

## **Reaction: A Critical Look at “The Official Language of Literacy”**

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This Problems Court was appropriately titled since the presenters and the ensuing discussion were largely critical of the standards movement. However, the word *critical* also implies reflection, seeing multiple points of view, and evaluation (rather than merely criticism). This reaction paper will attempt to summarize the concerns of the presenters and audience and reflect upon these concerns. First, however, it might be useful to present some background on the movement toward academic standards in schools.

### **The Changing Educational Environment**

Globalization of American business and industry has led to the realization that the U.S. workforce may not be as competitive as that of other industrialized countries. The "products" of our educational system do not seem to be competitive with those of other industrialized countries. Furthermore, recent national achievement tests (National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP) indicate a slow but steady decline in some basic skills from previous years (Williams, Reese, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Phillips, 1995). For example, the average reading proficiency of 12th grade students, including White, African American, and Hispanic students, declined significantly from 1992 to 1994.

In addition, the skills that high school graduates do have seem not to be well matched to the needs of the workplace. A report entitled *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990) called attention to the lack of a "system" for coordinating school and work, pointing out that many of the graduates from our public school systems were ill-prepared for the modern workplace. It proposed that a new performance standard should be set for all students to be met by age 16. Called the Certificate of Initial Mastery, it would be awarded only when students have demonstrated mastery on performance-based examinations for which they can explicitly prepare. As the report states, "Once created, this system would establish objective standards for students and educators, motivate students and give employers an objective means to evaluate the accomplishments of students (p. 6)." The National Council on Education Standards and Testing (1992), in a report to the Congress, the Secretary of Education, the National Education Goals Panel, and the American people, also recommended the adoption of high national education standards for all students and voluntary assessments that are linked to the standards. The report then recommends specific components for these standards that should be developed at the national and state levels including performance-based testing of competency or mastery.

Educational associations as well as many state departments of education have responded to the skill standards movement by developing education standards. Probably the best known and leader of these efforts is the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) (Malcom, 1993). Similarly, the International Reading Association

and the National Council of Teachers of English have created joint standards for English language arts (1996).

### **Problems Court Discussion**

Standards state what a person upon completion of study should know and be able to do. Strong concerns were expressed about who is setting the standards and the sources of knowledge from which the standards are drawn. All presenters seemed to recognize that the standards-setting process is an inherently political one.

While it may appear that business is controlling the standards-setting agenda in the schools, and in fact, business has pushed passage of the National Skill Standards Act of 1994 (1994) in setting skill standards for workers in various occupational areas, businesses have not been heavily involved in setting standards for schools. Similarly, educators have not been closely involved with most of the attempts of the business community to establish occupational skill standards, creating a gulf between the content of the skill standards and the curricula of the public schools. In fact, one criticism of the school standards is that they do not relate closely enough to the workplace. In other words, *school* seems to be its own workplace that operates in a vacuum from the rest of life (as well as the workplace).

However, the process of setting standards does appear to come from the business culture. Randlett cautions that this use of business and market metaphors in standards-setting turns people into products—that standards fail to convey special relationship between teachers and students. If children are “products,” and standards are to control the quality of the products, then standards can regulate teachers and instructional content. Parents who are informed about standards can demand more accountability from teachers and schools. Do standards, then, run counter to having parents involved in school if parents are there to judge the curriculum and the teachers in relation to the standards?

Furthermore, it seems that standards seem to be attempting to make the curriculum “teacher proof” like the old teaching machines. If teachers are provided the standards that children must master at a given level, they won’t spend precious time on activities such as reading award-winning children’s literature. In fact, Cloer’s examples of “ubiquitous vignettes” from the South Carolina English Language Arts Framework illustrate the lack of imagination and disregard for children’s literature that can make standards seem trivial and simplistic.

Both Hayes and Smith spoke about accountability at the university level as well. Hayes reported that K-12 standards are becoming a way of evaluating teacher education programs in Utah. Similarly, Smith said that in the near future high school students will have to pass a statewide exam--performance assessments by content area appropriately named PASS--in order to enter the universities in Oregon’s state system of higher education.

Much of the discussion in the Problems Court centered around the concern for diversity. Standards, by their nature, appear to eliminate (or at least ignore) differences

and diversity. This seems hard to accept in an increasingly diverse society. It could be suggested that standards may be part of a political agenda to disempower minorities who are becoming increasingly more vocal. That is probably not the ostensible intent, but it may in fact become the outcome.

Erickson's Benchmark Board Game with the Illinois state standards illustrates the difficulties of writing standards so that they can be assessed. Apparently, the state educational officials recognize this problem of misalignment between standards and assessments. However, is alignment a desirable process to be done at the state level? Will a statewide effort ignore the differences in communities across the state?

Perhaps standards are best left as a "veritable slinky" (Cloer) that can fit into any school, community, or culture. Perhaps they best serve the function of providing general guidance while letting local school communities provide the specifics. Perhaps educators should recognize that it is "extremely difficult to translate these (standards) into exemplary pragmatic, pedagogical models." (Cloer). Perhaps our role as educators and researchers should be to advocate for this moderate position, recognizing that standards are here to stay, at least for a while.

### References

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