



Focus: Curriculum Quality

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Building a Civil Rights Juggernaut Using the Common Core Standards

by Bradley Scott, Ph.D.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). According to the NGA and the CCSSO, they received initial feedback on the draft standards from national organizations representing, but not limited to, teachers, post-secondary educators (including community colleges), civil rights groups, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

These Common Core standards define knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate from high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs. Forty-five states have adopted the standards.

The NGA and CCSSO state that the standards are aligned with college and work expectations; are clear, understandable and consistent; include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills; build on strengths and lessons of current state standards; are informed by other top performing countries so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and are evidence-based.

The standards are intended to lay a foundation for system-wide education reform as they bring consistency across states and are likely more

rigorous than most state standards. Designed to reflect knowledge most critical for college and career success, the standards should increase the coherence and rigor of what is expected of U.S. students. The potential for academic benefit to all students regardless of their race, gender, national origin or other characteristics could be both impressive and powerful.

However, for the Common Core to produce the benefits above, there are some concerns that must be addressed. The CCSSO and the NGA admit that the standards do not address interventions for students who are currently well below grade level, do not delineate the full range of support for English language learners, and do not describe how teachers should teach. These holes raise obvious civil rights concerns for the groups of students for whom the standards have not been designed. They also speak to teachers who may not have the requisite skills to teach in culturally competent ways.

There are other civil rights concerns and thus additional questions that should be raised using an equity lens (Scott, 2012). The *equity context* is comprised of the systems and structures a school district puts into place to ensure that no learner is denied the fair and equitable benefit of a quality, sound educational experience afforded to all other students regardless of race, gender, national origin, language, economic level and special need.

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“If you look at all of the best, high-impact innovations – none involve stop-gap, slap-dash or silver bullet solutions. Rather, they all have demonstrated a set of key features that include assuring that students have access to quality teaching and a high quality curriculum.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO



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The equity lens may not be focused in this case. A key factor to consider is how the implementation of the Common Core impacts all learners.

- What might create a negative or adverse impact on any identifiable population of students?
- How do we address any adverse impact?
- How might that adverse impact be avoided?
- What precautions should we take as we move forward?
- How do we monitor our work so that we produce comparable outcomes for all students?

The equity lens is a bit hazy as well. We need to be sure that we pose the right kinds of questions about various groups of learners in the nation's schools.

- In the implementation of the Common Core, where do English language learners start?
- Where do low performers start?
- What do these standards look like for students in rural and remote areas?
- What do these standards really look like for students in inner-city (distressed urban) versus suburban areas?
- What do these standards look like for students in tribal settings on and off reservations?
- What do these standards look like for students in alternative school settings?

Poor teaching quality has been failing some students for a long while. To ensure comparable high outcomes for all learners that give them world-class competencies, our teachers will need to:

- have knowledge and skills in first and second

language acquisition;

- have skills for teaching the challenged learner;
- practice pedagogy that supports success with under-performing learners;
- use culturally competent pedagogy; and
- better align practice with research, philosophy, values, expectations for success and commitment to all learners regardless of their characteristics.

High quality, dynamic leadership is key. Leadership will need to think seriously and act decisively about:

- teacher evaluation systems that transform and lift up the practice;
- the principal as learning leader who guides teaching and learning, not just manages it;
- protection of civil rights under the law for non-discrimination in all educational programs;
- guarantees of equal protection under the law to equal treatment, the right to learn and the appropriate distribution of resources to support excellence for all (not just some); and
- the critical and important role regarding accountability where real answers are provided to the question: Who's responsible, who's to blame?

Transforming systems requires moving from one place to another with the right intentionality while dislodging old habits – seeing with a different lens for action and being part of a professional learning and support community that asserts what is right, fair and equitable for all learners.

The Common Core standards can be a force that finally begins to move all students to excellence

in academic performance and world class competency if we stand on the absolute belief in excellence for all, no excuses, no compromise, and nothing less than excellence and equity guaranteed for all.

Resources

Council of Chief State School Officers. Implementing the Common Core Standards (ICCS), web page (Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012).

National Governors Association. Common Core State Standards Initiative, web page (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association, 2012).

Scott, B. "The Challenge of Seeing – Shaping the Sixth Generation of Civil Rights and Educational Equity," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, September 2012).

Bradley Scott, Ph.D., is a senior education associate and director of the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at comment@idra.org.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/

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Publication offices:
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101
San Antonio, Texas 78228
210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714
www.idra.org | contact@idra.org

Maria Robledo Montecel, Ph. D.
IDRA President and CEO
Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR
IDRA Communication Manager
Newsletter Production Editor

Sarah H. Aleman
Secretary
Newsletter Layout

Asset-Based Lessons for Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

by Veronica Betancourt, M.A.

As the phase of the school year begins when teachers get ready for upcoming standardized tests, it is important to keep in mind that now, more than ever, lessons should be intentionally designed from an asset-based, or value-driven, perspective. Teachers should not allow themselves to fall victim to the pressures of “preparing” students for such lessons. When asset-based lessons are implemented year-round, there is no need to prepare students, because it has been happening all along!

It is important to note why this type of lesson design is most beneficial for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Subjects like math and science have an even greater challenge to successfully support a diverse classroom. Students seem to lose their positive stance toward certain subjects, such as science, as they get older and move up into secondary settings (Neathery, 1997). This is supported by brain research, which purports that cognition is shaped by emotions thus significantly affecting learners’ cognitive engagement (Jensen, 2003).

However, when teachers make a concerted effort to continuously value students’ perspectives and knowledge of science as they plan and deliver their lessons, they will lower students’ affective filter and increase their willingness to engage with the subject (Alsop, 2005).

IDRA recently outlined seven umbrella research-supported strategies to help English learners achieve in the science classroom. The strategies are presented in detail with their research base in *Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners – A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades* (Villarreal, et al., 2012), which is available from IDRA. This article describes one of the strategies: design asset-based science lessons for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Now the question begs to ask: So how do I create this type of lesson?

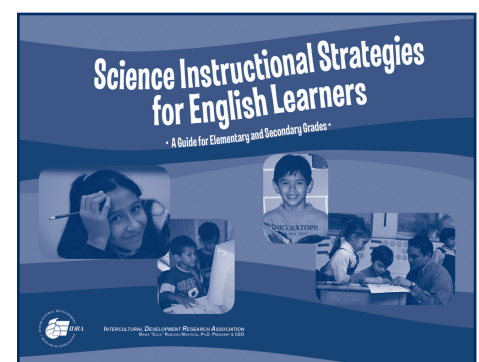
One of the most critical pieces in considering an emotionally engaging, value-driven science lesson is to reflect on how the content standards, activities chosen for the lesson, and performance assessments interrelate to support each other as well as how students’ culture and language levels will affect perceived outcomes for the lesson. It is imperative to begin with the end in mind. In addition to the fact that the learning outcomes drive the lesson design, consideration for student diversity will help ensure student academic success. When students’ culture and learner identity to science is respected, their engagement increases in the learning process (Purdy, 2008).

For example, let’s assume students are learning about the cause and effect of natural disasters on the environment and human populations. The teacher can begin the lesson, prior to any introduction of the topic, with a visual representation of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane along a coastal town, and ask students to write down observations, inferences and emotions about that picture in their interactive notebooks or journals. Doing this engagement activity immediately values students’ own experiences and leaves room for linguistic negotiation for students learning the English language to utilize words at their own level of understanding and ability. This type of activity specifically **draws from students’ background knowledge and cultural experiences**, thus giving the teacher a platform of formative assessment to determine the level of science understanding that students’ bring, and it can further drive the direction of the lesson.

Furthermore, students are given the opportunity to organize their understandings and thoughts about this natural disaster by **incorporating the design and use of charts**. Incorporating charts, such as organizing thoughts into categories, enables the learner to demonstrate an understanding of the topic at hand.

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*As educators, we must make every effort to be conscientious about not only **what** we are required to teach according to state and national standards but also **how** we ensure the lesson is responsive to the culturally and linguistically diverse population of students we serve.*



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Once students have completed this task, the teacher can have students share with a neighbor, then switch with a tablemate for review and discussion, and then complete a collective chart through whole class conversation of their ideas. This method allows for verbal negotiation of students' ideas, perceptions and knowledge; it reinforces any academic words used in expressing themselves; and it provides multiple platforms for learning science and language simultaneously.

Essentially, the activity becomes **responsive to student thinking while addressing the curriculum**. For the teacher, this engagement activity provides immediate feedback with students' levels of understanding and science knowledge. And, in turn, it gives students an opportunity to **capitalize on their emotional state to connect to science** by creating a safe space for learning in a non-stressful, value-driven setting.

As educators, we must make every effort to be conscientious about not only *what* we are required to teach according to state and national standards but also *how* we ensure the lesson is responsive to the culturally and linguistically diverse population of students we serve. This does not, in any way, equate to simplifying a lesson. Rather, it promotes an intellectual interaction between learner and subject as the teacher facilitates and pushes students cognitively to engage meaningfully with science.

Resources

- Alsop, S. *Beyond Cartesian Dualism: Encountering Affect in the Teaching and Learning of Science* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Springer, 2005).
- Jensen, E. *Tools for Engagement: Managing Emotional States for Learner Success* (San Diego, Calif: The Brain Store, Inc., 2003).
- Neathery, M.L. "Elementary and Secondary Students' Perceptions Toward Science: Correlations with Gender, Ethnicity, Ability, Grade, and Science Achievement," *Electronic Journal of Science Education* (1997) 2(1).
- Purdy, J. "Inviting Conversations: Meaningful Talk about Texts for English Language Learners," *Literacy* (2008) 42(1), 44-51.
- Villarreal, A., & V. Betancourt, K. Grayson, R. Rodríguez. *Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners – A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2012).

Veronica Betancourt, M.A., is an IDRA education associate. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at comment@idra.org.

IDRA 40th Anniversary

In February of 1981, Senator Carlos Truan introduced SB 477, which would become the *Texas Bilingual Education Act*. From our earliest days, IDRA was an expert resource in Texas and U.S. litigation and policy development for bilingual education knowing it is the most effective way for students to learn English while they learn their core subjects. Over the decades, IDRA also helped schools set up effective bilingual programs and designed the highly popular AMANECER national bilingual curriculum in the 1970s as well as the new *Semillitas de Aprendizaje* early childhood supplemental curriculum, which is available today.

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Access, Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood Education

by Rosana G. Rodriguez, Ph.D.

President Obama has issued a bold challenge: to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education from the day they are born to the day they begin a career. The future demands that we work collaboratively across sectors to strengthen our educational system. This means providing excellent early childhood education as a strong foundation for learning, healthy development and longer term school success.

Research has shown that a child's learning begins at birth with parents as a child's first teachers, who nurture, challenge, engage and provide high-quality relationships and environments. It is widely understood that children who have access to excellent early education from birth are more likely to improve their healthy development and school readiness, resulting in improved academic achievement, graduation and college readiness, and ultimately, in improved earning power and greater international competitiveness for our nation. For these reasons, commitment to high-quality learning has enormous payoffs, returning as high as 15 percent to 17 percent on the investment each year.

IDRA has a long-term commitment to quality early education. From our initial AMANECER curriculum, to our Reading Early for Academic Development (READ) project (funded by the U.S. Department of Education) and up to the current Semillitas - Seedlings for Learning initiative, supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, IDRA has provided research-based professional development, supported parent collaboration, and created excellent materials for English learners. In early childhood environments of quality, loving adults provide a stimulating environment where parents, teachers and adults read, talk and use rich vocabulary that enhances language and cognitive development with linguistically and culturally appropriate materials.

Unfortunately, many disadvantaged children

still lack access to such high-quality programs and support. As a nation, we have yet to achieve equity, access and excellence in early childhood education. We still need to implement rigorous and comprehensive reforms along the continuum of education, including the following:

- Alignment and standards for early learning and development programs;
- Improved training and professional development for teachers of early childhood education;
- Scale-up of evidence-based best practices;
- Use of culturally and linguistically appropriate educational resources for early childhood;
- Greater voice and decision-making for parents;
- Strategies for engaging parents in learning through improved home-school partnerships; and
- Utility-based and robust evaluation systems that not only yield data, but also promote and share effective practices and programs.

Texas State University recently hosted the Lady Bird Johnson Centennial Symposium on Early Childhood Education that brought together practitioner and policy experts in a forum with relevant stakeholders, including parents, educators, researchers and community members to identify and address the issues, progress and challenges facing our nation's youngest learners. IDRA was honored to collaborate as moderator for the stellar panelists in this event who issued a call for local communities to make their voices heard as proponents of early childhood excellence, access and equity in education.

Among the questions discussed were indicators from IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010): teaching quality; curriculum quality and access; parent involvement and community engagement; and student engagement through meaningful childhood experiences. The panelists who addressed
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Precisely because our children are our most valuable form of human capital, early childhood education is one of the wisest investments we can make for a better future.

Access, Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood Education, continued from Page 5)

policy issues were: Ms. Charlotte Brantley, Clayton Early Learning; Dr. Libby Doggett, Pew Center on the States; and Mr. Cleo Rodriguez, National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association. The panelists who discussed diverse needs of communities that Head Start serves from a practitioner perspective were: Dr. Daniel King, superintendent, Pharr-San Juan Alamo ISD; Ms. Suad Hooper, Community Action Inc. of Central Texas; Ms. Audrey Abed, Child Inc.; and Ms. Carol Armga, former Director of Head Start and Faculty at Texas State University. The panels reiterated the importance of hearing from diverse community voices in support of quality programs, the ongoing need for data to influence policy and practice, and the importance of exercising strong and committed leadership at all levels.

The current administration is on track in supporting implementation of new Head Start regulations that require, for the first time, that low performing programs compete for funding to ensure that children and families are served by the most capable providers. Head Start is to be recognized for reinforcing family engagement frameworks that involve parents in the learning of their children. Higher quality preschool programs will certainly result in better social-emotional and cognitive outcomes for children. As we plan together for strengthening early childhood education for the future, President Obama's Special Assistant for Education at the White House, Mr. Roberto J. Rodriguez, in his remarks to the NAEYC Public Policy Forum (2012) has reiterated the importance of continuing to focus on comprehensive standards and high quality programs and services for children.

There is great urgency to respond to President Obama's call to expand access to high quality early education for America's children and better prepare them for future success in school and in life. Our nation and future are at stake in this journey. An example of growing momentum to support this critical investment in our collective future is San Antonio's recent approval of "Pre-K 4 SA" initiative, led by Mayor Julian Castro, that promises to serve 22,400 children who would not otherwise attend a high-quality, full-day pre-kindergarten program.

Precisely because our children are our most valuable form of human capital, early childhood education is one of the wisest investments we can make for a better future. Attention to access,

equity and excellence in early childhood education reflects adherence to and investment in civil rights for all children. If we are to succeed in the future as we work together to make broad improvements to our educational system, we must consider deeper and more comprehensive approaches that focus on quality and outcomes, beginning with learning in the earliest years and reaching across the entire pre-K higher education continuum.

Now is the time for us to seriously consider making equal educational opportunity for all a civil right. President Obama at the National Action Network gala in April 2011 reiterated its importance: "The best possible education is the single most important factor in determining whether (our children) succeed. But it's also what will determine whether we succeed. It's the key to opportunity. It is the civil rights issue of our time."

For more information on IDRA's *Semillitas de aprendizaje* bilingual supplemental curriculum visit IDRA website or see Page 7.

Resources

- Jennings, J. *Reflections on a Half-Century of School Reform: Why Have We Fallen Short and Where Do We Go From Here?* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2012)
- Robledo Montecel, M., & C. Goodman. *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework™* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2010).
- Rodriguez, R.J. Remarks to the National Association for the Education of Young Children Public Policy Forum, unpublished (February 28, 2012).
- White House. Remarks by the President at the National Action Network Annual Gala (Washington, D.C.: White House, April 06, 2011).

Rosana Rodriguez, Ph.D., is the IDRA director of development. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at comment@idra.org.

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- Excerpt and sample from *Minority Women in Science – Forging the Way*
- Flip book sample from the *Semillitas de Aprendizaje Big Book, Dos Pollitas Listas*

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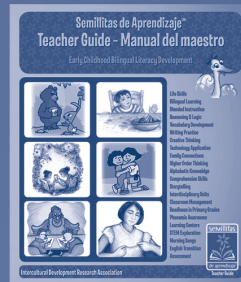


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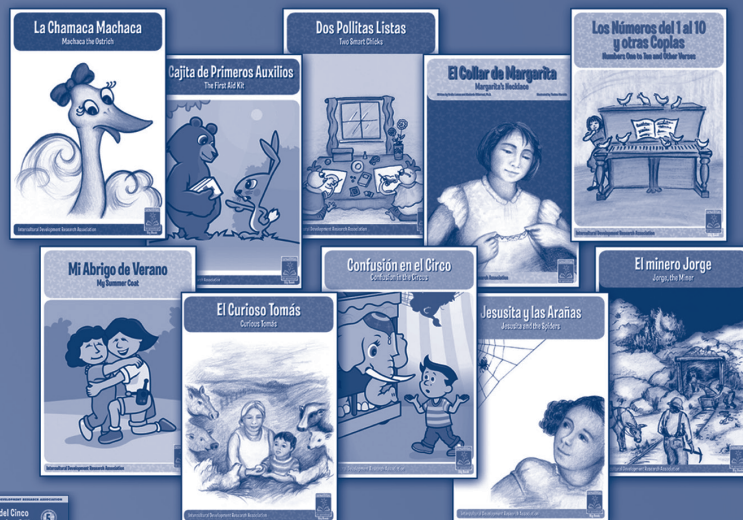
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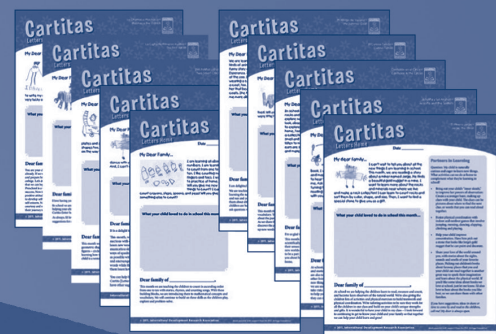
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“Children rise to the level of expectation that is made of them and to the level of challenge and support that is provided to them.”

— Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo
Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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