

Being an Uncommon Teacher in a Common Core World

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Several years ago, classroom teachers and administrators began to hear about a new educational reform that would change the way we think about standards and delivery of instruction. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed by both the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers and were first released to the public in March of 2010. This reform is designed as the “culmination of an extended, broad-based effort to fulfill the charge issued by the states to create the next generation of K-12 standards in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3). Almost immediately, the Common Core State Standards became a major issue of both excitement and concern for many stakeholders in the field of education. Since this is the third major educational restructuring effort to take place during the past thirty years, the first being *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and the second being the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a vast number of teachers were skeptical and nervous about the thought of implementing yet another reform and wondered what this would mean for them and for their students.

Although not yet fully implemented throughout the U.S, forty-five states have pledged that they will adopt the standards for both English language arts and mathematics for each grade from K-12. This includes, of course, the state of Montana, which in November of 2011 became the forty-sixth state to adopt the CCSS and is currently in its first year of full implementation (www.corestandards.org). In order to successfully implement the CCSS, teachers must be given

the opportunity to have a clear understanding of the Standards, especially in the area of language arts. If educators are to teach the Standards, they must first be given the time to comprehend the Standards and then must be given the opportunity to carry out and facilitate them in the classroom. As McLaughlin puts it, “Teachers need time to implement the Common Core” (2013, p. 2).

When implementing any type of change in education, be it a new curricula, new standards, or new administrative policies, teachers will embrace change best when given the opportunity to feel both competent and confident in the plans and procedures. Teachers who do not understand new reforms are often likely to feel frustrated, unsupported, and less than enthusiastic about new programs and policies. This in turn can have a negative impact on student learning and achievement and can leave teachers feeling burned-out and stressed. Many teachers already think of the Common Core State Standards as one more thing placed upon their already full plates and feel that the demands in education are mounting. Yet educators can survive, and thrive, during this age of new reform.

Teach Your Children, And Their Parents, Well

While you are teaching and implementing the Standards in the classroom, don't forget the students' parents and caregivers. Neuman and Roskos (2013) believe that while “many of us recognize that “parents are our children's first literacy teachers,” we often fail to communicate new reforms with parents” (p. 9). Parents, teachers, and students should be working together. When parents know what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, it allows them to engage in learning opportunities outside of the school (Neuman & Roskos, 2013). As educators, we often feel that parental involvement is lacking in our school systems today, but we

cannot expect parents to help us if we are not keeping them informed. While it is true that some parents, for various reasons, will remain uninvolved, many parents *would* become more involved if they simply knew what they could do to help their child.

Our job is to prepare students to become career and college ready (Neuman & Roskos, 2013) while also educating parents on the importance of preparing their children for future success. As language arts teachers, we must help parents to understand that to become skilled communicators, students need solid and substantial experiences in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The CCSS are rigorous, and many parents do not understand why their children are expected to learn information that they themselves learned later in their own school years. Teachers are on the front line, and parents will question us. It is important that we keep parents informed and updated on how the CCSS impact the learning that takes place in the classroom.

Know the Standards, Know Your Students

The CCSS state what students must learn at each grade level. However, they do not tell us *how* to get students to meet those expectations (Altieri, 2014). “The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). One of the most common misconceptions of the CCSS is that all teachers must be teaching *exactly* the same way. This is simply not true. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, educators were often required to follow pacing guides and teaching scripts (Van Roekel, 2010), and it was not uncommon to see the same exact teaching taking place in classrooms up and down school corridors. Teachers often grow tired of not having the opportunity to be creative in their teaching strategies. The CCSS do not mandate how to teach. Instead, they identify targets for each grade level. Teachers are therefore “free to provide

students with whatever tools they can identify as most helpful for meeting the goals” set for student learning (Neuman & Roskos, 2013, p. 10).

Teachers must differentiate instruction to meet the needs of the learners in their classrooms. *You*, not any set of standards, know your students best, and you know what is best when it comes to your teaching practices. There is a wide range of diversity in every classroom, and teaching practices that work for one student or one group of students may not work for others. Children who walk through those classroom doors come from varying backgrounds and home situations; students in your classroom may live in poverty, may be struggling readers, or may require special education services, while others may be gifted students or students who are English language learners. Some students in your classroom may already have the knowledge needed to meet a standard, while others may need additional support, time, and modifications to meet the CCSS requirements. Therefore, we must differentiate, we must scaffold our learning, and we must look at the needs of each individual student (Altieri, 2014).

Be “Uncommonly Good”

Let’s face it: teaching is hard work. It is a demanding job, and with all of the mandates, reforms, and requirements in the field of education today, it is easy to become disillusioned. When this occurs, teacher burn-out becomes all too common and negative feelings become hard to squelch. The Common Core State Standards have been extremely controversial since their inception, and because of this, many teachers have extremely negative feelings about teaching the Standards. Marcie Craig Post, executive director of the International Reading Association, believes one of the worst attitudes that teachers can possess is one of “passive aggressive acceptance,” in which educators have a “well, we’ll do it, but only because we have to” attitude

(2013, p. 4). It can become incredibly easy to go through the motions in the classroom, but the students are the ones who suffer the most when our teaching becomes commonplace and mundane.

Students deserve extraordinary teachers who do go the extra mile. Although it means spending more time and putting more effort into lessons, educators who learn all they can about the CCSS will be most effective. Taking advantage of professional development opportunities and devoting energy into understanding the Standards help to ensure classroom success for the educator and the students. Children, no matter the age, can perceive our true feelings about what we are teaching. If our hearts are not in it, the students will pick up on that and will feel as though the information presented is unimportant.

The teaching of language arts is very complex, and there are many variables involved in the process of learning how to read and write. In order to be “uncommonly good,” language arts teachers must willing to utilize research-based strategies, help students make connections between text and life, teach children (in all grade levels) to be critical thinkers, and set high expectations in the classroom. Because the CCSS “push down” information to the lower grades, we cannot say that it is someone else’s job. Uncommonly good teachers make the difference, no matter the grade level and no matter the students.

Conclusion—The Teacher Makes the Difference

Are the Common Core State Standards perfect? No. Like any reform, there are both positives and negatives, potentials and problems. The Standards are not infallible. Yet the CCSS have now been adopted by nearly all states and are currently being utilized in school

districts across the nation.

Yes, we must teach the standards, but first and foremost, we must teach the students entrusted in our care. Students may not understand the term “Common Core State Standards,” but they will remember what you taught them, and, most importantly, how you made them feel, long after they leave your classroom. That is the power of a teacher. As Altieri (2014) so aptly states, “We must continually ask ourselves, What should I do when I get to the classroom tomorrow to help nurture readers, writers, and thinkers who can be successful in later grades, their careers, and life?” (p. 16). Teachers do truly make the difference in the lives of children.

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