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The Common Core and Democratic Education Examining Potential Costs and Benefits to Public and Private Autonomy

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Abstract

This conceptual paper assesses prevalent critiques of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and analyzes content from the CCSS in language arts and literacy to determine whether the standards are likely to support or undermine key democratic aims of education. The authors conclude that critiques of the CCSS have some merit but are generally overstated and misdirected, and the standards give inadequate attention to the development of public autonomy but an ideal amount of attention to development of private autonomy.

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BY OCTOBER 2013, forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity had adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Some states, such as Indiana, South Carolina, and Oklahoma, however, have since backed away from their earlier decisions to adopt the standards. Strong resistance to the Common Core continues and is likely to intensify as the 2016 U.S. presidential race progresses, as the standards have already emerged as one of GOP nominee, Donald Trump's targets. Anticipating a renewed national focus on the subject, our primary objectives in this article are to assess the merits of prevalent critiques of the Common Core and determine whether the standards are likely to support or undermine key democratic aims of education.

Consideration of the standards' likely effect on two key components of democratic education—*public autonomy* (defined,

for our purposes, as a community's opportunity and capacity to influence public life and shape public policy) and *private autonomy* (defined, for our purposes, as one's opportunity and capacity to think for oneself, to set one's own goals, and to pursue those goals free from excessive outside influence)—provides a framework through which to assess prevalent critiques of the standards and analyze the standards ourselves. Our analysis shows that while

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adoption of the standards presents some potential limitations to local control over schools (a factor relating to public autonomy), many critiques of the Common Core are either overstated or misguided and may be mitigated by the standards' likely contribution to overall gains in both public and private autonomy. Additionally, we discuss how the standards might be improved to better reflect key aims of democratic education.

Our study provides analysis and evaluation of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2013).¹ Therefore, when we use the labels CCSS, *Common Core*, or *the standards* in the analysis that follows, we are referring to these literacy standards. Our use of the final version of the standards produced by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers rather than a more comprehensive review of each state's slightly modified version of the standards may be a limitation of our analysis. However, as we focus on the skills and dispositions components of the standards, which are consistent from state to state, this limitation is not so severe as to undermine the legitimacy of our argument. Additionally, it is worth noting that our analysis is of the standards themselves, and not the lesson plans, curriculum materials, or assessment and accountability measures associated with Common Core, which vary from state to state.

We begin with an analysis of critiques of the Common Core related to public and private autonomy. We then examine the meaning of autonomy and argue that a democratic society has an obligation to both develop young citizens' capacities for autonomy and employ democratic procedures for adopting and implementing educational standards to accomplish this aim. Finally, we assess the Common Core in terms of its likely contributions to the enhancement of public and private autonomy for all citizens.

Critiques of the Common Core

We have defined *public autonomy* as a community's opportunity and capacity to influence public life and shape public policy. Most critiques of the CCSS focus on potential losses to local control over school policy and curricular decisions—conflating adoption and implementation processes with the standards themselves—and thereby deal only with the opportunity component of public autonomy. A second type of criticism, which is less common but which we find more compelling, deals with the actual standards as they relate to developing students' capacity for public autonomy. In this section, we discuss both types of criticism concerning the relation between the standards and public autonomy.

Though criticism of the Common Core comes from individuals and groups with varying political perspectives, some of the strongest critiques come from leaders and organizations on the

political right. Of particular salience to the present discussion, many conservative critics claim that adoption of “national standards,” which they perceive the Common Core to be, will lead to a significant loss of state and local influence and opportunities for deliberation over public school policy and curricula (Graebe, 2013; Kurtz, 2013; McCluskey, Evers, & Stotsky, 2013; Paul, 2013; Russo, 2013; Scott, 2013; Smith, 2013;). This development, they have argued, would amount to a sacrifice of the interests of students, parents, and other members of school communities to those of distant special interest groups with influence at the federal policymaking level. Such arguments commonly reference the idea that the standards are yet another step in a series of efforts to bring about a federal monopoly over public education, which would inevitably lead to less opportunities for the exercise of public autonomy (or at least in relation to local control over public school policy and curriculum decisions), less competition, and poorer academic performance by American students.²

This type of argument is seen in the findings of an analysis of over 10,000 online survey responses to a March 2010 version of the CCSS, which found that a “significant number of respondents oppose all federal standards, which they perceive the CCSS to be” and that some “feel very strongly that any standard not perceived as local is problematic. Many of these respondents see this initiative as a first step toward a required national curriculum and loss of parental freedom.” Similarly, in their analysis of over 14,000 tweets from the top 150 Twitter subscribers who posted messages about the Common Core from February to July of 2013, Goldsworthy and Sam (2015) categorized approximately two-thirds of those tweets as oppositional toward CCSS. Among the most prevalent themes that emerged from their analysis was a widespread concern that the standards represented a significant threat to the local control component of what we refer to as public autonomy, signifying “an annexation of local decision-making, or wresting of control from those who should be making decisions about local education” (p. 5).

Sentiments such as these, centered on the perception that the CCSS are “national standards” that will lead to a loss of autonomy, have become so widespread that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2013) delivered a speech to directly address them. Duncan sought to push back against misinformation about the standards, stating: “The Common Core has become a rallying cry for fringe groups that claim it is a scheme for the federal government to usurp state and local control of what students learn.” He requested those in attendance—primarily newspaper editors—to ask their sources to “identify a single lesson plan that the federal government created . . . any textbook that the federal government created . . . [or] any element, a single word of the Common Core standards that was developed or required by the federal government.” Though the federal government had no direct role in the creation of the CCSS, the belief that the standards represent a federal takeover of public education remains widespread.

1 In this article, we do not consider the math standards. We recognize their potential contributions to the preparation of students for democratic citizenship, but we limited our analysis due to space constraints and our own expertise.

2 The new Every Student Succeeds Act allows states to adopt Common Core but does not require it. In fact, the act requires the federal Education Department to remain neutral toward the CCSS.

A strong voice in libertarian politics, Republican U.S. Representative Ron Paul (2013) echoed the above-mentioned fears relating to the loss of public autonomy: “We must oppose further encroachment on the autonomy of local public schools and work to roll-back existing interference” (para. 7). Similarly, Marco Rubio, U.S. Senator from Florida and unsuccessful 2016 GOP presidential primary candidate, referred to the CCSS as a means for the Obama administration “to turn the Department of Education into what is effectively a national school board” (Smith, 2013, para. 4). Graebe (2013) claimed that the “CCS[S] removes any instructional flexibility despite the possibility that their curriculum may not be what works best for a particular class” (para. 8). In a similar vein, Scott (2013) noted that many see the CCSS as an unproven endeavor undermining state autonomy to “direct their own educational programs and that set aside the high quality standards and assessments some states have created in favor of lower quality standards and less academically demanding assessments” (p. 4). These politically conservative critics of the Common Core have predicted that, by encroaching on the autonomous practices of local communities, the “national standards” will limit their ability to differentiate curricula based on student needs and particularities and will cause the quality of instruction to suffer.

Others criticize the standards based on their limitations of classroom readings to mostly informational rather than literary texts and general focus on developing transferrable critical thinking/reading skills rather than more specific knowledge.³ Bauerlein and Stotsky (2012) predicted that a heavier focus on informational texts will make students less college ready based on the belief that problems in college readiness stem from “an incoherent, less-challenging [student-centered, multicultural] literature curriculum from the 1960s onward” (p. 1). They warned that, because the Common Core focuses more on developing skills than specific canonical knowledge, widespread adoption of the standards presents an opportunity to those who would adopt less worthy contemporary texts over great works of English and American literature. Berry (2014) and Robbins (2013) sounded the alarm about the standards’ potential to be used by the political left through mass-marketed, standards-aligned informational texts and to promote “a social engineering ideology” as a substitute for traditional religious and family values. Thus, these authors held, nationwide adoption of standards that place too few requirements on schools to adopt literary classics creates a situation that gives large publishing houses too much influence over public education and opens the door for leftist mischief.

Critiques of the Common Core, however, extend beyond those of conservative politicians and scholars. Ravitch (2013) noted that the CCSS were “developed by an organization called Achieve and the National Governors Association both of which were generously funded by the Gates Foundation [and that] there was minimal public engagement in the development of the Common Core. Their creation was neither grassroots nor did it emanate from

the states” (para. 10). From another angle, Au (2013) argued that the CCSS will “inevitably lead to restrictive high-stakes, standardized testing similar to that associated with No Child Left Behind” (p. 1). Thus, Au suggested, high-stakes, standardized testing can play a significant role in undermining local influence over what goes on in schools by encouraging “teaching to the test.”⁴

Though we were unable to locate many published scholarly critiques of the Common Core guided by explicitly communitarian or multiculturalist frameworks, we think such arguments ought to be taken up as part of this broader analysis. Particularly, concerns about cultural loss for local (and, especially, minority) communities should be considered, including the concern that a nationwide adoption of a single set of standards (though versions of the CCSS do, indeed, vary somewhat from state to state) would impose a monolithic vision upon all students and might drown out the voices of cultural and religious minorities, people of color, and other historically marginalized groups. For instance, in one of the few published critiques of this kind, Gangi and Benfer (2014) criticized the standards’ list of 171 recommended texts for elementary children for only containing 18 works by authors of color and few that reflect the lives of children of color and the poor. They argued that acquisition of literacy skills and identity development requires students to be able to make meaningful connections with the people and stories in the texts they read. Consequently, the authors suggested, by recommending only a few works with which children of color are likely to relate, the standards do these students a significant injustice. Furthermore, they contended, stocking every classroom with literature that would allow children from the dominant, mainstream culture exposure to stories about others who look and live differently would likely yield social and democratic benefits. Further, some may see the standards’ primary focus on college and career readiness to come at the cost of the democratic aim of promoting tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. These are serious concerns that merit additional scholarly attention.

Not everyone is concerned, however, that the CCSS will encroach upon state and local autonomy. Some of the research on the Common Core has emphasized the fact that the adoption of the standards is strictly voluntary and that the federal government legally cannot mandate any state to adopt them (StudentsFirst, 2013). Along these lines, Pearson and Hiebert (2012) noted that the “CCSS provide a core set of expectations and intentionally leave much to districts, schools, and teachers to figure out for themselves—to, if you will, put a local signature on their implementation of the core” (p. 3). Scholars at the Aspen Institute (2012) similarly claimed that by focusing on the capacities of students, “the CCSS does not advocate one particular pedagogical approach over another” (p. 1). Further, the Aspen scholars emphasized that, in comparison to standards that focus on rote learning and content memorization, the Common Core standards

3 The standards require readings to consist of 70% informational texts and 30% literary texts across the high school curriculum, with a 50/50 split in high school English classes.

4 Some scholars may be concerned about losses to teacher autonomy (as opposed to autonomy of the local community) due to adoption of the CCSS, but these concerns do not fit within our public-private autonomy framework and, thus, exceed the scope of this analysis.

afford local schools stronger autonomy as they implement the standards.

The above critiques focus primarily on issues relating to local control of school curricula—that is, on issues that only correspond to the opportunity component of public autonomy. Critiques of the actual content of the standards relating to their suitability for developing students' capacity for public autonomy, however, were far less commonplace. In one of the few such critiques, social studies scholar Singer (2013a and 2013b) claimed that the Common Core standards do not promote the broad aims of a democratic education. Singer noted, "In the entire document, there is no real discussion of life in a democratic society and the role of education in promoting democracy processes and democratic values" (2013b, para. 1). And this, to Singer, is problematic, given that the leading organization in the social studies, The National Council For the Social Studies (NCSS), explicitly has stated that "the goal of schooling . . . is not merely preparation for citizenship, but citizenship itself; to equip a citizenry with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for active and engaged civic life" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010, para. 1). Thus, by not directly focusing on issues relating to democratic participation, Singer implied that citizens miss out on opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, and commitments that enhance public autonomy.

We need some way of assessing this collection of claims, and the public-private autonomy framework is useful in that regard because it addresses fundamental dimensions of the most prevalent Common Core critiques and enables us to more comprehensively understand the complex nature of autonomy that is at stake. Our aim of providing a substantive assessment of the above critiques requires that we direct our attention to the standards themselves. It also compels us to provide a straightforward account of the set of assumptions that grounds our argument. Therefore, we will assess these critiques after analyzing the standards through our public-private autonomy framework, which we explain in greater detail in the following section.

Public and Private Autonomy

Various assumptions about the appropriate role and purposes of public education inform our analysis. In addition to preparing students for college and career (the stated primary goals of Common Core), we believe public schools have a duty to help young citizens develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for active participation in a pluralist, democratic society. Toward these efforts, democratic societies are obliged to develop capacities for and guarantee opportunities for the exercise of both private and public autonomy in their young citizens. Furthermore, major curricular decisions, such as the adoption of state standards, should be made in a manner that aligns with democratic values. These assumptions and the thesis they inform are grounded in liberal political theory and a conception of democratic education constructed upon the foundational works of Dewey (1916), Rawls (1971, 1993/1996, 2005), Gutmann (1987), and Habermas (1995, 1984) and supported by more recent works of scholars Reich (2002), Fletcher (2000), and Creppell (2008).

We consider both private and public autonomy to be central components of democratic life and the development of these capacities to be important aims of democratic education. Our understanding of private and public autonomy derives from an intellectual exchange between political philosophers Rawls (1971, 1993/1996, 2005) and Habermas (1995) over the process of political decision making.⁵ In this debate, Rawls emphasized the importance of protecting individual liberty through universal, rationally justifiable, constitutional principles (relating to private autonomy). Habermas critiqued Rawls's position, arguing that it relied too heavily on abstract justification rather than on the actual consent of citizens. In other words, he said that Rawls's view imposed a top-down system of ready-made principles onto citizens, foregoing a participatory and deliberative democratic process (relating to public autonomy).

The capacities component of public autonomy, however, required a critical mass of citizens who were rational, critical thinkers with both the skills and the desire to deliberate with people from other cultural backgrounds—capacities that Rawls seemed to overlook, Habermas seemed to take for granted, and we think must be intentionally developed in young citizens. Public education, though not the only one, is an important setting through which democratic societies might develop young citizens' capacities for public autonomy. Furthermore, a community's capacity for public autonomy is severely undermined when its governing bodies fail to provide opportunities for its exercise. Thus, the opportunities component of public autonomy requires certain preconditions for its realization. There must be some significant degree of local control over and opportunities for democratic input into policy decisions. Because public autonomy requires a critical mass of individuals with the ability to deliberate effectively, the state has a responsibility to promote its citizens' development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for life in a pluralist, democratic society.

The ability to think and read critically is an essential component of both private and public autonomy and, thus, a key aim of democratic education. In addition to helping students develop as individuals, critical thinking is essential for the healthy functioning of a democratic state, lest its citizens fall victim to groupthink, mass media manipulation, or the propaganda and brainwashing of authoritarian regimes. Significant threats to liberal democracies arise when societies fail to foster a critical spirit in their future citizens. If students are not encouraged to question tradition, cultural norms, and authority, and demand justice and equality under the law, democratic societies will be ill-prepared to face the challenges they will inevitably encounter. Thus, the development of critical thinking skills in young citizens provides both individual and social benefits.

Yet, as important as critical thinking is, there are other skills and virtues that are also essential components of good citizenship and a good education. One manner in which schools can help to develop

5 Rawls responded to Habermas's critique (1995) of his work in Lecture 9 of the Expanded Edition of *Political Liberalism*, which was published in 2005.

future citizens is by educating individuals with the moral qualities needed for the functioning of a productive, deliberative democracy. Gutmann (1999) said that, “a democracy is deliberative to the extent that citizens and their accountable representatives offer one another morally defensible reasons for mutually binding laws in an ongoing process of mutual justification” (p. xii). She argued that public schools play a central role in developing the capacities for this type of deliberation in students:

A primary aim of publicly mandated schooling is therefore to cultivate the skills and virtues of deliberation . . . Deliberation is not a single skill or virtue. It calls upon skills of literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, as well as contextual knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of other people’s perspectives. The virtues that deliberation encompasses include veracity, nonviolence, practical judgment, civic integrity and magnanimity. By cultivating these and other deliberative skills and virtues, a democratic society helps secure both the basic opportunity of individuals and its collective capacity to pursue justice. (pp. xii-xiii)

The teaching of tolerance and respect is also an important component of democratic education. Students living in democratic societies ought to be made aware of their rights as well as the responsibilities that accompany them. One of the responsibilities of good citizenship is our obligation to respect the rights of others. Students can learn how to respect others’ rights through classroom discourse, guided by their teachers, in which each student is required to accord all others with respect as persons and to recognize what Rawls (1971) called the “burdens of judgment.” The burdens of judgment, which are basically factors that illustrate how reasonable people can disagree on matters of deep importance, call upon citizens of pluralist societies to recognize that none of us has a monopoly on truth and to exercise toleration toward one another.

In addition to teaching tolerance, public schools can provide meaningful opportunities for democratic deliberation among diverse students to cultivate a sense of trust and community in their classrooms. Along these lines, it is desirable to foster in future citizens a sense of *intersubjectivity* (Habermas, 1984) or *mutuality* (Creppell, 2008), initiated and sustained by a commitment to engage across differences in a shared political project. Mutuality, the term we prefer, asks citizens not to set differences aside (which is asking quite a lot) but only to commit to maintaining public relationships, in which individuals and groups engage in ongoing democratic deliberations across meaningful differences. Rather than focusing only on our own individual or group rights and identities, mutuality requires that we recognize others’ rights and identities and seek to engage with others in a public discourse through which differences might be negotiated diplomatically. This is certainly a tall order for schools, which are already saddled with enormous responsibilities (many of which remain presently unfulfilled). Nevertheless, the benefits and obligations of citizenship are too important to remain underexplored, and as one of the greatest purposes of public schooling, democratic education ought not to remain marginalized in the curriculum.

Furthermore, because public autonomy requires a critical mass of free citizens who have the ability to articulate their individual and group interests and assess the competing claims of their interlocutors, it seems that public autonomy, to a significant degree, requires some number of individual citizens who have the capacity for private autonomy. This is not to say that private autonomy is not valuable in and of itself but to acknowledge that both capacities are core components of our conception of democratic education. Private autonomy is a necessary but not sufficient component of public autonomy, and, therefore, the two must come as a package deal as part of an adequate democratic education. Scholars from various theoretical backgrounds, however, have conceptualized private autonomy differently, so some further clarification of what we mean by the term is in order. While the following cursory discussion is far from a comprehensive review of the literature on autonomy, we think it will direct readers’ attention to a few important concerns relating to the topic and provide a clearer picture of the conception of private autonomy we reference in our argument.

Fletcher’s (2000) notion of *autonomy as authenticity* takes into account how our “immediate circumstances necessarily shape the capacity we have to create and pursue our life-plans” (p. 119). The conception of authenticity envisions communities and relationships as potential avenues for supporting the development of individual autonomy:

When individuals draw on these local resources in ways that expand the range and possibility of their choices, increase the potential of their choices to meet their needs, and encourage the development of new interests and talents, then these relationships and communities support a capacity for autonomy that is generally not explained, and in some cases not supported, by universalist theories alone. (pp. 119–120)

This notion of autonomy as authenticity acknowledges the importance of recognition (Taylor, 1994) and takes into account how identity is formed not in total isolation from others but through

both the inward experience of our deliberation over possible choices and life-plans, and the outward experience of recognition we feel through the understanding and support that others express for our choices. These two aspects, one experienced self-reflectively, the other in our relations with others, are key aspects of authenticity. (Fletcher, 2000, p. 120)

This notion of autonomy as authenticity is emancipatory in the sense that it draws our attention to pressures for mainstream cultural conformity and calls upon educators to avoid practices that constrain or silence students’ expression of identities that lie outside of the mainstream or at the margins of society. Insights from Fletcher’s autonomy as authenticity—including the positive role communities play in shaping identity and providing opportunities for expression of individual members’ autonomy—inform our conception of private autonomy. Underemphasized, however, in this conception of autonomy is the tendency of some

illiberal cultural groups to stifle individuality or dissent among members. Reich's (2002) conception of minimalist autonomy provides additional insights that take a more critical approach to the potentially limiting aspects of culture and offers some ideas for how schools might respond to such challenges.

Like Fletcher (2000), Reich (2002) acknowledged the importance of community and rejects egoistic and hyper-rational conceptions of autonomy. He argued that these "strong conceptions of autonomy" are "too exacting to encompass the forms of life most people actually live or would wish to live" (p. 99), and they sever "autonomy from emotion and worldly passions" and seem to negate "the possibility of acting autonomously if we choose to act out of loyalty or love rather than out of duty to the dictates of reason" (pp. 96–97). He rejects any account of autonomy that constructs an ideal of the radical individualist who cuts communal ties and group commitments, which most people consider critically important aspects of a good life. He instead embraced a conception of *minimalist autonomy* that referred to:

a person's ability to reflect independently and critically upon basic commitments, values, desires, and beliefs, be they chosen or unchosen, and to enjoy a range of meaningful life options from which to choose, upon which to act, and around which to orient and pursue one's life projects. Minimalist autonomy understood as self-determination encompasses both evaluative capacities and a real ability to act on one's evaluations, if necessary adopting new commitments, changing one's values, altering previous desires, or revising old beliefs from a spectrum of meaningful possibilities. (p. 105)

Minimalist autonomy, which equates autonomy not with relentless rationality and egoistic individualism but with sovereignty and self-determination, is concerned less with what type of life a person chooses to live and more so with the process through which one makes such an important decision. In other words, this conception of autonomy is compatible with multiple ways of life, including those characterized by deep commitment to community, tradition, and/or devout religious belief. Though individuals with well-developed capacities for autonomy will most likely choose lives that allow them to exercise their autonomy, they are nevertheless free to autonomously choose lives as members of communities that do not hold autonomy among their highest values.

Reich (2002) suggested that, because the capacity for autonomy is such an important component of human freedom but does not automatically emerge within individuals, the state has an obligation to promote its development. Public schools, he suggested, offer particularly promising avenues for state-sponsored development of autonomy. Thus, the young citizen's right to the type of education that prepares him or her for autonomous decision making as an adult requires that the state guarantee access for all children—in line with Gutmann's (1987) conception of the democratic threshold and her principle of nondiscrimination—to this type of education even when it means going against the interests of parents or cultural groups who do not

place a high value on private autonomy.⁶ This is not to say that parents (or communities) have no rights or legitimate interests in the education of children but only that these rights ought to be limited insofar as they conflict with the child's right to an autonomy-facilitating education. Warnick's (2013) limited conception of parental rights reflected these sentiments:

1. Parents have a right to participate in shaping school policies that affect their children.
2. Parents have a right to invite, that is, to expose, their children to their own way of life and to persuade them to adopt that life as their own.
3. Parents have a right to engage in practices with their children that are essential to exposing the children to their own ways of life.
4. Parents do not have the right to restrict the exposure of children to only their own way of life. Children have rights to be exposed to multiple perspectives on important issues. (p. 51)

Additionally, respect for individual liberty and emancipatory insights from Fletcher's (2000) conception of autonomy as authenticity requires restraints on the powers of the state. It must be prohibited from imposing what Gutmann (1987) called overly determinant or repressive educational conditions upon students. For example, the state should not indoctrinate students into particular religions or coerce anyone to adopt what Rawls (1971) called comprehensive doctrines. Because the conception of private autonomy that we have described leaves open the realistic possibility of an individual choosing to live in an illiberal community, it cannot reasonably be considered a comprehensive doctrine. Further, because private autonomy is developed in students through a process of exposure to a wide range of perspectives, it cannot reasonably be said that students are indoctrinated into it as one might be into a comprehensive doctrine. Furthermore, mere exposure to an idea or perspective is clearly different from indoctrination into it.

In summation, if we value adult members' autonomous choices to live in illiberal groups, and capacities for autonomous decision making are not automatically developed, it follows that liberal, democratic societies have responsibilities to promote the development of citizens' capacities for autonomy and establish and maintain the conditions necessary for them to be able to exercise these capacities. Adult citizens, then, can choose to live nonautonomous lives but should not be permitted by the state to block children's access to an autonomy-facilitating education. In the pages that follow, we analyze the standards and the prevalent critiques outlined above through this public-private autonomy lens.

6 Though, unlike us, Gutmann believed the state should be willing to grant opt-outs for students whose parents object to their participation in school activities that might expose them to ideas that could potentially undermine their religious beliefs (e.g., comprehensive sex education, the scientific theory of evolution, positive depictions of other religious groups) to prevent fundamentalists from withdrawing from public education.

Assessment of the Standards

In our analysis, we found that the Common Core effectively promotes private autonomy but could be improved to increase the development of students' capacities for public autonomy. The CCSS lays out a general vision of what it means to be a literate person in the 21st century. Particularly, the standards are designed to cultivate students who demonstrate a range of characteristics relating to critical thinking and autonomous decision making—the basis of the conception of private autonomy to which we refer throughout this article.

Unlike most state standards that grant peripheral treatment to critical thinking, while focusing on content knowledge and basic skills, the CCSS set higher benchmarks encouraging students to actively participate in processes that require the use of higher order thinking. They aim to develop students who habitually perform the critical reading and thinking necessary to carefully navigate the staggering amount of information available to learners in the 21st century. They also direct students to consider multiple perspectives, engage in a process of evaluating these perspectives according to multiple sources of evidence, and examine how biases (including their own) influence this process. This type of reading and thinking aligns with the growing body of literature calling for disciplinary literacy within the classroom and is part of a larger effort to expose students to ideas that broaden their perspectives and enrich their lives.

An important, but certainly not the only, characteristic of an autonomy-facilitating P–12 education is that it helps prepare students who can function successfully in the environments in which they find themselves when they leave school. For many, this will mean entering directly into the workforce. For others, this will mean matriculating into some form of higher education. The Common Core standards, in fact, are designed primarily to enhance students' abilities to find success in these—college and career—realms of human experience. Thus, private autonomy and critical thinking, certainly beneficial to navigating challenges faced in the realms of college and career, are central foci. However, the literacy and critical thinking skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate also have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. To this point, the standards are designed to help students become independent people who reflexively demonstrate the “cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic” (CCSSI, 2013).

The CCSS aim to develop students beyond low-level thinkers, asking them to critique as well as comprehend. They are intended to cultivate students who are “engaged and open-minded—but discerning—readers and listeners . . . [who] work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning” (CCSSI, 2013). Accordingly, these students develop critical dispositions and place a high value on the use of evidence in argumentation and in informed decision-making. For instance, they “cite specific evidence when offering an oral or written interpretation of a text. They use relevant evidence when

supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener, and they constructively evaluate others' use of evidence” (CCSSI, 2013). The ability to evaluate propositions according to evidence provides helpful applications to citizenship and to individual pursuits.

Rather than accepting an author's arguments uncritically, students are called upon to evaluate the author's supporting evidence, assess the author's credibility, and consider the date and setting in which the work was written. Specifically, students are asked to “trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not” and to “delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced” (CCSSI, 2013). Keenly aware of how an author's biases can influence his or her writing, CCSS encourage students to assess how point of view and purpose shape the content and style of a text. For instance, students are required to cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support their analysis of an author's writing as well as inferences drawn from a text. Students are called upon to compare and contrast multiple authors' perspectives or interpretations of particular ideas or events and “integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources” (CCSSI, 2013).

When such analysis leads to confusion or conflicting points of view on an issue, students are asked to “identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation,” determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text, and “analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints” (CCSSI, 2013). Again, cultivating in students a desire to seek out and examine multiple perspectives as part of the process of forming their own views on a particular issue is of immense value to autonomy development and enhances the quality (and hopefully, the outcomes) of democratic deliberation.

Though explicit references to democratic education are limited within the standards, this is not to say that the standards fail to emphasize the development of individuals and groups capable of participating in the public sphere as rational, deliberative citizens—the very essence of public autonomy. Specifically, the standards direct students to consider multiple perspectives, engage in a process of evaluating these perspectives according to multiple sources of evidence, and examine how biases (including their own) influence this process—skills and dispositions that are central to deliberative democracy. Further, the standards consistently encourage various forms of discourse among diverse partners in the classroom. In this sense, students are expected to participate in a dialogue that is representative of ideal political discourse among adult citizens in a productive pluralist democracy. Such an aim—though only one example of how the standards mirror many of the aims of a democratic education—provides students with the opportunity to develop into citizens who recognize value in the voices of their peers and understand appropriate means for engaging in a deliberative community. Nevertheless, the standards'

explicit focus is on preparing students for college and career, not necessarily citizenship. The standards do not, in our view, give adequate attention to developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions relating to students' capacities for public autonomy.

Assessment of the Critiques

As we have already discussed, rhetoric in opposition to the Common Core includes critiques from a range of perspectives, with some arguments warning that adoption of “national standards” will lead to a significant loss of state and local influence over curriculum and, thus, sacrifice the interests of students, parents, and other members of school communities to those of distant special interest groups with influence at the federal policymaking level. These arguments typically stem from concern that CCSS will eventually lead to a centralized, federal government monopoly over public education, which critics contend will inevitably lead to less competition and poorer academic performance by American students as well as potential loss of voice for already marginalized groups. Though exaggerated, these claims likely reflect the concerns of a significant portion of the American population, and they deserve to be taken seriously by scholars, policymakers, and curriculum developers.

While we remain unconvinced that state adoption of Common Core will serve as a Trojan horse, leading to an inevitable takeover of public education by the federal government, concerns over the increasing centralization of public school decision making have some legitimacy. Arguments relating to the loss of local control, a very limited component of public autonomy, are also probably overstated, but, again, there is likely at least a kernel of truth behind them. That is, full implementation of any form of nationally benchmarked standards (even if they vary to a degree from state to state) would inevitably drown out a significant portion of local influence over what to teach in the public schools and how to teach it. Yet, as we have seen at various points in the history of the United States, when human rights are at odds with local decision making, it is often appropriate for local decision making to give way. If one believes that every child has the right to an autonomy-facilitating education, as we do, and observes inequities from one community to another in regard to children's access to this type of education, then it follows that some limited centralization of educational policymaking is appropriate.

Any loss to various aspects of public autonomy (e.g., local control or opportunities for public input into policy decisions) arising from adoption or implementation of CCSS could be mitigated by greater gains in private autonomy and other knowledge, skills, and dispositions relating to the capacity for public autonomy. This is not to say, however, that local values and voices should be ignored. In fact, the standards' design leaves much room for local influence into which content sources are selected for use in the classroom. Thus, only certain components of local control will be undermined and only minimal aspects of local cultures will be marginalized—those illiberal aspects that would undermine the development of students' autonomy—and this would be something to celebrate rather than dread. Further, if private autonomy is a necessary but not sufficient component of

public autonomy, as we have argued, then liberal democratic societies might even value some loss of other aspects of public autonomy in education if it led to more private autonomy for students and thus contributed to more public autonomy in areas outside of education. Given the fact that much space remains for local communities to shape what goes on in their schools, it is conceivable that conversations about educational policy and curriculum might actually improve as their capacities for public autonomy improve in the long run.

Critics of the Common Core often conflate implementation efforts with the standards themselves. While due consideration of standards implementation is of crucial importance for sound educational policymaking, this conflation is ultimately unproductive. Au's (2013) concerns, for instance, that the standards will require adoption of autonomy-inhibiting standardized tests does not implicate the actual content of the standards but rather the practice of high-stakes testing, which is a different matter altogether.⁷ Equally misguided are critics who point to, as evidence of the problematic nature of the Common Core, faulty activities, texts, or lesson plans created by companies more concerned with politics or profits than educational outcomes or teachers struggling to implement the standards. The process of resource selection and curriculum development should be guided by teachers' professional expertise and subjected to appropriate democratic constraints—that is, if excessively political texts and highly problematic supplemental materials are selected for use in the classroom, parents and communities should have meaningful opportunities to challenge these decisions and their concerns ought to be taken seriously. Poorly constructed implementation efforts do not reflect upon the quality or content of the standards themselves. If Common Core critics wish to enhance the credibility of their arguments, they should either explicitly state that they are addressing implementation efforts or actually address the standards in their analyses, which would require that they modify those aspects of their arguments that are unsupported by or directly in conflict with available evidence.

Furthermore, the CCSS do nothing to prevent any state from developing its own unique policies of education. Not only can states independently determine how the CCSS should be implemented, they are also free to make changes to existing standards. New York serves as an example of a state that has made significant changes and additions to CCSS, whereas Kansas chose to simply change the name (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). The CCSS do in some sense restrict individual states and districts but only from educating in such a way as to hinder students' consideration of a range of reasonable perspectives—strongly suggesting adherence to Gutmann's (1999) principle of nonrepression (p. 46). Similarly, states that adopt CCSS are required to ensure that all schools are afforded the resources necessary to provide students meaningful opportunities to acquire the skills they will need to participate in the democratic process

7 The new Every Child Succeeds Act is an attempt to address these important—albeit separate—issues.

(again, relating to Gutmann's conception of a democratic threshold and principle of nondiscrimination).

The conservative critiques of Common Core do not focus on the capacities component but only the opportunity component of public autonomy. That is, they give little indication that critics are concerned about how or whether young citizens will develop necessary capacities for public autonomy. Thus, their critiques rest on the claim that local communities are losing some degree of control over the public schools. This is true, but only in a very limited sense. If the Common Core really does have the power to influence political control over school policy, the only foreseeable cultural losses for conservatives (or other groups) would be those aspects of their culture that run against the development of children's autonomy—which, we believe, would represent constructive developments.

Similarly, most components of the multiculturalist argument also exaggerate the threats of the Common Core to public autonomy. If teachers can select much of the content based on their own professional expertise and the needs and interests of their students, which the standards clearly allow, it is unlikely that the CCSS would resemble anything akin to neoconservative cultural imperialism. Furthermore, as far as content is concerned, existing state standards (especially in the more ideologically conservative states) seem no less likely than so-called national standards to silence or marginalize minority perspectives. In fact, because they focus on critical thinking skills rather than canonical content, the Common Core standards are *less* likely than many states' standards to marginalize minority perspectives. Ultimately, these criticisms of the Common Core reflect only a superficial understanding of autonomy—that is, they generally only consider potential threats to local control or opportunities for public deliberation over policy rather than a more comprehensive view that considers both the opportunity *and* capacity components of public autonomy.

However, there are some aspects of the standards that might be revised to address the most compelling component, in our view, of the multiculturalist argument: the concern that the Common Core ELA standards' list of recommended texts does an inadequate job of representing non-mainstream voices. Fletcher's (2000) insights about the positive role of community and culture in the formation of identity are particularly salient in this regard—for, if a liberal, democratic society is to justly and effectively respond to the challenges of multiculturalism and religious pluralism, it must make serious efforts to include a wide range of minority perspectives on the public school curriculum. Such an inclusive list of texts would likely yield benefits to the development of autonomy in students from cultural minority groups who would be more likely to see positive aspects of their communities reflected in the curriculum as well as students from mainstream groups who would be exposed to a wider range of possibilities. Likewise, if Fletcher's insights were better reflected in the standards themselves—that is, if the standards contained explicit references to the importance of community, culture, and religion/worldview in the individual's life, students' autonomy interests would likely be furthered and forces contributing to cultural loss blunted.

We also agree with Singer's (2013) contention that the standards should have a stronger, or rather a more explicit, focus on democratic citizenship. The CCSS are problematic in this respect because, although they are well-designed to develop students' critical thinking skills and help them become individually empowered, they give inadequate attention to other components of democratic education such as the development of their capacities for deliberation and the disposition of mutuality. While the standards call upon students to listen to and assess other people's points of view, certainly both dialogue and discourse require more than carefully listening to another person or assessing the veracity of their claims. This shortcoming represents a major problem to those concerned about the development of students' capacities for public autonomy, and we would like to see revisions of the standards that give more attention to these important components of democratic education.

Conclusion

The driving purpose of the Common Core State Standards is to “insure that all students are college and career ready” (CCSSI, 2012). While the skills needed for success in college and career in a 21st century, interconnected world transfer easily to the arena of democratic citizenship, greater emphasis on the latter would certainly communicate an important message to young people. These potential shortcomings of the Common Core could be easily addressed without undermining the key aims of existing standards. By placing a greater emphasis on democratic citizenship, losses to local control over public school standards would be mitigated by overall gains in public autonomy relating to students' enhanced ability and motivation for democratic participation. Thus, adding the third component of citizenship to the college and career foci of the Common Core would greatly improve the standards, better promote students' development of capacities for public autonomy, and likely yield innumerable benefits for both individuals and society.

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