

The Common Core: Creating Common Citizens

By Valerie Mallow

Introduction

As an educator, one cannot ignore the monumental changes taking place in our country with regard to education. Educational reform has been around for a long time. This isn't a new phenomenon. But now, more than ever, educators are taking notice of the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) being adopted by most states that will dramatically alter education in our country. As a third grade teacher of language arts and math, I am concerned about the CCSS and what they mean for me as an educator, and for my students as learners. How will these new standards change the way I teach and the material I teach? Is this a change that will improve education? Has it been critically thought out or is the movement merely representative of another political agenda? Will my students receive the kind of education that I believe all students deserve, one that values experience, culture, and the arts?

Background

So where did this idea of common standards for all come from in the first place? On June 1, 2009, The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) announced that 49 states/territories agreed to join an initiative called the Common Core Standards Initiative to develop common standards for math and language arts (Tienken, 2010). Some people, myself included, question why common standards are necessary and brought up time and time again. According to Tienken (2010), “The NGA and CCSS make the double-barreled claim that (a) national standards will lead to higher international test scores for U.S. students; and (b) performance on international tests (aka competition with international peers) is a predictor of future economic superiority” (p. 16). So basically two important concepts play a role in this decision to nationalize the curriculum in our country: money and power. In order for our nation to be wealthy and powerful, we need national standards.

National Curriculum

Where is the evidence that the CCSS will provide this lofty goal with real results? According to the research, there isn't any. Beach (2011) states, “ At the same time, because the standards are just being implemented, we really do not know if the CCSS will actually result in changes in classroom instruction” (p. 179).

Some people believe that the United States is dragging behind other countries academically and this threatens our economic superiority. It is brought to our attention by policy makers and politicians that countries that are ranked higher than the U.S., according to international tests, have nationalized curriculums. According to Tienken (2010) international test scores cannot be easily compared at first glance. Since all countries are different, Tienken (2010) argues that you have to consider several factors when looking at international tests, including the “opportunity to learn the material on the test, selective sampling by countries, poverty levels of students in the sample, negotiations of actual test questions by the countries involved, culture, and other factors out of the control of schools” (p. 15). Standardization is complex and simply looking at other countries that have nationalized curriculums and thinking that this would automatically work for our country is ignorant.

Some countries that do have national standards actually perform worse on international tests than the U.S. China is one example of a country with a national curriculum and high stakes testing. Students take an exam for college admission and it is this one test that determines their future. These high stakes tests have caused much distress among both students and parents. The test is now receiving criticism “because it is considered the root cause of all educational ills in China” (Zhao, 2009, p.49). The Chinese recognize that the national standards did not improve the achievement gap that persists and instead, “Despite years of a highly nationalized system and a homogenous culture, significant gaps in terms of achievement exists among its students in different parts of the country” (Zhao, 2009, p. 47). Tienken (2011) also notes that, “Chinese winners of Nobel Prizes are scarce, and China does not hold many scientific patents” (p. 61).

China isn't the only country we can look to for what's to come. England also has a national curriculum. Some of the reported problems of its curriculum are narrow focus, loss of the arts, valuing basic recall knowledge instead of understanding, and time restraints (Zhao, 2009). Is this what we want as a nation? Why can't we learn from other countries' mistakes that a nationalized curriculum is not the answer to our problem? We are unique and what works for other countries may not work for us.

High Stakes Testing

What are the dangers of high stakes testing in the CCSS? One danger, which has become apparent since The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), is that students are no longer viewed as people but instead are viewed as test scores. The most crucial curriculum question according to Pinar (2012) is, "what knowledge is of the most worth?" (p. xv). But now, with standardization, Pinar (2012) explains that "*What knowledge is of the most worth?*" is replaced with '*what's your test score?*'" (p. 53). When we begin to view our students as test scores, we lose sight of the purpose of education. I am sorry to say that I cannot recall how many meetings I have attended where students were mentioned by their Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA) score and their particular subgroup. These students are targeted for intervention and as stated by Zhao (2009), "These 'at-risk' children are then forced to fix their 'deficiencies' instead of developing their strengths. As a result, other talents are devalued, suppressed, and left to wither" (p. 49). Instead of thinking about how to raise test scores, we should be thinking about what knowledge students need in order to be caring, intelligent, informed citizens. We need to focus on understanding rather than fact recall.

A few years ago, I was asked to be a part of the curriculum development team for the district and to represent my grade level in English/Language Arts. Pacing guides had already been created and my job was to help develop common assessments. Although I was against the idea of common assessments, I felt if it was going to happen then I should be involved and try to help make them as effective as possible. When I arrived at Central Office, I quickly discovered that my input wasn't exactly valued. We were not creating these assessments from scratch. We were required to use old

Ohio Achievement Tests (OAT) as our reading passages and as many of the questions from those tests as possible so the tests would be valid and reliable. We were encouraged to not make up our own questions, and if we needed to do that, we should model the content, structure, and format around other OAT questions. So my job was to take reading passages and test questions and match them up to the pacing guides that were created. What a waste of my time and talent.

When the assessments were implemented, I quickly saw the detriments that came along with them. I was to administer the common assessment at the end of each reading unit and I had to administer them as I would the Ohio Achievement Assessment, which means, the students were responsible for reading the passage themselves. Since they were taken from old OATs, the reading level of the test was an end of third grade level and even though it was the beginning of the school year, my students were expected to read it on their own. Well, as any teacher can imagine, many of them couldn't read it. Several students were reading below grade level and even the students on grade level struggled through the passages on the tests at the beginning of the year. The tests were not measuring the content I had just taught in that unit in reading. The tests were measuring whether or not students could read the passage. Of course, the data from the tests were to be submitted to Central Office, not as an assessment of me as a teacher and how effective I was (so they say), but rather to see how students compared across the district. I was furious. It was my first experience with standardized testing and how wrong it is on so many levels. It was wrong to ask my struggling students to read a passage they had no chance of getting through independently and then judging them on the content they "should have learned." Well, many of them learned the content but couldn't answer the questions because they couldn't read the story! The curriculum question that should have been asked is *what is the purpose of the test?* Is it to assess understanding of the content of the unit? Or is it to assess if the child is reading on grade level? I'm still waiting for the answer to that question.

In my experience, test scores can be useful if used properly and with minimal emphasis. I certainly look at my students' grades and scores on assignments and determine if the content was

mastered or not. However, one very critical part in my assessment is that I use *multiple* forms of assessments to make the judgement on proficiency or not. If I would base my judgement on one test on one day, I could miss all the other factors that could have contributed to the score: a bad day, cheating, missing mom or dad, being hungry, worrying about grandma, lucky guessing, and numerous other factors that alter how an eight year old might perform on any given day. As an educator, I know the results of *one* test for a small child (or one of any age) cannot solely be used to make decisions.

Benefits?

When I began receiving professional development in preparation for the CCSS, I was excited about the change. At the time I only taught language arts so I can only speak to those standards, but the changes I saw seemed positive. Instead of having more than 20 indicators to teach in a year, there are only 10. I thought this would give me the ability to go deeper into the standard than I usually got to go due to time restraints and the fear of not getting everything covered. The CCSS are also very broad and I felt would allow for lots of creativity on my part and flexibility with how to teach it.

The benefit of shared expectations across states would allow students to receive the same quality education no matter where they live. Rothman (2012) states that the CCSS were “explicitly designed around the goal of ensuring college and career readiness for all students” (p. 11). What an admirable goal for the students of our country! That all students, regardless of race, location, or circumstance, will graduate from high school ready for a career or college. Another positive impact of the CCSS according to Porter et al. (2011) is, “The common core standards may represent greater focus than the state standards typically do; that is the explicit intention of the math standards” (p. 103). These all sound like great ideas and that a positive change has come to save the day in our schools. Unfortunately, after further research and reflection, I realize that the CCSS bring with them a dark cloud.

Creativity-A Thing Of The Past

One negative impact of CCSS is the stifling of creativity for both the teachers and the students. Although the standards are broad and fewer than Ohio's current standards, along with the new CCSS comes the high stakes testing. Only language arts and math are being tested as of now, so teachers will ultimately focus more on those standards and the curriculum will narrow. Other vital subjects will be dropped by the wayside. The fine arts, for example, will not be considered an integral part of the curriculum and may be cut (as many districts are already doing due to budget cuts). Without those creative outlets, students will miss out on the opportunity to express themselves. Students who struggle with reading or math but are great artists or musicians will miss out on the opportunity to be successful in school. Later on in their schooling career, this could mean dropping out of school completely. As stated by Zhao (2009), "Being creative is to be different, to deviate from the norm, but common standards ask for conformity and demand a uniform way of thinking, learning, and demonstrating one's learning" (p. 49). Isn't creative thinking exactly the kind of thinking that solves nation and world problems, gets us to the moon, and allows for scientific discoveries? Tienken (2011) said it best when he stated, "Standardization assumes that children are not active constructors of meaning who bring prior knowledge and experience to the learning situation" (p. 61). This goes against everything I believe to be true about children. In my five years of teaching, I quickly discovered that students are not "blank slates" for which I am to impart knowledge. Instead, children bring with them their own knowledge, experience, and culture, and emotions that shape our classroom more so than I could have ever imagined. Standardization ignores this fact and does not give our students credit for the knowledge they bring with them.

Teachers also will suffer from the ability to be creative. I believe teaching is an art form, not everyone can do it, and not everyone can do it well. As a teacher, I have the ability to connect with my students, determine their interests, and become invested in their academic success. It is the relationships that I build that allow me to be creative in how I present new material so my students can

be successful. Standardization takes away my professional decision making ability and turns me into a robot-reading from a script and teaching in a way that anyone else could do. Pinar (2012) states, “For the foreseeable future, most teachers will be trained as 'social engineers,' directed to 'manage' learning that is modeled loosely after corporate work-stations, focused on test preparation” (p. 37). I have no desire to “manage learning,” to sit back and allow my ability to go to waste.

Null Curriculum

In looking at the CCSS, it is not only important to learn about what is there, but also it is important to determine what is not there as well. The null curriculum in the CCSS seems to be the appreciation and exploration of cultures. One of the advantages of the U.S. is our diversity. It brings various ideals, values, experiences, and perspectives that make us compassionate human beings. Tienken (2011) states, “The U.S. Economy is able to adapt to change because of the diversity of the workforce” (p. 60). In my experience, having the ability to take time to appreciate the diverse cultures in my classroom by sharing, discussing, and learning about each other's cultures has enriched my classroom in ways that cannot be measured. As Zhao (2009) states, “True global competitiveness requires the ability to interact competently with people from different cultures” (p. 51). By not including such a vital component in the curriculum, we are doing a disservice to our students, and our economy.

Conclusion

The CCSS has a goal for all students to be prepared for college or the work force. In turn, we are preparing our students for participation in our democratic society. It is crucial for me as well as other educators, politicians, and citizens to investigate the CCSS and determine what the reality of a national curriculum could mean for our children. As a country, we ask ourselves, “What does it mean to compete globally?” I think it means that we have knowledgeable citizens who can think critically, solve problems, and interact with others in a way that allows several minds to work together. We need people who are creative, who can be leaders, and who value others' thoughts and opinions. As Zhao

(2009) states, “The new national standards do not address or foster that type of thinking. In fact, they stifle it” (p. 52). Instead of finding ways to be rich and powerful, we should be asking the question “what knowledge is of the most worth?” (Pinar, 2012, p. xv). Only then will the education of our children be about them, and not about us.

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