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Do the CCSS Support Developmentally Responsive Teaching of Young Adolescents?

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Abstract

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has caused much debate across the nation. The arguments surrounding the standards range from the need for higher consistent standards across states to issues of states rights and developmental appropriateness. The CCSS comprise a portion of the curriculum in over 40 states across the nation, yet how do they align with the research-based characteristics of a good school? This article uses content analysis to analyze the CCSS for grades 6-8 with *This We Believe* (AMLE, 2010) the landmark position paper of the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE), which describes the essential attributes for the education of young adolescents.

Do the CCSS Support Developmentally Responsive Teaching of Young Adolescents?

Academic standards describe what students should know and be able to achieve at particular points of time in their education. The delineation of skills and knowledge for students has led to disagreement and controversy. One side argues that standards level the playing field across schools, districts, and states (Finn & Greene, 2012). The argument on this side is that standards provide “specificity, clarity, and rich content to provide real guidance to curriculum designers, classroom teachers, test developers, and more” (Finn, 2012). Opponents of standards believe the standards are not rigorous enough, will be difficult to implement, politicize education (Finn, 2012), and negatively affect pedagogy and motivation (Kohn, 2010). When debating the standards, there is often confusion between the standards and the testing movement (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). However, despite your opinion of the standards, they play a huge role in our conversations about teaching, learning, and teacher preparation; thus, they need to be examined for fit within our existing research and frameworks regarding effective education.

The current battle over the standards focuses on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) and their implementation in schools. The development of the ELA CCSS began in 2009, and they were released in 2010. According to the Core Standards website (CCSSO, 2010), the creation of the standards was informed by:

- The best state standards already in existence;
- The experience of teachers, content experts, states, and leading thinkers;
- Feedback from the public.

Today, the District of Columbia, 44 states, the Department of Defense, and four U.S. territories have all adopted the CCSS; although that number is decreasing as states repeal or review the adoption of CCSS (U.S. News & World Report, 2014). The CCSS are explicitly designed to guide teachers to implement a curriculum that will make students college and career ready.

The English Language Arts (ELA) standards incorporate both content and skills. The ELA CCSS mention specific types of texts such as myths, Shakespeare, foundational American literature, and America’s founding documents. Beyond these broad text suggestions, the decisions regarding content are theoretically left up to the state and local decision makers (CCSSO, 2010). The skills incorporated in the CCSS reflect a vision of “an active, engaged reader endowed with agency” (Pearson, 2013, p. 237). In short, the CCSS claim to describe desired student

outcomes at the end of each grade level, not descriptions of how teachers should teach (CCSSO, 2010, p. 6).

Like the standards movement in general, much controversy exists surrounding the CCSS. Some reasons for the controversy include a push for more non-fiction text, a focus on text complexity, and much more. The push back includes concerns regarding the process under which they were created, the nature of the assessments being developed, the connection to Race to the Top, and the recognition that standards alone cannot change achievement (Ravitch, 2014). Specifically, early childhood experts have decried the standards as developmentally inappropriate (Hiebert, 2011; Alliance for Childhood, 2010) due to the focus on complex text, unreasonable expectations, and narrowly focused curriculum intents.

Standards and Curriculum

How educators teach, the information being taught, and how schools are organized form the curriculum of a school. Standards are expected student outcomes. Curriculum, on the other hand, includes coherent goals and/or standards, strong teacher involvement, the making of classroom practice public, a strong parent-community network, a responsive student-centered learning climate, and leadership that builds collaboration among stakeholders where everyone is responsible for school improvement (Bryk, Bender, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). In other words, standards are the end while curriculum is the means.

Despite the fact standards only make up a small portion of effective school curriculum, they have received a significant amount of public focus. The attention is the result of the effect standards can have on the broader curriculum. In fact, standards have the potential to affect students' -- particularly adolescents' -- constructions of meaning and interpretations of school (Ecles & Roeser, 2010). Therefore, it is important that educators examine the standards, in this case the English Language Arts CCSS, to determine if they are coherent with the broader curricular needs of young adolescents. For the purpose of this study, we specifically examined the middle grades, 6-8, standards and their alignment with developmentally appropriate middle grades practice.

Developmentally Appropriate Middle Grades Practice

This We Believe (TWB) is the landmark position paper from the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) in which the association's vision for successful schools for young adolescents (ages 10-15) is delineated in 16 characteristics based on research and empirical evidence. Since the 1960s, when the middle school movement gained momentum, research has confirmed these 16 characteristics as essential to the academic achievement and personal development of young adolescents. Written initially in 1982 by National Middle School Association (now AMLE) committee members, it is in its 4th edition and has research supplements

which accompany it. Middle level educators view TWB as the seminal paper of the national association, one that has stood the test of time, and as a key resource to those who believe in and are committed to developing the most effective schools for young adolescents.

TWB sets forth 16 characteristics of effective education for young adolescents which fall into three larger categories: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community. The characteristics listed in TWB (AMLE, 2010) describe a middle school curriculum intended to be broad and exploratory in nature while allowing young adolescents to a gain deeper understanding of the world in which they live (Eichhorn, 1966; Lounsbury, 1984).

The text is divided into four essential attributes of middle level education and sixteen more specific characteristics. While the text takes a holistic view of school, the four essential attributes specify that education for young adolescents must be: a) developmentally responsive, b) challenging, c) empowering, and d) equitable. The characteristics further break down successful schools for young adolescents as those that examine the curriculum, instruction, assessment, leadership, organization, culture, and community to meet the attributes.

We recognize, as middle level educators, covering the content through standards and learning/mastering the content are not synonymous. In fact, Musoleno and White (2010) found instructional practices may have been compromised by the standards movement and the inevitable focus on testing which has accompanied it. As such, we believe that an analysis of the ELA standards and their relationship to TWB is essential in determining the appropriateness of the standards.

TWB describes curriculum as the “primary vehicle for achieving the goals and objectives of a school” (AMLE, 2010, p. 17). In fact, AMLE describes an effective curriculum as one that is *challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant* while being developmentally responsive to young adolescents. A challenging curriculum is described as one that has rigorous concepts and tasks that are individualized, diversified, and perceived as achievable by students. TWB says an exploratory curriculum provides opportunities for students to explore a variety of disciplines through student directed learning, choice, and collaboration. An integrative curriculum is interdisciplinary, centered around students questions, and encourages students to create and develop knowledge. The final facet of curriculum as described by TWB is relevant; a relevant curriculum focuses on real-life/authentic problems and the creation of new student interests.

Methodology

Since the purpose of this study is to analyze the ELA component of the CCSS, we opted to conduct a content analysis (CA), which Neuendorf (2002) defines as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics.” Crowley and Delfico (1996) assert CA can be used to describe the “attitudes or perceptions of the author” (p. 8) of a document, in this case, the CCSS. We contend a content analysis of the ELA CCSS would provide us with a better idea as to whether the writers of the standards shared the same definition of curriculum as TWB.

The CA was a multistage process. First, categories were determined using AMLE’s description of a developmentally responsive curriculum (see Figure 1). The categories were made up of the key words used by TWB to describe the four key areas of curriculum: challenging, exploratory, integrated, and relevant.

Challenging	Rigorous concepts Student personal responsibility and control Student learning tasks perceived as achievable Diversified learning tasks Individualized learning tasks
Exploratory	Performance based Student directed learning Collaboration between student and teacher Collaboration between students Allowing for student choice
Integrative	Centered around important questions Reflection on experiences Interdisciplinary Students as knowledge producers
Relevant	Focus on real-life, authentic problems Student generated questions Create new interests Application of digital tools

Figure 1: Initial Codebook - based on characteristics for an effective curriculum as defined by This We Believe (2010)

Then, a careful reading of the standards was conducted to determine the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis describes exactly what is being studied. In this situation we needed to determine if we were studying isolated words and phrases or entire standards and sentences. We concluded the words or phrase alone would obfuscate the larger meaning of the text; therefore, we opted to code complete standards and/or sentences. Next, we questioned whether a single unit of analysis could represent more than one category. As we reviewed the standards and the categories, the complex interrelated nature of the standards themselves led us to

decide that multiple codes may be applicable to a single sentence and/or standard. Although this did make the co-coded standards and phrases less precise, it does reflect the multifaceted nature of CCSS.

Next we determined what should be included in the analysis. We decided we should analyze the introduction, the ELA standards, the History/Social Studies and Science literacy standards (grades 6-8), the technical subjects standards, as well as the appendices. This determination was made as our purpose was to look at the ELA CCSS as a whole and the entirety of the ELA standards include all of the areas described above.

Once the discussions and decisions regarding how to conduct the CA were complete, coding began. We began analyzing the standards using the TWB's essential characteristics for effective curriculum (Table 1). Each researcher coded a third of the standards. After coding, we met to determine the effectiveness of the initial code book. We quickly began to see that not all were a "fit." As we read, re-read, coded, discussed, and recoded the standards for middle level ELA, we made adjustments to the codes, adding some and omitting others. We reached consensus prior to making adaptations to the codes.

During the next stage, we created the second code book. We opted to remove or edit codes, as they could not be established within the confines of the CCSS. For example, our initial coding found nearly all the standards could be viewed as *rigorous*. Thus we determined a need for specificity and added five sub-codes. To determine those sub-codes, we examined what made each standard rigorous in relation to TWB which maintains the curriculum is rigorous when "students grapple with and master advanced concepts and skills" (p. 18). Since the task of analysis requires students to wrestle with information, we determined standards asking students to analyze would be considered *rigorous*. Likewise, we added sub-codes to codes such as *students as knowledge producers*, specifying the various types of knowledge the standards ask students to produce. *Student generated ideas* code also required sub-codes to differentiate what types of ideas students might be *generating*—*questions, theories, organizational tools*. These additional codes allowed for a more precise analysis with identifiable differences between standards. Other codes were added as an antithesis to an initial code. We added codes for *non-exploratory* and *non-relevant* to counter the codes of *exploratory* and *relevant*. These codes allowed us to code data that we saw were contradictions to the principles of TWB.

Just as some codes needed to be added, others needed to be omitted. In our coding and subsequent discussion, we realized some of the initial codes were indeterminable. For example, codes under the heading *relevant* were difficult to determine because we, as researchers, can simply not ascertain relevancy for individual students. Nor can we say whether or not a particular standard might

create new interests in students. Other codes rely heavily on context, making them difficult to connect to specific standards; *focus on real-life, authentic problems*, and *centered around important questions* are examples of codes we deleted because of inability to determine based on the standards.

Other codes from TWB were unable to be aligned to the CCSS and were omitted because they relied so heavily on implementation. Codes in the *exploratory* category were particularly difficult to align. Codes such as *collaboration between students*, *collaboration between student and teacher*, *student directed learning*, and *allowing for student choice* were all impossible to assign to the CCSS in its written form. We might see these in classroom observations, but cannot assume they are present based solely on the standards themselves. Similarly, *individualized learning tasks*, *diversified learning tasks*, and *student learning tasks perceived as achievable* can simply not be aligned without more information about context and implementation.

After establishing the second code book (see Figure 2), we each reviewed 5% of the ELA CCSS before engaging in a new discussion of the codebook. The final discussion focused on the category of *exploratory* which we then removed. AMLE's definition of *exploratory* is linked to the exploration of different content areas or experiences, not a style of instruction. When removing this category, we were left with items identified as *performance based*. We determined the sub-category of *performance based* was applicable to the main category of *challenging*. *Performance based* describes how the ELA CCSS could be implemented or assigned to students and described a challenging way to do so.

Challenging	Rigorous concepts Analyze purpose Analysis overtime Analysis of two or more ideas in one text Analyze relationships in more than one text (compare and contrast) Analysis of language Student personal responsibility and control
Exploratory	Performance based (subjective, rubric needed, range of performances)
Non-exploratory	Objective based (not linked to comprehension or collaboration, something you could check off as right or wrong, easily assessed) Independent
Integrative	Students as knowledge producers Generate summary Generate an explanation Generate synthesis Generate argument
Relevant	Student generated ideas Questions Organizational tools Theories Application of digital tools
Non-relevant	Digital tools used for skill and drill

Figure 2: Second Codebook - based on characteristics for an effective curriculum as defined by *This We Believe* (2010)

This third and final revision led to the final code book (see Figure 3). These codes were checked and finalized by each researcher reviewing the 5% of the ELA CCSS and discussing coding reliability. This discussion led to inter-rater reliability with the final code book of 96%. Therefore, the final code book was established and determined sufficient for content analysis.

Challenging	Rigorous concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze purpose Analysis overtime Analysis of two or more ideas in one text Analyze relationships in more than one text (compare and contrast) Analysis of language Student personal responsibility and control Performance based (subjective, rubric needed, range of performances)
Non-exploratory	Objective based (not linked to comprehension or collaboration, something you could check off as right or wrong, easily assessed) Independent
Integrative	Students as knowledge producers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generate summary Generate an explanation Generate synthesis Generate argument
Relevant	Student generated ideas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Questions Organizational tools Theories Application of digital tools
Non-relevant	Digital tools used for skill and drill

Figure 3: Final Codebook - based on characteristics for an effective curriculum as defined by *This We Believe* (2010)

Findings

Our first finding came not from the data analysis, but from the in-depth process of developing the code book. There are simply some characteristics of *This We Believe* and middle level curricular philosophy that cannot be measured with the CCSS. For instance, an exploratory curriculum cannot be determined using the ELA CCSS. To be clear, we are not saying that the CCSS does not always align with middle level philosophy; rather, we simply cannot determine the alignment of some standards because of the reliance on implementation by individual teachers with unique strengths, weaknesses, areas of expertise, and teaching styles. Nor can we account for school resources, student characteristics, and other unknowns, which may influence the alignment of the CCSS with TWB. Thus, the findings below reflect how the ELA CCSS align partially with TWB's definition of a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

Overall Findings

The overall findings (see Figure 4) illustrate that the standards meet the criteria for *challenging*. However, the other criteria of a developmentally appropriate curriculum for middle school were not identified as central to the CCSS. In fact, 3% of the standards were identified as *non-relevant* and not meeting the description of developmentally appropriate curriculum.

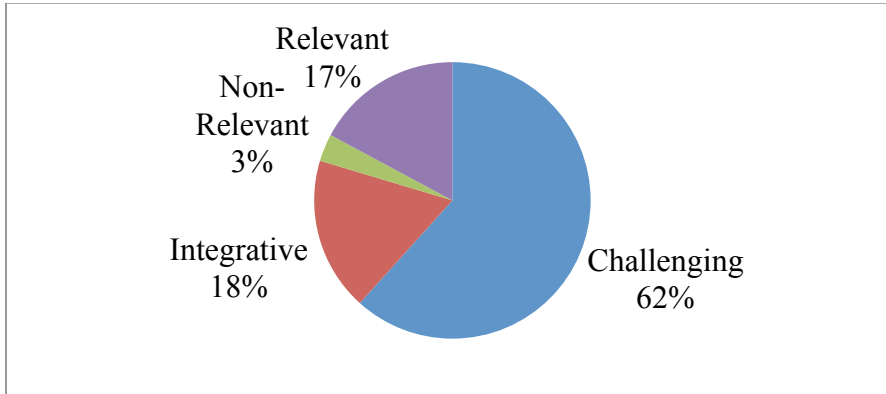


Figure 4: Pie chart showing the characteristics of the English Language Arts CCSS according to aspects of *TWB's curriculum description*.

Challenging

The preponderance (62%) of codes was identified as *challenging*. The task of analysis in general was the most predominant code (44%) with the *analysis of language* and *analysis of relationships in more than one text* receiving the bulk of the codes with 13% each. Examples of *analyzing relationships in more than one text* include:

Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.7)

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.8)

When the standards ask students to analyze language they are asking them to do tasks such as

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4)

Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.2.C).

These types of tasks, because they are analytical in nature and ask students to delve into ELA content at a deeper level, were determined to be *challenging*, one of TWB's four major attributes of effective education for young adolescents. Specifically, TWB views challenging tasks as those that ensure every student learns and that expectations are high for all learners. The examples above, involving analysis of relationships and language, challenge students to interact with texts in ways that require higher order thinking skills and move students beyond superficial or passive reading and viewing.

Since most of the analysis tasks ask that students demonstrate or perform, there was a co-occurrence with many of these codes. For instance over 50% of the *analysis of two or more texts* codes asked students to perform a task, so were labeled *performance based*,

...students need to be able to gain knowledge from challenging texts that often make extensive use of elaborate diagrams and data to convey information and illustrate concepts (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.Introduction).

Students need to first analyze two texts before conveying information. The high incidence of co-occurrences indicated students' performance on the standards required they combine skills to demonstrate proficiency.

We identified a predominance of the standards as challenging--62%. Many of the standards required students to analyze information across different texts and/or asked to students to synthesize information. These tasks often require students to demonstrate their knowledge through written or spoken artifacts thus making the ELA CCSS *challenging*.

Integrative

TWB (2010) purports that one factor of integrative curriculum is when students have the opportunity to generate their own questions and then to "produce or construct knowledge rather than simply being consumers of information" (p. 21). There were significantly fewer codes identifying units of the ELA CCSS as *integrative*. However, of the 18% of units identified as integrative, the predominance were described as *students as knowledge producers*. An example of one such code is

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.2).

Notice how this standard asks students to convey knowledge they have built through research. Rather than simply asking students to analyze provided information, standards coded as *integrative* require students to formulate their own texts using an array of knowledge and skills.

Relevant

TWB describes a relevant curriculum as one that “allows students to pursue answers to questions they have about themselves, the content and the world” (2010, p. 22). In the CCSS, students are asked to generate ideas when they conduct research and draw evidence from text. One piece of evidence that illustrates this is

Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2.C)

When students choose examples and facts, they are building personal answers to the questions that they are researching. Since students are determining which facts and examples to use, the research process becomes more personal and *relevant* because the students are answering their own questions.

Overall, the findings indicate that the standards are challenging. They also present opportunities for relevant and integrative teaching. However, the standards alone do not provide what is needed to create a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

Discussion

From our content analysis, we believe the CCSS have the potential to align with the characteristics of an effective middle level curriculum as outlined in TWB. However, since the CCSS are standards and not a curriculum, the challenge lies with the implementation of the standards. While the CCSS for middle school align relatively well, noticeable gaps exist between TWB and the CCSS ELA middle level standards. Most of these gaps occur because the standards are goals; they do not dictate how schools and teachers instruct students. Unfortunately, as we noted earlier, standards and high stakes testing often go hand-in-hand. As such, we are concerned that administrators (both state- and local-level) lose sight of the forest because of the trees. In other words, the implementation of the CCSS becomes prescribed during implementation because of the pressure of the assessments. We, in fact, through discussion with teachers, have heard firsthand stories of CCSS texts and lessons being adopted with little or no teacher input and without the learner in mind.

We suggest school systems take a different approach. Educators of all levels need to remember the CCSS is not a curriculum but simply a set of standards. We believe middle-level teachers must have the freedom to develop instruction, which builds upon both the CCSS ELA standards and the characteristics of effective curriculum as outlined in TWB. A top-down implementation of the CCSS may cause problems because, without the firsthand knowledge of the young adolescent learners in a teachers' classroom, the instruction is not likely to align with TWB.

Conclusion

Mention the CCSS in conversation and a lively debate is likely to ensue. The CCSS elicits strong feelings for many reasons, many of which are not even related to education but are driven by political forces and business stakeholders. The purpose of this study was to step away from the heated debate and analyze the CCSS to determine how well the standards align with AMLE's essential attributes of effective instruction for young adolescents. Through the content analysis of the standards, we found the CCSS have the potential to align with TWB; however, much of the alignment between the two hinges on the instructional approaches and curriculum implemented in schools. Administrators and educators should view the CCSS as the end goal. We encourage middle-level educators to draw upon AMLE's essential attributes and work with administrators to develop a curriculum that meets the learning needs of young adolescents. We also encourage all stakeholders to attempt to parse the intertwined relationship between the CCSS, commercial curriculum, and high-stakes testing. While the three are not mutually exclusive, we feel viewing the CCSS as its own entity has value and can benefit students in the long run and can support developmentally appropriate teaching.

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