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Standards and standard setting and the post school curriculum

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This paper is concerned with the role of standards and standard setting in shaping the expansion of post school education in highly unequal society. It draws on an account of the debates and policies on standards in the UK from the 1980's to today and the wider lessons that can be learned from them. It argues that relying on any type of standards on their own, independently of any consideration of curriculum, pedagogy and the distribtution of educational resources is doomed to failure. It concludes by linking the idea of higher stadards for all to Morrow's concept of 'epistemic access'.

Keywords: standards, standard setting, post school education, epistemic access

Introduction

The Higher Education and Training Department's recent Green Paper proposes an ambitious plan for expanding post school education and training by 2030. In combining this overall expansion with the proposal that much of this expansion will take place in the Further Education and Training colleges rather than in universities, the Green Paper represents a radical break with the pattern of provision inherited from the apartheid era. I do not intend here to consider the Green Paper's proposals in any detail. There is already an excellent analysis published by HESA (2011). This paper is concerned with the broader role of standards and standard setting in shaping the expansion of post school education, with particular reference to highly unequal societies such as England and South Africa. It makes two assumptions: one is that standards as measures of how quality in education is judged are in some form an inescapable element in any education system. The second assumption is that it may be useful in assessing the possible consequences of the different interpretations of standards being adopted in South Africa, to draw on the experience of the changing role of standards in how post school provision in England has been developed since the early 1980s. The English case may be of interest to South Africans because the meaning of educational standards, and their role in the expansion of post and upper

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secondary school expansion in England, has itself been the subject of explicit debate and controversy .

The assumption that all educational policies necessarily involve some idea of standards in terms of which the system and individual institutions are judged to have improved (or not) raises the question of the meaning of standards in education – a notoriously fraught and slippery idea. Until the 1970s the term 'standards' was largely taken for granted in educational debates in England. Standards were either high or low and rising or falling and 'high' standards were associated with the educational institutions in which the majority of pupils were successful in highly regarded examinations. It was assumed that such elite institutions (in England, the fee-charging public schools and state grammar schools) 'set the standards' for others to follow. At the same time, there was no expectation that more than a few of those attending non-elite institutions would reach the standards set by the elite.

The main way that the 'elite' institutions achieved their standards was through being highly selective in the students who they accepted. The idea of standards being 'high' or 'low' was not applied to the education of the majority of pupils; they attended school, but most were not expected to achieve enough to reach any publicly recognised standard. However, this hierarchical and relatively exclusive model of standards was flexible enough to allow a small but steady expansion of the numbers achieving 'high' standards, even in non-elite schools. This slow expansion was supported by a steady increase in educational expenditure and in the opportunities, for students from non-elite schools, at the top the universities.

The prevailing idea of standards was explicitly 'normative'; it limited the proportion achieving the highest grades- 1st class honours degrees and A grades at A level(the examination taken by students staying at school until the age of 18). Thus, high grades were rationed and quality was maintained – albeit it was a distinctly backward-looking concept of quality which was based on the assumption that only a small proportion of each cohort was capable of high achievement.

In considering possible alternatives to this highly traditional view of standards, its 'quality assurance' role should not be neglected. It is difficult to imagine any expansionist policy that is concerned with quality as well as access that does not involve some form of 'normative' concept of standards. It is a feature, in different forms, of even the most equal education systems such as those found in the Nordic countries.

However, from the 1970s, and as a result of political and economic changes, this taken-for-granted idea of standards began to be called into question, especially in relation to post school education. For example:

- The post school sector itself, previously relatively homogeneous, was becoming increasingly diversified as more and more students continued at school or college after the end of compulsory schooling at the age of 16.

- Doubts were raised about a concept of standards that relied on implicit and relatively fixed criteria that only recognised the achievements of perhaps a third of those attending school and provided no basis for assessing the progress of the rest.
- Policy makers came under increasing pressure to find a more inclusive concept of standards that (a) could provide a way to assess the achievements of the majority, (b) be a measure of whether the system, as a whole, was improving, and (c) could be operationalised quantitatively.

A new approach to educational standards

It was in response to these pressures that, in the 1980s in England, a quite new concept of 'educational standards' (Employment Department, 1982) was developed. The proposal was that, instead of starting with existing high achievers as the basis of standards, as in the normative model, standards could be expressed as 'written statements', referenced to explicit criteria at different levels, and representing what any learner could be expected to do or know. These 'new standards' were developed independently of any traditional ideas of 'high standards', and made no reference to whether the person being assessed had undertaken a specific course of study. This concept of 'written standards' is very similar in meaning to the idea of 'learning outcomes' that has been the subject of much debate in South Africa. A written statement might, in the language of the new standards, refer to how well someone could 'plaster a wall' or 'write an essay about the French Revolution'. In practice, in the first decade, the new model was applied almost exclusively to 'know how' competences rather than 'know that' knowledge..

Both the implicit (normative) and explicit (written) approaches to standards have strengths and weaknesses. The strength of the former is that it recognises that, in any society, there is an implicit, and assumed but always debated view about what high standards are and in terms of which, judgments are made by admission tutors and employers in selecting students and employees. It follows that, with such a model, many of those assessed will not reach the required standards and will fail. In other words, an element of selection is built into this approach to standards. Such an approach stresses maintaining high standards and, as a consequence, it neglects inclusion and widening participation, and is resistant to broadening the definition of a high standard. Problems are raised for such a backward-looking and inflexible approach when economic and political circumstances change.

In contrast, the idea of explicit 'written standards' offers the potential of greater precision about what achieving a standard means and places no prior limit on the proportion of learners who might succeed. Furthermore, it creates the conditions for debates about the criteria for standards and the proportion of a cohort that might be expected to reach different levels, in terms of the standards. It is these possibilities that are limited by the traditional view of standards that assumes both the criteria and the proportion achieving high standrads are given. In broad political

terms the explicit model of standards is democratic, at least in principle, . In not making any prior assumptions about the proportion of learners who can achieve the highest standards, standards are open to anyone who believes they can comply with the criteria. However, the new approach to standards involves a number of serious weaknesses. First, by dispensing with a normative assumption about what high standards are, it weakens the role of standards in maintaining quality. Secondly, reliance on the precision of the written statements as a guarantor of quality can easily lead to over-specification and the trivialisation of assessment tasks, thus undermining quality. Thirdly, in defining standards independently of inputs (such as curricula and teaching), the new approach emphasises the accountability role of assessment rather than the link between assessment and improvement. Each of these problems is exemplified, as I will demonstrate in the next section, in the expansion of the post school education and training system in England since the 1980s.

Post school education and training in the UK from the 1980s

Post school education in England has undergone massive expansion since the early 1980s. Until then two-thirds of each cohort left school at 16 or earlier with no certificate or qualification of any kind. Despite this evidence of persistent inequalities, so long as those leaving school without any certificates or qualifications found employment (mostly in factories, as unskilled manual workers), this was not seen as a problem by governments of either the Right or the Left. However, by the end of the 1970s, the labour market for unskilled, unqualified school leavers was disappearing, as such work moved to the low-wage economies of South East Asia. It was this collapse of the youth labour market that led to the first phase of expansion of post school education and training in England and to a re-thinking of the traditional concept of standards.

Initially, this expansion consisted largely of work-based 'training' schemes, linked in some cases to off-the-job periods of study in a college. The programmes, which came to be known as Youth Training (YT), had some similarities with the learnerships developed after 1995 in South Africa. A key difference was that Youth Training was based on government funding, not on a levy on employers. The second period of expansion involved vocationally oriented programmes in colleges (and in schools) for the low achieving section of the cohort who had previously left school at the age of 16. This form of expansion was initiated by Conservative governments in the 1980s, but extended by successive Labour governments in the period 1997–2010 .

The third phase I will refer to is the present Coalition government's response to post school expansion since 2010. My argument will be that standards were interpreted by the pre and post 2010 governments in very different ways with very different implications for the form and content of post school education and post 16 education at school. The post 2010 government's reliance on the older normative concept of standards makes it likely not only that post school education will change, but that the expansion of previous years may even be reversed.

Old and new models of standards

The new approach, based on written standards was introduced in the UK in the 1980s for vocational qualifications in parallel with the expansion of work-based youth training schemes referred to earlier. These 'standards of a new kind' were distinguished from the traditional and highly selective 'academic' standards, by being achievable in principle by anyone. At the same time, as a precursor to later developments, the 1981 White Paper argued that, as these 'new standards' could be specified at different levels, and that the levels could be used to treat qualifications based on the new standards and traditional academic qualifications as equivalent. Again, there are interesting similarities with the way these 'levels' were used in the South African NQF. In practice, in the UK, very few young people on work-based schemes obtained qualifications at other than the lowest level, so the idea of equivalence with academic qualifications was hardly tested. However, as we shall see, this was to change when the concept of 'levels' was extended to college- and school-based qualifications.

Qualifications associated with the new 'written standards' (National Vocational Qualifications or NVQs) (Young 2011) gained little credibility, either with employers or admission tutors for higher-level courses. Some research showed that employers preferred candidates with no qualifications at all to those with qualifications based on the new 'written standards'. Most of the complaints, which came from both teachers and employers, were about the inflexibility and over-specification of outcomes that the new concept of standards led to.

Problems with the 'standards of a new kind'

Firstly, the 'new standards' were static. They referred to what someone could do at a particular time and at a particular level. They did not provide evidence to the learner or anyone else as to whether they might be able to progress to a standard at a higher level. It is partly for this reason that the new standards were not widely trusted, and why so few of those certificated progressed from one level to another. Secondly, the new standards model (unlike the old model which was associated with specific institutions) separated the processes of setting and assessing a standard from the process of achieving a standard (teaching and learning). Such a model works well for the International Standards Organisation (ISO) when it is used to ensure that, for example, different manufacturers of screws or electrical parts make them of identical sizes. However, it causes problems when the 'object' being checked in relation to a standard that refers to the performance of a task that is never completely routine. Thirdly, in order to solve the immediate problem of assessing those who had left compulsory schooling with no skills or qualifications, the first written standards were set at the lowest levels; as a consequence, the new standards themselves became associated with low standards (using standards in the old sense). This illustrates how an approach to standards, which starts with the learner and sets out to promote

access and includes all potential learners, can all too easily perpetuate the inequalities that it was designed to overcome.

In England the expansion of post school education was based on a low achieving provision of compulsory education for the majority – a situation that I am sure has parallels in South Africa. This meant that, from the perspective of policy makers, it made sense to provide the lowest achievers with some kind of certificate. The alternative, which might have been more successful in the long run, would have been to start with the higher standards that the new programmes were supposed to lead to. Instead of being a developmental model, which linked standards at different levels with pedagogy and curricula, the new standards model defined learner progress in terms of a hierarchy of levels, but with no links between the levels and how the learners might progress up the hierarchy.

The next period of expansion, in the late 1990s, involved extending the model to full-time courses in schools and colleges. While the 'new standards model' was retained, the written statements were made more flexible and assessment became the teachers' responsibility, monitored loosely by external verifiers. However, as we will see, it was to lead to other problems.

The expansion of post school education in England (1997–2010)

After the election of the Labour government in 1997, education and training policy was driven by the goals of widening participation and inclusion. Success was measured by the increasing proportion of students achieving higher-level qualifications; this became a primary goal for schools and colleges and the main motivation for teachers and students. As the basis for a qualification system based on levels and outcomes, the new standards fitted neatly into their role as an instrument of accountability based on the ranking of schools and colleges on Performance Tables. In terms of more students' gaining qualifications and an increasing proportion obtaining higher grades, the policy was undoubtedly successful. However, England's drop in rank on the tables of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) developed by the OECD, although contested by some researchers, suggested that this success could not be straightforwardly equated with an improvement in standards (at least in a comparative sense).

How then were the year-on-year increases in numbers gaining qualifications achieved? This question points to what happened when the 'standards of a new kind', which were originally designed for low achievers, became standards for all levels of achievement. The main mechanism which led to the year-on-year increases in the numbers gaining qualifications at higher levels was the introduction of the principle of equivalence not dissimilar to the level descriptors adopted in the South African NQF. Standards were defined in terms of a hierarchy of levels and all qualifications were located on a level. In contrast to earlier policies which distinguished types of qualifications (vocational and academic), the new framework placed all qualifications

on a single set of levels regardless of their type, their methods of assessment, or their curriculum. Furthermore, the government introduced a whole range of new measures designed to make assessment more accessible and to promote widening participation. These policies can be seen, as I shall explain, as an extension of the aims of 'standards of a new kind' that I referred to earlier. For example:

- Programmes were broken up into modules and assessed separately
- An increased emphasis was given to continuous rather than end of course assessment
- The opportunities for students to repeat assessments which they had failed were extended.

All these changes were designed to make assessment more accessible and increase the role of student choice and, in this way, improve their motivation to learn. On the other hand, they focused on assessment, not the inputs (pedagogy and curricula), which might have demanded more from students and raised the quality of their learning if they became more motivated. Not surprisingly, there were substantial year-on-year increases in pass rates. Thanks to the new equivalence principle that required all qualifications to be located on levels defined by a single set of criteria it was achieving a qualification at a specific level rather than achieving the qualifications itself that became the new currency for both teachers and students. Students who would not have obtained a good GCSE in, for example, history or a foreign language under the old system, now obtained many more GCSE equivalents at the same level. In the period 2007–2010, virtually no questions were raised about the possible unintended consequences of this system of equivalence, despite the fact that it was treated with great scepticism by both employers and college and university admission tutors. However, it seemed at the time like a 'win/win' situation; more students gained higher-level qualifications and 'quality' was assumed to be maintained by the 'new standards'. Politicians and policy analysts were reluctant to raise any questions for fear of being seen as undermining the efforts of pupils and teachers.

There is a similarity between this situation and the earlier period when the 'standards of a new kind' were first launched that is worth noting. The assumptions of qualification equivalence and the loosening of curriculum criteria that characterised the post 2000 curriculum framework and the 'standards of a new kind' developed in the 1980s were both based on criteria that were not linked to any increase in the specialisation of knowledge, either occupational or academic. In both cases the 'new standards' and the new 'equivalence levels' acted more as accountability measures than as educational measures. As a result, they failed, in many cases, to fulfil their hoped-for educational purposes of preparing students to progress to higher-level courses or to gain employment. The contexts of the two periods, 20 years apart, were different, but the reasons why there was relatively little debate in each case may have been similar. In both cases the 'new standards' and new 'equivalence levels' only affected the lower-achieving sections of each cohort – those who, in the past, had not gained any qualifications at all. In the new system, the higher achievers

– usually in England, children of the middle and professional classes – merely found it easier to achieve higher grades. It led, however, to 'grade inflation' (too many students got A's)and the introduction of the A* grade. Many of the lower achievers now gained qualifications, but they were of dubious value on the labour market or in relation to progression at school or college. This brings us back to the problem of using more explicit 'written standards' for a system in which the traditional hierarchy of standards changes little or, at least, very slowly. As the saying goes, 'you cannot fatten a pig by weighing it'.

The Conservative response: back to traditional standards

The political context changed radically when the new Conservative-led government was elected in 2010. For them, despite the increase in numbers gaining qualifications, standards had fallen as a result of the previous government's policies. The idea that standards could be expressed as 'written statements' was, in effect, rejected and the new government returned to the old idea of 'high standards' expressed in the tried and tested examinations and syllabuses which the elite schools and colleges had always relied on. Equating standards with public examinations in traditionally recognised academic subjects meant that the government was led to revise equivalence criteria for qualifications and, as a consequence, the basis on which colleges and schools are now funded. This had a number of consequences. For example, schools withdrew many of the vocational courses that they had previously offered and the choices open to students were limited. Furthermore, many of the changes introduced by the previous government were reversed. For example:

- It is no longer possible for examination boards to modularise courses and assess students separately on individual units
- Continuous assessment is to be reduced
- Opportunities for students to retake examinations are to be limited
- Greater recognition is now given in Performance Tables to traditional academic subjects – English, single science subjects, foreign languages and Humanities (history and geography) – as schools are now ranked on five compulsory subjects, not three.

The other change that reflects the government's traditionalist concept of standards is that they propose to transfer responsibility for monitoring the standards of syllabuses and examination papers for A-levels (the equivalent of South Africa's National Senior Certificate) to the universities.

Each of these proposals follows directly from the new government's concept of standards which is designed to maintain and improve standards rather than make them more accessible. This is in direct opposition to the previous government's concept of standards which was designed to support access, participation and social inclusion, and rely on written standards to maintain quality.

Not surprisingly, the government's changes have been opposed by the Labour Party and the teacher unions. Both claim that the changes will discriminate against low achievers, increase student disaffection and reduce participation, and lead to fewer students gaining any certificates at all. The teacher unions also argue that, as not all 18+ students go to university, giving greater responsibility for A-levels to universities is elitist and fails to take account of the needs and interests of other users such as employers and many of the students themselves.

It is too early to have reliable evidence of the consequences of the present government's reforms. However, even in 2012, the increase in numbers obtaining higher grades and the overall numbers passing fell slightly for the first time since records have been kept.

We are left with two issues. One is the consequences of two very different interpretations of standards. To the extent to which inequalities are masked by the principle of equivalence, the negative consequences of the 'written standard setting' model are less visible than those of the traditional model. It is thus, at least superficially, a position that is easier to defend. In contrast, the present government's justification for returning to a traditional notion of standards has been that their policy is designed to raise standards for all. Social justice, they argue, requires that all students be assessed against the same standards. However, they do not acknowledge that the conditions for more students achieving 'traditional' higher standards are extremely unevenly distributed; a good example is the availability of teachers with specialist subject knowledge. A second and broader issue is that the standards debate raises questions that go well beyond the implications of different models of standards.

The final sections of this paper explore some of these questions, albeit briefly, and call for a much wider debate about the purposes of post school education. It begins with a summary assessment of how the standards issue was approached in the two periods.

Standards and the expansion of post school education in the two periods: a summary assessment

In the 1980s the UK government introduced a 'new kind of (written) standards' designed to recognise and accredit types of learning that had not previously been recognised. This model was gradually extended to learning at all levels in schools and colleges. The change was intended to have both economic and social benefits; the economic benefits were that the model would improve the skills base of the future work force, many of whom still left school with no qualifications of any kind; the social benefits were that sections of the population that had previously been excluded from post school education were now included.

More young people were undoubtedly 'included' in some scheme or programme and the new concept of standards led to far more students gaining qualifications. However, as the majority of new certificates awarded were at the lower levels, the 'standards of a new kind' did not achieve a reduction in inequality nor did it do much to improve the skills of the low achievers. Some apologists on the Left argue that the policy had broader social benefits beyond credential inflation. For example, some students, who would never have done so under the previous system, gained a qualification and, as a result, their confidence in their abilities improved. Before the bank crash of 2008 it might have been argued that these young people would find employment in the then expanding service sectors. However, as a consequence of the resulting cuts in public spending, both public and private service sectors are contracting and such arguments have lost much of their credibility.

The present government takes an opposite approach in two senses. First, they have not been committed to the continued expansion of the post school sector or to widening participation. Second, they have adopted a strictly market approach to vocational education. This assumes that the willingness of employers to pay for those leaving school to gain vocational qualifications is the primary criterion according to which such qualifications can be said to have value. On the question of standards, they are re-introducing a traditional standard-based approach. However, without significant other reforms in the quality of provision and the quality of teachers which appear nowhere on the horizon, it is almost inevitable that returning to a traditional model of standards will lead to greater inequalities, dropouts and failures.

So, we have two contrasting approaches to standards which, in different ways, lead to similar consequences. One extends the recognition of learning by developing a new, more inclusive approach to standards, but disregards whether these standards, at the lower levels at least, have any wider recognition. The second approach starts with a highly selective concept of high standards; in practice, if not in principle, this excludes the majority of learners. Neither approach addresses the real sources of raising standards – better qualified teachers and improved curricula. Both approaches to standards highlight the limitations, especially in unequal societies, of using standards for the dual purposes of maintaining quality and promoting greater equality.

The last section of the paper explores the implications of this analysis of the English experience for a country like South Africa that is seeking to expand its post school provision and, at the same time, maintain and improve standards and reduce inequality.

Facing reality: possible implications of the English experience

Whereas selection and the persistence of inequalities are inescapable consequences of the traditional concept of 'high standards', it at least offers a way of judging quality. In considering how standards as a measure of quality might be linked to standards

as a tool for expanding access, I find it useful to draw on the idea of 'epistemic access' that I borrow from the South African philosopher of education, the late Wally Morrow. For Morrow (2008) 'epistemic access' refers to 'how we shape and guide enquiry… in the discovery of truth' in whatever field one is studying. From an educational perspective, therefore, 'epistemic access' is what a curriculum or a set of educational standards entitle students to; in that sense, it has parallels with the traditional concept of standards. The difference is that Morrow does not associate the principle of 'epistemic access' solely with elite institutions. How could access to enquiries engaged in the discovery of truth be other than an entitlement for all? It follows that the idea of 'epistemic access' highlights the reality that, in England as in South Africa, epistemic access is denied to a significant and even majority proportion of young people. What then is its use in defining the purpose of post school education?

Both the UK and South Africa are deeply unequal societies, so it is no surprise that 'epistemic access' is only assured for the few. However, that is no excuse for giving up on it as a basis for defining high standards for all; either there are rules to follow 'in the search for truth' or there are not. The principle of epistemic access leads to two kinds of questions. First, how do we translate such a broad idea into a post school curriculum for schools and colleges with all their subjects, disciplines and applied fields of study and their many different syllabuses and specifications? The second question reminds us of the conditions that need to be put in place if extending this goal to a progressively wider section of each cohort is to be realised. This is a question of infrastructure, equipment and buildings. But first and foremost, it must be teachers, and whether they have the specialist knowledge they need. Another way of putting this point is that however high the standards are, they are only one element in achieving quality in post school provision for a wider section of each cohort. Standards, like qualifications and examinations, become distorted and distort provision, as they have in England, if too much emphasis is put on them. In the end, educationists can inform politicians, parents and voters of the consequences of particular interpretations of standards; the decisions about funding and resource priorities, however, remain political.

> *Neither of the two forms of standards that we have introduced in England are an adequate basis for expanding 'epistemic access'. So, is there a case for retaining school education? I think there is, although the dilemma of setting standards in an unequal society will not go away.*

The recognition that there are high standards, which can be objectively expressed and in terms of which reliable judgments about the quality of education can be made, remains important for any society committed to social justice and greater equality. All societies share beliefs about what a high standard is, whether in relation to truth, morality, or aesthetics in any field. This does not mean that such standards remain static or unchangeable or that, as in the past, there is some fixed limit on the proportion of a cohort who can reach a particular standard, or that standards are the

exclusive property of a particular group. A century ago in Europe, high educational standards were largely literary and equated with studying the Classics and associated with the idea of 'knowledge for its own sake'. Today, a similar idea of high standards is far more differentiated and is expressed in a diverse range of fields, some of which involve the pursuit of truth in Morrow's sense and others, the pursuit of a range of economic, technological and cultural goals. Each generation in each country has to re-examine the shared notion of the standards it sets for education at all stages.

In so far as high standards express as aspiration to universality they must be an entitlement for all. Such standards express a society's vision of itself and its sense of progress and possibilities for all. Although the goal of a modern concept of high standards is not to set limits, the idea of high standards accessible to all does not mean that everyone can be a quantum physicist like Richard Feynman or a Nobel Prize-winning novelist like Nadine Gordimer or JM Coetzee. What a modern version of the concept of high standards has to do and why such a concept cannot be dismissed as elitist or anti-democratic is to provide a vision for the education system (and society as whole) that should inform every stage of education from pre-school to university, so that each stage, while sufficient in itself, is also the foundation for moving higher. High standards in the sense I am referring to are not objectives or goals or levels in a framework; they are the product of 'communities of specialists' searching for and debating the truth ,whether the field is the best ways that houses can be built, crops grown and diseases treated – to mention only three of an infinite number of fields.

There are less obvious reasons why something from the proposals for a new type of standard should be retained, but they are no less important. The 'new type of standard' began by addressing the issues of access and exclusion of the majority. However, they started from where the designers thought people were with no connection to where they might be or become. With their static model from the International Standards Organisation, they failed to design standards that were truly pedagogic. Taking inspiration from Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' a new model of pedagogic standards must specify the gap between what a learner knows on their own (where they are) and what a learner could know or do with the help of a teacher or trainer (where they could be). Such a model of standards would be truly educational; it would link learning, assessment with the sources of development, pedagogy and curriculum. It is as different from the 'new standards' introduced in England in the 1980s as it is from the ISO model of standards for screws, that those new standards were based on. The link between this version of 'standards of a new kind' and the idea of 'high standards' is the curriculum which defines the high standards and pedagogy which, in turn, defines the work of teachers and students in Vygotsky's zone.

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