

## **Aligning Curriculum of Early Childhood Teacher Education with CCSS**

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**Abstract:** *Curriculum is designed to promote and guide instructional planning which in turn guides instruction leading to learning outcomes, therefore, curriculums in early childhood teacher education programs should be aligned with standards and assessments and provide the primary framework and content of teaching. The implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will bring tremendous benefits for the increase of educational quality and the quality training of early childhood educators have powerful and positive effects on children's learning. Many experts oppose the implementation of CCSS in K-3. However, the Aligning curriculum of early childhood teacher education with CCSS has many advantages for early childhood education students - to build their professional identity, adapt them to teaching, develop their critical thinking ability, and prepare them to become highly qualified teachers. "connect pre-service teachers with current policy in schools".*

**Keywords:** *curriculum, early childhood teacher education, CCSS.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Forty-six states and the District of Columbia have signed on to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), and the adopting states may augment the new standards with no more than 15% of state specific standards. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are theorized to improve education in three ways: They are superior to most current state standards; they set higher expectations than current state standards; and they yield their own efficiencies (Loveless, 2012). The CCSS spells out what students should learn in mathematics and English language arts from kindergarten to the end of high school. The standards were written by teams of curriculum specialists and vetted by panels of academicians, teachers, and other related experts. The benefit of the CCSS is that for the first time in U.S. history, educators are beginning to have conversations across states about curriculum in ways that did not exist in the past (Gallia, 2013). However, with the creation and implementation of CCSS, many different voices can be heard, especially in the field of early childhood education. Since CCSS covers K-12 grades, this overlaps with the grades early childhood education covers, namely K-3. The overlapping years implies the unavoidability of early childhood education in the implementation of CCSS; in other words, the success of CCSS in the future is determined by the foundation laid at the stage of early childhood education.

Many experts oppose the implementation of CCSS in K-3 for various reasons. First, early childhood teachers and child development experts were excluded from the K-3 standards writing process (Miller & Carlsson-Paige, 2013). Second, the standards do not reflect research; they reflect guesswork, not cognitive or developmental science (Strauss, 2013). Third, CCSS are age inappropriate and will bring stress to children, especially kindergarteners, because they are not prepared for this level of education (Koschnick, 2013). Fourth, CCSS require K-3 children to "learn specific content, facts and skills at certain ages. To get children to learn the same things at the same time will result in an enormous increase in direct teaching and direct instruction" (Miller & Carlsson-Paige, 2013), which will put active, play-based learning out of many kindergartens, and will intensify the push for more standardized testing, which is highly unreliable for children under age eight (Strauss, 2013). Fifth, areas such as active, hands-on exploration, and developing social, emotional, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills are difficult to measure, but are essential building blocks for academic and social accomplishment and responsible citizenship (Strauss, 2013).

## **2. SIGNIFICANCE OF ALIGNING CURRICULUM OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION WITH CCSS**

Among the states that adopted CCSS, these national standards provide a good opportunity to improve the educational quality of the states. States do not need to spend money in designing standards and evaluation systems. At the same time, they can compete for financial support from the federal government to develop education in their own states, especially the states in which educational quality has always ranked among the poorest states in the U. S. The implementation of CCSS will bring tremendous benefits for the increase of educational quality in the state. Aligning curriculum of early childhood teacher education with CCSS will have many positive effects on the training of pre-service teachers in their future vocation.

### **2.1. Building Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identity**

Korthagen (2004) indicated that teacher preparation programs should consider the student teachers' sense of identity and their mission as a teacher. With appropriate and successful teacher education programs, student teachers can acquire "the quality of the modeling and the opportunities to practice skills" (LePage et al., 2005), utilize a variety of observation systems, and accurately identify the roles of the early childhood teachers they observed (Saracho, 1988). Successful program can also make a difference in teachers' practices; teachers can develop confidence and long-term commitment to teaching if programs include more practicum experiences and student teaching integrated with coursework (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2005). The CCSS-based early childhood teacher education program can help those student teachers have a preliminary understanding of CCSS first, which is a new concept for them. The introduction of CCSS and how to align it with classroom teaching will make those student teachers form their own teacher identity and what teachers should do to meet the requirements of CCSS. All this can help them have a smooth transition from student teachers to real teachers.

### **2.2. Adapting Pre-Service Teachers to their Future Teaching**

Teacher education with specific structural systems provides students with the most appropriate training (Neal, 2011). These specific structural systems, as the foundation of teacher education, include curriculum in general education courses, core courses, instructional/method courses, and practicum experiences (Neal, 2011). All these curriculums can equip the pre-service teachers theoretically and practically. Putnam and Borko (2000) reported that the most viable place for new teacher learning to occur is in the classroom and they also found that teachers often complain that traditional professional development that occurs outside the classroom is too removed from their real world.

In order to overcome the disadvantages of traditional pre-development, teacher education programs should be based on current topics and policy in the educational field. However, members of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) found that most teachers lack the curriculum and instructional support that they need to teach the standards effectively (Rothman, 2013). By combining CCSS with the early childhood teacher education curriculum, the early childhood education students will have a good understanding of what class should be like and how to design lesson plans that align with CCSS. They would especially be acquainted with factors they need to consider in their teaching, such as deeper academic knowledge, students' differences such as English language learners, learners who need special education, and learners who have not been to kindergarten. Without introduction of CCSS-related topics, these early childhood education students will become nervous and puzzled when they step into class after they graduate.

### **2.3. Developing Pre-Service Teachers' Critical Thinking Ability**

The design, adoption, and implementation of CCSS have generated broad discussions in the educational field. Can professors in early childhood teacher education programs neglect these discussions? Education should be closely related to practice –classroom teaching. Early childhood teacher education, which emphasizes theory and practice, needs to focus on what happens in the real classroom. Therefore, in the curriculum for early childhood teacher education, professors should provide more opportunities for those early childhood education teachers to discuss CCSS, to find the advantages and disadvantages of applying CCSS in the state, and learn how to align CCSS with current class teaching. This process can improve those pre-service teachers' critical thinking ability, instead of totally accepting what others say.

### **2.4. Preparing Highly Qualified Teachers**

Effectiveness of teachers is one of the most critical factors in the quality of a child's education (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). An effective teacher is perhaps the most important factor in producing consistently high levels of student achievement. According to the NCLB Act, a highly qualified teacher holds at least a bachelor's degree, has obtained full state certification, and has demonstrated knowledge in the core academic subjects he or she teaches. From this act, teacher education is an important stage in becoming a qualified teacher. Therefore, the quality of teacher education programs can determine the quality of will-be teachers in their future teaching, especially in the era of CCSS. Since teaching in Mississippi public schools is CCSS-oriented, the curriculum in teacher education should be related to CCSS to provide pre-service teachers opportunities to become qualified teachers quickly in their professional career. Spodek and Saracho (1990) mentioned that the examination of the pre-service program of study is a strategy for characterizing teacher qualifications.

### **2.5. Connecting Pre-Service Teachers with Current Policy in Schools**

CCSS is not only a challenge for public school teachers, but also brings challenges to educators in early childhood teacher education programs. All these educators need professional development to better meet the new requirements of CCSS. The concept of professional development addresses the continuing development of any knowledge, skill, behavior, and attitude needed by educators. Teacher development intends to improve student learning through enhanced teacher performance (Sparks, 2007), which embraces both academic and professional study, and includes those experiences gained from extracurricular activities and the life of the institution in general. Thus, teacher professional development is organized to prepare educators for implementing the outcomes of curriculum planning activities, which deal with the development of programs, courses, syllabi, curriculum guides, resource units, teaching units, or lesson plans. The primary needs for professional development are identified from the curriculum planning activities that organize new programs or improve existing ones.

### **3. COMPONENTS OF CCSS-BASED CURRICULUM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION**

Traditional early childhood teacher education contains four specific teacher training areas: general education, educational foundations, instructional knowledge, and field experience (Spodek & Saracho, 1990). Teacher learning, in terms of content and effective pedagogy, as well as understanding and interpreting policy, is the key to enhancing capacity and encouraging implementation, thus leading to change (Cohen, 1995). The National Academy of Education Committee on Teacher Education summarized that beginning teachers should have a sound foundation in three aspects: knowledge of how children learn, including an understanding of their development; knowledge of subject matter (content) and curriculum goals; and knowledge of teaching in terms of multiple modalities, diverse learners, classroom management, and the importance of assessment in making curriculum decisions (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). Saracho (1993) recommended that the components of early childhood teacher preparation should include recruitment and selection, general education, professional foundations, instructional knowledge, practice, and program modification.

All these components show that teacher education is an extremely complex system. From the perspective of institutions, it should involve colleges, field placements in school classrooms, and departments of education at the federal and state levels. From the perspective of knowledge, it should involve general education, academic knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, internship knowledge, and policy knowledge. For participants in teacher education programs, it should involve early childhood education students and instructors in colleges, students and teachers in all kinds of schools, and policy designers in departments of education. In this complex and dynamic system, teaching concepts and contents are not stable, but will change continuously to meet the needs of the outside and inside environments.

Shulman (as cited in Ball, Thames & Phelps, 2008) divided teacher knowledge into several categories. These were general pedagogical knowledge with special reference to those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter; knowledge of learners and their characteristics; knowledge of educational contexts ranging from workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures; knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds; content knowledge; curriculum knowledge, with particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers; pedagogical content knowledge, that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding (Ball, Thames & Phelps, 2008). In study of standards-based teaching, some researchers found that teachers largely lack the knowledge and support needed to fully implement standards-based teaching and learning (Confrey, 2007; Jardine et al., 2008). The success of standards-based teaching depends mostly on systematic professional learning opportunities for teachers.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

The implementation of CCSS in most states in the US cannot make the early childhood teacher education be left from this tremendous event. Aligning curriculum of early childhood teacher education with CCSS has so many advantages for those pre-service teachers, like building their professional identity, adapting them to teaching, developing their critical thinking ability, and preparing them to become highly qualified teachers. Teachers and professors in early childhood teacher education programs should cultivate some curriculums which are aligned with CCSS to help those pre-service teachers have a good understanding and clear awareness about what happens in their future career.

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