider literacy differences as the babble of inequality that will be silenced by a set of monolithic national standards.

My mind is racing as I sit by the pool. My religion schema goes into overdrive and I realize that the language bishops have been chosen, they are meeting, they have a format, a model, but only drafts of the

content. The stories told by each standard are yet to be written. I realize that the form and content of the standards is not my concern. My fear at pool-side is the potential for standards to promote or kill literacy learning, depending on how they are used.

Startled by cold water from the child's pool-side splashing I stop reading Morrison's speech. Feeling hungry, a little chilly, even stiff, I gather up the newspaper, my notes, and head back to my room for lunch with Joan. I think of what is happening in my head at pool-side here at the ARF conference. Is it fate that Toni Morrison's words fell into my lap just when I was thinking about writing a reaction paper for the ARF yearbook about national language standards? As I walk down the beach my excitement fades away. Do I really want to write a reaction paper? What will I eat for lunch? Where is Joan? When I get to our room I put my notes, Morrison's article, and other papers away. When I get back home I will pick them up. For now, I reason, best to let it rest. I can decide about getting involved with national standards when I am back at my office.

**DECEMBER 13, 1994.** It's a cold, rainy Monday afternoon, 5:20 p.m. Far away from the sunny Sanibel Sundial, back to the midwest again. Another ARF conference is over. I look ahead a few rows and I am shocked back to my Sunday morning pool-side encounter with Toni Morrison. It's Jean Osborn, Project Coordinator for the Standards Project for English Language. She is on this plane! What was she doing in Florida? I catch up with her in the chilly gangway to the terminal, reintroduce myself, telling her I was at the ARF meeting. She smiles, introduces me to a teacher from Champaign who is traveling with her. They were in Florida working on the national language standards project. Obviously in a hurry to catch a commuter flight to Champaign they turn their eyes from mine upward to the ceiling monitors and walk quickly away. My thoughts race back to when I wrote Jean Osborn's phone number in my notes at the start of Al's talk. Is this chance encounter in the plane a reminder to call her—to get involved? If only I had known she was on the plane! I could have sat next to her. I could have shared my concerns with her! I could have read Morrison's words about standards, surveillance, the language police.

I muse, if I run into Toni Morrison here in the airport, then I'll have to get involved. I've been chosen to stop the project, to criticize, and warn others of the danger of national standards. I bring Morrison's warning message to Jean Osborn and Al Farstrup. They see the dangers. They agree that the standards as tools for surveillance will do more harm than good. They ask me to speak with the language bishops. I read this reaction to them. They listen. They ask questions.

I convince them to stop the project. I am the hero.

Joan interrupts my dreaming. "You're walking the wrong way, the baggage claim is this way." I panic as I search my pockets for the car keys. I find them. I panic again trying to recall where to catch the shuttle to long term parking. I remember and calm down as I trudge through the terminal thinking—will I recognize Toni Morrison when I see her?

**AUGUST 3 and 4, 1994.** I call the Center for the Study of Reading and talk with a researcher. She says the U. S. Department of Education stopped funding the project on March 18, 1994. The center and the University of Illinois are no longer involved with the project. She says the IRA and NCTE are both committed to the project but I need to talk to them. I call IRA and speak with someone in research. She says IRA and NCTE are committed to the project. However, the original policy board, the three task forces, and the management team headed by Jean Osborn are all changed. She could not give me names, dates, or answer other questions about the fate of the standards project or any new time lines. She put my name on a mailing list and promised to send material in the future.

**AUGUST 24, 1994.** Two IRA newsletters on the standards arrive in the mail. IRA and NCTE commit \$500,000 each to fund the project after federal funding is stopped. All previous documents placed under an embargo pending future planning. IRA and NCTE are "investigating the formation of a partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)." The three groups will collaborate to complete the standards. No dates, no details, a promise of more in the next, or third newsletter. In newsletter two I see a list of references (p. 3) and a form (pp. 6-7) I can use to FAX my opinions to IRA. Other portions of the newsletter address concerns about media and technology and non-English speaking students or those with disabilities (p. 2). I am struck by how casually the print hides the power of the standards. For example, I see the line "...Standards will treat **media and technology** (p. 2)," and "students...may not be fully accommodated by standards statements (p. 2)." I think they ought to print the words **treat** and **accommodate** in bold type. In the wrong hands standards come alive as agents that have great potential to treat (mistreat) and accommodate (control). They ask me to FAX them my opinion. On pages 3-5 I read a copy of Ken Goodman's objection to the standards. As I put the newsletters down I think maybe I'll send Ken my musings of December 12-13, 1994.