

New York's Common Core Pre-K Standards: They're Not Kidding Around

by Susan Ohanian

An angry New York City parent of a preschooler got my attention on Twitter. “Are you f**king kidding me?” she wrote. “I may just quit my job and home-school my daughter.”

I wondered what on earth could be so terrible. I soon found out: the New York City Department of Education’s “Common Core–aligned tasks embedded in a unit of study.”

“Common Core” refers, of course, to the Common Core State Standards, financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and coordinated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. They define “the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”

For the NYC Department of Education, aligning the kindergartner’s day with college and work expectations was not enough. They’ve prepared a get-’em-ready-for-college curriculum for the pre-K set.

The pre-college unit of study that raised the wrath of that parent is *Pre-K Literacy: Plants Are All Around Us!* (See http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/718E8BA4-95EA-42F4-A10E-28C442C38F05/0/NYCDOEPreKLiteracyPlants_Final_083011.pdf.)

The unit contains activities that children have traditionally enjoyed in grade 2. But this “Common Core–aligned task” reads like a college syllabus. It is highly teacher-centered—with the children doing a lot of sitting and listening.

In keeping with the declarations of the Common Core State Standards architects, nonfiction is the preferred reading material. Although there are many engaging works of fiction about planting seeds, the unit uses a nonfiction title—*From Seed to Plant*, by Gail Gibbons—that got a lackluster review in *School Library Journal*:

Unfortunately, the text is pedestrian and occasionally awkward. The boldly colored illustrations are casual, somewhat careless, and some plants are hard to recognize. Other books cover the same subject with more excitement in language and zest in visual design.

With all the emphasis these days on children of poverty lagging far behind middle-class students, this pedestrian book was probably chosen not for zest but for vocabulary. The unit planners say, “You may want to prepare students with some new vocabulary that they’ll encounter in the text.” In spite of their reassurance that students “are not expected

to memorize or acquire a working knowledge of all of these words,” they present the following word lists:

Tier 1: Seed, plant, flower, ground, food, sun, warms, wind, bees, insects, birds, animals, eat, water, dirt, sun, rain, food, fruit, vegetable, sunshine, air, leaves

Tier 2: Grow, ripens, roots, buds, soil, acorns, scatter, shoots, blows, falls, floats, lands, blows, soaks, softens, drops, streams, ponds, rivers, ocean, travel, shore, flower bed, vegetable garden, small envelopes or boxes; Parts of a plant: petal, flower, fruit, bud, leaves, root, berries

Tier 3: Botanists, nectar, pollen grain, pod, minerals, vitamins, nutrition, hooks, daisy, rose, tulip, pea, buttercup, tomato, squash, violet, corn, sunflower, oak tree, hummingbirds, apple tree, zinnia, dandelion, aster, pollen, pollination, shoots, germination, seed coat, full grown, parachutes. Parts of a plant: shoot, sprout, pod, sepal, stem, ovules, stamens, root, pistal [sic], pollen

Whew! We can only hope pre-K teachers know that direct instruction is the least effective way for young children to acquire vocabulary. (And that the word is spelled *pistil*.) Most effective are lots of conversation and lots of reading aloud.

But the guide warns that “the tasks are embedded in units of study that are also aligned to the new standards.” Will vocabulary tests to judge the success of pre-K programs and their teachers be the next step?

The unit also prescribes the following reading interruptions:

Start reading the text while pausing to prompt the students with the following:

- What types of plants do you notice in this picture?
- What is this part of the plant called? Stem, leaf, root?
- How do seeds travel?
- What are some places where seeds fall?
- What do birds do with seeds?
- How do plants grow once they land in the soil? What happens first?

Does anyone who savors books read that way?

I worry about this image of pre-K as a place for mainly sitting, listening, and responding in a group. Time spent on these teacher-directed activities is time away from the independent fantasy play that is so important to this age.

In *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*, Vivian Gussin Paley expresses a similar concern. She notes that while “Mr. McGregor waits for Peter in the garden and the wolf is huffing at the door, teachers show a growing preference for the more passive responses elicited by a skills-first curriculum.” Paley reminds us: “It was not the monsters

they invented that frightened them in kindergarten; it was being told to sit still and pay attention for long periods of time.”

I wonder if that angry mom on Twitter knows about the New York State Learning Standards for pre-kindergartners in mathematics. It's 10 a.m. Can your four-year-old “reason abstractly and quantitatively,” “construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others,” “model with mathematics” “look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning,” and “analyze, compare, and sort two- and three-dimensional shapes and objects, in different sizes, using informal language to describe their similarities, differences, and other attributes”?

Those are just five of New York’s pre-K math standards. There are 30 more. And that’s just in math. (See http://emsc32.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/pdfdocs/nyslsprek.pdf.)

The 17th-century poet Robert Herrick told us to “gather ye rosebuds while ye may.” Now time is pressing for us to pass this message on to toddlers.

Susan Ohanian writes about children and schools at www.susanohanian.org. This article is copyright 2012 by Susan Ohanian. Contact her at susano@gmavt.net.