



Education Policy Analysis Archives/Archivos  
Analíticos de Políticas Educativas

ISSN: 1068-2341

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Fissures in Standards Formulation: The Role of Neoconservative and Neoliberal Discourses in  
Justifying Standards Development in Wisconsin and Minnesota  
Education Policy Analysis Archives/Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas, vol. 15, enero, 2007,  
pp. 1-65  
Arizona State University  
Arizona, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=275020546018>

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# EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS ARCHIVES

A peer-reviewed scholarly journal

Editor: Sherman Dorn

College of Education

University of South Florida

Volume 15 Number 18

September 10, 2007

ISSN 1068-2341

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## Fissures in Standards Formulation: The Role of Neoconservative and Neoliberal Discourses in Justifying Standards Development in Wisconsin and Minnesota

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Citation: Caughlan, S., & Beach, R. (2007). Fissures in standards formulation: The role of neoconservative and neoliberal discourses in justifying standards development in Wisconsin and Minnesota. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 15(18). Retrieved [date] from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v15n18/>.

### Abstract

An analysis of English/language arts standards development in Wisconsin and Minnesota in the late 1990s and early 2000s shows a process of compromise between neoliberal and neoconservative factions involved in promoting and writing standards, with the voices of educators conspicuously absent. Interpretive and critical discourse analyses of versions of English/language arts standards at the high school level and of public documents related to standards promotion reveal initial conflicts between neoconservative and neoliberal discourses, which over time were integrated in final standards documents. The content standards finally released for use in guiding curriculum in each state were bland and incoherent documents that reflected neither a deep knowledge of the field nor an acknowledgement of what is likely to engage young learners. The study suggests the need for looking more critically at standards as political documents, and a greater



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consideration of educators' expertise in the process of their future development and revision.

Keywords: standards; policy development; language; discourse; neoconservative; neoliberal.

**Fisuras en la formulación de los estándares: El papel de los discursos Neoconservadores y Neoliberales en la justificación de los estándares curriculares en Minnesota y Wisconsin**

**Resumen**

Nuestro análisis del desarrollo de los estándares en Wisconsin y Minnesota en los últimos años de la década de los 90 e inicios de los 2000s muestra un proceso de acuerdo entre las facciones neoliberal y neoconservadoras involucradas en promover y escribir los estándares, mientras que las voces de los educadores eran visiblemente ausentes. Análisis interpretativos y de discurso crítico de algunas de las versiones de los estándares del idioma Inglés para escuelas secundarias y de documentos públicos relacionados con la promoción de los estándares revela conflictos iniciales entre las propuestas neoconservadoras y neoliberales, que luego de un tiempo se fueron integrando en los documentos finales de los estándares. Los estándares de contenidos que se hicieron públicos para orientar los planes de estudio de en cada estado eran documentos débiles e incoherentes que no reflejaban un conocimiento profundo del campo ni tampoco un reconocimiento de que estimularía el aprendizaje de los estudiantes jóvenes. Este estudio sugiere la necesidad de mirar más críticamente los estándares como documentos políticos, y una mayor consideración de la experiencia de los educadores en futuros proceso de desarrollo y revisión.

**Introduction**

In this report, we examine the development of secondary English language arts standards in Wisconsin and Minnesota to illustrate the influence of two competing discourses: neoliberal and neoconservative discourses of education that were invoked by various persons and groups involved in formulating these standards. Based on interpretive and critical discourse analysis of these standards, we identify various tensions and contradictions associated with the application of these two discourses to standards formulation. While these discourses reflect larger shared agendas associated with the assumed need for standards, we will identify competing agendas driving the justifications and construction of English language arts standards in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Having to compromise between these competing agendas resulted in often bland, problematic standards that perpetuate status quo practices.

*Varying functions of standards.* The word *standard* as applied to education is a slippery term, as standards can serve a variety of pedagogical, cultural, or political functions. A standard can be merely a criterion to use for comparison, in which case it can stand at any point along a range, from bottom allowable to height of excellence. Standards in this sense can serve to create a hierarchy of desired practices, where certain practices are considered more desirable than others, with display of the desired practices functioning as goals for students to achieve. Once such a standard has been codified, it is then possible to assess students as meeting or exceed it. For example, because the goal of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is that all students will meet

or exceed all standards at the level labeled “proficient” based on standardized test scores by the year 2014, this law implies that this condition will be an improvement over present educational achievement in this country, while at the same time requiring a standard set low enough that all students can meet it.

Standards can also function to foster curriculum development through definition of desired learning outcomes and methods to achieve those outcomes. When the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association standards were written and published in the mid-1990s, they functioned as a spur to discussion among educators as to what should be the goals of English language arts instruction. These standards were criticized for being vague, but according to NCTE and IRA, they were not intended to be more than a general framework designed to promote thinking about the various aspects of English language arts and the overall goals of producing a literate and thoughtful citizenry without dictating means or materials to teachers working as professionals in a wide range of contexts. More recently, there has been a marked shift in the function of standards in that they are now linked to a drive for *accountability* from both students and teachers based on standardized test scores as the sole determination as to whether one has achieved a standard.

This shift, we will argue, reflects the adoption of a neoliberal discourse of business accountability meshed with positivist psychometric measurement theory, presupposing that one can specify a certain cut point score as meeting *proficiency* in that standard, just a salesperson can be judged as meeting or not meeting their sales quota for a certain time period. Educational standards are politically framed as functioning to motivate both students and teachers through a rhetoric of “leaving no child behind” given their potential to achieve “excellence” through striving to meet high, “world class” standards (Thompson, 1997a, p. 1). This framing of the accountability function of standards overlooks the reality that students do not reach a singular standard, but exhibit a profile of different strengths and weaknesses in different areas and at different times.

However, because standards are now immutably linked to standardized test scores deemed to be valid measures of “reading ability” or another construct, it is then assumed that the focus of the English language arts curriculum should focus on preparing students to achieve proficiency on standardized reading tests. Rather than assess learning based on a rich set of performance assessments, using, for example, writing portfolios, what has evolved, for reasons we go into below, is the goal of measuring levels of achievement of a rather narrow range of tasks undertaken by all learners of a certain age at a particular moment in time in each state. In order to make such snapshots possible and affordable, multiple-choice measures are usually relied upon. To make the participants take them seriously, there must be serious rewards for accomplishment or consequences for failure. And to make this even remotely fair, states must then clearly state what tasks can be expected at each grade level. This has turned standards into static and limited documents—in our view, neither a necessary nor desirable outcome.

Why and how did the function of standards evolve to serve this narrowing of the focus of schooling to test preparation, particularly for schools serving low SES students? In this paper, we discuss the development of English/language standards in Wisconsin and Minnesota based on the ideological assumptions underlying rationales for the functions of standards, rationales that reflect another basic function—the use of standards to promote political agendas. For example, a politician may endorse the need for high standards to promote his or her image as someone who is concerned about education.

To unpack these ideological assumptions, we employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine certain discourses as ways of knowing or thinking used to frame standards justifications (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1995, 2001, 2003; Gee, 1996). Discourses of the law,

religion, science, psychology, business, or education, as reflected in language use and social practices, reflect power hierarchies in society. As Norman Fairclough (2002) notes:

Language represents or constructs a social reality, it positions readers and listeners, it creates identities and relations, it creates a voice for the one who would speak or write, and, thus, there are clear implications for “who can speak”, “what can be said”, “who and what is valued”, “who and what counts” in education. (p. 3)

We will demonstrate a general application of interpretive and critical discourse analysis to standards formulation in an analysis of the development of two competing sets of standards for English language arts standards for Wisconsin, focusing on a specific analysis of two letters associated with competing standards in Wisconsin. We will also discuss the development of the Minnesota Profile of Learning English language arts standards during the 1990s and then the critique and replacement of the Profile by an alternative set of standards in 2003. In both cases, standards formulation was shaped by both a neoliberal focus on the need to frame literacy instruction within the context of marketplace *flexibility* and *accountability* and neoconservative discourses framing instruction in terms of teaching traditional content in opposition to cultural diversity, framing which in some cases overlapped and in other cases diverged. In conducting this analysis, we hope to demonstrate how these competing discourses obstruct true reform of literacy instruction, ignore the need for critical literacy, and result in our current situation, where those who educate our children feel disengaged from the institutions within which they work.

## **Standards Development: The Influence of Neoliberal and Neoconservative Discourses**

### **The Perceived Need for Standards**

It is widely known that the standards movement grew out of calls in the 1980s and early 1990s for more rigorous curricula and more accountability for results in the public schools. The oft-cited 1983 document, *A Nation at Risk*, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, raised the alarm that America was falling behind in the global economy, largely because of the poor preparation of its workforce in schools. Throughout the 1990s, various groups (particularly business groups and allied groups of politicians such as the National Governor’s Association) promoted the notion that American schools were performing poorly compared to schools in other countries. All of this was framed in terms of the future economic survival of American society that required complete reform of schooling. This accompanied a tendency towards marketization of school discourse, as schools were increasingly positioned as operating as agents for economic interests (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen & Murillo, 2002). The resultant movement towards accountability, standardization of inputs and outputs, and the simultaneous portrayal of students as both products and consumers of the same system led to standards-based reform of schooling in America, initiated by federal legislation in the early 1990’s mandating that states adopt standards or lose their federal funding (*America, 2000: An Educational Strategy*, 2000). This early rhetoric promoting standards promised a clear, rigorous statement of the best thinking and best practice within each subject area. However, this means that standards are built on a discourse of consensus that papers over real disagreements over what constitutes best practice and best thinking.

## A Discourse of Consensus

One of the arguments for standards is that they provide a state-wide framework for teachers so that they have a clear sense of shared curriculum expectations (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Grant, 2000). This expectation assumes a consensus among educators, politicians, and parents regarding the desirability of achieving a certain set of standards (Shannon, 2001). This discourse of consensus encompasses the social, academic, and cultural aspects of schooling.

From a neoliberal model, managers need to frame policies and initiatives so that different constituencies in an organization are on the same page in terms of achieving the same results or outcomes (Shannon, 2001). Teachers and students are to acquire those particular literacy practices deemed important by the combined expertise of educators, politicians, and parents for success in the workplace, as opposed to engaging in what are perceived as idiosyncratic, unique practices. This consensus is often achieved by a rhetorical appeal to marketplace analogies in which schooling is framed as an expensive commodity that would be more efficient if driven by competition and results-based accountability, increasing the quality of commodities and lowering their price, thus leading to improved schooling and reductions in taxes (Cambourne, 2006). This appeal for consensus is also achieved by an appeal to “scientific research:” for example, the case of literacy instruction used to promote phonics-only instruction in California (Woodside-Jiron, 2004). These “common sense” rhetorical appeals to “what-works” research framed the need for standards related to phonics-only instruction in ways that “*identifies, verifies, finds, and reaffirms conclusions*” in an authoritative, definitive manner (Woodside-Jiron, 2004, p. 199; emphasis in original).

This discourse of consensus is also evident in neoconservative “common sense” moral appeals to offset the decline in cultural values through adopting *strict father* cultural models (Lakoff, 2002) to address issues of censorship, sex education, evolution, multicultural education, and vouchers through adopting definitive, nonnegotiable, “get tough” stances (Apple, 2003). This need for a definitive moral stance appeals to fears associated with the increased diversity of society related to “racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious admixture” (Singh & Han, 2006, p. 48), implying the need for unambiguous standards related not only to schooling, but also for a society at large framed as losing its “standards,” identified with practices traditionally valued by white, middle-class Americans.

From the perspective of complexity theory (Bowers, 1995), this need for consensus represents an attempt to impose a sense of control and predictability onto schools characterized by complex, unpredictable systems of learning that vary according to local needs and contexts (Stevens, 2006). These discourses of control are particularly evident in what Weis (1990, 2004) describes as intellectual control evident in transmission models of instruction prevalent in urban schools with largely working-class populations, schools whose literacy curriculums in the present climate are most often driven by teaching to the test.

The assumed consensus around shared standards also attempts to mask value differences associated with competing beliefs and philosophies. Analysis of the development of the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association language arts/reading national standards indicated a high level of disagreement regarding the focus, curriculum philosophy, valued instructional approaches, and strategies for implementation (Mayher 1999; Shannon, 2001), disagreement that reflected the inevitable differences across different disciplinary and philosophical perspectives associated with teaching of language arts and reading. One of the reasons that the NCTE/IRA standards were written as relatively general standards was to allow for variations in their implementation across local contexts, a level of generality that also serves to mask alternative ideological perspectives associated with implementing standards.

Based on their analysis of the California standards for English and social studies, Sleeter and Stillman (2005) note that adopting this definitive, non-controversial stance mitigates the need for alternative perspectives and invites compliance:

Although the content standards in both disciplines rest within a specific ideology, they are presented as if there were no serious ideological debates to consider.

Both present a detailed curriculum outline, and both give enough verbal recognition to cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity that teachers without a deep understanding of diverse intellectual funds of knowledge, diverse ideological perspectives, and effective pedagogy for diverse students might see the standards as fully inclusive. The use of disciplinary “experts” as curriculum document writers and the use of “scientific” research about reading encourage compliance. (p. 43)

Given their function to impose consensus onto schools, standards are then formulated in a manner that denies the necessity for grappling with competing value perspectives. Within a discourse of consensus, all historical and cultural forces are presumed to be relatively equal, negating a need for a means of determining historical or cultural difference that would lead to surfacing controversy in the classroom.

### **Variation among State Standards**

However, in spite of an implied consensus regarding standards, states varied in the nature and scope of their standards formulation (Furhman, 2001), especially in the decade preceding the passage of NCLB in 2002. Some states, such as Virginia, formulated standards based on teaching subject-matter content, positing that students would acquire certain specific content and then would be tested using multiple-choice tests to determine if that content was being acquired (Duke, Butin, & Sofka, 2003). This content focus led to increased “teaching to the test” and use of transmission, direct-instruction methods to prepare students for tests (Firestone & Mayrowetz, 2000). Other states such as Kentucky, Vermont, and Minnesota adopted more constructivist-based, “show-what-you-know” standards that emphasize students learning through hands-on participation in learning activities (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003). In this approach, learning is then evaluated using various performance-assessment measures ranging from constructed response items (short answer) to demonstrations of performance, such as conducting a science experiment or giving a persuasive speech. In contrast to the use of multiple-choice tests, the use of performance assessments is thought to challenge students in ways that allow for individual strengths and diversity in thinking (Eisner, 1999; Meier, 2000; Wiggins, 1998).

Analysis of standards construction at the state level reveals that these differences reflect different ideological assumptions or discourses shaping the content and evaluation of standards, differences shaped by larger political agendas and interest groups (Furhman, 2001; Shannon, 2001; Tremmel, 2000). An analysis of the development of state standards in Missouri indicated that educators’ attempts to formulate constructivist standards faced opposition from politicians and parents favoring content standards, resulting in compromises that attempted to balance both content and process in relatively bland, value-neutral formulations (Placier, Walker, & Foster, 2002). What the form of standards and the discourse of consensus deny are the ways in which curriculum always reflects competing ideological agendas at play in any context.

## How Ideology Works in Shaping Curriculum

In his theory of codes of power operating in curriculum, Basil Bernstein (1975; 2000) provides a mechanism by which curriculum is shaped by ideology. He examines the degree to which curriculum content may be highly separate, bounded, and hierarchical according to a focus on accumulation of core knowledge, a *collection code*, versus an *integrated code* in which the curriculum is organized according to knowledge construction and thematic connections to everyday life. In discussing the evolution of knowledge to the classroom, Bernstein (2000) identifies three fields: *production* in which new knowledge is constructed, *reproduction* in which curriculum is developed, and *recontextualizing* in which discourses from production are transformed into instruction. In recontextualizing of knowledge, various ideological forces can shape the curriculum focus by certain groups representing certain interests (Apple, 2004a; Bernstein, 2000).

Because these groups often exclude teachers from setting educational policy, teachers and students lose their influence over classroom curriculum, what Bernstein defined as *framing* (1975, p. 89). A curriculum with *strong framing* allows for little teacher or student control while a curriculum with *weak framing* allows for more local control in decisions about curriculum. Drawing on Bernstein's categories, Sleeter and Stillman (2005) described how a shift from integrated to collection curriculum codes influenced language arts instruction, both across the nation and in the California language arts and social studies curriculum. This shift was justified by an appeal to a discourse of science:

State and federal governments define science to mean studies that claim to be value-neutral and rely heavily on quantitative methods. Reading and language arts particularly were affected by the seminal "scientific" study supporting phonics instruction, commonly called *The Foorman Study* (Foorman et al., 1998) and sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (p. 32)

This reliance on a discourse of science as something that is inarguably good is part of the discourse of assumed consensus that undergirds the standards apparatus. In reality, a number of researchers have protested the use of the NICHD studies, which relied heavily on small numbers of learning-disabled and at-risk students, as the basis for statewide reading guidelines for all students (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Gee, 1999; Taylor, 1998).

The increasing hegemony of strong framing goes along with what Bernstein (2000) describes as the growing dominance of the *official recontextualizing field* (ORF) over the *pedagogic recontextualizing field* (PRF) (p. 33). The PRF consists of pedagogues: teachers, professors of education, writers and researchers in educational journals and private foundations. The ORF consists of politicians and bureaucrats working for the state, with no necessary expertise in education. In the United States, the ORF field works closely with the business community in such contexts as the 1990s governors' summits which eventually resulted in standards legislation at the state and federal level. The observed result of the dominance of the ORF in the English-speaking countries Bernstein observes is a reduction of autonomy and struggle over pedagogic discourse and practice, which is evidenced in the discourse of consensus.

## Battling Ideologies in the U.S.: Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism

Among the discourses shaping standards, Fairclough (2003) cites the example of a discourse of neoliberal "third way" capitalism that represents the economy in terms of globalism, in which rapid change and competition within and between multinational corporations is central to economic



success. This “fast-track” capitalism discourse justifies such practices as outsourcing jobs by evoking the need to be concerned with efficiency and the bottom line in a global economy. This discourse of neoliberalism, as we will explain further, has greatly influenced standards formulation in its treatment of teachers as interchangeable workers, its focus on efficiency, and its strong concern with accountability.

Neoliberal conceptions of a market-driven society with little government regulation and accelerating change can lead to an increased neoconservative push for strong state control of curriculum content and testing (Apple, 2004b). Michael Apple (2004b) posits that discourses of business management promote a masculinist need for control of schooling consistent with conservative values. Both Apple and Bernstein (2000) discuss the potential conflicts in conservative circles between a concern with conserving the country’s traditional heritage and values and the push to prepare workers for a changing workplace. We discuss ways in which these conflicts are negotiated in further detail below. In our analysis we examined how these two prominent ideological frameworks shaped the standards conflicts in the U.S. in general, and in the development of standards in Wisconsin and Minnesota, in particular. These ideologies entail consequences for standards: whether they follow a content or constructivist bent, whether they have a stronger relationship with the economy of the future or the heritage of our past.

## **Neoliberal Discourses and the Support for Standards**

### **Neoliberal Discourses of Society**

Neoliberal “third-way” discourses of society frame society according to economic and business models and forces associated with increased privatization, deregulation, efficiency, globalization, and accountability to bottom-line results. Such forces exist in opposition to fostering public, government-sponsored programs to assist people, as well as collective social and political activity to further social justice and economic equality (Apple, 2001; 2004a; 2004b). In perceiving individuals as producers and consumers in a market economy more than as citizens contributing to larger social, public good, neoliberals promote individual, private, competitive needs and consumption (Weiner, 2003). According to Eric Weiner (2003), neoliberalism values economic efficiency leading to high worker productivity but at reduced wages and benefits traditionally protected by unions, collective bargaining, and state policies. It supports the need for market forces as shaping policies as opposed to collective political action. For Weiner, underlying neoliberalism is a “discourse of needs” (p. 26) that values the individual’s needs and consumption as a byproduct of the economic, market-driven system. When applied to education, this discourse of needs seeks to achieve specific outcomes over the process of learning, the instrumental value over the intrinsic value of schooling, and quantitative indexes of learning over the qualitative indexes.

Adopting a business/accountability model entails the need to make data-driven policy decisions based on bottom-line results through standardized measures (Cuban, 2005). This focus on efficiency and results creates the need for what Michael Apple (2001, 2003) describes as an “audit culture” in which performances by various groups in society—public employees, doctors, managers, and other groups—are continually evaluated using measurement techniques in ways that can undermine alternative ways of defining effectiveness. This need for standardization denies the realities of race, class, and gender difference through adopting a “technicist discourse,” a discourse of experts, professional competence, and boundary maintenance” (McCarthy, Giargina, Harewood, & Park, 2003, p. 456) that rejects critical discourses associated with postmodern, cultural studies,

Marxist, and postcolonial perspectives. Adopting this technicist discourse of standardization leads to a “strategic alienation of the other in forms of knowledge-building, genres of representation, and the deployment of moral, emotional and affective evaluation and investments” (p. 456) evident in a perspective shared with neoconservatives.

### **A Neoliberal Discourse of School Standards**

The crisis orientation of the 1980s and 1990s positioned American students as failing and falling behind in American schools, while the economy suffered as a result of second-rate schooling. For example, Louis Gerstner (2002), CEO of IBM Corporation, noted,

The need to strengthen American education is still urgent. Last fall, college professors and employers were asked to assess the writing proficiency of high school graduates. Three-quarters of both groups rated graduates as poor or fair on writing. Two-thirds rated graduates as poor or fair in math. Too few children are getting what they need out of our public schools, and the performance gap between white and minority students is unacceptable.

Employers are well aware of deficiencies in education; they see how hard it is for young adults with inadequate preparation to move into the workplace. Any retreat from our national and state efforts now not only would harm students but would limit our competitive position in the global marketplace. (p. A3)

One element of this discourse is that it frames the public education system as static and impervious to change, requiring the imposition of outside activity systems—business and the political system—to step in and force change on intransigent schools. A neoliberal discourse also promotes the market-place value of having private schools create competition for public schools, assuming that private schools are more accountable to parents and are more innovative than public schools, even though research does not support such claims (Benveniste, Carnoy, & Rothstein, 2003; Buras & Apple, 2005).

This discourse of crisis and change often permeates sensationalized media reports of schooling that dramatize the shortcomings or failures of schooling, necessitating the need for change. For example, an analysis of a Queensland newspaper’s release of an education report found that the paper dramatized the schools as being in crisis, privileging the perspectives of external political and business groups over educators’ voices (Thomas, 2003). The result of these discourses of crisis has been calls for greater standardization of curriculum and greater accountability of schools and teachers regarding student progress within and across communities.

This push for more accountability drew heavily on discourses of business management as evident in documents produced by business advocacy groups such as Achieve, Inc. (funded by IBM), the Business Roundtable, the Business-High Education Forum, the Committee for Economic Development, and the Twentieth Century Fund, as well as neoconservative philanthropies and think tanks (e.g. the Education Excellence Network, Empower America, the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, the Manhattan Institute, the Thomas Fordham Foundation), neoliberal philanthropies and think tanks (e.g. the Carnegie Corporation, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the National Commission on Education and the Economy) who promote the need for technical solutions through standardization of schooling, and quasi-governmental groups (e.g. the National Governor’s Association, the Education Consortium of States, the Council of Chief State School Officers) who promote policy recommendations from the other three groups who are funded by and linked to various business or political interests (Tremmel, 2000). These business and economic interests advocate the application of business or economic

models and discourses derived from total-quality management models popular in the 1980s designed to assess worker productivity in terms of clearly-defined, measurable outcomes. Much of this reliance on standardized testing reflects what Norman Fairclough (2002) describes as a discourse of managerialism that adopts a distanced, technocratic stance “which disallows the speaking of concern, of welfare, of collective experience, of the whole human person, of emancipation!” (p. 2).

This discourse of managerialism can, at times, reduce the project of education to cost-benefit analyses. A report by former Minnesota Education Commissioner, Cheri Yেকে (2005), *Efficiency and Effectiveness in Minnesota School Districts: How Do Districts Compare?* analyzed the per-pupil costs related to measures of effectiveness as determined by high school graduation rates. Pointing out that one objective measure of school effectiveness is graduation rates, Yেকে suggests that they can also be used to calculate efficiency, aligning the percentage of students who graduate with the district’s cost per pupil. This emphasis on efficiency frames the management of schooling solely in economic terms, as opposed to theories or philosophies of teaching and learning or the role of schooling in addressing issues in society. In this analysis, school effectiveness is determined solely in terms of a quantitative measure of graduation rates, a measure that does not take into account all of the economic and cultural factors shaping high school drop-out rates.

*The effect on teachers.* Fairclough notes that such discourse serves to frame teachers as part of a larger corporate structure that emphasizes productivity, efficiency, and performance, which disallows teachers from expressing alternative voices or perspectives:

I would suggest that there is a “disjuncture”, a widening gap, between the values, beliefs and practices of many teachers and the “emergent” corporatism or managerialism in education—a dominant discourse is one of strategy, efficiency and performance, constructing education as a rational instrument. (Fairclough, 2002, pp. 1–2)

Fairclough (2002) argues that central to this managerialism in education is the use of statistical measures of quality that serve as seemingly objective representations of learning:

So-called “objective” standards of assessment are abstractions, a very long way away from lived reality. The numbers in a league table result from a wide range of varied experiences, which have been passed through various types of interpretive filters. A pupil attends school day in day out for many years, becoming enculturated (more or less successfully) into school practices and discourses. The “educational achievement” of this pupil is then measured and scored in some sort of standard test, the scores from which become part of the numerical information which is drawn on in the construction of the league table. As Lemke (1995: 63) points out, the idea of a “test score” condenses a complex process. (p. 4)

The increased use of a business management discourse served to challenge teachers’ professionalism, a trend similar to those decreasing the professional status of doctors, lawyers, and other professional groups. Ohmann (2003) argues that much of the increased focus on management represents a challenge to the status of teachers as professionals, a challenge he also finds evident in the health-care industry, increasingly influenced by management practices.

This discourse of de-professionalization positions teachers as needing to be subject to the same demands placed on workers in business—if they don’t “produce” or live up to their quotas, they should not be rewarded. This served to justify the need for measurable results that could be used to determine, as in business, whether teachers are being “productive” in raising test scores. As part of the reauthorization of NCLB, a bill identified as the “All Children Can Achieve Act” has been introduced in the U.S. Senate that includes evaluating “teacher effectiveness” based on increases in students’ test scores over a four-year period. Teachers who do not demonstrate

“effectiveness” in five years would face sanctions. This causal link between teachers and student performance reflects a decontextualized framing that ignores the fact that teachers interact with different students for different time periods as well as the fact that test scores may have little to do with what students actually learned from their teachers.

Having parents, business people, and politicians formulate content-based standards only further marginalizes teachers in their role as presumed experts in formulating their own curriculum. It implies a basic distrust of teachers, perceived as deviating from societal expectations for those literacy practices considered essential for participation in the global market. In their analysis of California standards, Sleeter and Stillman (2005), drawing on Bernstein’s notion of framing (above, p. 11), found that the reading and language arts standards were more strongly framed than history and social science, and the stronger framing was accomplished by administration of annual state-wide tests and a quite narrow range of choices among state-adopted language arts texts.

This framing of standards according to neoliberal discourses has also moved teachers’ conceptions of the nature of teaching a particular discipline in the direction of achieving a large number of atomistic standards, resulting in “fragmented, atomistic teaching” through using “some form of rote learning exercises that mimic the high stakes tests their students have to take,” instruction that “fragments aspects of discipline knowledge and processes” (Petrosky, 2006, p. 89). A comparison of New Zealand English teachers who started teaching between 1961–1970 and teachers who started teaching in 1995–1999 found that the former were provided with general objectives issued by the New Zealand government in 1983 such as “be involved in activities such as role-playing, interpreting visual images and sound pictures to help [students] understand that there are many signs, sounds, and symbols used in communication” (Locke, 2006, p. 213). As a result, the first group of teachers had enjoyed considerable autonomy in their teaching based on relatively progressive disciplinary theories.

In contrast, the second group of teachers was expected to teach according to another set of standards issued by the government in 1994 that specified outcomes within each of five “strands:” *Listening, Reading, Writing, Viewing, and Presenting* (p. 213). For each outcome, students were expected to be evaluated according to eight levels that were often difficult to distinguish. For example, for “close reading,” students were evaluated as reaching level 6: *discuss and analyze language, meanings, ideas, and literary qualities in a range of contemporary and historical texts, taking account of purpose, audience, and other texts*, as opposed to level 7: *analyze critically language, meanings, and ideas in a wide range of contemporary and historical texts, taking account of purpose, audience, and other texts*. While teachers in the first group were more likely to object to framing instruction in terms of these objectives as inconsistent with their broader conception of instruction and evaluation, teachers in the second group were less likely to object, having been trained to employ them in their preservice programs.

At the same time, it is important to note that teachers respond to this positioning in different ways. Based on his research with elementary teachers, Kris Sloan (2006) rejects the notion that accountability necessarily positions teachers in negative ways, particularly given the low quality of teacher instruction in large urban districts. His analysis reveals some teachers who translated these policies to suit their own local needs. One third-grade elementary language arts teacher, who was highly critical of the focus on testing as limiting her instruction, was not adversely influenced by testing mandates: having to provide district administrators with writing samples from her students meant employing more writing in the classroom, resulting in improvements in her students’ writing. Another first-grade teacher who objected to some of the district mandates as inconsistent with her curriculum was granted flexibility to employ her curriculum. Another teacher who was highly critical of testing was not sufficiently attending to his less-able students. Sloan argues for the need to focus on local, qualitative analyses of how accountability mandates position teachers in often complex,

contradictory ways given the fact that “individual actors interpret and then respond to information based on their own personal histories, past experiences, and frames of reference” (p. 146).

*Profiting from neoliberal economies of scale.* Analyses of the effect of commercial testing on teaching and learning provoke interest in another aspect of the neoliberal agenda: the relationships between the corporate publishing/testing industry and the formulation of standards in state-wide textbook adoption states such as California and Texas that serve to foster mandated selection of certain textbook series. In his analysis of the adoption of reading curriculum in Texas, Steven Metcalf (2002) noted that given a close relationship between the McGraw family and George Bush as governor, McGraw Hill textbook authors assumed considerable control over formulating curriculum policy focusing on phonics instruction consistent with their reading textbook series, as well as tests developed by the McGraw Hill testing companies.

This use of mandated textbook and teacher-proof curriculum materials serves to position teachers as having little autonomy in formulating their curriculum, particularly when, as is the case with the phonics approach, state tests are linked to the phonics curriculum. At the same time, it is assumed that their low test scores are related to the quality of their instruction. An analysis of teachers’ perceptions showed that newspaper reports of their students’ test scores that could be directly linked to them generated high levels of stress: “Many chairs wrote that pressure from their communities and administrators added to the stress level of teachers. One chair noted that ‘many [teachers] mention increased stress levels caused by negative media coverage, despite our students’ excellent scores.’ Being held accountable for forces beyond their direct control also reduces the job [of teaching]” (Duke, Butin & Sofka, 2003, p. 139).

*The other face of neoliberalism.* There is another side to neoliberalism, more akin to traditional liberalism in its view of education as a progressive force. This is well represented by the views of Robert Reich, formerly President Clinton’s Secretary of Labor. He divides American jobs into three categories: routine production work, in-person services, and symbolic-analytic services (Reich, 1991). Routine production work and in-person services tend to be low-skilled, routine, and paid by the hour. Symbolic analysis, on the other hand, creates wealth in the global information economy. Including financial consultants, engineers, software developers, architects, energy consultants, television producers, and university professors, these workers

... solve, identify and broker problems by manipulating symbols. They simplify reality into abstract images that can be rearranged, juggled, experimented with, communicated to other specialists, and then, eventually, transformed back into reality. The manipulations are done with analytic tools, sharpened by experience (p. 178).

Currently, education for such thinking is being provided mainly for children of elites, who go to schools where abstraction, systems thinking, experimentation and collaboration are at the center of curriculum. Memorization of facts is less important to students who know how to access information instantaneously. In contrast to this training of “skeptical, curious, and creative” minds (p. 230), the majority of students in the U.S. are spoon-fed prepackaged subject matter, whose order and significance are already defined for them; there is little discovery and little opportunity to “get behind the data—to ask why certain facts have been selected, why they are assumed to be important, how they were deduced, and how they might be contradicted” (p. 230).

Reich sees the lack of access to such education by the majority of children as both an issue of social justice and endangering the growth of our economy. Others also assert that all workers need the capacity to think flexibly, creatively, and from a systems orientation. Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, in *The New Work Order* (1996), describe the movement of workplaces in general towards more flattened hierarchies, and the tendency to place more responsibility for decision-

making on what were once line workers doing a single repetitive task. Although claims that those days are over are premature, companies have shed middle managers and expect workers to exhibit more flexibility in work assignments. Along with this comes a greater need for workers, many of whom used to have little use for literacy, to read training manuals, learn to operate new technologies, keep track of inventory of supplies and products, and come up with innovations to react flexibly to changes in local conditions without orders from above. These new workers need to function in new roles in distributed systems, where how to learn and adapt is more important than any previous knowledge they carry in from prior experience or schooling. This focus on group decision-making in the workplace is then addressed in school through cooperative learning and reciprocal teaching methods in “communities of practice,” although these communities do not engage in critical reflection about goals or identities (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, p. 65).

While this face of neoliberalism surfaces in some standards discussions which posit the need for performance assessment (NCTE, 1996; New Standards, 1997), it is at odds with the call for standardization and accountability that is cheaper and easier to implement on a statewide basis. Where accountability measures are stringent, or support is lacking, teachers are caught in a double bind if they attempt to implement constructivist standards or performance assessments. If they make the attempt without support, training, and political backing, they will experience difficulties. Teachers are often not well prepared to use nontraditional assessments (Bateson, 1994; Black & William, 1998; Firestone, Roseblum, & Bader, 1992; Plake & Impara, 1997). Missouri teachers experienced considerable difficulty implementing performance assessments, mostly due to lack of training (Jackson, 2000). An analysis of high school teachers in three suburban Illinois schools indicated that only a small number of these teachers were actually using authentic assessments (Meisenheimer, 1996). Those teachers who employed performance assessments successfully were more likely to be receiving in-service training, were actively involved in professional organizations and in their schools, and had a strong philosophical understanding of the purpose and value of authentic assessment. When teachers lacking such support fail, critics then charge that it is the *constructivist standards themselves that are problematic*, as opposed to the lack of support, training, and political backing in an era of budget cutting (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003). This then provides conservative forces with the rationale to justify the use of more traditional, content-based testing and standards.

When teachers *are* comfortable with nontraditional assessments, studies find that the format requires an enormous amount of teacher time in addition to the costs of scoring (Koretz, Stecher, Klein, & McCaffrey, 1994). Some states, including Arizona, California, Kentucky, and Maryland, have pulled back from the idea of using high stakes, performance-based assessments because of concerns about time, cost, and questionable psychometric properties. A few studies report teachers perceive positive changes in their instruction when they use performance assessments, but the same teachers question whether the costs make the change worthwhile (Herman, 1997; Koretz et al., 1994; Madaus & Kellaghan, 1993).

All of this adds up to a major schism in the standards-development movement between a more traditional content-based approach driven by multiple-choice testing and a constructivist, performance-based approach driven by alternative assessments, mentioned above. The majority of states, fueled by the implementation of the test-driven No Child Left Behind legislative mandates, have opted for or moved back to the former approach, reflecting the larger political and cultural agendas underlying the standards movement. This gives the advantage to those committed to a neoconservative agenda, which favors the content-based approach. However, it also leads teachers and districts back towards instructional practices that favor coverage over understanding. For example, when Virginia 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students in several different science classes were asked one week later to write short essay answers as to why they selected certain options on a multiple-choice

Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) test as a measure of their ability to explain their answers, 71 percent of the students who passed the multiple choice test failed the written test (Berube, 2004). Moreover, high-stakes testing has had adverse effects on low-income and ethnic minority students who are penalized by low test scores, resulting in increased drop-out rates (Myers & Curtiss, 2003; Orfield & Lee, 2005).

### Neoliberal Discourses Evident in English Language Arts Standards

The need for a focus on preparing students to operate in de-contextualized workplace worlds is evident in those standards formulated in terms of a skill-based, instrumental emphasis on acquiring basic literacy, reading, and writing practices, with the more constructivist, flexible types of learning showing up rarely in state standards. Thus, for example, one of the Wisconsin reading standards in an early draft that showed strong neoliberal influences stated that students are to read a variety of materials that will afford them opportunities to “respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace.” A central aspect of workplace literacy has to do with acquiring information. Within the “literature” section of that version of the Wisconsin standards, some ten standards were devoted to acquiring information, as in “Understand and use technical reports, technical manuals, historical papers, and government documents” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1997b, p. 27).

Similarly, the following current Minnesota standard I. C. 3: “Analyze and draw accurate conclusions about information contained in warranties, contracts, job descriptions, technical descriptions and other informational sources, selected from labels, warnings, manuals, directions, applications and forms in order to complete specific tasks” focuses on practices associated with workplace contexts. This focus on workplace skills was even stronger in the earlier Profile standards, and created a problem for neoconservative school critics who decried what they perceived as the “anti-intellectual” or lack of “academic content” in school curriculum related to teaching core subject matter knowledge.

*Measurable standards.* Given the need to develop standardized test measures, standards are then developed as “measurable,” i.e., as specifying content or skills that can be evaluated using commercially-developed, easily-scored tests. As a result, English language arts standards are framed in terms of knowledge of specific items that can be used to develop multiple-choice or short-answer test items. For example, the current 2003 Minnesota English language arts high school standards include the following standards related to grammar:

- II. C. 3. Edit writing for correct grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, verb tense, sentence structure, and paragraphing to enhance clarity and readability:
  - a. Correctly use reflexive case pronouns and nominative and objective case pronouns, including *who* and *whom*.
  - b. Correctly use punctuation such as the comma, semicolon, colon, hyphen, and dash...

By specifying this content, multiple-choice test items can then be created in which students identify grammatical errors in sentences.

The kinds of learning and instruction fostered by a focus on such testing limits students’ acquiring insightful understanding of knowledge. A survey study of 130 high school English department chairs (Duke, Butin & Sofka, 2003) indicated that the Virginia SOL testing program in English resulted in an increased focus on traditional versus performance assessment. While many of the department chairs in the survey agreed with the standards in theory, they often characterized the

tests as unfair because teachers had little control over the testing process. George Hillocks's (2002) multi-state study of the effects of writing assessment on instruction shows that the deleterious effects of standardized testing are not restricted to the content areas covered by multiple-choice tests. Analysis of the impact of testing on instruction in Jackson, Mississippi, and Austin, Texas found that given a focus on preparing for reading tests, there was less time for reading longer works of literature (Zabala & Minnici, 2007).

An extensive analysis of the impact of the Chicago Public Schools' literature standards, formulated according to content-based, district-mandated tests, found that the standards themselves shaped four urban Chicago English teachers' instruction and classroom discussions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Anagnostopoulos, 2005). These standards privileged text-centered analysis of formal characteristics of texts, as reflected in the following standard: "The student will read literature and be able to evaluate the relationships between a plot and its sub-plots, connecting themes, character traits, motives, tone, point of view, and setting" (Chicago Public School System, 1997, quoted in Anagnostopoulos, 2005, p. 46). The curriculum directives and sample lessons related to this standard emphasized the need to correctly identify literary elements consistent with an authoritative interpretation based on perceived authorial intent, a reflection of monologic instruction that students must correctly mimic that authoritative reading in their writing or on tests (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). The criteria for passing a written test with a score of two lacked critical rigor: the student "demonstrates an accurate but limited understanding of the text" and "uses information from the text to make simplistic interpretations of the text" (Nystrand et al., 1997, p. 48), criteria emphasizing "accuracy" and use of textual evidence consistent with a text-centered teaching approach.

These standards and implied practices influenced how the four teachers studied taught the novel in each of two classes, particularly the teachers whose schools were under scrutiny for low test scores. 61% of the teachers' written assignments involved multiple-choice and short-answer question worksheets; 75% of the questions consisted of restating information from the text. Only 14% of the writing assignments involved extended writing tasks (Anagnostopoulos, 2005, p. 51). The teachers also made consistent references to the need to prepare for the district tests through noting the value of, in some cases, memorizing information about the novel or referring to sample questions in preparation for the test. And, in instances in which students framed their own alternative interpretations associated with issues of racism in the novel that challenged the teachers' monologic, authoritative interpretations, the teachers silenced those interpretations by referencing the need to prepare for the test. This study demonstrates how content-focused, test-oriented standards and tests served to reify traditional, monologic forms of teaching that perpetuated deference to authoritative readings, low expectations for higher-order thinking, and marginalization of students who challenged this approach. Rather than enhancing the level of students' learning, the standards and tests in this study only served to limit that learning.

## Neoconservative Discourses and Standards Justification

### Neoconservative Discourses of Society

Neoconservative discourses frame society as challenged by diverse demographic shifts, a perceived decline in morality and discipline, and the complexity of technological change and globalization, resulting in the need to reassert traditional Western values. These shifts entail the need for standards as defined as norms for appropriate behavior consistent with traditional values, a need



that has a strong emotional appeal. Noel Wilson (1998) argues that in a period of perceived decline in authoritative control, the appeal to standards has a strong emotional resonance with the need for reinstituting traditional notions of discipline and respect:

People talk about raising standards when they perceive a slackness in the ropes of control, when they see a sloppiness infiltrating the verities of life, when they begin to be fearful about life's diminishing certainties. Talk of standards is talk about conservation, about protecting the past in its imagined superiority and security, and defending the future through strong leadership. "Discipline," "Respect," "Standards," "Leadership" are almost interchangeable words in a discourse that lauds the good old days and decries the soft underbellied freedom and license of the present. (Chapter 6)

He also notes a related mythic appeal to asserting the control of a particular dominant group over what are perceived to be counter-culture challenges to the authority of that group:

...the Fatherland, the Motherland, Our Land, Our Nation, Our Church, Our Family, Our Team, Our God, whatever its particular form. Words that recall our common heritage and our common destiny, and the myths and ideologies that surround that communality; we lose our individual and insignificant identity in the power and communion of the group, and are seduced into forgetting our fear even as we lose our freedom. (Chapter 6)

For Wilson, given a hierarchical value structure in which the dominant group's values are perceived to be superior, a standard "mediates between ideology and structure, between the moral values, and the relational power systems that they support" (Chapter 6).

During the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives voiced concerns about what they perceived to be the decline in moral values associated with issues of abortion, gay marriage, and portrayals of alternative life styles in popular culture and the media (Frank, 2004). This decline was linked to a moral relativism constituting the need for a more definitive set of authoritative values and authority figures. In his analysis of the political rhetoric associated with this political appeal, George Lakoff (1995, 2002) identified a conservative *strict father* cultural model as representing the need for the imposition of authority to counteract the permissive, relativistic moral and political culture in which people become dependent on government and thus lack individual initiative. He contrasts this *strict father* cultural model with the *nurturant parent* model associated with liberal political policies in which government serves to provide support programs for people, particularly people of color or poor people as well as immigrants, who by definition of receiving this support are perceived by conservatives to lack self-initiative.

This perceived decline in moral values associated with the permissiveness of the *nurturant parent* liberal cultural model implies the need for a *strict father* adherence to some set of standards that asserts the values of the dominant, white middle-class. As the increased diversity of many communities was read as a challenge to these values, there was an increased call for standards in the schools as reasserting them.

*Positioning students of color.* This need for standards as reflecting larger values reflects for Whites the need to control what is perceived to be a problem—"failing" poor students of color (Trainor, 2002):

Proponents of content-based standards resort to subtle use of discourses of race and class to argue for "accountability" to traditional content-standards. Framing the need for standards as a means of coping with an increasing number of poor students of color through a discourse of race and class appeals to a white, middle-class public's sense of the need to "control" and socialize students perceived as different or other than themselves. (p. 637)

Neoconservative discourses consistently place blame on the poor performance of students of color on urban schools and teachers for the “achievement gap”—a gap measured by test scores. In a letter to state education officials, Rod Paige (2002), then United States Secretary of Education, chided officials for attempting to lower the cut scores on mandated tests given the high number of students failing them:

It is nothing less than shameful that some defenders of the status quo are trying to hide the performance of underachieving schools in order to shield parents from reality. Not only is this political tactic an embarrassment, it undermines the public’s trust in education as a cornerstone of freedom.... (§ 15)

In order to ensure authentic school reform, our nation must raise the bar of expectations. Every child *can* learn. Every child *must* learn. And thanks to this bipartisan law, every child *will* learn. (§ 17)

The assumption is that urban schools and teachers are failing these students and that, according to Paige’s letter, educators who alter cut scores themselves are the “enemies” of “equal opportunity,” assuming that schools themselves in which “every child *will* learn” will lead to “equal opportunity” for those children.

The neoconservative discourse of blame of schools for low achievement does not take into account the influence of childhood poverty that correlates highly with low test scores as well as the high degree of school segregation according to race and class (Berliner, 2005). Berliner argues that this discourse also does not account for the influence of neighborhood facts related to unemployment, family support, housing, health, and overcrowding, which correlates with school achievement (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Catsambis and Beveridge, 2001; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991). This leads Berliner (2005) to recommend an approach that emphasizes inequalities outside schooling:

When we push for more rigorous standards in our schools we should also push for a raise in the minimum wage, or better yet, for livable wages. If we do not do this then we will ensure that the vast majority of those meeting the increasingly rigorous requirements for high school graduation will be those students fortunate enough to be born into the right families. If we really want a more egalitarian set of educational outcomes requires, our nation needs a more equalitarian wage structure. (p. 987)

The neoconservative agenda on testing as a means of addressing failing urban schools has resulted in increased amount of direct instruction and testing in these schools and a reduction of more constructivist instruction. Research of the effects of standards and standardized assessments in New Jersey and Virginia (Duke, Butin, & Sofka, 2003; Firestone, Camilli, Yurecko, Monfils, & Mayrowetz, 2000) indicate that students in poorer districts are more likely to experience the impact of a content-based, testing approach, while students in wealthier districts, even though their schools may have adopted a state-mandated content-based set of standards, are more likely to engage in constructivist forms of teaching and learning consistent with their potential experiences in higher education.

*Conflicts within the neoconservative group.* Bernstein (2000) complicates the picture of neoconservatives as mainly focused on conserving traditional values and reveals the tensions within the neoconservative group by marking the difference between what he calls “retrospective” and “prospective” pedagogic identities, which determine the career of the student. Retrospective identities hark back to the grand “national, religious, cultural narratives of the past... appropriately recontextualised to stabilize that past in the future” (p. 66). The focus is on preservation and continuation of heritage and tradition, and not on the student’s future interaction with the economy; it is usually asserted that a liberal studies education is the best preparation for any future. For

example, Katherine Kersten (1999b) contrasts what she perceives to be the decline in reading skills as due to the “dumbing down” of basal readers “to boost minority students’ self-esteem by lowering academic standards, they simplified vocabulary, and chose selections with shorter sentences and paragraphs” (p. 15A). She also argues that basal authors are chosen “for their value in shaping children’s attitudes about race, sex, class and disability. Classic stories that have delighted children’s imaginations for years were increasingly sacrificed for ‘ethnic cheerleading’ selections” (p. 15A).

She contrasts this reading with reading of more traditional literary texts, noting that at one private elementary school, students are reading “anthologies of folklore, myths, proverbs, poems and biographies from around the World” as well as “stories about Benjamin Franklin, fables by Aesop, and subtle, imagination-stirring poems by Emily Dickinson,” texts that “expand children’s intellectual horizons” (p. 15A).

Prospective identities, in contrast, while referring to the same narratives, do so more selectively, “because this identity is constructed *to deal with cultural, economic, and technological change*” (p. 67; emphasis in the original). Bernstein uses the example of educational reform under Thatcherism as an example, where conservative values relating to nation, family, individual responsibility and enterprise were fused in such a way as to motivate “appropriate attitudes, dispositions, and performances relevant to a market culture and reduced state welfare” (p. 68). These different identities and their conflicts can be identified in the American context, as well.

The existence of the neoconservative prospective identity may help explain what Apple (2004a) identifies as a collusion between neoconservatives and neoliberals in pushing the state to assume a more active role in promoting the idea of the competitive, entrepreneurial citizen and consumer. The combination of neoliberal visions of more effective workers and neoconservative pressures to regulate curricular content and student behavior has resulted in what Apple calls “the increasing power of the ‘evaluative state’” (p. 23). However, the motivation for increased accountability, while shared by neoliberals and neoconservatives, comes from different places. Similarly to Bernstein’s description of pedagogic identities, Apple describes the conservative construction of an imagined past that is used “to castigate the present,” and that necessitates tighter control over the curriculum, restoration of our “lost” traditions, and making education more disciplined and competitive. Few, if any, of these comparisons are based on research findings. For conservatives more than for neoliberals, the market works as a metaphor, “natural, neutral, and governed by effort and merit” (p. 18). The market works by the rational choice of individual actors, thus working as a metaphorical meeting place for neoliberals and neoconservatives in discussions of politics and education.

In contrast, one tension between neoliberal and neoconservative discourses of schooling stems from a neoconservative backlash against the complexities associated with fast-capitalist notions of constructing shifting, flexible identities and problem-solving skills suitable for work in a range of alternative careers and contexts. This backlash is evident in the rise of religious fundamentalism and the need for “certain immutable truths, truths they would like to impose and others and on the world as a whole” (Gee, 2006, p. 167).

### Neoconservative Discourses of School Standards

Given their conception of society facing the challenges of increasing diversity and in opposition to neoliberal scenarios of rapid growth and change, neoconservative discourses of school standards emphasize the need to maintain or return to a traditional, content-focused curriculum. In terms of English language arts standards, these neoconservative agendas often focus on the value of teaching a literary canon that is perceived to foster a Eurocentric, white, middle-class perspective

(Kouritzin, 2004). This content focus can therefore be distinguished from the neoliberal focus on reading informative texts, or acquiring problem-solving, technical skills through constructivist methods.

As it describes on its website, the neoconservative Fordham Foundation promotes the need to articulate “a solid core curriculum taught by knowledgeable, expert instructors.” It is also committed to the use of testing as a tool for accountability and the need for competition: “The Foundation also welcomes the ‘reinvention’ of K-12 education to include such alternatives as charter schools, contract-management, student scholarships and other strategies for stimulating more education choices, greater competition and real consumer empowerment,” thus taking on a strongly prospective pedagogic identity (Bernstein, 2000).

The Foundation also critiques the limitations of constructivist standards as a substitute for acquiring content, assumed to be a prerequisite for engaging in any constructivist projects. As Chester Finn (2005) notes:

Few skills are useful without any knowledge. A child doing library research will soon become frustrated when her lack of background information constrains her from understanding what she is reading. Knowledge is to skills as bricks are to mortar: you need both to build a strong wall. (p. 16)

This bricks-and-mortar metaphor presupposes that one must first have information or knowledge in order to construct understanding or to employ literacy “skills.” This metaphor frames knowledge as sets of facts or information as building blocks used to formulate ideas and understanding consistent with E.D. Hirsch’s (1988) notion of cultural literacy.<sup>1</sup>

Given the importance of these building blocks to learning, it is not surprising that conservatives generally call for standards to spell out as precisely as possible what content is to be learned, generally in a subject-by-subject, grade-by-grade, manner. This is exemplified in Sarah Stotsky’s evaluation of state English standards for the Fordham Foundation (2005). States get higher rankings for spelling out bodies of knowledge, identifying exemplary works of literature, and arranging these grade by grade. In conjunction with Bernstein’s observation that conservatives tend to prefer stronger framing of subject matter, she also prefers the language arts to be clearly divided into the subgroups of literature, reading, composition, vocabulary, speaking, and listening, “categories reflecting coherent bodies of scholarship or research in reading and the English language arts” (p. 84). Embedded in this and in other statements is an assumption of general scholarly agreement regarding not only pedagogy, but the organization of the discipline as a whole, which is just astounding to anyone familiar with English studies of the last thirty years.

A similar assumption of unity is found in Chester Finn’s introduction to Stotsky’s study, where he comments on their shared commitment to quality, traditional literature as the heart of the English curriculum and their equally shared fears regarding its present neglect:

Uncorrected, it portends a generation of Americans who may know how to read but, by the end of high school, cannot be assumed to have read much that’s worthwhile, let alone acquired a suitable grounding in the great works of our shared culture. (2005, p. 6)

The assumption here is that his readers will share his concept of what is suitable and great, what constitutes grounding in literature, as well as that we all share the same culture. As mentioned above, while the discourse of consensus underlies the very project of standards formation, it is particularly strong in neoconservative documents.

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<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on “facts” in opposition to constructivist instruction was evident in the Florida Legislature passing a law that stated that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed” and “shall be viewed as knowable, teachable and testable” (Norton, 2006, p. 11).

*Promoting a “common” culture.* The other conservative critique of constructivist standards as failing to value the need for knowledge is that they reflect a relativist theory of truth:

There is no actual truth or definite knowledge, relativists believe, only various culturally determined “scripts” or “versions” of the truth. It would be oppressive, they argue, for a state to identify specific knowledge that must be learned by all. Any such knowledge would be nothing more than the script preferred by the dominant class. (Finn, p. 16)

They argue that students need a “working knowledge of the nation’s heritage, history, and cultural and intellectual institutions” to participate as citizens in a democracy. This focus on the need to impart such knowledge as a set of truths masks the contested nature of knowledge, for example, about American history or its institutions.

In an interview with George Clowes (2005) of The Heartland Institute, former Commissioner of Education of Minnesota, Cheri Pierson Yecke, and, as of 2007, Chancellor, K-12 Florida Public Schools, lamented the fact that “American values” were no longer being taught in schools:

When you look at the destiny of our country, it’s a very serious concern. So many individuals have been raised on moral relativism--where you can’t say that some values or cultures are better than others--that there is a fear of teaching American values in the public schools. And yet, with all of the immigrants we have in our nation, what better place than the public schools for these students to learn what it means to be an American, the common themes that unite us as Americans, and the common history that we share. (¶ 27)

In her critique, Yecke sets up a comparison between her perception of moral relativism—in which it is assumed that all values or cultures are equivalent—and her notion of American values as presumably superior to other values.

Having evoked a neoconservative agenda to restore a particular vision of “American values” into school, Yecke also evokes a neoliberal strategy of school choice and charter schools to force public schools to be more responsive to parents who want more focus on “American values”:

Parents expect schools to teach American values, and if it’s not happening in schools, where is it going to happen? There is a lot of frustration among members of the public because they feel this is what the schools need to be doing, and they’re falling down on it. I do believe you will find a strong movement for charter schools and school choice whenever a school district is not responsive to what parents want. When a district is nonresponsive to parents, then parents should have the option to go elsewhere. That is the essence of school choice--giving parents the right to match their child’s needs to an appropriate school. (¶ 28)

### **Neoconservative Discourses Evident in English language arts Standards**

In their analysis of the Fordham Foundation and Achieve’s analysis of English language arts standards in different states, Valencia and Wixson (2001) examine these groups’ ideological orientation as reflected in the criteria they used in evaluating state standards. These criteria have to do with use of English in classrooms, as opposed to second language use; a focus on teaching knowledge about traditional American literature from the canon and related literary movements, as opposed to using multicultural literature, young adult literature, or connecting literature to social issues; the use of “measurable” standards that exclude a focus on teaching alternative strategies or

relating students' values to texts; an avoidance of connecting students' own lives to literature; and not prescribing certain types of teaching methods. Sandra Stotsky of the Fordham Foundation is highly critical of the NCTE/IRA English language arts standards as allegedly anti-intellectual given their lack of focus on what she acknowledges as content (2000). She is also critical of state standards that require students "to relate the literature they read to their lives, or to interpret what they read from within the framework of their personal experiences" as "anti-literary and anti-intellectual."

In conducting her review, Stotsky (2000) formulated a set of negative criteria which she describes as "anti-literary or anti-academic requirements" contained in standards. These included the following:

1. The document implies that the literary or popular culture of our or any other country is monolithic in nature.
2. The reading/literature standards require students to relate what they read to their lived experiences.
3. The reading/literature standards want reading materials to address contemporary social issues. (p. 23)

The implication of the first is that students cannot gain a true understanding of another culture merely from reading one or a few literary works from that culture. This is rather interesting, considering her faith in canonical American literature for passing on the dominant culture, values, and sense of history.

The second ties in with the neoconservative dislike of relativist values and constructivist learning. Having students relate their reading of literature to their own experiences undermines ... the very capacity of a literary work to help readers transcend their limited experiences. A major function of literature is to expand perspectives and free students from insularity. Thus, we should want to know what new insights into human relationships or into the deployment of literary skills students have. (Finn, p. 17)

From this perspective, encouraging students to connect texts to their own experiences reifies their limited, solipsistic, "insular" perspectives as contrasted with the universal, timeless truths portrayed in literature. This notion of students acquiring such timeless truths from literature fails to consider the ways in which any reader draws on his experiences in constructing text meaning. The third is intended to protect the English curriculum from being merely an adjunct to the social studies curriculum. Literary works are not good sources for the real background on an issue. Again, considering her commitment to teaching the foundational Revolutionary documents in the English classroom, this seems contradictory.

While Stotsky would deny that she is discouraging the reading of works by diverse authors, she would maintain that such works should not be sought out on that basis, but only as they reveal the universal truths associated with the more traditional works of the White, Western, Judeo-Christian canon. Underlying this fear of "addressing contemporary social issues" or "teaching moral or social dogma" (Stotsky, 2000) is a belief in the breakdown of a core of traditional moral values due to an influx of different, alternative values associated with diverse populations, leading to the need to valorize the canon of European/American literary texts that reflect definitive Western values (Tremmel, 2000). Such a concern frames literature as providing universal truths that transcend immediate social and political issues, a concern that reflects an uneasiness about having students address the limitations of the social and political status quo.

In her analysis of the 2001 California social studies standards, Christine Sleeter (2004) finds a consistent pattern of us/them dualisms evident in the bifurcation of "Western versus non-Western, Judeo-Christian versus other religions, and democratic political systems/free market economies versus totalitarian systems" (p. 27). A more recent analysis by Sleeter and Stillman (2005) found that

California's 2001 social studies and 1997/1999 language arts standards, despite the highly diverse populations in California's schools, reflected a shift towards more content-oriented and bounded standards, reflecting Bernstein's *collection code*, with few references to students' own experiences and interests. Literacy is framed in terms of mastering skills in a hierarchical order in which ELL students who are still learning English are relegated to a "back to basics" program. They note a connection to a discourse of Whiteness serving to privilege certain groups over others:

The reading/language arts documents consistently refer to California's nonwhite, non-English speaking students as "these students" and "they" instead of one of "us." History-social science is structured largely as a story of European immigration and the construction of a nation around Judeo-Christian values and European political institutions. Implicitly, in an attempt to reduce the significance of the growing demographic diversity of California's students, the content standards set up a we/they perspective in which "we" are of European, Judeo-Christian heritage and English-speaking, and "they" are not. Ideologically, the curriculum in both disciplines rests most comfortably on historically dominant groups' perspectives, language, and ways of seeing the world. (p. 43)

These dualistic discourses were reflected in a critique by the conservative Minnesota organization, EdWatch, of an early draft of the revised Minnesota literature standards (Effrem, 2003). In their critique, they noted that the use of certain literature (fairy tales, myths, and legends) serves to promote values contrary to White, Western, Judeo-Christian values. In noting the absence of standards related to American literature in grades 3–5, they imply that canonical American, British, and world literature promotes values they do subscribe to, especially American literature. The literature they promote portrays a particular set of values or norms that they hope students will acquire: "standards" as reflecting the need for socialization of students.

The combination of this reliance on canonical literature to teach dominant values and a focus on teaching factual content knowledge reflects a discourse of absolutist knowledge and values as a means of bolstering respect for traditional authority and certainty in opposition to an inquiry-based, critical pedagogy approach that challenges authority and interrogates certainty. The increasingly diverse student population, particularly poor students of color, are perceived to "lack standards"—cultural capital or social practices associated with White, middle-class markers of success. This leads to a highly appealing rhetoric of the need to "leave no child behind"—to no longer permit poor students of color to fail or fall between the cracks. The result of this appeal has been that more direct instruction geared for tests has become the norm in poorer schools, while students in wealthier schools continue to be engaged in more intellectually challenging instruction (Duke, Butin & Sofka, 2003). Ironically, the content-based standards movement may only further perpetuate social hierarchies in which the poorer students receive multiple-choice tests and the more privileged students receive AP courses.

*Local control versus accountability.* The neoconservative push towards state standards has been achieved at the cost of some traditional conservative ideals. One of these is local control, or the idea that local school districts, schools, and teachers should make all major curricular decisions. In his depiction of the *strict father* metaphor of family and government, George Lakoff (1995) points out that the father who rightly controls his children's movements, time, and thought processes when they are minors leaves them strictly alone as adults. The reward for being an obedient son in one's youth is the unfettered right to rule as father in one's turn. Similarly, while the *strict father* executive acts decisively and independently for the good of the state in those areas where he has authority, it is not the role of government to intervene in the decisions of local families and communities where their children are concerned. Local control has also traditionally been a value in the Upper Midwest among both conservatives and progressives. In their discourse analysis

of the development of character education in Upper Midwest states, Peter Smagorinsky and Joel Taxel (2005) explain how the conception of the strong, self-reliant community grew out of the particular history and blend of cultures involved in European settlement of this area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consistent with neoliberal notions of engaging different constituencies in achieving consensus, we also found evidence in each state that respect for local control was necessary to writing acceptable state standards. The neoliberal and neoconservative forces in each state that promoted statewide standards and assessments had first of all to gain acceptance for the idea that local districts needed to be accountable to the state at all.

### **Meshing Neoliberal and Neoconservative Discourses: Creating Ambiguous Standards**

In summary, while both neoliberal and neoconservative forces promote the need for standards, they frame competing conceptions of how to define standards based on their conceptions of society, conceptions of schooling, desired standards formulation, and assessment techniques, as illustrated in Table 1. When these competing forces attempt to achieve some compromise, they generate problematic standards that undermine substantive, challenging English language arts instruction.

As we will illustrate with examples from Wisconsin and Minnesota, attempting to reconcile these competing discourses generated incoherent, problematic standards that mask incoherent notions of teaching English language arts. For example, the combination of a neoliberal focus on performance-based assessment of communication skills with a neoconservative focus on teaching traditional canonical literature content assessable by multiple-choice tests represents two very different disciplinary conceptions of the English language arts curriculum. Nods made to reading and writing skills necessary to succeed in a global economy are contradicted by an emphasis on “safe” New Critical literary analyses that avoid linking literary reading to the world schools supposedly are preparing students to meet. Both states in our study also apparently ignored recent research on adolescent literacy practices and the importance of engaging student readers and writers.

## **Methods**

The documents analyzed for this study fall into two categories: drafts of the standards themselves, and public documents relating to the development and release of the standards, particularly those justifying particular approaches to voters. From Wisconsin, these consist of the state Model Academic Standards and three different drafts leading up to their final publication, as well as front matter in the form of letters to the citizens of the state from the state Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Benson, and then-governor Tommy Thompson. From Minnesota, we draw on excerpts from the Profile of Learning standards and the final version of the content-based Minnesota Academic Standards that were developed to replace the more constructivist Profile. Comments on both standards versions and justifications for the change are taken from reports from neoliberal and neoconservative think-tanks referring specifically to Minnesota standards; the website of a conservative parents’ group, the Maple River Coalition, and newspaper articles published during standards development, particularly interviews with Commissioner of Education Cheryl Yecke. Methods of analysis included thematic and cultural models analysis of the standards themselves, and critical discourse analysis of the public statements.



Table 1  
*Tensions between neoliberal and neoconservative frames for formulating English language arts standards*

Domain	Neoliberal frame	Neoconservative frame	Tensions
Society	Global market economy requiring flexibility/problem-solving skills	Decline in moral standards requiring <i>strict father</i> assertion of traditional values	Technicist/economic framing focusing on shifting contexts versus values/moral framing based on eternal past.
Purpose for schooling	Requires learning reading and communication skills operant in the workplace.	Return to content focus associated with grammar/phonics and British/American literature versus multicultural literature	Schooling for shifting workplace contexts/situations versus schooling to inculcate traditional values
Standards formulation	Frame standards in terms of “measurable” skills or literacy practices; attempt to involve different local groups	Frame standards by specifying specific subject-matter content allegedly valued by parents	Performance-based standards versus content-based standards based on traditional English curriculum
Assessment	Performance-based assessment based on specific criteria	Employ multiple-choice, “objective” tests of subject-matter content	Evaluating performance versus evaluating knowledge content

Cultural models analysis is a method borrowed from cognitive anthropology (Shore, 1996; Strauss & Quinn, 1997) to investigate the taken-for-granted theories or narratives about the world from the perspective of a particular discourse (Gee, 1996, 2004). The models identified in this analysis are a reflection of the value hierarchies of the various groups involved in formulating standards, containing exemplary beliefs and practices ranging from most to least valued in the ideological worlds discussed above. These models exist both in the external world, where they can be recognized as the perspectives of a group both by its members and outsiders, and internally as cognitive resources, called on by individuals in the course of negotiating daily life. Cultural models analysis investigates the assumptions underlying practices and ideologies through such tools as metaphor analysis (Lakoff, 1995; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), prototype analysis (Harkness, Super & Keefer, 1992; Lakoff & Kovecses, 1987), as well as looking at both the standards and the talk about standards for counter-examples (Price, 1987) and examples of causal reasoning (Price, 1987; Quinn, 1987). The analysis of literature standards, in particular, calls on previous work on cultural models of literature and literary study (Caughlan, 2003, 2004).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) operates on a view of language as both reflecting and constituting power relations and ideological forces shaping institutional practices and identity construction (Chouliarki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Gee, 1996, 1999; Rogers, 2004). CDA reveals the power dynamics of the politically-charged process of standards formulation by identifying the qualities of neoliberal and neoconservative discourses, their underlying ideologies and assumptions, and the positioning of participants in the process by each other. It also provides means of contrasting proponents' claims regarding standards with the actual product of standards formulation. And, it illuminates how interest groups or individuals frame policy formulations in ways that establish them as common-sense approaches to schooling. In a CDA analysis of the competing discourses associated with the development of legislation mandating reading instruction in California, Woodside-Jiron (2004) found that testimony by presumed "experts" such as G. Reid Lyon of the National Institute of Health as to the "scientific" research justification for the value of traditional phonics-based/decoding models of reading instruction helped establish it as the accepted, "common-sense" approach to teaching reading.

CDA relies on the application of an eclectic set of tools, including cultural models analysis and systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) to language at the level of context, text, and sentence grammar (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2003). In addition to the methods mentioned above, we made use of the systemic-functional tool of theme/rheme analysis to uncover how policy-makers used sentence grammar to make new proposals seem accepted fact. English grammar positions new information in the latter part of a sentence (the rheme) and given, taken-for-granted information in the theme, or first part of a sentence (Fairclough, 1992; Halliday, 1994). As Woodside-Jiron points out in her study of California reading policy implementation (2004), policy-makers will often introduce quite arguable items as new information in one statement, and then use it in the theme, or given, part of a clause in a subsequent sentence, making it appear as an uncontroversial aspect of policy background. This given/new, topic/focus shift serves to transform debatable contentions into seemingly established truths.

In addition, actor/goal analysis (Martin, Matthiessen & Painter, 1997) was combined with pronoun analysis and interactional positioning analysis (Chouliarki & Fairclough, 1999) to explore how stakeholders in the process, particularly teachers, were positioned by policy-makers. In the rest of this paper, we present analyses of the process of standards formulation in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and finish with a discussion of the implications such standards have for the ways in which teachers and schools operate.

## Development of the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards

The development of Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards between 1996 and 1998 reflected conflicts over the direction of the future of Wisconsin education that were similar to those unfolding in Minnesota. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), under the leadership of the elected Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Benson, had begun a process of public, inclusive standards development in the mid-1990s, which showed evidence of neoliberal influences. This process was both interrupted and disregarded by Tommy Thompson, the popular conservative governor of the state, in early 1997, when he presented the citizens of Wisconsin with a draft of model standards developed under the auspices of the conservative Hudson Institute, and which he proposed as the basis for Wisconsin's academic standards. The final document, released in 1998, was a compromise melding of the DPI and Hudson Institute efforts, a compromise that reflects the tensions between neoliberal (Benson's) and neoconservative (Thompson's) agendas.

In this section of the paper, we look at two types of documents in relation to Wisconsin standards formation, drafts of the standards themselves, and letters written by Thompson and Benson in 1996 and 1997 in which they introduced their drafts to the citizens and attempted to sell the idea of standards to the state. It is important to recall that as recently as ten years ago the necessity for standards was not a foregone conclusion among voters, especially those in strong local-control states, who had to be convinced. As will be seen, both Benson and Thompson were committed to the idea of standards-based reform, and shared a model of how standards would work to reform education. Our analysis of these letters shows not only the commonalities in their approaches, but differences which reveal deep fissures between their concepts of what students should be learning in schools and how standards should define what should be learned. In addition, the roles these two men chose to play vis-à-vis the standards and the public varied widely, with Thompson showing a shrewd, political understanding of the public's desire for decisive action in addressing what was perceived as the need for enhanced public control of schooling. His assumption of a *strict father* role (Lakoff, 1995) effectively derailed the more deliberate, inclusive process Benson had been pursuing.

The differences in rhetorical approaches are reflected in the developing standards. Thematic analyses of all drafts in the process show traces of the conflicts and compromises among traditional liberal and neoliberal forces, represented by Benson, and neoconservative forces, whose standard was borne by Thompson. An analysis of the high school literature standards, in particular, reveals a document which, in giving everyone a little something, lacks coherence and direction.

### Presenting Standards as the Solution

In initial letters presenting drafts of standards to Wisconsin citizens, Benson and Thompson presented an almost identical model of standards and how they would function in Wisconsin schools. Both men agreed that students needed to be functioning at a higher academic level in the future than they were at the time. Both stated repeatedly that if these higher expectations were stated clearly and precisely, so that students knew what was expected of them, students could and would put forward the extra effort needed to achieve at the higher academic level. Students would not do this on their own, of course: "In the near future, the fully developed standards will begin to shape teaching and learning in Wisconsin's 2,000 school buildings" (Benson, 1996a). "I realize that a strong standards-driven reform will demand needed changes in teaching and assessment. I believe our teachers and their respective districts are ready to make the needed changes and I look forward

to their involvement” (Thompson, 1997a). Central to this implicit prototypical narrative was the perceived need for definitive rigor and clarity. Similar modifiers were used to describe the standards in both men’s language: standards are *clear*, *high*, *academic*; *rigorous*, *higher*, associated with *excellence*; *clearly written*, *clearly defined*, and *specific*.

However, calls for increased top-down state control represented a challenge to the autonomy of local school boards. Given the rhetorical challenge of shifting public attitudes towards the need for centralization of curriculum control, each man, in introductory letters independently presented to the public, made use of textual and rhetorical strategies which had the effect of establishing the need for standards, while allaying fears that they would result in a state-mandated curriculum. They also both postponed any clear indication of how districts would be held accountable for meeting these standards.

The use of that aspect of English grammar which places the new information in a sentence second (in the rheme) and given information in the beginning (the theme) enables speakers and writers to portray innovations as established fact and was a textual device each man used in selling standards to the public (Fairclough, 1992; Halliday, 1994; Woodside-Jiron, 2004). One example of this shift appears in Benson’s first letter introducing the DPI standards. In his first paragraph discussed below, Benson quoted from the *Business Roundtable* to posit that new technologies and other changes would require new academic skills of our young people to meet the employment demands of the future. The second paragraph quoted below puts forth the argument for standards. Each subsequent sentence treats the new assertions of each previous sentence as given information. In this example, given information is underlined, and new information is in bold. Benson begins with a reference to the preceding paragraph:

These and other challenges require **higher standards of excellence to improve academic performance**. The only way to ensure that Wisconsin’s students have the skills and abilities to be successful in this rapidly changing technological world is **to set clear, high, academic standards**. These standards must describe precisely what today’s students must learn and be able to do to be successful in their adult lives. (Benson, 1996a)

By the end of the paragraph, *these standards* are accepted as fact, and in the following paragraphs are referred to as developing and soon to be implemented. In each of these letters, Thompson and Benson use this sort of complex construction to introduce the need for standards. Once this is accomplished, and the focus of the letters shifts to the steps to be taken, the structures of the theme elements of their sentences tend to be simpler.

A common rhetorical device that each writer used early on in these introductory letters, and which serves the function of reinforcing the message established by the sentence grammar, is the use of quotations by an authority which serves to convince the reader that a situation exists which requires the correction that the proposed standards will provide. However, these quotes are interesting at another level. While Benson and Thompson shared a similar model of how standards function, these quotes begin to show their differences in their arguments for the need for standards, what sorts of learning should be going on in Wisconsin classrooms, and the approach each man would take in the upcoming struggle to make the Wisconsin standards fit his vision. These are not just differences in style, but are reflected in the substance of the standards that each man proposed as the basis of state curriculum, and thus what teachers and students would find themselves focusing time and attention on in the future.

In Benson’s letter introducing the Draft DPI standards to Wisconsin taxpayers, the United States business community speaks through a national publication:

Today’s youth will face enormous challenges in the competitive world of the twenty-first century. As the *Business Roundtable* has observed, “Only a generation

removed from the time when hard work, a strong back, and common sense could secure a decent job, young people are faced with today's global, information-based economy defined by constantly changing technology." Not only must today's students learn advanced academic skills, but they must also gain the flexibility to learn and adapt to changing conditions and job demands throughout their lifetimes. (Benson, 1996a)

This quotation reveals Benson's allegiance to the standards as derived from an essentially neoliberal perspective, as he evokes discourses of business management and the sense of crisis and change in the global economy. The need for standards comes from a world portrayed as undergoing rapid, continuous *change*. Given the shifting needs of the workplace, the workers of tomorrow will need to be cognitively different, with more advanced and flexible cognitive functioning. In the following paragraph, he reminds the reader of the "skills and abilities to be successful in this rapidly changing technological world." In another letter, attached to the second draft of the standards, he goes into more detail about the types of learning he is referring to, "process" learning usually associated with constructivist teaching philosophy: "Writing, speaking, listening, reading, solving problems, conducting experiments, and evaluating ideas are processes that must be products of an excellent education" (Benson, 1996b).

Still, there is a fundamental contradiction within Benson's ideas of what standards should be, revealed not only in these letters, but in the developing drafts of the standards themselves, as discussed below. If standards function to specify what students should know and are able to do to be successful in their adult lives, but that target is continually moving, how can that be specified statewide for teaching and assessment? What becomes more salient, the flexibility or the specificity? The majority of Benson's writing discusses how to achieve the latter—the last paragraph of his letter contrasts strongly with the first:

Our young people deserve clear direction for learning in our classrooms; if students apply themselves, I believe they can succeed in school and in life. We owe them clear explanations of what's expected of them and an opportunity to practice, learn and perform.... The first and most important step is to prepare these rigorous standards. (Benson, 1996a)

While the expert educator in Benson may have been excited about the possibilities of flexibility, change, and lifelong learning, he never successfully resolved the contradiction between these two faces of neoliberalism of change versus stasis: that which looks to prepare workers for a new, continually-changing economy (Reich, 1991) and that which frames schools as a place of controlled standardization and accountability based on testable curriculum content (Achieve, 2000; Fairclough, 2003). Because he chose to take the *nurturant parent* role associated with a constructivist approach and the invitation for citizen involvement (Lakoff, 1995), Benson would allow the taxpayers and the governor to push him towards the second choice.

### Identifying Neoliberal Tensions in Early DPI English Language Arts Standards Drafts

The first two drafts of the standards, developed under DPI auspices by committees of educators, citizens, and DPI staff (here referred to as DPI Draft 1 and DPI Draft 2), reveal some of this movement and some of these conflicts. Our analysis focuses on the literature standards for ninth through twelfth grades, part of the English Language Arts (ELA) standards. These were organized under three subheadings.

The subheading "Students will read and discuss literature to understand themselves and others" (p. 6) shows evidence of tensions among various factions concerned with the study of

literature: liberal, neoliberal, and conservative. In the first draft, the traditional liberals seem to exert their influence, as expressed in a number of performance standards referring to students using literature to better understand themselves and others. This was the only draft to emphasize the use of literature for self-exploration: Students would “Respond personally” and “Make connections between their reading and what they already know by identifying experiences that are common to themselves and to the characters they read about” (p. 6). The more conservative concept of literature as a body of content was weakest in this draft, and seemed linked to the project of learning about others in order to gain some sympathetic understanding and broaden student horizons: Students would “Read literature to comprehend places, people, times and events both familiar and unfamiliar” and “Gain insight into cultures and analyze different cultural perspectives” (p. 6).

However, these therapeutic (Bernstein, 2000) goals did not survive public scrutiny. The public forums held throughout the state for citizen comment and the written feedback to the first draft apparently motivated a change. In DPI Draft 2, this section went from being the longest of the three to the shortest, and there is only one specific reference to self-exploration: “connect themes from literature to self and others” (Wisconsin DPI, 1996b, p. 25). Other discussions of motive, behavior, and consequences are now confined to characters. In addition, this section now specifically includes references to literary heritage code words and phrases, as in, “Read and discuss literature of various *historical periods* and cultures ranging from the *classical world* to the present” (emphasis added). Other cultures are still mentioned: “Discuss how others resolve issues and conflicts across cultures and *throughout history* in literature;” “Compare knowledge of *heritage*, culture, and life experiences to literature” (p. 25).

While language related to history and heritage is layered onto this section, it is not as the foundation for a strongly content-based literature curriculum rooted in Anglo-American heritage, as advocated by conservative forces (e.g., Stotsky, 2005). What is interesting here is that there is no evaluative difference between other cultures and our own, present and past. The literature helps us understand the history, the history helps us understand the literature, which functions as a reflection of its place and time. The same is true for cross-cultural understanding; it all helps us understand present issues and ourselves.

This pattern is more evident in the comprehensive resource list for teachers attached to the literature standards in Draft 2 (p. 26). This was a complete page of annotated lists of organizations, publications, and websites recommending books for children and young adults for use in classrooms. These organizations include the American Library Association, literacy education organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, various multi-cultural associations, including Kaleidoscope, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, as well as resources specific to Wisconsin. Literary merit is apparently secondary to engagement in this list that emphasizes young adult and multi-cultural books. While there is one book list entitled, “Outstanding Books for the College-bound,” there are six specifically related to multicultural literature, including two devoted to Native American literature, and the annotations make frequent references to these books’ *appeal* to young readers.

The subheading “Students will read to interpret and critically analyze literary works” relied on New Criticism as the default model for literary analysis in both drafts. This was more developed in the second draft, most likely in response to public requests for greater specificity: for example, Draft 1’s “Interpret literary devices” (Wisconsin DPI, 1996a, p. 6) became “Analyze the effect of literary devices such as figurative language, allusion, dialect, dialogue, and symbolism on a selection” in Draft 2 (Wisconsin DPI, 1996b, p. 25). This section provided a good example of the movement towards specificity and stasis mentioned above, while the use of New Criticism suits the neoliberal call for critical reading of a particular, technical stamp, reading that can be assessed through standardized measurements, as AP and the SAT have been doing for years.

However, it is under the subheading, “Students will read to acquire information” that the growing influence of the neoliberal faction can be seen between DPI Drafts 1 and 2. While literature’s therapeutic role diminishes, its role as a tool for teaching particular reading skills needed in the workplace becomes more important, even though this backgrounds the literary qualities of texts. In Draft 2, this section goes from being the shortest to the longest section of the Literature standard, growing from four bullets to ten, and dealing with a variety of document types and skills:

- Investigate and critically analyze information to arrive at defensible conclusions
- Understand and use technical reports, technical manuals, historical papers, and government documents
- Develop hypotheses to investigate an issue or dilemma (DPI Draft 2, p. 25)

Such standards seem to reflect a general reluctance to define a “literary” type of text and reading, a move in tension with those who added the literary heritage language to other performance standards.

An examination of the concepts of literature in Drafts 1 and 2 reveals a tension between more traditional liberal forces interested in literature as a tool for making students more self-aware and more other-aware, and the neoliberal advocates who want to prepare students for the new-capitalist future. Understanding others in the world is good in a global economy, but being able to access information in and across a variety of texts is absolutely crucial. This co-exists with the more conservative expectation that students will learn to do New Critical analysis of literary texts, consistent with other themes in Benson’s letter: the call for clarity and rigor, the need for specificity and accountability. In basing analysis on an outmoded model of criticism and in moving away from literature study that enables students to link the study of literature to their lives or current issues, the framers of the DPI standards were also moving away from flexibility and constructivist models of pedagogy, thus beginning to resolve the neoliberal conflicts expressed in Benson’s letter in the direction of specificity and accountability.

### Neoconservative Standards for Wisconsin

Tommy Thompson was less conflicted about his goals and about his role in developing standards. In his letter introducing the Hudson Institute’s Modern Red Schoolhouse (MRS) Standards to Wisconsin citizens (Thompson, 1997a), he opposes flexibility and process. Words like flexibility and change are conspicuously minimized in Thompson’s letter. He repeats the phrase “core set”: “core set of skills and knowledge,” “core set of subject areas,” which are always English, math, science, history, and geography. This idea is repeated in the Executive Order 302 that directs the development of a *set* of standards in the *core* subject areas (Thompson, 1997b). He approves of the Modern Red Schoolhouse standards not only because of their rigor, but because they “give equal weight to the bricks and mortar of education: knowledge and skills” (Thompson, 1997a; apparently borrowing from Finn, quoted earlier on p. 19 of this article).

In his letter’s early quote, Thompson himself is the self-proclaimed educational expert being quoted in the Forward of a national publication he was instrumental in promoting as chairman of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in order to encourage states to “embrace standards-driven reform.” In the Forward, he states:

We can no longer tolerate a situation where too many students are leaving schools without having learned the core set of skills and knowledge they will need to be successful.... The first most important step to correct this situation and

improve the performance of students is to agree on clear standards for what students ought to know and be able to do in a core set of subject areas: English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. (Thompson, 1997a, p. 1)

In both the prior, national roles (as chairman of this group and the National Governor's Association) and as governor of Wisconsin, he played the responsible executive, or, in Lakoff's terms, the *strict father*, correcting a situation which had become intolerable by drawing boundaries around the essential knowledge required in a limited number of subject areas. He therefore enacts the need for a strong leader perceived as taking charge and establishing control through adopting an unambiguous, definitive rhetorical stance and re-establishing traditional subject-matter in Wisconsin schools. The repeated emphasis on *core sets* also marks him as opposed to a constructivist approach, which would work from the abilities and interests students in various communities in Wisconsin might bring into the classroom: "Once standards are defined, our students can achieve at high levels." He frames this contention as non-debatable and as legitimated by the official authority of The Hudson Institute. He also implies that because the standards have been completed, contrary to Benson, there is only minimal need for further citizen input.

### The Modern Red Schoolhouse Standards

Our analysis of the high school literature standards in the Modern Red Schoolhouse Standards (MRS) that this letter introduces reveals the influence of the neoconservative stance on curriculum (Modern Red Schoolhouse, 1997). The Modern Red Schoolhouse Project, headed by Dr. Sally Kilgore, was sponsored by the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank. One of the striking aspects of these standards is their brevity; in spite of Thompson's proclamation that these standards would finally provide specific guidelines for students and teachers, they actually are more prone to the high-sounding, vague statement, and are less detailed in spelling out the types of learning which would take place than DPI Drafts 1 and 2. These standards seem to imply a pre-existing consensus about content-matter knowledge and how it is learned that one need only refer to. What is important is clearly marking the parameters around that body of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Lakoff, 1995).

It is clear that self-exploration and multi-culturalism are out, and Anglo-American cultural heritage is in. While the MRS standards do not detail specific activities, texts, periods, cultures, etc., there are more standards related to models of literature as an expression of its place and time and as a body of content knowledge, and these standards are listed first, indicating their prominence (emphasis added):

- Standard 1: Each student can draw on a broad base of knowledge about American, British, European, and non-European literature and recognize the conventions associated with the literature of certain historical periods and cultures.
- Standard 2: Each student can draw on a *broad base of knowledge about the great themes of literature*—for example, themes of initiation, love and duty, heroism, illusion and reality, salvation, death and rebirth—and explain *how these themes are developed in specific works from various historical periods and cultures*.



- Standard 3: Each student can draw on a broad base of knowledge about *great works*—images and ideas, episodes, characters, quotations, and so on—when reflecting about life and literature. (p. 9)

The “broad base of knowledge,” the “conventions” associated with a variety of literatures from different historical periods and cultures (with American and British leading the list) are the testable content that provides English with the knowledge base that is the bricks of the bricks and mortar Thompson discusses in his reference to a *knowledge and skills*-based curriculum. Stotsky (2005) points out that literature is central to the English curriculum, and that its neglect or mishandling is perhaps the greatest obstacle to standards reform. As in the above standards, Stotsky leaves undefined just what works are to be taught and what the criteria are for a work to be considered great. It is notable that, at this point, the Hudson Institute also does not specify which works of literature are worth reading, but leaves that up to the school districts of Wisconsin. It is unclear whether this shows sensitivity to Wisconsin’s tradition of local control of curriculum, or indicates an assumption that we share an understanding of the great works and great themes of our literary heritage. Completely missing from the MRS upper level standards are any references to relating literature to one’s personal experience, although there are brief references to this made at the elementary and intermediate levels.

As in the DPI Draft standards, New Criticism is the default critical mode, and it is integrated into these standards, but in less detail than in the DPI standards. Instead, the MRS standards that owe the most to New Criticism are very general and, umbrella-like, cover much of what teachers do with analysis in college prep classrooms. Standard 5 also shows the common tendency in American schools to blend New Criticism with a weak historicism (Applebee, 1993; Caughlan, 2004), which underscores the strength of the cultural heritage model in the MRS standards (emphasis added):

Standard 5: Each student can explain the structure of certain passages of literature *from various historical periods and cultures*, illustrating the authors’ use of syntax, images, figures of speech, literary and cultural allusions, symbols, irony, and other devices *in the context of history, cultures, and literary style*. (p. 9)

Students are expected to learn the tools of the New Critic, but these are mentioned almost in passing, subordinated to the main purpose of learning the great themes and ideas of our literary heritage.

The dearth of language promoting language and skills useful to navigating the workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was a surprise in the MRS English Language Arts standards. Thompson was considered a very business-friendly governor, and we expected to find more attention to technical reading and writing, integration of technology, and critical reading and writing in these standards, to go along with the focus on traditional content knowledge. Kilgore even mentions using the Department of Labor’s SCANS report in preparing the standards, but its recommendations are difficult to spot, not only in the reading standards, but in the research and listening areas of the ELA standards.

The range of extra-literary reading used to learn critical reading detailed in the DPI Drafts has been reduced to reading essays and articles in the two performance standards related to content-area reading:

Standard 6: Given an essay, each student can identify its central idea or ideas and explain how the author has developed the essay through coordination and subordination.

Standard 7: Each student can distinguish fact from opinion in an article, identify propaganda techniques and fallacious reasoning, and integrate knowledge from the article into prior knowledge about the topic. (p. 9)

The research and listening standards contain more on managing information, but these standards have much less than the DPI standards on the sorts of neoliberal reading for information, critical reading, preparing for the new-capitalist workplace skills evident in the DPI standards. However, some of those skills border on questioning authority, which, as Lakoff (1995) points out, is not a legitimate activity for minors where the *strict father* is in charge.

Strict-father *versus* nurturant-parent *discourses shaping involvement of constituencies*. There are also tensions between Thompson's top-down approach of imposing standards and Benson's bottom-up approach to soliciting constituent involvement in framing standards. Leading up to the introductory quote in the Thompson letter, discussed above, is a series of five I-statements by Thompson: *I* chaired these two national committees, *I* re-focused the country's attention on educational excellence, *I* advanced the issue of standards-driven reform, and *I* directed ECS to produce this document, in which Forward *I* stated important facts (Thompson, 1997a, p. 1). Later in the letter, he informs us that he reviewed numerous standards documents before choosing the MRS standards, and that he "adapted and adopted" them for presentation to Wisconsin citizens. He has been a busy fellow, and he is not finished: he intends to establish a "public engagement process" to obtain some input from Wisconsin citizens on a final version of these standards (p. 2). He does not mention in this document or in the Executive Order which established the public engagement process that John Benson and the DPI had been developing content standards for the previous eighteen months (Thompson, 1997b). In contrast, Benson placed himself in the grammatical subject position only three times in his introductory letter: "I seek your participation;" "I ask each of you to send me your comments;" and "I believe [students] can succeed" (Benson, 1996a).

However, because of the constitutional peculiarities of Wisconsin, which has a democratically elected Superintendent of Public Instruction and local control of curriculum, Thompson could not impose state standards by fiat. The one place he does use *We* (outside of the quotation above) is towards the end of the letter, in a brief paragraph where he introduces the idea of citizen input into the standards process:

We also need to involve many groups of stakeholders in our efforts to develop local high class standards. In association with educators we need active involvement by citizens/taxpayers, parents, business leaders and students themselves. (Thompson, 1997a, p. 2)

It is unclear who this *we* indicates, or why he relinquishes discursive control at just this juncture. In the next paragraph he goes back to talking about what *I* will do to establish the public engagement process. In comparison with Benson's process of standards-writing, it was a very limited process of public engagement. As stated in the Executive Order, the whole point of using the Modern Red Schoolhouse Standards and referring to others states' standards was to "save critical time in the standards development process," (Thompson, 1997b, p. 1) and while the committee was instructed to also seek "input and assistance from parents, educators and the business and labor communities" as well as "citizens of Wisconsin not affiliated with the educational community," the process was to take not more than one year (Thompson, 1997b, p. 2).

Benson was also an elected executive, the Superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction. He was a certified as well as a self-proclaimed expert in educational issues, and had at his command a large building full of people bristling with advanced degrees and many years of experience in education. He could have taken a similar strong executive role, but chose to adopt a more democratic, inclusive role, closer to Lakoff's (1995) *nurturant parent* role. Where Thompson used *I* to refer to actions taken by his administration, Benson tended to use *we*, which from context obviously referred to himself and his colleagues at the DPI.

The *nurturant parent* role plays out in government in attempting to strengthen social ties through empathy, fairness, and hearing all voices. In Benson's case, this became evident in the way he set out to develop the standards: write the standards in several drafts, disseminate the drafts throughout the state, and present numerous opportunities for comment, both in writing and at public forums throughout the state. The standards themselves were written by groups consisting of DPI employees, teachers, parents and other interested parties (Benson, 1996a), whose sometimes conflicting interests were reflected in the standards themselves, as seen in our analysis of Drafts 1 and 2, above.

Benson's first letter is full of invitations to Wisconsin citizens to take part in the standards process: "We are asking you to help revise and improve these preliminary drafts." "Your thoughts and ideas will ensure that the most important knowledge and skills are included." There are five separate requests for citizen input in this first letter, as well as a full explanation of how citizens have been involved up to this point, and how the standards will progress from this point.

However, the letter going out with the second draft raises questions about whether or not the voters of Wisconsin really wanted openness and flexibility, or whether they wanted the strict father to set firm boundaries around educational goals. Benson reports the variety of responses he received on a variety of issues, and in the interest of fairness (a *nurturant parent* trait, according to Lakoff), "we have attempted to balance the views on all sides of these issues. You will find the standards much more clearly stated. You will find a considerably greater degree of specificity without usurping the curricular control of local districts. Though adding specificity, we have not neglected processes" (Benson, 1996b). This last comment indicates that "specificity" is a code word for stasis, for spelling out and setting down what is to be learned. As a *nurturant parent* and consensus-builder, he had to compromise on the more constructivist *processes* and add more *specificity* to the standards because that is what he was hearing from constituents for whom *standards* connoted *clarity and rigor*.

Thompson's strict father move—the announcement of the Modern Red Schoolhouse Standards as the basis for the Wisconsin State Standards—would soon put an end to Benson's experiment in inclusive standards writing. Benson's expertise as educator and his nurturant-parent approach could not compete with the governor's political power. In addition, Benson could not oppose Thompson because he agreed with the governor about the need for rigorous, clear, academic standards. Over the next year, Benson served as one of only two educators on Thompson's Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards (the other was a conservative professor from outside of Madison hand-picked by Thompson), but because the Council also used the DPI work as a basis for the Standards, and the DPI staff did much of the compiling and writing, the work the educators had done over the previous two years was not completely lost.

### Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards: Who Won the Culture Wars?

The standards developed by Thompson's council and adopted in January, 1998, were presented with an introduction that signaled a bridging of the neoconservative and neoliberal divide.<sup>2</sup> Its brief historical background recognized the two years of DPI work, the Modern Red Schoolhouse standards, and gave nods to other states, including Virginia (whose neoconservative standards were prepared under the leadership of Cheri Pierson Yecke) and the New Standards Project (a more neoliberal document). In the English Language Arts standards, the wording of the Reading/Literature content standard and the Rationale were taken directly from the Literature and

<sup>2</sup> The standards are available at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/standards/index.html>.

Reading standards in the DPI drafts. However, the Performance standards are quite different and show the influence of the MRS standards. An analysis of that standard for its conception of literature also shows resistance to the influence of those standards.

In looking at literature as an object of analysis, it is not surprising that New Criticism implicitly remains the model for academic literary criticism in the standards, as it was the dominant model in the preceding drafts. However, considering Thompson's call to make "what students should know and be able to do" explicit (Thompson, 1997a, p. 1), it is interesting that this document relies more on the MRS standards as a model for describing critical analysis, which they did in a very vague way, and not on DPI Draft 2, which spelled out the types of tasks students do in analysis rather clearly. Instead, as in the MRS standards, New Critical techniques are listed as in service to larger aims of explaining how a work reflects its culture, or portrays a universal theme:

ELA A.12.2: Explain the structure of selected classical and contemporary works of literature, in whole and in part, from various cultures and historical periods, and illustrate ways in which authors use syntax, imagery, figures of speech, allusions, symbols, irony, and other devices in the context of history, culture, and style.

The references to history and culture remain in relation to literary analysis. However, the emphasis on "the broad base of knowledge" about "great works" that was so prominent in the MRS standards is largely missing.

At first glance, it is not obvious that the MRS emphasis on the cultural model of literature as an expression of our Anglo-American cultural heritage has been undercut. In fact, the introduction to the ELA standards includes a paragraph headed, **Great Authors and Literary Works**, which begins, "Human beings have produced a rich treasury of great writing." However, the main thrust of this paragraph is to explain that Wisconsin leaves which great works will be read up to the individual district to decide. "What is most important is that students learn to read well and read enough to meet their various needs and interests, that they have opportunities to read quality literature, and that they love to read. Exactly which works are read may vary from community to community. Selected resources are listed after the reading/literature standard."

While the reading/literature performance standards clearly borrow from the MRS performance standards, they also modify them. The first MRS performance standard listed the literatures that students would be familiar with: "American, British, European, and non-European... certain historical periods and cultures." This has been dropped. The modifiers "contemporary and classical" have been added, making room for contemporary works. Finally, "literary text" or "literature" is used, rather than making reference to literature from historical periods or literary periods, thus keeping the texts studied in school less tied to passing the test of time. (ELA A. 12.2)

In addition, a look at the "selected resources" mentioned in the "Great Authors" paragraph indicates that Wisconsin's growing interest in young adult and multi-cultural literature over the last twenty years continued to be encouraged, if somewhat quietly, by the DPI. This is a shortened version of the list of resources published in DPI Draft 2, which focused largely on children's, young adult, and multi-cultural literature. The only hint that the Hudson Institute has been here is the addition of two websites at the end of the list: *Project Bartleby* ("An archive of actual texts of classic works on the Web") and *Project Gutenberg* ("Another archive of actual texts of classic books").

While these suggested works might celebrate youth and cultural diversity, the earlier focus of the DPI drafts on analyzing "different cultural perspectives" has undergone a subtle shift. Under sub-heading 12.3, "Read and discuss literary and nonliterary texts in order to understand human experience" are the following pair of performance standards:

- Examine, explain, and evaluate, orally and in writing, various perspectives concerning individual, community, national, and world issues reflected in literary and nonliterary texts
- Develop and articulate, orally and in writing, defensible points of view on individual, community, national, and world issues reflected in literary and nonliterary texts.

Rather than link students to literature through their personal experience or through attempts to empathize with others, the task is to “examine, explain, and evaluate... *issues* reflected in literary and nonliterary texts.” The second step in this process is to develop and defend points of view on these issues. This seems more related to the increasing focus on teaching students to write persuasive essays than to develop understanding, more closely related to the neoliberal project of using literature to teach critical reading and writing skills.

However, this final draft of the standards separates the teaching of literature from the teaching of reading strategies to acquire information or analyze or evaluate an argument. They are separated under different subheadings, as are literary texts and non-literary texts. The sorts of critical reading associated with the literature standards are those one usually associates with literary reading, such as those delineated in the standards already mentioned, or analyzing a text for its themes or the author’s views. Literature is no longer just another tool for preparing students for the twenty-first-century workplace.

### A Discourse of Bland Consensus

Wisconsin’s Model Academic Standards are neither a strongly neoliberal nor neoconservative document. While Wisconsin did end up adopting state content standards that it would soon use as the basis for required standardized tests, Thompson’s *strict father* move did not work as planned when it came to the language arts standards in general, and literature in particular. He was not able to replace the neoliberal agenda with a neoconservative one; in fact, the neoconservative literature curriculum was largely resisted, both in terms of the types of texts, and the sorts of knowledge that would have been privileged. The extent to which he failed can be read in the Fordham Foundation’s *The State of State English Standards 2005* (Stotsky, 2005), which gave the Wisconsin ELA standards only a C, largely because its literature standards do not spell out “significant authors, works, literary periods, and literary traditions... to provide the contours of the substantive content of the English curriculum for the secondary grades” (p. 71). However, the liberals and neoliberals did not end up crafting coherent standards which reflected their philosophies, either. Most of the multi-cultural and personal knowledge standards were wiped from the standards, but they were largely gone after the round of public meetings held after the first draft of the DPI standards was released. More surprising was the weakening of the supposedly business-friendly critical reading standards. This analysis suggests that groups like the Hudson Institute are at odds with the groups that are looking to promote critical thinking, creative problem-solving and life-long, thinking-outside-the-box sorts of experiences. Instead, the Hudson Institute’s idea of training for the future is to analyze the inductive or deductive structure of an essay, or to tell fact from opinion in an article. But to “evaluate the reliability and authenticity of information conveyed in a text” (Wisconsin DPI, 1996b, p. 25) is crossing a line for those who find it inappropriate for young people to challenge authority.

These compromises represented tensions between Benson’s neoliberal appeal to address the economic needs of a global economy through development of technical communication and problem-solving skills versus Thompson’s focus on the need for a more content-based curriculum

reflecting traditional social values. The result is a document that neither defends our intellectual heritage nor breaks new ground in preparing children for a changing world. There is little or no focus on critical literacy or media literacy practices central to participation in contemporary society. Instead, Wisconsin has inscribed the status quo into a compromise document that presents the teaching of literature as a rather humdrum experience, but one that can be described and assessed using standardized instruments.

## Development of the Minnesota Standards

From the early 1990s to 2004, Minnesota developed and implemented two completely different sets of standards. The first set of standards, known as the Profile of Learning and its associated curriculum, was based on previous attempts to implement outcome-based education (OBE) in the 1980s. These standards were based on constructivist learning and an inquiry/project-based curriculum, with an evaluation system employing performance assessment as opposed to content-based tests. Development of the Profile of Learning standards was justified through neoliberal appeals for the need to acquire constructivist and problem-solving skills appropriate for the new global economic system and workplaces. Critiques of various problems with its implementation led to its repeal by the state legislature and its replacement by a more content-based set of standards, the Minnesota Academic Standards, a replacement justified by a more neoconservative appeal for the need to learn basic content.

Given these two competing sets of standards, we were interested in how neoliberal and neoconservative discourses were used to justify the value of each set of standards, with a particular focus on the English language arts standards. Such an analysis reflects the ways in which ideological assumptions voiced by external agencies served to frame curriculum development at the state level, a representation of an increasing influence of political forces and the diminishing influence of educators on curriculum development (Bernstein, 2000).

### The Profile of Learning

During the 1990s, the Profile of Learning was developed based on input from various educator groups who were asked to specify what students needed to know and be able to do. However, another major thrust for its development and implementation was the concern of community and business leaders about workforce preparation in a global economy. Much of the Profile developers' focus on replacing seat time with performance-based assessment and the development of self-directed learners and productive group participants was linked to the philosophy of Goals 2000 as developed during the first President Bush and Clinton administrations (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003). It also framed standards in terms of specific behaviors or cognitive processes while, at the same time, limiting the number of standards to avoid the problem that plagued the behavior-objective approach of the 1970s of creating multitudes of specific objectives.

This neoliberal project was associated with the need to develop students who could engage in problem-solving, inquiry-based learning so that they would be able to adapt to different social and cultural contexts associated with the global economy (Reich, 1991). A primary assumption was that students learned these workplace practices through engaging in hands-on learning projects and through being evaluated using performance-based criteria.

By the late 1990s, the emerging Profile was organized around ten *learning areas*. Two of these were specific to English language arts: "Read, view, and listen to complex information in the

English language” and “Write and speak effectively in the English language.” Several other learning areas incorporated language arts in more interdisciplinary projects (e.g., “Conduct research and communicate findings;” “Understand interactions between people and cultures”). Students were required to complete work in 24 of 48 *high standards* in these ten areas in order to graduate.

For each of the two areas that focused on language arts, there were two or more content standards developed for high school, middle school, and elementary grade levels. For example, the following content standard for middle school students is associated with the “Read, View and Listen” learning area:

*Literature and Arts Analysis and Interpretation.*

A student shall demonstrate the ability to interpret and evaluate complex works of music, dance, theater, visual arts, literature, or media arts by doing the following:

- A. describing the elements and structure of the art form; the artistic intent; and the historical, cultural, and social background of the selected art works;
- B. applying specific critical criteria to interpret and analyze the selected art works;
- C. describing how particular effects are produced by the artist’s use of the elements of the art form; and
- D. communicating an informed interpretation using the vocabulary of the art form. (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003, ¶ 14)

This literature standard incorporates some of the more traditional knowledge and skills associated with literature study: for example, the use of formalist analysis in “describing the elements and structure of the art form;” “describing how particular effects are produced by the artist’s use of the elements of the art form;” and using cultural and historical background in interpretation. However, this standard also deviates from a more traditional literature curriculum by defining literature as art to be evaluated according to aesthetic criteria, a relatively unusual conception of literature in state standards. In addition, studying literature is framed in multi-disciplinary terms as integrated into the larger project of arts appreciation, an interdisciplinary approach that created difficulties in attempting to implement this standard across the boundaries of traditional school disciplines.

To assist teachers in the implementation of these standards, the Minnesota state education department developed a set of *performance packages*, addressing the different standards and designed to model the implementation of constructivist, project/performance-based learning. Each package contained specific teaching activities and performance assessment criteria. For example, for the “Read, View, and Listen” learning area related to literature, packages were developed involving development of a group play involving an animal character through movement, sound and rhythm, voice, costume, and props; creation of a character autobiography and character interview leading to the development of a script and performance; keeping journal responses to literature; creating a *travel guide* to the fictional world of the story or novel; and writing a review of a novel.

Many teachers and administrators assumed that these packages constituted mandated curriculum instead of recognizing them as illustrative examples of constructivist teaching and performance assessment. Many teachers resented having to replace their curriculum with what they assumed was a mandated curriculum. Teachers also perceived the Profile as complex and difficult to implement; a poll conducted by the state’s teacher union of 603 teachers in Spring, 1999 found that 63% opposed the Profile and only 30% supported it (Bradley, 1999). The teachers focused their concerns particularly on the lack of training in how to conduct performance assessments, the excessive amount of record keeping and paperwork, and the difficulty of implementing the

performance packages. For example, one teacher who favored a focus on constructivist learning noted that assessing these packages using a 1 through 4 grading system was unrealistic: “I teach 150 kids, 30 an hour. It’s an unbelievable amount of work to sit down with each of them and go through these assessments” (Profile of Learning, 1999, p. 9).

There is evidence that the Profile was serving to foster higher-order thinking. A study conducted of 171 English teachers’ and 487 social studies teachers’ perceptions of the Profile found that 51% of the teachers perceived an increase in their students’ higher order thinking as a result of implementing the Profile (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003). Many teachers noted that their students’ engagement with more hands-on, project-based learning fostered their ability to formulate their own ideas and knowledge.

A key factor in teachers’ perceptions of the value of the Profile was the extent and quality of their training in constructivist teaching methods and use of performance assessment. Those teachers who rated their training and/or their access to resources as “good” or “excellent” were much more likely to report positive student outcomes associated with the Profile (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003), results that were confirmed in another study (Swenson, 2001). However, less than 10% of the teachers perceived their preparation and resources to be excellent, and over one-third of the teachers rated their preparation and resources as poor.

Teacher critiques reflect a primary issue with what are perceived as top-down state-mandated curriculum agendas without the necessary support and training, that position teachers with limited professional authority over their instruction. One commentator described teachers’ reactions to the initial implementation as one of lack of trust (Nelson, 1998):

I was struck by the unspoken, equally phenomenal lack of trust that inspired this centralized curriculum initiative. Minnesota’s professional educators are essentially being told that someone else—a politician, a community leader, a bureaucrat, another teacher—knows better what performance should be expected of their students. (p. 681)

Because much of the initial justification for the Profile was formulated in terms of neoliberal discourse associated with preparing students for the workplace, teachers were also critical of “the attempt to lay a business model over an educational system [that] reduced education to an accounting system rather than a human growth system” (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003, p. 32). In describing what they perceived as an accounting system, the teachers were therefore critical of the neoliberal assumptions, particularly in terms of the cumbersome measurement practices, underlying the Profile. However, a much more vocal critique of the Profile emerged from conservatives and neoconservatives, who perceived the constructivist orientation of the Profile as undermining the need for teaching academic subject matter and values.

### Neoconservative Critiques of the Profile of Learning

The Profile came under attack from neoconservative groups both outside and inside Minnesota. Outside the state, in their reports analyzing state standards, the Fordham Foundation and Achieve gave the Profile low marks in comparison to the more content-based standards of other states. For example, the Fordham Foundation’s study of state English standards, conducted primarily by Sandra Stotsky (1997, 2000), gave the Profile a failing grade. Because some of the standards were written with concepts such as *appreciate* or *engage* to avoid the behaviorism associated with behavioral objectives, “a large number of standards are not specific, measurable, or demanding. Moreover, literary study gets short shrift” (Stotsky, 2000, p. 28). In contrast, her review of the 1998 Wisconsin standards praises the clear expectation that students use Standard English



and the inclusion of the history of the English language, although she criticizes the standards for not including specific literary texts. Stotsky was also critical of the fact that in a constructivist approach to literature instruction, students were connecting literature to their personal experience, or reading “selections ‘representing various cultural ... perspectives,’ ... that ‘represent diverse points of view’” (Stotsky, 2005, p. 29). Her critique of literature instruction aligned with alternative, multicultural perspectives aligns with the political critique of the Profile by Minnesota groups as representing a decline in the authority of the political status quo.

The Profile standards were also analyzed by Achieve, a bi-partisan organization composed of politicians and CEOs with a strong focus on standardization and accountability. Achieve’s analysis (2000) reflected both neoconservative and neoliberal stances. It was critical of the lack of content knowledge given the Profile’s focus on “‘how’ students show what they have learned than ‘what’ they have learned” (p. 10). At the same time, Achieve critiqued the lack of specificity in describing the curriculum knowledge students should attain: “the standards are silent on the quantity, quality and complexity of what students in various grade levels should be able to read” (p. 23). Consistent with Achieve’s focus on aligning state standards with standardized test results, they were also critical of the use of “local performance projects” as not providing valid and reliable evaluation measures of student achievement.

In a follow-up review of the Profile standards, Achieve (2001) argued for the need for a greater alignment of standards with state assessments or tests so that test questions correspond to the standards, a match between the content of the test items and standard content, as well as the tasks of the test items (*identify, analyze, etc.*) and the standard tasks, and that the test items are challenging in that students know they need to provide correct answers.

*Internal groups’ critiques.* The Profile was also critiqued by internal state groups, critiques that also reflected various ideological perspectives. These included the conservative think tank Center for the American Experiment; the Maple River Education Coalition, a parent group; and evangelical Christians, who perceived the Profile as focusing on values as opposed to content subject matter and as promoting a relativist perspective on learning. Parents and conservative educators united with conservative political groups who were critical of what they perceived as a loss of traditional authority associated with the need to return to a content-based, back-to-the-basics curriculum. The notion that students were engaging in constructing their own knowledge represented a challenge to the idea of the teacher or parent who imparts knowledge rather than fosters knowledge construction. The concern about a perceived sense of loss of adult authority had a high political appeal to the conservative and evangelical constituencies in the state.

The Center for the American Experiment, a conservative Minneapolis think tank, published a series of critiques of the Profile and sponsored editorial columns by Katherine Kersten. Kersten was not a professional educator, holding a law degree and an M.B.A., but her articles for the foundation made use of educational and psychological research. In an interesting rhetorical move, she appropriates the educational psychological discourse of schema theory, which is foundational to the constructivist philosophy, to attack constructivist theory:

Cognitive psychology establishes that to make sense of a new thing, we need a mental framework in which to orient it. We need a body of knowledge— mental scaffolding—in which to integrate it, so that we can give it meaning, remember and use it later.... Psychologists have demonstrated that the ability to learn something new depends on an ability to accommodate the new thing to the already known. In other words, the more one knows, the easier it is to learn something new. When we don’t have a context into which to fit a new fact or concept, we can neither understand nor remember it. (1999a, p. 36)

Where she differs from constructivists is in what she considers a framework, how it is acquired, and how it is used. Her framework is what she calls content, facts and principles which must be learned before they can be applied in projects or learning. She argues that this content knowledge is not acquired through projects, which run the risk of leaving students with gaps in the framework and unable to work effectively with the concepts that only “structured, content-based instruction” can provide (p. 2). Also, the interdisciplinary nature of projects leaves students with a lack of coherent knowledge within subjects, unable to think effectively within them.

Far from teaching students to “learn how to learn,” the experiential approach has the following deleterious results:

- Its spotty, catch-as-catch-can approach leaves students with huge gaps in their knowledge base, giving them little “mental scaffolding” to build on in the future.
- Its blurring of traditional subject matter boundaries ensures that students—far from “integrating” disciplines—never learn the basic elements of important domains of knowledge. The result is a loss of intellectual coherence.
- Its disparagement of memorization, and of related drill and practice, prevent children from developing lower-order skills to the point of automaticity. (p. 38)

She also argues that experiential learning “creates the risk that children will ‘learn’ something quite different than the teacher intended. The remembered understanding that children take from ‘discovery learning’ is likely to be highly variable and uncertain” (p. 38).

In this analysis, what she claimed to be a core of substantive knowledge is assumed to be an external, preexisting phenomenon that students acquire prior to thinking critically about that phenomenon, in contrast to a constructivist notion of knowledge as formulated through mutual social interaction. She also notes that need for collective, bounded curriculum in which disciplinary boundaries are distinct (Bernstein, 2000). Finally, her concern that students will learn “something quite different” from what a teacher intends them to learn reifies a transmission model of instruction.

A key to what she intends by valued disciplinary knowledge can be gleaned by looking at her counter-examples to the Profile. In contrast to the Profile’s emphasis on “thinking like scientists” she argues for the need to be able to identify the nine planets in the solar system (2002, p. 38). She complains that the Profile wants students to “think historically,” but does not “emphasize (or even name) the great figures and events of the past. Nor do they suggest that some historical epochs (classical Greece, the Renaissance, the Reformation) are more worthy of study than others.” Instead, students look at the biases of historians and are invited to “‘construct’ their own version of history” (p. 44).

The discourse of academic knowledge that Kersten appropriates also negates the value of curriculum that attends to variations in literacy practices associated with different local or regional cultures. Her critique reflects an attempt to decontextualize the uses and application of knowledge in different contexts, an approach reflected in standardized, scripted instruction found in for-profit schooling programs such as “Success for All” and “Roots and Wings.” In his analysis of these scripted programs, Eric Weiner (2003) argues that “standardization attempts to rationalize the homogenization of knowledge and skills, in part, by decontextualizing knowledge, individualizing literacy and language development, and limiting teachers’ input and influence over pedagogy and curriculum development” (p. 49).

Another internal Minnesota group, a coalition of conservative parents and educators, the Maple River Education Coalition (later known as EdWatch), engaged in lobbying efforts with state legislators, evoking a discourse of populism to argue for more local control over public education and against attempts by the state as “big government” to impose the Profile onto schools. They particularly objected to the Profile’s constructivist bent (Quist, 2005).

After analyzing the Maple River documents critiquing the Profile and promoting the Northstar Standards (see below), it is clear while their view of academic excellence is stated vaguely, it is consistent with a neoconservative model of mastery of a bounded body of disciplinary knowledge and skills exemplified in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs, which they were concerned with protecting from incursions from Profile requirements. The Profile is critiqued because projects “focus on attitudes, values and beliefs of students, rather than on transmitting knowledge” (Maple River Education Coalition, 2002, ¶ 7). “Academics” is contrasted with “minimum competencies, attitudes, values, and beliefs” (¶ 10).

Allen Quist, a conservative politician and active member of the Coalition, was critical of the use of performance assessments as opposed to testing:

Why require assessments instead of tests? The reason is because the word “assessments” is broader and more ambiguous than “tests” and includes student opinion as well as subjective rating-scales designed to measure behavior and values. The core meaning of “assess” is to assign a value to something. Tests, in contrast, are more clearly defined objective instruments which are especially useful for measuring academic knowledge and skills. The new jargon is totally consistent with the goal of shaping student behavior as opposed to improving academic knowledge. (Quist 2005, p. 3)

In addition to their disapproval of constructivist philosophy and tasks, the Maple River Education Coalition was highly critical of what they saw as a federal move to replace academics with a vocational focus:

Students are now taught entry-level job skills and given the time to demonstrate their “proficiency” by working various jobs during the school day. For instance, Eden Prairie students discover their future by learning to operate a cash register, while a Saint Paul student gains experience in “media arts” in the Walgreen’s photo department. (Maple River Education Coalition, 2002, p. 2)

The result of this vocational focus was perceived to be limiting educational options for young people still trying to figure out what they want to do. MRC advised parents that it was against Minnesota state law to put students in any vocational track against their parents’ wishes, and advocated resistance to what they saw as the vocational arm of the Profile (Maple River Education Coalition, 2002).

An analysis by Mitchell Pearlstein (2000) of the Center for the American Experiment framed the Minnesota political landscape as one of fostering experimentation in education through choice programs, voucher programs, and charter schools in opposition to the “cartel” of teacher professional organizations, the Minnesota Education Association and the Minnesota Federation of Teachers, which eventually merged to form Education Minnesota. He notes that because “Minnesotans take local control in education seriously,” the imposition of the Profile violates the notion of local control in that even though the state argued that they were not imposing the “performance packages” onto districts, that local districts did not have the “ability or preference” to develop their own lessons and activities. He also noted that some elements of business community who did favor teaching students how to engage in problem-solving promoted in the Profile, raised questions about the Profile.

This conservative critique valuing local control differs from the Fordham and Achieve critiques, which in some cases are critical of the lack of state-wide uniformity given states' commitments to local control. In their 1998 critique of state standards (Finn, Petrilli, & Vanourek, 1998), a Fordham report noted that states' appeal for the need for local control is

... an abdication of responsibility. Instead of running with the standards ball, these states chose to punt. One sees evidence of this reasoning in standards documents themselves and in remarks by state officials. For example, in an attempt to explain why his state did poorly on various evaluations, a New Jersey official was quoted in the media as saying, "When they [the AFT and Fordham reports] accuse our standards of lacking specificity and measurability, we say, 'That's right, we know that. They lack specificity because they weren't designed to be specific. We are a local control state.'" (p. 6)

This commitment to local control was particularly strong among the Maple River Education Coalition constituents. Their publications repeatedly reveal their suspicion of standards imposed from above:

The highest academic standards ever attained in practice in the history of Minnesota occurred without federal or state mandates or standards. Let us not fear true local control. This is the most viable avenue to academic excellence. To do otherwise will continue to lead us away from freedom. (Maple River Education Coalition, 2002, p. 3)

However, knowing that the state would develop standards in accordance with federal law, and in their interest in getting rid of the Profile, the MRC assisted in the drafting of the Northstar Standards (NSS), which were proposed by an independent group as an alternative in 2002. In comparison with either the Profile or the standards that were eventually adopted by the state, the NSS are positively skeletal, reflecting their framers' interest in preserving the local autonomy of school districts. For example, here are the high school literature standards, in their entirety:

Section 16: Subd. 2. [LITERATURE.] A student should be able to demonstrate the ability to interpret and evaluate complex works of famous American and World literature, including works of prose, poetry, and theater, by: describing the elements of literature for intent, form, and context to historical, cultural, and social background of selected works; and demonstrating the ability to communicate an informed interpretation of any selection of literary works. (Minnesota House of Representatives, 2000)

They do indicate the reading of literature and want certain things to be done with it, but they leave the methods and the texts to local policy-makers.

However, under the general NSS provisions, each course must be assessed using criterion-referenced tests, and each student must be tested annually using a nationally-normed test. This indicates a tension between local and state accountability, and a neoconservative reliance on putatively objective measures of learning. The North Star Standards were not only not adopted by the Minnesota state legislature, but an analysis of the language arts standards finally put in place does not even show a trace of their influence. Thus, while neoconservative critiques of the Profile focused primarily on the lack of specific content knowledge and a loss of adult authority, there was some tension between professional groups that asserted the need for statewide content standards and tests, and parent and community groups that were wary of top-down attempts to impose standards onto schools.

## **The Creation of New Minnesota English Language Arts Standards**

As a result of this multi-pronged attack on the Profile, and with the election of a Republican governor who vowed to do away with it, in March of 2003 the Republican majority of the Minnesota House of Representatives voted to repeal the Profile. They also voted to substitute a new set of content-based standards that conformed to the mandate of the No Child Left Behind Law in specifying facts and concepts students needed to know at each grade level. Neoliberals in the state legislature fought to retain the Profile by creating a new version of the Profile. But, while this new version passed in the State Senate, it did not pass the State House of Representatives.

The Minnesota English language arts standards were created by a group of volunteers selected by Minnesota Education Commissioner Cheri Yেকে, well-known nationally for her previous experience developing Virginia's detailed and prescriptive content standards, often cited as model standards by neoconservatives. Her volunteers, consisting of classroom teachers, parents, school board members, college professors and business leaders, met to devise language arts standards in February, 2003. They then presented these standards at public hearings, and, based on feedback, reduced the number of language arts standards from 635 to 447, as well as adding media literacy standards.

The Maple River Education Coalition now supported the state standards. While this still meant having to cede some local control, the new standards restored disciplinary divisions, objective testing linked to national norms, and returned the focus from vocational prep to academic content. Emphasis was also placed on writing the standards using language that was less difficult to understand and that did not imply a particular teaching method.

## **Positioning and Re-positioning Teachers**

Many members of the standards-writing board consisted of parents who applied their nostalgic beliefs as to what constituted appropriate English language arts instruction based on their own prior schooling experience, a discounting of teachers' knowledge of more current instructional methods that reflects a discourse of de-professionalization. They were also opposed to what they perceived to be a moral relativism associated with constructivist approaches and multicultural education.

During the development of the new standards, teachers had little voice in drafting the standards. Within the larger public relations debate, teachers had often been positioned as presumably in support of content-based standards. An interactional positioning analysis (Chouliarki & Fairclough, 1999) of statements and articles by Commissioner Yেকে and Katherine Kersten show that when mounting their opposition to the Profile, teachers were positioned as victims of the Profile as an ill-conceived, bureaucratic system. In an early newspaper interview (Johnson, 2003), Yেকে explicitly aligned herself with teachers. Although the interviewer initially addressed her as a former "activist parent" who went on to obtain her Ph.D., Yেকে identified herself in her answer as "one of the first teachers to serve on the Virginia State Board of Education" (p. 6AA). When asked whether or not the Profile was a huge disaster, she only mentioned educators' reactions to it and the impact on teachers: "The Profile was far too prescriptive and the administration and paperwork for teachers too excessive. If we're going to think of teachers as professionals, we can't treat them like bookkeepers" (Johnson, 2003, p. 6AA).

In Kersten's 2002 article, she portrayed the argument against the Profile in common-sense terms as something that had already been decided, and assumed agreement on the part of her readers. As does Yেকে, she positions teachers as victims of the Profile: teachers are burdened by

administrative paperwork and they fear that their students aren't learning. A closer look at the role teachers play in her account show that she largely affords them roles as actors rather than goals of a process (Halliday, 1994; Martin et al, 1997): she mentions teachers 32 times, and 75% of the time they are actors in the clause. When they are being acted upon, it is usually by the Profile or the standards that are being developed (5 out of 8 times): as is often the case in standards literature, standards take an active role in the grammar. However, even in the clauses where the teacher takes an active role, it is usually to complain about the Profile, the main role she affords them: "many teachers expressed fear..." (p. 46), "Teachers were also dismayed by the loss of content" (p. 48), and "teachers also complained bitterly..." (p. 46). Only four times in the entire article are they portrayed as acting as teachers: "We had to cut out units..." (p. 48), "students and teachers worked after school to complete..." (p. 48), and "teachers theoretically can now design their own performance assessments without state intervention" (p. 47).

While complaining teachers may have been seized upon as allies in the attack on the Profile, this does not mean that they had a place at the table as respected practitioners. While there were some teachers on Yecke's volunteer task forces to create the new standards, these teachers were often hand-picked as representing views consistent with that of the Commissioner; teachers were also in the minority on these task forces. However, when teachers and their professional organization challenged these new standards, these challenges were described as attempts by teachers to perpetuate the status quo and as resistance to change (i.e., Johnson, 2003; Draper & Lonetree, 2003). In newspaper reports and on radio talk-shows, Commissioner Yecke framed teachers as opposed to change, thereby positioning herself as a proponent of change, assumed to be innovation. Thus, while Yecke and others were initially framing teachers as victims of the Profile, in defending the need for change through implementing the content standards, they then positioned schools, teachers, teacher unions, and teacher educators as a large, intransigent, bureaucratic structure that was not accountable to the public as taxpayers supporting the system, and opposed to any change that threatened their status.

### The New Standards

The Minnesota legislature approved the new standards for implementation in 2003–2004.<sup>3</sup> The new English language arts standards represented extensive compromise between the more content-based and traditionally phonics-based version proposed by Commissioner Yecke's parent groups and alternative, more progressive standards developed by the state senate and local educators.

Analysis of the high school literature standards gives some indication of the effect of these compromises among disparate groups. The neoconservative preference for rigor, apolitical analysis, and an emphasis on our literary heritage is strongly represented in the standards. Rigorous, apolitical analysis is guaranteed by the *very* strong presence of New Critical/formalist analysis: seven of the fourteen literature standards detail such analysis of texts; three others include the directive *analyze*. Examples include "I. D. 4. Evaluate the impact of an author's decisions regarding word choice, point of view, style, and literary elements" and "I. D. 11. Analyze classic and contemporary poems for poetic devices."

The focus on the Western literary heritage is stated in the first three standards, which detail that the activity in which students are engaged is to "Read, analyze, and evaluate traditional, classical,

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<sup>3</sup> See the Minnesota Department of Education website, [http://education.state.mn.us/mde/Academic\\_Excellence/Academic\\_Standards/](http://education.state.mn.us/mde/Academic_Excellence/Academic_Standards/).

and contemporary works of literary merit” from “American literature” (Literature Standard I. D. 1), “British literature” (I. D. 2), and “from civilizations and countries around the world” (I. D. 3). The theme of heritage, requiring the preservation of the school literary canon, is provided both by the mentions of *traditional* and *classical* and also the modifier *literary merit*. In addition, standard I. D. 11 directs, “Demonstrate how literary works reflect the historical contexts that shaped them.” However, there is no reference to literature as a reflection of its cultural or social background, as there was in the Profile.

The 2005 Fordham Foundation review of the new Minnesota content-based standards rewarded the new effort with a more positive review than their previous “F” grade given to the Profile: a grade of “B”, with high ratings for “disciplinary coverage” and “quality” (Stotsky, 2005, p. 48). The new standards were praised as “clear, measurable, and of increasing difficulty over the grades. They are grouped in categories that reflect coherent bodies of research: writing, reading and literature (with informational and functional reading separated from literary reading), and speaking, listening, and viewing” (p. 48). The fact that “study of American literature is mentioned at almost every grade level, as is study of a variety of genres and traditional, classical, and contemporary works of literary merit” was a plus (p. 48). However, they wished that the 9–12 standards had been more specific in stating which works were recommended, and suggested that the state develop “selective lists of authors and/or titles of culturally and historically significant literary and non-literary works to accompany each grade level” (p. 49), a reflection of the need to teach the content of specific literary texts. They did not seem to be bothered by the juxtaposition of the theoretically incompatible historical and New Critical standards, with no effort made to resolve the incoherence (Applebee, 1993; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995).

The influence of neoliberal values appeared in the approach to developing the standards and assessment. Great respect was shown for professional expertise (of the right sort) and accountability. A letter on the EdWatch website from a parent who was a member of the Minnesota Academic Standards Committee drafting English language arts standards attempted to answer complaints that the Committee standards “were hastily prepared and lack appropriate input by qualified educators” as well as rumors that the standards were merely a copy of those Commissioner Yecke had overseen in Virginia. He contended that, while the committee had looked at a variety of documents, including highly-ranked standards from other states, the standards were a new document. In addition, they took into account recommendations from Minnesota teachers and other professionals. The standards could also be implemented within the usual curriculum development process for each particular district, so would require no additional funding (Winters, 2003).

Winters’s defense responded to charges that the Committee did not include input from qualified educators. It borrowed a discourse of professionalism and bureaucratic process that was usually missing from the EdWatch (formerly the Maple River Education Coalition), materials, usually marked by a common-sense approach to simplifying complex issues and a rejection of jargon. While pointing out that the Committee drew on standards from highly ranked states, he did not describe the basis for this ranking (although it may be presumed that he refers to the Fordham Foundation rankings based on neoconservative criteria). This focus on ranking reflects a need to appeal to quantitative factors; he made sure to mention that the new standards were measurable, as well.

In addition to the strong neoconservative flavor of these standards and the neoliberal focus on accountability, there were a few anomalous standards that trace the influence of other traditions in English studies. Literature standards I. D. 14 and 15, in their directives to “respond to” various aspects of literature (“for personal enjoyment” in standard 15), seems closely tied to a philosophy of reader response. In addition, Standard I. D. 7, “Evaluate a literary selection from several critical perspectives” and Standard I. D. 12, “Synthesize ideas and make thematic connections among

literary texts, public discourse, media and other disciplines” invite a conception of the literary text as a multi-faceted object that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. While these standards were apparently advocated for by some on the committee, because they may not lend themselves to traditional content tests currently under development, they may be taken less seriously than those standards involving knowledge of American and British authors. They only serve to add to the lack of coherence already evident in this compromise document.

In summary, the development of these two competing sets of standards reflect the influence of neoliberal and neoconservative discourses shaping standards development in Minnesota. The neoliberal discourse of acquiring problem-solving, hands-on skills for successful participation in the workplace was used to justify implementation of the Profile of Learning. Critiques of the Profile from a neoconservative perspective led to its demise and the creation of new content-based standards, although with some reservations by particular groups of conservatives about the imposition of any set of standards. These new content-based standards reflected the influence of both neoconservative and neoliberal discourses, creating the potential for tensions and contradictions between a push towards teaching content as specified in the standards and the value associated with flexibility, given the need for local control of schooling.

## Summary and Implications

The process of standards formulation that occurred in Wisconsin and Minnesota reflects the conflicts that occur in much of the political arena in the United States (Frank, 2004; Lakoff, 2002), conflicts reflecting a larger divide between a conservative values orientation and a business and economic orientation towards society. The neoconservative *strict father* discourse voiced by Governor Thompson in Wisconsin, and by critics of Minnesota’s Profile of Learning, framed standards using political discourses associated with schooling and social values in ways that helped gain their adoption. This was accomplished through an appeal to hold schools accountable for teaching traditional subject-matter content associated with such subjects as British and American literature and grammar, content that could be easily tested using standardized measures: for example, through use of multiple-choice test items on knowledge of grammar. This content focus was also explicitly framed in opposition to teaching multicultural texts, problem-solving, and critical thinking assumed to lead to challenging absolutist religious and cultural beliefs valued by conservatives.

At the same time, the neoliberal discourse voiced by Superintendent Benson in Wisconsin and some of the Profile of Learning advocates in Minnesota stressed the importance of preparing students to participate in a global economy that requires a focus on diversity and problem-solving, but not necessarily critical thinking. While these competing rationales for standards resonated differently with different constituencies, the neo-conservative focus on acquiring subject-matter knowledge may have been more appealing to the public based on their familiar recollections of schooling as primarily knowledge acquisition and testing.

Both perspectives promote standards as providing a sense of certainty about and control over what is taught in schools. In both Wisconsin and Minnesota, teachers and taxpayers were promised that the new standards would provide clarity and rigor supposedly missing in pre-existing district curricula. Both neoliberal discourses, with their insistence on testable outputs, and neoconservative discourses, with their focus on the need to spell out traditional content, promised clear direction for teachers and students. However, the need to compromise on methods and ideology resulted in Minnesota standards that were less coherent in their philosophy and direction than the Profile for Learning had been, and Wisconsin standards that were fuzzier in spelling out what students should know and be able to do than earlier drafts formulated by educators. Ambiguity



in standards is not necessarily an evil, if the purpose is to provide professionals with the leeway to make decisions on what is best for their students. However, the Minnesota and Wisconsin standards also constrain teachers by highlighting the status quo in literature instruction and leaving little room for innovation.

Language arts standards thus conform to neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies but are not informed by recent research in literacy in general (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Yatvin, Weaver & Garan, 2003) or current pedagogical theory in teaching English language arts supporting a “literacy as practice” (Guerra, 1998) perspective. For example, New Criticism, the dominant form of literary study in universities in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century, assumed that meanings are located “in” the text and that readers’ social and cultural schema are irrelevant to constructing these meanings. With the rise of alternative literary critical perspectives—feminist criticism, cultural studies, poststructuralist analysis, etc., this New Critical approach was criticized and largely abandoned by universities for a broader array of critical tools, but still lingers in high school classrooms (Applebee, 1993).

Thus, within the larger field of English, a more current “rigorous” approach to teaching literature embraces the uses and applications of alternative critical perspectives. However, the Minnesota and Wisconsin standards still adopt a New Critical approach by focusing on the ability to identify examples of literary forms, tasks lending themselves readily to testing with standardized measures, while making little room for the application of alternative literary critical approaches, practices that are more difficult to measure with standardized instruments.

Employing what the field considers to be an outmoded approach casts doubt on claims that these standards are more rigorous than more recent alternatives. While anyone who has taken an AP test knows that New Criticism can be rigorous and challenging, so is a cultural studies approach calling on a variety of sources to tie literature to its cultural, social, and historical context (Carey-Webb, 2001; Gere & Shaheen, 2001), and so is applying critical theory to literary texts (Appleman, 2000; Graff, 1992, Tyson, 1999). Moreover, models of teaching literature that promote student engagement in the process (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Beach & Myers, 2001) are also missing, in spite of teachers’ recognition of their power in promoting effort and achievement. Those who study and work with adolescents, and who are aware of how the changing world outside of the classroom impacts the increasingly diverse mix of students inside it, are largely excluded from writing standards or setting policy.

### **Standards as Defining “Literacy as Institution” and the Positioning of Teachers**

The prevalence of neo-conservative and neo-liberal discourses in the final drafts of these standards illustrates what Basil Bernstein (2000) describes as the domination of those whose primary concern is pedagogy and schooling by business leaders and politicians with ideological and financial interests. Policy makers embracing both perspectives assume that they can define literacy curriculum standards in definitive, bounded ways according to their versions of the role of schooling as socializing students to acquire the values of social conservatism or the workplace, conceptions of literacy learning often at odds with educators’ conceptions. As Pennington (2007) notes, policy makers frame literacy as “literacy as institution” that can be codified and measured—defined by Guerra (1998) as

... a body of information that any member of our society must know and be able to manipulate... the view that students have to operate within existing institutional constraints in order to demonstrate their literacy survives as a cornerstone... [L]earners have to be provided with the necessary scaffolding and

are judged on their ability to meet certain institutional expectations. (Guerra, 1998, quoted in Pennington, 2007, p. 466)

This conception of “literacy as institution” was evident in the Minnesota and Wisconsin standards’ focus on acquiring information about parts of speech or authors. In contrast, educators are more likely to adopt a conception of what Guerra defines as “literacy as practice,” ...a socially constructed and highly contextualized activity. Literacy is no longer considered a singular, monolithic, or universal entity; instead scholars who take a practice-oriented perspective contend that there are many literacies in any society serving multiple and culturally specific purposes. The goal, from this perspective, is not to master a particular form of literacy, but to develop one’s ability to engage in a variety of social practices that require us to operate in a plethora of settings and genres to fulfill different needs and goals. (Guerra, 1998, quoted in Pennington, 2007, p. 466)

This conception of literacy challenges the top-down, homogeneous framing of standards as ignoring literacy practices students from different cultural contexts bring to schools.

As we argued in our introduction, standards can function to foster reflection on what students should be learning in English classes without dictating specific curriculum content, a function more in line with a “literacy as practice” conception. However, policy-makers that imposed content standards in Wisconsin and Minnesota saw their function as specifying content leading to testing to make both teachers and students more accountable to teaching and learning English in a certain manner.

While neoliberal discourses make passing reference to engaging teachers as partners in developing standards related to the first function, the actual agenda in Minnesota and Wisconsin was the latter function. The operation of these two functions simultaneously serves to position teachers in contradictory ways: you can be part of the standards-construction process, but you need to accept our standards. The process of creating the final standards as a compromise between the Modern Red Schoolhouse and DPI standards in Wisconsin was largely accomplished by politicians and bureaucrats, positioning teachers merely as needing to be made more accountable for improving test scores as a measure of the quality of their instruction.

In Minnesota, teachers’ voices were honored when attacking the Profile, but Commissioner Yecke portrayed them as obstructionists when they protested the imposition of content standards. In both cases, Minnesota teachers’ situations and experiences were given short shrift: in the case of the Profile by disciplinary experts who overlooked time constraints and lack of training, and in the case of the academic standards by non-educators whose nostalgia and ideology shaped standards teachers were responsible for implementing regardless of pedagogical orientation.

Once standards are in place, the tensions between these competing discourses are only the beginning of tensions involved with standards implementation. Teachers also face tensions with administrators who are more likely to need to subscribe to standards-based accountability dictates, and with perspectives more in line with Guerra’s (1998) literacy as institution. For example, one study found that 80% of Florida teachers indicated that they were critical of testing as opposed to 50% of administrators; 46% cited negative effects of testing compared with 27% of administrators; teachers indicated that having to prepare students for the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test narrowed the focus of their instruction; administrators indicated that having test results provided them with information related to student placement and teacher performance (Jones & Egley, 2006).

Teachers, students, and parents are also faced with other contradictions and inconsistencies that plague this system of standards and accountability. There are the contradictions between state standards and local districts’ efforts to lower their assessment criteria so that their district can be perceived as meeting these standards (McNeil, 2000; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004), as well as

contradictions between the standards themselves and the tests employed to assess those standards. An analysis by the American Federation of Teachers found that half of the 800 high-stakes tests employed in states to determine meeting the NCLB mandates are inconsistent with states' standards (Keller, 2006).

And, there are the tensions between the need to achieve standards versus the resources available to support schools in achieving those standards (McNeil, 2000). Analysis of the implied need for technology, books, and other resources necessary for the implementation of the California English standards found that California law did not guarantee that resources would be made available to support those standards (Koski & Weis, 2004). Similarly, while a 2005 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll indicated that the public is not concerned with specific issues of standards formulation, the public has strong concerns about lack of school funding, which remained the top problem for the six years up to the 2005 poll (Rose & Gallup, 2005). The public also shares concerns with teachers over testing, with 54% perceiving teaching to the test as a negative consequence of testing and 68% positing that a single test in English or math does not provide a valid measure of whether a school needs improvement.

All of this suggests that educators are operating in a climate rife with contradictory agendas constituted by conflicting discourses and perspectives. The promise of standards, that they would provide a clear roadmap to success for students and teachers and reflective conversations about the curriculum, has not resulted in coherent direction or a clear definition of the larger purposes for schooling in America. This suggests the need for alternative discourses to frame education in ways that challenge the dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative discourses imposed by forces outside the teaching profession.

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