Equity at the “Core” of the Common Core

A fundamental question educators must ask now is: *Will the Common Core, on the whole, be a force for equity? Or will it wind up reproducing the current inequities in our system?* Literacy educator Alfred Tatum asks this question even more provocatively:

**Will the CCSS yield the promise for African American and Latino boys that reshapes the trend for college and career readiness to be on par with the best young minds in the nation?**  
**OR**  
**Will the CCSS serve as a metaphorical noose that hangs young African American and Latino boys from data sheets until the next best reform effort comes along?**

At the National Equity Project, we view the Common Core through a lens of equity. We understand that the Common Core was originally designed, in part, as an equity strategy to ensure high expectations and college / career readiness for every student. We believe in the potential promise of the Common Core - the increased opportunities to engage students through a focus on depth over breadth of learning, greater relevance through applying learning to real-life problems and contexts, and a focus on critical thinking, collaboration and student-driven discourse across subject areas. These are only a few of the ways that the Common Core has the potential to engage students in new ways and bring about more powerful learning and equitable outcomes. What we also know to be true is that, unless educators approach its implementation with an eye to the predictably differential impacts it will have, the promise will go unrealized.

**Already, we are seeing a number of trends that present a threat to this promise. Here are just two:**

- The press to implement the Common Core reduces system bandwidth to keep a focus on equity. This shows up in time on the calendar, resource allocation, and presence of equity on the ‘agenda.’ We have heard frequent statements to the effect of: “Given everything we have to implement in the Common Core, how can we focus on equity on top of all of this?”

- The focus in Common Core implementation has been on learning to teach to a “higher” bar, and teach for “deeper” learning. However, the same students who have struggled to achieve proficiency in the old set of standards will not automatically find success in the Common Core. Understanding the root causes of those struggles is imperative as educators make the shift to the new standards - whether it be the need for a stronger connection between learning and students’ lives, and/or more trusting and culturally congruent relationships between adults and students, and/or the need to strengthen foundational skills (e.g. in literacy and math) that will be even more important while reading more complex texts and working toward deeper conceptual understandings of math.

We believe it is essential to start at the “core” of the Common Core - what happens in the relationship between a student and a teacher. One trend we’ve also seen is how, in the press to implement the Common Core, a focus on students and their particular needs has been fading to the background. School and district approaches to implementing the Common Core have been heavily technical. The necessity of focusing on learning the standards, training in new teaching practices that support the standards, addressing the demands of new assessments (their content and format), and the press/urgency to make all this happen NOW,
are all combining to create a focus on adult systems and needs that overshadows the needs of individual students.

How will students, especially those experiencing less success, and especially students of color and low-income students, experience teaching and teachers within this new Common Core era? How will the combination of (presumably) higher expectations, (theoretically) more engaging content, and new forms of assessment shape their learning experience? Their motivation and ownership of their learning? Their belief in themselves?

And for educators, how will the demands of the Common Core shape our experience of our students, especially those further from success?

Using an equity lens, one thing we can predict about the Common Core is that it will surface tensions in educators’ beliefs about “all students can learn.”

The Common Core indeed represents a “higher” bar - both for student learning and for instruction. So the more important question is how will we, as educators, respond to familiar patterns of student failure – and to new forms of struggle? In the words of the DuFours’ well-known “PLC question #3”: What will happen when students don’t learn? Will we unconsciously (or even consciously) tell ourselves that some of our students may not be suited for this kind of learning? Will we believe that “raising the bar” will necessarily leave some (potentially more?) students “behind”? As we continue to see drops in students’ scores – and increases in achievement gaps – as Common Core assessments get first implemented, how might that impact our confidence that these standards are a reachable goal for students who are further from success already?

Understandably, these issues can be hard issues to name and explore. We do not raise these questions to blame teachers or leaders, but rather to ask “What keeps reproducing these perceptions and experiences for teachers and students?” We must examine the ways our education institutions are structured at all levels, including classrooms, to see what keeps reproducing this experience.

It is important to normalize, not pathologize, the equity-related challenges that we face as we learn to teach and lead in the Common Core. And we need to see these actually as not so different from the challenges our students face. The Common Core calls upon students to engage in deeper learning… to take risks… to fail… and to learn from this failure. We should accept -- even embrace -- that we as adult educators are called upon to engage in a parallel struggle. This might give us some empathy – and some new openings in our relationships with students as we learn together to navigate this new era.

When we look at the bigger picture, it becomes clear that we are in it together with our students. We are not separate. Our fates are linked.

"If you have come to help me, then you are wasting your time... But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us walk together.”

Lila Watson
Australian Aboriginal Artist, Activist & Academic