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Teachers and the Common Core in Connecticut

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Where the future is present.

Abstract

Forty-two states across the country have adopted the Common Core State Standards, a set of K-12 education benchmarks for English Language Arts and math designed to unify academic expectations and prepare students for college and careers. However, while state governments initially chose whether or not to adopt the standards, previous research has shown that successful implementation of this policy ultimately lies in the hands of local educators. My study therefore seeks to understand how a group of teachers interpret and act on the Common Core State Standards and in what ways these educators use creative teaching strategies to move beyond the expectations of the Common Core. Findings are based primarily on responses from ten semi-structured interviews with elementary school teachers in an urban public school in Hartford, Connecticut, in the fall of 2015. My research shows that while teachers embrace the pedagogical messages of the Common Core, these educators also actively revise and refine their teaching methods in order to use the standards as a tool for teaching important life skills. By viewing student academic struggle as an opportunity for growth, teachers use the Common Core to teach ambition, self-sufficiency, and resiliency.

What is the Common Core?



The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of K-12 academic benchmarks for English Language Arts and math.

- The CCSS were released in 2010
- 42 states currently use the standards
- Main goals include rigor, consistency, and college and career readiness
- All Connecticut schools officially began implementing the standards in 2013

Example English Language Arts Standard

- "Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent." (RI.5.7)

Introduction

Research Question

How do teachers in an urban school in Hartford interpret and act on the Common Core State Standards? What creative teaching and curriculum design strategies are teachers using to meet these new standards?

Past Research

- Teachers play a key role in shaping policy inside the classroom, in part because educators respond to school reform initiatives with varying degrees of acceptance (Coburn 2004).
- The role of local teachers is crucial when studying the CCSS because these standards are a "learning change" for not just students, but educators as well (Supovitz 2015).

Methodology

I conducted my research in partnership with a local Hartford public school whose name remains anonymous in order to ensure the protection of all teachers involved. By concealing the school name, as well as teacher names and individual grade levels, I was able to ensure that all research participants could speak openly with me without fear their responses would affect their job status.

Interviews

- I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with elementary school educators at my community partner school.
- Interviews allowed me to engage in deep and thoughtful conversation with teachers about their personal experiences with the CCSS.

Lesson Plans

- I asked teachers who participated in an interview to provide an example lesson plan they recently designed to meet the CCSS.
- These lesson plans allowed me to see real samples of how teachers are transforming the CCSS into curriculum.

State Documents

- I analyzed documents from the Connecticut State Department of Education which discussed the CCSS.
- These documents helped me understand the official state interpretation of the CCSS compared to local teacher interpretation.

Key Interview Themes

Embracing

"The biggest difference is there is less teacher modeling, less teacher focus, less teacher 'teaching.' More of giving the kids ideas and letting them run with it. A lot of *grappling*. A lot of kids forming their own ideas."

Teachers generally embrace two key state-sponsored pedagogical themes surrounding the CCSS. This quote describes open-ended problem solving. Teachers also embrace rigor.

Refining

"As a team we sit together, we look at the targets, we decide which ones are applicable and which ones we think are necessary for our students, which ones we think are not appropriate for our students, and some that we may have to add in."

Teachers actively adjust and refine their teaching practices and decisions in order to meet the expectations of the CCSS and move beyond.

Transforming

"With Common Core, you have to push them and say, 'You've got to keep at it.' In today's world, you don't have somebody holding your hand the whole way through. You are forced to struggle. I think the more that we build kids' resiliency, the better off they are going to be."

Teachers transform the CCSS by embracing student frustration in order to teach life skills such as ambition, self-sufficiency, and resiliency through the CCSS.

Intended and Unintended Effects of the Common Core

Academic Skills

Life Skills

Common Core

Although the CCSS focus specifically on math and literacy skills, my research shows that teachers in my partner school are taking steps to not only meet these academic benchmarks, but also to move beyond and use the standards to teach life skills.

Significance

This finding reveals that despite the challenges and pressures teachers face while implementing the CCSS, the teachers involved in my study remain determined to make education about character development and not just content.

Conclusion

One problem I consistently heard teachers mention was the fact that they struggled to find appropriate curricular resources aligned to the CCSS, and when they did find a promising resource, there were few ways to share or store this document.

Online, sharable resource database

Through the use of Google Drive, I designed an online resource database where teachers can upload, share, and store useful curricular resources to supplement their lesson plans.

- Based on teacher feedback and requests, this database organizes resources based on the CCSS they relate to.
- Each individual standard has its own folder where teachers can upload useful resources that fellow teachers can use or access in the future.
- This design allows the database to continue to be used, modified, and improved after my project is complete.



Thoughts to Consider

Policy Implications

My research findings, which reveal that the teachers involved in my study accept key pedagogical messages within the CCSS and use the standards to teach life skills, suggest that any policy debate over the CCSS should consider separating the standards from their standardized test counterparts, the SBACC and PARC exams. Much of the controversy surrounding the CCSS stems from this focus on testing, so if legislators considered disconnecting these tests from states' adoption of the standards, citizens and their elected representatives may be able to more effectively evaluate the CCSS.

Suggestions for Future Research

Because my study focused on just one urban public school in Hartford, future studies could consider expanding their participant group to include multiple urban and suburban schools in order to see whether my findings can be replicated.

CLI Research Fellows

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