

## **“It serves a bigger purpose”: The tension between professional identity and bureaucratic mandate in public education**

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*ABSTRACT: The argument that we need content standards in public education often ignores a fundamental question: Even if teachers have a list of standards, will they use them? In the case of California’s self-proclaimed “world-class” content standards in Literary Response and Analysis, the answer to this question is an emphatic “No”. As part of a university research study, practising, high-school teachers with varying levels of experience (including several who were past participants in an affiliate site of the National Writing Project) were interviewed about their classroom implementation of the Literary Response and Analysis standards. Overwhelmingly, teachers claimed to ignore the standards almost completely when it came to planning and instruction, citing their own knowledge of ELA subject matter as well as their students’ needs as superseding the importance of standards created by an anonymous committee. Rather than serving as an indictment of the teachers’ abilities, this mistrust actually speaks to the teachers’ own firm conception of their professional identity, especially as it pertains to pedagogical content knowledge. While focusing on California’s state content standards at the time, the study has implications for the current widespread shift to the Common Core Standards.*

*KEYWORDS: Common Core, education reform, New Public Management, professional identity, Race to the Top, standards*

### **INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

The education reform narrative in the United States, such as it has been articulated by policy documents and adopted by the media, goes something like this: Tougher standards result in greater learning. This has been the case since at least 1983 and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. Essentially a call to action from then-president Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education, the report issued dire warnings about American public education’s perceived failings and made a clear call for higher standards for teachers and students. The push for standards has been a part of each subsequent president’s education policy. This gained initial traction with George H. W. Bush’s *America 2000* proposal and continued through Bill Clinton and his *Goals 2000* legislation (which saw, for the first time, education funding tied to the development of standards by each individual state as part of 1994’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act). George W. Bush’s administration kept the state standards piece intact, but added new accountability measures (a system of standardised tests under which schools had to meet Adequate Yearly Progress or else face an escalating series of punitive measures, including the possible replacement of the entire faculty) that were central to 2001’s *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Now, most dramatically, Barack Obama’s *Race to the Top* legislation has at its centre the Common Core State Standards: curriculum expectations adopted by all but four of the

fifty states (a fifth state, Minnesota, adopted the English, but not the math, standards), with an attendant national exam in development.

The various paths leading us through these different pieces of legislation (including the controversial development of national standards in the 1990's) are much too circuitous to detail here, and have been exhaustively documented elsewhere (Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005; Mayher, 1996; Ravitch, 1995; Salinger, 1995/1996). It is also worth mentioning that this move towards standards and accountability in the United States mirrors (or at least runs parallel to) the rise of New Public Management (NPM) in the United Kingdom during the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher. Just as *No Child Left Behind* made provision for a “failing” school to be taken over by a private corporation or converted into a charter school, NPM is based in the notion that “education is not a public good but a commodity in the marketplace” (Grace, 1994, p. 196) and, as such, should be subject to market forces including competition and accountability. Standards, too, have their place in NPM, and can be found in the UK's national curriculum (Arnott, 2000), ostensibly for the purpose of determining how well students are performing. One thing, however, is clear: standards have always been seen by education reformers as part of the solution despite any effort to determine how meaningfully teachers actually use them.

As a former high school English teacher, I had a chance to become well acquainted with California's content standards in English. My school site held professional development days designed to help us prepare students for the accompanying standardised tests, we were required to include standards relevant to each day's lesson in our plans, and administrators frequently checked to see that we had the day's standards posted in a conspicuous location in the classroom. Even though it was clearly the intent of administration that we should rely on the standards to guide our planning and instruction, I often had difficulty reconciling this desired reliance with my own sense of professional identity. While it is certainly true that a clearly defined sense of professional self is no guarantee of quality, I prided myself on being a collegial and reflective educator who closely monitored his students' progress and wasn't averse to modifying his approach when presented with something better. In short, I trusted my training, experience and knowledge of my students, and it often felt like, by adhering too closely to the standards, I was being asked to discount those things.

My concern was only reinforced by the state's own emphasis on the standards. In the original 1999 iteration of California's *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools*, the content standards were touted as being “world-class, comprehensive and balanced” (California Department of Education [CDE], p. vii), and the later 2006 version of the framework established itself as a “blueprint for the implementation” (CDE, p. v) of the standards. Further, the state admitted that incorporating the standards “may require changes in instructional programs, instructional materials, staff development, and assessment strategies” (CDE, 1999, p. vii). As a result of this emphasis on teaching to the standards, I saw many of my colleagues abandon their training and experience to rely on prescribed curricula and “canned” materials sold by textbook companies. Beach, Thein and Webb (2012) acknowledge this curricular homogenisation as one of the primary potential weaknesses of standards-based instruction. I do not think my colleagues resorted to these materials because they were in a hurry to abdicate their professional

responsibility. Rather, it makes sense that in a high-stakes, educational environment educators would fall back on materials seen in some way as “teacher-proof”: virtually guaranteed to meet standards, even if they do so without allowing the teachers to create meaningful lessons of their own or providing students with an opportunity to engage meaningfully with the subject matter.

Hawkins (2002) has much to tell us about the importance of “meaningfulness” in teaching. He views classroom dynamics as a triangle. The first two corners of the triangle, “I” and “Thou”, as he refers to them, represent the student and the teacher. As Hawkins sees it, “No child...can gain competence and knowledge, or know himself as competent and as a knower, save through communication with others involved with him in his enterprises. Without a Thou, there is no I evolving” (p. 55). The goal, he continues, is not to make students dependent on teachers, but for teachers to see that one of their tasks is, in fact, for students to transcend their need for teachers. The desired outcome of formal schooling, Hawkins believes, is “the child’s ability to educate himself” (p. 56).

The teacher (“I”) accomplishes this by introducing the student (“Thou”) to the third corner of the educational triangle: content or subject matter (“It”). Providing students with rich and engaging instructional material, and giving them the freedom to explore their own questions and curiosities, establishes for the student “a basis for communication with the teacher on a new level, and with a new dignity” (Hawkins, 2002, p. 59). The role of subject matter, then, is to create the common ground upon which teacher and student will stand. The richer the subject matter, the firmer the ground, and the more confidently the teacher can assist the student in his journey toward becoming an autonomous learner. Hawkins believes it is crucial for teachers not to neglect this third corner, for there must be “some third thing which is *of interest to the child and to the adult*, in which they can join in outward projection. Only this creates a possible stable bond of communication, of shared concern” (p. 60; italics mine). In short, it is through interesting and engaging subject matter that students begin to take their first steps toward independence. This is where a slavish adherence to meeting standards can go wrong. If the teacher’s emphasis shifts, even for part of the time, to completing a checklist of required tasks as opposed to engaging the student in instruction like that which Hawkins describes, a valuable opportunity to help the student gain independence is lost.

Implied in Hawkins’ view of the educational triangle (and specifically the “I”) is the notion of the teacher’s identity. The quality of the subject matter (“It”) to which the teacher introduces the student (“Thou”) will be in large part dependent on how the teacher views her role in the classroom, or her professional identity. If the teacher views her role reactively, where the goal is simply to “cover” a list of standards or work through an entire anthology, the quality of the subject matter will reflect that identity. If, on the other hand, she strives to engage her students in meaningful, authentic reading and writing assignments for the purpose of increasing their confidence, competence and sophistication as readers, writers and thinkers, the subject matter will look very different. While these two approaches to teaching are not mutually exclusive (most teachers, at one time or another, have probably taken a short cut that involved packaged materials, for instance), tipping the scale too far toward one extreme or the other does indicate a particular stance about the role of the teacher and the purpose of education, and we should be mindful of the implications of each.

While popular images of teachers often display the binary described by Alsup (2006), where teachers are often “depicted as failure or hero, villain or angel” (p. 24), identity is actually a much more complicated, fluid proposition. As Day and Hadfield (1996) pointed out, teachers can possess as many as three different identities: the actual (which is determined by current professional contexts; in this case, content standards and other external gestures toward education reform), the ideal (how one views the role of teacher), and the transitional (the negotiated space between the actual and the ideal). In other words, the way in which a teacher responds to a particular mandate (in the case of my study, the degree to which teachers use content standards in meaningful ways) will in large part be a negotiation between the nature of the mandate and how she views her role or purpose in the classroom.

This negotiation can result in tension. Solbrekke & Englund (2011) describe this tension as being between professional responsibility and accountability, where teachers and other professionals are challenged to reconcile their judgment and autonomy with external forces of control, such as, in the case of this study, the imposition of content standards. In a series of interviews, Lasky (2005) saw this tension first hand, as a group of Canadian teachers struggled to reconcile their professional identities with the new responsibilities brought about in an age of reform. The teachers associated numerous deleterious effects with the advent of the new education reforms, ranging from such things as teaching more material in less time to feeling as though their overall effectiveness had decreased because they didn’t have the opportunity to develop a strong rapport with their students. Perhaps most troubling, the teachers reported “experiencing increased guilt, frustration and...vulnerability” (p. 911) due to the new reforms. In other words, the teachers’ professional identity suffered as a result of new mandates that in some cases asked them to ignore (or at least minimise) the importance of their training and experience. In the end, it is promising to note that while the teachers reported feeling “impotent to affect the larger political and reform context” they still felt an “unwillingness to change their identity as individuals working in a human-centred profession” (p. 913). Still, the tension remains: do I follow a mandate with which I disagree, or do I do what I think is best for my students?

Finally, it is worth mentioning at this point that just having a strong professional identity isn’t enough to guarantee that the work a teacher does will be worth doing. A teacher can have a strong sense of identity and still take approaches in the classroom that run counter to what experts in the field generally believe to be effective. For example, there is a body of research (see especially Braddock, Lloyd-Jones & Schoer, 1963) that tells us teaching grammar in isolation (for example, worksheets, drills, correcting incorrect sentences, and so on) does not translate to any particularly useful skills, such as improving student writing. If a teacher has a strong professional identity that leads her to believe that teaching grammar in isolation is the best possible approach, this does not make her a good teacher just because she believes strongly in a particular method. Rather, when I speak positively in this study of teachers having a strong professional identity, it is with the understanding that embedded in that identity is pedagogical content knowledge that aligns with what most experts in English Language Arts now hold to be effective practices (examples of which will be described later in this article). All identities are not created equal, and this article should not be seen as a tacit endorsement of the idea that just because a teacher feels forcefully about something, that automatically means she is in the right.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

As I formulated this study, I was most interested in learning answers to two questions:

1. How (and to what degree) do practicing teachers consider the standards when planning lessons or units?
2. How do the standards manifest themselves in actual classroom practice?

As I began this study, the issue of professional identity was not one I explicitly considered. It was only after conducting the interviews that I began to see how the teachers' approaches to the standards were influenced by the way they viewed and talked about themselves and their practice. So while I did not consider professional identity to be a factor at the outset, I can see how these two questions provided the teachers an opportunity to discuss it.

In choosing teachers to interview, I wanted to ensure that I represented a range of teaching experiences. To that end, I interviewed nine teachers in the following categories:

- 3 “veteran” teachers (10 or more years in the classroom);
- 3 “veteran” teachers who were Fellows at a site of the National Writing Project (NWP);
- 3 “new” teachers (5 or fewer years of teaching).

By distinguishing between teachers based on their years of experience, I hoped to see if a teacher's attitude toward the standards (or the degree to which they were influenced by them) was contingent upon experience. As someone who also works with pre-service teachers, I have operated under the assumption that newer teachers, without the benefit of many years in the classroom to gain confidence and a wide repertoire of successful lessons and activities, would feel more beholden to the standards, and this might be reflected in their practice. I also felt it was important to have a mix of newer teachers and veteran teachers to see if there was any difference in the views of those who have taught before and after the implementation of the content standards versus those who only know what it is like to incorporate standards in their lessons. This decision also aligns with Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe's (1994) assertion that professional identity is shaped by experience. If this truly is the case, it made sense to choose teachers whose professional identities would presumably be at different stages of development, and who therefore might have markedly different approaches to working with standards.

I further broke down the “veteran” teacher category to include those who had successfully completed an Invitational Summer Institute at a site of the National Writing Project. My reasoning for this is similar to the reasoning I used in categorising teachers based on years of experience. The NWP provides highly regarded teachers (selected for their demonstrated expertise) with access to some of the leading specialists in English Education, and encourages an unusual degree of dialogue and collaboration between teachers. I hoped to see if this additional professional development experience in any way influenced the way teachers felt about the standards, or made them feel better equipped to meet them in challenging, rigorous and meaningful ways. So again, as with years of experience, my hope was

that interviewing teachers who had been through a specific professional development experience would tell me something noteworthy about the connection between professional identity and the use of content standards.

Because I refer to these nine teachers frequently in the following discussion, a list of their years of experience and NWP involvement is included in Table 1.

Teacher name	Years of experience	NWP involvement
Ashley	5	No
Emily	18	No
Holly	5	No
Joan	14	No
Kristen	5	No
Leah	36	Yes
Matt	26	Yes
Nicole	13	No
Rachel	20	Yes

**Table 1. Years of teaching experience and National Writing Project (NWP) experience for interview subjects**

I interviewed the teachers twice. My interview guide for the first set of interviews attempted to direct the teachers toward a discussion of how they implemented the content standards in their classroom. The thinking behind this was to start in the present (Patton, 1990) to see the “real world” application of the standards, rather than artificially requiring the teachers to point out for me whatever strengths and weaknesses they saw in the standards document. I started each interview by having the teacher walk me through a successful literature lesson they had recently taught, describing what the lesson looked like, sharing student work with me, and explaining why this was a successful lesson. The conversation could then naturally move into a discussion of how (if at all) the standards applied to this lesson, and such a foregrounding could allow for an easier transition into a more general conversation about how the standards influenced their instruction separate from the lesson they just described.

For my second interview, I followed what Charmaz (2002) tells us about grounded theory analysis and based many of these questions around issues that emerged in the first interviews, believing, as she does, that “the logic of the grounded theory method calls for the emerging analysis to direct data gathering, in a self-correcting, analytic, expanding process. Early leads shape later data collection” (p. 682). After conducting the interviews, I teased out a variety of themes by looking for “specific words, phrases, concepts, or other observable semantic data” (Huckin, 2004, p. 14). This article focuses on the two themes most closely relate to the idea of professional identity and the importance of engaging students in meaningful subject matter that responds to their interests and needs.

Before discussing my findings, one point I will immediately concede is that the interview data I am about to discuss is limited in scope. Even so, these teachers work daily with the same challenges facing teachers in other districts, counties and states. Their classrooms are populated with over-achievers and under-achievers, students living in poverty, resistant readers, English Language Learners, college-bound students, and students with Individualised Education Plans – in short, the same kind

of students in classrooms nationwide. While this might not be the largest study with the broadest cross-section of schools, I feel that the results should not be viewed as atypical or as representative of only these particular teachers. Their lived classroom experience is, to a large degree, the experience of other teachers throughout the country.

## THE THEMES

### Theme 1: Little to no consideration of standards during planning

As I mentioned previously, California’s *Reading/Language Arts Framework* establishes the standards as the engine that drives planning and instruction. Given this emphasis, it is surprising that, throughout the course of our interviews, teachers named a variety of factors they took into account when planning, but no one mentioned content standards. The closest anyone came to mentioning the standards was Nicole (thirteen years of experience), who said one of her biggest concerns was following her English Department’s curriculum calendar, a general pacing guide that determined in which semesters certain topics or types of writing would be taught. The calendar, Nicole said, is tied to the standards in terms of general concepts, but not “in the sense that we have, like, 3.5 and 3.7 and 2.4....In writing, we’ll have them do the narrative the first year, we’ll have them do the persuasive here, by the end of their freshman year they have to give an oral presentation.” While items from the standards are placed on the calendar, Nicole saw a clear distinction between the calendar and the standards themselves:

... now that we have a curriculum calendar and it’s kind of connected to what we’re doing in all four grades, that makes me feel a lot better ’cause I feel like I’m part of a much bigger cohesive whole and I’m much more loyal to that than I am to the standards because to me they’re [the standards] not as cohesive or helpful.

To Nicole, the benefit of the curriculum calendar was not that it helps to plot or chart the coverage of standards, but that it encouraged a sense of cohesion within her department when it comes to covering the curriculum.

This was the only place where the standards were even indirectly introduced as a concern in teacher planning.<sup>1</sup> More frequently, teachers indicated a strong sense of professional identity by naming issues that aligned with their philosophy of teaching. One of the most common factors named was that of *student engagement* with the subject matter. Emily, a teacher with eighteen years in the classroom, said that engagement was key for her when deciding how to teach her lessons:

I’m trying to think of engaging lessons to get their attention and excitement and that’s a really big challenge of teenagers ’cause they’re blasé about everything and it’s not cool to be excited about anything, so ... what will they like, what will engage them, what will turn them on?

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<sup>1</sup> While it is tempting to assume that the standards had so pervaded the teachers’ thinking that they were not aware of the degree to which they actually did consider them, my interviews actually revealed that the teachers often looked to the standards only as carriers of terminology. When they claimed they were “meeting standards”, what they were usually doing was addressing the literary terminology embedded in each standard (for example, theme, genre, characterisation) instead of a specific task (for example, tracing how genre shapes a text’s theme).

This sentiment was echoed by Matt, a 26-year veteran with extensive NWP experience:

My first thought is, “How am I going to engage the kids?” and how am I going to get them involved, not just physically but mentally and intellectually? How am I going to get them engaged in the ideas presented in this literature? What’s going to be the thing that they’re going to get fired up about?

For both of these teachers, activities that encourage student engagement look interesting, meaningful and challenging. Matt described a lesson where his students, after reading Sophocles’ *Antigone*, wrote and acted their own Greek tragedies, focusing on thematic issues relevant to adolescents, and utilising elements common to traditional Greek tragedy (such as the chorus and cathartic ending). Emily also described an activity she used when teaching *Antigone*, requiring students to work in collaborative groups and present one of the major concepts from the play, such as religion or respect for the dead. The students were asked to teach this concept to the rest of the class, incorporating visual elements and excerpts from the play. In their desire to create engaging lessons for their students, Matt and Emily had asked students to understand text in multiple ways (in the case of these activities, students needed a working knowledge of components and themes of Greek tragedy), to generate text of their own, to use a variety of learning styles, and to present their work to their peers. What Matt and Emily did not do in these examples was design lessons that explicitly addressed any of the Literary Response and Analysis standards.

A third teacher, Leah (a National Writing Project fellow and a veteran of more than 35 years in the classroom) found that the “students are happiest in the middle of a novel”, and this was where she endeavoured to spend most of her time as she planned lessons. Her classes were a mixture of analysis and reflection, and “the whole point is to build to the point where they are making connections and really able to do a deep reading on their own.” A typical class consisted of the students responding in writing to the previous night’s reading, and the rest of the period was taken up with small-group and whole-class discussion. What Leah emphatically did not do was consider the standards in any specific way as she planned her daily writing prompts or discussion topics: “I cannot simplify the teaching of English by saying, ‘Today we’re doing this standard and this standard.’ That’s not gonna happen. Because it’s much more complex than that. And I think there’s a problem with some newer teachers who think that they can’t do some of the richer things...because they are so concerned about teaching standards.”

The implication at the state level is that a teacher’s lessons should come as a direct response to the tasks established by the standards. What we see from Matt, Emily and Leah, however, is a reflection of their professional identity: a belief that for students to engage meaningfully with a lesson, attention must first be paid to its accessibility and the students’ interest in the material. In these instances, it is not the standards driving instruction, but the teachers’ attempts to create activities that the students will find exciting and interesting. And while presumably this approach is not antagonistic to the standards, it bears repeating that the teachers I interviewed took this approach of their own volition out of a sense of professional responsibility and a desire to do right by their students, not because they had been asked to by the state.

Also of particular importance to teachers when planning instruction was the issue of *student learning needs*. All of the teachers mentioned, at one time or another, needing to take into account student abilities when they plan. This included looking at the class’s needs as a whole, looking at individual students, and also addressing the needs of particular sub-groups within the whole class (resistant readers, for instance, or a group of students who have difficulty with paragraph organisation). Ashley, a teacher with five years of experience, said that, for her, “focusing on what they [the students] need” was of primary importance: “...recognising as a community of learners where their gaps are and where their strengths are and really trying to, you know, encourage those strengths and fill those gaps.” For her, this was accomplished by looking at her students’ scores on the previous year’s standardised test, and by doing other diagnostic activities early in the year to get a sense of student abilities in writing and reading. This was especially important in the class she taught for students who had taken and failed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). But again, rather than focusing on the content standards in her planning and instruction, she relied on her belief that it was more important to look instead at what her students were currently able to do, and use this as a way to get her students to the place where they could “independently take a passage that they’ve never seen before, whether it be fictional or nonfictional, and be able to apply certain reading strategies to that passage and be able to understand it independently and discuss it and have an opinion on it.”

A similar concern was addressed by Kristen, a fifth-year teacher who named “the level of my students” as the first thing she took into account when planning lessons. Similar to Ashley, Kristen found her planning necessarily influenced both by what her students needed and what they were already able to do. So important was this factor to Kristen that she actually named it, and not the standards or the state framework, as the blueprint that guided her teaching. Also like Ashley, Kristen looked at her students’ test scores at the beginning of the year, but she also made extensive use of student metacognitive writing as a way of gauging where she should go next in her teaching:

At the beginning of the year I always have them write down what they think they are good at, what they’re not. I always do lots of reflections with my kids, so after every single unit we write down, what did you learn, what are your strengths and weaknesses, what did I as your teacher do to help you, what did you do to help yourself, what didn’t you do, and I use those a lot as kind of immediate feedback, and then they also help me plan.

This kind of reflective, metacognitive writing is nowhere to be found in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade California standards, nor does it apparently have a place in the current Common Core standards – the implication being that because it is not part of the blueprint it is therefore not worth the time. But Kristen clearly used it in a targeted, purposeful way to guide her instruction. Just like the other teachers, though, Kristen was unequivocal in the attention she pays to the standards when planning: “I’m not a big fan of standards because I don’t like being micro-managed. It’s like, we put in all this time to get a credential and now you really don’t think I’m capable so you’re gonna tell me that I need to teach these things? It’s just ridiculous to me.” In Kristen’s statement we see an outright manifestation of the tension between professional responsibility and accountability described by Solbrekke & Englund (2011). Kristen felt, justifiably, that her training and experience qualified her to make informed instructional decisions for her own students, and the standards shouldn’t

supersede her own professional autonomy. The way she (and other teachers in the study) resolved this conflict is described below.

## **Theme 2: Standards are expendable and incidental to the teachers’ own goals**

One thing that can already be seen from interviews is the fact that the teachers often dismissed the standards outright when it came to planning. But perhaps more importantly – especially when keeping in mind the earlier discussion of professional identity – is how many of the teachers considered the standards incidental to their own personal goals for the class. While I stressed in the previous section that the standards were not named as factors in the teachers’ lesson planning, what I did not point out is the number of teachers who specifically stated that they *didn’t consider the standards at all*:

- “I don’t sit down and look at Standards 3.3 and 3.6 and think, ‘How am I going to meet those standards?’” (Matt)
- “It’s not like I really sit down with the standards beforehand....If I get observed I plan the lesson first and then I take a look at the standards and I’m surprised to see that I usually have a lot of them.” (Holly, a teacher with five years of experience)
- “Standards normally don’t influence my planning. Because I figure if I’m doing a good job, I’m gonna teach the standards anyway.” (Kristen)
- “I’m mostly not [thinking about the standards when planning]. I feel like I have a sense of what I need my kids to learn and what’s valuable in a text.” (Nicole)
- “You know, I just have to be honest. I don’t think about the standards when I plan. I just don’t.” (Rachel, 20 years’ experience and a National Writing Project fellow)

One thing to notice in these statements is the use of qualifying words. Kristen stated that standards “normally” don’t influence her planning, and Nicole said that “mostly” she isn’t thinking about the standards. What I found is that the teachers pay attention to the standards – as Holly acknowledged in her comment – only when faced with a scheduled administrator observation. Otherwise, the standards took a back seat to the teacher’s own personal goals for the class.

Rachel talked at length about wanting her students to get to “the heart of literature”, which includes discussions of the moral and ethical implications of literary conflicts, and to “develop an appreciation for going underneath”:

They call it “hidden meaning,” and I want them to know it’s not hidden, it’s just obscured a little bit, but it’s available, so it’s not hidden meaning, it’s not like there’s one level of understanding that some people have and only certain virtuoso students can see the hidden meaning. It’s not like that, it’s not magic, it just takes some thinking and some processing.

Her writing and discussion were designed to help the students “go underneath” and become capable of discussing literature on both literal and figurative levels. As a student of English Literature, she professed a love of examining literary devices and of helping her students appreciate such devices themselves. She was passionate,

intelligent and dedicated, but, as I indicated earlier, she admitted to not thinking about the standards when she planned. This was due in large part to her clear sense of purpose and professional identity, and the notion that, when it came to teaching her students, she knew what was best for them:

I know where I want them [the students] to go and I know what I want them to get out of my class. If it happens to coincide with the standards, that's great, but I don't go out of my way. Because I know what's happening. I feel so confident that it's happening and if it's not happening I don't consider it a worthwhile standard. I guess I'm guilty of hubris there. But I know what works. I've been teaching long enough to know how to stimulate my students and get them to write well, and I'd rather be the person who decides that rather than plan my next lesson around a group of what sometimes seems to be byzantine and arbitrary standards.

Perhaps the most important point to pull from this statement is Rachel's contention that she did not “go out of” her way to meet the standards, relying instead on her own belief that she knows what works in the classroom. Rather than the standards or the framework being the blueprint for planning and instruction, Rachel was writing her own.

Other teachers made similar statements during these interviews. After describing a lesson where her students analysed the setting of a short story, Nicole admitted that she could not find any mention of “setting” in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade Literary Response and Analysis standards: “It's never mentioned. We're not supposed to talk about setting? Does that mean I can't talk about setting because the word ‘setting’ isn't mentioned in the standards?” Despite her concern that such a fundamental textual component was absent from the standards, Nicole concluded, “Regardless of how it's articulated in the standards, I feel that it's a totally valid thing that I'm doing and I don't really care. It serves a bigger purpose.” Rachel and Nicole's statements essentially relegate the standards to curricular oblivion. Neither teacher admitted to paying particular attention to the standards when planning (in fact, both of them specifically admitted that they *didn't*), and, perhaps even more disturbing for the state, both were willing to dismiss the standards when faced with a disconnect between what the standards *said* they should do and what the teachers *believed* they should do, based on their experience and training.

When teachers ignored the standards (which appeared to be much of the time), they did so not out of any anti-authoritarian stance, or because they did not want to be bothered with bureaucracy; they did so out of their own specific, thoughtful and laudable goals for their classes. As I hope I have shown in my discussion of these two themes, this group of teachers was concerned with getting their students interested in the material, ensuring that different learning styles and individual needs were met, and encouraging their classes to dig deeply into and make connections with the texts that they read. When content standards were sidestepped or deemphasised, it was not without reason. These teachers planned with their students in mind, which, it seems to me, is as it should be. In the conflict between professional responsibility and accountability, the teachers' solution was this: when instruction exceeds the demands of the standards, it is the professionally responsible thing to do to pay the standards little mind.

## DISCUSSION

All nine teachers in this study viewed themselves as the most important (and, in some cases, sole) determiners of what constitutes meaningful instruction in their classes. Rather than rely on the content standards to decide the nature of that “third thing which is *of interest to the child and to the adult*” (Hawkins, 2002, p. 60), the teachers decided it themselves, which, in my observation, often exceeded or transcended the demands of the state’s content standards.

I posed this question earlier: do I follow a mandate with which I disagree, or do I do what I think is best for my students? Even after this study, it is still a tricky question to answer. As I mentioned earlier, a strong professional identity by itself isn’t any guarantee of quality. We have all likely had teachers who had very strong motives for doing some very questionable instructional things. But after interviewing the teachers in this study, it does seem that one’s professional identity can be used as a way to arrive at an answer to that question. Here, all nine teachers – even those in the early stages of their career – possessed a very strong sense of professional identity that, importantly, was guided by knowledge of their students and subject matter, as well as effective, research-based practices in English Language Arts. What I think this study endorses perhaps more than anything else is a need for strong professional development programs in our schools. It wasn’t until I became familiar with National Writing Project principles (see Gray, 2000) that I felt my own professional identity begin to cohere, so there is an argument to be made that in order to help teachers develop a professional identity they can trust, they should be provided with experiences based on effective classroom practice that increase their confidence, pedagogical sophistication and professional autonomy. This stronger sense of self will then better equip the teachers to serve their students and will provide them with the requisite metacognitive tools to resolve the conflict between identity and mandate.

### **The common core state standards and opportunities for future research**

The immediate problem, of course, is that all discussions of professional identity notwithstanding, American teachers still have the Common Core State Standards with which to contend. If site administrators mandate a slavish adherence to them, it is entirely possible that most teachers will feel the tension described earlier by Lasky (2005), as well as that named by Solbrekke & Englund (2011).

The teachers in my study felt no such pressure from administration, even though the nine teachers represent administration from four different high schools and two different school districts. Their administration paid lip service to the standards – requiring, for example, that relevant standards be included in observation lesson plans – but after talking to the teachers, this attitude never seemed to be anything other than perfunctory. What will bear watching is whether this degree of laxity in administrative oversight carries over from the current system where states are each using their own system of standards and tests to the new nationalised system governed by the Common Core State Standards and a national test that is currently in development. If school site administrators continue to pay minimal attention to how fully integrated the standards are in their teachers’ classrooms, it is possible (perhaps even likely) that little will change following the implementation of the Common Core.

There is, however, some evidence (anecdotal in nature) to indicate that such laxity will soon be a thing of the past. Publishers are racing to develop their own Common Core materials, including, in my discipline, the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project. The implication here is that the emphasis on the Common Core will be strong enough that teachers will need outside materials in order to adequately teach them to district specifications. Closer to my own home, Georgia is one of the first states to receive President Obama’s *Race to the Top* money, and in conversations with local teachers it is clear that site and district administration is stressing the implementation of the Common Core at all levels of planning and instruction. Teachers have reported their mandatory attendance at multiple seminars and webinars devoted to planning and teaching the Common Core, and one local principal has made it clear that her teachers are “strongly encouraged” to use the model instructional units developed by Georgia’s Department of Education. If this level of oversight becomes *de rigueur* nationwide, then it is likely that the teachers I interviewed – and others like them, whose teaching identities have in the past superseded bureaucratic mandates – will soon be feeling the frustration described by Lasky (2005).

It is clear that there is much opportunity for research as more and more teachers begin using the Common Core State Standards. Aside from the obvious question of how the Common Core State Standards are interpreted by teachers into actual lessons, it would be interesting to revisit the classrooms of the teachers I interviewed to see how (or if) their practices changed under the new mandates. It will also be important to follow how the advent of the Common Core influences teachers’ identities. Lasky made a convincing case that education reforms can negatively affect the very teachers they are supposedly trying to help; it will be crucial to determine if this brave new world of national standards is actually doing more harm than good.

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