Trinity College
Trinity College Digital Repository

Senior Theses and Projects   Student Works

Spring 2016

Teachers and the Common Core in Connecticut: From the State Capitol to a City School

Elaina G. Rollins
Trinity College, elaina.rollins@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, and the Education Law Commons

Teachers and the Common Core in Connecticut
From the State Capitol to a City School

Elaina Rollins
Educational Studies Senior Project
Trinity College
December 2015

Teachers and the Common Core in Connecticut
From the State Capitol to a City School

Introduction

Nearly two years ago, legislators, teachers, parents, and students from across Connecticut

gathered at the State Capitol to discuss what was, at the time, a highly controversial topic: the

Common Core State Standards. Today, most people know the Common Core as a set of K-12

educational benchmarks for English Language Arts and math that 42 states – including

Connecticut – have adopted. However, two years ago, "Common Core" was a vague and

worrisome idea for many educators and parents, and Connecticut legislators were deciding

whether or not the state should delay implementation of the standards. As a sophomore

educational studies student at the time, I attended the legislative hearing on March 12, 2014

because I was interested in educational policy and I wanted to find out how local citizens

actually felt about this reform. Looking back, I never could have anticipated the kind of heated

and polarized debate I would witness at the Capitol that afternoon. There were angry parents

dressed in personalized "Anti-Common Core" T-shirts, frustrated teachers lined up out the door

to present testimonies, and overwhelmed legislators attempting to field seemingly endless

questions, complaints, and concerns. I watched the Common Core divide hundreds of people

who all ultimately wanted the same thing: the best schools for their students and children.

Now, in the fall of 2015, much of the drama surrounding Common Core has subsided.

Public school teachers across the state use the standards every day, and while there are many

people who remain critical of the policy, the Common Core is no longer at the forefront of

controversy in Connecticut. Instead, teachers are reading, analyzing, and transforming the

standards into lesson plans and curriculum in order to help their students meet the academic

expectations their state has set in place. However, simply because legislators have stopped debating whether to implement the Common Core does not mean policy makers and concerned citizens who care about education should stop asking questions about this policy. This is where my research project comes in. As an educational studies student in Connecticut who has watched the Common Core transform from a heated talking point to a widely accepted reality of school life, I wanted to investigate how this policy functions on a local level. Therefore, the research findings presented in this paper address two overarching questions: *How do teachers in an urban school in Hartford interpret and act on the Common Core State Standard (CCSS)? What creative teaching and curriculum design strategies are teachers using to meet these new standards?*

When I looked inside one urban public school in Hartford, Connecticut, I found that elementary school teachers generally embraced several of the key state-sponsored pedagogical messages embedded in the CCSS, such as rigor and open-ended problem solving. In addition, I found that teachers actively blend the CCSS and their own personal teaching goals in order to meet the expectations of the standards and also teach broader life lessons, despite their expressed frustration with certain elements of the policy. Through this process of intertwining state policy with individual and school-level goals, teachers at the school where I conducted my research created a style of teaching that embraces, rather than rejects, students' academic frustration or struggle in the classroom. This distinctive teaching method and pedagogy allows local educators to meet the demands of the CCSS while also helping students develop other essential life skills, such as ambition, perseverance, and resilience.

My findings within this one school also reveal a greater shift in controversy that has taken place over the past year and a half. At the legislative hearing in March 2014, people who submitted testimony to the state expressed overwhelmingly negative sentiments toward the

policy. "Common Core" was an incredibly divisive idea, so much so that the hearing lasted for over twelve hours. The amount of concerned citizens who spoke at the Capitol seemed to suggest that Connecticut was just beginning to engage in a debate over the CCSS that would continue far into the future. Before beginning my research, I assumed that some of the controversy I witnessed in 2014 would reappear within this school while speaking with teachers. In reality, my research findings show that while many people still remain critical of the CCSS, the teachers involved in my study generally accept key elements of the standards that were once highly contentious. Even the select educator who opposed the policy in general acknowledged several of the important academic changes the standards bring about. While no one expects the same level of ideological debate present at a legislative hearing to exist within a school, it is surprising to see the amount of active participation the teachers involved in my study engaged in while working with the CCSS.

History of the Common Core

The fact that 42 states across the country currently use the CCSS marks a significant shift in American educational policy. Until 2013, Connecticut administered its own standardized assessment known as the Connecticut Mastery Test, and public schools used state-specific curriculum standards in areas such as reading, mathematics, writing, and science to prepare students for the exam.[1] Because other states designed their own standards and tests in the same way that Connecticut once did, large discrepancies existed between what students in one state should know compared to students in another state. These inconsistencies, paired with a general concern for the academic performance of American students, spurred the National Governors

---

[1] Connecticut State Department of Education, "Connecticut Mastery Test," *Connecticut State Department of Education*, http://www.sde.ct.gov.

Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to create the CCSS.

Today, these standards outline English Language Arts and math benchmarks for students

beginning in kindergarten all the way up through the twelfth grade. By focusing on two core

subjects over the course of a student's schooling experience, the CCSS seek to provide clear,

consistent, and rigorous achievement goals that prepare children for college and competitive

careers. By holding all students to the same high expectations, the creators of the CCSS believe

these standards can help American children succeed and compete with their international peers.[2]

Although the CCSS were not released until 2010, state educational officials began

discussing the idea of common standards in 2007 and the writing and revision process started in

2009. The NGA and the CCSSO wanted to ensure that states were involved in the creation

process, so a year before the release of the standards, these two organizations invited states to

help them develop common standards in English Language Arts and math. After a series of

revisions led by team made up of various educational figures, including public school teachers,

college professors, and representatives from national testing agencies, the NGA and CCSSO

officially released the standards in 2010.[3] In the following years, individual states chose whether

or not to adopt or reject the CCSS; however, the federal government did play a role in expanding

the CCSS through granting select states waivers to the No Child Left Behind policy requirements

which encouraged them to adopt the standards.[4] Today, 42 states officially use the standards in

their public schools, but the adoption process has proven to be temporary in certain cases.

Several states that initially adopted the standards, such as Indiana and Arizona, repealed the

---

[2] National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, 2015, http://www.corestandards.org/.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Gregory Korte, "The Every Student Succeeds Act vs. No Child Left Behind: What's Changed?," *USA Today* (McLean, VA), December 11, 2015.

CCSS after trying out the policy. States that have repealed the standards have often do so out of concern that the CCSS are an example of federal overreach into local schools.[5]

Today, Connecticut serves as an example of state that adopted the CCSS shortly after their release and continues to use the standards, despite initial pushback. Beginning in 2013, all teachers in Connecticut started to align their curriculum to the CCSS in order to meet the expectations of the standards, which are ultimately tested on a new standardized test developed specifically for the CCSS. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test is a computer-based exam which uses adaptive technology to adjust question difficulty based on previous student responses. Although Connecticut (and 17 other states) use the SBAC, 11 other states and the District of Columbia currently use another CCSS-aligned exam known as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test.[6] Therefore, while the standards themselves focus solely on English Language Arts and math benchmarks, teachers who currently use the CCSS also inevitably maneuver these new standardized tests along with their daily use of the standards.

What We Know About Implementing the CCSS

Although the CCSS may emphasize consistency and uniformity, existing research on the standards and previous reform initiatives has shown that implementation of education policy is anything but consistent, and teacher interpretation plays a key role in how reforms function within the classroom. Policy analyst Diamond (2015) argues that the links between policy and instructional practice are often complicated, and the implementation of Common Core will

---

[5] "Common Core Out," *KTAR News* (Phoenix, AZ), October 26, 2015.
[6] "Information Related to the Assessment Consortia," *National Conference of State Legislators*, 2015, http://www.ncsl.org.

depend on how teachers make sense of the policy in the first place. Diamond draws upon the work of educational researcher Coburn (2004), who found that the most common teacher response to policy measures involving pedagogical or curriculum changes was assimilation, meaning that although teachers understood the policy, they made no fundamental changes in their instruction to address the change.[7] In contrast to these findings, in my own research I found that teachers generally embraced or willingly accommodated the standards, reactions that were much less prevalent in Coburn's work. In addition, the research of policy analyst Supovitz (2015) further supports the notion that teacher interpretation matters when analyzing education policy at the ground level. Supovitz argues that the CCSS are a "learning change" for both students and teachers, and the ways in which teachers engage with this change directly impact how the standards shape American schoolchildren.[8] My research draws upon these findings from other scholars by viewing local teachers as key figures to consider when trying to understand the CCSS.

Many scholars have also investigated how certain subsets of teachers use the CCSS on a daily basis; however, these studies generally focused on either relatively broad participant groups or extremely small and specific groups of teachers. For example, Cogan et al. (2013) conducted a study of over 12,000 math teachers in grades 1-12 to find that the CCSS influenced teacher instruction more than their school-prescribed curriculum textbook. The researchers designed the sample size to be representative of each state that had adopted the CCSS at the time of the

---

[7]John B. Diamond, "Implementing the Common Core: How Individuals, Organizational Resources, and Instructional Practice Matter," in *Challenging Standards*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 25.
[8] Jonathan A. Supovitz, "Engaging with Standards," in *Challenging Standards*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 5.

study.[9] Similarly, Matney and Bostic (2013) studied teacher use of the CCSS math standards on a relatively broad scale. Their research drew upon K-9 teachers in four different counties in the Midwest in order to produce results that were generalizable across grade levels in the broader region.[10] On the other end of the spectrum, Barrett-Tatum and Dooley (2015) studied just two English Language Arts teachers in their small-scale project.[11] Both large and small sample sizes have their own unique benefits. On one hand, a 12,000 teacher study can reveal broad, statistically representative trends, while a two teacher study can reveal deep and thorough description of select individual experiences. However, my mid-level study of ten teachers allows me to look at a unique theme that is difficult to analyze with an extremely large or small sample size: interconnectedness. By speaking with a range of teachers within one specific school, I was able investigate whether teacher interpretation and use of the CCSS exist within a network of communicating teachers, while a study of 12,000 or two teachers makes it much more difficult to consider these kinds of relationships.

Much of the existing research on CCSS implementation has also used survey data as a primary method of data collection, while my own research uses semi-structured interviews to elicit thorough and thoughtful responses from participants. Bostic and Matney (2013), who used an anonymous survey to study teacher "perspectives on [CCSS] mathematics content and pedagogical needs," represent a larger group of researchers who use similar survey techniques.[12]

---

[9] Cogan et al., "Implementing the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics: What We Know About Teachers of Mathematics in 40 States," *The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University* (2013): 4, https://www.researchgate.net.

[10] G.T. Bostic and J. Matney, "Overcoming a Common Storm: Designing Professional Development for Teachers Implementing the Common Core," *Ohio Journal of School Mathematics* (2013): 13, http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/teach_learn_pub/1/.

[11] Jennifer Barrett-Tatum and Caitlin McMunn Dooley, "From Idealized to Actualized Instruction," *Literacy Research and Instruction* (2015): 257, http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/yXvIIWasEARfM4aRASdb/full.

[12] Bostic and Matney, "Overcoming a Common Storm," 14.

By conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers and their curriculum coach, my study

draws upon elements of the methodology used by scholars such as Porter (2013). Porter studied

teacher perspectives of the CCSS in two North Carolina elementary schools through a

combination of teacher surveys, focus groups, and interviews with school principals.[13] My own

research draws upon Porter's method, but focuses exclusively on the experiences of educators in

only one local Hartford public school. During my own interviews, I also asked teachers to

provide example lesson plans they designed to align with the CCSS. These select primary source

documents further expand my methodology beyond the survey techniques that have been

frequently used in existing research.

The latter component of my research question asks what kinds of creative teaching and

curriculum design strategies teachers are using to meet the CCSS. While prior research on

teacher use of the CCSS often includes a final section about suggested strategies for more

effective implementation of the policy, my project takes a somewhat different approach by

explicitly trying to understand what techniques teachers are already successfully using to meet

the standards. For example, in their 2010 report, Finn and Petrilli offer five main suggestions for

improved implementation of the CCSS based on questionnaire responses from a variety of

upper-level administrators or directors, such as Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, and

Rod Paige, a former U.S. Secretary of Education. Unsurprisingly, Finn and Petrilli's

recommendations primarily target upper-level officials by suggesting ideas such as, "[States

should] track and report efforts toward the implementation of standards and assessments."[14] My

---

[13] Rachel Porter, *Understanding Common Core Implementation: How Educators Intuit, Interpret, and Begin to Integrate Curriculum Reform* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2013) , 1.

[14] Chester E. Finn and Michael J. Petrilli, "Now What? Imperatives & Options for Common Core Implementation & Governance," *Thomas B. Fordham Institute* (2010): 17, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED516606.

research diverges from these large-scale policy recommendations by instead investigating what strategies local teachers have already created to help them meet the standards.

Methodology

As a researcher interested in studying teachers, my main goal was to establish relationships with local educators. Before beginning my project, I knew that it would be important to build trust with the participants involved in my survey, so I selected a research design method that took these concerns into consideration: semi-structured interviews with a group of educators at one local Hartford public school. As a city, Hartford is home to many low-income residents of color, and the city's public schools typically underperform on standardized tests compared to neighboring suburban schools. For nearly twenty years, Hartford has also been in the midst of building and expanding a school choice program which attempts to alleviate racial isolation and educational inequality through the creation of inter-district magnet schools, charter schools, and urban-suburban school transfer programs. The school where I conducted my research serves as an example of a typical public school serving predominantly poor children of color that is situated in the midst of a city undergoing extensive education reform.

By choosing to conduct research at only one urban school in Hartford, I was able to focus in-depth on a specific community of teachers and form connections with the participants involved in my study. Over time, I got to know many of the teachers at the school, partially because in addition to conducting formal research, I also volunteered as a classroom aide for eight hours per week. Although these volunteer hours did not necessarily contribute to my research findings, working with students and teachers on a weekly basis allowed me to solidify my relationships within the school. In terms of actual data collection, I used semi-structured

interviews in order to yield detailed and thoughtful responses from research participants. By conducting this kind of interview, I was able to provide teachers a safe and open space for them to share their thoughts, ideas, and concerns about the CCSS that was separate from typical teacher meetings or professional development seminars.

In September and October 2015, I conducted a total of ten semi-structured interviews with nine teachers and one curriculum coach at the school that lasted about fifteen minutes each. Eight of the ten participants were female and two were men; a breakdown which reflects the general composition of the teaching staff. Five of these participants taught upper elementary grade levels (3-5) and four participants taught early elementary grade levels (K-2). The tenth participant, a curriculum coach, works at the school in a somewhat unique role that does not correspond to any single grade level. The curriculum coach is a former elementary school educator who now who offers curriculum and lesson plan guidance to other teachers in the school on a full-time basis. In all of my interviews, I encouraged participants to discuss similar themes, such as their general understanding of the CCSS, how they incorporate the standards into their lesson plans, and whether they have faced any challenges since Connecticut adopted the CCSS. In addition, I asked teachers to reflect on whether they noticed any changes in their teaching now compared to years before they used the standards.

Because teachers' schedules were incredibly busy and differed depending on grade level, I organized my interviews through the help of one upper elementary grade teacher whose classroom I volunteered in as a teacher aide throughout the semester. This select teacher reached out to teachers throughout the school regarding my project and then scheduled the times and dates of my interviews with people who were willing to participate. I compiled my participant group based on this strategy in order to streamline communication and maximize efficiency:

many teachers had little time during the day to speak with me, so through the help of one classroom teacher, I was able to easily connect with a variety of teachers throughout the school. However, due to these unique circumstances, my participant group does not serve as a truly random sample of teachers throughout the school, since one classroom teacher had to ask other teachers across grade levels to participate in the study.

At the end of each interview (aside from my conversation with the curriculum coach), I asked teachers if they would be willing to share an example lesson plan they recently designed to meet the standards. I purposely asked teachers to share a "typical" and "recent" lesson plan in order to ensure that the documents I received would reflect of an average daily lesson and not a particularly special lesson the teacher may have designed weeks ago. This second method of data collection allowed me compare teacher explanation of lesson plan design with concrete examples of lesson plans they have actually used in the classroom. While all teachers promised to share a lesson plan with me at the end of the interview, I only received four documents.

I believe part of the reason I received so few lesson plans may be because teachers did not want their skills as a teacher to be judged off of just one lesson, which is an understandable concern. Even though I requested a "typical" lesson from each participant, teachers may have felt initial pressure to look through their documents for an "exceptional" lesson since it might be included in research. This pressure potentially caused many teachers to simply not submit a sample so they would not have to wonder whether my project would judge the quality of their work. In addition, I may have received a small number of lesson plans because many teachers keep all of their curriculum documents on their computer, so they did not have a hard copy on hand to easily distribute. However, in this situation, I exchanged email addresses with the participants and then followed up via email regarding the lesson plan. In most circumstances, I

still did not receive an example document. Therefore, because of the relatively few documents I collected, my research findings stem primarily from the semi-structured interview data.

Upon completion of my ten interviews, I transcribed the recordings and then thematically analyzed teacher responses. During this analysis, I looked for unique themes within individual interviews as well as themes that appeared across grade levels, such as common problems, use of external resources, or strategies for designing lesson plans. I also examined the select lesson plan documents I received to look for unique formats or design methods teachers used to translate the CCSS into practice. In addition to these analyses of interview responses and sample lesson plans, I used state legislative documents and online resources regarding the CCSS to gain a deeper understanding of Connecticut's formal approach to the standards. This comparison between my own primary source data with teachers and official documents released by the state allowed me to connect my local analysis to broader, statewide themes.

Ensuring Confidentiality

An essential component of my research design was individual and school-level confidentiality. Because my interviews encouraged participants to discuss topics that relate to their jobs, such as how they design lesson plans and whether they experience any problems while using the standards, I ensured that the teachers involved in my study would not face any professional or social risks due to their answers by keeping the name of the school and the names of all teachers confidential. In addition, I also referred to teachers as either "early elementary" or "upper elementary" grade teachers in order to further anonymize the process. Based on this design, participants in my study are identified as either an early or upper elementary grade school teacher at an urban public school in Hartford. For the purpose of this paper, I also assigned each participant a pseudonym which I use throughout the course of my analysis.

Classroom Life and Capitol Controversy

My research findings within the school focus on three key ideas surrounding teachers and the CCSS: understanding the standards, translating the standards into curriculum, and developing creative teaching strategies that meet the standards but also move beyond their expectations. Teachers understand the standards by embracing two key pedagogical themes within the CCSS, rigor and open-ended problem solving. Teachers then translate the CCSS into curriculum by blending uniform standards and personalized goals through a process of active revision. Finally, teachers utilize a creative teaching strategy that embraces student academic frustration in the classroom in order to meet the standards and also teach important life skills. All of these findings come together to demonstrate how a group of Hartford teachers interact with the CCSS on a daily basis. On a broader scale, it is also important to consider how the experiences and attitudes of these teachers are somewhat unexpected, considering the intense debate that once surrounded the CCSS. Although I expected to see some remnants this controversy present in teacher discussion today, I was surprised to see that throughout my research the majority of teachers involved in my study took an active and participatory approach toward embracing the standards and implementing them on a daily basis.

*Emergence of Pedagogical Themes*

Since Connecticut formally adopted the CCSS in 2013, the State Department of Education has released a variety of documents concerning the standards, including monthly newsletters, teacher resources, and parent guides. While the state may direct some of its discussion of the CCSS toward teachers, when comparing state policy language and casual teacher discussion of the standards, we might not expect both sides of the conversation to be completely similar. For example, while the Connecticut Department of Education inevitably

views the CCSS as both a state and national policy issue, local teachers might be more inclined to understand the topic in terms of their individual school and students. However, in terms of the standards' main themes regarding teaching and practice, my analysis of interview data reveals that key primary pedagogical messages behind the CCSS -- such as rigor and open-ended problem solving -- exist in both state and teacher interpretation of the policy.

One of the most frequently recurring pedagogical elements of the CCSS present in both state and teacher discussion of the standards is the importance of ensuring rigor in all student work. One of the State Department of Education's most parent-friendly resources for understanding the CCSS, a three-minute video created by the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) that provides a general explanation of the policy, discusses this notion of rigor in a practical and easily accessible way. After noting that in the past, each state wrote their own academic benchmarks, a cheerful, narrating voice explains that without the CCSS, "A boy in Seattle who is rocking an A in English literature could be getting a C on his Chicago friend's [test]. Oops."[15] In this one sentence, not only does the CGCS note the former discrepancies between previous state standards, but they also imply that students in certain cities are held to much higher expectations than students in others parts of the country. The Connecticut State Department of Education reiterates this emphasis on academic rigor in its *Common Core State Standards Strategic Plan* by listing "rigor" as one of the three key instructional shifts the state will experience with the adoption of the CCSS.[16]

---

[15] Council of Great City Schools, "Three-Minute Video Explaining the Common Core State Standards,*" Vimeo*, 2012, https://vimeo.com/51933492.
[16] Connecticut State Department of Education, "Common Core State Standards Strategic Plan," *Connecticut State Department of Education*, 2012, http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/ccss/ccss_strategic_plan_sbe_120512.pdf.
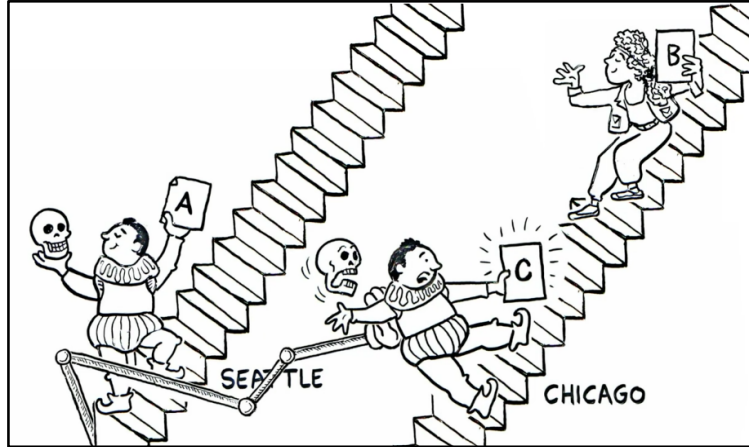
A screenshot from the CGCS video shows a Seattle student receiving an
"A" on a Shakespeare test while a Chicago student receives a "C."

Teachers at this Hartford school not only appear to receive this general message about the importance of difficult benchmarks; they repeatedly use the word "rigor" to explain the purpose of the CCSS. Nine out of the ten participants involved in my study explicitly used the word "rigor" while discussing their understanding of the standards. All nine of these participants were teachers, while the one person who did not use this word was the curriculum coach. One upper elementary grade teacher named Richard discussed the new focus on rigor in relation to Connecticut's former benchmarks. He explained, "The standards we used to use were not really as rigorous, and what we are finding is… if you just compare fifth grade math [standards] to what they used to say a few years ago, you would see a huge difference in what kids are expected to do." Even teachers who initially struggled to explain the overall mission of the CCSS immediately thought of rigor as the first key component. During our interview, an upper elementary grade teacher named Marie explained, "The overall mission… I'm not really sure, but I'm thinking it has to do with being able to present or give teachers a more rigorous set of standards for students to go by… I mean [the CCSS] are more rigorous and the kids are now held to a higher level of what is expected of them." In this sense, the rigor of the standards may feel

even more significant to local teachers because of the kinds of benchmarks Connecticut used in

the past. Clearly, the CCSS set high expectations for students, and local teachers have taken

strong notice of this pedagogical shift.

Along with this pedagogical emphasis on academic rigor, another frequently recurring

theme present in both state and teacher discussion of the CCSS is the importance of open-ended

problem solving. Open-ended problem solving generally refers to academic assignments or

activities which encourage students to engage in a process of self-directed, trial and error

thinking in order to come to a conclusion. Open-ended problems also typically have a variety of

"correct" answers, so students must explain or justify their thoughts. Instructional videos from

The Teaching Challenge, a website the Connecticut State Department of Education frequently

references on its own website, encourage teachers to consider how open-ended questions prepare

students for future assignments and grade levels.[17] My own interviews revealed that teachers

frequently encourage this kind of student-led problem solving in their own classrooms. The

CCSS challenge teachers to model problem solving strategies less often and instead challenge

students to devise strategies on their own, often through a process of trial and error. For example,

one upper elementary grade teacher named Frank noted that the CCSS have pushed him to ask

more "interesting and challenging" questions compared to years before the standards. He

explained that in the past, "[My teaching] was more of 'Here is how we do this, let's all try it

together.' We don't do that as much. We try to put the ownness on the kids." Another upper

elementary grade teacher named Susan reiterated this idea when she told me, "I like the fact that

the students are doing more of the heavy lifting and the work and they are the ones doing all of

---

[17] "Common Core: Elementary School," *Teaching Channel*, 2011,
https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/common-core-state-standards-elementary-school?fd=1.

the discovering." In this sense, Frank and Susan used words like "ownness" and "self discovery" to reference student-led work and a move away from teacher-led instruction - a key element of a the open-ended problem solving that the CCSS require.

My analysis of teacher interviews also reveals that while teachers absorb this message about open-ended problem solving, they often use a unique word to describe the instructional technique: "grappling." The term "grapple" appears to be word that may be specific to this school, as the phrase does not appear in any state documents concerning the standards. Although no teacher explicitly defined the word, their use of the term in the context of the discussion suggests that students who "grapple" must persevere through intellectual challenges with less teacher assistance in order to solve problems. One upper elementary grade teacher named Claire positioned the term in context of other new instructional methods that stem from the standards. When asked whether her teaching now is any different compared to years prior to the adoption of the CCSS, she explained:

> Definitely. Hugely different. 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. A lot more summarizing and synthesis than was ever included in work before.

In this sense, these educators appear to have absorbed broader, state-approved messages surrounding the importance of open-ended problem solving; however, in this process, they created their own language to apply this message to context of their own school.

While several themes behind the CCSS, such a rigor and open-ended problem solving, translate into teacher interpretation of the standards, components of the policy that are less focused on pedagogy rarely emerged in teacher discussion. For example, global competitiveness and the standards' ability to ensure that American children can compete with other children

around the world is a defining factor of state-sponsored language surrounding the CCSS. In the

State Department of Education's *Common Core State Standards Strategic Plan*, the authors

immediately define the CCSS as "a set of K-12 expectations… designed to ensure all students

are able to compete and succeed globally."[18] Similar language inevitably reappears on the

official CCSS website, which the state of Connecticut lists as a resource for inquiring parents.

The CCSS site explains that not only did the standards emerge due to large standardized test

score achievement gaps between the United States and other nations, but that academic standards

from some of these countries played a "significant role" in the creation of the CCSS that states

use today.[19] These kinds of state-sponsored resources do not simply mention global

competitiveness in passing; international motivation lies at the center of the discussion.

My research reveals that Connecticut's emphasis on global factors does not reappear in

teacher discussion of the standards, as none of the participants involved in my research

mentioned international relevance of the CCSS during our interviews. Instead, when teachers did

position the CCSS on a broader scale beyond their individual school, they discussed how the

standards function at the state and national level. For example, when asked to explain her general

understanding of the CCSS, one early elementary grade teacher named Becky interpreted the

policy to be "across the board, so every state has the same standards. If kids move, they are

going to be expected to learn the same thing, versus before, when every state had their own idea

of what kids needed to master by the end of twelfth grade." However, even teachers who did see

the CCSS as a policy with national implications mentioned this component only in passing.

---

[18] Connecticut State Department of Education, "Common Core State Standards Strategic Plan," *Connecticut State Department of Education*, 2012, http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/ccss/ccss_strategic_plan_sbe_120512.pdf.
[19] National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, "About the Standards," *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, 2015, http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/.

Rather, teacher interpretation of the CCSS focused much more on pedagogical goals rather than the notions of global competitiveness that the state officially supports.

Blending Uniform Standards and Personalized Goals

In order to effectively use the standards in their own classrooms, I found that every teacher I spoke with in this Hartford school used the CCSS as a central and guiding feature while designing curriculum while still finding ways to revise and refine the standards in order to fit their own personal goals and group of students. Typically, the teachers involved in my study design lesson plans based on this model: identify the standard they wish to meet, create learning targets, sub-targets, and assessments aligned with this standard, and then design appropriate activities to help students meet these goals. Within this model, teachers take additional steps beyond simply copying and rewriting the original standard in order to ensure the CCSS function in their classrooms. For example, Susan, an upper elementary grade teacher, noted that even after teachers align their lesson plans and curriculum to the standards, there is a lot of "going back and adjusting and refining… to make sure it makes sense." Susan's explanation reveals that even at a basic level, teachers take steps to move beyond the basic standards through a process of revision that allows teachers to ensure that this uniform policy will meet the needs of their own students.

Beyond basic adjustments, I found that many teachers are even more collaborative and proactive when it comes to transforming the standards to match their unique classrooms and teaching goals. When asked to describe her process for incorporating the standards into her lesson plans, one early elementary grade teacher named Jessica stated, "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." Other teachers have taken active steps to enhance the

standards by designing their own supplemental curriculum materials. For example, while the city

of Hartford is currently working to standardized English Language Arts curriculum across the

district, there is no uniform math curriculum that schools must follow. Because of this

discrepancy between English Language Arts and math, individual educators have taken it upon

themselves to fill in the gaps. One early elementary grade teacher named Megan explained she

wrote her own CCSS-aligned long-term and short-term targets for math, because the district is

"all over the place" with this subject. Jessica and Megan serve as examples of how teachers

actively and collaboratively find ways to blend the official standards with their own personal

goals and needs in order to help their students succeed.

What makes these teachers' efforts to rework uniform standards even more significant is

the fact that they have continued to do so in the face of challenges. Every teacher I interviewed

noted at least one problem they face while attempting to successfully use the new standards, with

the three most common problems being pacing, interpretation, and students who enter new grade

levels without mastering earlier standards from the previous year. Teachers across all grade

levels noted the difficulty involved with pacing their curriculum to meet the large amount of

standards each child is expected to master. Both early elementary and upper elementary grade

teachers also struggled to properly interpret certain standards, which some teachers described as

"vague" or having "a lot of wiggle room." However, the problem which appears to elicit the

most frustration from teachers occurs primarily in the upper elementary grade levels, and that is

the challenge of teaching students who continue to progress through each grade without ever

properly mastering the standards from the year before. Richard, Frank, and Marie, all upper

elementary grade teachers, showed visibly negative reactions when probed further on this issue.

Marie explained, "It's a struggle with math because the kids lack such foundational skills… That

is what I think is difficult. What they come up to us with." She even went as far as to describe her current classroom as a "hot mess."

Despite these expressed challenges, teachers are not resisting the adoption of the CCSS by ignoring the standards or performing only the minimal required effort. On the contrary, the elementary school teachers involved in my study actively seek to revise and refine their own curriculum in order to properly meet the expectations of the CCSS. Richard explicitly noted that while teachers could passively accept the policy, he feels compelled to go above and beyond by adapting his teaching style to effectively teach new standards to his class:

> We could all meet the Common Core standards if we just hand-hold our students through it, but when it comes time to test them and you can't [hold their hands] anymore, you will see that, "Okay, my kids have met all of these standards all year because I helped them." But when they go to test on it, they don't really know any of it because they were guided through the whole process. As teachers, we have a bit of a balancing act to play with that. I want to make sure my kids are prepared because I don't want them to just be able to [meet the standards] in my classroom here.

Teachers have thus chosen to accept the new expectations defined by the CCSS and push through the challenges rather than dismiss the policy entirely.

Student Growth Through Struggle

Throughout the course of my research, I noticed that even though my interview questions focused specifically on the CCSS, I often found myself talking to teachers about the kinds of life skills they wanted their students to develop in addition to the basic academic standards the state requires them to meet. Many of the teachers involved in my research explained that at the end of the school year, they want their students to be able to do more than simply master questions on a standardized test. These teachers want to see their students develop their character so they can grow as human beings, a desire that I am sure the majority of educators across the country share.

What makes the participants involved in my research particularly interesting is that these teachers have found a way to use the CCSS as a tool for developing life skills such as ambition, self-sufficiency, and resilience by choosing to encourage, rather than reject, student academic struggle in the classroom.

Although I found myself having many conversations with teachers about developing life skills in the classroom, Richard was one of the participants who was able to articulate this connection between the CCSS and an embrace of academic struggle extremely well. Even in our short conversation, I could tell that Richard felt very strongly about helping his students build skills that extend beyond core academic content. During our interview, he explained:

> With Common Core, it's really pushing kids' stamina to stay with it and try. I think naturally as a teacher, you want to come in and support everything that they are doing and you want to help them out. 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 do that and we build kids' resiliency, the better off they are going to be.

As an educator, Richard sees a clear link between the standards and student resiliency, but he also believes that teachers must play a role in ensuring that this character building happens. Frank, another upper elementary grade teacher, expressed a similar sentiment when he told me that one of his biggest challenges as a teacher is keeping his class from feeling discouraged when they do not perform well on an assessment. He acknowledged that in order to maintain a positive attitude in the classroom, everyone must put in a lot of extra work, but that his overall goal as a teacher is to "maximize student learning capabilities so [my students] are self-sufficient." Both Richard and Frank serve as examples of how teachers are using the CCSS to strengthen their own pedagogy of student academic struggle, because they believe the standards can be used as a starting point to build important life skills.

My limited collection of sample lesson plans reveals that teachers take concrete steps to build life skills in their classroom through the CCSS by dedicating portions of their class time to this topic. My analysis of the lesson plans shows that the most common way teachers use the CCSS to build character traits such as resiliency is by planning specific activities that they label as "grapple" or "engage" activities. For example, in a weekly lesson plan for math, one early elementary grade teacher portioned off time in the lesson for children to engage in a "grapple" activity for three out of the five days a week. In the case of this weekly plan, the grapple activity provided students with a sample multiplication problem ("Problem: 8x7 = ____) and gave the students five minutes to try and find the answer on their own, without any teacher modeling. The rest of the class was then dedicated toward using multiple visual strategies to solve multiplication problems, a skill that is aligned with the CCSS. Another way teachers use the CCSS and student struggle to build life skills is by explicitly including words such as "resiliency" into their learning objectives. Teachers at the school where I conducted my research have a 40-minute period every morning that they set aside for team building activities and other forms of hands-on learning that do not necessarily relate to the standard school curriculum. In another sample weekly lesson plan, the daily learning objective for this team building period was: "I can show resilience." My small collection of sample lesson plans reveals that teachers take active steps to use student academic frustration to build important life skills by portioning off pieces of their weekly schedule to address these skills.

From the Classroom Back to the Capitol

My research findings paint a descriptive picture of what is happening with the CCSS in one urban public school in Hartford, but these teacher experiences also serve as a sharp contrast to the attitude toward the CCSS at the Capitol in 2014. At the legislative hearing a year and a

half ago, people were tense on both side of the aisle: many parents, teachers, and organizations wanted Connecticut to move forward with the adoption of the standards, while an even larger group of people vehemently opposed the state's support of the policy. Research on this hearing by Benjamin (2015) reveals that while 71 speakers or organizations submitted testimonies expressing support for the CCSS, the state received 202 testimonies which spoke out against the standards - almost three times as many compared to positive testimonies.[20] The most frequent claims made in favor of the standards cited the standards' ability to prepare students for college and careers and the increased rigor involved in the standards. On the other hand, people who spoke out against the CCSS were concerned that the standards lacked creativity, did not address the needs of diverse groups of students, and were actually too rigorous. Interestingly, both proponents and critics of the CCSS cited increased rigor as either a positive or negative element of the policy.[21]

Benjamin's analysis of testimony documents also reveals that while suburban teachers and parents were more outspoken against the CCSS compared to urban teachers and parents, there were still more urban teachers who testified against the standards compared to those who spoke out in favor. Only nine urban teachers testified in favor of the CCSS, while 17 urban teachers opposed the policy.[22] My experience at this hearing, listening to all of the people critique the CCSS and witnessing the visible frustration in the room, initially made me think that the teachers involved in my study this fall would express similar sentiments. I predicted that while these teachers would surely not feel as heated about the standards compared to the people who gave testimonies to the state, I suspected that my research might strike a nerve with some of

---

[20] Richelle Benjamin, "Common Core Conversations in CT: Analyzing Public Testimonies," 2015, http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/448, 16.

[21] Richelle Benjamin, "Common Core Conversations in CT," 2015, 17-18.

[22] Ibid., 16.

the teachers, considering how controversial the policy was not long ago. To my surprise, I found

that the teachers involved in my study appeared to be either neutral or supportive of the

standards, overall. All of the educators I spoke with, aside from one, were eager to discuss how

they interpret the CCSS and then transform the standards to fit the needs of their students.

I only spoke to one teacher who vehemently opposed the CCSS, and even though this

educator reminded me the most of the people who gave testimonies against the standards at the

Capitol in 2014, even she still acknowledged several of the positive elements of the policy.

Becky, who is an early elementary grade teacher, showed no hesitation in expressing her

frustration with the CCSS: "This Common Core thing, I will be quite honest, is a big joke. I am

speaking honestly. It is a joke. It is awful... They didn't put any deep thought into this. They just

sort of threw it at us and that angers me." Becky's main concern stemmed from her belief that

the standards are too vague, thus leaving too much room for interpretation on behalf of teachers.

However, even in the midst of her strong negative opinion of the CCSS, Becky still

acknowledged that the standards have some positive elements. When asked to explain the overall

mission of the CCSS in her own words, she told me, "It is a set of standards that push children to

think more deeply and more critically… The standards simply allow teachers to have a bigger

understanding of what children need." Becky serves as an example of how while there are still

people who oppose the CCSS, even the critics have come to acknowledge elements of the

standards that they view as potentially beneficial for students and teachers.

It is important to note that these findings do not intend to suggest that all teachers

involved in my study are "proponents" of the CCSS or would attend a Capitol hearing to testify

in favor of the policy. These findings do not even suggest that the CCSS are no longer

controversial. Just last month, the Massachusetts State Board of Education decided to abandon

PARCC, one of the multistate tests designed to assess student knowledge of the standards.

Massachusetts, a state typically at the forefront of education reform, serves as an example of how

citizens and their elected representatives are still questioning the standards and their

accompanying standardized tests.[23] My research acknowledges this existing controversy

surrounding the CCSS while also showing how the attitudes of one group of public school

educators in Hartford are surprisingly accepting toward the standards. Considering the level of

controversy that once existed in Connecticut, and still does exist in many states, one might

expect to see more ideological division reappear in teacher discussion of the policy. In reality, I

was surprised to find that the teachers in my study took an active and collaborative approach

toward embracing the standards by working with fellow educators to fully interpret the standards

and make them work for their students.

Giving Back to the Community

As a supplemental component of my research project, I participated in Trinity College's

Community Learning Initiative (CLI) research fellowship, a semester-long research colloquium

in which student researchers who are conducting community-based projects develop and share

their work with a select group of students and faculty advisors. Over the course of the semester,

fellows design a final project that uses their research in a way that is beneficial for their

community partner (the local Hartford school where I conducted my research) and themselves.

As someone who spent nearly eight hours per week at my community partner school, I wanted to

make sure that my research findings would be meaningful for the teachers who kindly welcomed

me into their school community. Over the past three months, I have come to know many of the

---

[23] Kate Zernike, "Massachusetts's Rejection of Common Core Test Signals Shift in U.S," *The New York Times*,
(New York, NY), November 21, 2015.

teachers in this school beyond our short interview conversations, and I recognize that they face many challenges related to the CCSS every day. Through the CLI fellowship, I am working on a project designed to address one of the common frustrations I heard about during my interviews: a lack of high-quality resources aligned with the CCSS.

In order to help teachers easily access high-quality, CCSS-aligned curricular resources, I am using the knowledge I gained during my interviews to create an online sharable resource database. The teachers involved in my research create all of their own lesson plans, despite the abundance of premade CCSS lessons available online. What these teachers have trouble finding is resources that supplement their own self-designed lessons, such as example CCSS math problems or appropriate grade-level English Language Arts texts. The online database I am designing will operate on Google Drive, so teachers can easily upload resources and share them with fellow colleagues. I will also use the information about teacher needs and preferences I gained during my interviews to search for resources that I will add to the database for teachers to potentially use in their classrooms. Ideally, I envision this project serving teacher needs in the present, because I am hunting for relevant resources on my own, but also in the future, because teachers will be able to continue to add to the database after the completion of my project.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While my research findings offer unique insight into one Hartford public school, my results are partially limited due to my sample size and certain components of my methodology. Because I only worked with one elementary school, I cannot generalize these findings to other public schools in the area since my research school is not necessarily representative of the greater Hartford area. In particular, because my research focused on one urban public school, it

would be interesting to see whether these findings applied to neighboring suburban schools. Additional research could be done to interview teachers in both urban and suburban schools in order to find similarities and differences between these two groups of teachers. In terms of my interviews, it is also important to note that because my interviews were organized through the help of one teacher, my participant group is not necessarily representative of all teachers in the school. For example, there is a chance that the teacher who organized the interviews purposefully reached out to other people within the school are interested in the CCSS and frequently use the standards in an active way. I also could have expanded my interviews by speaking with the principal to see whether this authority figure potentially shaped the attitudes of teachers within the school. However, because I interviewed a variety of teachers across grade levels and I did speak with one participant who strongly opposed the standards, I believe the potential risk of my data being skewed by this potential methodological flaw is minimal. Also, as I discussed earlier, my sample of lesson plan documents was limited, possibly because teachers were wary about submitting lesson plans which they felt would be judged in a research context.

My observations about the controversy surrounding the CCSS are also limited due to the fact that I did not know how the teachers involved in my study felt about the standards in March 2014. At the legislative hearing, the majority of people in attendance spoke out against the standards - including urban teachers. However, there is a possibility that the group of teachers involved in my study generally embraced the pedagogical elements of the CCSS from the start. If this were the case, it might not be as surprising that during my research I saw teachers actively working with the standards to make them work for their students. This gap in my research would be an interesting place for other scholars to step in. Additional research tracking teacher attitudes

and interpretations of the CCSS over time could offer a deeper explanation of how controversy surrounding the policy has changed or remained the same.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that teachers play such a significant role in life of American students, it is easy to forget about these educators in the midst of strong, political rhetoric. When hundreds of people gathered at the State Capitol in 2014 to debate whether or not Connecticut legislators should delay implementation of the CCSS, everyone had their own opinion on whether the standards would be good for teachers and their students. Yet somehow, only a few years later, the lives of teachers can once again seem mundane, even though these educators are implementing a policy which once lit a fire in the hearts of citizens across the state. My experience in one urban public school, talking with real teachers about how they use the CCSS on a daily basis, revealed strong links between state-sponsored rhetoric about pedagogy and teacher interpretations of those messages. Yet I believe that my most significant research finding actually moves beyond the official government policy I initially set out to study. Rather, I believe my research is significant on a broader scale because it shows how despite the numerous frustrations American teachers face on a daily basis, these educators continue to actively challenge students, embrace their struggles, and push them to be more resilient human beings.

Bibliography

Barrett-Tatum, Jennifer, and Caitlin McMunn Dooley. "From Idealized to Actualized Instruction:

Two Elementary Teachers' Enactment of the ELA Common Core State Standards in

Instructional Scripts." *Literacy Research and Instruction* (2015).

http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/yXvIIWasEARfM4aRASdb/full.

Benjamin, Richelle, "Common Core Conversations in CT: Analyzing Public Testimonies."

Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2015. Trinity College Digital Repository,

http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/448.

Cogan, Leland, William Schmidt, and Richard Houang. "Implementing the Common Core State

Standards for Mathematics: What We Know About Teachers of Mathematics in 40

States." ResearchGate. *The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University*,

Working Paper 33 (2013).

"Common Core: Elementary School." *Teaching Channel*. 2011. Accessed November 2, 2015.

https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/common-core-state-standards-elementary-

school?fd=1.

"Common Core Out: Arizona Education Board Votes to Repeal Controversial Standards." *KTAR

News*, October 26, 2015, News sec. Accessed November 26, 2015.

http://ktar.com/story/720331/common-core-out-arizona-education-board-votes-to-repeal-

controversial-standards/.

"Connecticut Mastery Test." *Connecticut State Department of Education*. Accessed December

12, 2015. http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2748&q=334702.

Connecticut State Department of Education. "Common Core State Standards Strategic Plan."

Connecticut State Department of Education. December 2012. Accessed November 2,

2015. http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/ccss/ccss_strategic_plan_sbe_120512.pdf.

Council of Great City Schools. "Three-Minute Video Explaining the Common Core State

Standards." *Vimeo*. 2012. Accessed November 2, 2015. https://vimeo.com/51933492

Diamond, John B. "Implementing the Common Core: How Individuals, Organizational

Resources, and Instructional Practice Matter." *Challenging Standards: Navigating

Conflict and Building Capacity in the Era of the Common Core*. Ed. Jonathan Supovitz

and James Spillane. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. Print.

Finn Jr., Chester E., and Michael J. Petrilli. "Now What? Imperatives & Options for" Common

Core" Implementation & Governance." *Thomas B. Fordham Institute* (2010): 17.

http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED516606.

Korte, Gregory. "The Every Student Succeeds Act vs. No Child Left Behind: What's Changed?"

USA Today. December 11, 2015. Accessed December 12, 2015.

http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/12/10/every-student-succeeds-act-vs-

no-child-left-behind-whats-changed/77088780/.

"Information Related to the Assessment Consortia." *National Conference of State Legislators*.

2015. Accessed November 26, 2015. http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/common-

core-state-standards-assessment-consortia.aspx.

Matney, Gabriel T. and Jonathan Bostic. "Overcoming a Common Storm: Designing

Professional Development for Teachers Implementing the Common Core." *Ohio Journal

of School Mathematics* (2013): 12. http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/teach_learn_pub/1/.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School

Officers. "About the Standards." *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. 2015.

Accessed November 2, 2015. http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/.

Porter, Rachel. "Understanding Common Core Implementation: How Educators Intuit, Interpret,

and Begin to Integrate Curriculum Reform." *ProQuest* (2013).

http://search.proquest.com/docview/1697491574?accountid=14405.

Supovitz, Jonathan A. "Engaging with Standards." *Challenging Standards: Navigating Conflict

and Building Capacity in the Era of the Common Core.* Ed. Jonathan Supovitz and James

Spillane. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. Print.

Zernike, Kate. "Massachusetts's Rejection of Common Core Test Signals Shift in U.S." *The

New York Times*, November 21, 2015, Education sec. Accessed December 16, 2015.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/us/rejecting-test-massachusetts-shifts-its-

model.html.