

Reference

Roberts, T., & Billings, L. (2008). Thinking Is Literacy, Literacy Thinking. *Educational Leadership*, 65(5), 32-36.

The first unit of *Taking Sides* covers a wide range of basic theoretical issues that are often the basis of many discussions and controversies in Education. The differing viewpoints give a thought-provoking look at what vital elements make up schooling in America. The issue of standardized curriculum is one that surfaces quite frequently, especially with the recent implementation of Common Core standards and the continuing compliance with NCLB and high stakes testing. The topic brings about debate because it calls upon the most basic philosophical ideals, and challenges the idea that schooling belongs to the individual, and teachers decide what is crucial to teach and when. In Unit 1 of *Taking Sides*, Mortimer J. Adler writes about the Paideia Proposal, and outlines its relevance to a standardized curriculum. Later in the Unit, during the discussion of the definition of Public Schooling, the authors suggest an article by Roberts and Billings (2008) called “Thinking is Literacy, Literacy Thinking”, which focuses on the art of teaching thinking as a literacy by way of Paideia seminars.

The authors begin their article by relaying an effective example of what teaching a student to be a thinker really means. An algebra teacher, seemingly jaded and buried in papers to grade, expresses her frustration in her students for not grasping a concept that she had taught and failing a test as a group. Perhaps she had taught the concept of the steps of the formula, and how it applies to a large number of similar problems, but she had failed to teach the students the reason why the formulas work. This idea that all things we learn about are *systems*, from obvious topics like Life Cycles and Legislative Process to more obscure topics like Poetry or a Folktale, is one that is central to the National Paideia Center. They explain that thinking is an

important literacy skill, no matter what the subject matter. Students must be able to read, write, speak, listen and *think* in order to become lifelong learners with “abundant lives”. The article then goes into a discussion of the Paideia seminar, which is a literacy cycle of instruction that teachers use for deeper understanding of subjects. In this setting, students are set up in a circular fashion, and complete the seminar in a Socratic or Maieutic discussion of the topic. Students set goals for themselves for the discussion, and then complete a self-assessment at its completion. The role of the teacher is important because he/she facilitates the group through the different types of literacies as they relate to thinking. The example used in the main part of the article is a seminar of sixth graders discussing an eight-line poem by Emily Dickinson. The teacher takes the students through stages of thinking as related to reading, speaking/listening, collaboration, and writing. The final product of the seminar shows the intrinsic creativity and thinking skills of each student. The authors conclude with thoughts about “Growing Lifelong Thinkers”, which is a concept often overlooked when discussing content delivery and student learning. Because the ability to think, recognize and analyze complex relationships in a myriad of subjects is an important skill of a lifelong thinker, it is crucial that teachers provide an opportunity for this type of literacy development to flourish in the classroom.

I’m personally interested in the topic of multi-modal literacies and how addressing different literacies is a more effective way of reaching the whole learner. I was drawn to the table in Adler’s article (page 18 in *Taking Sides*) because it inferred an idea that standardized curriculum can be just as much about delivery as content. When the term “standardized curriculum” is mentioned, one often thinks immediately of grade-level standards and content benchmarks. However, I think now that a more effective way to standardize curriculum is to

organize and identify the standardization at a deeper level. How can we ensure that students are not only full of information, but full of strategies that help them synthesize new information as they encounter it in their subsequent years of life? By simplifying the delivery into three distinct stages, we enable students to use a foundation of basic knowledge to their advantage. In closing, the one aspect of the Paideia Curriculum model that stands out to me as the biggest challenge is that teachers must be competent enough to deliver such a literacy model. Teachers must wholeheartedly buy into the effectiveness of teaching to all modes of literacy, and be comfortable enough with posing open-ended Socratic questions, without knowing which answers will come, and knowing how to process and facilitate the group when the answers which are unexpected arise. To me, these teacher qualities are rare in many schools, especially in areas where high-stakes testing occurs, mostly because the idea of open-ended inquiry is something not usually encountered in test preparation scenarios. Curriculum should be standardized in this way, but I feel like the current climate in many public schools is not conducive to such a shift at this time.