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FEATURE ARTICLE

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What the CCSS Are, and What They Are Not

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; www.corestandards.org) were developed in 2010 and have been adopted by most states. Sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors' Association, the CCSS were designed to bolster the college and career readiness of students leaving high school. The sponsoring agencies contracted with a core group of experts to draft standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics. In the final document, a wide range of opinions and demands were accommodated—including those of state departments of education, professional groups, university professors, advocacy groups, and publishers. Thus, the CCSS are in some areas consistent with scientific research on learning to read, write, and do math, but in other ways they simply reflect current and popular ideas about learning that have not been scientifically validated. As the developers have stated, the CCSS describe what students should know in order to succeed beyond high school, but they do not specify how students should learn the subject matter. Of particular relevance to the community concerned with learning disabilities (LD) is that the standards do not address the realities of individual variation in learning abilities, aspirations, or preferences.

The developers of the CCSS were motivated primarily by data showing that high school students in the United States who went on to college but who did not succeed were students who had done poorly on ACT reading comprehension items requiring interpretation of complex text. In explanatory material, the CCSS development team argued that students in middle and high school were being exposed to less and less rigorous textbook material and were being required to do less challenging reading than they were in the 1970s. They concluded that texts needed to be harder and more complex, that teachers needed to do a better job teaching advanced and sophisticated reading comprehension, and that “close” and “deep” literary and informational text reading should be the main outcome of



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standards-based instruction. The standards-writing effort, therefore, was undertaken in a reverse sequence—from the end-goal of advanced, college-level academic reading and writing (and math)—backwards to its presumed underpinnings at each grade.

Realities of Language-based Learning Disabilities

And herein lies a major tension between the vision and requirements of the CCSS and the realities of student learning as we understand it from research. With regard to reading, the area of academic learning on which all other academic success depends, let's revisit some facts (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007): The average reading level in the US is equivalent to 8th or 9th grade. About 34% of the population is “below basic” on the National Assessment of Academic Progress in 4th grade. About 70-80% of students in high-poverty areas enter school being at risk for reading failure. About 5% have very severe and enduring reading disabilities, but another 10%-15% have significant impairments of reading and writing stemming from a “wiring” difference affecting language processing capacities of the brain; they are “poor readers” who may not qualify for special education. Mixed in are all those who simply have not been taught how to read. About half of the students who start out in the range of the 20th to 40th percentile by third grade do not achieve “benchmark” reading skills according to national norms. The implication of these facts is that raising standards and expectations, without sufficient attention to the known causes and remedies for reading and academic failure, is not likely to benefit students with mild, moderate, or severe learning difficulties.

What do we know about the prevention and/or amelioration of reading disabilities and related academic problems? First, there are too many cases for special education to handle, and regular classroom instruction is as critical to changing growth trajectories as remedial instruction. Second, if we do not catch students early (by 2nd grade at the latest) we have less and less chance to

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improve students' relative standing in reading. Third, although many reading disabilities can be remediated successfully by the end of first grade, (Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005) intensive effort on the part of teachers and students is required to achieve modest gains once students are beyond kindergarten and first grade. In a classic study, Torgesen & colleagues (Torgesen, Alexander, Wagner, Rashotte, Voeller, and Conway, 2001) showed that poor readers in grades 3 to 5 needed 70 hours or more of instruction, about 2 hours per day, to bring their basic reading skills up to the level predicted by their verbal reasoning abilities, and those students continued to be dysfluent on follow-up. Robin Morris and colleagues (Morris, Lovett, Wolf, Sevcik, Stinbach, Frijters, & Shapiro, 2012) showed that high schoolers with poor reading skills can improve one-half a standard deviation in reading after expert, intensive, closely monitored, theoretically sound, comprehensive, integrated instruction was delivered for 70 hours. The teachers in these studies had expertise in the subject matter, were well trained in the methodology and remedial strategies, and worked with well-defined populations of students. Such is not the everyday reality of most public school settings.

Real gains in student achievement, if students are affected by LD, are difficult to attain because students' relative standing in reading, spelling, writing, and language tends to be stable over time unless interventions are very intensive, well-informed, and sustained. Even then, neurobiological and environmental conditions conspire to limit what some students can understand, remember, and/or produce, even under ideal educational circumstances (Fletcher et al., 2007). That is why we have provided protections for students with LD: "appropriate" and meaningful education for students with learning challenges may vary from "mainstream" education in structure, content, goals, strategies, and time-frame. Because this is a complex professional undertaking, our educational treatments should emanate from scientific study of well-defined populations and should strive to emulate validated approaches for those populations.

How the CCSS Adoptions May Not Help Students with Learning Disabilities

The CCSS present a series of lofty academic learning goals, but curriculum and instructional design guided by the standards are left for other organizations to develop. Once a development group works on standards-aligned curriculum and instructional design, however, they face an enormous challenge (see, for example, the Common Core Curriculum Maps, www.commoncore.org). No single series of model lessons and no single curriculum guide can describe the variations in content and methodology necessary to reach all students (see Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Connor, Morrison, & Underwood, 2007). Any classroom will contain students with learning disabilities, poorly developed language abilities, and other characteristics of risk, but the model lessons featured in these new curriculum guides often assume that students have

either mastered the foundational skills or that they will learn them with incidental, embedded instruction. With the recent promotion of the CCSS' emphasis on informational text, complex text, reading aloud, and inquiry-based learning, the kind of instruction most necessary and beneficial for students with LD is getting very little emphasis in workshops, publications, and policy discussions. The teacher-directed, systematic, sequential, explicit approaches that work best for students with LD and learning challenges (Archer & Hughes, 2011) are receiving much less attention than they deserve, and the result will be lower student achievement, not higher.

In other subtle ways the language and organization of the CCSS may actually direct practitioners away from instruction informed by reading, language, and writing research. The Reading Foundations component of the CCSS is separate from the Literature (Informational and Narrative Text) components in English Language Arts, and the Writing and Language components are separate from one another. Although the Reading Foundations standards cover the critical milestones in reading development, they cannot inform an educator about the important relationships among phonology, word recognition, spelling, fluency and comprehension (e.g., Mehta, Foorman, Branum-Martin, & Taylor, 2005). Those relationships among components, however, actually determine the sequence, emphasis, and effect of instruction. The Writing component of the CCSS focuses only on composition and lacks explicit guidance regarding the importance of foundational writing skills (Berninger & Wolf, 2009). The Language component contains standards that are pivotal for reading comprehension but does not distinguish between spoken and written language competencies. The critical interdependences among oral language, written language, reading foundations, writing foundations, and "higher" level goals in comprehension and composition must be learned in professional development that extends far beyond the superficial question of "how to teach to the standards." Disclaimers in the CCSS document itself remind the reader that the Standards have a limited purpose, and yet we seem to be fixated far more on the Standards than the science behind effective instruction.

Avoiding a Trap of Our Own Making

At this point in our national discussion of education for students with LD—whether diagnosed or not—we need to be vigilant about the consequences of the CCSS adoptions for students who do not learn certain things easily and naturally, and for whom there is a neurobiological limit on achievement potential. If we buy in to the rhetoric claiming that all students should be able to achieve the standards by virtue of "equal access," accommodations, assistive technology, and vaguely defined "supports," we may find ourselves without a leg to stand on if students with LD are denied diplomas, given inappropriate tests, made to repeat grades or courses multiple times, or expected to learn with instruction that is simply not appropriate for them. We need to avoid creating a trap for ourselves by virtue of idealistic claims

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about student potential that ultimately results in students being punished for not being like everyone else.

Imagine if everyone were expected to meet a high standard of accomplishment in music. We would have special education for people with dysmusia. In a humane society, we would probably recognize that some people, no matter how much we work with them, will have poor rhythm, poor pitch, poor memory for melody, and no ability to compose. We would teach them to be as proficient as possible, as long as they were invested in learning, but we would nurture other strengths and minimize the limiting impact of the dysmusia. We would not make them take Band, Chorus, and Orchestra. Standards requiring analysis of an opera or composition of counterpoint, although fine for the musically inclined, would be waived for the musically challenged students. They, instead, would spend more time on art, mechanics, engineering, outdoor leadership, Spanish, alternative energy development, or any number of other subjects pertinent to meaningful preparation for life. And they would do just fine.

Advocate Where It Counts

Advocacy for students with LD should direct attention, training, and resources where they will be truly helpful. Educational standards can be irrelevant to an individual if the expected outcomes exceed the student's capabilities, have little bearing on the student's future goals, and/or do not help the student become a self-sustaining, socially competent and productive citizen. Effective advocacy might focus just as vigorously on meaningful assessments, diversity in educational opportunity, and teacher training as it does on everyone achieving a uniform academic standard.

Of these areas for advocacy, the most important is, and has been, teacher preparation and professional development. We continue to certify teachers in special education who have not been trained to teach reading, language, or writing to students with severe learning disabilities, even though at least 85% of their caseload is likely to present with these problems. CEC and DLD should pursue this training gap aggressively. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) has adopted rigorous professional standards for teachers of reading and related subjects, and is currently using them to evaluate university-based and independent teacher preparation and certification programs. IDA is also moving ahead with plans to develop and promote a competency exam for teachers of reading that will be aligned with the standards. All special education teachers should be required to meet those standards. If at some point they do, then these well-trained individuals can be trusted to make good decisions on behalf of students and to deliver effective, research-based instruction.

Rather than joining the rhetoric about the CCSS, let's continue to keep our eye on what matters most: meaningful, research-based education that maximizes potential and opportunity and

that safeguards students' self-esteem and social adjustment. The CCSS may play some role in guiding that process, but should not be the overriding or dominant influence on the shape of education for students with LDs.

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