



## Who They Gonna Call? Bias at the New York Times on Education Reform

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On Sept. 6, 1871, *The New York Times* published Karl Marx's obituary,<sup>[1]</sup> even though Marx was very much alive at that time—and didn't die for another eleven years. Whether it was obstinacy or wishful thinking, the *Times* never ran a correction on this item. In more recent times, educators who wondered if they'd live long enough to see a correction on *Times* fly-by-night education reform claims found small hope in this *New York Times* official Correction, March 2, 2013:

An article on Friday about New York City's estimate that it will cost about \$56 million to buy new textbooks and other materials to help city public school students meet rigorous Common Core academic standards misidentified the classes in New York State that will take standardized tests in April based on the new standards. It is third through eighth graders, not kindergartners through eighth grade.<sup>[2]</sup>

Certainly, this glitch doesn't compare with other *Times* bloopers that have made it to the Corrections page:

- \* Walter Cronkite did not storm the D-Day beaches but covered the landing from a warplane
- \* Congressional candidate Alexander Sacks said "Communist fronts," not "Communist faggots"
- \* In "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" a spy from an atheist organization fell into a vat of broth, not a monkey or Sampath in the form of a guava.
- \* An article about drilling for oil off the coast of Angola erroneously reported a story about cows falling from planes, as an example of risks in any engineering endeavor. No cows, smuggled or otherwise, ever fell from a plane into a Japanese fishing rig.

Other corrections have involved misidentifying someone's *My Little Pony* character, clarifying just when Gore Vidal had sex with his longtime live-in companion, situating Bermuda in the Caribbean, mistaking longitude for latitude, putting the picture of the wrong catcher in Yogi Berra's obituary, offering illumination on whether Ahmed Abu Khattala drank a strawberry frappe or mango juice at a luxury hotel, correcting the age of Melania Krauss [Trump] when she posed for a picture in *Talk* magazine: "She was 29, not 26, making her almost a quarter-century younger than her future husband, not more than a quarter-century younger."

And so on.

Considering all the *Times*' misstatements on Common Core since the June 3, 2010 announcement of the release of the standards, the glitch about K-3 is indeed very small potatoes. But correction of small detail is a critical *Times* strategy, such repairs serving as opportunistic sly boots, offering reassurance to readers that the paper is meticulous about facts. Get the small trappings right and then maybe nobody will notice the deliberate, obfuscating curtains of distortion and duplicity shrouding what matters. As Renata Adler points out, [3] "the policy of Corrections is a form simultaneously of consolidation of power and of hiding. . . . It is a form of Fundamentalism, it protects the ideology." With *New York Times* Common Core coverage, that travels as News is corporate Verdict.

The face that in *Times* education coverage, public relations crackerjacks are much more likely to be quoted than pedagogy experts sits in sharp contrast to news presented by the science staff when writing about medical research. Health and science writer (and part of a 2015 Pulitzer Prize team) Pam Belluck explains:[4]

Once we decide it's worth doing a story, there are several next steps. Besides doing a detailed reading of the study, examining related cancer research and interviewing the researchers and unconnected experts, I'm always interested in talking with real people with relevant experiences.

That last sentence cuts to the core of the problem with the *Times* coverage of education in general and the Common Core in particular:

- \* Interviewing researchers
- \* Interviewing unconnected experts
- \* Talking with real people with relevant experiences

This has happened in Common Core coverage.

Let's start with the June 2010 article announcing release of the Common Core.[5] Longtime reporter and two-time Pulitzer Prize (for writing on Iran-Contra and drug trafficking in Mexico) reporter Sam Dillon declared that "The new standards were written by English and math experts convened last year by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers." In the ensuing five years, *Times* staffers repeat this claim again and again, though no experts are named, other than Sue Pimentel. Dillon gives no clarification here. In actuality, Pimentel trained as a lawyer but is a Standardisto's standardisto. She got her big start in Standards setting with a 1993 grant in from the Walton Family Foundation and was a co-founder of Standards Work. Her close connection with Achieve put her in prime position to write the Common Core standards in language arts.

This piece introducing the Common Core to America does not mention that the Common Core existed because of a hundred million or so from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Instead, for his opening description of the Common Core, Dillon called on the perennial *Times* favorite education go-to mouthpiece, Chester E. Finn Jr., here identified as "a former assistant secretary of education who has long called for national standards."

In some 60+ education articles that Dillon wrote for the *Times* in 2010, he quoted 14 different university professors, 12 individual school superintendents, and a school bus driver—one time each. No repeats. That same year Dillon quoted Finn seven times. Finn was on the *Times* speed dial long before Dillon used him. Since the early 1980ies, whether the subject has been bilingual education, school governance in Chicago, Maxine Greene’s pedagogy, same-sex education, gifted education, special education, or merit pay for teachers, the *New York Times* calls, and Chester E. Finn, Jr. delivers. In 1991, Finn himself was profiled in an article[6] with this headline: “Washington at Work; Education Pundit Heard As Voice of Revolution,” In November 1997, in an article on the teaching of mathematics,[7] Finn’s remarks were bannered on the front page as Quotation of the Day.

The *New York Times* calls and Finn delivers. He’s smart, and he’s colorful. The fact that many respected educators think he’s wrong is irrelevant to the *Times*. The paper’s approach was made very apparent in 1999 with the release of a Harvard Graduate School of Education Civil Rights Project study, “Resegregation in American Schools.”[8]The *Times* quoted three sentences from the civil rights study. The only person in the country asked to react was Chester E. Finn, Jr., who was also given three sentences, including this one: “Gary Orfield must be the only American who still thinks that integration for its own sake is an important societal goal.” No one was quoted supporting the report. Then, one month later, the *Times* carried news[9] about the release of another report—one from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation advocating scrapping most teacher-hiring regulations tied to schools of education. The *Times* identified Chester E. Finn, Jr. as Fordham president and a principal editor of the report as well as an Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administration. The *Times* gave 1 ½ time more ink to the Fordham report than to the Harvard Civil Rights Project report.

### **Up Close and Disturbing: *The New York Times* Looks at Common Core**

When I read an article about China in the *Times*, I know that one correspondent, has a Ph.D. in Chinese studies and has lived in China for 15 years; another received Polk and Asia Society awards for China coverage; another took a sabbatical to improve his Mandarin. And so on. Think of what education reporters bring to their beat: they went to school. When coverage of the Common Core began to rev up in 2013, here’s who covered it:

\*22 news items by staff reporters whose beat was at least temporarily education. One had been covering the metropolitan policing, another global terrorism. For another, a temporary stop at education came before assignment to the China beat.

\*12 news items by reporters on other beats, including the science of climate change, New York regional news, book review, data analysis, economics, Congress, scientific miscellany, technology, wedding announcements

\* 9 opinion pieces by *Times* Editorial Board plus 2 signed pieces by Brent Staples who writes the unsigned Editorials on education

\* 5 opinion pieces by staff op ed writers

\* 3 op eds by someone not employed by the *Times*, including a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an emeritus professor of political science at Queens College, a middle school English teacher

The *Times* Editorial Board, like the legendary Boston Brahmin Cabots, who spoke only to God, finds no need to communicate with education practitioners or researchers to reinforce their claim that the Common Core is necessary for the economic well-being of the country. The board is joined by staff of ed writers in insisting that the Common Core is heavily researched and jam-packed with critical thinking and problem-solving skills that workers need to keep the nation competitive in the Global Economy. Like people waiting for Senator McCarthy to open his briefcase at the House UnAmerican Activities Committee meetings, *Times* readers wait for even a snippet of a study by one education researcher providing evidence for all this phantasm.

It just isn't there.

The *New York Times* education coverage has become quasi-governmental, promoting the corporate push for standardization of public schools. Not only are readers not informed that the Common Core was developed and heavily promoted with hundreds of millions from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the oft-repeated selling point that these “standards that have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia” fails to acknowledge that the states did it for the money, accepting the Common Core for the Race to the Top financial bribe handed out by the US Department of Education, most definitely not for the pedagogy. Savvy readers keep a count of how often the *Times* intones unproven key phrases right out of the press releases from Common Core headquarters: “the Common Core sets a national benchmark for what students should should learn”[10]; “a focus on critical thinking and primary investigation”[11]; “set more rigorous classroom goals for American students, with a focus on critical thinking skills, abstract reasoning in math and reading comprehension”[12]; “emphasize critical thinking”[13]; “emphasis on free-form thinking”[14]; “emphasize deep analysis and creative problem-solving”[15]; “written by a panel of experts . . . focus on critical thinking and analysis”[16]; “modeled on the teaching strategies of countries, especially in Asia, that perform better on international comparisons”[17]; “a more rigorous set of standards”[18]; “heightened expectation of student progress. . . ideal of a rigorous national standard”[19]; “tougher learning standards taking root across the country”[20]; a set of rigorous academic standards”[21]; “the new, more rigorous academic standards”[22]; “a set of rigorous reading and math standards”[23]; “a tougher set of standards”[24]; “the standards were written by a panel of experts convened by a bipartisan group of governors and superintendents to emphasize critical thinking over memorization, to better prepare students for college and jobs”[25]; “new benchmarks for what students need to know and be able to do”[26]; “new and more rigorous set of academic standards”[27]; “more rigorous academic standards.”[28]

As we read this over-the-top legerdemain about the Common Core—verified by absolutely no evidence from research or classroom practice—we have to wonder about the absence of those reportorial strategies so clearly outlined by the Pulitzer science reporter:

- \* Interviewing researchers
- \* Interviewing unconnected experts
- \* Talking with real people and relevant experiences

**Where's the Left?**

In an August 16, 2013 piece on the Common Core,[29] Motoko Rich mentioned “growing opposition from both the right and the left before it has been properly introduced into classrooms.” Let’s think a moment about just whom the *Times* is talking about here. “The Right” is clearly marked as Tea Party zealots. “The Left?” Anybody’s guess. The only Common Core opponents Rich mentioned are “a group of parents and teachers” who argue that the tests aligned with the standards are too difficult, but she quotes Kati Haycock of Education Trust worrying about the “terrifying prospect” if “a bit of anti-test rebellion coming from the left” joined up with the Tea Partiers.

Sam Dillon covered[30] a paper published by the ostensibly liberal Albert Shanker Institute advocating common curriculum, but the *Times* ignored the manifesto signed by a group *Education Week* described[31] as “more than 100 leaders in education, business, and politics, most of them conservatives.” Likewise, the Cato Institute opposition to the Common Core goes unmentioned. Instead, the *New York Times* chooses to give ink to the bizarre. We get eight-year *Times* executive editor Bill Keller announcing[32] that Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin and their cohorts are trying to kill the Common Core, “arguably the most serious educational reform of our lifetime.” Common Core: *most serious education reform of our lifetime*, and to attack it, declares Keller, is to be stupid. Keller identifies conservatives who support the Common Core, as “scholars”: Katherine Porter-Magee of Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Partnership for Inner-City Education and Sol Stern, senior fellow at Manhattan Institute. Neither Keller nor any of his Op Ed cohorts seem to be able to find any scholars on the Left. Or even in the middle.

Instead, we get Op Ed windbag David Brooks,[33] who offers a flip dismissal of both the right and the left in the “boredom” known as Common Core:

We are pretty familiar with this story. A perfectly sensible if slightly boring idea is walking down the street. Suddenly the ideological circus descends, burying the sensible idea in hysterical claims and fevered accusations. The idea’s political backers beat a craven retreat. The idea dies.

This is what seems to be happening to the Common Core education standards, which are being attacked on the right because they are common and on the left because they are core.

Of course it’s a given that opinion columnists get to say anything they damn well please, but does anybody think David Brooks has ever talked with a Leftist education researcher?

In a 2014 piece headlined “Common Core Curriculum Now Has Critics on the Left,” Art Baker, claimed[34] that Common Core, “applauded by education leaders,” previously had no resistance from liberals. But now, an “acclaimed high school principal on Long Island,” called the Common Core a “disaster.” He offered no hint of how he came to know this principal’s political philosophy and offered no statements from any avowed Leftist scholars. Instead he quickly moved on to the *Times*’ tried and true source on the Right:

Common Core advocates like Michael J. Petrilli, executive vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy group, have been taken aback.

Twenty-three paragraphs later, Baker closed with a statement from Chester E. Finn, Jr., identifying him as “a former assistant education secretary and now senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford.” Baker fails to acknowledge that Finn was also president of the Fordham

group for which Petrilli was vice-president, thus avoiding the admission that he was using two soundbites from Fordham in one article.

On his Taking Note blog, Editorial Page Editor Andrew Rosenthal zeroed in<sup>[35]</sup> on one Florida politico to nail home the proposition that Common Core opponents are out to lunch: “Florida State Representative Charlves Van Zant, a Republican, said the new educational standards were a ploy to make schoolchildren gay.”

In 2015, an Ivy-League-educated freelance ed writer trained as a lawyer told *Times* readers that poor kids in particular need something like Common Core because “they’re the least likely to acquire the kind of knowledge they need at home.”<sup>[36]</sup> The *Times* failed to inform its readers that this contributing writer serves on the board of the Writing Revolution, where Common Core architect David Coleman is an advisor. This outfit promises to deliver the exact skills students “need to meet the demanding new standards of the Common Core.”

*New York Times* education coverage seems particularly egregious when one looks at other reporting. Take knee replacement, for example. Articles acknowledge the procedure as contentious and a variety of people with diverse expertise and experience are cited: surgeons, physical therapists, researchers—and patients. Similarly, with a disputed topic like geo-engineering, both advocates and opponents with scientific expertise are given quite a bit of ink. But a topic like Common Core, which exposes every schoolchild in the country to radical disruption, is presented as necessary and beneficial, with dissenting expertise notably absent.

As Eugene Debs noted in 1920, <sup>[37]</sup> “The working class can expect nothing from the press of the capitalist class but misrepresentation and injustice in the struggle for its rights.” News folk at the *New York Times* seem determined to trumpet the miracle flimflam Bill Gates paid for while at the same time beating up on teachers for not being smart enough to do the job corporate America wants done. The public remains in the dark about the fact that once Gates got that Standardize Test bee in his bonnet he shelled out money to organizations ranging from the PTA to the Council for a Strong America to the American Enterprise Institute to the US Chamber of Commerce to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute to New Venture Fund to Success Academy — and nearly 200 more—18 pages of recipients—to bring the notion home. This money went not for researching the need for and benefit from national standards and testing, but to promote and/or develop supportive materials and implementation plans for a done deal called the Common Core. Readers can ask when the *New York Times* will cover the origins and promotion of the Common Core in muckraking detail, but it’s difficult to see that anyone on staff might be listening.

In *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the selling of the Iraq War*, Michael Isikoff and David Corn reported<sup>[38]</sup> that for a year the *Times* had been under pressure from readers and press critics demanding the paper explain its reporting on Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. Then-executive editor Bill Keller wrote this admission regarding the paper’s Iraq coverage:

[W]e have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged—or failed to emerge.<sup>[39]</sup>

Make no mistake: With regard to the survival of public education, the weapons of mass destruction are real, and the *New York Times* offers a cover-up that parallels the one Keller admitted to. Schoolchildren, their teachers, and anyone who recognizes the importance of public education in a democracy deserve an aggressive reexamination of the unsupportable spin on the Common Core published and applauded in this newspaper of record.

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