

Moving Forward with Common Core State Standards Implementation: Possibilities and Potential Problems

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Abstract

The standards-based education reform has reshaped curriculum in the United States. This reform came about in large part as a result of the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), which urgently warned that something needed to be done to fix failing schools across the nation. This report undoubtedly transformed teaching and learning in schools, despite the fact that almost three decades later our nation still faces the problem of poor student achievement (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Toch, 2012). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was an attempt to use recommendations from the earlier report to reform education practices, but it had questionable success. The current attempt to address student achievement concerns written by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Although not fully implemented yet, there are already foreseeable advantages and disadvantages to the new standards. This perspective piece examines the possibilities and potential problems of this newest reform effort as it relates to social justice and the skills required for current and future educators to implement it.

The standards-based education reform has reshaped curriculum in the United States. This reform came in large part as a result of the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), which urgently warned that something needed to be done to fix failing schools across the nation. The report undoubtedly transformed teaching and learning in schools, despite the fact that almost three decades later, our nation still faces the problem of poor student achievement (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Reeves, 2011; Toch, 2012). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was an attempt to use recommendations from the report to reform education practices, but it brought questionable success in student learning. The current attempt to address student achievement concerns written by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a). Although not fully implemented yet, there are already foreseeable advantages and disadvantages to the Common Core State Standards. In particular, I will examine the CCSS as they relate to issues surrounding equity and teacher education. One stated goal of the standards is to provide equitable chances for all students to learn and demonstrate success; simultaneously, they provide a chance to raise the bar for teacher education. These

goals are admirable, but the processes implemented to accomplish them are equal to, if not more important than, the achievement of long-lasting success.

A Brief History of Standards in Public Schools

In the pivotal report *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education believed our nation was failing and in dire need of education reform (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The Commission reported on the status of schools and made recommendations for improvements. In order to increase student achievement as a nation, the Commission recommended being explicit about what the “high level of shared education” would be as well as implementation of formalized achievement tests (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7). Following these recommendations, state standards were identified with corresponding assessments. This launched the standards-based education movement and the eventual development of NCLB in 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2008).

The NCLB act was the largest federal attempt to address the concerns put forth by *A Nation at Risk*. Despite the noble attempt to ensure that all students had clear learning goals and highly qualified teachers, in many ways NCLB was a failure (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Teachers began instructing their students in ways that assured that they knew content on mandated tests, and as a result, many students became obsessed with passing these tests (Guilfoyle, 2006). Diane Ravitch (Hudson, 2012), education historian and former NCLB advocate, described this process:

We’ve seen our schools transformed into test-prep factories. There’s a kind of a robotic view of children, that they can be primed to take the test, and that the test is the way to determine if they’re good or their bad, and if their teacher’s good or bad. (para. 3)

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aim to ameliorate some of the issues of teaching, learning, and testing that have been plaguing schools.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative

The CCSS were first released to the public in March 2010 and came primarily from two organizations: the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a). The voluntary standards intended to provide clear academic benchmarks with more concise academic standards for essential learning that will prepare students to be college and career ready (Achieve, 2012). The standards were developed by considering the standards of top performing countries and strengths of current state standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011; Reeves, 2011). They have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia (CCSS, About the standards, 2011), and are supported by prominent foundations and businesses, College Board and the National Education Association,

for example. They have also been endorsed by some of the nation's most influential leaders in education, such as Bill Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers; and Brenda L. Welburn of the National Association of State Boards of Education (CCSS, Voices of Support, 2011). Michael Casserly (2010), the Executive Director on the Council of the Great City schools, has declared, "The common core standards finally make real the promise of American public education to expect the best of all our schoolchildren" (para. 5). Achieve (2012), which partnered with NGA and CCSSO on the initiative, offers further support that the standards can and will improve student learning.

Achieve's Main Reasons for Supporting the CCSS (Achieve, 2012)

- **Preparation:** The standards are college- and career-ready. They will help prepare students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in education and training after high school.
- **Competition:** The standards are internationally benchmarked. Common standards will help ensure our students are globally competitive.
- **Equity:** Expectations are consistent for all – and not dependent on a student's zip code.
- **Clarity:** The standards are focused, coherent, and clear. Clearer standards help students (and parents and teachers) understand what is expected of them.
- **Collaboration:** The standards create a foundation to work collaboratively across states and districts, pooling resources and expertise, to create curricular tools, professional development, common assessments and other materials.

Despite strong support for the CCSS, "the implementation stage brims with possibilities both promising and threatening" (Gewertz, 2012, para. 3). The possibilities for equity in our schools and teacher education are of particular importance.

Equitable Education and the Common Core

As aforementioned, the CCSS were designed to make education equitable for all students (Achieve, 2012). *Equity in education* is the concept that all students have fair access to resources, opportunities, treatment, and success (Bitters, 1999). Cochran-Smith, Gleeson, and Mitchell (2010) provide more detail: "The assumed bottom line of teaching should be to enhance students' lives by challenging inequities of school and society" and that teachers should be "...committed to the democratic ideal and to diminishing inequities in school and society by helping to redistribute educational and other opportunities" (p. 5). Some social justice advocates, such as Alfie Kohn (2010),

argued that common standards go against the core principles of equity and social justice and that NCLB neglected these basic ideals all together. Students across the nation were being taught different standards, but they were expected to make the same achievement regardless of possible inhibiting factors (Apple, 2007). In 2007, before the CCSS initiative's inception, Apple and Beane (2007) emphasized the importance of a common core curriculum being essential to a truly democratic school; however, they warned that for national standards to be truly equitable for all students, schools must also embrace the ideals of social justice (Apple, 2007; Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2013). Use of the CCSS holds possibilities for all students regardless of class, race, gender, and location to be provided the same high standards for learning.

Possibilities: A More Equitable Education for All Students

According to Rothman (2011), a senior fellow at Alliance for Excellent Education, "The importance of the Standards is that for the first time, expectations are the same for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or where they live" (p. 178). Regardless of the state a student lives in or moves to during their academic schooling (aside from the handful of states who are not adopting the standards), the standards are the same and, ideally there will be consistency. This is an improvement from NCLB, as it ensures students will not be at a disadvantage due to their individual state standards (Delpit, 2003). Kohl (2006) puts it well in comparing standards to improvisation: "To play well you have to know the standards - not because they make you a better performer but because they provide a common language that allows you to collaborate with other musicians and take off on the tradition and go where your imagination leads you" (p. 4). Unlike previous individual state standards that had varying levels of rigor, this is what the CCSS could provide students across the nation: a common knowledge that they can build upon and mobility.

Another potential advantage to the standards is that they do not detail exactly how the goals must be met; they just "articulate the fundamentals" (CCSS Frequently Asked Questions, 2011, para. 6). Teachers will have flexibility and room to apply new understandings of teaching and learning as they are discovered with their students rather than following mandates to teach certain content on an exact day. Teachers under NCLB were often required to follow strict pacing guides and day-by-day teaching scripts and were thereby denied flexibility (Van Roekel, 2012). Teachers that use the CCSS can integrate the ideals of equity and social justice, which have proven to be successful in raising achievement in schools that NCLB may have deemed as failing (Beane & Apple, 1995; Delpit, 2003). Educators that tell successful stories of schools where the majority of students are in marginalized populations contest that addressing barriers, inequities, and working to integrate instruction that is culturally relevant is the key to transformation (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Luke et al., 2013; Meier, 1995).

Identifying Problem Areas: Equity

While the goals of being equitable for students and flexible for teachers may seem good in design, the process of getting there is not foolproof. Two large concerns with the standards in regard to equity exist: There are already inequities in implementation, and the assessments are not complete. As a result, it is unclear whether the standards will truly be equitable for all students.

There are already inequities in implementation. There is already acknowledgement that there will be varying levels of implementation of the CCSS. Murphy and Regenstein (2012) hypothesize there will be three ways implementation will happen: (1) States will approach implementation as business-as-usual by continuing to use hard-copy textbooks, paper assessments, and face-to-face professional development; (2) In a bare bones lowest-cost alternative, schools will primarily utilize online and open-source materials and resources; (3) States will use a mix of traditional and bare bones in a balanced approach to implementation (Rothman, 2012). The claim that CCSS implementation will be totally equitable is devalued because of the inherent variability within each of these approaches for teacher training, materials used, and experiences offered to students.

Before implementation is too far underway, a “moral framework” (Reeves, 2011, p. 2) should be decided upon. The CCSS were designed to prepare students with 21st century skills and rely heavily on the use of technology. Some of the assessments will be offered digitally. Unfortunately, there are some states that are less prepared for this digital dependency than others (Rothman, 2012). The states that do not have the financial means to fully implement the standards, complete with digital components as well as hard-copy materials as they were intended to be, may be at a disadvantage. States that are not as well equipped will have to devote significant funding to get their schools up to speed, resulting in fewer funds for instructional materials for students (O’Hanlon, 2012).

The assessments are not complete and are likely to be inequitable. Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) are offering new assessments for states to use in place of their current standardized tests (Rothman, 2011). All but five states are planning on using these in some capacity (*Education Week*, 2012). Because the assessments are not complete, it is impossible to know if test items will be equitable and fair for all students; however, it is already clear in PARCC’s priorities for the design of assessments that there is reason for concern (PARCC, 2013):

Priorities for PARCC’s CCSS Assessment Design

1. Determine whether students are college- and career-ready or on track.

2. Assess the full range of the Common Core Standards, including standards that are difficult to measure.
3. Measure the full range of performance, including high- and low-performing students.
4. Provide data during the academic year to inform instruction, interventions, and professional development.
5. Provide data for accountability, including measures of growth.
6. Incorporate innovative approaches throughout the assessment system.

These priorities are potentially problematic in regard to equity because there is not enough attention given to English Language Learners (ELLs) in the CCSS. This is inexcusable given the changing demographics and low performance of this subgroup over the past decade (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2011), from the 1997-1998 to the 2008-2009 school year, the number of students identified as ELLs enrolled in public schools grew from 3.5 million to 5.3 million, a 51% increase. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2050, the Hispanic school-age population will exceed the non-Hispanic white school-aged public school population (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008). In her report for the Center for Applied Linguistics on English Language Learners and the Common Core State Standards, August (2010) stated that ELL students should be held to the same high expectations as other student groups, but may require additional time and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge. The CCSS concur that accommodations will need to be made for ELL students and that resources developed should consider their needs (NGA & CCSSO, 2010b). Furthermore, the SBAC claim they are committed to ensuring that assessments reflect goals of the CCSS and that all students have an equitable chance to learn and demonstrate their knowledge (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012). PARCC's priorities, however, do not reflect that ELL students have been considered in assessment design considerations.

In addition, Priority 1 states assessments will determine if students are college- or career-ready or are on track; this suggests that students are destined for one path (PARCC, 2010). An equitable education should be one that "is a movement against and beyond boundaries" and is a "practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Taking an assessment that determines if students are college- or career-ready or on track is still an obstruction of that freedom. Under NCLB, students were labeled by their passing or failing scores on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond, 2007). While acknowledging that not all students intend to go to college and that careers are important can be viewed as improvements; labeling a student to be destined for one or the other is still oppressive. This stance promotes the idea there is only one path for each student and that a test can determine this path. Ayers believes truly transformative education "asks

students to become artists, actors, activists, and authors of their own lives. To change themselves, to make the world their own” (2012, Biography section, para. 10). The solution should not be to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves” and determine their own destinies (Freire, 1970, p. 55).

Teacher Education and the Common Core

In many ways implementation of the CCSS will raise the bar for what is expected of current and future teachers. It will also require deep understanding and knowledge that cannot be accomplished through quick hit training (Gewertz, 2013). In order to encourage successful implementation, education and professional development for teachers must be ongoing and deep.

Possibilities: Improved Teacher Quality

The CCSS state that an intentional limitation was not to spell everything out. Consequently teachers are required to unpack the standards, design curriculum, and make instructional decisions for their students (CCSS Introduction, 2011). Under NCLB, scripted curricula were prevalent in schools, and teachers were thought to be “consumers of curriculum knowledge,” but not wise enough to be able to “create or critique that knowledge” (Paris as cited in Zeichner, 1996, p. 199). Many teachers left the teaching profession due to testing pressures and stifling restrictions on what and how they could teach (Harrell, Leavell, & van Tassell, 2004; Strunk & Robinson, 2006). CCSS provides teachers with opportunities to incorporate students’ cultures, backgrounds, and ideas of respect and understanding into lessons. Trust in teachers’ opinions about what to teach and how to teach it will hopefully renew educators’ passion for their craft. There is reason to believe that the mindset will shift back to acknowledging that teachers know what is good for our children’s varying needs (Russell, 2012). Kohl (2003) warns that this shift from a scripted curriculum could take time, but could also be the rebirth of teachers.

Another advantage is that the CCSS will be almost ubiquitous across the nation, creating increased opportunities for collaboration and enhanced materials (Achieve, 2012). Online tools, such as Common Core 360, that offer videos of real teachers using the CCSS, will be available to all teachers (Rothman, 2012). Unlike previous efforts where every state had a different set of standards and in turn different trainings and resources, now professional development and materials can be designed by content experts to benefit a much larger group (Samtani, 2012). In contrast to having the most capable person available in the district providing training, as has been standard practice in the past, the pooling of expertise and resources nationwide should create higher-quality professional development opportunities and materials (Education First & Editorial Projects in Education, 2012).

Identifying Problem Areas: In-Service and Pre-Service Teacher Training

Implementation of CCSS has already begun in many states and should be fully implemented by the 2013-2014 school year; both in-service and pre-service teacher training and education will take many more years to come (Kober & Rentner, 2011; Saavedra & Steele, 2012). The impact of educational opportunities that teachers receive may be one of the most, if not the most, important factors to the success of the CCSS. Therefore, two essential adjustments would benefit in-service teachers' training: a provision for more time for training and increased exposure and focus on the ideas of equity education as embedded in the CCSS. As for pre-service teacher education, a priority should be to revamp programs so that they align with the demands and content of the CCSS and provide multiple opportunities for pre-service teachers to explore their own perceptions.

Practicing teacher education and training. There needs to be a significant amount of professional development and substantial time for teachers to collaborate in order for them to truly embrace and understand what equity means (Luke et al., 2013). Darling-Hammond (2010) cites New York City School District #2's success in raising student achievement, but points out that the professional development was the most important focus of all the district's efforts. Unfortunately, teacher education does not currently appear to be the priority focus of the CCSS implementation (Loveless, 2012). In a recent survey of 670 teachers, 49% rated themselves as a 1, 2, or 3 on a scale from 1-5 (1-not at all prepared - 5 very prepared) for implementation (Editorial Projects in Research Education Center, 2013). Britt, who provides professional development for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) on the CCSS summarized, "Teachers need time to collaborate ... This is very complex work, and the time is just not built in for them" (Britt in Gewertz, 2013, para. 25). She continues, "Without a strong, clear vision and support for ongoing, consultative professional development, teachers ... don't really build their collective capacity to improve instruction" (para. 26). Each state seems to have a different plan for rolling out CCSS, and many are using the *train the trainer* model (Education First and Editorial Projects in Education, 2012). Although this may seem like the quickest and most efficient way to get the CCSS into schools, the efficacy of this approach in relation to CCSS is, as of yet, unproven.

In addition to needing time for teachers to learn about the CCSS, another potential problem may be the integration of *equity* in teacher training sessions. Each community throughout the country has varying populations that respective schools must respond to; thus, centralized decisions about what teacher training on the CCSS should look like may be counterproductive. Therefore, strategies that detail ways educators can work to create more equitable schools would strengthen implementation plans. Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that it is not that we do not know how to improve teaching and learning to be more equitable, it is that we do not have systematic ways of doing it. Brown (2006), in her study "Transformative Learning Strategies for Preparing

Leaders for Social Justice,” identified eight activities that educators could use to incorporate equity in teaching that is aligned with the CCSS. Zeichner (1996) has suggested that there must be some commonality and strategy among the trainings offered or a set of guidelines that are focused on ways to reach greater social justice. Furthermore, these strategies need to incorporate ways to make teachers feel that they have ownership of and a voice within the CCSS (Ewing, 2012). As was experienced with the implementation of NCLB, teachers will likely need to perceive that the change to a new set of standards is worthwhile and that they are at the heart of the process (Zeichner, Melnik, & Gomez, 1996). Without teacher buy-in, there is a high likelihood of complaints and resistance (Apple, 2006).

Pre-Service teacher education. The initiative is not only a chance to rethink how we teach, but also how we train teachers (Rothman, 2012). This will require institutions that engage in teacher education across the country to revamp their programs. In a survey on districts’ perceptions of the CCSS for the Center on Education Policy, 21 states noted aligning their teacher education programs with the CCSS would be a challenge (Kober & Rentner, 2011). Teachers will not be required to just teach to the standards; they will be responsible for designing curriculum and making instructional decisions that support all of their students. They will need to know how to encourage students to think critically, connect knowledge to real-world problems, engage in cross-cultural discussions, and debate diverse viewpoints, all in addition to developing basic skills (Cochran-Smith et al., 2010). Teacher education programs must begin integrating CCSS ideas *now*, so the next generation of teachers is prepared (Wilhoit, 2012).

In considering how teacher education programs will respond to CCSS, efforts regarding pre-service teachers perceptions of learners may need to be enhanced, especially regarding perceptions of diverse learners (Kohl, 2006). It is crucial that the next generation of teachers does not believe that the standards can be taught the same way to all students and that students should be categorized solely on their test scores (Luke et al., 2013). There are tools, such as Teacher Assessment/Pupil Learning (TAPL), that have proven to be effective in helping pre-service teachers become more aware of their perceptions and the importance of teaching for social justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2010). TAPL assesses the intellectual quality of assessments created by pre-service teachers and how “cognitively complex, authentic, and demanding they are” (p. 3). Student responses are analyzed to see how well they align with ideas and concepts of social justice. The integration of this type of tool into teacher education programs may prove beneficial in helping pre-service teachers make connections between how perceptions impact what is taught and students’ learning outcomes (Cochran-Smith et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The CCSS are the most promising set of standards since *A Nation at Risk*. The defined goals for the standards are an improvement from NCLB (Finn & Petrilli, 2010). Accordingly, Freire's statement about ideal goals for education over 40 years ago aligns well with the foundations of the CCSS today: "The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society" (Freire, 1970, p. 13). The intent of the CCSS initiative to provide equitable education for students and for teachers to have more intellectual capital in what is taught is refreshing. Caution still needs to exist through the implementation phase, however, in order to avoid repeating the pitfalls of NCLB and to ensure that stakeholders recognize that CCSS are about new "standards, not standardization" (Reeves, 2011).

In order to ensure the standards initiative is successful and the proposed goals are reached, the implementation must be strategic and thoughtful. Although one of the key design considerations of the CCSS was that in teaching with these standards, we would create schools that are equitable for all students, there is no guarantee that this will occur. Efforts need to be made to see that all states are working toward similar levels of implementation and that assessments are equitable for all students, especially students involved in English language learning education. In addition, there must be an emphasis placed on designing and providing on-going effective teacher training for both pre-service and in-service teachers on concepts of equity in education. Finally, enough time and appropriate teacher training on the key changes and founding ideas of the CCSS are necessary for teachers to recognize and appreciate the differences between the CCSS and NCLB.

The Fordham Institute notes, "Standards describe the destination that schools and students are supposed to reach, but by themselves have little power to effect change. Much else needs to happen to successfully journey toward that destination" (as cited in Finn & Petrilli, 2010, p. 2). This idea applies directly to the argument that although the CCSS are designed to provide equity in our schools and foreseeably could be just what teachers are asking for and need professionally, there is much more to be done for this new initiative to fulfill the goals it has set forth. The Common Core State Standards have great potential, but to be successful, careful attention must be given to the concerns of social justice and implementation.

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