

DARE WE CRITICIZE COMMON EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS?

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ABSTRACT. This paper offers a critical discussion on the issue of educational standards by (i) clarifying issues around the debate on educational standards, (ii) offering a critical examination of the assumptions underlying popular discourse about standards as well as common objections (lack of high standards and lack of common, universal standards), and (iii) offering and arguing for an alternative perspective based on the democratic ideal which takes difference seriously.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article propose une analyse critique de la question des normes pédagogiques i) en clarifiant les questions du débat sur les normes pédagogiques; ii) en se livrant à un examen critique des hypothèses qui sous-tendent le discours populaire sur les normes ainsi que les objections courantes (absence de normes élevées et pénurie de normes universelles communes) et iii) en offrant un autre point de vue axé sur l'idéal démocratique qui prend les différences au sérieux.

In the last decade or so there has been a rather fervent public interest in educational issues, practices, and beliefs. One only needs to recall the public debates in Canadian media on, for example, mainstreaming, whole language vs. phonics, separate schools, multiculturalism in schools, and, more recently, the concern about educational standards.¹ The call for higher standards, common national standards, and the need to evaluate more thoroughly students' achievements, as well as the complaints about the lowering of standards in schools, demonstrate the need to seriously examine the issue of standards which has become a predominant educational issue in Canada, perhaps particularly in the field of literacy evaluation.

In this paper we first attempt to clarify the issues involved – issues which are usually conveniently ignored or blurred in the popular discourse at the benefit of those who are in power. Second, we offer a critical examination of the assumptions underlying popular discourse

about standards. And finally, we offer alternative perspectives on educational standards and justification for these perspectives. We want to make it very clear at the outset that although our focus is on the issue of standards, we do not see this issue as discrete from other current and important educational, social, and, ultimately, political debates, including for example, social justice and issues of difference. In other words, we very strongly believe that the issue of standards, like any other educational issue, is not merely an educational issue but that it is also ethical and political in nature. Ultimately, there are no purely educational concerns.²

One of the major popular concerns is the claim that we don't have high standards in education (Nikiforuk, 1993). There seems to be a widespread public concern that educational standards in Canada are slipping in comparison to the "good old days" when education, it is claimed, was more rigorous. Another equally loud concern is the fear that we do not have a common set of standards throughout the country which is an echo of the larger plea for common, global, universal standards (Eisner, 1995). The argument seems to be that if we had common universal standards then our quality of education would not be deteriorating. And hence the sense of urgency for schools to develop mission statements with which everyone can agree or pretend to agree. This argument is also presented as a plea for practicality: if we do not have a common set of standards, then we cannot proceed or operate well in practice; it is not practical to operate with different criteria. Moreover, it is claimed, that having diverse criteria does not make the standards clear.

What are standards?

Before we move to some critical analysis of these concerns about educational standards, it is crucial to make some clarifying remarks about the nature of standards. The term "standards" has different meanings and is used in different contexts. For example, we refer to "the standard point or complaint made", namely the typical or popular point made. But then we also say "these are the standards that we use", namely the criteria that we use to evaluate something, or in a sense the policies that direct our actions. And we also have the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) that develops and monitors standards. The CSA makes sure that the standards are met and that they are at least of acceptable quality. And we also use standard in another context when we refer to standard as a flag or emblem, as in "standard-bearer"

in the case of the military. The term is also used as a verb when, for example, we try to "standardize equipment" or even "standardize replies". In these instances what we mean is to try to conform to an established or uniform position or specifications. Surely, in the educational context we do not mean to use all these different meanings at the same time. But the confusion about the issue of standards arises partly because of the lack of clarity.

In an educational context we need to distinguish between "standard as a measurement" and "standard as a value" (Eisner, 1993). An example of the first meaning would be the meter: the fact that we have conveniently agreed that a meter is 100 centimetres and that we use it as a tool to measure. In this context not many controversies arise. But there is another meaning to the word standard, as when we say we have high educational standards. The second meaning involves values and criteria, not just an agreed upon measurement, as in the metric example. Moreover, these criteria are value-laden and will therefore probably involve differences simply because people consider different things to be worthwhile.

It is crucial not to confuse these two very different meanings of standards, but, unfortunately, the notion of standard as a measurement and of a standard as a value are confused in the public discourse about standardized testing in Canada. The assumption is that standardized tests (the measurement) will improve educational standards (the value). Literacy and reading, therefore, are treated as if they were objective facts measurable by a yardstick and not as contested, value-laden ground. We thus move to a discussion about the popular concerns raised about educational standards in order to raise the values issues that need to be clarified and discussed.

Lack of high standards

There is no doubt that this is a very loaded and serious charge for no one really wants to promote mediocrity. But are educational standards really low? Of course, the reply will depend on the criteria and underlying values that one is using to assess the quality of education. If two people are using different and possibly conflicting criteria, then it should be no surprise that the evaluations will be very different. The claim that standards are low is debatable. A quick glance at a high school curriculum, for example, certainly contradicts the view that the standards have decreased from "the good old days" of educational rigour: the academic high school curriculum of today is decidedly

advanced over our curricula of 25 years ago. In this vein, Barlow and Robertson (1994) have argued convincingly that the popular discrediting of public education in Canada is part of a larger hidden agenda. They demonstrate how recent media reports have carefully selected and distorted evaluative data in order to support a view of a failing public education – a tactic designed in part to garner support for cuts to education, they argue. For example, Barlow and Robertson clearly show, by using StatsCan figures, that contrary to popular mythology, the drop-out rate today is lower than that in 1956 and 1971, and that the Economic Council of Canada information on illiteracy is mischievously distorted and inflated.³

We are not suggesting here that there are no compelling problems facing public education in Canada. Quite the opposite, in fact: we are suggesting that the issues facing education presently are far more complex than the standards movement would allow. It may be that the cacophony about standards serves as a convenient distraction from far larger social, educational, and political issues facing us.

Lack of common, universal standards

As mentioned earlier, there seem to be two reasons for this perspective: common standards will secure high quality and will make practice more efficient and less confusing. We have to be very cautious with these seductive arguments. First, there is no intrinsic or necessary connection between common standards and high quality. Having common standards is no guarantee that the quality of education will be of superior quality or even improve education for there is no one-to-one correspondence between the formal and actual curriculum. Such beliefs have given rise to movements like outcomes-based education which assumes agreement on issues upon which there may be little real agreement. We may agree that public schools ought to support people's ability to read critically, write clearly, and to think for themselves; however, we may mean very different things by these phrases. Secondly, agreement on "outcomes" desired does not guarantee that the outcomes will be achieved. Unfortunately popular education documents have fallen victim to these kinds of problems. The most obvious case is that of the language used in these documents, e.g., cooperative learning, critical thinking, high quality, good and productive citizens. This kind of rhetorical language gives the impression of universality or homogeneity and hides the possibility of differences (Shannon, 1995). The language of forced consensus gives the illusion that there are no differences or that there ought to be no differences, while in fact, there are disagree-

ments and differences among educational "experts" on what amounts to quality education (see Popkewitz, 1991, pp.191-4).

The argument based on practicality is also deceptive for even if we were to agree on a commonly held set of standards, in reality we still have to face the diversity and multiplicity that the application and interpretation of standards require. Standards are by nature subject to interpretation. For example, as teachers even when we espouse identical standards for writing, rarely do we evaluate the same writing identically. In practice standards are always negotiated. And hence, in this sense, claims to common standards are artificial and enforced. Standards, given their interpretive nature, are not naturally-given unquestionable facts (Shannon, 1995).

The call for common, universal standards is problematic on other counts too. Whose standards are we going to follow? And who decides what is going to amount as common standards? If we were to arrive at a set of common standards that would mean that some people's standards may be left out and, if so, for what reasons? Whose standards count the most and why? These are vital questions that the movement for common standards does not really address for these questions are deemed to be the kind of questions that lead to inefficiency.⁴ Moreover, forceful emphasis on common standards contradicts popular notions of democracy which, by definition, rule out emphasis on conformity. This is rather ironic for only six years ago the popular western criticism of the Soviet block and China was that these people did not allow diversity. We used to complain about their emphasis on uniformity (same clothes, same jackets, same ties, same hairstyle) which was associated with communism and totalitarianism. The West was seen as the bastion of democracy precisely because of its encouragement of diversity.⁵ So now we need to ask: how can we explain the contemporary emphasis on uniformity (as exemplified in the harsh call for common, universal standards) and still claim that we embrace democracy?

The erroneous view that having common, essential standards will translate into being able to apply them commonly assumes meritocracy. It assumes that if we have common standards, then we can apply them fairly and in the same way to all contexts. There are at least two problems with this. First, there is a difference between having a meritocracy and assuming a meritocracy. Secondly, even if we had a meritocracy, evaluating fairly may need or imply holding different standards. As even Plato argued a long time ago, fairness is not always identical to sameness. To be fair, sometimes we need to account for and

acknowledge differences which do not necessarily lead to a common standard or a common solution. In other words, there is a difference between equity and equality (Martin, 1985, especially Ch. 2). As Shannon (1995) argues: "Set in this context, equality does not seem to be the ideal toward which we should strive; in fact, it leaves previous inequalities intact while at the same time frustrating any attempts to alter those inequalities by characterizing them as attacks on the ideal of equality. Requirements that we ignore the past and treat unequals equally mean that we can never approach true equality, that is, fairness among human beings" (p. 230).

Where do we stand?

In a nutshell we are arguing that the public discourse around defining and maintaining common standards is ill-conceived, misleading, and fundamentally dishonest. Let us be very clear. We are not saying that we do not care about the quality of education. Criticizing common standards does not imply a lack of concern about quality or standards themselves. As Eisner (1995) puts it: "To give up the idea that there needs to be one standard for all students in each field of study is not to give up the aspiration to seek high levels of educational quality in both pedagogical practices and educational outcomes" (p. 760). We are concerned about quality and what it involves, for example, by taking difference seriously. We urge teachers and parents to ask the questions concerning quality that are left out by the common standards movement: Whose standards? How are these standards to be arrived at? Who is included and who is excluded from defining these standards? (Apple, 1993; Kelly, 1993; Swartz, 1996). Why is there a real resistance to looking at these kinds of questions? Who benefits from not raising and discussing these questions?

The popular view pushed by the corporate and conservative world rests on the fallacy that unless standards are clear and commonly held then we have no standards. The assumption is that unless we have commonly agreed upon standards set up and advertised, there will be no real change; mediocrity will flourish. We are arguing that it's not the agreement on standards but the discussion of them that will help bring about change. As Shannon (1995) recommends:

... we should begin with the clarification of our starting points for thinking about literacy and assessment that the standards processes seem to paper over. Just what do various groups have in mind when they use terms such as interests of the students, fair, and equitable?

We must display these differences in public. It is not our dirty laundry; rather, it is our reasoned way to air the issues. (p. 232)

The media and corporate discourse about standards seems to be based on a belief that standards are very easy to define, that we have common agreement on them, and that all we need to do to improve public education is to measure students against these standards, as though measurement itself somehow improves learning (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Shannon, 1995; 1996). As Margaret Meek Spencer (1993) reminds us, the pig will not gain weight the more often we weigh it. We need to feed the pig as well as consider the quality of the food!

Contrary to the popular belief, we are arguing that educational standards are not absolute, fixed, naturally-given facts. They are socially constructed. Even Richard Weaver (1970), a conservative rhetorician, objected to the way we continuously treat rhetorical socially contested issues as though they were physical facts about which there can be no disagreement. In other words, we are not dealing with so-called scientific laws that are expected to apply universally by definition. We cannot expect that kind of exactitude when we are dealing with the human predicament. And hence we need to ask who constructed these standards, for what reasons, and whose values are included and excluded from them. The public discussion on standards will continue to reproduce inequities and injustices unless these questions are dealt with seriously and differences are recognized.

This last point may give the impression that we are urging an "anything goes mentality". We are not. We do, however, maintain that insistence on commonality and uniformity will discredit important differences which is ultimately contrary to one of the basic values or principles of the democratic spirit, namely, the acknowledgment of differences. In a democracy, people should not be concerned that we have different accents, that we express ourselves differently. The urge for uniformity, on the other hand, can be seen as a fear of dealing with differences, of losing power, of change, and discontent with ambiguity and uncertainty. Yet, to be honest, we have to ask another question: Are all differences of equal worth? Is the view that people as human beings ought to be respected, of equal worth to a view that promotes hatred towards certain people? We need to distinguish between (1) accepting that there are different values and (2) holding that all these different values have equal worth. Democracy implies the acceptance that there are different values; it does not imply that all values are of equal worth.

Acknowledging difference does not rule out the possibility of basic human rights which need to be respected by all.

Ultimately our views rest on the belief that the either-or mentality is problematic (Dewey, 1938). We object to the view that maintains that either all values are absolute or anything goes; or that we either take an extreme conservative position or an extreme liberal position. There are other positions that go beyond this simplistic either-or way of thinking, and account more fully for questions of educational equality in a pluralistic society.

What does all of this have to do with teaching?

The debate about standards – the attempt to define and enforce appropriate academic standards in Canadian schools – is for teachers in classrooms simultaneously critically important and something of an irrelevant luxury. How the debate comes out, whatever “outcomes” we decide upon, will have immediate and substantial consequences for curricula, determining issues like whether an educated Canadian can continue to be defined solely by her or his knowledge of western European traditions, or whether we might justifiably expect an educated Canadian to know something of the cultural traditions of, for instance, aboriginal peoples. In that sense, the debate has everything to do with classroom teaching, however absent (at least at public levels) teachers’ voices have been from that debate. But, in another important sense, the exercise of defining common standards is very far removed from the “dailyness” of teaching actual people in actual classrooms. As one teacher put it, “They can define whatever outcomes they like; unless those outcomes are possible and sensible and purposeful for the real children in my real grade three classroom, the whole exercise will remain just an exercise.”

We have argued that the rhetoric within the standards movement is misleading in a number of ways, including the assumption (based on little evidence) that “standards are slipping” in Canadian schools, the assumptions that standards can be easily and justly defined and interpreted, and the slipshod logic that confuses measuring quality with improving quality.⁶ From the point of view of teaching, however, the standards debate poses a further problem in that it serves as a distraction from conversations in teaching and schooling in which we, as a society, urgently need to engage ourselves.

Let us illustrate this with an example. Recently in Halifax a grade four child who was a beginning reader was coded by his school as having a reading disorder. Talking to the child, his teacher discovered that for his entire school career the child had spent no more than six months in any one classroom because his father, a construction worker, had been moving all over the country in search of work. In the context of working with the child, the teacher learned that the child's "reading problem" had little to do with reading or academic ability at all, and everything to do with a level of anxiety and disruption in his life that made learning to read difficult and, apparently, irrelevant. Like many educational problems, this child's learning problem was in fact a consequence of a much larger social problem (underemployment and the creation of surplus labour markets) manifested in schooling.

Hence, the act of teaching in Canada's increasingly diverse and increasingly underfunded classrooms graphically illustrates the manner in which education is embedded in complex social and political realities. From this vantage point, the debate about standards – the campaign to define a set of common standards that can only serve to further sanction the official knowledges of the already privileged – is entirely beside the point. Moreover, the debate, perhaps deliberately, distracts us from asking the kinds of pressing questions that teaching presently raises, questions like: Why is it that we appear unable to create just and viable schooling for all Canada's peoples? Are teachers being prepared and supported to be able to respond to the many different and conflicting perspectives they encounter in their students? Do they have the time and the support they need to address and come to terms with the kinds of changes happening in their classrooms? The standards debate, by reducing these complexities to a simple matter of defining common standards and measuring student achievement against them, conveniently allows us to blame the individual (the student and/or the teacher) and ignore the larger social and political realities in which teachers, students, and schools are immersed! And as Maxine Greene (1995) warns us:

... a return to a single standard of achievement and a one dimensional definition of the common will not only result in severe injustices to the children of the poor and the dislocated, the children at risk, but will also thin out our cultural life and make it increasingly difficult to bring into existence and keep alive an authentically common world. (pp. 172-173)

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NOTES

1. See special issue of *Maclean's*, 11 January, 1993, entitled, "What's Wrong at School? Parents, Educators and Policy-Makers Are Determined to Improve the Standard of Public Education," and "What's Happening in Our Schools? A Special Report on Education in Canada" in *Today's Parent*, September, 1993.
2. For an elaboration of this point, see: Shor (1992), Giroux (1994), Portelli (1996), and Freire (1996).
3. The same point is made by Shannon (1996) and Berliner and Biddle (1995) for the U.S. context.
4. In reality, however, these are the crucial questions that challenge the inequities of the status quo that favours the predominant class. It is frightening to observe that even in universities these kinds of questions are becoming more and more of a taboo!
5. In reality one could argue that in the West we actually encourage individualism rather than genuine diversity; that is, while individual differences are accepted, that is not the case with social differences such as race and gender. One has to be careful not to conflate a sort of apolitical individualism with democracy.
6. Barlow and Robertson (1994) note: ". . . if testing created excellence, American students, the 'most-tested' students in the world, should be winning the education sweepstakes" (p.117).

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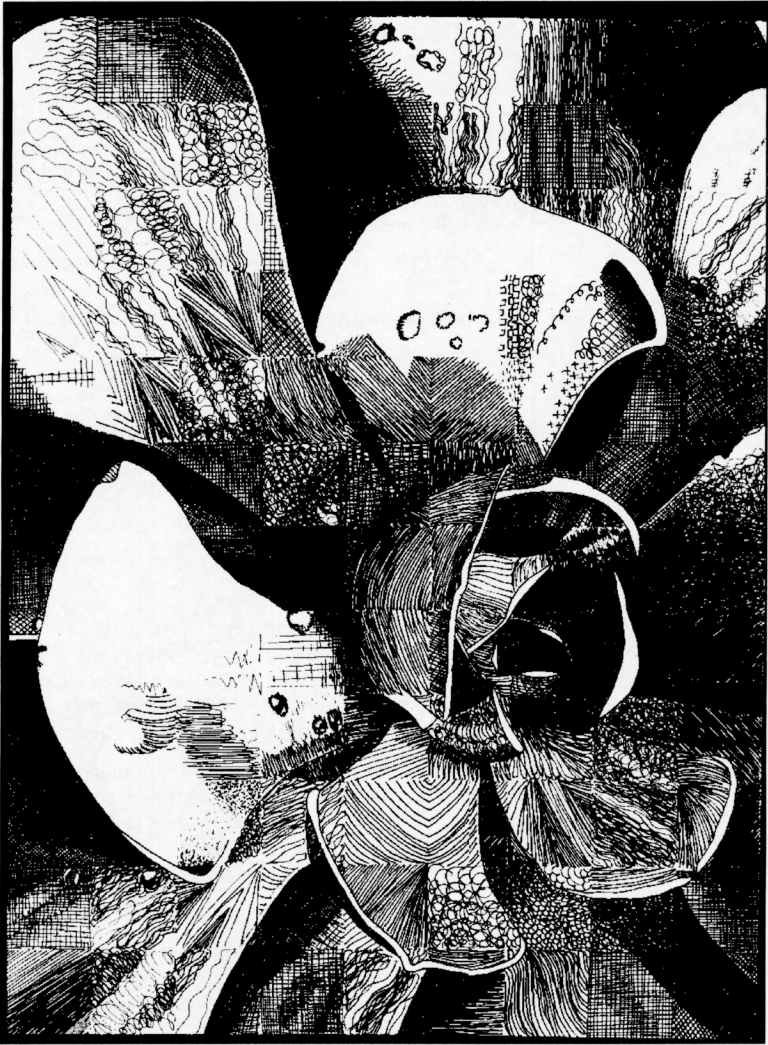
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