Equity Dispatch

Will the Common Core Promote Equity?

IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity*

Education is radically about love.
--Paulo Freire

Meet the Authors:

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Educate

If there was a top ten list of buzz phrases in education for 2013, *Common Core* would be high on it. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, a collaborative venture on the part of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (with input from other organizations), has defined for itself the task of providing a clear framework for what students are expected to know and do. These expectations are proposed to reflect the knowledge and skills needed to ensure success in college and the global workforce (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). With nearly all states positioned to adopt the expansive K-12 mathematics and English language arts standards, this major reform effort warrants close scrutiny. We question whether the Common Core will promote equity in education, closing gaps in access to high quality learning experiences and promoting greater access to college and career choices. In addition, we examine the notion that individuals in positions of legislative power should play such a determinative role concerning the trajectory of student learning. Finally, we argue in favor of professional communities demonstrating responsiveness to the needs of students and associated stakeholders within the context of the standards movement.

The Common Core & Student Engagement in High Quality Learning Experiences

Proponents of the Common Core suggest that one unifying set of standards is an improvement over the current model in which each state develops its own standards. This state-by-state model has been critiqued on numerous points; e.g., state standards: 1) are too numerous, 2) are confusing and inconsistent across states, 3) hold students to low expectations for mastery and rigor, and 4) are not adequately aligned with the demands of college and career (Quay, 2010). By offering "fewer, clearer, and higher" standards, proponents argue that students will be able to engage in deeper learning, resulting in an increased ability to apply what they have learned in real life. For example, under the Common Core, students are expected to spend more time learning data analysis skills rather than advanced algebra (Phillips & Wong, 2010), shifting the emphasis to conceptual abilities grounded in real-world application rather than memorization of abstract procedures. In English language arts, the Common Core is expected to promote more writing and analysis of non-fiction, so that students will be encouraged to articulate and interrogate ideas across subject areas (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

Because low expectations and limited access to rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum has been a persistent equity concern, particularly for students of color, students in poverty, English language learners, and students with disabilities, there is reason to be hopeful that high national standards will result in improved access to high-quality learning experiences. However, simply changing or ratcheting up the requirements will not ensure that this will happen; there are significant obstacles to overcome to ensure that all students have access to quality curriculum and instruction. Chicago Public Schools' *College Preparatory Curriculum for All* initiative demonstrated that educators' beliefs about students, political interests seeking to preserve the status quo, and technical challenges associated with de-tracking stand among the many significant barriers to uniformly high-quality experiences for all students (Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2009). The Common Core will need to be accompanied by strong supports for reflection, customization, and problem-solving at the local level as school communities work to understand and respond to this policy shift (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009).

Furthermore, advocates suggest that fewer standards will create more room for culturally responsive pedagogy (Chiariello, 2012). There are some reasons to doubt this claim, as the Common Core's emphasis on mathematics and English language arts could result in narrowing of the curriculum (Center on Education Policy, 2005). In other words, students who struggle to pass may receive reduced instruction in subjects other than English and mathematics as school systems work to bolster their academic achievement in these areas. As states prepare to be compared to one another, a shift to the Common Core may also mean more time spent on standardized testing (Strauss, 2012). Students in Ohio are expected to spend an additional 49 hours a year taking standardized tests starting in 2014-2015 under the Common Core (Bloom, 2013). However, if the promise of greater teacher freedom bears out, our schools will need on-the-ground support to capitalize on the available spaces to move toward culturally relevant materials and instructional methods. For example, as the Common Core shifts responsibility for teaching literacy across subject areas - a research-based recommendation - there is the possibility for students to "question, unwrap, expose, and interrogate" texts that are relevant to their lives throughout their academic experiences (Chiariello, 2012). With nearly half of all teachers suggesting that they feel unprepared to put the Common Core into practice, and an even greater number expressing concern about implementing the standards with specific student groups such as English language learners and students with disabilities (EPE Research Center, 2013; Gewertz, 2013), providing

teachers the time and resources to develop responsive materials and instruction will be necessary.

Access to College & Career for All Students

Access to college and meaningful work experiences also has been a persistent equity concern. While the percentage of U.S. college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and Black has increased (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), gaps still exist in access to and receipt of two- and four-year degrees (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). One major goal for the Common Core Standards is to prepare students to be college ready; i.e., able to access two-year transfer programs or four-year colleges with the knowledge and skills to succeed in freshman-year core courses (Phillips & Wong, 2010). Because access to college preparatory curriculum is a major obstacle to college access in general (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010), the Common Core seems to be a promising step toward opening the sometimes barred doors to these institutions. But again, standards alone do not guarantee that all students will be granted access to and/or will be successful in college preparatory curriculum (Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2009). In addition, shifting to the Common Core does not address the many other barriers that economically disadvantaged students, students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities face in their quest for postsecondary access, participation, and credentials. Among these are the availability of guidance, information, and support in navigating the college search and application process as well as rising costs (Nagaoka, Roderic, & Coca, 2009). Without accompanying supports that address these areas, such as assistance with non-tuition expenses and transition programs (Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, Lang, 2010), college access and success will remain elusive to many students.

Democracy vs. Global Competitiveness

Stepping back from issues of quality and access, there is one final question that deserves consideration as we examine the Common Core from an equity perspective: To what extent should the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, disciplinary 'experts,' or a desire for global competitiveness drive what happens in schools? A stated rationale for the Common Core Standards is to prepare students for the global market and to be able to compete with students from around the world. To this end, the Common Core places the kinds of knowledge and skills that powerful individuals believe are important – namely, mathematics and language arts-based skills – at the forefront of our country's educational goals (Garrison, 2012). Many voices – including those typically marginalized in larger policy conversations – were left out of the construction of the Common Core (e.g., National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, 2009; Strauss, 2010). If the mandate is for each school to "build its pupils according to the specifications laid down" (Beyer & Liston, 1996, p. 19), all should have a voice in those specifications. And while there is some room left for educators, students, families, and communities to construct other goals *within* the boundaries defined by the Common Core, the standards themselves may limit the diversity of knowledge and ideas to which children are exposed (Sleeter, 2005). For example, while school communities may select *which* non-fiction texts to engage in the classroom, they cannot decide to adopt a curriculum that is more heavily focused on fiction, narrative, or poetry. On a larger scale, whole bodies of knowledge – arts, sciences, physical education – are deemphasized when mathematics and language arts are named priorities.

Perhaps most importantly, the notion that externally-imposed specifications for learning are important to the successful functioning of schools reflects a particular set of ideas about the nature of students and the goals of learning. When students are cast as fairly homogenous "empty vessels to fill" (Sleeter, 2005), culture, ability, and language differences – the cornerstones of a vibrant democracy - are no longer celebrated (Garrison, 2012). In fact, traditionally marginalized groups are again marginalized in the construction of the Core as evidenced by relegation of English language learners and students with disabilities to the appendices of Core standards documents (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Furthermore, rather than empowering students, families, and teachers to develop a contextualized, multicultural curriculum that fosters engagement and activism (Sleeter, 2005), the Common Core centers the beliefs of legislative and educational policy makers about what

their peers, specifically White and Asian students. As the only girl in a family with four brothers, this issue is personal to me," said Brown. Over the last year, she has chaired weekly meetings of a Core Planning Team at the MDE created to inform staff about the reality of the achievement gap, plan strategy sessions, host professional learning communities, and develop recommendations for increasing achievement among African-American males. To this end, MDE has engaged in the unprecedented work of identifying policies, practices, systems and structures that foster inequities among African American males. MDE offices have employed a policy analysis tool developed by the Great Lakes Equity Center to assist in this work.

Dr. Brown will further the MDE's efforts by ensuring that student voices are heard, launching pilot programming in schools, and hosting an Achievement Gap Summit in June of 2013 to further engage external stakeholders. "I prefer to say that our African-American male youth are *At Promise* rather than *At Risk*. As Gloria Ladson-Billings has argued, it is up to those of us in the system to deliver on our education debt to these young men," said Dr. Brown. As this former banker concluded, "One day, in the not too distant future, I hope we can proudly say that our debt has been paid, with interest!"

Virtual Equity Library
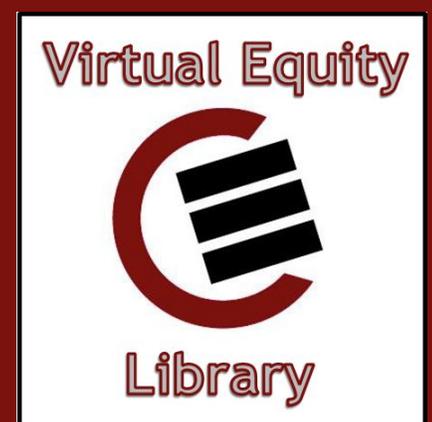
all students should know and be able to do (Strauss, 2010). Because students and families have a variety of educational aims and approaches, the Common Core and its emphasis on a timed, sequential presentation of curriculum and expectation of learning can constrict students' opportunities to chart their own course and play an active role in their learning. In order to circumvent restrictive schooling practices, teachers and administrators should commit to ongoing professional learning experiences that will facilitate implementation of the critical pedagogy required in the 21st century.

Recognizing that a customized, empowering approach will be necessary to reach each student, state, district, and school leaders must create time and space for teachers, students, and families to think critically about how to bridge the standards and their students' experiences and interests. Interdisciplinary, student-centered learning *is* possible under the Common Core, and work is underway in multiple contexts to develop curricula and lessons based on the interests and strengths students bring to their individual schools and districts (Chiariello, 2012; Students at the Center, 2013). This will require engaging new opportunities and structures, such as interdisciplinary thematic units, made possible by the Common Core's emphasis on literacy across the curriculum (Heitin, 2013). The moments for pause, reflection, and response afforded by transitions to the Common Core may be the most valuable contribution these standards make to our educational system.

Conclusion

The Common Core holds promise to shift policies and practices toward greater access to high-quality learning experiences, college, and career options for traditionally marginalized students. However, to do so, it must be paired with strong, overlapping supports for local contexts, educators, and students. Simultaneously, it is important to be mindful that any standards movement carries within it assumptions about learners and learning; if these shut out dialogue about different ways of knowing and ways of doing, we will all be the poorer for them.

Have a question or comment about this article? Share it here!

Engage

Disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes have many names: opportunity gaps (da Silva, Hughley, 2007), educational debt (Billings, 2006), receivement gaps (Chambers, 2009), or, most commonly, achievement gaps (Billings, 2006). Whichever name one chooses, disparities in access to, participation in, and success in high-quality educational programming is an undeniable issue plaguing our education system. According to the National Governors Association, this issue is one of the most pressing education policy challenges that states currently face (Billings, 2006). In early 2012, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) chose to tackle this issue head on. Upon discovery that throughout the state of Michigan, African-American male students were not being served appropriately in comparison with all other groups of students, the MDE began forging a plan to eliminate these disparities. Since that time, the Department personnel have worked tirelessly to identify and change internal and external policies, practices, structures, and systems they believe have contributed to these gaps.

Internally, MDE personnel engaged in a number of initiatives to educate the Department on

issues related to achievement incongruences throughout the state. First, the Department formed *Think Tanks*, where longitudinal data were used to expose inequitable practices. Then, through brown-bag dialogues and professional learning communities, the MDE engaged state and school leaders in conversations about White privilege, equity, and institutionalized racism. The MDE also structured break-through sessions comprised of structured dialogues where "courageous conversations" (Singleton & Lipton, 2006) could be had among colleagues. Additionally, the Department gathered comprehensive reports from other states to serve as examples for the elimination of disparities among and between student groups. Uniquely, the MDE has leveraged both local human resources, such as student voice, and national human resources, like public intellectual Tim Wise and school principal Baruti Kafele, to help deepen understanding and develop capacity toward systemic change.

As part of its external efforts, the MDE reached out to stakeholders through a series of one-page messages about the achievement gap. Moving forward, the MDE will collaborate with several pilot schools as the schools implement research-based strategies targeted at improving specific metrics identified by an internal research and data team. This strategy, along with other stakeholder-led opportunities, will help form collaborative relationships between stakeholders, schools, districts, and the MDE as they work to resolve issues of access and success.

As an Equity Assistance Center, we want to formally recognize and commend the Michigan Department of Education. They are an exemplar of how an organization can be engaged in intensive continuous improvement efforts, leveraging both internal and external resources while engaging all stakeholders in reflection and action toward equity-focused change.

Empower

Something to Use!

Q&A for Common Core Standards

Have questions about the relationship between the Common Core and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework for curriculum development that is designed to give all students an equal opportunity to learn? This two-page FAQ, written by the National Center on Universal Design for Learning, addresses questions such as, "Is UDL included in the Common Core?" and "What aligns or might not align with UDL?"

Something to Read!

The "Common Core" Standards Initiative: An Effective Reform Tool?

This brief by Dr. William Mathis of the University of Colorado raises a number of concerns about the development, content, and use of the Common Core Standards and supporting documents. Some of the issues have to do with the level of input from school-based practitioners, the fact that the standards have not been field tested, and the question of whether the tests used to measure the academic outcomes of common standards will have sufficient validity to justify the high-stakes consequences that are likely to accompany their use. Mathis also argues that it is
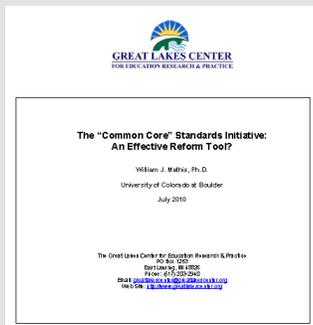
unlikely that the Common Core standards will have the positive effects on educational quality or equality being sought by proponents, particularly in light of the lack of essential capacity at the local, state, and federal levels.

Something to Watch!

This video is of a forum on Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Common Core Standards. It is moderated by Anthony Rebora, the Managing Editor of *Education Week Teacher.* The other panelists are Dr. Ricki Price-Baugh, the Director of Academic Achievement at the Council of the Great City Schools; Emily Chiarello, Teaching and Learning Specialist for Teaching Tolerance; Dr. Yvette Jackson, CEO, National Urban Alliance for Effective Education; and Brian Pick, Deputy Chief Academic Officer of Curriculum and Instruction, District of Columbia Public Schools. In the video, they discuss the instructional context in which teachers are working and how that intersects with the Common Core Standards movement. The panelists also explore the question of whether the standards will help teachers improve the learning experience for traditionally marginalized students.

We also recommend that your take time to view this three minute video on the Common Core State Standards, produced by the DC Public Schools.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Common Core (Teaching Tolerance 2…

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