

Warning: The Common Core standards may be harmful to children

Joanne Yatvin

JOANNE YATVIN (jyatvin@comcast.net) is an adjunct professor and supervisor of student teachers at the Portland State University Graduate School of Education, Portland, Ore., and is a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

Abstract

The author, a longtime teacher and principal, levels harsh criticisms against the English/language arts standards of the Common Core State Standards. Some standards call on young children to behave like high school seniors, making fine distinctions between words or literary devices, carrying on multiple processes simultaneously, and expressing their understandings in precise academic language, she says. While others expect them to have a strong literary background after only two or three years of schooling.

The language arts standards of the Common Core in too many places are simply too difficult and/or irrelevant for elementary grade students.

When I first read the Common Core English/language arts standards for grades K-5, my visceral reaction was that they represented an unrealistic view of what young children should know and be able to do. As an elementary teacher and principal for most of my life, I could not imagine children between the ages of 5 and 11 responding meaningfully to the standards' expectations. But clearly I was in the minority. Forty-five states have adopted the standards without a murmur of complaint; writers and publishers are racing to produce materials for teaching them, and the teachers quoted in news articles or advertisements speak of the standards as if they are the silver bullet they have been waiting for.

Since then, I have read the English/language arts (ELA) standards many times; each time, they are more troubling. Some standards call on young children to behave like high school seniors, making fine distinctions between words or literary devices, carrying on multiple processes simultaneously, and expressing their understandings in precise academic language. Others expect them to have a strong literary background after only two or three years of schooling. Some standards are so blind to the diversity in American classrooms that they require children of different abilities, backgrounds, and native languages to manipulate linguistic forms and concepts before they have full control of their own home language. And, sadly, a few standards serve only to massage the egos of education elitists, but are of no use in college courses, careers, or everyday life.

To give you just an inkling of the problems in applying the ELA standards to young children, I offer a scenario of what might happen in a 1st-grade classroom when the following language standard is approached: (L.1.1) *Use the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (e.g., -ed, -s, re-, un-, pre-, -ful, -less) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word.*

While reading aloud from a 1st-grade book, Zach stumbled over the word "recheck" and, although he eventually pronounced it correctly, his teacher felt that he did not fully grasp its meaning in the sentence. It seemed like a good time to make the class aware of the prefix "re" and how it works. So, she stopped the lesson and wrote these words on the white board: remake, rewrite, and retell. Then she asked the children to explain what each word meant. Several students raised their hands and answered correctly.

"What does the 're' part of each word tell us?" she then asked. The first student called on said "re" means to do something again. Nodding in approval, the teacher wrote "recheck" on the board leaving a space between "re" and "check." Then she asked, "So, what does 'recheck' mean?"

"To check something again," answered the class in chorus.

Since things were going well, the teacher decided to continue by asking students to name other words that worked the same way. Various class members confidently suggested, re-eat, re-dance, re-sleep, re-win, and others were waving their hands when she stopped them.

"Those aren't real words," she said. "We don't say, 'I'm going to resleep tonight.' Let's try to think of real words or look for them in our books." After giving the class a few minutes, she asked again for examples.

This time, the words were real enough: repeat, renew, reason, remove, return, read, and reveal, but none of them fit the principle being taught. Since it seemed futile to explain all that to 1st graders, the teacher did the best thing she could think of: "You reminded (uh-oh) me of 'recess,'" she said. "So, let's go out right now."

As they left the room, the children chatted happily among themselves: "We're going to 'cess' again!" "We'll 're-see' our friends." "I want to 're-play' dodge ball."

"Next time," thought the teacher, "I'd better try a different prefix." But then "un-smart" and "un-listen" popped into her head, and she decided to leave that particular standard for later in the year.

Although I could write scenarios for several other standards, they would make this paper much longer and not be as amusing as this one. Instead, I will present just a few standards that I find inappropriate for K-5 students along with brief explanations of their problems.

A Reading/Literature standard for 4th grade calls on students to: (RL.4. 4) *Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g., Herculean).*

I can't help wondering how 9- and 10-year-olds are supposed to do their "determining." Competent, engaged readers of any age do not stop to puzzle out unknown words in a text. Mostly, they rely on the surrounding context to explain them. But, if that doesn't work, they skip them, figuring that somewhere down the page they will be made clear.

Should students regularly consult a dictionary or thesaurus while reading? I don't think so. That's a surefire way to destroy the continuity of meaning. Nor would I expect them to recall an explanatory reference from the field of classic literature at this early stage of their education. Moreover, for each "Herculean" word that matches a literary character, there would be several like "cupidity" and "pander" that have strayed far from their original meanings.

In the Reading/Information category, I quickly found a standard with expectations far beyond the knowledge backgrounds of the children for whom it is intended: (RI.2.3) *Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text.*

Just assuming that 2nd graders are familiar with "a series" of historical events, etc., is simply unrealistic. But expecting them to "describe the connection between (sic) them" is delusional. Is there only one simple connection among a series of "scientific ideas"? How would you, as an adult, describe the connections among the steps in building a robot or even baking a pie?

In most of the Reading/Information standards, the same expectations for describing complex relationships among multiple items appear: (RI.5.5) *Compare and contrast the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in two or more texts.*

For 5th graders, this standard would be even more difficult to meet than the previous one because it asks them to carry out two different operations on two or more texts that almost certainly differ in content, style, and organization.

In the Writing and Speaking/Listening categories, there are fewer standards altogether. Yet, some of these standards also make unrealistic demands. One asks 1st graders to: (W.1.7) *Participate in shared research and writing projects (e.g., explore a number of "how-to" books on a given topic and use them to write a sequence of instructions).*

Since this standard does not mention "adult guidance and support," as many others do, I assume that a group of 1st graders is expected to work on its own to digest the content of several books, prune it to the essentials, and then devise a well-ordered list of instructions. This would be a complicated assignment even for students much older, requiring not only analysis and synthesis, but also self-regulation and compromise. I cannot see 1st graders carrying it out without a teacher guiding them every step of the way.

Of all the ELA standards, the ones in the Language (i.e., grammar) category are the most unrealistic. I could cite almost all of them as unreasonable for the grades designated and a few as pointless for any grade. Here is part of a kindergarten standard that fits both descriptions: (L.K.1). *(When speaking) Produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.*

Most of the kindergartners I know have no idea what the term "complete sentence" means. Children and adults commonly speak short phrases and single words to each other. I can't imagine any kindergarten teacher insisting during a group language activity that children speak in "complete sentences" or that they "expand" their sentences. Those directions would in all likelihood end the activity quickly as most children fell silent.

Here is another unrealistic standard, this time designated for 3rd grade: (L.3.1) *Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences.*

Aside from the unreasonableness of expecting 7- and 8-year-olds to explain the use of grammatical terms, this standard has no applications in reading, speaking, or writing. Research has shown unequivocally that being able to name parts of speech or diagram sentences has no positive effect on students' writing. This standard wastes instructional time on a useless skill.

I cannot leave this critique of the ELA Standards without taking one more swipe at the Language category. Standard (L.4.1) asks 4th graders to: *Use relative pronouns (who, whose, whom, which, that) and correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., to, too, two; there, their) in speech and writing.*

Several of these words are ones that many educated adults use incorrectly all the time. In fact "who" is so often used in place of "whom" that it is widely recognized as correct. Why not hold adults accountable for meeting this standard before expecting 4th graders to do so?

In finding fault with so many of the K-5 ELA standards, my familiarity with children's abilities and educational needs have guided me. Standards advocates may well argue that I have offered no evidence and scant research to support my views. In rebuttal, I would argue that they are in the same position and that much of what they propose for children flies in the face of established learning theory and brain development research. The reality is that the standards' creators have laid out a set of expectations for America's children that are grounded only in an antiquated conception of education and their personal preferences. And their followers, bedazzled by the standards length and breadth, illusion of depth, and elitist aura, have fallen into line as if lured by the Pied Piper of Hamelin.