



Autism Spectrum Meets Common Core... Somewhere Over the Rainbow

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From state to state, even from district to district, the quality of education across the United States has been strikingly inconsistent. Variables such as funding, resources, teacher-education, and demographics have allowed significant educational inequities to persist. In today's global economy, this educational system stands out as shortsighted at best, discriminatory at worst.

In 2010, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) blew in like a tornado to slam shut these achievement gaps and whip every student into readiness for college and careers by the end of high school. The term "Common Core" refers to a set of "core" standards that every student across the country will be expected to meet, regardless of location, funding, resources, teacher-education, demographics, or ability. Oh, wait—*ability*? Where do students with differing abilities fit into this one-size-fits-all equation?

Since the tenets of CCSS include skills like "close reading," "analysis," and "practical application," let's give the standards themselves a close look to analyze their practical application to our children on the autism spectrum. I'll describe some of the new challenges our children and their teachers face and offer my take on the potential benefits (yes, there are some!) of Common Core for our uncommon kids.

CCSS has already been adopted in 45 states, which have been granted federal Race to the Top funding in exchange for their compliance. Given this rather coercive initiation, CCSS has not been warmly embraced by educators and still faces a significant publicity problem: It is widely perceived as a mandated *curriculum*. Teachers feel they are being forced to abandon tried-and-true lessons and to adapt to someone else's idea of curriculum. As they dig in to the standards, and to the "guided" pathways and text "exemplars" offered by Common Core, they fear their independence and creativity are being stripped away.

But in fact, as of now, CCSS does not dictate curriculum. Instead CCSS sets a *destination*. For now, the route toward reaching that destination is up to each individual teacher. CCSS is a set of learning *standards* in Math, English Language Arts, and Literacy in Science, Social Studies, and technical subjects. It is not a curriculum. In other words, it doesn't matter how you get there... just get there if you can.

Nevertheless, teachers are in a bind. On the one hand, in recent years unprecedented numbers of students on the autism spectrum have been placed in mainstream classrooms. Teachers have been told: *Differentiate!* But now, with the advent of CCSS, teachers are being told to bring all students to a *common destination*. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, standards become increasingly uniform. It's a twister.

And though CCSS does not dictate how teachers must teach, it does dictate, quite specifically, what learners must learn. Not surprisingly, parents are not warming to this idea either. Every student

will be assessed according to his or her progress toward standards of high-level abstract thinking, including our children on the autism spectrum, who tend to be grounded firmly in concrete.

The ultimate goal of Common Core is to mold a generation of adults who are adept at reading complex literature critically, at engaging with informational texts thoughtfully, and at analyzing evidence in a way that is, according to CCSS, “essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic.” Does that sound like your child? No? Not mine, either. But read on.

These types of pie-in-the-sky ideals are examples of meta-cognition (*ie.* thinking about thinking). Without meta-cognition, information is gathered on a superficial level and tends to stay with students only until the next quiz. But when information is reflected upon, it becomes *knowledge* that may be assimilated for life.

For our kids—who struggle to take the perspective of others, who think that “reading between the lines” is something that requires a magnifying glass, and who almost never learn spontaneously from their own mistakes—reflective thinking sounds like the stuff of fairy tales. And it may well be. The standards are intense, the stakes are high, and some of our children may never fully comprehend the nuance and depth that both enhance and complicate this colorful new frontier. Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore.

But just as Dorothy discovered in Oz, certain familiar and supportive elements from home have found their way into this mysterious new world. Remarkably, there are aspects to the structure of Common Core that may actually suit our children on the spectrum. In fact, some of them happen to align closely to strategies that autism education specialists, like myself, have been promoting for years.

Primary among them is that the standards outlined in Common Core are sequential steppingstones, like signposts marking the way toward higher-order goals. Though undoubtedly quite challenging, these signposts guide learning progressions, one step at a time. This kind of orderly, bite-sized instruction has always been beneficial for kids on the spectrum.

To this end, along with creative classroom activities, in the early elementary years there will be plenty of repetition, memorization, and practice of discrete skills for all students until they achieve mastery. Dry? Maybe. But this kind of pinpoint focus can only be helpful to our kids on the spectrum. Committed efforts will be made to solidify a sturdy foundation of rote skills as more abstract concepts get layered on top. This means that the days in which a student—my own son, in fact—is expected to solve algebraic equations while still adding on his fingers, may be over.

So to achieve its very lofty goals, CCSS encourages all students to become specialists—not only about presidents and train schedules, but also in specific fundamental academic areas. Since our kids are often, *by nature*, specialists rather than generalists, specialized mastery may be a good beginning for them.

Under CCSS, children will not only be taught discrete skills in depth, but will be shown how to apply skills fluently to real-world problems. In my son’s case, the only way he will engage with math concepts is if they are introduced in terms of time, money, or years. Like my son, many children on the spectrum are available for learning only when the curriculum connects to familiar and high-interest topics. To meet the broad Common Core standards, teachers will have to encourage and help all students to activate prior knowledge and connect what’s already known to new information. CCSS guides teachers to make real-world connections overt in order to engage students. Getting them to generalize those skills, however, may be a course of a different color.

Still, another potential benefit for our children on the spectrum is Common Core’s emphasis on *digital* literacy. Standards in digital literacy are in place to ensure that every student masters

keyboarding, word processing, and graphic manipulation. Technology is not only often highly motivating to students on the spectrum, but also offers a host of alternative learning and testing options.

Along these lines, Common Core will include unprecedented digital opportunities. Assessments can be administered and completed via tablets or computers. Moreover, digital testing accommodations such as enlarged print, on-screen highlighting, use of a calculator, text-to-speech technology, and even speech-to-text technology will be built directly into most systems, though, as before, available only to students who qualify for them.

Another bonus could come in the form of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which is a national program specifically designed to ensure that the learning needs of every kind of learner are met in the classroom. Although UDL has been available for several years, Common Core encourages teachers to turn to it now as they work to adapt to CCSS. UDL guides teachers to present information in multiple ways; to give students ample opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge through diverse and active means; to offer students choices that allow them to engage in ways that are most comfortable and motivating to them; and to offer assistive technology devices and services, as appropriate. For our children, who learn and demonstrate their learning in dramatically diverse ways, these varied options may open up a world of opportunity.

Even so, there is no doubt that, through the grades, Common Core's broad standards become far less about regurgitating specific factoids than about meta-cognitive generalization. And there is no doubt that this is the very kind of higher-order thinking that may be unattainable by many of our children on the spectrum.

More than ever, it will fall to teachers and parents to walk arm in arm together with our children, from signpost to signpost along this perilous yellow brick road. As educators and parents collaborating effectively, we need to face our children's strengths and challenges; we need to acknowledge our own limitations and each others' areas of expertise; we need to allow our kids to keep their feet securely on the ground while encouraging them to reach for the stars.

But there's a good chance we'll find ourselves clicking our heels together a few times, too.

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For more information:

Great 3-minute video describing the principles behind Common Core:

<http://www.commoncoreworks.org/site/default.aspx?PageID=239>

Common Core's Application to Students with Special Needs:

<http://www.corestandards.org/assets/application-to-students-with-disabilities.pdf>

Parents' Backpack Guide to Common Core Standards:

http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/parent_workshop_backpack_guide.pdf