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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers' Implementation of and Stages of Concern regarding English Language Arts (ELA)

Common Core State standards (CCSS) in New York State

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## Abstract

In the State of New York, the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and associated high-stakes assessments have sparked debates among education stakeholders. Educators are concerned about its impact on students' test scores, graduation rates and school funding. Unfortunately, there were no studies that promoted understanding of teachers' concerns and the extent to which they were implementing the English Language Arts (ELA) CCSS. This study investigated ELA teachers' concerns and the extent to which they were implementing the CCSS in language arts in the state of New York.

In this non-experimental quantitative design using survey research methodology, a modified Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) and a researcher-developed implementation of language arts core standards questionnaire were given to Grades 6-12 ELA teachers from 75 selected schools in New York state. Fifty-three useable responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation. Respondents were mostly from urban/suburban schools (90.4%). Teachers implement 13 of the 15 common core standards in language arts at least once a week ( $M=4.02$  to  $M=6.15$ ). Levels of implementation are similar in both middle and high schools ( $p>.05$ ) and appear to be unrelated to number of years implementing the CCSS. Approximately half (52.8%) are at concern stages 4 to 6. There is no relationship between stage of concern and levels of implementation of the standards. The data suggest that teachers are adequately implementing language arts common core standards in New York. Half of the teachers' concerns are generally about how implementation of the standards affect their students and their colleagues. The other half are concerned about how implementation affects them personally. Teachers must continue to receive targeted professional development in their identified areas of needs.

## Introduction

Curricular controversy has for long taken a center stage in America. Every education stakeholder defines curriculum in their terms and their expectation of educational outcomes differ accordingly. “They believe they know what should be taught in any given discipline, and equally important, just what a student should know or be able to do upon completion of that course study” (Maxwell & Meiser, 2001, p. 36). The Common Core State Standards were crafted to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students. But the hasty adoption and implementation of the curriculum and the associated high-stakes testing are problematic for all education stakeholders. Educators across America feel threatened because of the punitive use of students' test scores on Common Core assessments and graduation rates. "The Perception of a potential or real reduction in status can generate a strong threat response... a status threat can occur through ...simply suggesting someone is slightly ineffective at a task...." (Rock, 2008, pp. 3-4). The use of standardized test scores in this manner has negative consequences on students, especially the poor. Zimmerman (2010) noted that government insistence on standardized testing as the sole educational achievement primarily victimizes poor students. When threatened with closure, schools "tailor their curriculums as precisely as possible to the tests, even providing minute-by-minute scripts for the teachers" (as cited in Pinar, 2012, p.17).

McMurrer and Frizzell's (2013) evaluation of efforts that were being made to implement the Common Core Standards, its adoption, and diffusion focused on the administration and implementation of the curriculum. Other studies focused on the process of implementation of the Common Core focused. Hodge, et al. (2016) focused on the secondary English/language arts resources provided by 51 State Education Agencies (SEAs) (p.1). Supovitz et al. (2016) focused on the professional resources within schools that might be utilized to develop instructional

capacity from within (p.1). The important question in the public eye is probably whether or no and to what extent the curriculum is working to make students more college and career ready (Polikoff, 2017, p. 1).

Given these problems, this study examined four research questions: 1. The what extent do teachers in New York State implement the English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core State Standards? 2. Is the extent of implementation related to school level (middle vs. high school) and years of implementing common core standards? 3. What concerns do New York State ELA teachers have regarding the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and at what stages are their concerns? 4. What relationships exist between teachers' Stages of Concern and their extent of implementation of the ELA Common Core State Standards?

### **Background**

America has a long history of education reforms with a continuous shift in emphasis, currently in high-stakes testing and accountability. "As we enter the 21st century, curricular controversy continues. National and state standards are a major issue in every school district; the debate on what is essential in English language arts arises in every state and national testing and a nation that looks at statistics for evidence of learning" (Maxwell & Meiser, 2001, p. 37).

Currently, the push is to get all American students to become capable of navigating, reflecting, and critically thinking about complex texts. According to curriculum scholars and education historians, the dissatisfaction with the performance of American schools when compared to other nations ushered in another wave of education reform, the Common Core Standards. As noted by Johnson (2002), "Evidence continues to build around the necessity for all students to engage and become proficient in rigorous curriculum content and problem-solving skills" (p. 10). However, the proposed curriculum initiatives are becoming more complicated and

devastating than ever before, and the use of the data generated from the accompanying high stakes testing is equally of dismal consequences to students, teachers, administrators, and school districts. "Today, change incorporates much more comprehensive vision for school improvement. We have transitioned from clearly defined, easily delineated innovations to complex, multifaceted innovations and school improvement projects" (Hall et al., 2013, p.43).

The Common Core State Standards were written in response to the push to get all American students to become reflective and critical thinkers capable of navigating complex texts, as noted earlier. The asserted goal of the Common Core Standards is to ensure that "all students, regardless of their circumstance, receive a content-rich education in the full range of the liberal arts and sciences, including English, mathematics, history, the arts, science, and foreign languages" (commoncore.org). New York State was one of the first states to adopt and implement the Common Core Standards as part of its Regents Reform Agenda to provide students for college and careers. The Board of Regents in its July 2010 meeting adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy and Mathematics and created the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) by adding New York-specific components (EngageNY, 2013). In Spring 2014, New York State administered the first Regents Examination in English Language Arts (Common Core) to communicate to all educational stakeholders measures of student proficiency on the competencies students need for college and career success (EngageNY, 2014).

However, in New York and many other states in the nation, parents, teachers, teachers' unions, the private sector, and the State are at war over the Common Core State Standards and Common Core standardized testing. Year after year, in New York State, more and more students opt out of the high-stakes Common Core Assessment. Barlowe and Cook (2016) have noted that

the large number of participants in the opt-out movement indicated strong resistance to a school ‘reform’ that has done more to undermine public education than to improve it (p.4). This scenario is not only challenging for educators but frustrating for students and their parents.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

The theoretical frameworks for this study were the Innovation-Decision Process and the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). The theory of innovation-decision process asserts that an individual or a system’s evaluation of a new idea and the decision to incorporate or not to incorporate it involves a process through which a series of choices and actions take place over time (Rogers, 2003, p. 168). The rate of adoption of innovation varies in different social systems, and the system's norms and its other characteristics have both direct and indirect impacts on the behavior of its members (Rogers, 2003, p. 23).

The CBAM provides ways for studying teacher change in the context of educational innovation (Wang, 2014, p. 23). The decisions to adopt or to resist the adoption of any innovation (such as the Common Core State Standards) occur in a social context that involves policymakers, administrators, teachers, students, and parents—a complex social structure. The social context of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is replete with concerns related to its rigor, implementation, assessment, and use of the assessment scores. The CBAM framework assumes that there is a stage-defined progression of feelings, perceptions, reactions, and attitudes of individuals within a system toward innovations and that there are differences in the levels of use of innovation among individuals in the same system. Using the framework in this study helped to understand at granular stages the complexity of teachers’ concerns and the trajectory of their learning and development as they continue to grapple with

the implementation of the Common Core Standards. It provides ways for studying teacher change in the context of educational innovation (Wang, 2014, p. 23).

### **Literature Review**

In recent times, the demand for curriculum reform has become a global zeitgeist. Like in other nations, the debate and fight over curriculum reform are continuing to rage in America. It is multi-faceted and often involves different stakeholders. Longstreet (1993) noted that “Every few years, a major movement of some kind appears” (as cited in Marshall et al., 2007, p. 269). Raising the standards of learning through schooling has become an important national priority that has caught the attention of many nations in recent years, causing governments, the world over, to vigorously pursue this goal (Black & William, 1998).

### **Trends in Curriculum Development**

The Common Core State Standards is one of the many curriculum innovations in the history of American education and is not immune to the harsh scrutiny that those before it suffered. Wraga (1999) opined that “Politicians have encoded national education goals and subobjectives [sic] into federal law and have touted the ‘voluntary’ adoption of national standards and assessments by state and local education agencies” (p.4). According to Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), “Public education has been subjected to countless reforms that were undermined by hasty, inadequate implementation” (2016, p. 1). The curriculum has focused on what schools should do, fundamental values and beliefs about how the youngsters should perceive the society, and the expectations of adults as they enter the world (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, in Flinders & Thornton, 2009, p. 303). Two curriculum standards movement and alignment arguments (equity and accountability arguments), appeal to parents, policymakers, and politicians (Fenwick English, 1992, as cited in Wraga,

1999). The equity argument maintains that majority-culture students are favored by the socio-economic bias in standardized tests and work in tandem against minority-culture students and limit their educational opportunities and life chances. The accountability argument, English asserted, projects curriculum alignment as a useful teacher-management tool (p. 6). Eisner (2001) argued that the formulation of standards of measurement of performance had always aimed at making teachers and school administrators accountable to the stakeholders and for the public to know which schools are performing and which ones are not (a cited in Flinders & Thornton 2009, p. 327).

### **The Common Core State Standards (CCSS)**

The Common Core State Standards framework comprises six instructional shifts: 1. balancing informational and literary texts for Pre-K-5, and for grades 6-12, 2. knowledge in the disciplines, 3. staircase of complexity, 4. text-based answers, 5. writing from sources, and 6. academic vocabulary (EngageNY, 2012).

### **Concerns Related to Common Core State Standards**

Concerns related to Common Core include: implementation and teaching, testing and evaluation, students' academic success, accountability, and professional development.

#### *Implementation/Teaching Concerns*

Learning is driven by what happens in the classroom between the teacher and the students. If teachers effectively manage other complex factors and demanding situations that exist in the classroom, standards can be raised (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Teachers can know students' progress and problems through observations, class discussions, and reading students' work (Black & Wiliam, 1998; see also Troia & Olinghouse, 2013).

Teachers in New York State teach a diverse population of students and under inequitable conditions that can positively and negatively impact their implementation of any curriculum. The use of students' test scores to evaluate teachers and schools could provoke a status reduction threat to teachers and school administrators, and this could adversely impact their extent of implementation of any curriculum and the administration of the schools, respectively. "The Perception of a potential or real reduction in status can generate a strong threat response (Rock, 2008, pp. 3-4). It is challenging to get the millions of K-12 public school teachers to integrate the expected changes into their practice (Sawchuk, 2012, p. 4). Teachers may be willing to implement the curriculum but may not have an adequate structure to facilitate innovation adoption. "The structure of a social system can facilitate or impede the diffusion of innovations" (Rogers, 2003, p. 25). Wallender (2014) predicted that the Common Core State Standards reform initiative would require several changes in philosophy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

#### *Testing and Evaluation Concerns*

Under the standards-based accountability system, subjects outside the core are likely to be undermined (Siskin, 2003, in Flinders & Thornton, 2009, pp. 318-319). The focus of accountability efforts in the United States is on the achievement of higher test scores. However, the kind of teaching and learning systems and practices capable of developing a widespread capacity for significantly greater learning was lacking (Darling-Hammond & McCloskey, 2008, as cited in Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2011, p. 344). "At the most basic level, it is not obvious how to measure whether teachers are actually implementing the standards" (Polikoff, 2017, p.3).

#### *Students' Academic Success Concerns*

High-stakes testing has dramatically impacted the teaching and learning process. As Barlowe & Cook (2016) noted, "High-stakes, test-driven assessment inhibits collaboration among educators, hinders student engagement, and undermines critical thinking" (p. 6). Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) have also said that "Generally, these assessments are referred to as 'high-stakes' assessments because critical decisions about students, teachers, and schools are made based on their results" (p. 248). The importance attached to these tests, they further noted, has risen correspondingly and has dire consequences both for the teacher, students, and administrators (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 249).

Some curriculum scholars argue against standardized tests. Sleeter & Stillman (2005) noted that "compliance with the standards is enforced mainly through testing and textbooks" (as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2009, p. 312). Grummet (1988), opined that they are meaningless, and "foreclose originality, creativity, and independence of mind" (as cited in Pinar, 2012, p. 30). Pinar (2012) argued that "Without the agency of subjectivity, education evaporates, replaced by the conformity compelled by scripted curricula and standardized tests" (p. 43). The implementation of educational change involves a change in what teachers do in the classroom (Fullan, 2001, p. 38).

### *Accountability Concerns*

According to Daniel T. Willington, more challenging standards for students translate to more challenging content for teachers and also impacts the support teachers needed to receive (as cited in Sawchuk, 2012, p. 4). The instructional core elements—teacher, student, and content (curriculum)- do not function in isolation. What upsets one upsets the rest. "Intervening on any single axis of the instructional core means that you have to intervene on the other two to have a predictable effect on student learning" (City, E., et al., 2009, p. 26). According to Heifetz and

Linsky (2004), “Policymakers are demanding performance accountability measures for students and educators that bring into question deeply held notions of good teaching, good learning, and success in the classroom...” (p. 37). Similarly, Stigler and Hiebert (n.d., as cited in Black & Wiliam, 1998), have noted that estimating standards and accountability over teaching and learning processes do not translate to teacher improvement (p. 81). Linking learning to test scores does not serve a useful purpose. It encourages the drop out of students who are weak in the core subjects and lack the motivation to learn them, and the expulsion of students whose failing scores could cause the schools to lose the bonuses that increased test scores attract (Ravitch, 2010, as cited in Pinar 2012, p. 18).

### *Professional Development Concerns*

The professional development of teachers is at the heart of any curriculum reform initiative. A good curriculum in the hand of an incompetent teacher is as ineffective as the teacher. So, pitching the standards at a level that may require teachers to function at a higher cognitive plane has become a matter of concern (Sawchuk, 2012, p. 4). According to City et al. (2009), “The idea that instruction is at the core of school improvement is typically not a particularly hard sell with educators in this period of high-stakes accountability” (p. 86). Besides, overemphasis on the standards could lead to overlooking the much-needed investment in ineffective curriculum and professional development for teachers (Main, 2012, p. 73; see also McPartland & Schneider). “Curriculum workers in our current climate,” Snow-Gerono of Boise State University noted, “must learn to work within moves toward high-stakes testing and standardization” (as cited in Marshall et al., 2007, p. 274). Therefore, investment in teacher expertise and curriculum resources is also critical, not just investment in well-designed assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2010, as cited in Main, 2012, p. 74, see also City et al., 2009).

## **Methodology and Design**

This study was designed as a non-experimental quantitative survey study of fifty-three public school Grades 6-12 ELA teachers in New York State. Because of its versatility, efficiency, and generalizability, survey research is commonly used in education (Schutt, 1996, as cited in McMillan and Schumacher 2010, P. 236). A nonprobability sampling approach called *purposive sampling* used involved the selection of a sample of fifty-three Grades 6-12 English Language Arts public school teachers, tenured and non-tenured, who have one or more years of Common Core State Standards implementation experience participated in this study to which results can be generalized.

*Stages of Concern.* Teachers' Stages of Concern regarding the Common Core State Standards were studied quantitatively with a seven-path Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) comprising of 35 focused items.

*Extent of Implementation.* A researcher-designed extent of implementation questionnaire was used in collecting data and in determining teachers' extent of implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

Expert judges ensured the reliability and the validity of the instruments, both the modified Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) and the researcher-designed Extent of Implementation Questionnaire were pilot-tested with a sample representative of the target population.

## **Procedures**

Participants were protected from psychological risks and guaranteed confidentiality in all phases of this study. Necessary IRB approvals were obtained. Participants were adequately informed about the survey even though participation through questionnaires and surveys does not

require physical interaction with participants (Portney & Watkins, 2000, p. 312). Both instruments were administered together electronically using the SurveyMonkey platform. Participants were recruited through emails, newspaper advertisements, and postcards with a link to the questionnaires.

## Data Analysis

*Research Question 1.* Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency) were used to determine the extent of implementation of the common core standards. For interpretation purpose, raw scores of 1(never) and 2(monthly) are considered inadequate; scores of 3(once biweekly), 4(once a week) and 5 (2-3 a week) are considered moderately adequate; and 6(once a day), 7(2-3 times a day) and 8 (more than 3 times a day) are considered adequate.

*Research Question 2.* Independent samples t-test was used to compare middle and high school teachers' levels of implementations. Spearman rho correlation was used to determine the relationship between implementation levels and years of experience implementing the common core standards. Teachers indicated their years of experience in categories (ordinal).

*Research Question 3.* Frequency distributions were used to determine the stage of concerns with teachers' implementation of the common core standards.

*Research Question 4.* Spearman rho correlation coefficients were used to determine relationship between implementation and stage of concerns.

## Findings

### Research Question 1

To what extent do teachers implement the Common Core State Standards?

1. *Reading.* Approximately 77% to 98% of teachers were moderately adequate or adequately implementing the reading core standards. Adequate implementation range from a low of

30.2% for analyzing ‘how two or more texts address similar themes to a high of 84.9% for “activities that require students to read closely to determine what the text says.”

2. *Writing.* Most teachers were adequately implementing activities in two areas: activities requiring students to produce clear and coherent writing (62.3%) and developing and strengthening the writing process (54.8%). More than half of the teachers were inadequately implementing to ‘write narratives to develop real or imagined experience or events’ (56.6%); ‘gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism’ (52.8%) and ‘implement activities that require students to conduct short and sustained research projects’ (67.9%).
3. *Speaking/Listening.* Over 90% of the teachers moderately adequately and adequately implemented ‘activities that required students to prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners.’ Only about 60% implemented making ‘strategic use of digital media and visual displays’ and ‘adapt speed to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks.’ About 80% integrated and evaluate ‘information presented in diverse media and formats’ and implemented ‘activities that required students to present information, findings, and supporting evidence’.
4. *Language.* More than 50% of the teachers adequately implemented all items of the language core standards. Only 15% or less implemented them inadequately. The best implemented standard is to ‘acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases’.

#### Research Question 2

Is the extent of implementation related to school level (middle vs. high school) and years of implementing common core standards?

*School Type and Reading.* At  $\alpha=.05$ , there are no statistically significant differences between middle and high schools on all 5 reading core standards.

*School Type and Writing.* At  $\alpha=.05$ , there are no statistically significant differences.

*School Type and Speaking and Listening.* Observed differences between teachers in the two types of schools are not statistically significant ( $p>.05$ ).

*School Type and Language.* With  $p >.05$ , there are no statistically significant differences.

*Implementation and Years of Experience.* Overall, at  $p \leq .05$ , only two correlation coefficients are statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ): between years of implementation and key ideas/details ( $r=.339$ ) and production and distribution of writing ( $r=.307$ ). Correlation coefficients are negligible ( $r=.060$  between 'range of reading and levels of complexity' and years of implementation) to weak ( $r=.339$  between 'key ideas and details' and years of implementation').

### Research Question 3

What concerns do New York State English Language Arts Teachers have regarding the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and at what stages are their concerns? Approximately 50% of the teachers were in Stage 4 through 6 in which teachers were concerned about how the implementation of the core standards affects their students and their colleagues and that they may have better ideas of implementing the standards.

### Research Question 4

What relationships exist between teachers' Stages of Concern and their extent of implementation of the Common Core State Standards? Overall, there are no correlations between implementation of core standards stage of concern.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and their implications, the following recommendations for future research were proffered.

1. *Change in Study Design.* This study's findings and conclusions, as expected, were limited to the number of accurately completed surveys. Future studies on this subject can be conducted regionally or nationally. A longitudinal or a mixed-method (interview and observation) study of this topic would allow for sufficient time to collect and collate a large volume of data to make broader generalizations on the subject.

2. *Studies of Professional Development.* Focused studies on the relevance, timing, and extent of professional development opportunities teachers are getting when a new curriculum is adopted is necessary. According to Reyes and Lappan (2007), the implementation of a coherent and rigorous curriculum requires leadership, cooperation, and collaboration (as cited in Main, 2012, p. 74. See also Polikoff, 2017, p.4). Therefore, studies are needed to determine the extent to which school administrators are involved in curriculum adoption with regards to what monitoring and feedback strategies they are using to ensure that all teachers are collaborating and adequately implementing all components of the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers are adequately implementing language arts common core standards in New York. Half of the teachers' concerns are generally about how implementation of the standards affect their students and their colleagues. The other half are concerned about how implementation affects them personally. To achieve the objective of the curriculum and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), teachers must continue to receive targeted professional development in their identified areas of needs.

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Keywords: curriculum, standardized testing, common core, common core state standards, education standards, curriculum reform, education reform, stages of concern, school reform

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