
Democracy & Education

Does the Common Core Further Democracy?

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Abstract

The Common Core does not advance democratic education. Far from it, the opening section of the language standards argues that the goal of public K–12 education is “college and career readiness.” Only at the end of their introductory section do the Common Core’s authors suggest that K–12 education has any goals beyond the economic: learning to read and write well has “wide applicability outside the classroom and work place,” including preparing people for “private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a republic.” The democratic purposes of K–12 education are not goals but, in the Common Core’s words, a “natural outgrowth” of work force preparation.

This article is in response to

Bindewald, B. J., Tannebaum, R. P., & Womac, P. (2016). The Common Core and Democratic Education: Examining Potential Costs and Benefits to Public and Private Autonomy. *Democracy and Education*, 24(2), Article 4. Available at <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss2/4/>.

IN THEIR ESSAY “The Common Core and Democratic Education,” Bindewald, Tannebaum, and Womac (2016) assessed whether the Common Core State Standards further or inhibit the goals of democratic education. To do so, they first enumerated critics’ arguments and then evaluated the Common Core’s standards for language arts in relation to the standards’ capacity to produce what they called public autonomy and private autonomy, the twin aspirations of democratic education. Their conclusion was provocative. They concluded that the Common Core furthers the goal of private autonomy but is less effective in promoting public autonomy.

Critics contend that the Common Core is undemocratic because it threatens local control of schools and focuses on informational texts and transferable skills over subject matter knowledge and because the standards are designed to foster “college and career readiness” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 3) rather than such democratic virtues as tolerance. In response, the authors argued, we need “some way of assessing” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 4) whether the Common Core can serve broader democratic

purposes. To do so, they concluded, we must evaluate the standards themselves. Before doing so, however, the authors offered us a benchmark against which to assess the standards, the ideal of autonomy.

“Public schools,” Bindewald et al. (2016) argued, “have a duty to help young citizens develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for active participation in a pluralist, democratic society” (p. 4). Therefore, “decisions, such as the adoption of state standards, should be made in a manner that aligns with democratic values” (p. 4). Drawing on a vast variety of thinkers, from Dewey and Rawls to Gutmann and Habermas, the authors “consider both private and public autonomy to be central components of democratic life” (p. 4). Public autonomy, the authors argued, drawing from

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Habermas, requires “the ability to think and read critically” (p. 4). It also involves “other skills and virtues” (p. 4), including a commitment to deliberation and respect for difference. In the case of private autonomy, rather than a thick definition of individual flourishing, the authors embraced a thinner “minimalist autonomy, which equates autonomy not with relentless rationality and egoistic individualism but with sovereignty and self-determination” (p. 6), a definition “compatible with multiple ways of life” (p. 6). Private autonomy is valuable not only because autonomous individuals are more able to engage in public life but because individual people are free to make choices about the kinds of lives that they have reason to value.

The authors concluded that the standards are effective at promoting private autonomy because “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” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 7). By encouraging “critical reading and thinking” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 7), the standards allow students to engage multiple perspectives, assess evidence, and reach thoughtful conclusions. But, the authors added, even if the Common Core encourages the skills that democratic citizens need to cultivate, because of the standards’ focus on career and college preparation, they “do not, in our view, give adequate attention to developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions relating to students’ capacities for public autonomy” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 8). However, they considered this shortcoming largely cosmetic, writing in their conclusion:

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. (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 9)

Since I wrote an essay with the same title as the one under consideration, from which I draw my comments here (“The Common Core and Democratic Education” [Neem, 2015]), and since I came to the opposite conclusion based on reading the same standards, perhaps it is not surprising that I am not convinced that the Common Core will achieve the democratic purposes the authors eloquently laid out. If we accept that the goal of democratic education is public and private autonomy, we must also admit that the Common Core does not seek to achieve these goals. Far from it, the opening section of the language standards argues that the goal of public K–12 education is “college and career readiness” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 3). Only at the end of their introductory section do the Common Core’s authors suggest that K–12 education has any goals beyond the economic: learning to read and write well has “wide applicability outside the classroom or work place” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 3), including preparing people for “private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic”

(Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 3). The democratic purposes of K–12 education are not goals but, in the Common Core’s words, a “natural outgrowth” of work force preparation (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 3).

So what, so long as the standards achieve the kinds of critical thinking that democratic education requires, Bindewald et al. (2016) might have responded. The problem is that learning cannot be divorced from its ends. If the goal of K–12 education is to develop human capital, then economic purposes will animate not only the standards’ authors but students themselves. Another way of saying this is that absent ends, critical thinking skills are purely instrumental. One *could* use them to achieve private or public autonomy, but one would not be encouraged to, and one could use them to achieve other goods instead. Democratic education requires prioritizing democracy in the spirit and values that animate the curriculum. Students will get the message otherwise: Education is valuable only to the extent that it leads to money.

Moreover, the Common Core’s authors have been disdainful of the idea that education should encourage private autonomy. Indeed, one of the standards’ primary authors, David Coleman, has famously mocked the premise that education should seek to help people make sense of and real choices about the kinds of lives that they have reason to value. Employers want the skills that they want, not what might make an education meaningful from the perspective of private autonomy. No boss, Coleman noted, would ever say, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood” (Schneider, 2014, p. 169). In short, there is no guarantee that the Common Core will promote private autonomy when it is designed for other purposes.

I would also quibble, and for some of the same reasons, with the authors’ dismissal of state-level content standards. By elevating critical thinking above access to subject matter, the authors not only mistake the basis for critical thinking but once again risk divorcing the means of thinking from the ends of thinking. I understand why the authors appreciated the Common Core’s emphasis on “higher order thinking” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 9). One cannot think critically about anything without higher-order thinking, and one of the Common Core’s potential benefits, the authors rightly concluded, is that the standards demand that students not just read but engage seriously with texts. Students must be able to identify arguments, assess evidence, and evaluate alternatives. Reading is not about memorizing stuff but using one’s mind to take apart a text. This is important and worthy of support. It may improve dramatically our students’ capabilities. In many ways, these aspects of the Common Core go back to the original liberal arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, which were critical thinking skills to enable people to read, write, and speak effectively.

Yet scholarship has determined that one cannot read, write, or speak effectively without actual knowledge. In this sense, the Common Core and the authors accept a false distinction between higher-order thinking and access to subject matter. As Lang wrote in his book on the scholarship of teaching and learning, “knowledge is foundational: we won’t have the structures in place to do deep thinking if we haven’t spent time mastering a body of knowledge related to that thinking” (Lang, 2016, p. 15). Research on

student learning reinforces the claim. Without knowledge, we cannot even begin to ask the right kinds of questions (Hirsch 2016; Willingham, 2006). Thus, even in the age of Google, students need access to subject matter to know what to search for and how to make sense of the answers that they uncover. That is because the ability to ask sophisticated questions and to evaluate answers is premised on what one already knows, not just on abstract skills like critical thinking. Thus, we need students to study deeply subject matter in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Students need to engage seriously with history and politics or economics and physics before they will be able to think critically about those subjects.

When the idea of national standards first emerged, access to subject matter was crucial and was considered an essential aspect of America's commitment to equality. For earlier standards' advocates, the richness of the arts and sciences belonged to every American, not to an elite few. Thus, according to one document from the George H. W. Bush administration, too many students "have not been introduced to literature because the focus has been on basic skills" (National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992, pp. 22–24). The move away from subject matter is less because of a deeper commitment to higher-order thinking than because the culture wars of the 1990s convinced policymakers—perhaps rightly—that Americans could not agree on the content of the curriculum. Better to leave that, then, to states and localities. It also reflects our era's elevation of the economic functions of education above the personal and civic. Education is supposed to create human capital. To do so, employers want people with skills. They may or may not care whether those employees have been exposed to, much less transformed by, access to great literature or history. But if we want critical thinkers capable of private and public autonomy, we must still care. Finally, the focus on skills reflects a managerial conception of education—the standards were developed with the idea that standardized assessments would be used. Content was too difficult to assess (Neem, 2015).

There is another issue that Bindewald et al. (2016) did not engage fully. Democracy demands cultural solidarity to sustain the social and civic trust that enables citizens to engage in collective self-government. One of the central historic purposes of public education therefore has been to bring a diverse people together as one nation and to foster shared values (Kaestle, 1983; Neem, 2017, ch. 5). The authors recognized the importance of *intersubjectivity* as a means to "engage across differences in a shared political project" (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 5), but this may not be enough. Democracies, social theorist Charles Taylor has argued, demand a "strong[er] form of cohesion" than other forms of governments because citizens must learn to work together and must feel connected to each other to do so (Taylor, 2003, p. 17). This means that public schools may legitimately seek to shape the identities of students in ways that reinforce their membership in the American nation, admitting that our understanding of what it means to be an American is always subject to deliberation in the public sphere. In this sense, it is because we are diverse that we need common institutions like our schools. No doubt, among the character traits that our schools must

inculcate is an appreciation of our differences, as the authors argued. But appreciating our differences may be insufficient if there is not a cultural core that we also share.

Finally, I want to address one of the other issues that Bindewald et al. (2016) raised and that many critics of the Common Core have raised as well: the question of local control. What role should and could local control play in our democracy? And how might local control be threatened by the Common Core? As the authors noted, many critics of the standards have argued that they were designed by private foundations and companies under the sponsorship of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Moreover, although never endorsed or mandated by the federal government, President Barack Obama pressured states to adopt the Common Core as part of his Race to the Top initiative. Defenders have responded that the Common Core is not a federal mandate, but instead every state has the opportunity to embrace them or not. Some states have chosen to design their own standards; the majority of state legislators and governors have embraced them. Thus, the standards have been supported by democratic processes.

This is a long-standing tension in American education history. Since the 1830s, centralizers have struggled against advocates of local control. For those who believe that a democratic education is a right and necessity for all citizens, it has sometimes been frustrating to deal with the realities of education in a democracy in which not all citizens support reformers' programs (Neem, 2017, ch. 3). This was true for Mann, and it has been true for Arne Duncan. It is also true for Betsy DeVos. At times, advocates of centralized reform have expressed real disdain for ordinary citizens. For example, Pennsylvania's education superintendent Townsend Haines proclaimed in 1849, "It is worse than folly to leave to illiterate men, altogether unacquainted with the progress of knowledge, a power, on the proper exercise of which, depends the vitality of our public schools" (McPherson, 1977, 140). Similarly, former Education Secretary Arne Duncan stated in 2013 that resistance to standardized tests was nothing more than "white suburban moms who [discover]—all of a sudden—their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn't quite as good as they thought they were" (Strauss, 2013). But what role do citizens play if they cannot disagree with the dictates of elites?

This is not to suggest that local control is inherently superior. There were good reasons why Americans accepted professional oversight and guidance of their schools and why schools are better with professional, credentialed teachers. Moreover, local control can promote democracy, but it can also promote privilege. Today, local control is as much about preserving racial and class privilege as it is about protecting local autonomy (Scribner, 2016). Balancing local control with central guidance in the interest of serving democracy remains an ongoing challenge that requires consistent care and effort.

Bindewald et al. (2016), however, were less worried than the Common Core's critics. They noted, rightly, that the standards do not cover everything. The standards focus on skills but leave pedagogy and content to state governments and local districts. The

authors also dismissed concerns about standardized tests, suggesting that this reflects “poorly constructed implementation” (p. 8) and not poorly constructed standards. That is true, of course, but given that the standards were designed with assessment in mind, and given policymakers’ efforts to increase the role of assessment, citizens have reason to raise questions about whether the assessment regime will narrow the curriculum or reshape pedagogy (for better or for worse).

Most important, because the authors concluded that the standards further democratic education by supporting private autonomy, they hoped that even if national standards limit local democratic oversight, in the long run democracy’s interests will be served. In other words, the authors argued, losses to local control “could be mitigated by greater gains in private autonomy and other knowledge, skills, and dispositions relating to the capacity for public autonomy” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 8). Moreover, they concluded, “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” (Bindewald et al., 2016, p. 9). But what if the goal is not so much “neoconservative cultural imperialism” but a determination to use public schools to serve the needs of America’s business over those of democracy (Tampio, 2017)? A lot rests on the authors’ contention that the Common Core will promote democratic outcomes, regardless of the process through which it was written, its close ties to standardized assessment, and its stated goal of ensuring “college and career readiness.”

The Common Core has many virtues. If implemented well, it could promote the kind of private and public autonomy that the authors value. Ideally, the Common Core will encourage students to be better readers and writers. These are fundamental to both personal and civic capabilities. The Common Core will not do so, however, unless students are encouraged to use these skills for personal and civic purposes. The Common Core, from this perspective, is decidedly hostile to democratic education. It was designed to serve the human capital needs of today’s economy, not the personal needs of human beings nor the civic needs of our shared democracy. It will take a fundamental rethinking of why we educate before we can once again place the personal and the civic alongside the economic and revive the democratic purposes of our common schools.

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