

# A Critical Analysis of Philosophies of Education and INTASC Standards in Teacher Preparation

by  
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The establishment of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in 1987 and the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) in 1992 called for the development of performance-based assessment for teacher certification. This paralleled the development of curriculum standards and standardized achievement testing in K-12 educational settings. It has been our experience as teacher educators that these developments have resulted in many teachers adopting the perspective that standards control what and how they teach. Some teachers and pre-service teachers in our classes have expressed that these educational policies force teachers to adopt an essentialist perspective, which results in a renewed emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic (Bagley, 1934, 1938). As teacher educators, we are concerned because these practices exclude the possibility of a more constructivist perspective offered by progressivism—one that is grounded in John Dewey's (1916) democratic theories, and in Paulo Freire's (2003) critical literacy theory, which we believe promote a more inclusive educational experience. Instead, pre-service teachers resist our practices to introduce them to critical literacy theory and request more practical teaching strategies that prepare children from success on standardized tests.

Moss's (2007, in press) work indicates one's educational philosophy, and not external standards, determines how a teacher teaches. In an attempt to verify this notion, we have provided pre-service teachers with a forum to critically examine

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the INTASC standards by applying what they had learned about essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, and critical theory. Our goal was to have students realize that critical pedagogy is a viable philosophical stance that can guide them in their professional decision-making concerning curriculum and instruction, even in the face of essentialist state and national legislations, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

## Critical Inquiry in Teaching and Research

Although we are not social activists in the Marxist sense that McLaren promotes, we have both been inspired by critical theory (Carspecken, 1996). Glenda, a white female, came to this theory by way of her thirteen years of middle school teaching practice with African American students in a Title 1 school: She would encourage her middle school students to critique the Texas state language arts test for the ways it privileged conventional English dialects and marginalized her students' African American dialects, as was evidenced by the answers that "sounded right" to students of each dialect. Her students grew in understanding of their culture and language and gained skills to choose the dialectical answers that would produce a successful achievement score. Only later, when she read critical texts during her doctoral program, was Glenda able to connect what she had been doing with her students to critical pedagogy (Moss, 2004). As Glenda pursued her studies, she saw a gap between university scholars and multicultural education classes (Moss, 2001), and what classroom teachers do in practice, and began to ask how she could translate critical pedagogy in preparing teachers for practice in middle and high schools.

Cheu-jei joined the teacher education faculty in the fall 2007 and began to teach one section of the critical reading in the content areas class. Glenda asked him to review her syllabus with his critical theoretical perspective and knowledge from his recent doctoral studies in literacy (Lee, 2009) to engage with her in inter-subjective dialogue. This drew Cheu-jei and Glenda into a collaborative teaching and research partnership that focuses on critical pedagogical development in the program.

As teacher educators interested in preparing teachers to address the complex issues presented by a multicultural society as a form of critical pedagogy, it is important for us to continuously ask how to move our teacher education practices, such as portfolio assessment, to a level of critical self-reflection (Breault, 2003; Freire, 2003; Moss, 2003) that frees pre-service teachers from tacit assumptions that may stifle their ability to build multicultural learning communities in their classrooms. Portfolio assessment promotes reflection on learning experiences (Anderson & DeMuelle, 1998; Camp, 1998; Moss, 2003; Murphy, 1998), but without critiquing the INTASC standards (1992) and one's philosophy of teaching that reflection may reproduce traditional teaching practices and the status quo in society.

This raises the critical question for teacher educators as to how we can prepare pre-service teachers with other philosophical education options and the skills

to actualize critical pedagogy if that is the action they want to take as professional teachers. We constantly ask if our curriculum and instruction results in the development of pedagogy toward the goal of preparing pre-service teachers to become “more caring, humane, and functional citizens in a global, multicultural, democratic society” (School of Education, 1996, p. 3), which is one part of the mission of the program in which we teach.

### Contextualizing the Study

At all levels of American education, there is a tension between critical theoretical frameworks and what appears to us as an essentialist interpretation of national and state accreditation systems: In P-12 schools, administrators often rely on the results of their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) assessment to gauge their school’s success. Consequently, many teachers decide that they should “teach to the test” through essentialistic practices.

Pre-service teachers in our program are introduced to four theories in their educational foundations course during their first block of education classes: essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, and critical theory.

#### *Essentialism*

Essentialism, according to Bagley (1934, 1938), calls for a renewed emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Advocates of essentialism believe that schools should equip students with the basic academic skills to survive in society. Teachers are supposed to transmit knowledge to students who usually play a passive role in the process of learning. Standardized testing is seen by essentialists as an ideal benchmark for assessing students and holding teachers accountable for student achievement.

#### *Perennialism*

Like essentialism, perennialism places a great emphasis on the roles teachers play in teaching and learning. Perennialists argue that teachers are more knowledgeable than students who are incompletely formed human beings. Therefore, teachers should assume the authority and command in the classroom. In addition, Hutchins (1936), a strong advocate of perennialism, argued that “[e]ducation implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. Truth is everywhere the same. Hence, education should be everywhere the same” (p. 66). Consequently, all students are supposed to pursue the same curriculum regardless of individual differences.

#### *Progressivism*

Progressivism, in direct contrast to essentialism and perennialism, advocates a student-centered education. It is based on John Dewey’s (1916) theory of education, which explores the relationship between democracy and education. Dewey

believed that democracy is a way of life. In a democratic society, people should work cooperatively to solve the problems and schools are responsible for equipping students with the problem-solving ability. Progressivists argue that schools are miniature societies and should focus on real-life problems students face in school or will face in the future. Therefore, education should revolve around authentic activity in a social setting and cater to student needs.

### *Critical Theory*

Parallel with progressivism, critical theory puts students in the center of education. Critical theorists even take a step further and argue that our society, including the educational system, is brimming with oppressions and injustices. Critical theorists' educational agenda includes not only helping students acquire knowledge, but also making them aware of power and politics. As a result, education is supposed to empower the marginalized and transform social inequalities (McLaren, 1997). We hold a critical theory philosophy and hope educators act as social activists and change agents that have an impact both on their students and society as a whole. We are conscious that this is a political perspective that is counter to the politics of de-skilling teachers through standardization (Apple, 1988; Apple & Teitelbaum, 1986).

The following semester, we engaged the same pre-service teachers in critical reading classes. In these classes, we observe that many students feel a sense of entrapment: On the one hand, after reading *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1991) and short readings about critical theory, they are inspired to teach for social justice. On the other hand, they are very conscious of the pressure of standardized testing and think they have to be essentialists to get and keep a job since their students' achievement scores are the measure of their effectiveness as educators. Consequently, many think that their hands are tied. We believe it is imperative that we address this issue and imagine with our students another perspective—a praxis that includes becoming critical pedagogues who reflect on curriculum standards, multicultural issues, diverse learning styles, and the politics of high-stakes testing and tracking in schools.

Students are then given an introductory course to explain how portfolios work and how they are assessed. As they begin preparing their teaching portfolios, many students believe that they should be standardized (Moss, 2003). They start by writing a philosophy of education statement. In it, students are required to explain the four major philosophies and explain how each informs their personal philosophy. The pre-service teachers then designed units of study, taught lessons in a field experience, and reexamined the philosophies to determine which one best framed their beginning practice. As a final experience in the Critical Reading in the Content Areas class, the students were divided into four different groups—Essentialist, Perennialist, Progressivist, and Social Reconstructivist. Each group examined all ten INTASC standards (which are listed in Appendix A) through their assigned philosophical lens. The students charted their discussions on large

tablets of paper and presented their analyses to the whole class. We then analyzed their discussion narratives from a classroom learning activity.

Our thinking was that if a teacher's philosophical perspective does not matter and it is external standards that drive a person's teaching practices, then this would result in a consistent view on standards across the four groups' perspectives. However, if a person's philosophical perspective does matter and does in fact drive what one does in their practice, different philosophical orientations would lead to different interpretations of each INTASC standard, most of the standards, or some of the standards.

### Analysis of Pre-service Teachers' Narratives

To date, a total of 62 pre-services teachers have participated in the study: 31 pre-service teachers in the fall 2007, nine in the spring 2008, and 22 in the fall 2008. Appendix A summarizes our analysis of the narratives collected from these three semesters. It is not difficult to see that the interpretations of each standard are different across all four different philosophical perspectives. For example, the first (INTASC, 1992) standard is concerned with subject knowledge: It states that "the pre-service teacher should understand the central concepts, tools of inquiry and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches, and can create learning experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful for students" (p. 14). Simply put, the first standard is concerned with subject knowledge. The groups that used an essentialist perspective believed that a teacher's subject knowledge would be demonstrated if they taught the core curriculum that is mandated by their state for K-12 schools. The students using a perennialist approach believed that if a teacher taught classics such as Shakespeare, then they are demonstrating core subject knowledge. The progressivist group interpreted a teacher's subject knowledge as knowledge that is informed by multiple perspectives, including those of their students. Finally, the critical theory group argued that subject knowledge goes well beyond our traditional view. In fact, the four groups differ at least slightly on their interpretations of all ten INTASC standards. Consequently, our analysis shows that the philosophy which pre-service teachers believe does have an impact on how they perceive and enact educational standards.

However, through our narrative analysis, we also observed that the critical theory groups' interpretations are more closely aligned with the progressivist groups' interpretations than with the essentialist and perennialist groups' interpretations. Take the second standard, which is concerned with a teacher's understanding of human development, as an example: According to those using a critical theory lens, a teacher should view students' culture as important. Similarly, the progressivist group stated that a teacher should acknowledge that there is individual variation in the way that students approach learning and a teacher's focus should be on their students' strengths. In contrast, the essentialist and perennialist groups had much more traditional views of students' development that emphasize

the importance of teachers getting through their prepared material and lesson plan at the cost of students' learning needs. Some teachers reported that their Districts told them what page(s) they must cover each day in preparation for a standardized test. This pattern further confirmed that a teacher's philosophical perspective does affect how they perceive and use standards.

## Critical Incident

Across the four groups from the three semesters that are part of this study, the pre-service teachers' narrative analyses of the INTASC standards were consistent, except for the two students who used the progressivist lens during the spring 2007 semester. This pair stood out from the two other progressivist groups because they challenged us to consider the complexity of adopting a philosophical lens that is not aligned with one's own perspective. Glenda perceived that Sam (pseudonym), one of the two pre-service teachers in question, came to her Critical Reading Class with an essentialist perspective and over a half of a century of life experience aligned with essentialism, yet Sam chose to analyze the INTASC standards through a progressivist lens with a partner. Sam tended to dominate the other pre-service teacher during the activity, skewing the results towards Sam's perspective. Despite the progressivist lens that they were supposed to employ for the assignment, their analysis showed reflections of Sam's essentialist perspective. This was particularly evident in their interpretations of standard three, Adapting Instruction, and standard four, Instructional Strategies.

Their narrative analyses for these two standards consisted of six words: "Present topic using variety of strategies." It is clear that Sam lifted those words directly from standard four, which states: "The pre-service teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students' development of critical thinking, problem solving, and performance skills" (INTASC, 1992, p. 20). Their analysis of INTASC standard five, Motivation and Learning Environment was also disjointed. This standard states: "The pre-service teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation" (INTASC, 1992, p. 22) The pair's interpretation was "Use group competition in a positive way." Sam's partner did not disagree. Interestingly, the term "competition" never appears in the extended text concerning this standard. We believe that its inclusion perhaps reveals their essentialist interpretation of "individual and group motivation and behavior," which is part of the INTASC Standard Five principle. In this case, we judge that they imposed their essentialist perspective not only on the INTASC standard, but on progressivist philosophy as well. This is consistent with our critical analysis that standards themselves do not drive what teachers believe, but teachers' philosophical perspectives drive their teaching actions in relationship to curriculum and instruction.

## Lessons Learned and Implications for Practice

We constantly encourage pre-service teachers to become scholar-practitioners, examining their instructional strategies and students' responses for evidence of critical learning. We stress the importance of using the knowledge they gain to inform lesson plans. We expect the same scholarly practice of ourselves and present the lessons we have learned from examining pre-service teachers' responses to critical texts and learning activities.

## Standards Are Not Dictates that Control Teaching Practices

In the wake of NCLB, too often classroom teachers give up their imagination and creative thinking capacity for routines that lead to memorization, formulaic writing, and computations. Such practice may be driven by an essentialist perspective. There is evidence that an essentialist philosophy would view the core subject matter to be that which K-12 students will be tested on standardized tests. A more progressive philosophy would allow for multiple perspectives, use prior knowledge, and engage students in generating knowledge. Critical teachers would engage students to question the core content and examine how the core content advantages some and disadvantages others. The narrative analyses suggest that teachers who rationalize essentialist approaches to teaching are viewing through an essentialist lens and using standardized testing to justify such practices.

## Curriculum and Instruction Influence Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching

The pre-service teachers' narrative analyses of the standards show that reading works such as Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*, Nieto's (1999) *The Light In Their Eyes*, and Ladson-Billings's (1995) *The Dreamkeepers*, help them to develop a beginning understanding of what a critical lens might look like. We struggle with how to engage pre-service teachers to gain this critical understanding without doing it in an essentialist way. We believe that if pre-service teachers only read literature from an essentialist or perennialist perspective, they will never entertain critical pedagogy. Although we know that it takes more than reading critical texts to develop critical pedagogy, exposure to critical pedagogy literacy is an effective beginning point. Pre-service teachers can then view the same core curriculum standards and imagine new possibilities that work to actualize democracy, respect of others, and an ethic of care in community life.

## Critical Analytical Skills Are Important in Developing Teachers as Active Learners and Participants in Educational Reform

The pre-service teachers' narrative analyses further show the importance of developing pre-service teachers' scholarly skills, building their capacity to use

scholarship to inform their teaching practices, collect and analyze narratives from their students to determine the impact of their instructional practices on learning, and reflectively plan subsequent teaching to build student capacity to inquire and develop their own theories.

This study models the scholar-practitioner teacher leadership ideal in that it bridges theory and practice through an intersubjective scholarship of pre-service teachers and teacher educators learning from educational history and from each other in the preparation of becoming cultural workers (Freire, 2005) to shape the future of educational history. Today is history, and education is political; therefore, the foundation of American education is a study of the political forces that influence and shape educational practices. This project opens the door to allow pre-service teachers to actively participate in the politics of education, becoming conscious of the ways their teaching identities are shaped by educational policies, practices and curriculum, and the ways they can act to shape the system and society.

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**Appendix A: Critique of INTASC standards through the lenses of four major educational theories.**

INTASC Standards	Essentialism	Perennialism	Progressivism	Critical Theory
Knowledge of Subject	Core subject matter that K-12 students will be tested on	Shakespeare every year in high school, curriculum passes on dominant culture	Multiple perspectives, use prior knowledge, engaging students in generating knowledge	Knowledge goes beyond traditional
Human Development	Develop through traditional ideas	Students are empty buckets, teacher is authority and dispenses knowledge	Individual variation in each area, development, focus on students' strengths	Student culture is important
Adapting Instruction	Adapt instruction for standardized testing and discipline issues	Does not apply Students adapt Teacher-centered Curriculum-centered	Well-rounded framework	Respects and celebrates diversity. Culture informs instruction
Instructional Variety	Instructional strategies through same repetition, practice, and drills	Variety would be within the dominant cultural structures, lecture, Socratic, testing	Multiple teaching & learning strategies, students use learning resources	Think outside the box and question authority
Learning Environment	Motivation through the importance of skills they will use outside of school	Promote dominant cultural patterns, motivate with threats, appeal to cultural morals	Peer relationships & recognizing how to encourage each other's learning	Teachers and students combine forces to make things relevant
Communication	Teaching traditional communication skills and professional setting	English only, technology valued as foundation to economy, market	Expands learner expression	Access to technology can be discriminatory; dialogic
Planning	Textbook, traditional lesson plans	Teacher-centered, focus on teacher authority	Take students' needs and interests into account	Take community into account

Assessment	Testing of essential skills, standardized	Grading, knowledge level, structured tests from material provided	Self-assessment, evaluates how class activities affect the individual	Standardized testing can be biased
Reflection	Taking college courses	Reflection on teacher activities, reflection on dominant cultural patterns, reflection on student behavior	Self-directed learning as habits of mind, values critical thinking	Reflects on how teaching meets aims of social justice
Community	Maintaining contact when necessary	Involvement in community and sustaining dominant culture, correct cultural differences	Using community resources to foster student learning	Empower the powerless