

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Common Core Standards Program in the State of South Dakota

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ABSTRACT

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study investigated and interpreted the Common Core State Standards program (the phenomenon) that has been the dominating topic of discussions amongst educators all across the country since the inauguration of the program in 2014/2015 school session. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) was a program that 48 states, two U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia (DC) established in 2009 to improve the educational standards of schools in their respective states and territories. The objective of this research project was to assess and gauge the impact of the program vis-à-vis how it has impacted the 'lived experiences' of the educators in the country, specifically, in the state of South Dakota. South Dakota, though a very small state relative to other larger and economically stronger states, has truly engaged and provided resources to her educators for training and other needed infrastructures to help with the implementation of the program. Stories have been flying around the country about how the program has disrupted the flow of 'teaching and learning' in the American classrooms; however, the educators interviewed in this study did not believe that was the case, at least, not in their respective schools. These educators, who also happened to be principals and assistant principals of the schools under investigation, spoke highly of the potential of the program, especially the resources and engagement that the state of South Dakota has provided for its successful application and implementation.

Key words: Common Core State Standards, South Dakota Common Core Standards, No Child Left Behind

INTRODUCTION

Educating and instilling knowledge in the K-12 students is an issue that many school administrations in the United States of America have struggled with to accomplish for years. For example, President George W. Bush, the 43rd President of the United States of America had to deal with similar issues as well, because his administration introduced the 'No Child Left Behind' program to try and put extraordinary emphasis and pressure on school educators to make sure that students under their care are adequately prepared for success through the standardized test systems. However, it seems as though American educational systems are falling behind our competitors around the world. American public educational systems were found to be failing and falling behind their counterparts in countries like Japan, Korea, Singapore, and parts of China (Heyneman, 2013). Because of the unacceptable state of the educational standards with the rest of the world, a national educational standards program was conceived by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) called the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) program. This program created a framework with which every school district, school teachers,

and school administrators in the United States (with the exception of perhaps 2 states) would have a national standardized test system that would prepare their students for post-secondary school experience. Currently there are about 48 states, two U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia (DC) that are participating in the CCSS program. The actual implementation and practice of the system went into operation in the 2014/2015 academic year. This paper will concentrate on two schools both of which are in the city of Brookings, South Dakota; George Middle School (GMS) and Bobcats High School (BHS). George Middle School (GMS) was established in the 1967 and it is a grade 6 through grade 8 middle school. Bobcats High School (BHS), on the other hand, is a grade 9 through grade 12 high school.

As a country, the United States of America is known for its democratic governing system (the freest country on earth), its educational systems (the highest educational standards), its technological advancement (the highest technological innovation country on earth), etc. With all these exceptionalism that the United States is known for all around the world, it is, however, inconceivable that the country's educational systems should be perceived as failing in rankings and falling

behind other countries in the world. As a solution to the educational standards problem that the country faces, Governors around the country (NGA) and their Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) came up with a scheme (program) they thought will help change the paradigm in the state school systems. This scheme is called the Common Core State Standards program (CCSS). However, because of the strict requirement of the program, many educators now believe that the program is inconsistent and somewhat unfair to the very same students it was originally set up to help get ready and prepared for future endeavors. Additionally, some activists have also claimed that the burden was too much on the educators and school administrators who are charged with responsibility of implementing the program.

History

This program was a state-led program that created the CCSS and it was established in 2009 by 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia. This program came through the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The state governors and their school chiefs' believed that school standards and values for the purpose of consistency and real-world learning experiences and standards have begun to deteriorate; hence they believed that something needs to be done to change the tide. As such, CCSS program was created to ensure that students, regardless of their state or place of residence, are assured of high standards of preparedness for getting into college and/or perhaps go into life-career, knowing very well that they have been adequately trained and prepared for the real world.

Impacts on the Local School Systems

The essence of this IPA research study is to try and understand where the educators and school administrators' positions are with regard to the implementation of this standardized educational program (CCSS). Though, it is understandable that many parents, educators, and state governments are interested and involved in finding a solution to the educational problems, however, the issue is that the solution might not be the right fits for the problem. Therefore, the goal of this research study is that it wants to try and understand the problematic issues that the educators and school administrators are seriously concerned about vis-à-vis the compliance and implementation of the program in their schools.

Audience

Essentially what this research study is trying to do is to ignite some kind of thoughtful and national debates amongst the stakeholders. These stakeholders obviously are the people who are most affected by the deteriorating standards in the school systems, i.e., the students, parents of the students, educators, school administrators, school districts' superintendents, law-makers, and the governments (both state and federal governments). As an interpretative phenomenological analysis research project, this study will try to examine

and interpret the 'lived experiences' of the research participants to get a gauge and understanding of the problematic issues they are facing.

Purpose Statement

As aforementioned, the goal of this phenomenological research study is to examine and interpret the 'lived experiences' of the participants in this research as it relates to their experiences and how the phenomenon/subject-matter (the Common Core State Standards program) has impacted their ability to perform their duties as educators and school administrators. As for the questions, Trede and Higgs (2009) believed that "[r]esearch questions embed the values, world view and direction of an inquiry. They also are influential in determining what type of knowledge is going to be generated" (p. 18). Additionally, Creswell (2003, p. 106) advised that researchers should only "ask one or two central questions followed by no more than five to seven sub-questions." Creswell (2003, p. 107) went on to also suggest that researchers should "[u]se open-ended questions without reference to the literature or theory unless otherwise indicated by a qualitative strategy of inquiry." With that said, this research study will ask the participants pertinent and probing (open-ended) questions to try and get to the 'core essence' of how the participants' 'lived experiences' were impacted. Additionally, this research study will follow and utilize the advice and guidelines set forth by Creswell (2003, 2013) to capture the essence of what this interpretative phenomenological analysis research study is trying to explore, understand, and interpret. Therefore, this research study will ask the following questions:

Research Questions

1. How do school administrators in South Dakota assess the impact of the Common Core program on schools in the state?
2. What are the effects of the new program on the relationship between the teachers and students in the classrooms?

Positionality Statement

The position of the author of this research is that he is in favor of establishing a workable, but fair educational standards program that works for every student in the state. A standardized program that considers situations in the different school districts all across the state, i.e., school districts in the urban areas (inner-cities) that require lots of financial and material resources to adequately perform its job properly; and also a fair shot for the rural and suburban area school districts that also need financial and material resources to educate their students adequately. The fact of the matter is that the author is not swayed one way or another; however, as a phenomenological (IPA) researcher, his main goal is to allow the research participants to express their 'lived experiences' as stakeholders in the phenomenon/subject-matter that this research study is investigating.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

As a qualitative research study (and an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach), this study elected to utilize the liminality theoretical framework to help navigate and guide the exploration and interpretation of the findings in this research study. As aforementioned, the intent of this study is to understand the 'lived experiences' of the research participants' vis-à-vis their experiences as they relate to the impact of the introduction of the Common Core State Standards program in their respective local schools' curriculums. Alase (2016, p. 26) stated that "Qualitative research approach allows for a researcher to construct his/her theory under the lens of a theoretical framework as a guide and frame for navigating the foundation and structure that the research study intends to stand on." Alase (2016) also went on to add that

As a phenomenological interpretative research study, it is important that this research utilize the most rigorous theoretical framework that will allow it to capture the phenomenon that the study intends to investigate. The liminality theoretical framework posits to have the ability to put in context the transitional "betwixt and between" periods of the impact [on the stakeholders, particularly the educators and the school administrators]. (p. 26)

Past Studies

In order to familiarize with the Common Core State Standards program, eight articles were reviewed. The first study was conducted by Bidwell (2014) who stated that

"[a]lthough they only recently captured national attention, the Common Core standards – which lay out what students should know and be able to do by each grade – have been in the works since at least 2008. It all started with former Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, who was the 2006-07 chair of the National Governors Association and now leads the University of California system. (p. 1)"

It is believed by many that the new Common Core standards program has been a resemblance to the 2002 President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind educational scheme. Bidwell (2014) reported that Rick Hess, a resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, acknowledged that the Common Core standards program had its roots in the No Child Left Behind program that was established under the President George W. Bush-era education law. This law allows "the federal government [to] required states to test, disaggregate and report data on student performance, but allows states to continue deciding on their own which standards and tests to use" (p. 2).

Williamson, Fitzgerald, and Jackson Stenner (2013, p. 1) stated that "The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) set a controversial aspirational, quantitative trajectory for text complexity exposure for readers throughout the grades, aiming for all high school graduates to be able to independently read complex college and workplace texts." However, they went on to also say that "the trajectory standard is presented

without reference to how the grade-by-grade complexity ranges were determined or rationalized, and little guidance is provided for educators to know how to apply the flexible quantitative text exposure standard in their local contexts" (p. 1).

Maloch and Bomer (2013, p. 205) stated in their article that everyone who read their column is probably aware of the efforts by state governments to engage in pushing a new educational policy that introduced a "curriculum that requires students to read and write more informational texts." Additionally, they asserted that educators in the 45 states and territories that are adopting the Common Core program are "undoubtedly also are aware that the college-readiness standards, the grade-level standards, the guidelines for publishers, and the now emerging assessments all emphasize students working with informational texts" (p. 205). So, what is exactly this informational text they were referring to? Maloch and Bomer (2013) argued that "[i]nformational text is a common term, but it can be confusing. All kinds of texts include information, of course, and lots of different genres can be used to inform readers or can be read in order to develop knowledge and understanding" (p. 207). In their article, they implied that there was some confusion in the definition of informational text as it relates to information in a text, and informational text as it is meant in the Common Core standard. However, at the end of their discussion, they recommended that educators should not worry too much with the terms as it is used in the Common Core get, but to focus more instead on the "range of text types included inside the Standards. We hope that teachers will take the inevitable taxonomies coming out from publishers, state departments of education, and test consultants with substantial grains—no, handfuls—of salt" (pp. 209-210).

Zygouris-Coe (2012, p. 35) presented a "perspective on disciplinary literacy and the Common Core State Standards based on the argument that disciplinary literacy is embedded in the standards". Her article highlighted the "possibilities and challenges associated with national efforts to prepare students for success in college and the workforce" (p. 35). In the article, she argued that "[i]nformation is presented on the basis of a selected literature review of disciplinary literacy, adolescent literacy, student achievement, and the common core standards. Instructional strategies also are presented for developing students' disciplinary literacy and meeting common core goals" (p.35). However, in her summation, she asserted that she called for "collaborative inquiry and shared accountability among stakeholders to ensure that all students' literacy and learning needs are met in a new era of educational reform" (p.35).

Graham and Harris's (2013) article examined the Common Core State Standards as they are applied to writing and students with learning disabilities. In their article, they "first consider why the implementation of these standards is advantageous to writing instruction for students with LD as well as the challenges in implementing them" (p. 28). Their next step was to recommend four implementations:

- (1) increase general and special education teachers' knowledge about writing development;
- (2) create a

writing environment in which students with LD can thrive; (3) employ evidence-based writing practices in general education classes (where most students with LD are taught); and (4) use evidence-based writing practices effective with students with LD. (p. 28)

Graham and Harris (2013, p. 28) then concluded by “considering research that still needs to be undertaken to help educators maximize the probability that students with and without LD meet the writing benchmarks proposed in these Standards.”

Dalton’s (2012) article was trying to link the digital and multimodal composition with the Common Core standard program. As such, he discussed issues of “[i]ntegrating technology and media in ways that matter for students and that are manageable for teachers to enact in their classrooms is not a simple endeavor” (p. 334). He then went on to also discuss ways by which educational system can begin to encourage students to think of themselves as digital-media designers; he argued that as a society we live in a “multimodal world where being an effective communicator involves composing with media. Students will have modal preferences and talents, which they can pursue in depth while they are also developing a broad range of composing and technical skills” (p. 336). However, at the end, he tried to illustrate the connectivity between multimodal composition and Common Core program; Dalton (2012, p. 338) asserted that as a composition, multimodal “produced a digital text using print and media and are developing a critical understanding of how modes carry meaning and interact with one another to communicate a message, skills that the CCSS identifies as important to 21st-century literacy.”

Powell, Fuchs, and Fuchs (2013, p. 38) asserted that “The Common Core State Standards provide teachers with a framework of necessary mathematics skills across grades K-12, which vary considerably from previous mathematics standards.” In their article, they discussed issues that concerns educators about “the implications of the Common Core for students with mathematics difficulties (MD), given that students with MD, by definition, struggle with mathematical skills” (p. 38). As a suggestion, they advised that “instruction centered on the Common Core will be challenging and may lead to problematic outcomes for this population [of students]” (p. 38). As a proposal for the highlighted problematic issue, they proposed that “working on foundational skills related to the Common Core standards is a necessary component of mathematics instruction for students with MD” (p. 38). They suggested that teachers should be provided with a “framework for working on foundational skills concurrent with the Common Core standards” (p. 38). However, Powell, Fuchs, and Fuchs (2013, p. 38) advised that the “implementation of the Common Core is in its infancy, and the implications of the Common Core for students with MD need to be monitored carefully.”

As a way to truly understand the program that has become the ‘talk of many school systems’ all across the country, McLaughlin and Overturf (2012) asked the question – ‘What Is the Essential Philosophy of the Common Core?’ They eventually answered their own question by stating that

The Common Core State Standards emerged from the convergence of several factors: (a) the desire for one set of common standards to enable students to compete on a global scale; (b) the efforts of the CCSSO and the NGA to coordinate a state-led effort to create a set of English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics Standards that would ensure that all United States students were prepared for college and the workplace; and (c) the Gates Foundation’s ambitious goal to have all students graduate college-ready. (pp. 153-154)

McLaughlin and Overturf (2012) alluded to the fact that many states have included significant and meaningful content into their Common Core standards programs. For example, they stated that “New York has included its pre-K standards in the CCSS and added “Responding to Literature” as an additional anchor standard in the K–12 reading and writing CCR Standards and more detailed information in the CCSS” (p. 154). As such they stated that New York had added specified anchors for their grade K-5 Reading and Writing Standards. New York State Education Department, 2010 statement reads:

Responding to Literature (Reading):

Respond to literature by employing knowledge of literary language, textual features, and forms to read and comprehend, reflect upon, and interpret literary texts from a variety of genres and a wide spectrum of American and world cultures.

Responding to Literature (Writing):

Develop personal, cultural, textual, and thematic connections within and across genres as they respond to texts through written, digital, and oral presentations, employing a variety of media and genres (Cited in McLaughlin and Overturf, 2012, p. 154).

As a continuous effort on the part of the New York Dept. of Education, McLaughlin and Overturf (2012, p. 154) believe that “New York has also interjected a variety of benchmark details that support topics such as making connections, cultural diversity, a variety of genres, and higher order thinking.”

McLaughlin and Overturf (2012) believe that even though there are challenges and difficulties in implementing the program, they still believe that the program is worth the headaches and problematic issues that it is currently encountering, and possibly the ones it is going to encounter in the future. However, they asserted that implementing the “Common Core State Standards is not an easy task, but it is an urgent one. Although we may encounter many obstacles to the Standards as they are now written, the potential rewards make our effort well worth the investment” (p. 164). They then went on to state that “[w]e have a great deal of work ahead of us. We need to stand together and strive as diligently as possible to implement the CCSS in meaningful ways” (p. 164). As such, McLaughlin and Overturf (2012, p. 164) believed that “this is a challenging task, particularly in a time of fewer teachers, larger classes, and more diverse populations.”

METHODS

In order to collect and analyze the data, this study followed qualitative research methods, which is conducted to explore

a problem or issue (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). The study uses the interpersonal leverage that qualitative method affords researchers to examine the “lived experiences” of the research participants and gauge the impact of the phenomenon that is being researched (Alase, 2016, p. 79).

Research Design

The study used the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. This approach will position the researcher to be able to interpret the ‘lived experiences’ of the research participants. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) asserted that the IPA research study approach has the ability to explore and interpret the ‘lived experiences’ of the participants vis-à-vis how the subject-matter (phenomenon) impact their ‘lived experiences’. Smith et al. (2009) argued that “IPA shares the views that human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience” (p. 4). Hence, this is the reason why the study employed the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach as its research explorer, investigator, and interpreter.

As a way to assess and gauge the educators’ feelings about the CCSS program in the state of South Dakota, semi structured and open-ended interview questions were e-mailed to the participants for convenience purpose. The author interviewed two educational leaders in the Brookings School District in the state of South Dakota. The research questions that were asked were potent and relevant to the CCSS issues in South Dakota.

Research Participants

As for how many research participants are going to be invited to the study, in order for this study to get a ‘rich’ and ‘thick description’ of the ‘lived experiences’ of the research participants, this research study elected to utilize two participants who are intimately involved in the phenomenon that this study is trying to understand and interpret. The participants interviewed are Mr. Patrick (pseudonym) Principal at Bobcat High School (BHS) (pseudonym for the High School) and Mr. Tony (pseudonym) Assistant Principal at George Middle School (GMS) (pseudonym for the Middle School); both of these schools are in Brookings, South Dakota. Though Smith et al. (2009) suggested that between three and six participants can be used in a phenomenological research; however in a phenomenological research study, the sample pool (participants) can be between 2 to 25 participants, depending on the type of research study which is being conducted. Therefore, this study is still within the parameter (requirement) for a phenomenological research study. Additionally, Smith et al. (2009) also advised that the “primary concern of IPA is with a detailed account of individual experience. The issue is quality, not quantity, and given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases” (p. 51).

Credibility and Authentication of the Research Findings

As an important part of a qualitative study, this section presents a thorough deliberation and affirmation by the researcher of what was found in the process of investigating and interpreting the results. However, in order for the researcher to truly affirm his findings for the purpose of authentication, credibility, and transferability, the researcher adhered to Creswell’s (2013) suggestion. He advised that phenomenological researchers should adhere to the following standard questions that he uses to assess and gauge the quality of a phenomenological research study (Creswell, 2013, p. 260):

1. Does the author convey an understanding of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology?
2. Does the author have a clear “phenomenon” to study that is articulated in a concise way?
3. Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology, such as the procedures recommended by Moustakas (1994) or van Manen (1990)?
4. Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants? Does this essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred?
5. Is the author reflective throughout the study?

Therefore, the above questions are addressed in this section to satisfy the question of authentication, credibility, and transferability.

Does the author convey an understanding of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology?

Yes, as a qualitative research study that utilizes the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, the author was very cognizant of the requirements of the IPA approach. As such, the author made sure that every philosophical tenets of the interpretative phenomenological analysis were adhered to in this research study. From its philosophical tenet that requires that IPA researchers bracket themselves, such as their personal prejudicial thoughts away from the research participants’ ‘lived experiences’.

Does the author have a clear “phenomenon” to study that is articulated in a concise way?

Yes, this researcher (and the research study) has a phenomenon that was studied. The objective of this phenomenological research study was to explore, understand, and interpret the ‘lived experiences’ of the research participants vis-à-vis how the Common Core program has impacted their respective schools. As part of this research process, this research study articulated, in clear and concise manner, the essence of what the objective of this research study was. As such, the research participants were selected purposefully on the basis of their qualifications, experiences, and intimate knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon/subject-matter (CCSS program) in the state of South Dakota, where this research study was carried out.

Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology, such as the procedures recommended by Moustakas (1994) or van Manen (1990)?

Yes, this research study followed the advice of Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990) vis-à-vis their suggestion that phenomenological researchers should be attentive and allow the research participants to tell their ‘lived experience’ stories without any input from the researcher or anyone else (in essence, bracketing themselves away from the participants’ stories). More importantly, as a sense of fairness and prudence, the researcher made sure that the participants were afforded the respect, dignity and sensitivity they deserved, so that they were comfortable enough to share their innermost true feelings with respect to the “if and/or how” this program has impacted daily activities in their respective schools. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that researchers should engage their participants and make sure that they feel as though they are part of the research process and that their ‘lived experiences’ will be respected and interpreted fairly. As a result, this study was able to gather relevant and important information from the responses given by the participants.

Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants? Does this essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred?

Yes, as an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach research study, it is important that the participants’ ‘lived experiences’ were analyzed, conveyed, and amplified in the interpretation. In addition to that, the author purposefully e-mailed the questionnaires to the participants so that their responses can be rich, impactful, and ‘thick in description’ vis-a-vis how the phenomenon (CCSS program) has impacted their responsibilities as public educators in the state of South Dakota. Therefore, it is without a doubt the responsibility of the researcher to probe and inquire about the implementation and management of a program as fundamental and consequential to the educational preparedness of students in the South Dakota school system. More importantly, as a vessel to accomplishing the stated goal, this research study made sure that it engaged and conducted the study with full-sense of transparency in everything it did, thereby allowing for easy and credible transferability of the findings.

Is the author reflective throughout the study?

Absolutely yes; as a practice, the author was very reflective throughout the research process. As an interpretative phenomenological analysis research study, it is very important that phenomenological researchers are reflective and cognizant of their position as conveyors of other people’s ‘lived experiences’, but more so the journey and experience they themselves as researchers had undertaken to get the research study to its final conclusion. As such, Alase (2016) in his advice to interpretative phenomenological analysis researchers suggested that

As a qualitative research study where subjectivity and interpersonal actions and experiences interplay with everyday life nuances, it is very important that a thick personal reflective description be included in the narrative of the research study, so that the audience can see for themselves the journey that the research study has gone through. This interpretative phenomenological analysis research study believes that it is important that every research study give a detail account of the mountains each study has climbed to get to their individual destinations. For a research study to be authentic and credible, telling a narrative of the journey should be part of the research study’s narration. The truth of the matter is that life is noting, but what we make of it as participants in this experiential life journey; it is up to each research study to tell their stories and allow the audience to partake in the journey with them. Therefore, as a phenomenological research study, this study has had its twists and turns. (pp. 148-149)

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questions posted to the principals of these schools were answered in detailed responses to explain their positions. The principals of these schools were interviewed (via a semi-structured questionnaire) to get their perspectives on the CCSS program at their respective schools. Analysis of the principals’ responses and the dynamics of the CCSS program (the dynamics of change) would be analyzed to understand how the program is seen from the perspectives of the educators who will be implementing the change at their respective schools. Leithwood (1994) found that principals were more effective when they fostered a group goal; encouraging and supporting others in their individual’s desires for self-development. In this discussion section of the research findings, the strategy is to break down the discussion topics so that adequate attention can be devoted to each of the topic for better understanding of the ‘lived experiences’ of the research participants. The topics analyzed are the following: Content of change, Process of change, Context of change, and Reaction to change.

Content of Change

The premise behind the CCSS program was to standardize the nation’s educational standards so that when a student from a place like Illinois transfer to a school in South Dakota, there is compatibility and continuity with the school that he/she is transferring to in South Dakota. Moreover, there will be a single testing system in practice all across the country. As it is right now, there are multiple tests that school systems all across the country are using to gauge how their students are doing vis-à-vis their readiness for college and career lives. However, this multiplicity of standardized tests in the country makes it extremely difficult to actually understand the level of readiness of these students, because many research studies have shown that students in the U.S. are

not faring well compared to their counterparts in the world (Heyneman, 2013), especially in some parts of Asia and Europe. In a country that is full of educational ingenuity and innovative people (U.S), it is the job and responsibility of American educators to bring out the best in the students so that they can compete and excel in any subject-matter they choose to pursue.

To understand what this new national program entails (the content of change), the Common Core State Standards is a program that is supposed to prepare and equip students with the knowledge they will need to survive either in the college environment and/or at work (career-wise). The criteria that were used in constructing this college and work readiness standards were the following:

- Standards alignment with college and work expectations
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards
- Informed by top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society
- Finally, Common Core State Standards program will be evidence and/or research based.

This readiness and preparation construct is similar to the Hargreaves (2009) five pillar theory. Hargreaves (2009) theorized that the five pillar change theory was “[a] viable theory-in-action of educational change must rest on the basic principles of sustainability” (p. 22). Every one of the five pillars has at its core, the sustainability of the change mechanisms that it is supposed to affect. The five pillars illustrate the need to have a paradigm change. The CCSS program in a sense is the paradigm of change in the American educational system, because it allows for both the American school systems and the students to strive, be engaging and ready for whatever the future may throw at them. There are three pillars in the Hargreaves (2009) theory that speaks directly to the essence of the CCSS program. In his first pillar (pillar 1), Hargreaves (2009) alluded to the moral and inspirational change. Changes that encourage team-work and selflessness; he went on to expressed “[a]n inspiring and inclusive moral purpose steers a system, bind together, and draws the best people to work in it” (p. 23). This kind of moral purpose is what our educational systems need if we are to continue to be a major player on the international scene, producing the next innovative, charismatic, and transformational leaders of tomorrow. To make the content of this program (content of change) viable and long-lasting, our educational systems need a change system that allows for evolutionary change that will continuously strive to be innovational and transformational in the implementation of the needed objectives.

Educating American children requires the whole village, as the African proverb goes (it takes a village to raise a child). Therefore, it is going to take the whole of the American educational systems to raise and train all of the American students. Hargreaves (2009) in his second pillar (pillar 2),

expressed the sentiment of engaging the public in the immediate and future vision of the American educational systems and not leave it to the government. He stated that “[t]he purposes that define a society’s future vision are not for governments or their educational advisors to decide. They are a matter for public engagement and for leaders who can tap into and elevate the public’s spirit” (p. 24). Finally, pillar three (the third pillar) is another vital component of the stability of this program if it is to survive and achieve what it is designed to accomplish. The pillar calls for no achievement without investment, though in South Dakota where the schools this research study examined reside, it seems that for now, the feedback indicated that the state government through the Department of Education has allocated approximately \$8.4 million for investment in the teachers’ initiative training programs. But the fact still remains that to achieve what the state government wants to see come-about in the South Dakota educational system; they (both the state government and the private sector) will have to find the resources necessary to continue funding the program.

Process of Change

The interviews conducted for this research indicated that both the Principal and Assistant Principal interviewed were in support of the program and rallied their teaching staff around the successful implementation of the program in their respective schools. Though change can be tough, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) did say that the teleological theory can help accommodate the impact of new change, and also appeal to like-minded individuals with similar aspiration for change. With that said, to truly understand the ramification and the unspoken thread of this program vis-à-vis how the stakeholders truly feel about the program, it is fundamentally important that a gauge of reactions, especially among the educators, be conducted to understand how they feel about the program. In the process of this research study gauging and understanding how the educators feel about the program, the author conducted a semi structured interviews (via e-mailed questionnaires); the author interviewed two educational leaders in the Brookings School District (South Dakota), and the questions asked were very potent and pertinent to the CCSS program in the state of South Dakota.

The participants agreed to participate in answering the research questions, and the questions were e-mailed to them at their school e-mail addresses for convenience purposes. According to the responses that the research study received from the participants, these educators seemed ready for the implementation of the program. In a response to one of the question about how their schools were faring in the implementation of the program, Mr. Tony stated that “We firmly believe that we have quality staff members that know what and how to teach, thus, we are quite positive that our students will fare above average in this area.” It is perhaps this kind of response that will help keep this program alive. As Rouseff-Baker (2002) noted, the involvement of faculty in decision making processes will make them feel as though they are part of the system and in the process do whatever they can to improve the quality of education. Rouseff-Baker

(2002) also noted that “transformational faculty development must be coupled with institutional change” (p. 40).

These two change agents (research participants) were leaders who are charged with the responsibility of making this program work. Even when they don’t know what the outcome of the program will be, they are still optimistic; Mr. Patrick, the Principal at Bobcats High School (BHS) in answering one of the research question about the reactions of the stakeholders at his school, he responded by saying that “I fully anticipate our teachers and students struggling with this transition for 2-4 years before we truly become proficient and these changes become the new norm.” According to Hargreaves (2009) catalyst of coherence, he stated that “[t]he hardest part of any theory of action in educational change is not how to start it, but how to make it spread” (p. 32). In catalyst one, Hargreaves brought back the fundamental characteristic of a sustainable leadership quality. He stated that “[i]nstitutions in crisis look for exceptional leaders to rescue them. Systemwide change efforts gather leaders together for a few meetings and hope they will follow through” (p. 33). Hargreaves’ (2009) sentiment is truer now with this Common Core State Standards program as it was when he first conceptualized and wrote the theory, because for this program to truly work, the stakeholders are going to need the help of dynamic and transformational leaders who are ready to do whatever it takes to fudge ahead and implement the program and stick with it for as long as it is humanly possible. The fact of the matter is that these leaders are not naïve nor gullible to assume that this program is going to work like a ‘charm’, but they are leaders who know that change is inevitable and necessary to elevate the American students to the next level, educationally; they are the change agents who are charged with the tasks of getting these students to that next level.

Context of Change

As Rodriguez (2010) asserted in his “Leading Change transforming doubters into believers” article, their journey, as educators, was not quick or easy, but that “[i]t required clear focus, consistency, persistence and the creation of multiple opportunities to look deep into our actions and their impact on student achievement, and to share the responsibility for the academic progress of all students” (p. 12). Sometimes the reason why we do the things that we do may be lost in the midst of many other important things that we juggle around; therefore, to truly understand the essence and contextual reason why the state of South Dakota joined the other 47 states (plus the territories) to create this educational program, the first question that this research study asked the participants was “As the principal of your school, what do you think, contextually, are the driving factors behind the CCSS program in the state of South Dakota?” In part, Mr. Patrick was concerned about the need for the program, but tempered his response with the following statement:

I have a few concerns about a “National curriculum.” I feel that the patchwork effect of the different curricula around the country help diversify student experiences, so that when students come together from

different regions, they may each be bringing a different piece of the puzzle... I believe the Common Core was created so that it is easier to test our students. Assessment is absolutely necessary, but I hate to see diversity of knowledge suffer so we can more easily take students’ academic temperatures...

Mr. Tony on the other hand stated that

I think that because there are so many states that are adopting the Common Core State Standards, that is the main reason that the state of South Dakota followed suit. Plus, it is nice to know that if a student leaves, let’s say, Illinois, and comes to South Dakota, that school are not that much different from what is taught to that particular student. We are becoming a much more global society, so, hence, that is another reason for South Dakota “jumping on board.” At this point, teachers who have embraced the Common Core are moving forward with the thought that they will be teaching to those standards soon. Matters of fact, many teachers at GMS are teaching to the Common Core standards already. We have had 3 days of training this past summer where teachers started to align their curriculum with the Common Core Standards, plus, several early dismissals in the spring of 2012 were spent looking and familiarizing themselves with the Common Core standards.

The above statements from the two educational leaders in the Brookings school community speak volume to some of the concerns that many of the educators may have about the program. Though that does not mean that they disagreed with the objectives of the program, it is just that they have no idea where this lofty program is going to end up. To them and many other leaders like them, it is an uncharted territory and even though they all somewhat sounded optimistic, at the end of the day, they are also very concerned. Perhaps this sense of concerns might be what Hargreaves (2009) was alluding to in his principle# 3. In this principle, Hargreaves (2009) stated that “[a]lthough teachers are often enthusiastic innovator individually or in small group, collectively, their record on sustainable improvement is no better than that of their government” (p. 30). Sometimes the public has seen the government come up with elaborate and lofty ideas that sounded and looked incredible, but when it is time to ‘put up or shut up’, many times the government have backed-off the implementation of the program using financial constraints as an excuse. However, as the American educators have resigned to showing less self-initiative, innovation, and ingenuity efforts in educational issues, Lortie (1975) has a slightly different take on the issue, he noted that perhaps the classroom isolation has left the teachers with a sense of non-innovative culture of presentism, conservatism, and individualism.

Contextually if the government through her agencies truly wants this program to work, they cannot afford to send out mixed and contradictory messages to the communities of educators. The bottom line is that if this is what the country wants for the American students, then teachers should be fully engaged and be allowed to be involved in the process,

so that they can feel as though they are part of the progressive change. Hargreaves (2009, p. 30) concurred by saying that “[c]ollaborative cultures are strongly associated with increased student success (Rosenholtz, 1989) and also very important to the improvement and retention of new teachers (Johnson, 2004).” He also went on to state that “[t]hey promote mutual learning and provide moral support through the difficulties of change” (p. 30). More importantly, to understand how students and their parents see the introduction of the Common Core State Standards program, the author felt that it is important that the research find out from the principals “what has been the reactions of the students and their parents?” Collectively, both educators (research participants) indicated that it is still too early to tell because the program will not be fully implemented and operational until 2014/2015 academic year. However, the few parents who have heard of the program seem to be okay with it. Mr. Patrick stated that “[a]re students and parents in support? I believe so. I don’t remember asking them if they were in favor of our state’s change. I believe they see it as a mandate and that it will soon become “business as usual.” Mr. Tony on the other hand, said that “[t]hrough our PTA’s, however, we have been discussing the Common Core Standards so that our parents are somewhat knowledgeable. We will continue to educate our PTA’s as time progresses.”

Reaction to Change

According to the responses received from the questionnaires posted to the principals, it seemed as though the major stakeholder, the teachers, are trained and ready for the roll out of the program in 2014/2015 academic year. Even the main recipients, i.e., the students and their parents, seemed to be okay with it as well, because according to the feedback that the educators were getting from the students and their parents, they seemed to feel as though it’s going to be ‘business as usual’ program. Hargreaves (2009) stated in his ‘principle 3’ that “PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) have sharpened collaborative cultures by adding a clear school focus and providing performance data to guide teachers’ joint reflections, discussions, and decisions, and to connect them to student achievement” (p. 31). If these collaborative efforts can truly be integrated into the teaching practices of the teachers, perhaps that could strengthen the chance of the program accomplishing its goal, because it will allow the teachers to have current data on students’ performances vis-à-vis putting the teachers/schools on ‘the know’ regarding how the students are doing in the core subjects. Moreover, Cooper and King (2007) indicated that a key element of successful change is a two way communication and the ability to engage with the key stakeholders through all the facets of change. Cooper and King (2007) went on to also say that “Communication is the cornerstone of successful change” (p. 17).

More importantly, understanding the support system of the program vis-à-vis its survivability for the near and future term existence is very important, because as Burke (2011) stated “[t]o survive, especially for the long term, organizations must change and adapt to their environments” (p. 11). We know that the program was conceived by both the

National Governors Association (NGA) and their Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO); hence, efforts were made to solicit every state in the federation to participate in the implementation of the program. In addition to what many other states are doing to make this program work, South Dakota legislature has voted to allocate about \$8.4 million for the funding of teacher-related training in the K-12 school systems. Moreover, as of right now, it seemed as though many of the stakeholders including the American corporations and the students (and their parents) are in support of the program. Perhaps it is important to emphasize that the major benefactor of this program will be the American corporations (American businesses). American corporations have been saying for years that they need well trained and savvy employees for their workforce, and from the looks of things, if the program turns out to be successful, it could be a win, win situation for everyone concerned.

POST-SCRIPT SELF REFLECTION

This is a project that the author was very interested in partially because he has a son who will be transitioning into the public school system next year and he wanted to know what he should be expecting once his son gets into the system. The author is also very curious to know what the South Dakota state government is doing to help the school districts prepare the students for the future, i.e., either for college preparation and/or for career preparedness. These interests led the author to embark on this research study; however, the journey to get the research study going was not easy. As an interpretative phenomenological analysis research study, the author had to solicit the participation of qualified educators who could speak fluently and with true command of what the phenomenon/subject-matter (Common Core State Standards program) was really about. The author needed to speak with people with knowledge of the Common Core State Standards program in the state of South Dakota; more importantly, people who could find the time in their busy schedule to either sit down and talk to the author about the program or find the time to respond to the research questionnaires.

As a journey, it took the author weeks before he was able to finally meet both of the eventual participants. These two men were principal and assistant principal in the Brookings school district in South Dakota State. The men were kind enough to agree to respond to the research inquiries into how their schools (both teachers and students) were faring with the new required standards that the state just introduced (actually, this applies to almost all the states in the federation). These educators’ answers and analyses of the program and the processes they were going through at their respective schools did help the author a lot with his analysis of the research findings. Their acceptance of the research invitations and their responses to the research questions were truly and without any doubt helpful and appreciated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the day, the essence of creating an educational standardized program is to elevate the standards of American

education in comparison to the rest of the world (especially our competitors). Though in this case, developing a national standards program is truly long overdue. As the most powerful and admired country in the world, it will be a travesty to see the American educational standards fall behind any of its competitors in the world. Coming up with a singular and coordinated national standardized system that every school districts in the country can use to test/grade their students will truly make the American educational standards (model) the envy of the world. More importantly, seeing the level of commitments that many states have put into the successful implementations of this program speaks volume to the seriousness of these state governments; the fact that they are doing something about the education of the students speaks volume. In the state of South Dakota, as small as the state is GDP-wise, the state has committed a huge sum of money (\$8.4 million) for the training of the teachers to get them prepared and ready for the implementation of this program in each and every school district in the state. And as Piderit (2000) eloquently put it “[s]uccessful organizational adaptation is increasingly reliant on generating employee support and enthusiasm for proposed changes, rather than merely overcoming resistance” (p. 783).

As a program that seems to be looking out for the betterment of the students’ future career preparedness, it seems as though every stakeholder has ‘bought’ into the implementation of the program which is a very good thing; however, for the program’s sustainability and survivability, this research study recommends three essential things. The first is the need to fully involve the teachers in the implementation and governance of the program so that they feel as though they are part of the change process and mechanism. Secondly, for the survival of this program, adequate funding is very important. The lack of funding of any enterprise can be the singular most critical devastation and down fall of the enterprise. Therefore, all the stakeholders in this Common Core State Standards program must make every effort to keep the program adequately funded and managed. It is to the best interest of every stakeholder that this program stays alive. Finally, the third recommendation is for the program to have a good national coordination. The essence of the program is that the program is set up for its flexibility, so that when students move or transfer from one state to another state and/or from one school to another school, the student knows that he/she will be receiving the same quality and standardized education and curriculum at their new school as they did at their old school.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study was able to be transparent and thorough in the way it was conducted. The responses given by the participants were unfiltered and thoughtful; the participants were able to express, in their own ‘lived experiences’, the impact of the program (CCSS) on their schools. As a result, they gave examples of how their teachers were trained on the new teaching methods and techniques on how to deliver the program’s curriculum in their respective schools. They also expressed the level of support that the

new program was getting from stakeholders in the South Dakota school system, i.e., local school administrators, teachers, students and their parents. They mentioned the fact that many of the stakeholders, especially parents and students in their respective schools, were understandably in support of any program that is targeted to improve the quality of education in South Dakota. These results have methodological implications. They provide evidence for methodological strength of IPA research design as an effective approach to elicit dependable data from individuals’ real experiences.

The other important finding that was prominently evident in this study, and deserve to be reiterated, was the level of seriousness and investment that the government of South Dakota has invested in the successful implementation of the CCSS program. As aforementioned, South Dakota is definitely not a “power-house state” economically compare to some other states in the federation, however, the state has “stepped-up” and invested a lot of money and other resources to making sure that not only is the implementation of the CCSS program successful, but also provided all the necessary tools and resources needed to deliver a smooth transitional process into the new program, i.e., provided series of training tools and sessions for classroom teachers and also engaged in an extensive public mobilization to galvanize public awareness for the new program.

Finally, based on the findings of this study, it seems logical to argue that if the efforts and optimisms (‘lived experiences’) exhibited in this study by the participants, stakeholders, and the state government was anything to go by, then this program will be successful in the state of South Dakota. The truth of the matter is that it is abundantly evident that the optimisms expressed by the participants, and others, have the chance of carrying and moving this program forward in a progressive and sustainable way, but it can only do so if this enthusiasms can be managed and sustained.

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