Robots Teaching Other Little Robots: Neoliberalism, CCSS, and Teacher Professionalism

Jason L. Endacott, Ginney P. Wright, Christian Z. Goering, Vicki S. Collet, George S. Denny, and Jennifer Jennings Davis

“These mandates are taking all of the joy out of teaching. Give us the big ideas of a subject, and let us do our jobs! I don’t need standards for every action I take. Learning is more than having some robot feed standards to other little robots!”

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) in 1983 tilted an already shifting paradigm regarding the purpose of a public education in the United States toward one that is based on a line of reasoning that assumes: (1) education should serve the primarily economic function of preparing students for the workforce; (2) public schools in the United States are failing to produce the educational success that is imperative for national economic success; and (3) schools must be held solely accountable for producing academic outcomes as measured by externally administered tests (Mehta 2013a). A national narrative that echoes these assumptions has opened the door to modern education reforms that seek to inculcate neoliberal ideology and its attendant corporate cultural values of commercialization, privatization and deregulation into the public school system (Sloan 2008). Meanwhile, federal educational policy under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which had already arguably eliminated the traditional American loosely coupled school system (Fuhrman 1999, 2001; Rowan 2006), has further stabilized a fertile market for private interests with Race to the Top (RTTT) by ensuring continued demand for products related to high stakes accountability.

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by forty-four states has further tightened the bonds between educational policy makers at the highest levels with practitioners in the classroom by establishing a common set of standards through which the aforementioned federal mandates can be operationalized (Endacott and Goering 2014, 89–92). Unlike many earlier policy reform efforts, the proponents of this market-based and economically focused vision of schooling have managed to dramatically change the technical
core of school practice (Mehta 2013b, 1–36), and the ramifications of these changes are in need of careful investigation.

Recent quantitative research on the implementation of CCSS in schools across Arkansas has discovered that teachers’ perceptions of job satisfaction, agency, and professionalism are significantly affected by their school leaders’ openness towards autonomy, flexibility, and opinions of teachers (Matlock et al. 2015). The purpose of this article is to expand upon these findings by drawing upon survey and interview data collected from a stratified sample of teachers in a mid-southern state to qualitatively examine the impact that narrow interpretation and autocratic implementation of the Common Core State Standards has on teachers’ perceptions of their agency and professionalism. We then present a contrasting view of teachers’ positive perceptions that describe circumstances of teacher autonomy and professional agency.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Shift in Educational Paradigm

Notions of economic success, new institutionalism, reform, and accountability dominated the conversation surrounding public education in the aftermath of ANAR (Meyer and Rowan 2006; Mehta 2013a). ANAR painted a desperate picture of a national education system that could not provide a sufficiently educated workforce, and of a failing American economy that was “in danger of being relegated to Second World Status by the First World education systems of competitive economic juggernauts in Western Europe and Asia” (Guthrie and Springer 2004, 22). Studies clearly show that any relationship that may exist between rankings on standardized tests and national economic success is either negative or too weak to be considered significant (Krueger 1999; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2002; Bracey 2005; Ramirez et al. 2006; Baker 2010), yet that has not halted a national narrative that continues to widely and wildly exaggerate the effects of public schools on the economy (Harris, Handel, and Mishel 2004; Tienken and Orlich 2013). Continued acceptance of this false narrative has contributed to unprecedented federalization of education policy, a willingness to define student achievement exclusively by standardized test scores, and the belief that all of the nation’s social problems can be solved by improving schools alone (Guthrie and Springer 2004).

False assumptions of American educational failure have also fueled an evolving approach to educational reform driven by neoliberalism, an often misunderstood ideology that views public institutions as potential threats to market freedoms and believes that the unregulated market should be the organizing force behind decisions that are made in the personal, political, social, and economic domains (Sloan 2008). Neoliberal ideology, which is shared by both major political parties in the United States (Giroux 2004), privileges private interests and goals over those of the public (Sloan 2008; Mehta 2013b). These private interests, often taking the form of wealthy “venture philanthropists,” have become a powerful force in the new educational paradigm, devoting hundreds of millions
of dollars to reform efforts that promote choice and deregulation, while also rhetorically marginalizing critics who speak out in opposition to their efforts (Barkan 2011; Saltman 2012; Mehta 2013a). The resulting effect is a significant decrease in American’s confidence in public schools and the empowerment of market-based reformers who seek to promote competition in K–12 schools (Rowan 2006).

Although neoliberal actors have often clashed with public institutions, especially the federal government, others have co-opted the regulatory and legislative power of democratic institutions to expand market-based principles into traditionally public domains, thereby benefitting from the preservation of order that leads to market stability (Giroux 2004). In education, neoliberal ideology unifies private interests with the government entities that create a common and stable market in which profits can be maximized. Private interests have become more widely accepted as providers of educational services as the federal government exerts greater control over educational outcomes (Meyer and Rowan 2006). At the federal level, the Obama administration has aligned the U. S. Department of Education with neoliberal interests to shift the purpose of a K–12 education away from the development of an engaged and critical citizenry, focusing instead on developing producers, consumers, and investors (Sloan 2008, 555–78; Thomas 2011). Nowhere is this shift more evident than with the recent creation, adoption and implementation of the CCSS (Endacott and Goering 2014, 89–92).

CCSS and Technocratic Classroom Control

The creation of the CCSS was led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers with guidance from an advisory group consisting of representatives from Achieve, Inc., ACT, the College Board, the National Association of State Boards of Education and State Higher Education Executive Officers. The two writing teams for the CCSS standards consisted of only twenty-five members, including six test-makers from the College Board, five from test publisher ACT, and four from Achieve Inc., but did not include any classroom teachers (Cody 2009). Organizations such as the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and National Council of Teachers of English were allowed to organize groups of teachers to provide feedback only after the standards had actually been drafted. After receiving nearly 10,000 comments from teachers, parents, administrators, and other citizens, the final standards were released in June of 2010 after two months of revision (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers 2013a). Although the authors of CCSS attempt to promote solidarity by claiming they were “designed through collaboration among teachers, school chiefs, administrators, and other experts” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers 2013b), the process has instead resulted in the establishment of a quasi-monopoly over the ideological capital that guides curriculum-making, consulting, professional development, and assessment (Johnson 2014).

Critics of the CCSS initiative are skeptical of the “grassroots” genesis of CCSS (Ravitch 2013), pointing primarily to the considerable amount of private money
used to create and influence their adoption. The Gates Foundation has granted over $200 million to organizations involved in the creation and promotion of the CCSS, including Achieve, Inc., The Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (McDonnell and Weatherford 2013). In addition to monies granted to assist in the creation of CCSS, the Gates Foundation also granted millions of dollars to the American Federation of Teachers, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the national Parent Teacher Association. These organizations subsequently came out in public support for the CCSS, leading to claims that the Gates Foundation money was little more than a bribe for buying into the new standards (Ohanian 2013). Meanwhile, the federal government limited eligibility for RTTT awards and NCLB waivers to states that adopted a common set of “college and career ready standards,” effectively presenting the forced choice of either adopting the CCSS or losing out on millions in federal funds (Mathis 2013, 2).

Despite the paucity of empirical evidence supporting the connection between standards and achievement in general (Mathis 2013), and the construction of the CCSS in particular (Tienken 2011, 58–62), forty-four states currently operate under standards that arguably represent little more than technical specifications applied to human learning capabilities (Tienken and Orlich 2013), privilege the interests of big business (Endacott and Goering 2014, 89–92), and promote the “soft domination” of the masses by the government and corporations who were behind their creation (Giroux 2012, 7). The widespread adoption of CCSS has created an estimated $500 billion common market for educational products and services that corporations have jumped into on a massive scale (Adams 2011). Conferences have been organized to promote the corporate takeover of public education, providing guidance for the “numerous for-profit companies making inroads into public and non-profit education by taking over large swaths of the market” (Strauss 2013).

One sector of this market is the creation and administration of the standardized tests used to measure student achievement, which has been estimated to cost $16 billion (Pioneer Institute 2012). The same companies that profit from the annual testing regimen also sell materials such as scripted curriculum and test preparation workbooks designed to prepare students for the tests they create (Sloan 2008). The profits available in creating scripted curriculum ran into the millions of dollars prior to CCSS when states had individual standards (Ede 2006, 29–32), and the potential for profit is substantially greater with CCSS. The federal government contributes to the stability of this market through its accountability requirements under NCLB, ensuring that any state wishing to receive millions of dollars in Title I funds will continue to assess students annually and employ corporately developed and marketed “scientifically-based” curricula (Milner 2013).

This confluence of political and private interests around a manufactured crisis of confidence in our public schools represents a penetration of “technocratic logic” that promises to gain control and reform a failing school system (Mehta 2013b, 1–36). Ultimately, the penetration of this logic is successful when educators are unable to resist, and are often co-opted into, external pressures to reform due in part to their socially institutionalized position as bureaucratically-administered
quasi-professionals who lack a widely respected set of professional standards (Mehta 2013b). The de-professionalization of teaching would presumably favor those who would benefit politically or financially from a less professional and therefore less expensive and more compliant workforce. This agenda has been actively, if not overtly, pursued through the circumventing of rigorous training and licensure requirements, the commoditization of teaching through high stakes accountability, and the devaluing of professional expertise through mandated standardization of practice (Milner 2013).

Teacher Professionalism and Agency

The debate over whether or not the occupation of teacher should be considered a “profession” is one that has been addressed in considerable detail (Ingersoll et al. 1997; Biesta 2009; Webb 2009; Ingersoll and Merrill 2012). One issue confounding the question is a lack of consistent criteria when defining “profession” as it relates to education, leading many to take an apples-to-apples approach in comparing education to fields such as medicine and law, focusing on form instead of content (Rotterham 2011). Ingersoll and Merrill (2012) echo this claim, pointing out that those who seek to uphold the status of teaching as a profession often disagree on whether teacher professionalism should be distinguished by advanced training, dispositions, or standing in society. Fortunately, scholars have worked to synthesize the disparate literature on the subject, establishing similar if not completely congruent criteria for considering the professionalization of teaching as a field.

On the broadest level, sociologists consider rigorous training, licensure requirements, positive working conditions, presence of a professional organization, workplace authority, respectable compensation, and prestige to be distinguishing characteristics of a profession (Ingersoll and Merrill 2012). In 1997, the U.S. Department of Education published a report on teacher professionalization and commitment that narrowed this list down to the five criteria of credentialing, induction, professional development, authority over decision-making, and compensation (Ingersoll et al. 1997). Ingersoll and Merrill’s (2012) analysis maintained this set of criteria with the addition of specialization and occupational social standing, whereas Connelly and Rosenberg (2009) suggest the expectation of developing and maintaining professional expertise is also a crucial aspect of professionalism (201–14). Rotterham (2011) posits three broader criteria for professional work including practitioner agency, risk-reward, and norms-culture.

The aforementioned influence of neoliberal ideologies in educational administration and policy-making has diminished the scope of teachers’ professional influence on policy and practice (Gerwirtz et al. 2009), a process that has primarily occurred through the segmentation rather than distribution of power (Webb 2005). Conservatives have made no secret of the fact that standardization of teaching through accountability is a matter of control over classroom teaching, with the goal of centralizing policy and curricular structure (Au 2011). Through the establishment of a corporate model of top-down, autocratic leadership structure, some schools have begun to equate professionalism with acquiescence to
authoritative hierarchy, even going so far as to deem democratically-responsive teaching as “unprofessional” (Sloan 2008, 564). These practices can vary greatly by state, district, and school and in some cases have developed into sophisticated networks of surveillance, threats, and punishment (Webb 2005). Ironically, the same accountability systems touted by political progressives as the answer to issues of equity actually undermine teachers’ ability to make complex professional judgments related to issues of social justice in the classroom (Lipman 2009).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was guided by the following research question: How does the nature of Common Core State Standards implementation impact teachers’ perceptions of agency and professionalism?

Methodological Framework

A mixed mental model approach to social inquiry was used for this investigation to benefit from the collective generation of understanding that is possible when complementary paradigms are applied to the same inquiry (Greene 2007). To maximize understanding of our participants’ perceptions and situate their experiences within a larger social context, our methodological framework was informed by a constructivist approach to generate meaning from participants’ responses (Hatch 2002) and a critical approach to their interpretation (Comstock 1982; Giroux 2001). Taking a complementary strengths stance towards the mixed mental model approach to social inquiry, we harnessed the strengths of the constructivist and critical paradigms separately, linking them at the inquiry stage of interpretation and inferencing (Greene 2007).

We used a descriptive survey research design with follow-up interviews to collect data on teachers’ experiences with CCSS implementation and effects on job satisfaction. The survey instrument consisted of three components: (1) demographic data; (2) teachers’ views on CCSS and their implementation; and (3) teachers’ perceptions of factors that influence job satisfaction. The data used for this qualitative examination of teachers’ perceptions was collected through open-ended questions that prompted participants to provide description of their: (1) overall views of CCSS implementation; (2) perceptions of district and building leadership; (3) current perceptions of cooperation, collegiality, and involvement in school governance compared to pre-CCSS perceptions; (4) current perceptions of instructional autonomy and flexibility, job related stress, job satisfaction, feelings of professionalism, and enjoyment of teaching compared to their pre-CCSS perceptions; (5) greatest achievement with CCSS implementation; and (6) greatest struggle with CCSS implementation.

Participants & Sampling

A stratified random sample of K–12 public school teachers in a mid-southern state served as the participant pool for this study. Sampling procedures began
with a list acquired from the state’s Department of Education that included 38,185 public school teachers working in the state during the 2012–2013 academic year. We divided the list into separate elementary, middle level, and high school categories, and then created three subgroups for each category according to size of student population. Each subcategory was then sorted by zip code to organize by geographic location. We then selected every fifth school from each list to form a sample that was balanced between grade configuration, size and geographic location. The survey was sent to every teacher at the schools on the sample list resulting in a potential participant pool of 6,826 teachers across the state.

Sources of Data

Surveys were distributed to participants by email in January 2013 with two weekly follow up email reminders sent to participants who had not yet completed the survey. The initial email and reminders were sent on different days and at different times to maximize exposure. Responses were recorded using Qualtrics web-based survey management software. Of the 6,826 teachers in the sample, there were 1,303 total survey responses resulting in a response rate of 19.09%, which is typical of an external electronic survey without a response incentive. The research team developed a list of interview questions following an initial coding of survey response data and conducted follow up interviews with twelve elementary, six middle level, and ten high school teachers. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and added to the 1,584 qualitative responses generated by the open-ended survey questions in order to arrive at the final data set.

Data Analysis

The coding process for constructing meaning from the survey and interview responses included a series of eight steps: (1) initially reading every response to get a sense of the whole; (2) jotting down impressions of possible underlying meaning; (3) creating an initial list of topics generated from key words or phrases repeated in the responses; (4) coding the data with the initial list of topics; (5) combining and grouping conceptually congruent topics into categories; (6) creating codes for each category; (7) recoding each response by category; and (8) assembling the data by category for analysis (Creswell 2009). The constant comparative method (Merriam 2009) was used to regroup all of the responses by category and recheck coded answers for consistency within categories until they were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent.

Assuming a critical approach when interpreting the results generated from the first phase of data analysis was crucial to this study because it promotes understanding of our actions and the actions of others within socially situated contexts (Sloan 2008). We operated on the assumption that agency and structure presuppose each other and that the prevailing dependence on positivist rationality oversimplifies educational purposes, thereby leading to hidden meanings, structured silences, and unintentional truths (Giroux 2001). Therefore, our analysis sought to uncover the contradictory conditions that arose from ideologically determined
actions, link those conditions to the social processes and structures that created and maintained them, and critique the currently dominant neoliberal ideology that prevented our participants from fulfilling the promise of their position (Comstock 1982).

MARGINALIZATION, LACK OF AGENCY, AND RISK

Results of this article are reported in two main sections. We first describe and discuss factors that negatively influence teachers’ perceptions of their professional agency due to implementation of CCSS, followed by a contrasting view of teachers who describe implementation in a positive manner. Three main themes and attendant subthemes emerged from our analysis of the participating teachers’ responses describing negative impacts of CCSS implementation: (1) organizational marginalization; (2) lack of agency to meet student needs; and (3) an imbalance in professional risk and reward (Table 1).

Organizational Marginalization

Marginalization from the educational process outside the classroom was a powerful theme running through the teachers’ responses to our survey. Teachers described their leadership as “top down,” “closed minded,” and “not open to communication” when referencing their role within the curriculum planning and CCSS implementation process. In addition to seeing their school leaders as already “having their minds made up,” many teachers claimed that they were not included in any decisions regarding CCSS implementation at all. In many cases, this view of organizational marginalization was one of purposeful intent, with teachers viewing their exclusion from the larger work of the school or district as an orchestrated effort on the part of their administrators. The following comments are illustrative of teachers’ feelings of marginalization:

The school district has implemented a system that pretends to include the teachers and their input, but in actuality, they have already decided what they want to see happen.

It has become clear that their primary goal is to keep individual teachers from making important decisions. They show no trust of our professionalism or ability to develop

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materials on our own, and instead trust their understanding of what we are doing, despite the fact that they have no actual experience in classrooms at our grade.

We’re asked opinions and begged to give input, but then the suggestions are always ignored. We’re never told why our suggestions are “wrong” they’re just always ignored, as if the suggestion was never even made at all…This “valuing” of our opinions tends to wreck motivation for input, and makes the asking just a puppet show, now doesn’t it?

Many teachers viewed their marginalization in organizational decision-making as an affront to their expertise as educators outside the classroom. A picture developed of teachers who felt as though they were having their professional responsibilities diminished through relegation to “classroom only” concerns. A tone of desperation arose in a substantial portion of the responses, as teachers wondered why they were no longer trusted to participate in curricular decisions, despite the fact that their professional reputations would be on the line for the results of those decisions. In some cases, the responses suggested frustration, anger, and resignation for the autocratic leadership styles employed in their district, such as the teacher who told us, “We are being treated like people who don’t understand our own craft instead of like the professionals most of us are. It’s rather disgusting, actually.”

The vacuum that was created when teachers were marginalized from the implementation process was filled in many cases by paid internal or external consultants or by the district administrators themselves. Relying upon external consultants has become a common use of funds that originate from the U.S. Department of Education (Brown 2012). In Colorado, one of the few states willing to calculate and provide data on the subject, school districts paid consultants 9.4 million dollars in 2010–2011, a figure that represents 35% of the total funds originating from the U.S. Department of Education (Brown). However, positioning outside experts in roles of authority privileges the expert’s perspective and message (Johnson, 2014), and relying upon external consultants to assume the responsibilities typically held by teachers could be viewed as a form of status-based exclusion from valuable opportunities (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Teachers with negative perceptions often viewed consultants as ineffectual or as an impediment to implementing CCSS in the manner best suited for their particular students:

District officials dictated too much of what we did, hiring an expensive consultant to tell us what to do. They did all this without having seen an assessment. It was very much a “top down” decision.

The teacher has been reduced to a minor player in schools because of the growing number of “coaches” in our schools…If collaboration is really the key to CCSS then we need to let teachers collaborate and have true decision-making power. I feel that consultants are a waste of money and actually contribute to low teacher morale in most districts.

Perceptions of external consultants were very similar to perceptions of district leadership, in that consultants were portrayed as one of “them” rather than one of “us.” Many teachers viewed the consultants as an extension of the administration, especially if the consultant approached their role in an authoritarian fashion. A distinction developed in their responses between leadership within ranks
(teachers) versus leadership outside ranks (coaches, consultants, coordinators), and in many cases the dynamic was described in adversarial rather than cooperative terms. Some examples of teacher responses that illustrate the effect of dependence on external consultants on teachers’ perceptions of their role in the school as organization include:

Yes, it is helpful to have an instructional facilitator to help you with your data, or come observe and give suggestions on things that teachers have asked for help with. It is NOT helpful for instructional facilitators to tell teachers what or how to teach. And it is NOT helpful for the administration to give more credence to the instructional facilitator’s opinion than the teachers.

This consultant doesn’t have very much teaching experience and no teaching experience in English education. We were pulled out of our classrooms... I can’t even tell you... six, seven times a year, which is excessive. The consultant didn’t even really give out lots of information to teachers.

**Information**

Not surprisingly, teachers’ perceptions of organizational marginalization were often accompanied by confusion surrounding the quantity and quality of information available to them as classroom practitioners. Depending on their particular situation of marginalization, teachers described information about the “right way” to implement CCSS as an asset that was held tightly to the vest. Many described access to information in terms of extremes, in that they were given very little information with which to understand their role in implementation, or they were inundated with information with little guidance for processing. As one teacher put it, “There are few people who can give clear answers on what is expected and how to get from what we are teaching now to what we are expected to teach and be tested.” Many teachers also referenced the way that “CCSS expects” the standards to be implemented as though the standards themselves held sway over the process, though more often the complaints were aimed at state, district, and building level administrators who sent mixed signals and left it to the teachers to decipher them:

The implementation process of CCSS has been absolute chaos in our district. No one knows what is really going on. The right hand is not talking to the left. At every meeting you get different information. Texts are being changed last minute. Nothing is consistent, there are no resources given, and no one is teaching how to implement standards. Just basically “here they are—good luck”

Organizational tasks of greater uncertainty require greater amounts of information to be processed during the execution of the task itself (Galbraith 1984, 21–34), and there are likely very few changes that can happen to a school system that requires greater change than a complete overhaul of its ELA and Math curriculum within a very short period of time. This, when considered with the teachers’ perceptions of allocation of resources, provides further insight into their feelings of de-professionalization through organizational marginalization.
That resources were a problem for teachers during implementation is not surprising given that many existing texts, materials and resources were immediately deemed unacceptable for use with the new standards. Teachers who had relied upon “tried and true” resources and materials that they had either developed themselves or adapted from others found themselves scrambling for resources that administrators would approve for use in the classroom. The word finding was used seventy-one times when teachers described their greatest struggle with implementing CCSS. Compounding this problem was the relatively short timeframe for implementation, which for many teachers was less than a year between adoption and full implementation. Even though the CCSS had created a new market for materials and resources that corporate publishers were trying to fill as quickly as possible, the K–3 teachers on the leading edge of implementation had very little established materials from which to draw. This led to observations that the materials that were available were “just the old stuff with a ‘CCSS’ sticker slapped on the front,” or failed to live up to their standards of “appropriate, effective, and research-based resources.” In some cases when resources were provided for teachers, they were purchased in insufficient quantities leading to a number of teachers to make comments such as:

My school won’t purchase more than a class set of books, so I can’t send books home for students to read or do assignment.

We also were only given fifteen copies of the texts, and students have to share, and definitely can’t take one home... We also weren’t given the new books until school started, so we are barely keeping our heads above water trying to come up with lessons for each of the new books we were given to teach.

We were told the funds were not there and I purchased materials with my own money and what little is in the classroom account.

The lack of resources had a direct impact on their ability to meet student needs and directly affected their perceptions of risk-reward in terms of accountability for test scores and the new teacher evaluation instrument adopted by the state in response to Race to the Top. We take up those issues in subsequent sections of this article but introduce it here because the availability of classroom resources was also related to how teachers viewed their organizational marginalization. Many teachers who viewed the treatment of their status as being less important than that of external consultants and mid-level administrators suggested that the allocation of resources by their districts indicated an assumption of superiority and competency for those who held those roles, which in turn aids the reproduction of privilege for parties receiving the resources (Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Skaggs 2010).

Curricular Intrusion
In addition to the privileging of certain roles within the district, teachers who taught subjects other than English–language arts (ELA) or math found themselves marginalized through curricular exclusion or intrusion. In some cases,
teachers in subjects such as social studies, art, and music found themselves on the outside looking in, such as the art teacher who told us, “I have not received any CCSS information for Art, and I don’t even know if I am the one responsible for finding it.” An even worse affront in the eyes of many teachers in non-CCSS subjects was the intrusion of the standards on their subject areas. CCSS for ELA includes a page of literacy and writing standards for both history/social studies and science, which teachers were expected to integrate into their teaching of the existing state frameworks. Most but not all non-CCSS teachers viewed this expectation as reasonable, though in many cases teachers found themselves pushed aside while others planned their lessons for them. For instance,

We have not had any PD that focuses on the CCSS for social studies. Two teachers in my department were sent to something called the LDC to design lesson plan modules. Our literacy specialist designed one module for us to implement with our history classes. I do not understand why we all were not given the opportunity to attend the LDC workshop.

Social studies has been left out, as usual. We could have been an asset in the implementation phase, but instead, have been looked upon as an unimportant extra. The literacy teachers have planned the units with the input of one social studies teacher per grade level—for a district that includes more than 1000 students per grade level. It would have been nice for all literacy and social studies teachers to have had input in the unit.

The blatant disregard for non-CCSS teachers’ expertise and ability to integrate CCSS standards into their own disciplines left many of these teachers feeling “demoralized” or “insignificant” within their own buildings as they watched literacy coaches or small cadres of instructional facilitators, many of which were not even content area experts in their field, take over the instructional planning for their courses. This autocratic commandeering of their professional autonomy led some teachers to describe even their own ranks using an “us” and “them” dynamic, and likely left many of them feeling “deskilled, unceremoniously removed from the process of school governance, largely reduced to technicians, or subordinated to the authority of security guards” (Giroux 2012, 1–2).

Lack of Agency to Meet Student Needs

Teachers also discussed how narrow interpretation and autocratic implementation of CCSS impacted their agency as classroom instructors and adults who care for the well-being of their students. In terms of agency as classroom instructors, teachers described the impediments created when school leadership drastically restricted their professional autonomy over teaching methods and the selection of materials. Teachers described instruction in their buildings as “teach-by-numbers” and “lacking individuality,” causing them to “feel like a robot or an assembly line, just pushing out the material.” The frustration of these teachers was palpable in their responses as they made claims such as, “administrators have taken over our classrooms to an unspeakable degree,” and described their inability to differentiate instruction to meet the individual needs of a wide variety of learners:

I feel handcuffed now. I have no freedom. I was trained to be a teacher, not a robot. I have no individuality now. I cannot make decisions about teaching based on the needs of my
students. Instead, I have to follow a strict schedule telling me how to teach and what to teach and what to use to teach it.

Really, it’s taking all the individualism of teaching out, they’ve just thrown it out. You no longer are allowed to use your style of teaching. You have to fit into overall cookie cutters now and doing it the way they’re telling us to do it.

Despite the fact that there is still a major push to differentiate learning for individual students, we are lowering the flexibility to even differentiate learning for individual classes.

Teachers in these situations were struggling with their professional agency due to administrative attempts to script curriculum and teaching, thereby mistaking common standards for common teaching (Goering 2012). Some argue that scripted curriculum increases equity; however, research indicates that they are unresponsive to the particular social contexts of schools and individual needs of students (Smagorinsky, Lakly, and Johnson 2002; Mathis 2013) thereby impeding teachers’ response to sociological needs in the classroom (Milner 2013). The centralization of lesson planning through scripted curriculum also reduces teachers’ freedom to determine curricular matters (Wong 2006), leads to the deskilling of teachers (Apple and Teitelbaum 1986; Apple 1987), and ultimately diminishes teachers’ professional status (Milner 2013).

Many teachers recognized and affirmed the increased “rigor” of the CCSS relative to the state’s former frameworks. Yet, they also described in great detail how the increased rigor of CCSS in combination with narrow interpretation and inflexible district requirements of lockstep teaching further eroded their sense of agency in meeting students’ needs:

We’re trying to jump over the basics and go straight to trying to do higher level things, in whatever area you’re in, and if kids don’t have the basics, then they’re just really being left behind. It seems to stretch across every area in our school. It doesn’t matter what you’re actually teaching. We’re skipping over things to be caught up with what Common Core has done, instead of looking at students and meeting the students where they’re at and teaching from where they are.

The gap between the expectations of autocratic school leadership to teach the standards exactly as written with little to no room for differentiation left teachers without the power to meet students in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), thereby drastically reducing their perception of themselves as effective teachers. Often accompanying their claims of reduced agency were descriptions of how the students were “frustrated,” “lost,” or “unprepared” to learn from the scripted lessons. Rather than adapting their teaching to meet the needs of their students, these teachers were being told to adapt their students to meet the needs of their scripted teaching. Autonomy and professionalism cannot be considered synonymously (Rotterham 2011), though the teachers taking part in this study appeared to be lamenting the loss of flexibility in addition to autonomy, with blame often placed on the need to prepare students for high stakes standardized assessments:

All of the materials that we use are focused for the quarterly assessment. We spend our entire quarter teaching them information that they’re going to be assessed on. I think
it’s really narrowed the curriculum to anything that is not going to be assessed is basically discarded.

My own school district has chosen to interpret the PARCC framework as a mandate instead of as a suggestion, meaning that teachers have to rearrange their sequencing of lessons in order to meet the (rather arbitrary) sequence laid out by PARCC.

Allowing teachers to respect the specificity and diversity of children’s needs by enabling teachers to act as critical intellectuals who have control over their own pedagogical efforts is a precondition for a flourishing democratic education (Giroux 2012). Yet, many teachers have been experiencing conditions that are anything but flourishing, and in many cases, their situations reflect the neoliberal values that drove the creation of the standards themselves. Teachers who portrayed their teaching conditions in this manner were under no illusion that standardization of teaching was a requirement of CCSS, suggesting that misinformation or misinterpretation may be a reason why some teachers, “have been told that we must all teach the same units at the same time in order to align with the Common Core, but I saw no requirement of the kind in my own reading of the CCSS.” Much like their marginalization from the broader educational processes of the district, many teachers saw this as an affront to their expertise as seasoned classroom veterans, relaying that they were “told by learning specialists that I should not be using anything that I have used pre-CCSS. I do not believe that everything I have used over the past 16 years is now worthless . . . I should not be expected to toss methods that I know work for kids.” Perhaps the most poignant example of how expertise has been disregarded was found in the words of a teacher who told us that she had once been the recipient of the state’s the Teacher of the Year Award:

This is very disheartening for me. I don’t spend my time really chewing on my lessons, really planning them anymore because I don’t have to. It’s basically been scripted out for me. I believe that the phrase that was used with us was that our plan is to make the “lessons idiot proof.” I really took that to heart. I was like, you just called me an idiot and I really resent that. I work very hard and I’m very proud of the work that I’ve done with my students. I draw on other things that I’ve done in the past to try to find ways for the kids to connect to the information, but it feels ham-handed. It doesn’t feel thoughtful and reflective. I know that I’m still trying to meet my kids where they are, as much as I can. I can’t stop doing that. I don’t want to stop doing that. I think that’s responsible and professional. I know that it’s not happening consistently across my building. I see the morale in my building is low.

Risk-Reward

Authoritarian, top-down accountability was also a driving force behind the de-professionalization of teachers through the perceived imbalance of risk-reward in their work. Teachers mentioned many additional risks to their status as competent professionals without mentioning any associated rewards to accompany those risks. Most problematic for teachers was the fact that the national standardized exam that would eventually measure their students’ progress towards meeting the CCSS benchmarks did not, and as of mid-2014 still does
not, exist. The absence of a CCSS aligned test meant that the state still required teachers to test students on the former state frameworks, despite the fact that they were supposed to be teaching from the CCSS. The state granted a “waiver” for the test results, assuring teachers that the scores would not count, but teachers were less concerned about what the state would think and more concerned about how the contradiction would affect perceptions of their professional competence:

The greatest struggle I have had with CCSS is the double standard between what CCSS wants and what the district wants. The district talks about wanting to strictly focus on CCSS, but yet teachers are expected to teach the old standards for the test. It simply is not possible to do both, especially in areas such as math.

How are [students] and their parents going to feel when they get results saying they are below basic in certain areas because skills were not taught in the CCSS and that is what their teacher was using? Parents will be mad, students will feel dumb, and teachers will look incompetent.

The lack of flexibility with materials and methods discussed in the previous section also contributed to the teachers’ concerns regarding the risk-reward balance. They viewed themselves as taking on the additional risk of high expectations for testing under CCSS, without having the agency to control the outcomes of those tests to the best of their professional abilities. Respondents portrayed an implementation process that was more focused on “little checklists and boxes” rather than “analyzing curriculum to see whether it’s actually working or not.” When added to the uncertainty about the future standardized test for CCSS, the teachers discussed the added personal risk in an approach to implementation that was more concerned with arbitrary administrative procedures rather than their instructional efficacy. Further adding to their concerns about accountability to high stakes test scores was the state’s upcoming implementation of a new teacher evaluation system that would be partially based on those scores. Teachers mentioned that “trying to predict what the state wanted” was a significant risk in their daily instruction, and that the addition of a high stakes teacher assessment to an uncertain curricular environment created a “learn as you go situation that has been very difficult when expectations are so high.” The combination of these factors left teachers with a disproportionate amount of professional risk, with little chance of professional reward.

Others have written about how the combination of high stakes testing, accountability, and neoliberal reform have led to a system of surveillance and threats designed to keep teachers in line with the narrow focus of raising test scores (Sloan 2008; Brooks 2009; Lipman 2009; Au 2011). Unfortunately, the responses of many teachers who took part in this study demonstrated further evidence that these systems exist, or that conditions exist that lead teachers to believe they are being managed by surveillance and threat. Teachers mentioned a “dreaded situation” of being “threatened on a weekly basis with job security,” “administrators using evaluations as weapons instead of tools,” and being ‘bullied into implementing this ‘standard’ way of doing things.” For example:

There’s a real negative sense among the teachers where it’s almost like they are trying to... It’s like there’s this watchfulness there. It’s hard to describe but there’s a sense that
you’re being watched all the time and that if you don’t toe the party line that somebody’s going to tell on you... I don’t know that my colleagues have had a good experience with it either, but I also know that most of them are not willing to talk about it.

The climate of “Obey or Quit” is so authoritarian that teachers will leave the profession in droves. There is no autonomy in education anymore, no professional courtesy. As a result, our educational system will lose its organizational memory, as experienced teachers are degraded and dehumanized in the reform of “Big Brother.” Unfortunately as well, no one will ever understand that allusion again.

I feel free to be critical, yes, but I also suffer administrative bullying from the district level for my willingness to do so. My principal is wonderful, but our district recently removed every member from our school from the district’s vertical team committee because we wouldn’t quit asking critical questions about how this might work and how the district policies are complying with the CCSS guidelines.

These teachers spoke of a climate in which organizational factors have created a set of working conditions that are marked by suspicion, threat, and forced compliance. Others spoke more specifically about experiences in which their expression of individual opinion or even successful instructional achievements were targeted by school leaders intent on protecting the accountability-surveillance-threat dynamic of control:

I have personally been chastised and reprimanded for teaching my students to do more than what these graphic organizers are asking of them. I actually was told that I helped my kids too much; that my students scored better than the other students in the district and that they were afraid my students would finish the year behind. Like I said, an example of that mixed message. How is it a wrong thing for me to do more, to help them more? I guess if standardization is the game, then anything above that standard is going to be viewed as suspect.

As a matter of fact, any dissension or any comments that anyone administratively perceived to be quote “negative” were discarded and teachers were chastised for it. This consultant would tell us to bring ideas for texts that we wanted to use for this common curriculum that we were going to supposedly create. Then every suggestion, almost every suggestion, that we would bring she would shoot us down and say it wasn’t appropriate.

These examples of organizational inflexibility may be due to the phenomenon of threat rigidity, which occurs when an organization perceives itself as under attack from an external threat and responds by tightening structures, centralizing control, enforcing conformity, and discouraging independent or innovative thinking (Olsen and Sexton 2009). Avoiding threat rigidity is possible through “opening communication, encouraging innovative thinking, supporting teachers, and striving to put forward a climate of cooperation and trust” (2009, 39). Unfortunately, many teachers in this study painted a picture of school leaders failing to respond to their needs as professionals and as people charged with an enormously ambiguous and nearly impossible task:

Even the school leaders are constantly telling the teachers, “keep getting better, keep getting better, you need to be great, how can you be greater?” Even a prized racehorse gets
taken care of between races. You can’t expect students and teachers to keep racing without eventually getting tired.

Our school leaders are impossible to please and always point out the negative in everything. Unfortunately, this bleeds over into the implementation of CCSS and our accomplishments. We could get perfect test scores and all they would see is that our standards aren’t written on the board for the day.

There has been no help given to me, nor has there been any inquiries about why I might be “struggling” with this. I have only been told to “fix it” by doing what I have always done.

I spend more time in meaningless meetings being told over and over that it’s my fault students aren’t succeeding, but there are no practical answers given, and the time away from planning and grading is severely impacting my performance, not to mention my motivation and job satisfaction.

The lack of administrative trust in teachers and the intrusiveness of managerial style through surveillance and threats is a detriment to teacher agency and professionalism because it places inordinate emphasis on accountability, structure and rules rather than responsibility, emergence, and trust (Hoyle and Wallace 2009). It is not surprising that many of these highly experienced and well trained professionals currently feel as though they “are stripped of their worth and dignity by being forced to adopt an educational vision and philosophy that has little respect for the empowering possibilities of either knowledge or critical classroom practice” (Giroux 2012, 3). However, although this condition may be occurring in an increasing number of schools, there are also districts and schools that have created an environment that honors teacher autonomy/agency rather than infantilizes teachers, and may serve as a beacon of hope for pursuing a desirable and possible future that confronts contradictory social conditions (Comstock 1982).

A CONTRASTING VIEW OF AGENCY AND RESPONSIVE SUPPORT

In contrast to the experiences we’ve just detailed, a number of teachers painted a very different picture of CCSS implementation that spoke of meeting student needs, efficacy, collaboration, and support. The positive responses were considerably outnumbered by negative responses, though it was still possible to discern themes in teachers’ positive perceptions related to autonomy, agency, and responsive support from school leadership.

Meeting Student Needs

Differentiation and depth were the focus of teachers who told us that the implementation of CCSS had helped them meet the needs of their students. Teachers specifically mentioned the ability to “allow time for deeper engagement,” “making sure that all students have mastered the lesson,” “providing tools for success,” and “developing better student understanding.” A sense of agency with differentiating lessons in order to meet the needs of diverse learners
was especially evident in responses of teachers who mentioned English Language Learners or students who received Special Education services. In many of these cases, the teachers appreciated the construction of the standards that were “fewer and deeper” than the previous state standards. These sentiments were probably best summed up by the teacher who told us, “I am seeing some of my kids making connections to previously taught skills. The hands-on manipulatives are helping to build a bridge between the concrete and the abstract. Additionally, they are seeing how these skills are used daily in the real world.”

In addition to meeting the needs of their students, many teachers discussed how implementation of the new standards had increased their efficacy as classroom instructors. The word helping was mentioned many times in regard to helping students, helping colleagues, and even helping themselves. Prior research has demonstrated that an increase in accountability policies can have both positive and negative effects upon the quality of teaching, specifically concluding that mandates that are not too prescriptive (e.g., increased time in reading or writing) can improve instruction without preventing teachers from meeting the specific needs of their students (Sloan 2006; Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson 2000). Teachers who had been trusted to use specific instructional philosophies or methods that represented best practice without requiring lockstep teaching described a perceived increase in instructional efficacy. There were specific mentions of “giving students more responsibility in their learning,” “incorporating media and technology,” “more one on one instruction,” “incorporation of more long-term and interdisciplinary projects,” and “taking my students to a whole new level that I never thought they were capable of.” In more reflective terms, the implementation of CCSS had helped teachers become more willing to “try new and creative methods,” “avoid the ‘sage onstage’ approach to teaching,” or simply “let go of the podium.” In some cases teachers actually gave credit to “CCSS methodology” for these improvements. However, the CCSS do not endorse any single method of teaching, and it is rather telling that teachers who made these comments typically had positive perceptions of their school leadership as well.

Leadership Treatment and Support

Teachers’ perceptions of the support and treatment they received from school leadership held substantial influence over their perceptions of agency and professionalism. For those who responded in a positive fashion, they often mentioned receiving resources and/or time they needed to implement CCSS in a thoughtful and collaborative fashion:

As a department, we wrote our own 8th grade curriculum for this year because there were no resources already available. It was great to work together and get better insight to each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

Very supportive. They’ve asked us as a committee, ‘What do you need?’ They have listened. They have given us days to align curriculum and to learn from each other... they have given us days during the year to work, to plan and allowed us to order books
that are Common Core. I had a very positive experience with my administration, especially building level.

Our principal helps us get anything we need because she, she believes in what she’s doing. She believes in the common core and she is showing us what it does and what the future is… I think she’s great and I think our district is really good at that too. I don’t know if they have a lot of money but they act like they do because whatever we need we get it. I don’t know if you see that everywhere.

In contrast to the marginalization of their teacher colleagues at other schools, leadership support was a powerful theme in the responses of teachers who described positive circumstances of agency and professionalism. They described leadership as “supportive of our needs,” “willing to help us,” “listening,” and “invested” in the success of teachers as well as students:

I spend a lot of time, but I like it because I really want to implement it right. I’m telling you that’s really how my principal is too though. She’ll stay at the school till 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. I’m not joking… She is such a hard worker that it’s like everybody there wants, it’s not just me, everyone there wants to go Gung ho with it. We like it though because we want to do it right. I think that’s because she’s like that, honestly I do. I like it. It’s helping me a lot in fact my lesson plans, it’s like a do a skeleton lesson plan, because I have to change it all the time according to the students, but I get it. I feel good.

They’ve been very supportive; any questions we’ve had, there’s been somebody there that if they didn’t know the answer, they’d go find it for us. We’ve had administration that’s helped us locate projects that we can do in our classrooms and they’ve just been very supportive.

I’ll tell you one thing… I have an excellent principal… she is intelligent and she believes in us learning… she should be forerunner of the principals… I think she’s great and she has made it easy for us.

In most cases, it was the building principal that teachers described as particularly responsive, perhaps because they were the level of administration in closest contact with teachers. However, these teachers also described the coaches and consultants employed or hired by the district as supportive and willing to help teachers rather than dictate to their instruction. Many comments were specific to the mentoring and assistance teachers were receiving with materials and methods:

Any concerns or anything I need, our literacy coach will say to me, “Do you have…?”. We just finished a unit where we were reading a lot of biographies. She said, “If you run across any biographies on your own that you felt the students enjoyed,” and I said to her, “We need more biographies about women.” I know she took that back to the district, and I suspect that next year they will purchase us some readers about women that we can implement in the classroom.

Math coaches and people from the math department are coming down actually in the classrooms and teaching. That’s been really nice to see. You know, they’re trying to get around to every school and also that’s been really nice. They come in to observe my lessons and to talk with me and give me feedback. Is this what I’m supposed to be doing?
Is this the way to get the skill across? Even some encouragement, just to say, “Yeah, you’re doing it. Just keep doing it. They’re going to get it. Just keep doing it,” so that’s been nice.

Not coincidentally, teachers who described their school leadership as responsive and open to teacher autonomy were far more likely to use the word *our* when referencing administrators rather than referring to them as a distant and disconnected third party. Ownership and agency during the implementation process was evident in their responses, which stood in stark contrast to the majority of participant comments from the first portion of this results section.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Johnson (2014) posits a compelling discourse analysis that demonstrates how the language found in the CCSS documents attempts to project an impersonal and distant professional identity for the standards, while also describing how the social practice and implementation of CCSS are mediated by authoritarian “experts” such as David Coleman. In many ways the teachers’ positive and negative perceptions of agency and professionalism in this study were a reflection of what happens when the rubber meets the proverbial road of curricular implementation. Whereas many teachers experienced marginalization, lack of agency to meet student needs, and increased risk in their professional status, others experienced inclusion, collaboration, and support in that endeavor.

For teachers in the state in which this study took place, the disconnect between implementing the CCSS, the as yet undefined high-stakes national test, the state’s insistence on continuing the testing regimen based on its former standards, and the new test-score-dependent teacher evaluation system created a daunting situation in which maintaining the appearance of competence became extremely difficult. In response to uncertainty, many districts and schools turned to an autocratic and top-down approach to CCSS implementation that robbed teachers of professional agency by scripting curriculum, marginalizing teachers from the decision-making process, and adding to the risk-reward imbalance created by the state.

Teachers’ working conditions affect their willingness to remain in the profession (Johnson, Kraft, and Papa 2012) and the retention of high quality teachers is partially dependent upon the administrative support they are provided (Certo and Fox 2002). Yet many of the teachers who took part in this study felt as though their school leadership was more interested in control and conformity as they reported surveillance, threats, and being treated more like “automatons rather than as professionals solving the complex problems of teaching and learning” (Milner 2013, 19). These factors and the forced subordination to paid external consultants contributed to many teachers feeling as though they were “robots teaching other little robots.”

Fortunately, other districts and schools managed to implement CCSS within the constraints of the testing and accountability culture while still recognizing that teacher professionalism requires “judgments about meeting a broad range of educational ends by employing appropriate means with particular students in particular situations” (Biesta 2009, 184). In these
schools, teachers spoke of treatment that aligns with best practices in retaining high quality teachers such as being provided with resources and time to collaborate, being included in educational decisions, receiving visible but not prescriptive support, and being recognized for their professionalism (Certo and Fox 2002).

It is tempting to think that the problems experienced by the teachers in this study are isolated and localized incidents of autocratic school leadership. However, organizations are responsive to environmental contexts (Scott 2002), and the narrative of economic success, career readiness, accountability, and teacher culpability drives the current educational context in the United States. Unfortunately for many teachers, their practice is situated in a context in which “anyone who does not believe in the pursuit of material self-interest, unbridled competition, and market-driven values is a proper candidate to be humiliated” (Giroux 2012, 25). In schools, the humiliation of teachers through de-professionalization is leveraged by the “discourse of accountability” that has been adopted by many teachers with little resistance, leading them to become “compliant, complicit, and de-professionalized” (Brooks 2009, 318).

As long as the national narrative continues to echo the false claims of A Nation at Risk that schools are failing and teachers are at fault, it will be difficult for us to reverse the trend towards teacher de-professionalization that is occurring in too many schools across the United States. That larger conversation is beyond the scope of influence for any single district or school, yet we hope that the experiences of the teachers who took part in this study can help educators at all levels view their situation differently and work towards honoring teachers as “critical agents” of inquiry (Giroux 2012).

REFERENCES


