Teacher Perceptions of and Experiences with the Common Core

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Introduction

Since Illinois introduced the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, responses among those implementing this policy at the classroom level—teachers and students—have been mixed. Against the backdrop of national and local controversy relative pushes to “opt out” of CCSS and anti-testing rallies, many of those in favor of increased standards argue for their justice-oriented, equality-producing outcomes (e.g., closing achievement gaps, holding all students to high standards and achievement). However, student achievement as measured by high-stakes testing has been argued to be a mechanism for race- and class-based sorting (Heilig, 2015). This sorting arguably increases the achievement and opportunity gap between low-income, minority students and their more affluent, white peers. As Heilig (2015) asserts: “In the Florida case Debra P. v. Turlington, it was argued and acknowledged by civil rights groups at the time that the tests had a disparate impact on students of color” (p.1). The National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that “the achievement gap between white and minority high school students remains wide and steady” (Lee, 2014). Further, gaps in achievement between students of high and low socioeconomic status have increased over the past 50 years (Reardon, 2011).

Such recent re-attention to high stakes testing and controversy over CCSS invokes a great number of questions at the classroom level. However, because CCSS is still relatively new, little research to date has examined the more direct impact of this particular policy within the classroom. At this level, teachers are largely responsible for implementing educational policy. “As the street-level bureaucrats of the educational system, they [teachers] may need the space to work out their own arrangements for handling the complex learning environment of the classroom, where general rules simply don’t apply, even if they come from reformers with the highest educational aims” (Labaree, 2010, p.156). The purpose of this project is to examine the classroom-level impact of
the Common Core State Standards on Illinois public schools (including the impact on teaching practices, student achievement/performance, and so forth). Specifically, this research examines teachers’ perceptions of Common Core State Standards relative to student academic achievement in math within low-performing and high-performing high schools in Illinois. In order to meet this purpose, this qualitative research asked the following overarching question: How do math teachers articulate their experiences with and perceptions of CCSS relative to student achievement/performance?

Findings from this research revealed disparities between schools serving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds versus those serving lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These differences are mostly evident in the type and amount of resources available at the schools and have the potential to increase existing achievement, opportunity and attainment gaps between students of low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Methodology**

Data sources for this project include interviews with math teachers from 2 different schools and analysis of publically available descriptive statistics for two schools per two school districts within the state of Illinois. The data itself shows whether the scores for the state test have gone up or down since the implementation of CCSS. This shows whether CCSS has been successful or not with helping students achieve more. The interviews will provide more detail to the statistical data. The interviews will explain why the test scores have or have not gone up and where the issues and successes lie within the implementation of CCSS.

**Interviews**
Interviews were conducted once during the course of the project with each participant (two math teachers from each of two schools within different districts). Interviews took place within the teacher’s classroom before or after school hours (or at a public location off school grounds of their choosing), lasted approximately half an hour, were audio-recorded, and were later transcribed. Teachers were asked questions about their educational and family backgrounds (demographic information) and were asked to reflect upon their teaching experiences at their respective schools, their perceptions of students and student performance, and their experiences with and perceptions of the CCSS, including but not limited to issues, challenges, and positive implications related to their implementation.

**School-level descriptive data**

I have collected descriptive statistical data several years prior to the implementation of CCSS through to the most current data available from the Illinois State Board of Education Report Cards in order to examine changes in test scores from the old standards to the CCSS. I also looked at the demographics for each school including the percent of low-income students at each school and racial/ethnic breakdown as these factors contribute to student achievement. This data, in combination with the interviews, helped give me a better understanding of how CCSS is affecting our schools and the people within them, as well as gave some insight to where there weaknesses or strengths are with CCSS relative to math, in particular.

Table 1. District Data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>% Low Income</th>
<th>% Homeless</th>
<th>Racial Breakdown</th>
<th>% Meets/Exceeds</th>
<th>% Meets/Exceeds in Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Greenville     | 27,498           | 78.7         | 6.3        | White: 33.1
Black: 29.6
Hispanic: 26.5
Multiracial: 6.4
Other: 4.4 | 38.6            | 35.2         |
| (District 205) |                  |              |            |                               |                 |                         |
| Georgetown     | 28,117           | 18.1         | 0.6        | White: 52.9
Black: 9.3
Hispanic: 10.5
Multiracial: 4.3
Other: 23       | 76.9            | 77.1         |
| (District 204) |                  |              |            |                               |                 |                         |

The table above shows the demographics for the districts examined during this research project (please note that both Greenville schools were in the same district while the Georgetown schools were in separate districts). The racial breakdown shows that the Georgetown districts have almost twice as many white students and a much smaller black and Hispanic population than the Greenville schools. The percent low income and percent homeless is much higher for Greenville
than Georgetown. This is critical to this research because this shows that Greenville does not have as much funding due to the lower property tax-base. Also, because of the relative poverty of the surrounding community, students have fewer resources at home to help with this kind of new learning and ways of doing mathematics that CCSS requires. The percent meets and exceeds and percent meets and exceeds for math also vary greatly between the Georgetown and Greenville districts. Reasons for this are complicated and are beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 2. Percent Meets/Exceeds

The previous four charts show the percent of students who meet or exceed required state tests and how the percentage of students who tested at this level has changed. When looking at the data for
Northdale high school, the data did not change much over the years, although the Georgetown high schools have consistently scored significantly higher than the Greenville schools, further supporting the lack of resources and struggle to implement CCSS. Northwest high school has also had an increase in test scores since the implementation of CCSS. Further supporting the implementation of CCSS and the resources that the Georgetown schools have.

Table 3. Percent Low Income

The previous four charts show the percent of students from low-income families for each of the schools and how this has changed over the last seven years. Percent low income is a direct reflection of the income of the area, which directly affects funding and resources for schools. The
schools in Greenville have a much higher percent low income, reflected in the resources and funding available for schools in this district. This includes reduced (or non-existent) funding to send the teachers to workshops to teach them more about CCSS, which will be explained further in this paper.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis portion, when dealing with the tables it was very important to look at how the data for that specific school had changed over the years, paying attention to the years when prior to the emergence of CCSS. It was also very important to compare the data between all four years to see what differences there were between schools in the same district and compare those to the schools from the other district. Once transcribed and de-identified to protect the identities of participants, I printed and coded each hard-copy interview transcript using open and closed coding. To begin, I practiced “open or provisional coding,” which initiates the process through the close reading of interview transcripts to determine connections between the data and to chunk portions of text into a manageable list of codes. The second stage, “focused coding,” allows for a deeper analysis of the interview data through the narrowing of previous codes (Saldana, 2013). This two-step process results in emergent themes, discussed below.

Findings: School Disparities and the Implementation of CCSS

Northdale High school

While Northdale High school did not show drastic changes since the implementation of CCSS in terms of test scores, teachers faced a host of issues relative to implementing CCSS within
the classroom. In my interview with Mr. Anderson, a math teacher at Northdale, he explained the struggles the teachers face:

    Dana: Can you describe any changes you’ve seen since the common core standards have been implemented?

    Mr. Anderson: Um, the big change that I have seen here at Northdale High school is we don’t understand them very well. Um, we don’t have the insights we don’t know where to go for the insights as to really define what the standard are and to find out what the target goal is. We know obviously where the standards are located, we don’t know how deep they need to be covered in order to be covered in order to hit and we don’t know nor do we have the time to change the curriculum to meet those right now. That’s what I would say.

Mrs. Miller’s perspective is presented differently (focused on new PARCC test), but still maintains much of the struggle Mr. Anderson discussed and refers to the CCSS as “garbage” that they hope will “go away in a couple years.” When asked about the changes she’s seen since implementing CCSS she responded:

    Dana: Can you describe any changes you’ve seen since the common core standards have been implemented?

    Mrs. Miller: Um, so by ‘common core standards being implemented’ in our school it means PARCC test. And so, um, we’re trying to incorporate more ‘common core-y’ type questions, um, but it’s really, really hard. Our kids are not at the ability level that the PARCC demand and I mean, I know this is on the record, but we all kind of think it’s garbage and it’s gonna go away in a couple years. And um, I think at the elementary levels it’s really, really helpful, but at the high school level it’s
horrible and we don’t, I mean we have to teach to the ability level, if you just throw them these questions no one’s gonna go anywhere. So we have, we talk about it a little bit, especially around PARCC, um, so how has it changed, really it’s a week out of the year for more standardized testing. It’s irritating and it’s horrible and we all hate it.

While the test scores did not change drastically at either school, it is clear that CCSS is not being effectively implemented within classrooms and schools that do not have the resources to enable the effective implementation, which is contributing to the low scores at the Greenville schools. Mr. Anderson also stated that the school will not send them to a conferences or workshop about CCSS, which further inhibits the teachers from being able to effectively implement the standards and fully help the students. Mr. Anderson goes on to explain how the students are responding to implementation of CCSS:

Dana: Have you experienced any difficulties implementing the standards? How have the students experienced difficulties?

Mr. Anderson: Um, the difficulties that we see a lot with our students is with the reading of the problems, digesting the information in the text, and being able to match a mathematical quality or practice to what’s in the text in the problem. That’s where they struggle.

This directly relates to the scores on the PARCC test, to which Mrs. Miller referred. He also says in the interview that the standards are good for the students, but the teachers are lost in terms of teaching them to the students. Interestingly, both teachers discuss CCSS struggles relative to students’ lack of ability or intellectual struggle, placing responsibility on the students, rather than the system itself (e.g., lack of resources to implement and prepare students). At
Northdale, teachers interviewed spoke a lot about challenges students faced. For example, when students were challenged with the common core material or different way of thinking, teachers described how students shut down. Specifically, teachers discussed students’ difficulties reading the problems and being able to find the information in the text needed to solve math problems. A lack of ability was mentioned several times. Both teachers do, however, acknowledge that teachers need to be taught how to implement these standards. If they don’t know what or how they’re supposed to be teaching, the students will become lost:

Dana: Have you experienced any difficulties implementing the standards? How have the students experienced difficulties?

Mrs. Miller: well, so it’s funny that you ask that, because we have been, everybody keeps telling us we’re not doing common core, we’re not teaching common core and we’re not putting it in our classrooms, so we keep asking to be sent to workshops. We’re like well if we’re not doing them then somebody needs to teach me because I have no idea what I’m doing wrong. So um, we’ve been asking and asking and asking to go to different workshops and we’re kind of hitting brick walls. So um you know we want to do it. To me common core is a lot more of, at the high school level it’s a lot of word problems and multi-step problems and being able to solve multiple things at once as far as math goes, so um, you just need the resources, we have no resources, unless you want to purchase it online with your own money.

Resources and knowledge are very important to allow these teachers to be able to teach students and do what the standards require. It is clear that a lack of resources in the schools is causing difficulties with the implementation of CCSS. Further, although teachers acknowledge professional development and lack of resources as a problem for implementation, they also point
toward student deficit, which research shows has serious implications for students who are already underserved (Valencia, 2006).

Northwest High School

Northwest High School has a large variety of resources, including a math resource room to help students and help aligning their textbooks and materials with the common core, none of which are available in Greenville. And although Northwest High teachers still struggle with the implementation of CCSS, the struggle seems to be discussed as a new way of thinking for the students who are in transition and adapting, rather than there being a lack of understanding of teachers, lack of ability of students, or a lack of resources. Since the implementation of CCSS, test scores have not decreased, and in fact, have increased by a small number over the years since the implementation of CCSS. While interviewing Mrs. Jones at Northwest High school, she explains what the department and the district have been doing to help with the implementation of CCSS:

Dana: Alright, and then um can you describe any changes you’ve seen since the common core standards have been implemented?

Mrs. Jones: How specific, how do you want me to look at this from my perspective or from the perspective of the department?

Dana: Um, both.

Mrs. Jones: Okay, they are kind of two different perspectives. We have had a pretty strong push for common core for a lot of things curricular wise we try to be at the forefront for that. So when we went to institute days a lot of the sessions we would go to were about common core and how it was going to be implemented and what we should be looking for and we’ve taken a look at curricula and how they alight with the standards and over the last several years we
have gone through rewritten the curricula for the algebra, geometry, algebra II trig and pre-calc was last year so this year was the first year implementing that and they’ve also done the lower level classes. Um, and so it’s been our entire department has been turned upside down with rewrites with doing tasks doing formative assessments there’s just a major, major push and I think later this year it’s going to kind of flatten out. For myself I teacher honors algebra II trig, honors pre calc and calculus those curricula have not been touched yet. So for myself that change is going to actually be implemented next year. Those courses are in the process of being rewritten so I will see a lot of that impact next year. We want to make sure those two curricula are aligned form one to the next so it will be interesting to see how that will change we’ve talked about incorporating task and stuff but for those courses we haven’t really found it a necessary as for the regular classes.

This supports that the school is working very hard to implement CCSS and is trying to make sure all classes are aligned properly, including advanced-level classes that are not offered at Northdale. While neither teacher has been sent to any kind of conference regarding CCSS, Northwest High school has had institute days to help prepare teachers with the implementation of CCSS, something that is lacking at Northdale. As a district, Georgetown schools have been deemed high-achieving for many years and since the implementation of CCSS, their scores have not seen drastic changes. However, although there are still some struggles with implementation, teachers at Northwest seem to feel more comfortable with these new standards. Importantly, and unlike Northdale teachers, teachers at Northwest did not discuss struggles with CCSS as an indication of student deficit or lack, and spoke about students being able to adjust to the
standards—students who are already high-achieving. As Mrs. Jones notes in her interview when discussing difficulties in implementing CCSS:

Mrs. Jones: […] I think it’s been a difficult transition for a lot of those kids because of the application piece they didn’t have before. It’s just more discovery learning, they don’t like that. […] I think that was a tough transition for a lot of the students. I think with the honors students when we do more of that, if we do incorporate more of those activities there’s not gonna be as much of an impact because some of those kids are very good at finding those things out on their own and wanting to- seeing how those things fit together. They don’t necessarily want to be spoon fed some of them just want, oh this is really neat this matches up with this “wow.”

Overall, at a district level, Northwest is able to better address issues related to CCSS each year, and as a result, students are becoming more comfortable with them and continuing to perform at a higher level. This is not the case in the Greenville district, of which Northdale is part. Again, at Northdale, none of the classes have been rewritten to account for the common core. Teachers spoke about trying to fit in these new ideas and new ways of thinking without rewriting the curriculum, which only further confuses students who are underprepared and underserved.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The data tables are significant in showing that the test scores are not being drastically lowered by the implementation of CCSS. Although many hold this view, it is also important to show that the common core is not necessarily ruining our education system. Indeed, most students are uncomfortable with CCSS, regardless of context, because it is so new for them.
Students were never required before to learn the why and how of mathematics; they were simply required to memorize formulas and know when to use them. Asking students to think this way is very different from what they have been doing before and will be difficult until they become more familiar, which is not necessarily a bad thing. However, it seems a major problem lies within the preparedness of our teachers, both in terms of implementing new education policy, but also in terms of how we think about underserved students and ability. At the level of implementing new policy and reform, one of the teachers interviewed at Northwest, Mrs. Johnson, who has only been teaching for two years and has recently graduated from college, mentioned feeling totally prepared for CCSS because of her pre-service teaching preparation. Clearly her teacher preparation affects how CCSS is playing out in her classroom and relates to the success she has with implementation. While this may be the case with new teachers just coming out of college, as shown with Mrs. Johnson, all of the other teachers who have not graduated in the last five years or so are not being educated on CCSS and how to implement them to help students. This of course occurs even in the face of so many who note that professional development is an important and necessary part of CCSS (Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014). Consequently, our students are not as prepared as they could be and there are more problems and struggles in the classroom with the new material and new ways of thinking. However, it is important to note that Mrs. Johnson is a teacher at a well-resourced, high-achieving school and these issues most affect underserved students within under-resourced schools that battle a host of issues unseen within schools serving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. CCSS is meant to account for these differences in resources and contexts with added flexibility (as opposed to stricter policies like NCLB), but this does not
appear to be the case. And, things like professional development are in the hands of districts (Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014), which of course vary in resources.

Again, it’s not necessarily the standards themselves, but is seemingly more about the implementation and the preparedness of the teachers. In an article by Marrongelle, Sztajn, and Smith (2013), they state:

The recommendations for supporting professional development aligned with the CCSSM focus on the important role that professional development plays in ensuring the successful implementation of standards. However, like making a major purchase such as an automobile, we know as consumers ‘caveat emptor:’ buyer beware! Not all cars are created equally and there is great variation in the quality and performance of different cars. Likewise, not all professional development is created equally and we must ensure the highest quality of professional development is delivered to our nation’s teachers (p. 209). But, importantly, high quality professional development is more than learning how to implement new policy and align the curriculum. High quality teaching is also about understanding students and the contemporary issues that permeate certain classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2006). As Darling-Hammond (2006) argues: “schools of education must design program that help prospective teachers to understand deeply a wide array of things about learning, social and cultural contexts, and teaching and be able to enact those these understandings in complex classrooms serving increasingly diverse students” (p. 3). Doing so may allow those who implement policy at the classroom level to do so in a way that does not further marginalize underserved students (e.g., by way of deficit models of education).

The proper implementation of CCSS comes from the knowledge of teachers, the “street level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010), which can only come from their education, experience, and
professional development. If teachers can be trained more effectively to really understand the standards and how to make them work in their classroom while better understanding the context within which they teach (e.g. taking into account lack of resources and gaps in the students’ preparedness rather than ability), CCSS may play a larger and more effective role in the classroom.

References:


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Lipsky, M. (2010). Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services. (30th


