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Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Literacy Common Core State Standards for
English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities

Audrey Figueroa Murphy

Elizabeth Haller

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to gain insight into the experiences of teachers of English language learners (ELLs) and of students with disabilities (SWD) as they aligned the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with previously used standards and instructional approaches during the first year of CCSS implementation. The participating teachers taught across the K-12 spectrum in public schools in a large urban metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. The researchers selected literacy in the CCSS as the focus of the study due to its importance as a gateway to accessing the curriculum in content area teaching (Janks, 2012; O'Neill & Geoghegan, 2011; Willhoft, 2013). In addition to their experiences teaching literacy in the classroom, the study considers the teachers' perceptions of the support that they received, as well as the issues that they perceived as unresolved with respect to CCSS implementation. A qualitative approach was taken in the belief that contributing to a holistic understanding of the experiences of these often overlooked groups within the general teaching population may benefit districts and teachers as they continue the process of aligning curricula and teaching methods with the CCSS.

The CCSS movement is one of the most powerful and sweeping educational reform initiatives in recent U.S. history. The new standards are the result of a process that began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and

that saw the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) legislation (Public Law PL 107-110), which required accountability in the form of test scores and so-called adequate yearly progress (AYP) reports. Currently, the CCSS have been rolled out in 45 states, the District of Columbia and four U.S. Territories (National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The CCSS were designed to ensure that students are college and career ready by the time they graduate high school. To this end, the standards specify what students should know and should be able to do. However, these standards do not define a particular curriculum to be taught, nor do they specify the approaches, techniques or strategies that teachers should use (Dove & Hongisfeld, 2013). Rather, teachers must define what is needed in order to promote academic success for students who are not performing at grade level, and this is both a frequent and a particular challenge for teachers of ELLs and SWD.

Children of immigrants are the fastest growing population sector in the United States (National Clearinghouse for English Acquisition, 2011). Approximately 11% of students across the nation are ELLs, and about 12% receive special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Moreover, studies indicate that both ELLs and SWD are typically being included in mainstream classrooms for longer periods of time than previously in U.S. schools (Zehler et al., 2003). Nonetheless, graduation rates for ELLs and SWDs are as low as 25% in some states (Simon, 2013). Hence, it is important to understand how teachers are responding to the challenge of implementing the CCSS with these students.

Both ELL and SWD populations have traditionally been provided with extra learning support as compared to their general education or mainstream peers. After all, ELLs, by definition, are in the process of learning English, and SWD have goals based on their Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) that take into account their individual challenges and that specify areas

of focus. However, the CCSS explicitly avoid providing any stated accommodations for these groups of students. For example, New York P-12 Common Core Standards (New York State, 2011) states that “it is...beyond the scope of the Standards to define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with disabilities” (p. 4). Nonetheless, teachers of ELLs and SWD must ensure that their students meet the same standards as those in the general population, and they are to be held accountable for adjusting the curriculum accordingly. The present study was designed and carried out with the goal of helping these teachers to meet this challenge.

Method

Participants

Given the diversity that was likely to characterize teachers' experiences implementing the new standards in different classroom environments, as well as the desire for rich, holistic data that capture the nuances of these experiences in as much detail as possible, the researchers chose a qualitative approach based on teacher interviews. Qualitative research requires the purposeful selection of individuals who can provide the best responses to the phenomena under investigation, in line with naturalistic inquiry (Creswell, 1994). These select individuals “directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). Those eligible for the present study therefore had to be current teachers with ELLs and/or SWD in their classrooms. Participants meeting these criteria were purposefully selected from among the graduate education students at a large metropolitan university.

Twenty teachers of ELLs and SWD were contacted by phone and asked to participate in the study. Thirteen teachers of ELLs and SWD accepted the invitation to participate voluntarily in this research. Nine of the participants were female and four were male. All were currently

attending graduate courses within the university's school of education. Nine of the participants had completed Master's degrees in elementary education, two held secondary education degrees and one held a Master's degree in psychology. Three of the thirteen participants had between one and five years' experience in the classroom, six had five to ten years, two had experience ranging from ten to fifteen years and two participants had fifteen to twenty years of classroom practice. In terms of age, eight participants were in their twenties, four were in their thirties, and one participant was over forty years old.

Procedures

Data were collected through face to face interviews. The initial contact included a request for voluntary participation from individuals who met the stated criteria. Consent was read and signed by each participant at the start of the interview. At the established time, the interviews were conducted using the open-ended interview guide (see Appendix). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

Interview Guide

The open-ended questions in the interview guide were developed by the researchers. Using relevant literature (Charmaz, 2010; Glazer & Strauss, 1967, Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Thomas, 2003), the researchers chose three factors as a focus for the investigation of teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the CCSS with ELLs and SWD:

- a) the experiences of the teachers as they began the alignment of the CCSS to their current curriculum
- b) perceptions of the support that they received and that they still require
- c) perceptions of the challenges to and potential for implementation.

Questions were crafted to explore the teachers' perceptions of their experiences with respect to these three factors. All of the participants responded to the seven items in the interview guide in the same order.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is based on the interpretation of "...how the individual components of the study weave together" (Saldana, 2009, p.36). The researchers used a three-stage data analysis process: 1) reduction of the data; 2) display of the data; 3) formulating conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1984). After identifying each interview with a code assigned to each participant, the recorded interviews were transcribed onto 8 1/2 x 11" sheets of paper containing ruled columns on the left side of each page.

The first step in data reduction is coding the data. The coding process is cyclical, with data being compared to other data, then to codes, then to other data. The codes are then compared to each other and then compared to categories. Afterwards, the categories are compared to each other and then again to the data (Saldana, 2009). In this study, when a unit or phrase was identified, it was printed to the side of the ruled column on the left of each page. After re-reading the data to ensure that they had been reduced to the smallest units of meaning, these data units were written on 3 x 5" index cards. The cards were then grouped according to their meaning as perceived by the researchers. This process resulted in a data display that enabled the researchers to begin to glimpse ideas and patterns emerging from the data. By focusing in on a piece of data and comparing it to other data, the researchers were able to observe and categorize relevant phenomena.

The process of formulating conclusions based on the data was assisted by questions such as "What is actually happening in the data? What category or what property of what category

does the incident indicate?”(Creswell, 2012, p.247). These questions were responded to using the constant comparative method of connecting and generating categories through the comparison of incidents in the data to other incidents in the data (Creswell, 2012, Glaser, 1994). This method of slowly developing categories assists in conceptualizing, understanding and defining the properties of the categories (Charmaz, 2006). Initially, data cards were placed in categories together with those containing similar meanings. After labeling the categories, the data cards were compared with other cards under the same label. For instance, a data card containing the words “need structured presentations” was initially placed with cards denoting “challenges.” However, when compared with order phrases under this heading, the data card did not appear to fit. The data card was then compared to data under other labels until a more meaningful match was found. If a data card did not appear to fit with any existing label, a new category was formed. This comparison process was continued until the researchers believed that all of the data were grouped under the appropriate categories. Eventually, four categories emerged as themes that assisted the researchers to formulate conclusions about teachers' perceptions of their experiences implementing the CCSS with ELLs and SWD. These themes were: 1) alignment to the CCSS; 2) teacher comfort level; 3) best teaching practices; and 4) challenges of teaching literacy.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Qualitative research rigor requires that the researchers demonstrate the trustworthiness of their findings according to the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). To ensure credibility, the researchers used the procedures of triangulation, member checking, peer reviews and prolonged engagement (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, participant triangulation was

established by collecting and combining data for comparison of the teachers' experiences implementing the CCSS with ELLs and SWD. Second, member checks were conducted by the researchers by sharing the interview notes and resulting themes with the participants of the study to ensure that they agreed with the comments as written. Third, prolonged engagement was used as the researchers knew and worked with the participants over time. As a result, they built trust and established rapport so that the participants felt comfortable in the disclosure of information. Fourth, peer debriefing was carried out by reviewing the data with a professional educator familiar with this field of research, who provided support, challenged assumptions and assisted in formulating tentative interpretations and conclusions.

Dependability is established through the use of an audit trail to ensure consistency. In this study, dependability was based on maintaining a record of the procedures followed during the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collected and maintained in this record included transcribed interviews, participant contacts and written memos.

Confirmability requires that the researchers maintain an objective viewpoint throughout the study. This was accomplished through memo writing and through a journal of reflective thoughts kept by the researchers during the study. Additionally, this writing by both researchers was shared with a professional colleague to decrease the likelihood of researcher bias.

Transferability refers to the external validity or "the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations" (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). The ability to generalize to other settings or populations, as well as limitations thereto, can be made discernible by controlling the population so as to ensure a certain degree of consistency. In this study, the participants shared the experiences of working as full-time classroom teachers and attending a graduate education program in the same geographic area. In addition, the interview format

provided the participants with opportunities to deeply discuss their experiences, perceived support and ongoing challenges, providing rich and meaningful data regarding these participants, as well as further indications of the extent to which these data might contribute to our understanding of the issues that similar teachers face.

Results

Coding and analysis of the participants' responses regarding their experiences implementing the CCSS with ELLs and SWD revealed four main themes, each of which is treated in a sub-section below:

- Alignment to the CCSS
- Professional development
- Best teaching practices
- Teaching literacy skills

The sub-sections corresponding to these themes present an analyzed and selected account of the participants' responses to questions 3-7 on the Interview Guide (see Appendix). Questions 1-2, however, solicited information on participants' experiences prior to CCSS implementation. Results derived from these questions, therefore, are presented separately, in the subsection that follows immediately here.

Teacher Background Information

Participants' answers to the first two interview questions provided the researchers with insight into their prior training, experiences and established pedagogical strategies. In this regard, the diversity in the responses was noteworthy, particularly with respect to the broad differences--as self-reported by the participants—in the extent to which their teaching had been grounded in pedagogical theory. Those for whom a deep grounding in theory had not been part of their pre-

service training, however, reported striving to become better teachers through professional development after observing their colleagues continue to attend university classes.

One participant, for example, reported having been teaching ELLs at various levels for six years prior to CCSS implementation. Her first three years in teaching had been spent with small groups of fourth and fifth graders in a pull-out/push-in model. (In this model, ELL teachers either go into the general education class or take students from the class for a set time.) Thereafter, she had taught self-contained third grade special education classes, with approximately 75% of the students also classified as ELLs. This teacher's pre-service training had been primarily in Teaching English to Students of other Languages (TESOL), literacy and elementary education, in addition to which she had completed three college special education courses.

Another participant reported that she was in her fifth year of teaching special education Kindergarten; she explained that her Master's degree was in special education, but that prior to completing that program she had not taken any education courses. Rather, her undergraduate background was in psychology. At the time of the study she was enrolled in a university TESOL program, in which she had already completed four classes. She said that training provided at her school had included

some special education professional development...but no professional development [specifically targeted to teaching] ELL[s]. [However, t]he professional development focused on differentiating instruction, setting goals for the students around their needs and providing support—mostly for reading and writing—and [these elements can contribute to] ESL/ELL teaching.

This teacher also reported that she had “really learned a lot from the ELL teachers in [her] school, through speaking to them.”

Regarding teaching methods reported as used prior to CCSS implementation, the array of knowledge, strategies and scaffolds that the participants mentioned attests to their efforts to reach all students and to help them to participate as fully as possible in reading and writing activities. One teacher, for example, noted that she had used her knowledge of Italian to help her Latino students recognize cognate words. This participant reported having 15 years of teaching experience—which, together with six credits from college ESL courses and her ability to apply her knowledge of another Romance language, she considered to be vital in helping her to bolster her second language students' efforts to develop their English skills and learn to enjoy reading in their new school language.

Another participant, who reported having had 3 years of teaching and 4 months of preservice preparation, explained that she focused on scaffolding in her classroom work with ELLs:

I [have found it] really helpful to allow—especially the beginners—to acclimate to the classroom [and to begin] to learn spoken English instead of jumping right into reading and writing. Once they start to learn a little bit of the language, I use a lot of oral language activities [such as] interviews with peers [and] groups talking about topics that [the students] are familiar with. We have a new program this year called “on our way to English,” so that [program] has been helpful in identifying how to teach the different levels of ELL students [as well as in providing the teachers with] excellent activities for [use with] newcomers.

A teacher of SWD with 12 years of teaching service and more than 6 months of preservice preparation by her school reported that she emphasized collaborative and student-centered learning as her primary instructional approaches:

My special needs students respond to group work and collaborative learning. Teachers cannot simply transfer knowledge to students as if they were empty. Special education students, as well as general education students, need personal and active engagement. This way they all get a chance to participate and to become involved instead of [being expected to learn solely from] lectures and large group discussions.

Finally, according to a teacher with 10 years of teaching experience and 8 months of preservice preparation provided in workshops by her district and school, reported that variety in pedagogical strategies was the key to keeping her students engaged: “I use many instructional strategies: I do guided reading and [exercises that focus on] small group conversational skills, including small group strategy lessons, and I try to buddy students up with a person who may be more skilled in one area—[i.e.,] peer partnering.

Alignment to the Common Core State Standards

According to David Coleman, contributing author of the Common Core Standards, “alignment” means “really changing materials so that they focus on what matters most in the standards” (Coleman, 2012). Meeting the challenge of alignment in the first year of CCSS constituted what Erlandson et al. (1993) refer to as a *shared experience* for the study participants. Qualitative analysis of their interview responses, moreover, revealed many common threads in the participants’ perceptions of this experience. In particular, a teacher with 20 years’ experience expressed a sentiment that was echoed by many of the participants when she suggested that teachers were being given too great a share of the responsibility for shaping CCSS implementation strategy—that is, *alignment*—and too little guidance in doing so:

I don’t feel qualified, and I think [implementation is] going to produce a whole range of different types of teaching. I wish [the administrators/curriculum writers] would give me a lesson and then I could modify it. I became a teacher because I wanted to teach curriculum, not write curriculum.... We have meetings [in which our administrators] come in and don’t really give us anything.

Similarly, another participant stated: “[T]he administrators need to tell us what we need to teach, instead of leaving it up to the teachers to decide. Many of us, especially the younger teachers, want a curriculum to follow rather than [to be expected] to create one.” Another teacher flatly

stated that her district had had a “slew of administrators [who] didn’t know what they were doing and [the] teachers knew it.”

Several teachers of SWD made comments that conveyed both their sense that greater support and training were needed and their concerns about their students’—and, hence, their own—special needs: “I don’t feel 100% comfortable in saying I feel prepared to adapt my lessons to the common core. I would need specific training in the steps needed for my special needs students to take to be able to access the standards—taking their disabilities into account.”

Similarly, another participant stated:

The administration has not really shown us what we can use—what accommodations or modifications or how to get [students] ready for these standards. Our students are not taking standardized tests, and it’s very hard when the Common Core Standards are grounded in [expectations that student are] college bound. Our students have severe disabilities and realistically they are not college bound; but I guess if the standards are exposed the right way, they might be able to participate.

For yet another special education teacher, the bottom line was simple: “I will find a creative way to align the state standards, but I don’t really feel that the Common Core should be used with children who are not college bound.”

The self-efficacy and determination evidenced in this latter comment are notable, but this participant was not alone in this regard. As one teacher explained:

I will be able to align the lessons. My personal experience will help me, but I have not received a great deal of training in the Common Core Standards and most[ly I have had to do] my own research into them. I do research online. I have looked up the Common Core Standards [although] I do not know about the EngageNY [New York State Department of Education, 2013] website.

Still another participant stated: “I have no qualms about starting the adaptation. [However,] I would love to see an overview and have someone who is well versed in the common core explain

it to me—the components of the entire curriculum and the expectations of the teacher's role. I would love to see how it is supposed to be used to create lessons and then carry out the lessons.”

Here, it is clear that teacher self-efficacy and a desire for greater direction and/or additional training in aligning the curriculum and established teaching methods to the CCSS were not mutually exclusive. As one teacher put it: “[I feel] prepared to adapt my own lessons to the standards, but I think that having the principal or the assistant principal...telling us what we should do is helpful.” More specific recommendations for the form or content of support that would be helpful to teachers included one participant's suggestion—echoed by similar comments from others—that “faculty meetings can be held to create student centered activities” for use in lesson plans aligned with the CCSS. Other comments combined the desire for specific activities with an emphasis on the importance of collaboration and faculty leadership in adapting to the standards, as in the following: “I would like more structured presentations, more activities that could help me in aligning my lesson plans with the Common Core. I would also like to hear [from] other teachers—senior teachers who are using [the Standards] and [who could explain to us] how they are planning to adjust their lesson plans to the Common Core.”

One third grade teacher provided an example that encompassed both positive administrative support and collaborative faculty alignment efforts. “The alignment of the nonfiction informational text unit,” this participant explained, “was revised during one school day when the principal released our grade team.” As the participant further noted, one teacher had been charged with reviewing exemplars, sharing them with the group and initiating a discussion about alignment. However, since the principal had taken the step of carving out time for the whole team to meet, the actual work of alignment was carried out collaboratively.

Finally, some of the participants taught in schools that are part of the Teachers College (Columbia University) Reading and Writing Project. The mission of this project

...is to help young people become avid and skilled readers, writers, and inquirers. We accomplish this goal through research, curriculum development, and through working shoulder-to-shoulder with students, teachers, principals and superintendents. The organization has developed state-of-the-art tools and methods for teaching of reading and writing, for using performance assessments and learning progressions to accelerate progress, and for literacy-rich content-area instruction. (Teachers College, 2010)

Several participants noted the helpfulness of participating in this program when it came to aligning their curriculum with the CCSS, as in the following:

[In] being thrown into my first year dealing with the CCSS, it was challenging because I had nothing to compare it to. My school was very focused on aligning [the curriculum], but the good news was [that] it wasn't like a leap but [rather like] a shift, in that our school was [already] doing all of these things that the Common Core tasks had asked.... It was more like a natural way of teaching rather than trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. It was kind of a bridging [from] what we already did to...where the [emphasis of the] CCSS lies.

Professional Development

Professional development is defined by the Education Information Resource Center (1979) as “activities to enhance professional career growth.” Many of the participants clearly felt that they had not yet received sufficient professional development to bolster their skills, knowledge and self-efficacy with respect to alignment. Most, however, like the teacher who reported the following, felt that this training would be forthcoming:

I haven't been trained in [the CCSS] yet. I was covering for a teacher who just retired. I know the school is aligning with the common core standards. I am supposed to be trained this summer.... In September I will be ready. I'm not sure what kind of training I should be offered to align the common core standards. I have heard that the teachers meet once a month and I am not sure exactly what they will do but I have heard that the once a month training will be for the common core. At this point, because it is the end of the year, I am not getting training, but I will get trained a lot more in the new year.

An elementary teacher of 15 years' experience expressed confidence that: "The Teachers College staff will probably train us for the Common Core [see Teachers College, 2010]. Some books were ordered. There is thematic study linked to the Common Core. I could be okay with less than a year of training." Another optimistic statement was expressed by a third grade teacher: "Professional development for the staff is important, and I know that our future grade team meetings will focus heavily on matching our units of study with the CCSS."

Indeed, while alignment was reported to have been perceived as a daunting task by many of the participants, they generally expressed the belief that through quality professional development they would become more confident in their ability to facilitate the knowledge and skills that students need to become career and college ready—as stated in the CCSS. As one participant succinctly explained: "I know that my school is going to have extra professional development on the Common Core Standards. I will benefit from this training."

Reviews of the CCSS professional development that participants had already experienced, however, were mixed. A 15-year veteran teacher of special education had some ideas regarding ways to improve professional development at her school: "The staff development should be more hands-on. They need to show us what materials, strategies and methods we can use to meet the Common Core Standards while addressing the needs of all our students with disabilities." This participant explained that she had been disappointed with the quality of the professional development she had received, which consisted merely of an information session: "They just said this is what is expected of us and we are going to have to find a way to meet those standards. The people who told us about the Common Core Standards did not seem to know that much about [them]."

Others felt that they had had good formal training thus far. One kindergarten teacher of five years' experience expressed the following:

I do feel prepared. I feel that I have a good beginning... I feel that it will take a year of work to figure [alignment] out and see how I can do it seamlessly. At this point, my district has offered so much, I would have to go through it and see what specific areas I would need training in. The training was that we went to some other workshops outside the school, but primarily the training was inside the school at our grade level. I did extensive work with the literacy coach...at my school, who has a lot of knowledge about the Common Core Standards. She helped me individually as well.

This teacher appeared to have experienced the type of professional development that the participants as a group seemed to be calling for. Their comfort zone consisted in having good role models and in experiencing opportunities for collaboration with others. One participant noted the presence of a collaborative effort at her school, but she expressed the view that professional development should be more individualized:

...the team had to look at the everyday math and eliminate lessons that were not aligned to the common core.... I think there should be initial hours to understand the language [of the Standards] and how [they are] laid out. After that [professional development] should be [conducted] on an as-needed basis because some teachers will be able to learn [the Standards] on their own and others will need more support. Almost like a scaffolded approach.

A reflection that sums up the needs of teachers for professional development is the following from a teacher of an inclusive class: "I try to personally take advantage of anything that's offered; it's not necessarily required, but I think the more you're aware of it, the easier it is to put into play."

Best Practices

Best practices were defined as the approaches, techniques and strategies that appeared to be effective in working to meet the needs of ELLs and SWD as they strove to reach the standards. In this regard, teachers valued the learning process—taking on alignment with the

CCSS as a way to organize the curriculum—and also the opportunity to create a greater role for their students in constructing their own learning and in developing their reasoning skills. Most or all of the study participants appeared to teach from within the socio-constructivist framework, which is based largely on Vygotskian theory and advocates the learner actively constructing knowledge within his or her zone of proximal development rather than receiving instruction passively from the teacher (Liu & Chen, 2010). A response from a first-year teacher with a Master's degree in English as a Second Language showed how she embraced this philosophy:

...if you combine the international model of heterogeneity and collaboration, working in groups, doing project based learning, all the things that are best practices that research is saying should be used for culturally, linguistically and [sic.] special needs students, it really works. I knew about the differentiation, the scaffolding, the different methods and strategies...and different types of graphic organizers, visuals [and] using native language—so, when you combine all those things together, that's what really drives the learning for the students...and also through doing a project around the whole unit.... [R]ather than just 'chalk and talk' [one practices] learning from each other, [in which approach] the teacher is like the 'guide on the side.'

Repeatedly, best practices emerged as involving exercises that practiced students' higher order thinking skills, using either the framework of Bloom's Taxonomy or Webb's Depth of Knowledge. Bloom's Taxonomy is a classification system of learning objectives, whereas Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK), which is used more extensively by educators in conjunction with the CCSS, "provides a vocabulary and a frame of reference when thinking about our students and how they engage with the content. DOK offers a common language to understand 'rigor,' or cognitive demand, in assessments, as well as curricular units, lessons, and tasks" (NYC Department of Education, 2013). As one participant said about his school, "They [the authors of the CCSS] are looking for a higher level [in students' thinking skills]. I think my school is doing [so] as well and is on the right track because they are looking at the skills and not

just looking at the content [of the curriculum].” Another participant also referred to advances in higher order thinking skills as part of the promise of the CCSS:

Students will become more proficient and be able to ‘dig deeper’ on their own. Students’ fluency and comprehension are comparable and strong. This means that inferencing skills and abilities to draw conclusions will be heightened. This will lead to higher level thinking [skills], and students will have a deeper understanding [of curricular content].

Additionally, a special education teacher commented:

I think that the Common Core Standards provides a framework through which students with disabilities can access the same general curriculum as their typically-developing peers, with adaptations and modifications [achieved] through the principles of universal design of learning. These students can be provided opportunities through engagement in meaningful learning [and] activities embedded with rigorous activity-expectations in the content area such as reading, writing, speaking, listening and mathematics. This immersion in high level academic standards can help prepare these students for success in their lives after school, including career settings.

A component of the so-called staircase of complexity within the CCSS, Shift 3, stipulates that students spend time with “sufficiently complex texts” (New York State Education Department, 2012). Several of the study participants expressed concern over the frustration that such texts might cause for ELLs and/or SWD; however, they also felt that this potentially negative impact could be alleviated through scaffolding and/or through support provided during the learning process. As one participant explained: “scaffolding helps teachers to keep students from getting frustrated while teaching them new material within their zones of proximal development.” Another teacher focused her similar comments specifically on the case of SWD: “The mere fact that my students have IEPs is an indication that they need scaffolding, that they need support.... It will take them a lot longer to get there [i.e., to reach the CCSS] than [it will for] general ed[ucation] students. That’s why they are special needs students!”

Several teachers of ELLs expressed similar perceptions. In this regard, they emphasized the fact that their students--although in many cases not provided with IEPs—are in the process of acquiring English, and that consequently they are not on an equal footing with native English speakers in their capacity to fulfill the demands of the CCSS.

Teaching Literacy Skills

Teaching literacy skills to ELLs and SWD was defined as a challenge in that the nature of these student subgroups calls for modification and/or supplementation of instruction. The strategies that participants referenced most frequently in connection with teaching literacy to ELLs and SWD included role play, graphic organizers, visuals, group work, activating student background knowledge through so-called KWL strategies (viz.: What students know, what they would like to learn and what they have learned), modeling, read-aloud for more complex texts, inferencing type questions, modifications, peer partnering, small group skills and theme units. In addition, one participant stressed the importance of using scaffolding to support the growth of all students. She stated that she made it a point to work most often with her lowest functioning students, who need the extra support:

During literacy instruction in my class, which is a 90-minute block focused on reading and writing, I teach a whole group lesson with scaffolds. My scaffolds could be a model of my own work, a previous student's work, vocabulary with pictures and/or in context, sentence/paragraph frames or graphic organizers. I aim to advance my students' literacy by working frequently with the lowest functioning students. Small groups work best because I am able to reach more students in the time allotted. I'll do a guided reading, shared writing activity, or vocabulary building activity with them.

Teaching vocabulary skills was a concern noted by many of the other participants. One teacher explained her strategies for teaching vocabulary skills as follows:

Students can review vocabulary first and learn how to use context clues to discover the meaning of words. Having students keep a vocabulary log is also helpful, as well as hanging up vocabulary charts around the classroom. I have my

students stop during reading if they do not know a word, and I make sure to use activities that incorporate the new vocabulary—sentences, stories, dictionary use, quizzes [etc.].

Many of the participants linked their concern with establishing a strong foundation in vocabulary skills directly to the goal of fostering Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1981), which can be particularly challenging for ELLs and SWD. Moreover, several participants noted that further challenges arise owing to differences in their students levels of proficiency—with some, such as newcomers to the country, having little to no knowledge of English. Therefore, as several participants noted, teaching comprehension of important task words like “identify,” “analyze” and “evaluate” can also be difficult.

Finally, as noted, several of the participants expressed concern over the challenge of teaching reading of complex text to their particular student populations. For some teachers, the emphasis placed by the CCSS on this skill interacted with the goal of connecting content to students' knowledge and experiences. As one participant put it, “Teachers will have to choose books based on information, as well as entertainment. In the English Language Arts classroom, if the students are reading novels, teachers will need to choose other outside informational texts for students to read that relate to the novels.” The same teacher also said:

Connecting with prior knowledge and personal background—that's something I have to work on more next year. I have to connect what I'm teaching to [the students'] experiences. It's a common sense goal: of course, you want to make it so they relate to [the material], but it's a process, and you have to be very explicit and very deliberate and think about how you connect your content to what [your students] already know. Sometimes it's easier to make that connection, and sometime you need to be very creative...just to get [them to develop] a deeper understanding.

Another teacher expressed enthusiasm for a similar strategy, but with a more individualized focus:

I really get to know my students—what their interests are, what their family background is, their country, their culture.... Then, in reading, I find out what the child is really interested in, and then [provide] literature in that area—and then you build their vocabulary, their fluency, everything in that genre. *Then* start [using targeted] teaching strategies so they can go to the next level!

Discussion

Overall, the participants appeared eager to speak about their experiences—not so as to boast, but to convey their eagerness to help their students to move on to the next step in the thinking process. In connection with this goal and with the challenges of implementation the participants frequently referenced the following personality attributes as helpful to teachers in the process of learning the CCSS: trust in students, trust in other teachers, flexibility, creativity, confidence, self-efficacy, being open and well organized, sharing, patience and love of learning. These qualities, the teachers suggested, would facilitate successful CCSS implementation despite the lack of clarity in some schools regarding alignment of existing methods and curricula with the CCSS.

Both challenges and promises regarding CCSS implementation became apparent in the analysis of the interview data. One particular concern centered on a challenge that might reduce self-efficacy among ELLs: students with minimal language skills are given assessments despite the fact that they have been in the country only for a short period of time (Solano-Flores, 2008). However, one assurance that is expected to come with CCSS implementation is that the focus in the curriculum will be on depth instead of breadth, which will allow for real understanding for ELLs and SWD:

Assessments (for special education students) that are aligned to the common core state standards (CCSS), now in final development and testing, will be ready for use in the 2014-15 school year. Transition to the new standards and assessments will require fundamental changes in how special educators prepare their students. (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013)

Nevertheless, the teachers admitted to some anxiety concerning their ability to adapt their curriculum to the CCSS, which they frequently connected to the fact that the designers of the standards have not spelled out a path to alignment for teachers of ELLs and SWD (Coleman, 2011). Apropos of this was the anxiety that the teachers also felt for their students, particularly in light of observed student frustration with the pacing of the CCSS. A second grade inclusion teacher said:

I have not truly seen the 'shifts' [New York State Education Department, 2012] because although we are implementing [the Standards] in our own classes, these students haven't been exposed to the CCSS. Students are becoming frustrated with the heightened demands. They feel like they can't keep up with the curriculum. In writing, students are frustrated by not being able to interpret why their sentences are not complete, or why their grammar usage is incorrect. It is tough for them to support anything with...enough details.

Professional development opportunities were also seen as limited—or, to some extent, squandered—which contributed to anxiety. Just as classroom activities are learning situations for students, professional development constitutes a learning environment for teachers (Cwikla, 2003). Indeed, professional development provides teachers a with an opportunity to network, compare their classroom procedures with others, gain knowledge of practical applications, develop collaborative skills and advance their craft. One impression that the researchers had based on participants' responses was that if collaborative workshops could be put into place, many teachers could learn from their colleagues and could acquire or develop effective strategies (Draper, 2008; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). Still, while some participants believed that their schools were providing effective professional development, those who yearned for more felt that they would eventually receive staff development to support their efforts in meeting the demands of the CCSS. Thus, despite the shortcomings of CCSS professional development as described by some of the participants, a feeling of positive energy was palpable in most of their responses.

One teacher expressed it this way: “Over time, the kinks will be worked out. Teachers are becoming more comfortable with the shifts.”

Time may not be an ally for all teachers. Teaching literacy skills is widely perceived as difficult, but it is particularly challenging for teachers of ELLs and SWD. The participants in this study frequently expressed concern over the fact that students must master a concept before moving on, but the time constraints affecting the school day and the academic year—including holidays, weather-related school closings, student absences, assessment days and professional development days—do not allow for many concentrated hours of learning. One teacher put it this way: “With the idea of going deeper and wider in our teaching, time is a true concern—[because there is] so much to accomplish in our curriculum that pacing is a true issue. [For example,] informational texts are more complex in [terms of] language, format and vocabulary, which makes [them] more difficult for our ELLs and SWD [to process].”

Indeed, the interview data clearly showed that, overall, the participating teachers needed more time to develop their understanding of the CCSS as they relate to their curriculum and to their students' learning needs and capabilities. One participant said: “You don't realize how much time you need to spend with students in order to analyze them and study them.” Another participant echoed the feeling that additional time in the day was necessary to meet the standards and achieve success for each student: “I need to creatively find time within the school day to assess each child and design individualized instruction to help him/her meet his/her goals.”

Recommendations

Based on the participants' interview responses, their own experience as educators and the review of literature conducted for the present study, the authors put forward the following

recommendations for supporting teachers—particularly teachers of ELLs and SWD—in their effort to align teaching methods and curricula with the CCSS:

1. Alignment of the curriculum to the CCSS is critical for effective teaching. Planning groups for alignment should be instituted, with lead teachers helping to organize workshops and seminars.
2. Professional development must provide equity in training for all teachers, as well as access to needed materials. Training should also be provided to all levels of staff, including teachers, paraprofessionals, teaching assistants and administrators. In addition, districts and colleges should work collaboratively to meet the challenges of professional development. Finally, professional developers must be knowledgeable about the CCSS, the curriculum and the needs of teachers of all populations of students.
3. Community and political involvement are also important. One teacher explained that his borough president held “an education summit, and [that] he actually had a seminar on the Common Core [Standards]. And the...audience was parents and teaches as well as community leaders, because they all wanted to know how they could get the kids up to the standards.” Government officials must be held accountable for the successful implementation of the CCSS. Teachers alone cannot be held responsible. In this regard, building on the strengths of the community can be vital to success.
4. On-going school-wide conversations should take place among teachers. Teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-administrator trust must be developed in order to ensure open and meaningful dialogue. Teachers should engage in inter-class observations so that they do not feel as though they are working in a vacuum. Teachers must also be willing to share information, observations and strategic advice.

5. An equal emphasis must be placed on *career* alongside college readiness, as many students do not pursue higher education. This is especially true for SWD.
6. A closer look must be taken at the amount of time that teachers need to improve all aspects in delivering curricula that are aligned to the CCSS. This is particularly important with respect to teachers of ELLs and SWD, and district and school administrators must make every effort to ensure that these teachers are provided not only with the resources but with the flexibility that they need in order to ensure successful implementation.

Conclusion

The National Governors Association (2011) stresses the importance of adhering to the CCSS in order to ensure that all students graduate from school “college and career ready”:

Today’s students are preparing to enter a global economy where they will be competing for jobs with students from around the world. These [new] standards seek to define the knowledge and skills that students should have to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing, academic courses and in workforce training programs. Moreover, they are internationally benchmarked to ensure that all of America's students are prepared to succeed in a global society.

It is, however, not politicians but teachers who stand on the front lines in terms of imparting to students the knowledge and skills needed to meet these goals. The responses of the participants in this study reflect the fact that a great deal of hard work is still needed to make this national endeavor a success.

Given the crucial role of teachers in this regard—together with the need to ensure college and/or career readiness for *all* students—the study examined the perceptions of a sample of teachers of ELLs and SWD and their unique experiences in relation to the implementation of the CCSS. The participating teachers cited time, professional development, strategies, scaffolding, conversations with other teachers, as well as their own resourcefulness in finding information from web-sites, books and other sources as crucial factors in making implementation a success.

The passion of educators, translated into a love of learning, also emerged as an important component in successful implementation of the standards. However, the effectiveness of teachers' efforts to achieve this goal depends on support and encouragement from administrators, communities and local governments. Only such broad-based collaboration can ensure that professional development opportunities are maximized and optimized, so that schools are able to support all teachers—including those responsible for educating ELLs and SWD—as they align existing curricula and methods to the CCSS.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little about your experiences teaching in your school. What type of training in teaching English language learners and/or students with disabilities have you received?

2. In the past, how did you advance literacy for your English language learners and/or students with disabilities? What instructional strategies did you use for this purpose?

3. When did your school begin the work of aligning the current curriculum to the new CCSS? Can you describe your experiences as you began to undertake this work?

4. How do the CCSS meet the unique needs of the students in your class? How do you differentiate instruction without weakening the required rigor of these standards?

5. How prepared do you feel to adapt your lessons so that they align with the CCSS? What specific training can your school or district offer you to make the transition more effective for the students in your class?

6. What promises does the new CCSS hold for you as a teacher of ELLs and/or SWDs?

7. What challenges do you foresee in implementation with your specific student population?