

Common Core State Standards and Students with Severe Disabilities: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This paper introduces a special issue of *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, entitled “Common Core State Standards and Students with Severe Disabilities.” The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a far-reaching policy intended to help all students be college and career ready. Yet, there seems to be quite a gap between interpretation of the standards and development of academic and social supports based on these standards for students with severe disabilities. In this introduction, some background is presented on the CCSS and why it is critical to examine the impact of standards adaptation and implementation for all students, including students with severe disabilities. Additionally, a rationale for the special issue is presented, along with a description of the special issue contents.

Keywords

access to the general curriculum, Common Core State Standards, students with severe disabilities, policy, college and career readiness

Whenever there is a call to standards, or aspirations for guiding practice, this can be intimidating. Perhaps this is intimidating because inherent in such a call, there is a not so subtle demand for excellence. Thus, creation and subsequent implementation of standards is often associated with controversy. This is apparent in standards for clinical trials in medicine (Jones & Podolsky, 2015) as well as standards for educational research (Whitehurst, 2004). The recent call for standards to ensure that all students in the United States are college and career ready, as prescribed in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), is also not free of controversy. This policy has been described as a welcome reform (Conley, 2014) as well as a policy likely to draw attention away from skills that fall outside of the CCSS (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2012).

Students with the most extensive and intensive support needs (i.e., students with severe disabilities) are intended to be part of the greater student population to benefit from the implementation of the CCSS. Yet, it is not clear what the future truly holds for students, teachers, and administrators as implementation efforts move forward. There seems to be quite a gap between interpretation of the standards and development of academic and life skills for students with severe disabilities. While much has been written about standards,

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what is to guide the link between the CCSS and the curriculum/instruction necessary to support education for students with severe disabilities?

Almost all change in education, particularly a call for large-scale change, such as the implementation of the CCSS, has implications for virtually everyone and everything. Undoubtedly, people will be impacted. Teachers will have to modify practice (Jenkins & Agamba, 2013), students will have to learn distinct content (Conley, 2014), and educational leaders will have to facilitate and support these change efforts (Lazarus & Rieke, 2013). Standards are intended to guide the selection of curriculum, which in turn leads to the selection of instructional methods, ultimately leading to positive learning gains.

If the CCSS is intended to provide opportunities for all students, leading to greater college and career readiness, then it is essential that the policy espouses standards that can be translated into learning experiences promoting such outcomes for students with severe disabilities. To the greatest extent possible, policies should be interpreted and implemented in a relatively consistent manner, so that all students have the potential to reach their desired goals. While there are examples of successful policy interpretation and implementation, some students may still not be “college or career ready.” Although successful policy interpretation and implementation may increase the likelihood that students become “college or career ready,” we know that there is indication that students with severe disabilities have difficulty making educational gains. This may be in part due to inconsistent policy implementation or perhaps misconceptions about policy.

The CCSS are intended to guide the education of all students. Thus, educational experiences for students with severe disabilities must be considered in light of the proposed standards. Access and progress in the general education curriculum has been and continues to be a critical point of focus. Policy is intended to guide behavior, but it is the interpretation of the policy that may or may not lead to the design and implementation of the most effective educational practices for students. For example, Kleinert et al. (2015) conducted an extensive survey in 15 states examining the level of involvement in general education for students with significant cognitive disabilities who took part in an alternate assessment ($N = 39,837$). Results of the survey indicated that a large number of students received services in self-contained settings, separate schools, or home settings. In fact, less than 10% of the sample spent greater than 79% of the school day in general education settings. One reason for these findings is attributed to different interpretations of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Inconsistent policy implementation or misinterpretation reflects only part of a complicated story about adequate progress for students with severe disabilities. Stagnant progress for students with severe disabilities may also be attributed to insufficient preparation of teachers in light of new policy stipulations. For example, Ryndak and colleagues (2014) contend, “teachers might not understand what can be gained from involvement in the general curriculum or how involvement can be achieved” (p. 69). In addition, Kearns, Kleinert, Thurlow, Gong, and Quenemoen (2015) assert that teachers need professional development if student results from CCSS alternate assessments are to be used as part of teacher effectiveness evaluations. Thus, the necessity to understand and implement policy consistently should not be discounted.

Teachers are often placed in quite the quandary, as the teaching and learning process must move forward in spite of the little time available to understand a policy. This is demonstrated in a study conducted by Timberlake (2016) in which 33 special education teachers with varying experience were interviewed about the process they use to plan for how students with severe disabilities access the general education curriculum and how they make decisions for how/when/where students access the general education curriculum. The results revealed reluctant decision makers were often forced to make a decision in isolation of a clear path or implementation rules.

Education, and special education in particular, has enjoyed a highly productive period yielding a collection of work that reflects the illuminating torch of science. Scientifically based research has given way to robust evidence-based practices for students with severe disabilities. For example, Hudson, Browder, and Wood (2013) describe a number of promising practices that promote academic learning for students with severe disabilities in general education settings. In addition to a strong literature base providing practices for promoting student skill development, teacher education has received attention as well. For example, Whetstone, Abell, Collins, and Kleinert (2012) introduced a tool for evaluating interns preparing to teach

students with severe disabilities. Notably, the tool is also designed to support teacher development in addition to evaluation. The future of teacher education should include the consideration of policy, like CCSS, and the fundamental changes necessary to reshape education for the betterment of all students, including those with severe disabilities (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). Quite possibly, the convergence of a policy designed to guide the selection of the most salient skills for all students and evidence-based practices that can effectively promote the skill development of students with severe disabilities may prove to be an ideal match.

This special issue was conceived to bring together articles that focus on the CCSS, an educational policy, and students with severe disabilities. There are a number of topics to be explored to better understand common core and students with severe disabilities. This particular collection of articles explores different issues related to the CCSS. Dukes, Darling, and Bielskus-Barone reviewed State Department of Education and school district websites to determine how the nexus of policy related to the CCSS and students with severe disabilities was communicated to teachers. Ballard and Dymond conducted a systematic review of literature focused on stakeholders' beliefs about addressing the general education curriculum in general education classrooms. Spooner, Saunders, Root, and Brosh discuss (a) research that has emerged on teaching mathematical problem solving, (b) what to teach and how to create mathematical problems for students with severe disabilities to be successful, and (c) how to teach students to be a mathematical problem solver. Finally, Morningstar, Zagona, Uyanik, Xie, and Mahal describe Common Core's impact on college readiness for youth with severe disabilities.

In addition to the common overall theme (i.e., intersectionality of adoption and implementation of CCSS and students with severe disabilities), the articles in this issue have two common features related to CCSS. First, in the "Implications for Research" section, authors pose viable questions/inquiries which logically follow from the work described in the article. Second, in the "Implications for Practice" section, authors provide practical applications to the development/implementation of services and/or supports for individuals with severe disabilities. The intent here was to explicitly provide a guidepost for illuminating further study with the population of students with severe disabilities and CCSS. In this relatively early stage of CCSS, there is much to learn, and with more investigations, we hope much will be learned.

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