

## **The Representation of the Common Core State Standards in the U.S. Media**

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### **Abstract**

This research examines how the U.S. newspapers portrayed the Common Core State Standards between 2010-2017. Lexical choices and discursive strategies in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal were identified using the Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies framework (Partington & Marchi, 2018; Reisigl, 2018). As a diachronic study focusing on the change in news discourse, the analysis unpacked the news framing during the adoption and implementation phases of the Common Core movement. The analysis showed that the media primarily foregrounded the perspectives favoring the quality of the standards (e.g., rigor, uniformity) and the control over local education. Clear shifts in news coverage were noted starting with the implementation of the common standards based on student and teacher experiences as well as testing practices.

*Keywords:* Common Core, CCSS, discourse historical approach, discourse analysis, corpus, educational policy

### **Introduction**

This exploratory research examines how Math and English Language Arts standards in the U.S., also known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), have been covered in national newspapers since CCSS's launch in 2010. Governors and state commissioners of education from the majority of the American states launched an initiative in 2009 to provide public schools with consistent and research-based college and career readiness goals. This initiative was led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and was later named the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative (Core Standards, 2010a).

An increasing set of research studies has been carried out on the policy and practice landscape of the CCSS since its publication in 2010. To varying degrees, these studies projected the voices of policy makers, district officials, and teachers as well as addressed the content of the written standards, challenges with classroom practice, and CCSS-aligned teaching materials (Beach et al., 2022; Center on Education Policy, 2016; Center on Education Policy, 2016; Hodge et al., 2016; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b; Polikoff, 2012; Supovitz et al., 2016). While their primary focus was on policy enactment and the implementation of standards in public school settings, this research has mostly voiced the interest groups involved in the development of the standards, teacher unions, policy makers, and school districts. A few studies have specifically attended to the analysis of the discourse and ideological standpoints of the proponents and opponents (Johnson, 2014; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b; Polikoff et al., 2016; Smith, 2017; Supovitz & Reinkordt, 2017) and the public comments on the CCSS in social media platforms (Wang & Fikis, 2019). Yet, as the public and professional knowledge about the CCSS has grown over the years, little is known about the discourses of the newspapers and their roles in informing the wider public about the views on the new standards.

Additionally, as tools of informing the public widely and presenting news from different angles, newspapers constitute important sites for investigating how an educational reform movement was framed in particular ways. Since the U.S. public education institutions are generally composed of multilingual populations (e.g., Latinx, Black, Asian, etc.), this reform movement bears implications for the education of such minority groups such as learning English as a second language while developing content mastery simultaneously. Therefore, the adoption and implementation of the Common Core in schools is also dependent on how this movement is perceived by the public, educators, and politicians based on the image drawn by news reports.

The primary goal of this paper is therefore to analyze the discourse of popular newspapers that possess different reader profiles to better understand how the CCSS was represented at different stages of implementation. Currently, no study is known to have explored the discourse of the popular news media in a long period of time. This article also aims to track how the CCSS representation might have evolved over time. A discourse analysis of news reports may provide valuable insights into how newspapers can present educational reforms from different angles as important information tools that reach a wide audience everyday. With its focus on the news discourse, this research also responds to the paucity of discourse analytic research that addresses educational policy matters in the media (Rogers et al, 2016).

Since the Common Core's launch in 2010, popular media tools such as newspapers, TV channels, and social media have served as major sources of information about the CCSS' implementation in public schools. Being sources of information makes the media one of the most powerful tools shaping the public opinion concerning social matters, including educational policy (Cohen, 2010). In Fairclough's (1995) terms, we gain access to the truth about social and educational matters such as the CCSS via the media. As popular media outlets present social, educational, or political matters, they vary "in terms of what they include and what they exclude, what they foreground, and what they background" in the news reports (Fairclough, 1995, p. 47). Therefore, the representation of educational issues in popular media differs from one media source to another in terms of completeness and partiality of the news reports, which implies the ideological aspects of media outlets. Since the public consumes the media discourses everyday, it is important to explore how those discourses are constructed and the information about national matters are presented.

## **Historical Background**

The CCSS was introduced with certain flexibilities and incentives that states could benefit from. At the time when the CCSS was published, the freedom of adopting and implementing them was also provided. Moreover, individual states were given the option of augmenting the CCSS with up to 15% content of their choice (Common Core, 2010b, Kendall et al., 2012). The states implementing the CCSS would also receive incentives by the federal government's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which provided the Race to the Top Grants (Core Standards, 2010c). By the end of 2010, 45 states, four U.S. national territories, and the District of Columbia had adopted the CCSS with the goal of implementing them in the following years, including Minnesota, which only adopted the English language arts standards (Smith, 2017). Alaska, Indiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia decided to opt for not participating in this reform movement (Common Core, 2010d). Most states (41) did not start to fully implement them until 2013 and 2014 school years (C-SAIL, 2016). Starting with the implementation of the standards, the debates became more heated due to concerns such as swift implementation, appropriateness of the standards, and political reasons

like the federal involvement in national education via grant allocations (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b).

McDonnell and Weatherford (2013b) explained that the primary rationale fueling the opposition, especially by conservative groups, was federal intrusion into education. The individual states normally possess the autonomy to determine their own educational standards and implement them. However, the perception of federal involvement in creating one common set of standards was created by the allocation of the Race to the Top (RTT) grants by the Obama administration and the financial support provided to consortia for the development of the common tests. Moreover, the critics of the standards movement objected to the idea of pursuing a set of national standards asserting that there was no evidence of higher rigor in the CCSS compared to the earlier standards (McCluskey, 2010).

### **Discourse Analysis of News via the CADS Framework**

Discourse Analysis (DA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have traditionally been viewed as a qualitative study of texts that relies on a researcher's experiences and understanding of the social and political contexts (Partington & Marchi, 2015). Partington and Marchi commented that this understanding might stem from most forms of discourse analysis analyzing a small number of texts, often a single text, and incorporating few linguistic concepts. Corpus linguistics (CL) researchers, on the other hand, use tools and methods to identify and understand the linguistic frequency and patterns in texts, which might lead those unfamiliar with the CL method to consider it as a quantitative only method. Unlike the misconceptions about these two approaches, both (critical) DA and CL possess the potential for a close understanding of texts via qualitative and quantitative toolkits chosen for the purposes (Marchi & Taylor, 2018).

This research study aimed to utilize the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative tools to better understand the discourse of news. Moreover, the representation of the Common Core in a diachronic study required the use of multiple news articles in a wide timeline. The addition of the corpus linguistics tools (e.g., frequency counts) to the qualitative analysis of discourse thus facilitated the use of texts from two newspapers and a more nuanced representation of the Common Core via quantified analyses.

The Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) framework has been applied to various discourses relating to gender, political speeches, identity, marginalized groups such as indigenous nations or refugees and so on (Baker et al., 2008; Flowerdew, 1997; Krishnamurthy, 1996; Stubbs, 1994). CADS was also applied to diachronic studies of discourses, which investigated how discourses change over time such as Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl, 2018; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016; Wodak, 2001). The DHA is a critical approach in the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework that also utilizes the notions of 'critique', 'power', and 'ideology' in discourses (Fairclough, 1995) and the discursive changes in the sociopolitical contexts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The current study thus combines the CADS framework with the DHA approach to investigate the shifts in news discourses at different phases of the Common Core implementation.

An example of a study utilizing the CADS framework and the DHA approach is Baker et al.'s (2008) research on the discourses of immigrants in the UK newspapers. Baker et al. (2008) incorporated the CL and the DHA to provide a historical preview of how the discourse of news articles in the UK presented immigrants and asylum seekers between 1996-2006. Particularly interesting in their findings was that immigrants and migrants frequently co-occurred with expressions such as *fleeing* and *fled* in the same context. However, immigration is usually not for

people feeling from unfavorable or life-threatening circumstances, but a concept referring to a planned process. Moreover, refugees and asylum seekers were portrayed as an uncontrollable group of people who *flood* and *pour* into the country.

Following similar procedures of combining the CADS and DHA in a discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008), this study focused on how the US news articles covered the Common Core over eight years (2010-2017). Two media outlets, i.e., the New York Times (NYT) and the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), were chosen based on reader demographic profiles and their sizable presence and popularity in the US.

The following two research questions were answered:

- (1) How did the two different media outlets portray the Common Core State Standards?
- (2) How did such representation change over time?

## **Methodology**

### **Compiling a Corpus**

To answer the research questions, the Corpus of Common Core News (CCCN) including a total of 25 news articles was compiled. Since the study was interested in the subtle framing in the more objectively presented news reports, any op-ed and editorial pieces, which are known for their highly opinionated content, were intentionally excluded from the study. The news articles found through Google search and the newspaper websites appeared between 2010-2017. Of the total number of articles, 13 were published in the NYT and 12 were published in the WSJ (see Table 1). The CCCN involved a total of 22,386 tokens or words.

### **Research Design**

The ideological distinction between the two news outlets constituted an important aspect of the data because newspapers with different ideologies inform the public and represent national matters in particular ways. In fact, Pew Research Center (2014), which focuses on media research, found that ideological differences in the reader preferences may form unique media profiles. Based on Pew's research, the NYT has a more liberal reader profile, whereas the WSJ has a more conservative reader profile. Therefore, using these two newspapers allowed me to investigate how differently the CCSS might have been represented by two different U.S. media outlets.

Before initiating the analysis, I reviewed the background of the CCSS in the news articles, books, and publications to identify major milestones that might have triggered positive or negative news coverage about the CCSS reform. Based on this informal review, two important milestones for the policy landscape of the CCSS were determined for a diachronic analysis of the discourse between 2010-2017:

a. The *adoption-alignment period* (2010 - 2012) represents the first three years of this educational movement during which the standards were shared with the states and the public.

b. Full *implementation-testing period* in most states (2013-2017) involved the school years when the standards went into effect and the first common tests were implemented. This period was designated based on the study by Palikoff and colleagues (C-SAIL, 2016), which showed that most states (41) started to implement the standards in the school years 2013-14 and 2014-15. The first CCSS tests were also administered during this period.

**Table 1***Distribution of the News Reports in the CCCN Corpus*

	Tokens	Adoption-Alignment 2010-2012	Implementation-Testing 2013-2017
NYT Sub-corpus	11733	4	9
WSJ Sub-corpus	10509	2	10

To analyze the news articles in this corpus both quantitatively and qualitatively, Antconc concordancer (Anthony, 2018) was utilized. First, a frequency list of words that appeared in the entire corpus and the two sub-corpora (the NYT and the WSJ) were created separately. The frequency list (Table 2) then allowed for a preview of the most frequently used words in the corpus. Particularly, this study focused on how the CCSS were portrayed in relation to the stakeholders of the CCSS (teachers, students) as well as the overall occurrence of the CCSS (i.e., Common Core, standards) and the testing experiences (i.e., test, tests, testing) since they appeared among the most frequently occurring content words in the corpus, thus providing an entry point to the data.

The most frequently occurring content words related to the stakeholders, standards, and tests (teachers, students, tests, standards) were further analyzed in the two sub-corpora to answer the first research question of how the two different media outlets portrayed the CCSS. The second research question about the diachronic change (2010-2017) in the CCSS coverage was also answered based on the analysis of each lexeme, but the changes in discourses was identified by comparing the discourses during the adoption-alignment (2010-2012) and the implementation-testing periods (2013-2017).

The following step involved the analysis of the concordance lines in which the focus words chosen for this discourse analysis occurred (i.e., teachers, students, standards, and tests/testing). Antconc provides the concordance windows including the lines in which the focus words occur (see Figure 1). By engaging in a qualitative analysis of the concordance lines, the positive or negative context in which the focus words occurred were tallied. Specifically, within the concordance lines, the vocabulary (adjectives, nouns, adverbs, etc.) occurring to the left and to the right of the focus words was identified for the sentiment analysis. As an example, the concordance window in Figure 1 below illustrates the concordance lines in which *standards* occurred in the CCCN. For example, in Line 42, *standards* was used in a negatively connotated context due to the word ‘intrusion’.

Following the tallying of the negative and positive instances of each focus word in the sub-corpora, a collocation list was generated using Antconc to further identify any favorable or unfavorable connotations (see Table 3). Collocations are vocabulary words that frequently occur in the same vicinity as the target words (i.e., standards, teachers, tests, and students). Antconc software provides a ranked list of collocates based on Mutual Information (MI) score, which is a statistical calculation based on frequency and distance of co-occurring words from the target search words (Evert, 2008). MI score answers the question of to what extent the occurrences of one word determine the occurrences of another (Evert, 2008).

**Table 2***Frequency of the First 15 Content Words in CCCN*

The NYT Sub-corpus (11733 tokens)			The WSJ Sub-corpus (10509 tokens)		
Rank	Lexeme	Frequency	Rank	Lexeme	Frequency
1	<b>standards</b>	175	1	<b>standards</b>	195
2	<b>students</b>	102	2	<b>common</b>	169
3	said	99	3	<b>core</b>	158
4	state	95	4	state	108
5	new	90	5	said	106
6	<b>common</b>	85	6	new	85
7	states	82	7	states	80
8	<b>core</b>	71	8	education	65
9	education	71	9	<b>students</b>	59
10	<b>tests</b>	69	10	<b>teachers</b>	57
11	school	56	11	<b>tests</b>	45
12	test	54	12	school	39
13	<b>teachers</b>	49	13	year	31
14	year	49	14	grade	29
15	grade	44	15	group	28

*Note:* Raw frequency counts in the NYT and WSJ were not normalized due to small and comparable corpus size.

**Figure 1***Sample Concordance View of the Word 'standards' in Context*

39	ers, who say their implementation has been botched. The standards lay out what students should know from kindergarten th
40	e must have standards for New York's students, but those standards will only work if people—especially parents—have faith i
41	stems, called the standards "high quality grade-by-grade standards that the nation can be proud of." They outline concepts
42	ervatives who decry the implementation costs and call the standards an intrusion into local education decisions; union leaders
43	he nation's largest urban public school systems, called the standards "high quality grade-by-grade standards that the nation
44	ds with no time to deliberate on their worth. He called the standards "mediocre" and costly to implement.
45	pectations for U.S. students, but some critics called those standards too prescriptive. Many educators embraced them but ca
46	l of better preparing students for college and careers, the standards have been adopted entirely by 45 states and the Distric
47	lf reflection" and "relevant connections" to certain writing standards, to emphasize the need for students to go beyond close
48	as added more nonfiction books to her classroom. "These standards take students much deeper into the subjects and force t
49	sure they were being adequately prepared for college. The standards were adopted across the country starting in 2010, enco

## Results

This section explains the discourse analysis of the news articles in four different thematic categories emerging in the corpus. The lexical items, 'standards, students, teachers, and tests' chosen for analysis correspond to the educational reform itself (*standards, Common Core, tests/testing*) and the two stakeholders (*teachers and students*) impacted by the educational

reform. Since multiple forms of these words appeared in the data (e.g., standard (s), Common Core, test, testing), they will be referred to as lexemes.

The most obvious finding that emerged from the analyses of the CCCN corpus was that the media outlets consistently portrayed the CCSS in a negative tone during the implementation years (Figure 2). While the NYT was consistently positive during the adoption-alignment period, the WSJ reflected a mix of sentiments in its coverage during the same period. The use of evidence and research in the writing of the CCSS was a notable aspect of the CCSS (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013a), which the NYT and the WSJ covered during the adoption years.

Another noteworthy finding was that the WSJ articles heavily reported the conservative groups and state governors as well as think tank organizations that opposed the adoption of the standards (e.g., American Principles in Action, Brookings Institute). The lexical choices occurring in these two media outlets demonstrated the differences in how things, people, or actions are represented and thus the ideological differences in these two media outlets (Fairclough, 2001).

**Figure 2**

*Representation of the CCSS during Adoption and Implementation*

Newspaper	Milestone	Standards	Teachers	Students	Tests
The NYT	Adoption	Grid	Grid	Grid	White
	Implementation	Black	Gray	Black	Black
The WSJ	Adoption	Black	White	Grid	White
	Implementation	Black	Black	White	Black

Black= Dominantly Negative; Gray=More Negative; White=Balanced-no particular difference; Grid=Dominantly Positive

Following this colossal movement taking effect in the 2013-2014 school year, the criticisms also increased exponentially. Overall, several themes recurred considerably such as the quality of the standards (evidence and research-based, internationally benchmarked), speculative thoughts on the CCSS being a corrupt attempt at establishing federal control over education, and low assessment scores on the standardized tests. Space devoted to teacher insights and concerns was little, an issue also raised by Porter et al. (2015) regarding the overall CCSS implementation. Progress in the CCSS implementation was not mentioned at all while positive learning experiences in classrooms were superficially noted.

### CCSS in the NYT

The qualitative analysis of the concordance lines involved a close review of the contexts in which the four lexemes occurred (Table 3). The positive and negative instances of the key search words assisted in understanding the coverage of the CCSS during the *adoption-alignment period*.

**Table 3**

*Analysis of Concordance Lines in the NYT and the WSJ*

	Search Word	Total Instances (T)*			Positive Instances (P)			Negative Instances (N)		
		NYT	vs.	WSJ	NYT	vs.	WSJ	NYT	vs.	WSJ
<b>Common Core Standards</b>	Adoption	107			47		22	8		15
	Implementation	58			18		44	52		185
		128								
		248								
<b>Teachers</b>	Adoption	74			3		0	0		0
	Implementation	80			0		6	14		34
		58								
		72								
<b>Student</b>	Adoption	18			6		10	2		0
	Implementation	14			2		13	41		16
		84								
		45								
<b>Test</b>	Adoption	14		3	5		0	2		1
	Implementation	129			11		8	58		77
		185								

\* Neutral occurrences of these key terms also included in the total numbers

Since the CCSS was publicly announced for adoption in 2010, the news reports highlighted the purposes of the new standards, which were to set high *expectations* of students and *prepare* them for college and the workforce. As a newspaper possessing a more liberal reader profile (PEW, 2014), the occurrences of the key words showed that NYT tilted towards a more positive portrayal of the CCSS. The words *common core* and *standards* were primarily used along with lexical items expressing a positive connotation such as *thoughtful*, *noteworthy*, *uniform*, *coherent*, *rigorous* and *high quality*. The other key words occurred much less frequently with few negative connotations. The NYT articles adopted a particular discourse strategy to establish this positive context by comparing the new standards to the former one.

I'm hopeful that a bunch of states with **crummy** [emphasis added] standards will end up with **better ones** this way," said Chester E. Finn Jr., a former assistant secretary of education who has long called for national standards. (20100620\_NYT\_N.txt)  
Mr. Stergios' group found the common standards **less rigorous** than Massachusetts' existing ones. (20100721\_NYT\_N.txt) [emphases added]



In these comparisons, more negatively connotated words describing the former state-specific standards emerged such as *crummy*, *hodgepodge*, and *weakened*. These words refer to the low-quality content and extreme variation in former standards before the CCSS. Similarly, the NYT highlighted the specificity of the CCSS guidelines, portraying the old ones as expecting too much content delivery at the expense of superficiality. Since no teaching experience with the new standards was yet available, most lines including *teachers* in the NYT news noticeably adopted a more neutral stance. While highlighting the need for national tests that are more rigorous and aligned with common standards, the common tests were also envisioned to provide more comparable test results across the states compared to the earlier tests in five instances. Former tests were described as *easier* and having common tests was considered as a cost-saving option. While some critics raised concerns regarding federal government's grants for testing, the overarching positive aura before the actual implementation of the CCSS was reinforced via such a comparative discourse.

The picture of the CCSS differed substantially during *the implementation -testing period* (2013-2017). The NYT sub-corpus skewed toward the negative side. Few positive references to *the CCSS* were noted whereas all the keywords occurred in more negative contexts as shown in Figure 3 above. Since the standards were implemented for the first time, particularly *teachers* carried a negative sentiment in the concordance lines (e.g., unsettling, frustrated, concerns, etc.).

The collocations of the lexeme *teacher(s)*, which were identified using Antconc, specifically indicated the sources of the negativity: *evaluations*, *test*, and *scores* (Table 4). These collocates, which occurred significantly frequently in the vicinity of *teachers*, pointed to the new practice introduced with the birth of the CCSS: teacher evaluations based on test scores. In the NYT articles, for example, almost half of the occurrences of the phrase “test scores” (45 % or 10 out of 22) particularly related to teacher evaluations. Teacher evaluations along with tests seem to have triggered a negative representation of the standards especially as a tool for penalizing teachers. While it will be further discussed below, it is important to note that students were not listed among the groups impacted.

**Table 4**

*Collocations of the Focus Words in the News Articles and MI Scores*

Focus words	Collocations in NYT	Collocations in WSJ
standard(s)	adopted (5.43) national (5.15), effort (4.84) high (4.8)	uniform (5.43) academic (5.36), higher (5.26) adopted (5.06) critics (4.48)
student(s)	Hispanic (7.2) learn (6.1) prepare (6.0) expected (5.8) work (5.67) college (5.38) reading (5.2) exam (4.90)	skills (6.47) college (5.56) tests (5.22)
teacher(s)	evaluations (8.19) federation (7.6) parents (6.3) scores (5.60) test (5.40) school (5.06)	parents (6.60) grade (5.97)

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test(s)/ testing	standardized (7.38) scores (7.1) evaluations (6.76) use (6.30) teacher (5.44)	scores (8.30) using (7.65) students (5.22) parents (5.40) new (4.62)
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Reactions to the tests were described in many lines such as *upset* parents and students *opting out* of tests. The negative sentiment reflected the increasing resistance against these standards (e.g., *protest, control, more difficult, federal takeover*) due to demands for local control, discussions around leaked test items, high-stakes accountability, and some dissatisfactions with the content of the standards. Discussions about possible revisions and repeal of the CCSS also start during this period. Moreover, the lack of attention to vulnerable student populations are highlighted.

But striking gaps in achievement between **black** and **Hispanic** students and their counterparts persisted... On the English exam, 3 percent of **nonnative speakers** were deemed proficient, and 6 percent of **students with disabilities** passed...In math, 15 percent of black students and 19 percent of Hispanic students passed the exam, compared with 50 percent of **white** students and 61 percent of **Asian** students...Critics of Mr. Bloomberg latched onto the disparities in the scores, arguing that the mayor's 12-year effort to overhaul city schools had neglected the most **vulnerable students**. (20130807\_NYT\_N.txt) [emphasis added]

Before the implementation of the standards, students were described as one homogenous group that would master the highly advanced skills set by the standards regardless of where in the U.S. they live. No discussion appeared regarding how disadvantaged, or minority students would be served with the same standards in different school contexts in the U.S. Unlike the initial years of the CCSS, the NYT seems to cover more reports on learning gaps among student groups during this period.

### CCSS Image in the WSJ

Unlike the NYT reports, which covered the CCSS in a more positive aura in the adoption years, more critical views of the CCSS were visible in the WSJ sub-corpus during the same period. Out of all concordance lines in which *standards* appeared (T= 44), a lot more negatively connotated instances (34 % or N=15) occurred within the vicinity of negatively connotated words such as *weak, controversial, de facto, oppose, undermine, and worry* along with few favorable words (i.e., *rigorous, consistent, deeper learning*). In all the concordance lines in which the lexeme *teacher(s)* and *test(s)* appeared, no strong inclination was not noted. Of the total number of references to *students* in the WSJ sub-corpus (T=14), the majority of those lines (71 % or P=10 out of 14) were tilted toward a positive content about the common standards and their goals for student learning and no negative references related to students were noted. The WSJ highlighted the quality of the standards during this time such as allowing for *deeper learning* and providing *world-class* skills for students for *college* readiness. Only one negative instance of *test(s)* occurred during this time.

The discourse in the WSJ was not very different from that of the NYT during the implementation. The lexeme *teacher(s)* was used with a negative sentiment in 34 lines out of 72 total number of lines (47 %) as opposed to only 6 positive instances (8 %). The context in which this lexeme appeared indicated several concerns about the implementation of the standards such as stressing out about the pace of changes, having too little support and training on CCSS

implementation and so on. In some instances, teacher unions appeared to voice teachers' opinions and needs during the implementation of the standards mostly in negatively connotated contexts. As seen in Figure 3 below, a negative sentiment is sensed in the WSJ's reports on the teacher unions as they often raised their concerns about the implementation and the amount of support provided for the teachers. Overall, the WSJ reported the perspectives of the teacher unions throughout the CCSS experience more often than the NYT.

**Figure 3**

*The Use of Teacher Unions in the WSJ*

1	coming predominantly from the teachers	union. A vote on	a union-backed bill that would have delayed Comm	20140711_WSJ_N.txt
2	ntly from the teachers union. A vote on a	union-backed bill that	would have delayed Common Core testing wa	20140711_WSJ_N.txt
3	ersey Education Association, a teachers	union, criticized the testing	commission, saying it ignored public tes	20160111_WSJ_N.txt
4	oo. The Kentucky Education Association	union doesn't have	a formal position on Common Core, but union lea	20150508_WSJ_N.txt
5	a math teacher at Mattituck-Cutchogue	Union Free School District	on Long Island, said in one of the signific	20170502_WSJ_N.txt
6	2013, and many educators, parents and	union leaders said schools	didn't have enough time, books and train	20150903_WSJ_N.txt
7	a formal position on Common Core, but	union leaders say they	have worked hard to make sure teachers rec	20150508_WSJ_N.txt
8	intrusion into local control, and teachers-	union leaders, who say	their implementation has been botched. The	20140820_WSJ_N.txt
9	intrusion into local education decisions;	union leaders who worry	that states have tied, or plan to tie, teacher	20130430_WSJ_N.txt
10	entation of the Common Core has been,"	union President Michael Mulgrew	said in a news release. High Achie	20150903_WSJ_N.txt

About 91 % of all the references to testing in the WSJ news during the implementation-testing period reported involved a negative sentiment (N=77, T=85). The WSJ journal reports highlighted extreme concerns caused by the testing practices (e.g., costs, frequent testing) and the reactions from students and parents in the form of protesting or opting out of the tests. Some improvement in testing scores is observed in a couple of states. Moreover, common tests are reported to provide uniformity across states and show gaps in achievement, but they are still considered *harder, tougher, flawed, time-consuming, and expensive*.

A negative representation of the *standards* via word choices were visible in reports such as *mediocre, vague, and inadequate* while concerns about authority over education were consistently raised (e.g., intrusion, overreach). What distinguishes the WSJ's overall discourse from that of NYT is that no reference to vulnerable student populations is made during this phase. Another outstanding characteristic of the discourse is that the WSJ news reiterates the intentions to remove or modify the standards more emphatically than the NYT. Eight of the ten articles that appeared during this period involved a discussion around next steps about the standards (e.g., *repeal, replace, overhaul*). However, the NYT articles mainly emphasize the criticisms against the standards (e.g., *resistance, opposition*).

The WSJ sub-corpus also comprised a balanced amount of positive and negative references to the standards by reporting student experiences in the *implementation-testing phase (2013-2017)*. Of the total 45 instances that appeared during this phase, 13 instances of positive (29 %) and 16 instances of negative content (36 %) appeared during this period<sup>1</sup>. The WSJ reported the new standards to provide a *rich exposure* to challenging texts for reading. No matter where they lived, students would receive a comparable education through the *uniformity* of the standards. With higher expectations, students would also be able to *compete* internationally. When the common tests (i.e., PARCC, Smarter Balanced) were administered in schools, though,

<sup>1</sup> The remaining 16 instances were found to be more neutral statements about the CCSS. For news reports, having neutral reports was expected.

students were particularly mentioned in terms of their struggles with the computerized tests associated with the standards (e.g., *facing excessive tests, dropping scores, protesting, boycotting*). The low-test scores seem to have overshadowed the intended goals of the standards.

### **Discussion**

Considering the wide political acceptance in the midst of a “pervasive national atmosphere of low expectations” in American schools (Smith, 2017, p. 9), the adoption and the implementation of the CCSS was an unprecedented development. Prior to the CCSS, the states had specified their own educational standards, which in some states fell short of providing students with the literacy and workforce skills needed in the 21st century (Smith, 2017). Despite the past attempts to establish common standards in some disciplines in the 80s and 90s, those attempts did not receive as much support as the CCSS did. Therefore, the vast agreement on higher educational standards was an opportunity to address the issue of scrambled educational standards.

As the findings showed, the U.S. media approached the standards based on their own ideologies and reader profiles. The NYT (a more liberal newspaper) supported the CCSS in the beginning while the WSJ (a more conservative newspaper) consistently approached the CCSS with the skepticism. My argument is that such consistent negativity aligns with the political standing of the right wing in terms of maintaining the local control over education and not using federal government funding for educational reforms and common standards (Research Question 1). Both news articles increased the level of criticism during the implementation-testing stage. However, such criticism was also limited to reporting the concerns of the public rather than bringing expert voice to the news (Research Question 2).

The coverage of the CCSS in the entire news corpus also displayed other problematic assumptions related to reforming the U.S. education. One primary problem with such news discourse is that the news articles did not question the assumption that learner groups in the socioeconomically disadvantaged school contexts would be served equitably compared to the wealthier parts of the country. All learners would be educated using the same rigorous standards for college and career readiness regardless of where they lived across the nation (Kornhaber et al., 2014). However, this uniformity brought the assumption that less economically developed regions would equally respond to same standards. The newspapers’ representation of the Common Core reflected the ideological views related to the involvement of government as in the WSJ and the laudable goals of the CCSS as in the NYT in the beginning of the reform movement. Students with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and their learning experiences were only minimally covered in a NYT news article during the implementation period.

What these two media outlets foregrounded and backgrounded further demonstrates their interest and partiality (Fairclough, 1995). The WSJ’s news foregrounded the widely existing political perspectives on federally led vs. state-led reforms and presented the CCSS as the violation of the status quo. On the other hand, the negatively recurring *testing* theme in the WSJ news implies the disparities in the learning experiences without naming any socioeconomically disadvantaged learner groups. This strategy keeps the attention on the failure of the CCSS rather than the realities in different school contexts. The WSJ news mainly placed the blame on the CCSS as a *divisive* attempt in education.

Communications scholarship in the field of media also showed that news outlets have a central role in presenting the news in particular ways. Media institutions adopt an approach that aligns with the pre-existing beliefs and notions of their readers on national and global matters, which has a strengthening effect on the readers' perspectives and understanding of those matters (Carmichael et al., 2017; Feldman et al., 2015). In the case of the CCSS, too, the discursive strategies adopted by the WSJ and the NYT likely point to the views of their unique reader populations. As the media reports, the NYT has a more liberal profile than the WSJ (PEW, 2014) and approximately 20 % of its readers consists of American youth (Statista, 2018). The NYT's supportive coverage of the CCSS reform reflected it as an opportunity for resolving an educational matter with a progressive perspective. On the other hand, the WSJ's consistently negative coverage of the CCSS from the beginning reflected the more skeptical viewpoint on the underlying political purpose of the federal government under the Obama administration.

### **Conclusion**

Grand educational reforms such as the CCSS should not be expected to provide satisfactory outcomes without challenges in implementation, cost, and teacher education. The quick shift from the relatively optimistic expectations built at the initiation of the CCSS to negatively connotated perceptions demonstrates how fast the doubt surrounds the news discourse. This might have stemmed from the fact that both the NYT and the WSJ increasingly voiced policy makers and politicians who mainly reiterated suspicious perspectives on the purposes, funding, and political agendas regarding this reform. The CCSS thus became the source of polarization between the liberal and conservative groups. Neither of the newspapers seemed to have adequately voiced expert figures who could have drawn a more realistic picture of how the new standards would transform public schools into better college preparation institutions. By doing so, the news media reproduced the day-to-day concerns and discussions about the standards.

The CADS framework allowed for a description of how the so-called neutral news articles inform the public and disseminate certain messages subtly. Several studies investigated the practical implementation of the standards in the classrooms and political background of this reform. However, this study contributed to the understanding of educational reforms can be reflected in particular ways through the media and showed how the news media discourse shifted its discourse on educational matters over a long period of time. The news coverage of this colossal educational policy is particularly pertinent given that the states had the freedom to implement these standards written by expert groups or to compile their own standards to increase the educational quality. The coverage of this reform movement by different information sources such as newspapers likely impacted how teachers, school administrators, and politicians gauged the value of the CCSS in different contexts. Eventually, while many states continue to use the CCSS in the public schools, many others decided to opt out of this reform movement or modified it. During the time that the CCSS was implemented, the media's role was to spotlight certain aspects of the reform, but not others based on the interests of certain groups and readers.

As this research has shown, media discourse can vary substantially in the discussions of educational policies. Research studies utilizing a variety of approaches such as Discourse Historical Approach and the Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies may provide valuable insights into such discourses to unpack the representation of social and educational matters. Furthermore, the use of such frameworks in discourse studies could assist in better understanding how the

policies are understood or framed nationally or locally. Since educational policies (e.g., math, English) may have implications for minority groups, researchers should approach news reports more critically.

### **Limitations**

This exploratory study focused on the discourses of two newspapers with different reader profiles during the period of 8 years. The corpus linguistic methods facilitated the analysis of the news discourse while mitigating the subjective nature of discourse analysis. While the discursive strategies identified through the CADS framework clearly differed from each other in the NTY and the WSJ journals, a further study could demonstrate such differences more comprehensively by using a larger corpus that involves more national and local newspapers. Such a study would also allow to run analyses to build assertions about the statistical significance of such differences.

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