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The Common Core and Inquiry

The implications of the new Common Core State Standards are both exciting and overwhelming. . . . Transitioning to the new standards and the new generation assessment systems that will accompany them requires determination, vision, commitment to change, increased instructional capacity from classroom teachers and school leaders, honesty, and incredible professional dedication.

— Cheryl Dunkle (2012, p. 35)

If you have opened this book, you no doubt count yourself among the thousands of educators across the nation preparing for or in the midst of a transition to the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). It is likely that you approach this transition with mixed feelings and a host of heartfelt questions:

- What exactly are the CCSS and what difference will they make?
- What will it mean to teach in ways that are consonant with these standards, and will I be able to do it?

- Is this just one more educational fad, reform effort, or policy initiative that will come and go with time?
- Is all this talk and attention on the CCSS really worth it?

The mixed feelings and questions educators hold in their hearts and their heads as they approach CCSS implementation are not surprising. Many teachers and administrators have grown weary from the accountability mind-set framed by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the annual statewide high-stakes testing in multiple subject areas that accompanied it. According to leading scholars Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2009), “By requiring that teachers concentrated on raising scores in a limited set of school subjects,” NCLB “virtually assured a narrowing of the curriculum” (p. 75). Furthermore, “by privileging subject matter over pedagogy and by taking most of the important decisions out of the hands of teachers, NCLB’s images of teaching and learning (were) deceptively simple” and “required teachers to attend primarily to student deficits rather than their strengths” (p. 74).

It is no wonder that teachers feel tired, perhaps even devalued, and therefore uncertain exactly how to feel about the CCSS. In contrast to NCLB, however, the CCSS values the voices of teachers, as teachers were and continue to be involved in their development (National Governors Association [NGA] Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2012d). Furthermore,

while the Standards make references to some particular forms of content . . . they do not, indeed cannot, enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in the document. (NGA & CCSSO, 2010)

As such, the CCSS puts important decisions about teaching back into the hands of teachers, where they do (and always have) belonged.

Hence, the CCSS create an opportunity for teachers to reclaim their voice in the acts of teaching and learning. Although this opportunity exists, what is less clear is how to seize it. Cheryl Dunkle (2012) provides some insights into seizing the day:

Accepting the role of change agent and understanding that content of change is a priority for all educators ready to champion the cause of the Common Core State Standards. We must avoid at all cost the temptation to treat this initiative as another

one-way mandate or another stand-alone education reform. Instead, it should be viewed as an organic process: one that is complex, complicated, and multidimensional but also meaningful and doable with a focused effort and a sense of efficacy. Because of its complexity, it must be viewed with a growth mindset. Implementation work must migrate from knowing to doing so that the potential impact and influence in school improvement begins and ends in the classroom with teachers assuming the headlining role of educational reformers. (p. 8)

Teachers assuming the headlining role of educational reformers to “seize the day” of the Common Core is what this book is all about. In this first chapter, we begin building the foundation for teachers to assume this role by overviewing the Common Core as well as introducing inquiry and the role it can play in both understanding and implementing standards.

What Is the Common Core?

The CCSS are defined by their developers on their website as follows:

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts, to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce. (NGA & CCSSO, 2012a)

Presently, standards have been developed for literacy, math, and speaking, and listening.

It is important to note in the definition above that the standards are not a federal mandate; rather, individual states led this reform effort. Not only did states lead the development effort, but states alone decide whether or not they would like to adopt the CCSS. Currently, forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the CCSS. For these states, the Common Core makes up 85% of the content of their state’s individual standards. The remaining 15% of the content is individualized state by state to meet the needs of the state’s particular population.

How Did the Common Core Develop?

Although once an international leader in education, in recent years students in the United States have scored far below other countries on international assessments (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). Hence, the United States has faced a decline in global competitiveness.

The decline of the United States as an international leader in education has likely resulted from the rapid changes in our world in the past 25 years. For example, advances in technology have greatly accelerated the pace at which knowledge is created as well as the pace that anyone with a computer can access that knowledge. To illustrate this point, educational scholar Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (2008) report that “during the four years between 1997 and 2002, the amount of new information produced in the world *was equal to the amount produced over the entire previous history of the world*” (Darling-Hammond et al., as cited in Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 9). As a result, the types of jobs available and the skills they require have also dramatically changed, with only 10% of the labor workforce consisting of low-skills jobs in contrast to 95% just 25 years ago.

Despite these rapid and dramatic changes, schools and schooling in the United States have remained relatively unchanged, no doubt leading to the U.S. decline in global competitiveness, as well as students leaving their K–12 schooling experiences unprepared for their futures. For example, statistics indicate that many students need to spend up to a year of their first year in college in remediation. In fact, between 1995 and 2000, institutions reported a 25% increase in the number of students needing an average of one year of remediation upon entry to college (Parsad & Lewis, 2003). Clearly, the static nature of our school system is problematic.

Almost 50 years ago, John Dewey (1968) recognized this problem when he stated, “If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow” (p. 167). Not robbing children of their tomorrows became a problem that state after state tried to tackle on their own by developing, implementing, assessing, and redeveloping, reimplementing, and reassessing their own set of state standards. Because states have been working alone, efforts have been duplicated, and vast differences in curriculum can exist from New York to California and every state in between. This led some educators to call for the creation of a national set of standards.

After decades of failed efforts to create these national standards, in 2009 governors and state commissioners from 48 states, 2 territories,

and the District of Columbia through their involvement with the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council for Chief State Schools Officers, came together to tackle the task. The standards for each area (English language arts, math, speaking, and listening) were written by one or more anonymous authors as a road map to better prepare students for life after high school. As the committee collaborated on these standards, they worked toward a common goal of preparing American students for the future to compete in a global economy. Beginning with the end in mind, the creators pulled from the highest performing state standards, colleges, and experts in content areas to determine content and skills students leaving high school need to master to be successful, whether their track would be continuing on to college or entering the workforce.

Why Is the Common Core Important?

Perhaps the most obvious reason that the Common Core is important is that many of the careers that exist today, or will exist in the future, require a different set of skills than those currently being taught in schools. Tony Wagner, author of *The Global Achievement Gap* and director of the former Harvard School Change Leadership Group, notes that to be competitive in the job market today and in the future, students need to be able to critically think, problem solve, collaborate, adapt, show initiative, communicate effectively through written and oral language, access and analyze information, and use their imagination and curiosity (Wagner, 2008). The CCSS were designed specifically with the development of these skills in mind.

A second reason the Common Core is important is that it will create some degree of consistency to the educational experiences for students and teachers across the United States. The common language of the CCSS will provide teachers the opportunity to collaborate more openly, both within their own schools and with a more geographically diverse group of teachers. In the past, teachers from one state had limited capacity to collaborate with their colleagues in another state, because they were operating on two different sets of standards. Common standards will provide a greater opportunity to share experiences and best practices within and across states that will improve teachers' abilities to best serve the needs of students (NGA & CCSSO, 2012f).

In addition, from a student perspective, no longer will moves from one state to another during the K–12 schooling years be as traumatic

as students can navigate these moves much more easily when standards are aligned. In the past, when families moved from one state to another, children needed to make dramatic adjustments to vastly different curriculums or repeat curriculum previously learned in a different state that held different expectations or covered different skills at different times and grade levels. Common standards will cause less disruption to the total educational experience of children in the United States where mobility during the K–12 schooling years has become an increasing reality (NGA & CCSSO, 2012f).

Finally, the Common Core has the potential to spur the creation of richer and vaster resources for teachers. Publishing companies can invest money in products and tools for teachers around one set of standards rather than spread resources thin to develop different materials for different standards in different states. Teachers will be able to go online and access resources from virtually anywhere in the country for their classrooms and know that their fellow teachers across the country are striving toward the same standards and goals. Undoubtedly, more resources for teachers and the competition amongst companies to produce quality products will benefit both teachers and students.

How Is the Common Core Different From the Status Quo?

As stated in the beginning of the chapter, NCLB has resulted in the current era of high-stakes testing and accountability, which has narrowed the curriculum. Diane Ravitch (2010), professor and educational historian, sums up what has become of our school system over the past decade:

How did testing and accountability become the main levers of school reform? How did our elected officials become convinced that measurement and data would fix the schools? Somehow our nation got off track in its efforts to improve education. What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward. No education experience was needed to administer such a program. Anyone who loved data could do it. The strategy produced fear and obedience among educators; it often generated higher test scores. But it had nothing to do with education. (p. 16)

This current reality described by Ravitch (2010) has resulted in the loss of many important aspects of curriculum that ensure students leave their schooling career prepared for the ever-changing global economy. In contrast, the CCSS ensure that the new levels of literacy required to navigate the information economy of today are cultivated within the K–12 schooling experience:

As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. In short, students who meet the standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language. (NGA & CCSSO, 2012c)

Other noteworthy aspects of the Common Core that may require a shift in thinking and teaching from a test-driven perspective include the following:

- Research and media skills are highly important and woven throughout the standards.
- There is a shared responsibility amongst all educators for students' literacy development.
- Students must be reading more nonfiction and informational texts at all grade levels and in all subject areas.
- Teachers need to increase text complexity and also require students to cite the text.
- There are three main foci for writing: to persuade, to explain, and to convey real or imagined experience.

- Math standards require that students be able to explain and defend their thinking, and there are fewer standards at each grade level that build upon one another.
- With math in particular, teachers will have less content to focus on, but must ensure proficiency with concepts at their grade level in order for students to be successful in the future.

While implementation of the Common Core requires a shift in framing one's teaching away from preparation for a single test and toward the development of students' higher level and critical thinking skills in preparation for their entrance into college or career, assessment is still an important component of the Common Core. The new proposed assessment approach of the CCSS will be different from the current popular multiple-choice format high-stakes test given at the end of a school year. Rather, assessments being developed for the CCSS will be both formative and summative and will be performance based.

The U.S. Department of Education has selected two consortia to create the assessments for the CCSS, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC, formed in 2010) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC, formed in 2010):

The two consortia are developing comprehensive assessment systems tied to common academic content standards that are valid, support and inform instruction, provide accurate information about what students know and can do, and measure student achievement against standards, including those that are typically hard to measure, designed to ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace. The assessment systems must include one or more summative assessment components in mathematics and in English language arts that are administered at least once during the academic year in grades 3 through 8 and at least once in high school; both consortia are also creating a series of diagnostic, formative, or interim tests that will be available for their member states to provide on-going feedback during the school year to inform teaching and learning. (SBAC, 2012)

The new assessments will be implemented in the 2014–2015 school year, and this shift in assessment will require teachers, whether in high school or elementary school, to alter how students convey their knowledge in the classroom. Rather than spending time preparing students

for a single high-stakes test, teachers will engage students in authentic and engaging instruction to meet the standards and use formative assessment measures to understand their students' development of critical and higher-order thinking skills. With the implementation of the CCSS then, classrooms shift from places where teachers are lecturing and students are working independently on worksheets and test preparation activities, to communities of learners, where students are working together to solve problems, collaborate, and engage in authentic learning tasks.

What Difference Will the Common Core Make to Teachers and Students?

Perhaps the most important difference the Common Core will make to teachers and the students they teach is that teachers "are not merely the recipients of standards, but the architects of their implementation" (Dunkle, 2012, p. x).

During the era of high-stakes testing, teachers were often handed teacher editions to text books and pacing guides that determined every minute detail of when, how, and what they would teach their students. Teachers lost the ability to be creative with their students, to enact "teachable moments," to respond to their students' needs, and to make instructional decisions in the best interest of the children they teach. Subsequently, in many cases the rigidity of the high-stakes testing regime resulted in students who were not engaged or excited about learning. The joy of teaching and the love of learning were literally sucked out of many classrooms across the nation.

In contrast to rigid adherence to a long list of standards that mandate what, how, and when to teach, the Common Core gives teachers and schools a lot of flexibility. If implemented as intended, the CCSS will be used as a *guide* rather than a *bible*. Notably, the standards are more focused and more rigorous than previous state standards, but there are also fewer standards, allowing teachers to dive deeper into content and ensure that their students have sufficient time to grasp difficult concepts. The standards are not a curriculum that tells teachers *how* they will teach but rather where they need to go with their students (NGA & CCSSO, 2012d). And most important, it is teachers themselves that make the decisions regarding how to get their students where they need to go! This creates the potential for a much more dynamic and engaging curriculum for both teachers and students.

How Can Teachers Learn More About the Common Core and Its Relationship to Their Practice?

The potential for a much more dynamic and engaging curriculum is good reason to learn more about the Common Core and how it can be actualized in practice. While it will be important for teachers to read about the standards and attend workshops and webinars to develop content knowledge about the Common Core, these professional development mechanisms alone are not enough to help teachers become architects of the Common Core's implementation.

The concept of teacher inquiry (also referred to as action research) has been around for ages, with its roots in the work of John Dewey (1933), popularized by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s (Alderman, 1993), and shortly thereafter applied to the field of education by Stephen Corey (1953). Since its inception, many educational innovations have come and gone, but the systematic study of educators' own practice is a concept that has proved it has staying power. Hence, teacher inquiry is a logical mechanism with which teachers and administrators can gain insights into the CCSS, what they mean for teachers and students, and how the Common Core can be actualized within the reality of teachers' everyday work with students in the classroom.

The process involves teachers defining a wondering, or burning question about practice, collecting and analyzing data to gain insights into that wondering, sharing their learning with other professionals, and making change and improvement to practice based on what they have learned through inquiry (Dana, Thomas, & Boynton, 2011; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). In Chapters 2 and 3, we illustrate in greater detail the ways the inquiry process can help teachers gain insights into the Common Core as teachers try out new techniques and strategies related to Common Core implementation in their classrooms.

How Can Teachers Actualize the Common Core Standards in Their Daily Approach to Teaching?

We just introduced teacher inquiry as a mechanism teachers can use to gain insights into the Common Core as they try out new techniques and strategies in their classrooms. Ironically, one teaching technique

or strategy that holds great potential to actualize the Common Core in classrooms is *student inquiry*. The concept of student inquiry has also been around for years, particularly in science (see, for example, Callison, 1999; National Research Council, 1996), but has lost momentum as a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning as a result of NCLB and the era of high-stakes testing and accountability that followed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Student inquiry can be defined as

both a philosophy and an approach to the organization of classroom learning as investigation-based. Students become researchers, writers, and activists rather than passive recipients of a textbook's content. Students take ownership of their learning; they discover that school can be a place that nurtures curiosity, inspires important questions, and produces real joy from learning (Dana et al., 2011, p. 90).

According to Steven Wolk (2008), "Inquiry-based teaching transforms the aims of school from short-term memorization of facts into disciplined questioning and investigating" (p. 116). As such, engaging students in inquiry is consonant with the Common Core's focus on preparing students for college and the workforce through the development of higher order and critical thinking skills. In Chapters 4 and 5, we illustrate in greater detail how to engage students in inquiry in the classroom, and how this process helps teachers actualize the Common Core in their daily practice.

Where Can I Learn More About the Common Core?

Developing a deep and rich understanding of the CCSS is an essential component of seizing this day. While a large number of articles, books, and resources are available to provide greater insights into the Common Core, some of our favorites include these:

- The Common Core State Standards Initiative Website: www.corestandards.org—Download the CCSS here as well as find news, resources, and frequently asked questions and answers. In addition, there are appendices that go more in depth around each standard and give sample resources for teachers. There is also a page describing

what is not covered by the Standards, which is helpful for educators to better understand and define their roles.

- Calkins, L., Ehrenworth, M., & Lehman, C. (2012). *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. In this book, Lucy Calkins and her colleagues help educators navigate the Common Core standards for literacy. The chapters focus on expectations for students in writing, reading, speaking and listening, with specific examples teachers can use in their classrooms. They also address the new assessments and the effect they will have on whole school reform.

- Dunkle, C. A. (2012). *Leading the Common Core State Standards: From Common Sense to Common Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. This book chronicles the author's beliefs about the tremendous potential that CCSS offer our education system. With chapters focused on powerful professional learning for adults and powerful learning through technology, the author helps educators understand how to garner resources and support for the CCSS reform effort.

- Burris, C. C. & Garrity, D. T. (2012). *Opening the Common Core: How to Bring All Students to College and Career Readiness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Offering a detailed analysis about what it means to become college and career ready, this book takes the reader through a framework the authors designed called ACES—Acceleration, Critical Thinking, Equity, and Support. Chapters on each component of the ACES framework illuminate understandings about the Common Core and how it can play out in practice with sample lesson plans and examples of teaching episodes consonant with the Common Core.

- Kendall, J. (2011). *Understanding Common Core State Standards*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. This short book gives a brief overview of the standards, their history and goals. It also addresses the organization of the standards and outlines what schools may want to consider as they begin transitioning to the new standards.

- The Teaching Channel Website: www.teachingchannel.org—Teachers can watch lessons based on the Common Core at any level and also download lesson plans. There are videos that outline the history and purpose for the Common Core. A great resource to introduce the CCSS to teachers.

- Website: www.achievethecore.org—This website is run by the nonprofit group, Student Achievement Partners. It has articles, professional development resources, and tools for implementing the Common Core.

In this chapter, we provided a brief overview of the CCSS and set the stage for teachers to be the architects of their implementation through engagement in the process of teacher inquiry. To help you get started in the process, in Chapter 2, we provide a more detailed look at teacher inquiry and its relationship to the Common Core.