Master Project

Increasing the Effectiveness of Teaching the Common Core Standards for Students with

Severe Cognitive Disabilities: A Professional Development Study

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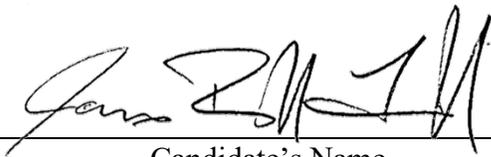
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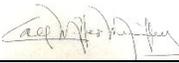
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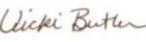   Corll Miller Morrissey   Date

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

This Action Research/Professional Development Study looks at the Common Core State Standards through the lens of Special Education and attempts to find a way to successfully integrate the standards into the academic needs of students with severe cognitive disabilities. The literature review shows a constant tension between administrative requirements and the difficulties of integrating grade level standards into the academic lives of students that are not at grade level. Through personal reflection, the writer critically reviews the information and applies it to personal experience to find a balance between the needs of the students, the administrative needs of the teacher, and the realities of working with this student population.

Introduction

Students that require intensive life skills development require highly specialized instructional opportunities in order to increase student potential for success both in and out of the classroom. Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and 504 plans are designed to increase student success and provide the needed accommodations and modifications to help build that success. In 2011, the need for educational reform compelled the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to provisionally adopt a set of national educational standards. OSPI directed educators in Washington State to incorporate these standards into their teaching practices by the 2014-15 school year. These standards, referred to as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), are a single set of standards designed for all students, regardless of intellectual ability (National Governors Association, 2010). These universally applicable standards created an immediate challenge for special education (SPED) teachers of students with severe cognitive disabilities (SCD).

Today, with student college and career readiness being the impetus behind the CCSS, many SPED teachers are faced with the task of making the framework offered by the standards work for students that did not meet the lower grade level standards. This dilemma has been a part academics for many years and is a struggle for many teachers: How to apply grade level standards to students that do not have the required prior grade level skills while maintaining the progress of those students who have mastered those same skills. This is especially difficult for teachers of students with SCD, where many students are in a permanent state of being behind academically.

As a teacher of students in highly specialized classrooms that address both academic and behavioral needs, there are many times when student need goes far beyond the framework of the

standards. These non-academic needs, including behavioral, social-emotional, and life skills, have a direct impact on how I utilized the CCSS. I found the standards to be an afterthought in my planning rather than a framework or guide. They created an underlying tension in my academic planning that was uncomfortable because the needs of the students did not fit into the parameters of the standards. This tension invited me to ask how I could effectively, meaningfully, and with integrity incorporate the CCSS into the day to day processes of a life skills classroom while understanding and applying policy and best practices with fidelity. This tension also created a personal struggle between honoring the student's IEP goals and adhering to the administrative expectations to teach using the CCSS.

Dilemma

Originally, I worked in a life skills classroom where the modification and differentiation of the CCSS to something functional within my lesson design for students with SCD was a consistent challenge. Each student required a significant amount of one-on-one work in order to successfully move toward achievement of their IEP goals, which were typically significantly below grade level. Because of their SCD, our work as educators had a primary focus on life skills with a secondary focus on academic skills. Many students could not speak or effectively communicate their basic needs and wants except through alternative communication devices such an iPad or visual images on a page. It was my work with these students that drove me to ask how to effectively teach using the framework offered by the CCSS while maintaining the integrity of their IEP goals.

Rationale

This Professional Development (PD) study seeks to identify meaningful connections between the concrete goals of the Common Core State Standards and the more fluid needs of

students with SCD. The goals of this PD study are to increase positive teaching practices and build my professional knowledge base. Using the Action Research cycle and reflective practice, I conducted an in-depth study of my teaching practices using the CCSS for students with SCD and set professional goals designed for classroom implementation. These goals are designed to better provide academic opportunities for students with SCD while increasing my ability to address a broader range of student needs.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Introduction

In 2010, the Washington State Legislature passed Engrossed Second Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 6696, which focused on reforming the educational processes within the state to provide an accountability framework for the continuous improvement for all schools and districts. ESSB 6696 required the adoption of an aligned federal/state accountability system that provided an equitable education for all students. The CCSS, adopted by Washington State in 2011 and implemented at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020) was used to meet the requirements of ESSB 6696. The standards, created as a way "to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life" (National Governors Association, 2010) appeared to be an ideal fit for the raised standards required through ESSB 6696.

In the United States, the population of students with SCD continues to grow; Over 14% of all enrolled students receiving special education services are estimated to have a SCD (Marsh, 2015; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). The CCSS, when applied to students with SCD, presents unique challenges to both students and teachers. These challenges require

strong classroom management skills, imaginative lesson planning, continuing professional development, support from school administrators, and access to professional networks to ensure students have meaningful access to the curriculum (Gallagher, & Odozi, 2015; Murphy & Haller, 2015; Van Boxtel, 2017; Taub et al., 2019).

The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2013) surveyed 599 qualified educators, including both teachers and administrators, in regards to the CCSS. Of those surveyed, 71% indicated that the training and/or professional development done in anticipation of the implementation helped to better understand the CCSS, but only 45% of the respondents who taught SPED felt adequately prepared to teach their students using the CCSS. This lack of confidence is addressed in the preparation needs noted by Graham-Day et al. (2014) and Van Boxtel (2017). These studies looked at the needs of both SPED and General Education (GenEd) teachers and noted that specific professional skills must be developed in order to effectively utilize the CCSS: The ability to align IEP goals with the CCSS, implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a primary source for teaching, and evidence-based practices focusing on collaboration which can strengthen a SPED teacher's ability to not only apply the standards to a student's needs but work with their GenEd peers in relation to serving those students. These studies also discussed the need for administrative supports in order strengthen the skills of SPED teachers to implement the use of the CCSS in their classrooms.

Professional Development

The literature repeatedly noted the need for teachers to receive active and continuing training and support to use the CCSS with fidelity: Van Boxtel (2017) notes that familiarization with the standards at each grade level as well as creating IEP goals aligned with the CCSS can help to increase the positive impact on both individual students and in the classroom. By

developing the ability to apply the CCSS throughout IEP creation, SPED teachers develop assets that not only benefit students but also help to increase their success in working with GenEd teachers and other stakeholders (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Platten, 2014; Van Boxtel, 2017). When teaching students with SCD, the collaborative process with GenEd teachers, community members, and administrators has been shown to strengthen a SPED teacher's applicable skills and increase the effective impact of the CCSS. (Graham-Day et al., 2014; Marsh, 2015; Murphy, & Haller, 2015). These researchers also noted the importance of collaboration as a long-term goal best achieved through improved professional development opportunities that target teaching through the lens of the framework provided by the CCSS.

Researchers have also found that another element of professional development lay in lessening work-related stress: This form of professional development improved teacher performance. Through professional development and positive administrative support, teachers had higher job satisfaction and less work-related stress related to administrative requirements such as paperwork and professional observations (Haydon et al., 2018; Filippi & Hackmann, 2019). These qualitative studies also found correlations between the amount of administrative support and levels of teacher stress. Haydon et al., (2018) found that SPED teachers indicated a higher amount of work-related stress when support from administrators was lacking, while a higher level of positive supports from the administration helped lessen work related stress. Their research also noted that positive administrative supports such as understanding SPED laws, proper supervision practices, and targeted professional development opportunities which equally focused on all standards encouraged less teacher turn over year to year (Haydon et al., 2018; Van Boxtel, 2017). Other noted positive supports included autonomy in the classroom, peer interactions, and support from parents and other stakeholders while issues such as a high

workload, increased paperwork, and low salaries increased work related stress and a encouraged a lack of retention in SPED teacher longevity, especially in relation to early career teachers (Chatman, 2017; Frank et al., 2020).

These studies also provided opportunity to see differing points of view based on the focus and participants of each study: According to Van Boxtel (2017), administrators see the CCSS as a means to provide educational opportunities for all students while Hayden et al. (2018) found SPED teachers tend to view it as an intrusion that does not fit the needs of their students. McGurn (2014) and Murphy & Haller (2015) discussed teacher perceptions in regards to implementing the CCSS. Their research found that teachers had developed negative opinions in regards to the effectiveness of teaching in conjunction with the standards and that positive student outcomes were hindered because of the CCSS. Researchers also noted that teachers with less than 5 years' experience in the classroom left their teaching careers sooner due to a lack of support and professional development. These negative opinions created a lack of employee retention which then starts a cycle of new teachers attempting to learn to teach using the CCSS without supports and then leaving due to high work-related stress. (Chatman, 2017; Frank et al., 2020; Hayden et al., 2018). Researchers also discussed the need to increase professional development opportunities as a means to decrease teacher dissatisfaction related to implementing the CCSS (Jenkins & Agamba, 2013; McNulty & Gloeckler, 2011; Petersen, 2015). Quality opportunities for professional growth were found to be a key to retaining early career teachers and increasing professional effectiveness in using the CCSS.

Impact

Throughout implementation of the standards, researchers have investigated their impact on both students and educators. The IDEA entitles all students access to the general curriculum,

including those with SCD (Cushing et al., 2005). The CCSS did not alter this entitlement, and the overall message has remained consistent: The CCSS were written for all students and all students can successfully access both the general curriculum and CCSS (National Governors Association, 2010). Best & Cohen (2013) do not agree with this assertion and discuss the need to provide standards specifically designed for students with SCD, stating that accommodations and modifications are not enough to provide meaningful access. Other researchers noted the need to connect the CCSS to the curriculum in terms of an adaptive approach. Their research suggested IEP goals can be achieved through an intentionally designed curriculum that targets student needs and aligns with the standards (Taub et al., 2019).

For students with SCD, the chosen curriculum is a vital part of meaningful access to the CCSS (Cushing et al., 2005). According to Taub et al. (2019), commercially available curriculum for SPED is being sold without research to back the claims being made by the creators: they describe the effectiveness of these commercially available curriculums, in terms of providing meaningful access to the CCSS for students with SCD, as significantly lacking. The provision of effective instruction and meaningful access to the CCSS by varying instructional approaches, applying Universal Design to lessons, and providing opportunity for inclusion in GenEd classrooms with specialized pull-out services have all been found to be successful in some cases and lacking in others, making it difficult to create a consistent model for academic achievement (Stephan & Smith, 2012; Platten, 2014; Patterson, 2014; Fuchs et al. 2015). Fuchs et al. (2015) specifically note that student inclusion does not mean student engagement in lessons and explored the concept that inclusion did not guarantee access to the general curriculum. They describe their findings in terms of the need for student engagement through quality educational

practices such as inclusion-based classrooms where all students learn from each other and explicit instructional strategies that target student need while addressing specific standards.

Gallagher, & Odozi (2015) reported that engagement through cognitive and behavioral means is especially important for students with special needs. Their research determined that effective classroom management skills can increase the effectiveness of the CCSS while developing a level of engagement in students with cognitive disabilities that builds learning opportunities. ShaBazz (2019) discusses effective lesson design for students with special needs as the process of incorporating classroom management with specialized instruction. Another component discussed in the literature is the need for intentional collaboration between GenEd and SPED teachers in order to build effective instruction and increase student engagement (Graham-Day et al., 2014; Murphy & Haller, 2015). These researchers discuss the effect these components have on instructional practices and the resulting impact on student learning. They repeat the need for engaging instructional practices and quality classroom management skills. Their research indicates that students, when learning through the lens of the CCSS, require effective and specialized instruction, which in turn can help increase student engagement. This increase through targeted instructional strategies helps to overcome the obstacles faced by students with SCD (Constable et al., 2013) and opens up teaching opportunities.

Browne (2018), suggested that the CCSS must be changed or modified to be effective for students with SCD, but that further research is warranted. Other research by Cash (2014) noted that many teachers do not trust they are able to effectively implement the CCSS for SPED students even with targeted professional development. Noted teacher concerns included managing issues inherent with teaching autistic students such as difficulty concentrating and focusing (Constable et al., 2013), classroom management (Gallagher, & Odozi, 2015), and

beliefs that the standards limit the successful completion of IEP goals (LaRock, 2018). These perceived barriers are shared by many and prevent them from attempting to incorporate the standards into instruction.

Challenges

Negative teacher perceptions of prior standards-based educational reform efforts create roadblocks to implementing the CCSS (Cheng, 2012) while a lack of professional development opportunities allow negative perceptions to persist (Jenkins & Agamba, 2013). Together, these challenges prevent the CCSS from being as effective as intended and help to continue to widen the achievement gap between student groups. Pearson (2018), Best & Cohen (2013), and Browne (2018) describe the impact of negative perceptions on the effective implementation of the CCSS and the need to overcome these perceptions to ensure equitable access for all students. According to the research of Estrada (2017), Rao & Meo (2016), and Scott & Bruno (2018), the concept of a multi-level teaching approach, as accomplished through UDL, can effectively use the standards to address every student's educational needs, which works towards the effective use of the CCSS and overcoming negative perceptions of educational reform efforts.

The National Governors Association (2010) describe the Core Standards as being designed for all students, yet some researchers question or disagree with this assertion. Best & Cohen (2013) describe standards in terms of student need: a single set of standards does not take into account the varied needs of all students, especially those with SCD. Their research focused on targeted lesson design and personalized supports to accomplish learning using the standards. Other research, studying the progression of learning using the standards, by Stephan & Smith (2012), Platten (2014), ShaBazz (2019) and Taub et al. (2019), concluded that students need both basic skills and prior standards to be mastered before progression through the framework of the

standards is possible: without mastery, students cannot successfully progress through grade level standards.

While systemic in form, the formatting of the standards by grade level has created difficulties for SPED teachers in terms of effectively connecting standards to IEP goals. Diehm (2017) notes that IEP goal writing in the post CCSS era has resulted in the use of online or software-based goal banks that are not individualized and are often poorly written and unmeasurable, creating an artificial alignment with the standards that has little impact on student growth. Lowman (2016) studied the connection between professional development and IEP goal writing and found that those teachers with continued opportunities for skill development increased their abilities to create effective, standards-based goals which in turn provided opportunity to maintain student academic growth that could be related to the CCSS.

Some states faced significant challenges in implementing the standards: resistance from teachers in implementation, insufficient or ineffective curriculum choices that are not standards aligned, time constraints in relation to both professional development and lesson time, and funding issues related to both professional development and curriculum. Hursh (2007) posed one possible negative outcome of implementing the standards and related it to passing standardized tests: by shifting implementation from an academic process to a political process, the CCSS are able to be used to recreate students as "commodities" which are then related to the successful passing of standardized tests. Hursh continues by suggesting that by politicizing standardized testing, students are intentionally left behind academically and effectiveness of the framework created through the CCSS is reduced.

The literature pointed out a mixture of challenges for students with SCD. Authors discussed a variety of challenges in implementing the standards: repeated changes to available

curriculum, differing approaches to implementing and using the standards, and shifting legal requirements for SPED teachers (Coburn et al., 2016; LaRock, 2018; Smith & Thier, 2017). Also discussed in the literature is the impact of professional development that was lacking or even nonexistent in relation to students with SCD (Jenkins & Agamba, 2013, McGurn, 2014; Murphy & Haller, 2015). Murphy & Haller (2015) quoted a respondent as saying the CCSS should only be applied to those students who are college bound. This assertion is well beyond the main goal of the CCSS: access is for all students and specifically described as being designed to be challenging while providing the opportunity for all students to be college and career ready. According to National Governors (2010), the CCSS do not provide guidance in terms of implementation or continued professional development for SPED teachers. They intentionally leave these needs to be addressed by other parties (such as school districts). The creators of the CCSS instead offer the same guidance SPED teachers have had for many years: provide quality accommodations, modifications, and supports to students with special needs.

Another challenge in implementing the CCSS connected to standardized testing is that parents can legally refuse to allow their children to take high stakes standardized tests. Their reasons, as stated in multiple sources, ranged from over use of testing, the belief that standardized tests are not a true indicator of student ability, and that standardized tests create undue strain on student mental health (Abraham et al., 2019; Heissel et al., 2017). Tienken & Zhao (2013) posed the argument that the CCSS and other related educational reforms discourage student educational growth and remove classroom autonomy from teachers. These authors stated that standardized testing widens the achievement gap between GenEd students and students with special needs while encouraging the construction of school cultures primarily focused on passing standardized tests. They also argue that schools that have this focus remove the opportunity for

students to learn beyond the parameters of standardized testing. Finally, Tienken & Zhao (2013) contend there is a connection between increased accountability and the widening of the achievement gaps.

Gallagher & Odozi (2015), Yearta et al. (2014), and Logan & Wimer (2013) discussed the challenges associated with implementing the CCSS for students with SCD. They associated implementation with an increase in inclusion policies in GenEd classrooms by school districts working to ensure equal access for all students. They discussed the need to develop teaching skills and assessments that work within the higher expectations of the CCSS while providing accommodations designed for differing learning needs. In addition, they indicated that lower classroom sizes assisted in making inclusion viable for teachers and students. These authors also discussed using instructional strategies that encouraged inclusion for students with special needs by offering all students the opportunity to collaborate and creatively problem solve while incorporating both new and prior learning into their academic tasks. As a final note, they noted the use of UDL as an ideal means of connecting these needs together to overcome the challenges associated with an inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

An overarching theme repeated throughout the literature is the need for professional development for special educators on management of the CCSS and SPED. For teachers, this can be accomplished through both administrative guided and self-directed means, but the overall benefits of continued quality professional development far outweigh the time it takes to develop these skills. The issue that comes up is the need for continued access to quality materials and professional development opportunities. The interactive process of teaching and learning is a

vital part of professional development and should be a consistent part of these training opportunities.

Many teachers view the CCSS as a difficult piece of educational reform when applied to students with SCD. The literature suggests a variety of solutions, but the main theme repeated by authors is the need to be open to teaching practices that can be modified and applied to the academic needs of each student. This is an important part of teaching using the framework created by the CCSS. For all of the research done concerning the CCSS, the most basic component repeatedly noted is to teach using variety so all students are given equal access to learning opportunities while acknowledging differing learning styles to encourage academic growth. Equal access is an important component of the college and career ready goals created by the CCSS and a vital piece of providing an equitable education for all students.

Question

Can a special education teacher effectively modify the Common Core standards to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities and maintain the intent behind the standards?

Purpose

By using the CCSS as an intentional educational framework, I will be better prepared to provide opportunities for student growth through both effective modification and accommodation of standards-aligned lessons and IEP goals. I also believe that highly vulnerable students with SCD represented within these classrooms deserve the very best we, as teachers, can offer. With these in mind and as a result of this study, I will:

1. Develop lesson plans that provide for the successful attainment of student goals;

2. Maintain instructional materials designed to develop necessary skills that remain grounded in the needs of each student as an individual; and

3. Develop teaching skills that are both applicable to in the classroom and modified to accommodate changing student needs and environmental impact.

Methodology

Design

My motivation behind implementing this PD study is to address the needs of teachers in life skills classrooms. I chose a PD study because it allows the opportunity to focus on professional needs that are personal, practical, and applicable within my classroom. I approached this study by first searching my personal perceptions regarding the CCSS and the way I have used them in the classroom. I focused on both teacher and student needs in terms of skills development using the framework of the CCSS and Maslow's Hierarchy.

Context

When I first considered this as a potential source of research, the only real exposure to the CCSS that I had was through my personal education as I worked towards my degree. I worked in one of the largest districts in southwest Washington State in a self-contained school that was designed to help the most vulnerable and behaviorally challenged students in the district. We also contracted with other districts to assist in the education of students who were not safe around others. The school has two life skills classrooms and between four and five behavioral classrooms (depending on enrollment). Listed in the top 10 districts in Washington State for size, there are several specialty schools that serve a variety of student needs and populations. The school is designed to serve students with severe behavioral needs and students with both SCD and severe behavioral needs. With a total of 96 students including those who do not attend school in a traditional way, the school averages 4 students per classroom with anywhere from 1 to 7 paraeducators in each classroom. The school has over 90% attendance by

students but less than 10% meet grade level standards. (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020). This is can be partially attributed to the transitional nature of the school and partially to the behavioral and cognitive issues of the students.

The life skills classroom where I worked provided few details in terms of academics other than the lesson's relation to the students IEP goals. Staff turnover is high in a life skills classroom partially due to student violence against staff, each other, and themselves. In my time working as a paraeducator and student teacher, I was supervised by 4 teachers (a different one each year) and worked with many different paraeducators. I saw co-workers get both minor and major injuries even though we worked to maintain a safe environment through diligence and training. This violent atmosphere coupled with the difficulty of hiring staff and finding substitutes helps provide a consistent source of stress for all staff members.

One final note of significance in relation to this study is the emergence of the Novel Coronavirus, COVID-19. As the world is aware, COVID-19 forced the closure of schools and the quarantine of most. This prevented me from performing a traditional study but opened up the possibility of creating a qualitative study that focused on professional development through the lens of Action Research, which provided opportunity for deep reflection on the CCSS.

Data Gathering Instruments

The question *can a special education teacher effectively modify the CCSS to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities and maintain the intent behind the standards?* guided my efforts to seek information and self-reflect on my intents, beliefs, and perspectives. I wanted to find a meaningful answer to this question that was honest and fit the needs of my students while being applicable to other students with SCD. In order to accomplish this, I worked

to address the academic needs of the students in this population through both professional development and personal reflection.

Personal Journal

A personal journal was kept to explore negative perceptions, learning goals, and opportunities. This also provided an exploratory method of reviewing information from conversations and defining my professional development needs while self-reflecting and delving into the questions and answers motivating this study.

Peer Dialogue

I used informal online discussions with other SPED teachers to focus on using the CCSS to raise questions for inquiry and reflection. These discussions coupled with a personal journal assisted in providing personal reflection on the perspectives of other SPED teachers.

Action Research and Professional Development

Using Action Research as the basis for this PD study, I identified a need in my classroom to resolve and clarify: How do I effectively apply the CCSS to students with SCD? I worked to use an approach that focused on possible solutions while building a process that I could repeat to answer future questions. These steps, as an intentional process, are designed to focus on possible solutions while providing opportunity for self-reflection and peer dialogue. The final piece of this process is the possibility of finding future questions that can be answered using this process.

Validity

This PD Study will provide valid results through the provision of targeted personal growth opportunities tied to my professional practice as a teacher and the opportunity to share these results with other professionals. This study directly connects student need to the construction of student instruction through targeted professional growth and intensive personal

review of teaching practices. It also provides opportunity to develop new ways of viewing professional needs while working to overcome personal biases. This positive growth is a vital part of teaching as it allows me to continue to develop skills that have a direct impact on my teaching practices, student academic need, and student needs beyond academics such as behavioral interventions and life skills instruction.

Conclusions

My personal perspective on the CCSS was not favorable. I found that I did not believe they were an effective framework for students with SCD. The goals of college and career readiness described within the CCSS did not appear, to me, to fit within the needs of these students and were just something I had to paste onto my lesson planning to fill an administrative requirement rather than a student need. The standards were simply a necessary evil that I had to add during observation times by other educational professionals. For example, standard

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.D*: Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic*, an 11th-12th grade standard in literacy, will never be addressed in a life skills classroom in a meaningful way. This standard is built off of previous standards that students needed to master in order to move forward academically. These students are struggling to master the basics such as read a 3-5-word sentence or communicate their need to use the restroom. I write this not to be cold and callous but to illustrate the true needs of these students. Academics are not their primary focus.

To understand the relationship between the CCSS and SPED, I needed to understand the intent of the CCSS. As a general framework and not a specific curriculum or teaching method (National Governors Association, 2010), the standards provide a means to guide lessons and help focus on student needs. This is important because the standards encourage a broad variety of

approaches in teaching. Because of this design, I can use instructional approaches as described by UDL. UDL closely mirrors the design intent of the CCSS (CAST, 2018) by encouraging a variety of approaches suitable for all students. This allows me, as a teacher of students with SCD, to effectively approach modifying standards and accommodating their needs. By using effective accommodations and modifications that target specific needs, I can apply the CCSS to the most severely impacted students and still maintain my autonomy in academic approach, lesson planning, and assessment. Prior to this study, I viewed the standards as a necessary evil and not an effective tool to assist my teaching.

A second important distinction in connecting SPED and the CCSS is using the standards as a framework for lesson design. The CCSS do not have an inset rigidness that forces a student's IEP goals into a set course that cannot be modified or forces teachers into a predetermined lesson design that cannot be altered. The standards are, by intent, of a more fluid nature that focuses on higher level standards that can be applied to all students, regardless of cognitive function. Building student learning strengths and working through weaknesses while determining the impact of teaching, lesson design, and the overall educational approach is important because these processes inform my design of IEP goals, teaching practices, and effective collaborative practices with other teachers. Peterson (2016) noted the importance of collaboration as form of teaching that builds student strengths and increases teaching skills. This is important because it allows for the connection of lower level skills to higher level skills as listed in the CCSS. This allows for standards to be broken into more manageable pieces for students to work towards mastery and provides opportunity for succinct lesson design that focuses first on student needs and goals.

These combined issues help create the question that started this study. My concerns and needs as a teacher coupled with questioning the effectiveness of available training and decisions regarding curricula combined with the wide array of disabilities represented in my classroom to allow negative perceptions to grow. These perceptions about the CCSS removed my trust in using a framework designed to challenge all students and changed it into a burden, making me believe the CCSS were no more than an administrative requirement designed to remove autonomy in my classroom and a box to check on my lesson plans. Through action research and a focus on my needs as a professional, I reviewed the literature and explored what it meant to use the standards. Through this lens, I was able to view them as a tool rather than an intrusion into my classroom. An important piece of this lies in maintaining the idea that tools are meant to be used for the purpose they were designed. I do not blame the wrench my mechanic used if his repair fails.

Through self-reflection, I found that my perception of the standards was negative, and applying them in a meaningful way was not happening because of this view. I carefully reviewed the standards and worked through lesson plans and IEP goals in an attempt to better understand the framework of the standards and found I was viewing the standards as a sequence that had to be followed like I was driving from point A to point B. If a student masters a standard, I move on to the next appropriate standard. If they are not successful, I continue to work with them for as long as needed. This is especially true of students with SCD. They sometimes need more time to master a skill. I know this and apply it in my classroom, but when connecting the standards to the process, I was not using it as a framework to build success. It was a burden and not a tool. This realization helped to focus my conversations with other teachers and provided me with the next step in this process.

Unfortunately, my discussions with other special educators did not provide a lot of options in terms of utilizing the standards any more than I already had. This pointed to another need that was repeated in the literature: the need for quality, focused professional development opportunities specifically for SPED. These other professionals were unable to provide anything that I had not considered through my self-reflection. The one conversation that started to add a positive perspective on the standards quickly turned negative when the teacher said data drives instruction and he would find a standard that fits the lesson by starting at grade level and working backwards until one fit. This type of process was repeated by others, leaving me to question whether the standards could be effectively applied in SPED classrooms or if we were going to constantly be in a state of application after the fact.

As I began exploring ways to use the framework offered through the standards, I found that it can be effective in terms of lesson plan management and continued fidelity to the academic needs of the students, but I still did not find it to be a tool that was useful for students with SCD. I was looking at the framework as a guide to teaching when it is a guide for intended outcomes. I was applying the standards to students that never met the prior standards and expecting everything to work out. The fallacy of my perception created a negative loop in my thinking and application of the standards: I started with the idea that the CCSS were not applicable to my students due to the need for an appropriate developmental approach and moved on to creating a lesson then finding a standard to apply. This created a negative perception of the outcome because I did not perceive the standard as a positive influence at the end of the lesson. The scaffolding required to build student success appeared to dismantle the standard to a point where it no longer held its original meaning. This led to a new lesson where I continued to apply this cycle of negative perceptions, applying standards that seemed to fit the lesson.

This study taught me to critically view negative perceptions and expectations while encouraging me to continue to expand my knowledge base using a variety of tools such as journaling. How I apply and use the standards is my choice. The CCSS do not dictate how I teach or remove my ability to manage my classroom in a way that works for me. There are many different arguments surrounding the CCSS, but understanding how to effectively utilize them is a major part of applying them to all students. The successful application of the standards is in using them as a framework for academics. While many teachers and parents do not see their benefits, the problem lies outside of the standards and not implicitly within the standards themselves. This is the concept behind the fallacy of negative perceptions. It is difficult to successfully use something that is initially viewed as useless. The most difficult part of using the standards in relation to students with SCD is appropriately applying each standard while maintaining awareness of each student's developmental need. With mindful application and student-oriented lessons, the standards can be used for all, but the biases I carry towards their effectiveness need to be replaced with a mindset that accepts their use and focuses on student need.

Recommendations

This study provided opportunity to delve into a need I found in my classroom, but it also touched on related questions that could be addressed in future studies:

1. By modifying and differentiating the CCSS, are we undermining the overall intent and effectiveness of the CCSS for students who qualify for special education services and their eventual or possible success?

2. Were all students considered when creating the CCSS including those with SCD?

3. Are there limits to modifications and accommodations? Is there a point where the accommodation and/or modification effectively eliminates the effectiveness of the original intent of the standard?

4. Do my past/present biases, inexperience, or current experiences negatively/positively impact how I develop lessons related to the framework of the CCSS?

5. Do we apply the standards prior to or after the creation of the lesson, IEP, and other essential pieces of the educational process? Are they a guide or an afterthought?
Each of these questions are a motivator for me to continue to grow as a teacher and expand my skills to include a large variety of options that can be uniquely applied to students.

Distance learning is not a new activity. For some, it is the only way to access an education. This type of process has been used for mental health in rural communities and to ensure access to professionals in a wide array of fields. One issue being discussed after beginning this study was the effect distance learning coupled with COVID-19 will have on students and teachers. There have been many arguments both for and against distance learning during COVID, but there was one point made during a conversation that had an impact on my personal journey: a student placed in an inpatient rehabilitation facility was able to participate in distance learning with their same teacher and classroom peers. As a former employee in mental health, I found this to be both interesting and important. The idea of a lock down facility is to provide help for an individual when other forms of care do not work. For youth in these facilities, they are taken from family and friends, providing opportunity for continued traumatic impact based on the circumstances of their placement. Because of COVID, this student had the opportunity to maintain a "new normal" with their peers. While the teacher that mentioned this was struggling with ways to utilize the accommodations noted in their IEP, another teacher

mentioned that the accommodations should only matter if they still apply to the needs of the student, regardless of what is in the IEP. In other words, are the accommodations a vital part of the plan if the student does not require them? If a change to the environment has this type of impact, is this a clue as to how to approach these problems if the student returns to class in a more traditional way? This was important to me because of the significance it held at its core: as a teacher, I need to be aware of how some changes can affect everything while others have no impact at all. This is the lifecycle of the CCSS in SPED. The hope is to have a large positive impact, but the current reality for many teachers shows it to be more of a nuisance than a masterful piece of academic reform, or to use their own terminology, a "common" piece of academic reform.

Professional Growth Plan

STATE OF WASHINGTON
PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR
STANDARDS BOARD

Washington State educator Professional Growth Plan (PGP) template for educator preparation program completion

Educator information	
First name: James "Russ"	Last name: Fowell
Preparation program: City University of Seattle PBMIT	Academic year: 2019-2020

For information regarding Washington state educator certification, please consult the OSPI Certification Office website at http://www.k12.wa.us/certification/, email cert@k12.wa.us, or call (360) 725-6400.

Needs assessment and goal selection

1. Self-assessment. Use a self-assessment to identify an area of focus that will lead to your professional growth. You might choose to use one of the self-assessments based on the certificate standards for your role: https://www.pesb.wa.gov/workforce-development/developing-currenteducators/pgp/pgp-forms-and-support-materials/. You might also choose to use another self-assessment. Identify the self-assessment and area of focus you used:

I focused on the instructional need of using the Common Core State Standards for students with severe cognitive disabilities. In the coming year, I will build on this study by focusing on quality teaching through professional development and planning that creates opportunity for growth for students.

2. Standards. The area of focus for your professional growth goal needs to align to the certificate standards. You may find the certificate standards for your role here: https://www.pesb.wa.gov/workforce-development/developing-current-educators/certificationstandards-and-benchmarks/. Note the standard you have selected for your area of focus for professional growth.
Standard one: effective teaching
    Criteria 1: Using multiple instructional strategies to address individual student needs.
    Criteria 5 – Planning curricula for diverse student needs
Standard two: professional development
    Criteria 1 – Utilizing feedback and reflection to improve teaching practice
    Criteria 2 – Using standards for self-assessment, plan and implement professional growth
    Criteria 3 – Seeking new learning to remain current in field
Standard three: teaching as a profession
    Criteria 1 – Advocating for diverse needs of each student

3. Professional growth goal(s). What is your goal for this professional growth plan?

My goal is to use my learning regarding the framework of the Common Core and apply it to my teaching practices through lesson planning and developmentally appropriate accommodations based on student need.

4. Intended outcomes. What will you and/or your students be able to do as a result of your professional growth that you and/or they are not able to do now?

By using the CCSS as a framework, I will be able to track student progress throughout the year, providing data that can be used to gauge student need after longer school breaks and maintain lesson plan outlines using the standards that can be used for future lessons. This focus will benefit students by providing data for continued academic growth and a focus on needed skill building through better lesson planning.

Professional growth action plan

5. Activities. Describe the specific growth activities you will engage in to obtain the identified new learning. How will these activities positively impact student learning?

Through active participation in professional development opportunities and consistent review of research and theory, I intend to maintain my growth as an educator and find the best practices and effective means of applying the CCSS to student work through intentional modification, differentiation, and accommodations. I will continue to develop these intentional practices and work to build new skills and improve existing ones to ensure I am able to meet the needs of all students I will also focus on ensuring my possible past/present biases against academic initiatives and my inexperience does not decrease the impact of new educational reforms.

6. Proposed evidence. Describe the evidence you plan to collect to support your goals. Evidence may include areas beyond test scores such as attendance rates, discipline referrals, programs implemented, student work, videos of lessons, and other student or adult data.

Student progress will be monitored throughout the year and data collected indicating student need and review. This data will provide information to ensure a continued progression through the standards. Lesson plan outlines will be kept that provide information regarding use and re-use or updating. These forms of data tracking will provide valuable information regarding both teaching skills and student progress.

Review

Candidate signature
James Russell Fowell
Print name
9/11/2020
Date

Program signature   Click here to enter text.
Print name
Click drop down to enter a date.
Date

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