

Educational Tools vs Content

Education in America has shifted over the past several decades from the importance of content to providing “tools” for learning. E.D. Hirsch points out the flaws in this approach.

“American educational theory has held that the child needs to be given all-purpose tools that are needed for him or her to continue learning and adapting...but when this tool metaphor has been taken apart and examined for its literal content, its highly exaggerated claims have been powerfully contradicted by research, and after six decades, it has shown itself to be ineffective.”¹

The shift in approach from content to “tools” has created “...vague, gap-ridden “conceptual” curricula have been developed as a reaction to earlier, content-oriented approaches to forming a curriculum. ...The first inherent weakness is the arbitrariness of the large-scale conceptual schemes and classifications that make up all such curricular “strands” or “objectives.”²

Why are students today not as well educated as the students of the past? E.D. Hirsch explains, “There is another inherent shortcoming in the overreliance on large-scale abstract objectives as a means of determining a curriculum. These general objectives do not compel either a definite or coherent sequence of instruction. The main source of their repetitions and gaps continues to be their lack of content specificity.”³

“To stress critical thinking while de-emphasizing knowledge reduces a student’s capacity to think critically.” E.D. Hirsch

The emphasis has been to teach a child to think critically. The proposed new standards are flawed to achieve this objective. Why?

“Without background knowledge and rote memorization it is a fallacy that: 1. it is possible to teach abstract reading ability, 2. it is possible to teach abstract problem-solving ability, and that 3. once provided with these abstract abilities, students would be able to pursue a “lifetime of learning.”⁴

Children’s readiness for secondary processes such as reading and arithmetic is not simply a matter of natural development but also one ***of prior relevant learning***. (Ibid p.89)⁵

“The first years of schooling are called the “grammar stage,” not because you spend four years doing English, but because these are the years in which the building blocks for all other learning are laid, just as grammar is the foundation for language. In the elementary-school years—grades 1 through 4--the mind is ready to absorb information. Since children at this age actually find memorization fun, education involves not self-expression and self-discovery, but rather, learning facts: rules of phonics and spelling, rules of grammar, poems, ...vocabulary...the stories of history and literature, descriptions of plants and animals and the human body, the facts of mathematics—the list goes on. This information makes up the “grammar” for the second stage of education.

A classical education assumes that knowledge of the world past and present takes priority over self-expression. Intensive study of facts equips the student for fluent and articulate self-expression later on.

¹ The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them. E. D. Hirsch. Page 21.

<https://books.coreknowledge.org/product.php?productid=16161>

² Ibid. Page 30.

³ Ibid. Page 30.

⁴ Ibid. Page 68

⁵ Ibid. Page 89

Too close a focus on self-expression at an early age can actually cripple a child later on; a student who has always been encouraged to look inside himself may not develop a frame of reference, a sense of how his ideas measure up against the thoughts and beliefs of others.

So the key to the first stage of the trivium (K-4) is content, content, content.⁶

“Basic processes need to be made unconscious and automatic as early as possible in order to free the mind for critical thinking and problem solving...the human mind has a limited sphere of mental activity “short-term memory” or “working memory.” This refers to the absolute amount of time that items can be functionally active in the mind at one time. The child has more room in conscious working memory to think critically and creatively about comprehension and problem solving.”⁷

“The development of real-world language skill results then in functional masteries which are extremely complex in their interactions but which can be schematized for convenience into three aspects: 1. Mastery of the continually repeated formal elements of language to the point of automaticity, 2. The gaining of a content-rich knowledge base represented by particular word meanings and cultural conventions, and 3. The successful active deployment of these elements in comprehension and problem solving. The same pattern holds for penmanship and composition...so that level-one letter formation becomes sufficiently automatic so as not to interfere with the conscious deployment of written words to convey meaning. Because of the limitations of working memory, the more these formal and foundational processes are automatic, the more effectively the comprehension, expression, and problem solving aspects of any intellectual skill can be deployed. **Higher-level skills critically depend upon the automatic mastery of repeated lower-level activities.**”⁸

“Studies converge on the conclusion that, once basic underlying skills have been automated, the almost universal feature of reliable higher-order thinking about any subject or problem is the possession of a broad, well-integrated base of background knowledge relevant to the subject.”⁹

“Teaching higher order thinking skills without the total mastery of lower level skills and the acquisition of specific background knowledge is totally misleading. In fact, it is backwards.”¹⁰

Age-appropriate standards match children’s mental development

Standards that are “developmentally appropriate” are written with an understanding of how children’s minds mature, so that the content and material presented correspond to the appropriate stage of mental development. “Age- appropriate” standards adhere to a sequencing that advances a child’s academic progress.

Understanding how children’s minds develop and then matching how the teacher presents the information to them, based on their stage of development, provides for “developmentally appropriate” standards. Research in cognitive science proves that there are *stark* differences in the learning abilities of children age 5 (Kindergarten) and age 8 (Grade 3) and even *more* so when the child turns 11 (Grade 5). In fact, their brains continue to develop and change until adulthood.

⁶ The Well Trained Mind. Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, p. 53. <https://www.amazon.com/Well-Trained-Mind-Guide-Classical-Education/dp/0393067084>

⁷ The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them, E.D. Hirsch p.150. <https://books.coreknowledge.org/product.php?productid=16161>

⁸ Ibid. Page 150

⁹ Ibid. Page 152

¹⁰ Ibid. Page 156

The famous child psychologist Jean Piaget determined that those entering school in Kindergarten were on the verge of entering into the Concrete-operational Phase, where their minds best understand things with concrete examples. **What distinguishes this phase from the next, which begins around age 11 or 12, is that they can't yet think abstractly.**¹¹ (Emphasis added.)

“By fifth grade, a child’s mind begins to think more analytically...The second phase of the classical education, the logic stage, is a time when the child begins to pay attention to cause and effect, to the relationships among different fields of knowledge, to the way facts fit together into a logical framework.

“A student is ready for the logic stage when the capacity for abstract thought begins to mature. During these years, the student learns algebra and logic, and begins to apply logic to all academic subjects. The logic of writing, ...includes paragraph construction and support of a thesis; the logic of reading involves the criticism and analysis of texts;...the logic of history demands that the student find out why the War of 1812 was fought...the logic of science requires the child to learn the scientific method.¹² (The Well-Trained Mind, Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, p.43, 44)

The whole structure of the trivium recognizes that there is an ideal time and place for each part of learning: memorization, argumentation, and self-expression. The elementary years are ideal for soaking up knowledge.¹³

Inappropriate Standards Result in Negative Consequences

What happens to children when they are being taught developmentally inappropriate standards?

In speeches at Notre Dame and before the Ohio House Education Committee, child clinical psychologist Dr. Megan Koschnick explained that standards that young children are expected to meet, e.g., to “collaborate” “engage in multiple discussions,” “express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly,” etc., might be appropriate for training a “global workforce,” but they are *not* appropriate learning standards for young children. Dr. Koschnick warned: “Kids who are subjected to inappropriate standards will be more stressed. This is shown to be true in research. This is just one of the research studies that have been done. They looked at Kindergarteners in a developmentally-appropriate classroom, compared to one that wasn’t. And in the one that wasn’t, kids were biting their nails, twirling their hair, doing some of these other things: exhibiting tremors and tics, and looking nervous.¹⁴

Dr. Koschnick further explains that:

“Five and six year olds

- Believe that other people see the world much the same as they do (ego-centrism)
- Cannot understand another’s perspective
- Cannot reflect upon their thinking
- Semi-logical
- Confuse reality and fantasy

¹¹ Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development. http://epltt.coe.uga.edu/index.php?title=Piaget%27s_Stages

¹² The Well Trained Mind. Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, pp. 43, 44. <https://www.amazon.com/Well-Trained-Mind-Guide-Classical-Education/dp/0393067084>

¹³ Ibid. Page 44.

¹⁴ Dr. Megan Koschnick presents on Common Core at APP Conference. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrQbJlmVJZo>

Instead of proposing something that would be more aligned with a Kindergartener’s goal of exploring, being creative, demonstrating independence, instead they’ve suggested a social-emotional goal of being dependent on other people.

They are also going to get frustrated, because the child is internally motivated to be independent, and you’re asking them to be dependent on other people.

The results of developmentally inappropriate standards are:

- Loss of creativity
- Frustration
- Possibly conflict
- Lots of tears”¹⁵

How do developmentally inappropriate standards affect the classroom?

Inappropriate standards are going to affect the classroom as a whole, “because the curriculum is going to include lessons and strategies that aren’t appropriate, and the teachers are going to have to go over and over and over them to nail those down. It’s going to leave less time for grade-appropriate materials, and no time for repetition of those. Teachers are going to perceive typically developing children as “delayed” parents may be informed that their children are behind, and kids are going to get measured against inappropriate standards and might be held back or tracked into remedial classes that they don’t really need.”¹⁶

Therefore, standards that are not developmentally appropriate force the curriculum to include strategies and lessons that aren’t understandable to students. When this happens, teachers must spend an excessive amount of time trying to teach a concept that children aren’t capable of mastering, thus crowding out grade-level, appropriate materials that would *truly* advance the child’s progress. This effort creates frustration on the part of the teacher. This frustration, in part, explains the exodus of teachers in Arizona. Another unintended consequence in the classroom is a lack of qualified teachers.

The proposed 2016 Arizona Draft ELA Standards fail to give careful consideration for what is “developmentally appropriate.” The negative consequences to children, by implementing these standards, compel us as concerned citizens to not accept the proposed Arizona Draft ELA Standards and to eliminate the current standards (which are basically the same).

The lack of input by child development experts during the review of the Arizona Standards¹⁷ is obvious in the approach the writers chose to determine the standards. Instead of considering what is “developmentally appropriate” for each grade, the proposed standards backtracks the end goals of college and career readiness down to the Kindergarten level. The set of skills and expectations that define a “college and career ready” high school graduate, such as critical thinking, begin in Kindergarten.

The current and proposed AZ Standards, which are still Common Core standards, fail to honor the *widely held* understanding of childhood development and require children who are in the middle of the concrete operation period to explain, justify, and apply principles that are abstract in nature.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Common Core State Standards Development Work Group and Feedback Group Announced. https://www.nga.org/cms/home/news-room/news-releases/page_2009/col2-content/main-content-list/common-core-state-standards-deve.html

As Mary Calamia, clinical social worker in New York State, who has provided psychotherapy services to parents, teachers, and students from all socio-economic backgrounds since 1995, explains, “We cannot regulate biology. Young children are simply not wired to engage in the type of critical thinking that the Common Core calls for. That would require a fully developed prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that is not fully functional until early adulthood. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for critical thinking, rational decision-making, and abstract thinking—all things the Common Core demands prematurely.”¹⁸

Writing of the standards

Dr. Sandra Stotsky, the premier ELA standards authority in the United States¹⁹ and a member of the Common Core Validation Committee, has stated that the Common Core standards are “murky, badly written standards” with multiple activities written into one standard. The proposed and current AZ ELA standards suffer from this defect.

Early childhood educators and child development experts were not involved in the development of the standards. AZ has repeated that mistake with the current revisions.

Kindergarten:

The following standards should not be used for one or more of the following reasons:

- considered developmentally inappropriate,
- have multiple standards within a standard,
- are unclear
- teach “all-purpose tools” vs needed content

K.RL.1-4, 6-10

K.RI.1-5, 6 (name the author and illustrator only), 7-10

K.RF.2e, 4

K.W.1-8

K.WF. 2c, 3e

K.SL.1, 2 (remove “through other media”), 3-5

K.L.1b, d, e, 4-6

First grade:

The following standards should not be used for one or more of the following reasons:

- considered developmentally inappropriate,
- have multiple standards within a standard,
- are unclear

¹⁸ Statement for New York State Assembly Education Forum Brentwood, New York October 10, 2013. Mary Calamia, LCSW, CASAC. http://stopccsinnys.com/uploads/Al_Graf_-_Mary_Calamia_full_text.pdf

¹⁹What Common Core has done to Massachusetts. <http://truthinamericaneducation.com/common-core-state-standards/common-core-done-massachusetts/>

- teach “all-purpose tools” vs needed content

1.RL.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10

1.RI.1-10

1.RF.1 (capitalization of first word and ending punctuation is good), 2 (phonograms listed are inaccurate according to some phonics programs), 3 (remove a-f and let districts decide the phonics and word analysis program), 4 (read on level text orally is the only sentence that is appropriate),

1.W.1-8

1.L.1 (simplify to appropriate developmental stage), 4-6

1.WF.8 (simplify to 100 most often words in English), 9

Second grade:

The following standards should not be used for one or more of the following reasons:

- considered developmentally inappropriate,
- have multiple standards within a standard,
- are unclear
- teach “all-purpose tools” vs needed content
-

2.RL.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10

2.RI.1-10

2.RF.4 (only read on level text orally with accuracy is appropriate)

2.W.1-8

2.SL.1-6

2.L.1 (remove assistance), 2 (remove e), 3-6

2.WF.2,7 (remove a and b-state only 200 most common words in English)

Third grade:

The following standards should not be used for one or more of the following reasons:

- considered developmentally inappropriate,
- have multiple standards within a standard,
- are unclear
- teach “all-purpose tools” vs needed content

3.RL.1,2,3,4,5,7,9,10

3.RI.1-10

3.RF.3 (d is unclear and dependent on what phonics program a school may use.) 4a (take out purpose and understanding) 4c (all purpose tool)

3.W.1-7 (only one project) 8,10

3.SL.1-6

3.L.1 (c-do not think abstractly, g is wordy and unclear), 2 (f-very successful reading programs do not use the listed patterns and generalizations, so remove the examples), 3-6

4th Grade

The following standards should not be used for one or more of the following reasons:

- considered developmentally inappropriate,
- have multiple standards within a standard,
- are unclear
- are teaching “all-purpose tools” vs needed content

4.RL.1-7,9,10

4.RI.1, 2(take out summarize the text)3-10

4.RF.4a. (take out purpose and understanding), 4c

4.W.1-7(only one project)8,10

4.SL.1-5(take out when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes), 6

4.L.1(g-frequently confused words should read homonyms), 3, 4a,6

4.WF. 4,5

5th Grade

The following standards should not be used for one or more of the following reasons:

- considered developmentally inappropriate,
- have multiple standards within a standard,
- are unclear
- are teaching “all-purpose tools” vs needed content

5.RL.1,2,5,7,9 (take out on their approaches to similar themes and topics),10 (Just state read and comprehend literature appropriate to grade 5)

5.RI.1, 2(take out summarize the text)3-10 (Just state read and comprehend informational text appropriate to grade 5)

5.RF.4a. (take out purpose and understanding), 4c

5.W.1-4, 5 (just state writing through planning, revising, editing and rewriting, 7(only one project)8,10

5.SL.1-5(take out when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes), 6

5.L.3a,6

From Cara Palmer for 9-12 ELA standards

It is evident, after reviewing the Draft 2016 AZ ELA and Math Standards, that the review committees are hard-working and committed individuals who are worthy of this trust to revise and edit the 2010 Standards. Below you will find five main responses of how the standards need to advance for the health, benefit and success of our students.

1. **Developmental Expert Consultation:** Originally with Common Core, there were not enough experts in education or child development on the board of its creation. Inclusion of child development experts, those who understand developmental stages and the variances of learning that take place within each grade level, is vital to the progression of the new standards. Specialists of this kind would guide our state against overloading our children to the point of burn out and anxieties that could be harmful. The 2016 standards revision workgroups did incorporate “numerous models and sources, including state departments of education, scholars, K-12 teachers, academic and instructional coaches, curriculum directors, administrators, university professors, parents, students, and other members of public” (2016 ELA Draft Introduction 1), however, upon adding the new written standards in the 2015 ELA Draft and retaining primarily the same structure as the 2010 Common Core Standards. Have developmental experts played a significant part in this process?
2. **Parent Involvement and Notification Guaranteed:** Parents have been involved in the revision and feedback of the new 2016 ELA and Math Standards, however, in the future is parent involvement and incorporation guaranteed? This is not seen in the new standards. Parental concern of what resources and texts should be used, as well as, how the curriculum should be taught could easily and conveniently be overlooked by the schools and districts, leaving the parent unable to influence what they find to be unacceptable or inappropriate for their child. The curriculum, as well as the state level standards, may also shift and adjust as time evolves. How will parents know their voice will be heard and incorporated into any future revisions? Will they be given adequate notification of upcoming changes or revisions?
3. **Educational Vision More than College/Career Readiness:** While the standards and curriculum, as presented in the Drafted 2016 ELA and Math Standards, are designed to “demand high levels of reason and thinking” (2016 ELA Draft Executive Summary 1) and prepare them to “succeed in credit-bearing, college-entry courses and/or in the workplace” (2016 ELA Draft Introduction 1) how will we be sure that other programs and subject areas important to student growth and development won’t get pushed to the side or cut. Is there more to education? Education translates into a Latin base “educare” which means "to bring up," "a rearing," might this mean

more than college and career readiness? What about being a responsible citizen or developing important life skills--such as budgeting and paying taxes?

4. High Stakes Testing Needs to be Strictly Limited (or Deleted): Is all this testing really necessary and helpful for student learning? According to a study titled "High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Does Accountability Pressure Increase Student Learning?" conducted by researchers at the University of Texas at San Antonio and Arizona State University, it claimed "no consistent evidence that high-stakes testing works to increase achievement" (Nichols, Glass, G.V, & Berliner, D.C. 2006). From my own experience as a teacher and parent of children enrolled in Arizona schools, high stakes testing impedes on genuine learning and teaching. It places a pressure on students and teachers that is primarily task based and not inquiry based, thus making internal learning artificial at best.
5. PRIVACY of OUR CHILDREN and their FAMILIES: If we do not know what is on a statewide test and/or survey and are not sure we can, with full confidence, protect the opinions, beliefs, descriptions and personal history and/or information of our children and their families then the test should not be administered into AZ schools. This is a trust that our schools, teachers, students and families desperately need. This cannot be emphasized enough.

Citations:

Nichols, S. L., Glass, G. V, & Berliner, D. C. (2006). High-stakes testing and student achievement: Does accountability pressure increase student learning? Education Policy Analysis Archives, 14(1). Retrieved [date] from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n1/>.