Special Educators' Perceptions of State Standards in a Large, Urban School District

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ABSTRACT: The implementation of Common Core State Standards raises challenges for teachers, particularly those in urban settings and those who work with students with unique learning challenges, particularly students with disabilities. This article provides the results of a study that surveyed special education teachers' perspectives related to the implementation of the new state standards in one large urban school district. Analysis of both closed and open-ended survey responses yields information about teachers' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and perceived support needs for successful implementation of state standards with this unique population.

Keywords: urban education, accountability, special education, state standards

Introduction

Schools and districts around the nation are currently engaging in planning and implementing national standards for K-12 education (Haager & Vaughn, 2013). The National Governor's Association, in conjunction with input from numerous other educational organizations, developed new standards in mathematics and literacy to increase students' academic performance (National Governor's Association, 2009). This is particularly pertinent for urban school districts where a long and well documented history of inequities of access, achievement, and outcomes for students with disabilities has persisted (Cramer, Little, & McHatton, 2017). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are college or career ready and that parents, teachers, and students have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) states are required to adopt challenging academic standards, although they do not necessarily have to adopt the CCSS. The CCSS, adopted by 43 states, outline the expectations for students and are to guide teacher instruction. The purpose of the CCSS is to prepare the school-age population for college and careers or postsecondary experiences (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). The CCSS focus on English Language Arts and Mathematics standards that are rigorous with the intention that students will be able to compete nationally and globally in the workplace and in postsecondary educational environments. In addition to adopting the CCSS, an assessment needed to be created that would assess if students were meeting the expectations and to inform all stakeholders of the results. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC, 2014), which consists of state-led partnerships, is one of the entities that was given the task of creating an assessment that would determine student attainment of the CCSS. A state-led coalition developed an assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (Dynamic Learning Maps, 2014).

Nationwide, there are currently some sources of information on how to implement the

CCSS with students with disabilities (e.g., Armstrong, 2012; Bulgren, Graner, & Deshler, 2013; Graham & Harris, 2013; Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Powell, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2013; Scruggs, Brigham, & Mastropieri, 2013); however, these are not based on empirical research but on analysis of the demands of the standards and the alignment of current best evidence-based practices. Nevertheless, all students with disabilities are included in statewide assessments related to the standards unless, due to extraordinary circumstances, the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) team determines that they are not able to participate in the state assessment. The literature available (e.g., ACCESS Project, 2014; Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Powell et al., 2013) posits all best practices that have been and could be effective. However, these do not address special education teachers' perspectives or awareness regarding students with disabilities using the standards to guide their instruction. This is particularly relevant in urban districts which routinely have higher percentages of the total student population receiving special education services. For example, according to the United States Census Bureau (2010), children with disabilities make up 5.2% of the school-age population or about 2.8 million; the district involved in this study, the largest most urban district in Florida, has 10% of its population of students receiving special education services. This is nearly twice the national average.

Despite the large number of students with disabilities, CCSS documents and supporting appendices, guidelines, and publications (Kober & Rentner, 2011) provide limited information about accommodating students with disabilities (Haager & Vaughn, 2013). Some state departments of education have provided limited information related to students with disabilities but these documents simply mirrored those already available from CCSS. This includes general information which essentially identifies the areas of the IEP that would be important to address when aligning IEP goals and services (e.g., assistive technology) to the CCSS.

In November 2013, Florida withdrew from the PARCC, revised the Common Core State Standards and renamed them the Florida Standards with the goals to: (a) maintain high education standards; and (b) remove the state from federal intrusion in education policy (Governor's Press Office, 2013). The Florida Standards were required to be implemented in all public schools in the State beginning with the 2014-2015 school year. The Florida Standards, which are comprised of Mathematics Florida Standards (MAFS) and Language Arts (English Language Arts) Florida Standards (LAFS), are being implemented with all students in the state, including students with disabilities, even those with the most significant cognitive disabilities via the Florida Standards Access Points.

Although the Florida Department of Education and other entities have provided some information related to the implementation of the MAFS and LAFS with students, including those with the most significant cognitive disabilities (ACCESS Project, 2014; CCSSO, 2013; CPALMS, 2014), there was a lack of information as to the perspective or understanding that special education teachers have related to the implementation of the standards to guide their instruction with students with disabilities. According to Bulgren et al. (2013), teachers, including special education teachers, would have to make changes that are complex and challenging to implement the new standards. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) indicate that changes such as these occur on two dimensions: (1) technical and (2) adaptive. Technical refers to knowledge and skills (e.g., teaching informational text), and adaptive changes involve adjusting beliefs, values, and attitudes as these relate to instruction, since implementation of new state standards would require planning and collaborating with other teachers.

The lack of information available, combined with the level of change expected of teachers, raised concerns about the preparedness of urban special educators to implement the

Florida Standards. In an effort to understand these teachers' knowledge and perspectives about the implementation of the standards, the *Implementation of the New Florida Standards with Students with Disabilities Survey* was sent to all special education teachers (approximately 2900) in the largest urban school district in the State of Florida. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions that urban special educators had about the implementation of the Florida standards for their students with disabilities and to determine if any relationships existed between teachers' background and their perceptions of the standards.

Methods

This study examined the perceptions of special educators on the new implementation of state standards for students with disabilities. Data were collected via a survey that contained both closed and open-ended questions.

Context and Participants

This study took place in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the fourth largest and among the most diverse school districts in the nation. This large, diverse urban district serves a total of 355,268 students: 8% White, Non-Hispanic; 67% Hispanic; 24% Black, Non-Hispanic; and 1% of "other' ethnicity. Spanish is the most commonly spoken home language, and 74% of all students receive free/reduced price lunch. The total number of students with disabilities in the district is 34,834. The teaching force mirrors the diversity of the student body with 81% of the full-time staff coming from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. Of the 24,546 teachers employed by the district, 2,862 of them are special educators. All special educators in the district, regardless of the students with disabilities they were instructing, were emailed a copy of an electronic link to the survey in the body of an email that explained the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey participation. Since this project was a collaboration between district personnel and a local university professor, the link to the survey was distributed via email directly from a district special education supervisor via a Survey Monkey set for anonymous responding to teachers' school email accounts. The teachers were sent bi-weekly reminders over a period of approximately two months until the survey submission deadline. Responses were received from 288 teachers. These teachers taught students covering a wide variety of disabilities, including but not limited to: learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorders, and intellectual disabilities. Table 1 shows the demographic makeup of the responding teachers. These demographics represent the overall demographics of the special education teachers in the district.

Table 1: Teacher Demographics

Age	%	N
18-24	0.0%	0
25-34	12.2%	35
35-44	29.7%	85
45-54	33.6%	96
55-64	23.1%	66

65-74	1.4%	4
75+	0.0%	0
Gender	%	N
Female	89.5%	256
Male	10.5%	30
Years of Experience as Educator	%	N
0-4	4.0%	13
5-9	14.6%	41
10-14	23.2%	65
15-19	19.6%	55
20-24	13.6%	38
25+	24.2%	6
Years of Experience in Current Position	%	N
0-4	30.6%	85
5-9	23.3%	65
10-14	19.4%	54
15-19	10.4%	29
20-24	8.0%	22
25+	8.0%	23

Survey Instrument

The 28-question survey was developed by the researchers as a pilot tool since no other survey could be found that evaluated special education teachers' perceptions of state standards. The survey contained 10 questions that measured demographics of the teachers, such as age, gender, and years of teaching experience. Then, 15 Likert-style questions were proposed on a scale of 1-4 representing disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), somewhat agree (3), and agree (4). These questions measured teachers' knowledge of, confidence in implementation of, and comfort level with the new Florida standards, as well as their perceptions of how these standards would affect their students. The final three questions were open-ended and sought to examine how teachers' prior training or experience had affected their ability to implement the standards, their general opinions about the standards, and their implementation support needs.

Research Design and Analysis

All the information obtained from the demographic and Likert scale responses were entered into IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software file to be analyzed. All data collected were entered into SPSS in numerical format; any data not originally provided by the participants in numerical format was transcribed based on a predetermined conversion protocol. After all available data were entered into SPSS, descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, of teachers' responses was first generated in order to obtain a full picture of the teachers' perceptions on the standards. We then ran reliability analysis for the 15 survey items that focus on teachers' perceptions. Cronbach's alpha was used to indicate the internal consistency of the items (Thorndike & Thorndike-Christ, 2010). Further, correlation analyses were conducted to determine if there were statistically significant relationships between teachers' training/experience in special education or years of teaching experience and their perceptions of state standard implementation. Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed in the analysis because it measures the strength of the linear relationship between two quantitative variables (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011).

The open-ended questions were analyzed to obtain more detailed information to assist in explaining the SPSS data analysis results. Categories were coded and themes were identified in the analysis to provide additional information to the quantitative data collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Coding categories were identified to assist in identifying regularities and patterns that existed in the responses from the participants. Coding was conducted by a district-level special education supervisor and a university professor. Identified codes and themes of each were then compared for overlap. Together, these researchers created categories that were translated into trends or common conceptions held by the participants. The purpose of the open-ended questions was to allow the participants to further express their beliefs in the constructs being studied.

The responses from each question were reviewed with the intent of identifying a common theme. Each participant's response to the open-ended question was read one at a time. Each new response was coded as a possible theme; each additional response was reviewed. If the participant's answer could be grouped with an existing possible theme, it was recorded to indicate that the theme was repeated. If the response indicated a new theme, this new theme was provided a new code. This was repeated with each participant who responded to the open-ended questions. It should be noted that not every open-ended question was answered by every participant (approximately 170 out of 288 participants answered the open-ended questions).

Results

Survey responses can be found in Table 2. Mean responses show teachers were aware of the implementation of the new standards, with questions 11 (*I am aware of the Florida standards being implemented*) and 23 *(I am aware that for students on a modified curriculum, the Florida Standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics which include CCSS will be the Access Points*) being the highest rated responses and the only ones that fell into the "somewhat agree" or "agree" category. The lowest mean responses that fell into the "disagree" category included question 21 (*Parents of my students with disabilities understand the standards*) and question 18 (*My students will be able to keep up with the pace of the standards*). Overall, most questions fell into the "somewhat disagree" category. Additionally, the reliability analysis of the 15 items showed that Cronbach's alpha is .93, which is very high.

Table 2: Closed-Ended Survey Question Means and Standard Deviations

Survey Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Aware of Implementation Start Date	3.82	0.59
Aware of Effect on Current Teaching Assignment	2.95	1.24
Confidence in Implementation	2.55	1.55
Have Been Trained to Implement	2.38	1.61
Trained to Implement with Students with Disabilities	1.96	1.6
Comfortable Implementing IEPs	2.35	1.65
Student Can Successfully Access FL Standards	2.02	0.41
Students Can Keep up with Pace of FL Standards	1.44	1.72
Students Can Meet FL Standards	1.53	0.5
Students Understand FL Standards	1.70	1.58
Parents of Students with Disabilities Understand FL Standards	1.37	1.6
Students' IEP Goals are Aligned with FL Standards	2.52	1.76
Aware of Access Points for Students on Modified Curriculum	3.34	1.5
Have State Adopted Textbooks	2.42	0.82
Have Necessary Classroom Materials	2.22	0.37

Results of the correlation analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between years of teaching experience and confidence in implementing the Florida standards, and between years of teaching experience and ability to align students' IEP goals with the standards. The results of Pearson's correlation indicated that years of teaching experience showed significant correlations with confidence in implementation with a Pearson's correlation coefficient of -.128 ($p < .05$). The years of teaching experience also showed significant correlations with teachers' ability to align IEPS with the Florida standards with a Pearson's correlation coefficient of -.132 ($p < .05$).

Open ended responses indicated that teachers had received limited training in the standards, and the trainings that were received were not specific to students with disabilities. For example, one teacher writes, "The training has been minimal and rarely do they focus on SPED [special education] students other than they have to meet the same standards with accommodations." Another teacher states, "The training I have received was geared towards

students in the general education population, not the students with disabilities."

Teachers who had received training indicated that they felt more confident to implement the standards after completing training. For example, one teacher writes, "The various trainings have affected my method or practice of teaching by allowing me to ensure opportunities for incorporating an array of teaching strategies, along with offering a supportive learning environment, which encourages and fosters students' learning and engagement. Also, my autonomy in teaching is not suppressed." Another teacher states, "After I have done a workshop outside my school to learn how to adapt the new CCSS to my students with disabilities, I've been able to help my students understand the new standards."

There were clear concerns expressed among the teachers that their students would not be able to meet the new standards and that the standards did not take individual student needs into consideration. One teacher captures this by stating, "The vast majority of my students are not able to access the new Florida Standards. They are the children being left behind. One size does not fit all." These concerns were particularly evident in the pacing and rigor of the standards. Another teachers writes, "I feel that it is very difficult for them. My students try their best but in a class of SLD [specific learning disabilities] part of their disability is retention and not able to process information the way it is required in the new standards. It's overwhelming for both myself and the students. Geometry requires a lot of memorization of rules which they forget the next day. If they had the capabilities to make inferences and interpretations then they wouldn't even be in my class in the first place but in an honors class." Another teacher captures a similar sentiment with, "The standards are out of touch with the needs of my students. The standards' rigor, pace of delivery, and complexity of presentation is a recipe for disaster."

The most commonly requested supports from teachers included strategies and hands-on materials and workshops or trainings on implementation of the standards for students with disabilities, or as one teacher called it "trainings, materials, and technology." Another common request was for support in aligning IEPs with the standards, or as one teacher requested, "training in order to implement the new standards appropriately and use them in our IEP implementation."

Discussion

While teachers appeared aware of the implementation of the new standards, the lack of confidence, lack of training, and concerns about their students' abilities to be successful with the new standards was evident across both the open-ended and closed-ended responses. There was also a notable gap between teachers' awareness of the standards (highest rated response) and teachers' perceptions of parents' awareness (lowest rated response). This raises concerns about parental involvement in standards implementation and active participation in IEP meetings, particularly when annual goals, some relating directly to standards (e.g. literacy expectations, math computations) are being developed.

Teachers' comfort level with standard implementation was higher than their ratings of how well their students would fare in accessing these standards. Since teachers with more teaching experience were more confident in their ability to implement the standards and to align the standards with IEP goals, urban schools that typically have higher teacher turnover and less experienced teachers (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010) may be at higher risk for teachers who are not confident or prepared to implement new standards for students with disabilities.

Themes from the open-ended questions reveal that the limited trainings that special education teachers had in the Florida standards were often not specific to students with

disabilities and that this would be a necessary component. More training was called for in aligning state standards with IEP goals. Special education teachers need to have extensive knowledge of how to support students with disabilities achieve the rigorous content standards (Lekol, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). This in-depth understanding of how to support students with disabilities includes several areas such as cross-curricular collaborative skills (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012; Lekol et al., 2015), accommodations, and adaptations to the curriculum. Teachers, particularly urban special educators who typically provide instruction and supports to the most diverse students, need to be able to understand the standards, align them to a student's IEP, and adapt accommodations and modifications so that instruction for students with disabilities is designed and provided in a cohesive and precise manner so students can access and achieve the expectations of the new state standards. Special education teachers must find the difficult balance to both provide individualized instruction that is explicit, direct and systematic, as well as meeting the required standards.

Clear concerns were raised that students with disabilities would not be able to meet the new standards and that philosophically these standards did not take the individual needs of students into consideration. The concerns of these teachers were echoed in other parts of the country. Zorn (2015) stated that "If average and above students are struggling, imagine what it must be like for my students -- children with severe dyslexia, ADHD, Asperger's syndrome and other learning disabilities" (p. A,13). According to Corlett (2014), special education teachers who work with students with disabilities are concerned with the implementation of the standards; teachers in general education are equally concerned with the adaptability of the CCSS for students with disabilities.

This is particularly concerning in urban settings as it has been long established that teachers in urban schools are not prepared for the cultural complexities of diverse communities (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). With established disparate outcomes for CLD learners in urban settings extending from the earliest grades into post-secondary and career outcomes (Darling Hammond, 2010) and a documented lack of access to necessary supports and services (Ford & King, 2014; Oakes, 2010), the implementation of new state standards for students who are diverse in culture, language, and ability without necessary supports for teachers could be particularly problematic for this most vulnerable population. This was also evident in responses provided in Corlett's (2014) study, particularly as it relates to English language learners.

Implications and Conclusion

If Heifetz and Linsky's (2002) change dimensions are revisited, it is evident that teachers in urban settings, particularly those working with students with disabilities in general or special education settings, will need adaptive and technical supports. In addition to providing more knowledge and training about how to implement state standards, there will also be a need to establish supports that can adjust teacher beliefs about standardized curriculums, the abilities of their students, and the alignment of standardization efforts with the individualization of special education. Further, school districts and institutes of higher education should partner to establish supports for teachers in their induction year and beyond to reduce teacher attrition and keep seasoned teachers in urban classrooms. The seasoned special education teachers can provide the new inductees with mentoring assistance in the area of standards implementation, since years of teaching experience was the most significant factor in teacher confidence to implement standards and the ability to align the standards with IEP goals. It is critical to keep experienced special educators in the field and reinforce their confidence by providing them with these leadership

mentoring experiences.

It is also essential for special educators, particularly new inductees, to overcome the affective challenge of the implementation of the standards so that the individual needs of students with disabilities are addressed. Teacher effectiveness is positively correlated with higher student achievement (Hora & Farrare, 2012). However, if teachers' self-efficacy has a significant impact on their ability to instruct students with disabilities on CCSS or state standards expectations, this will have a significant impact on special education students' academic success. Teachers' efficacy in the implementation of said standards must be ensured through external factors, such as support from district offices in the form of targeted professional development, support from school site administrators, and support from other faculty members (Cash, 2014).

Institutions of higher education educator preparation programs will have to review their foundational pedagogical anchors, such as deliberate practice with performance feedback approaches (Lekol et al., 2015), to determine which are essential for special education teachers. This will ensure that they acquire and are able to generalize in practice the skills needed to address the current trends in the context of schooling and special education (e.g., state standards, multi-tiered systems of support). These skills include knowledge of such distinct concepts as the impact of language (e.g., text demands) within the prescribed state standards (Cash, 2014). Preservice and inservice teachers can also be supported in learning to communicate effectively with parents about the standards and provide them current available resources. Teachers can also acquire the knowledge on how to conduct parent training related to the standards and their role in IEP development and implementation. As parents' understanding of state standards was the lowest scoring variable on the survey, teachers may not be adequately prepared to communicate with parents about critical issues such as the new standards, particularly CLD parents who often make up the majority of families in urban schools.

While it is important for all students to have access to rigorous curriculum and for teachers to be held accountable for the achievement of their students, the implementation of Common Core or state standards is not a simple task, particularly for diverse learners within urban districts. With the recent passage of the ESSA legislation and the shift toward increased state and local authority over educational policies and services, it is imperative that efforts are made to ensure our most vulnerable students and families are considered and their teachers are supported to best be able to meet their needs. These efforts should include partnerships between research institutions of higher education and local school districts to ensure that all teachers have access to the latest research findings, knowledge, resources, and supports to best educate students with disabilities. Through collaborative and targeted efforts, students and teachers will have the best chance of meeting high standards.

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