Gifted Education and Common Core: Accepting the Challenge by Making Connections with the General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

Forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and four territories have adopted or partially adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). States are working to develop plans for implementation of CCSS. On the state of Mississippi website resources related to math, English Language Arts, English Language Learners, and for parents, teachers, and curriculum developers are available. What is missing is how the CCSS will affect students served in gifted programs. This paper is an attempt to investigate conceptually and practically how implementation of the CCSS will influence gifted programming for students identified as intellectually gifted in the state of Mississippi. Ways in which teachers of the gifted, advocates for the gifted, and school districts can use adoption and implementation of CCSS to improve the quality of programming for gifted students and change the nature of the relationship between the gifted education program and the general education program are proposed. Though focused on education in the state of Mississippi, this process is one that should occur in all states and can serve as a model for CCSS and gifted education integration.

Key words: Common Core State Standards; gifted education; curriculum integration

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Gifted Education and Common Core: Accepting the Challenge by Making Connections with the General Education Curriculum

Forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and four territories have adopted or partially adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Common Core State Standards Initiative). States are now in the process of developing plans for the implementation of the new standards. In Mississippi, the state department of education has links on its website to various training resources, an implementation timeline, links for math and English Language Arts, as well as resources for parents, teachers, and curriculum developers, including resources related to how implementation of the CCSS will affect students with disabilities and English Language Learners. What is missing is how the adoption and implementation of CCSS will affect students served in gifted programs in the states.

The background, purpose, and goals of Common Core State Standards have been addressed elsewhere (Kober & Rentner, 2011; MUW Center for Creative Learning, 2011; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). The purpose of this paper is to address the how and why as they relate to gifted programming in the state of Mississippi with the understanding that lessons learned can be adopted and applied in other states. I propose ways teachers of the gifted, advocates for the gifted, and school districts can use the adoption and implementation of CCSS to improve the quality of programming for gifted students and change the nature of the relationship between the gifted education program and the general education program.

Common Core Standards and Mississippi

Recent research indicates that adoption of the CCSS will have a significant impact on curriculum and instruction in Mississippi schools. A study funded by the Thomas Fordham Institute rated Mississippi’s 2010 English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum framework a “D” and the math curriculum framework a “C”, concluding that compared to the CCSS the Mississippi curriculum frameworks are “clearly inferior.” The authors went so far as to characterize the Mississippi ELA standards as “mysterious, as if they were constructed to obfuscate rather than clarify student expectations” (Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010, p. 185). An evaluation by the Mississippi State Department of Education was more favorable when it concluded that for ELA “overall alignment is good,” and that rigor is “comparable.” The prognosis was not as favorable for math. It was concluded that the “overall alignment is not good” and that “CCSS for math are more rigorous than the Mississippi framework” (House, 2010).

Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011) compared CCSS to current state standards. Their content analysis of each state’s curriculum compared to CCSS resulted in an alignment index score that ranged from 0 to 1, with 1 equating to 100% alignment between the state frameworks and CCSS. Mississippi's alignment index for 4th and 8th grade Math was .25 and .16 respectively. For 4th grade Math, this was slightly above the national average of .22 and for the
8th grade it was well below the national average of .22. For English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) comparisons and reports are available for only the 2nd and 3rd grade. The alignment index for 2nd grade was .27, below the .31 national mean. The alignment index for third grade was .21 below the .26 mean. The authors concluded that nationally the CCSS “represent considerable change” (p. 114) from existing curriculum in the states, including Mississippi.

Since there is the potential for significant change in curriculum and instruction in Mississippi schools, we should ask the question: “What does this mean for programming in gifted education?” The rationale behind gifted programming is the idea that gifted students require a qualitatively different educational experience. This is evident in the Federal definition of a gifted student: “these are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society” (The Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 Public Law 91-230, Section 806). The Mississippi Gifted Education Act of 1989 (Mississippi Code of 1972, Sections 37-23-171 through 37-23-181) declared that gifted students “require additional opportunities to allow them to develop their capabilities to their fullest potential” (Mississippi State Department of Education, 2006, p. 1). It further requires that programming be provided for gifted students “in addition to and different from the regular program of instruction provided by the district” (p. 1-2).

These legal requirements reflect the wealth of findings and recommendations of how gifted or high ability learners develop, are different and require differentiated educational services (Baskin & Harris, 1980; Cartwright in Shore, Gagne, Larivee, Tali, & Trembley, 1983; Clark, 1997; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Gardner, 1997; Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; Jackson & Moyle, 2009; Kramer in Shore et al., 1983; Maker & Nielson, 1996; Marland, 1972; Mrazik & Dombrowski, 2010; Sousa, 2003; Terman, 1954; Tomlinson, 1995; Van Tassel-Baska, 1992; Van Tassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Though there are multiple competing theories of giftedness, most agree that gifted students require differentiated services. The adoption and implementation of CCSS should result in a more rigorous curriculum for all students. As instruction in the general education curriculum becomes more rigorous this will require a response in the gifted education curriculum.

**Gifted Education in Mississippi**

In order to understand fully the nature of the response required from the gifted education program, it is necessary to understand the Mississippi gifted curriculum formally enshrined in the *Suggested Outcomes for Intellectually Gifted Programs Grades 2-8 in Mississippi* (Mississippi State Department of Education, 1994). The outcomes for gifted programs fall into six major process skill categories: Thinking skills, Creativity, Group Dynamics, Communication, Research, and Self-Directed Learning. Each of the process skills outcomes is further broken down into sub-categories that include the major outcomes for each of the six process skills. Supplementing the outcomes document is the *Suggested Teaching Strategies for the Teachers of the Intellectually Gifted* that provides teachers guidance on how to implement the teaching strategies in their classrooms.
Mississippi Gifted Education Programs: Program Standards Evaluation and Monitoring (2004) shed further light on the nature of the gifted curriculum in Mississippi. Criterion I specifically calls for qualitatively differentiated curriculum for identified gifted students that is “in addition to and different from the regular program of instruction” (p. 1). Regulations for the Gifted Education Programs in Mississippi (2006) call for pull-out resource programs for intellectually gifted students for a minimum of five hours per week. The regulation directs the teaching of process skills from the outcomes document and the teaching strategies notebook. The regulation also calls for investigation of topics that are not covered in general education classes. In essence, the Mississippi gifted curriculum is a content-neutral process skills curriculum. This does not imply that teachers do not teach content. Rather, that the teaching of content is not systematic or done in a way that is connected to content students learn in the general education curriculum.

The nature of the curriculum in practice is harder to describe, because teachers and programmers at the school and district level exercise their discretion regarding what content is studied. The local gifted programs are required to teach the process skills curriculum through content that is “not normally covered in the general education program” (p. 1-2). The efficacy of this approach is unknown, but this approach to gifted programming has long been subject to question as exemplified by Baskin and Harris’s (1980) discussion of enrichment in Books for the Gifted Child:

Enrichment is typically a nonsequential, segmented, idiosyncratic, unarticulated, and unmonitored approach to instruction . . . . Rather than expressing a systematic plan, the content of enrichment additions are frequently a reflection of the particular abilities and enthusiasms of the instructional staff. These supplemental programs are usually tangential to the regular classroom . . . . Such provisions tend to be eccentric and fragmented, yielding an isolated, disconnected, often unidimensional view of subject matter. (p. 29)

Van Tassel-Baska (1992) indicated that if the field of gifted education is to “advance as a field” it must “embrace the world of general education” including curriculum reforms and moving to “a content-based instructional model for the gifted” (p. 2). The current nature of the Mississippi gifted curriculum is divorced from general education because there is no formal link to the content covered in the general education curriculum.

Baskin and Harris’ (1980) and Van Tassel-Baska’s (1992) analyses present a unique challenge to teachers of the gifted and other advocates for gifted students in Mississippi when coupled with the advent of CCSS. Gifted education is at a crossroads. Does gifted education continue on a separate path from the regular curriculum, ignoring the changes in that curriculum resulting from the implementation of CCSS? Alternatively, does gifted education ask a series of questions about the impact of CCSS on education in regular and gifted education specifically, answer those questions, and possibly change the nature of gifted education in Mississippi and other states?

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1 The Regulations for the Gifted Education Programs in Mississippi are in revision. The new regulations will go into effect school year 2014-2015. Changes in the regulations do not substantially change the program requirements as described in this article.
Gifted Education’s Role in Implementing CCSS

The goal of this paper is to begin a dialogue with teachers of the gifted, teacher educators, district personnel, curriculum developers, advocates for the gifted, and other interested parties about how CCSS will affect gifted programming and what our response should be. The conversation has already begun at the national level. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) has provided multiple documents on their website related to CCSS and gifted and talented students. One document of interest is “Common Core State Standards: Issues and Recommendations for Gifted Education Professionals” (NAGC, n.d.). In that document, NAGC addresses pull-out programs. NAGC recommends that teachers of the gifted “consider how their infusion of literacy and numeracy address the CCSS” . . . and that they “remain informed of the content and scope” of learning experiences in the regular classroom. The recommendations are general and leave the actual implementation to teachers and schools. The goal is to address implementation in Mississippi.

Guiding Questions

To start the conversation, I propose a series of questions that reflect the nature of the gifted education program in Mississippi, but should have applications in other states:

1. How will CCSS change the nature of instruction in the regular classroom? What does this mean for instruction in gifted classrooms? This question is important because if the implementation of CCSS is successful in changing the nature of instruction thereby increasing the complexity of learning accomplished by students then that will affect the nature of instruction and learning in the gifted programming. If the general education program begins to address more adequately some of the unique learning needs of gifted students then gifted education programs can respond by adapting instruction to focus on other needs.

2. In what areas are there overlap between CCSS and the Mississippi Gifted Outcomes? A quick look at the Mississippi Gifted Outcomes and the CCSS identifies several potential areas for overlap: (1) Mississippi Gifted Outcome: Communication appears to have some overlap with CCSS College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening, and (2) the CCSS Anchor Standards for Writing appear to have multiple areas where they overlap with Mississippi Gifted Outcomes: Communication and Research. Researchers have already studied how well the Mississippi Curriculum Frameworks align with the CCSS (Carmicheal, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). A systematic study of areas of alignment between the Mississippi Gifted Outcomes and the CCSS is necessary. The resulting alignment will necessarily lead to two more questions: (a) what does the alignment mean for Gifted Education Programs and (b) are there skills and concepts that should be dropped from or taught differently in the Gifted Education Program because they are covered adequately in the general education program?
3. In what areas can gifted education support general education in implementation of CCSS? The CCSS include many skills taught in the gifted education programs in Mississippi. This provides teachers of the gifted an opportunity to provide a service to the general education teacher. They can help general education teachers change their teaching methods based on experience teaching process skills.

4. In what areas can the Gifted Education Program provide differentiated services that build on instruction in the general education classroom? Tomlinson (1995) differentiated curriculum along three lines: content, process, and product. Tomlinson also provided a unique way of conceptualizing differentiation as sliding the buttons of an equalizer on a stereo. Examples of buttons on the stereo are moving from (a) foundational to transformational information, ideas, materials, and applications; (b) concrete to abstract representations, ideas, applications, and materials; and (c) simple to complex resources, research, issues, problems, skills, and goals. There are a total of eight, but for illustrative purposes, three examples suffice. Van-Tassel Baska (1992) added to content and process modifications the idea of differentiation along concepts and themes. Howley, Howley, and Pendaris (1986) (as cited in Shiever & Maker, 1991) identified enrichment as differentiation of content, process, and product and identified one problem of enrichment programs is that the processes are taught in isolation. The point of this brief discussion of differentiation is that currently in Mississippi, planned and systematic differentiation focuses on process and product. Missing are planned and systematic differentiation of content linked to or allied with what students are studying in the general education curriculum. Teachers of the gifted should systematically look for links and plan instruction to make connections to the general education curriculum. This would result in programs that are more defensible, better learning, reduced barriers between the teachers of the gifted and general education teachers, and more relevant programs.

5. In what ways will adoption of the CCSS open opportunities for truly differentiated learning for gifted students? On page six of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/ Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects there is the section: “What is not covered by the standards.” Item number 4 reads, “The standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations.” Question 5 deals specifically with that statement.

To illustrate the type of data that asking these questions can result in for a district, I have included the results from two groups of teachers who participated in an exercise during professional development sessions with gifted and general education teachers. To address questions 2, 3, and 4 the teachers received matrices with Mississippi Gifted Program Process Skills Outcomes on the horizontal axis and the CCSS on the vertical axis. Their task was to label areas where there was (a) overlap between CCSS and gifted process skills, (b) CCSS standards that teachers of the gifted could support implementation of in the general education classroom, (c) CCSS that teachers of the gifted can reinforce, extend, or go deeper within the gifted education program. The overall results of the exercise indicate that though there are differences in the results of the activity between the two groups, there is an understanding in both groups that
there is significant overlap between the Mississippi Gifted Program Process Skills and the CCSS. Additionally these teachers of the gifted can help with the implementation of CCSS by serving as a resource for classroom teachers in the general education program and through designing learning activities in their gifted education classrooms based on the CCSS. Results for the two groups of teachers are in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1**

*Group 1 Comparison between CCSS and Mississippi Gifted Outcomes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchor standards</th>
<th>Gifted standards and CCSS overlap</th>
<th>CCSS gifted teachers can support</th>
<th>CCSS that gifted teachers can extend</th>
<th>Total CCSS Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
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<td>Language</td>
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<td>33.33%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking/Listening</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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<td>100.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
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<td>0.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

*Group 2 Comparison between CCSS and Mississippi Gifted Outcomes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchor standards</th>
<th>Gifted standards and CCSS overlap</th>
<th>CCSS gifted teachers can support</th>
<th>CCSS that gifted teachers can extend</th>
<th>Total CCSS Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
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<td>50.00%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking/Listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sousa (2003) described the three main ways to intervene or adjust learning for gifted learners as (a) acceleration, (b) curriculum compacting, and (c) flexible grouping. Under acceleration, he listed strategies that are more specific: (a) early entrance/ early exit, (b) content based acceleration (remain on grade level), (c) telescoping, and (d) grade level advancing. Van Tassel-Baska (1992) specifically addressed modifications to content identifying options for gifted students: (a) acceleration, (b) compression, and (c) reorganization. The Mississippi Gifted Education Program Standards call for no single gifted program, but rather a continuum of
services and for the adaption of the general education program for gifted students. The question for gifted education professionals in the state is how will we advocate for a true continuum of services? What will we demand be done for the fourth grade student who already has demonstrated mastery of 80% of the ELA standards? Will she have to sit through the entire school year learning and doing what she already knows?

A Model for Making Curricula Connections between gifted and general education

The good news for teachers is that the field of gifted education is rich with a variety of models that will support efforts to build upon the general education curriculum. Renzulli, Gubbins, McMillen, Eckert, & Little (2009) edited a book in which theorists and practitioners described specific programs designed to address the unique learning needs of gifted individuals or to develop talent in full school settings. There are 25 specific models detailed in the volume. All of these models have potential use for teachers of the gifted in identifying ways to link into and extend the general education curriculum into the gifted education curriculum. The task for teachers of the gifted, curriculum designers, theorists, and others interested in the meeting the needs of gifted students is to identify a model to use and then to use it to make strong and effective links between the two curricula.

Regardless of which theory or model teachers of the gifted use to link into the general education curriculum, adherence to certain principles is essential in order for gifted programming to be relevant and reinforcing, yet not redundant, to the general education program. It is important for teachers of the gifted to consider how they will address the general education curriculum and differentiate it for inclusion in the gifted curriculum. Differentiation should target (a) content, (b) process, and (c) product (Tomlinson, 1995), and learning environment (Tomlinson, 2000).

The following model is one way to conceptualize a systematic process linking the gifted curriculum to the regular curriculum. The model requires teachers of the gifted to make three different types of links between the gifted education curriculum and the general education curriculum.

Curriculum link #1 represents depth not normally reached in the general education curriculum. Within all academic disciplines studied in school, the curriculum does not cover material to the depth teachers or experts in the field would like. There is only so much time in the year and when defining depth, the ability of all students is an essential consideration. Those areas, not normally covered in depth in the regular curriculum, present opportunities for the gifted curriculum to make links with the regular curriculum. Through this link, the gifted program can add both depth and complexity to the content in the general education curriculum.

Curriculum link #2 represents opportunities to extend the general education curriculum. These are subjects and content not normally taught in the general education curriculum. These include content from the academic disciplines that teachers of the gifted have used historically in Mississippi to teach the process skills curriculum. Such links broaden the curriculum through collaboration with the classroom teachers in the general education curriculum. Often, they are dependent on student or teacher interest/ expertise.
Curriculum link #3 represents processes, skills, and knowledge within the general education curriculum that the gifted education program can reinforce. The gifted program can reinforce writing, mathematical, scientific, and literacy skills used in the general education by using and extending these skills in the breadth and depth of academic disciplines identified in curriculum links #1 and #2. The gifted education program can also provide students an opportunity to use the skills and knowledge from the general education curriculum in authentic ways, in more complex settings, and to create knowledge and products for a real audience. The gifted program provides students the opportunity to move from their role of consumers of information in the general education curriculum to producers and selective consumers in the gifted education curriculum.

The model focuses primarily on the differentiation of content, but as teachers differentiate content, as seen in the description of the model in the paragraphs above, they addressed both process and product. The nature of the pull-out program in Mississippi addresses the fourth dimension of differentiation: learning environment (Tomlinson, 2000). The opportunity to use the knowledge and skills in authentic ways for real audiences also addresses modifications to the learning environment. The design of gifted programs in Mississippi specifically modified process, product, and environment (Mississippi State Department of Education, 1994). The one area not specifically planned was differentiation of content, which is the reason the model, described herein focuses on differentiation of content.

This model provides a way for those involved in gifted education in Mississippi and other states to address the concerns raised by both Baskin and Harris (1980) and Van-Tassel Baska (1992). This model will help teachers of the gifted make meaningful links to the general education curriculum resulting in a multi-dimensional view of subject matter in the pull-out enrichment programs. It will also help gifted education “embrace the world of general education” as Van-Tassel Baska recommends. Accomplishing these two tasks will result in more defensible and relevant programs for gifted learners.

Conclusion

Terman and Oden (1954) identified “Educational opportunities that are feasible” as one of five major issues facing gifted education. Over fifty years later, the field of gifted education is still struggling with how to provide quality educational opportunities to gifted students. The adoption of CCSS does not require a response from the field of gifted education. Significant changes can be made in the general education curriculum and the field of gifted education can continue to provide programs that are as Baskin and Harris (1980) described “tangential to regular classroom” or the field can do as Van Tassel-Baska (1992) recommended and “embrace the world of general education” through fully supporting the implementation of CCSS. Vaughn, Feldhusen, and Asher (1991) reported that combining pull-out programs for the gifted with other strategies would better meet the needs of gifted children than pull-out programs alone. I posit that pull-out programs directly linked to the regular education program using the three curriculum connections outlined above is one of these strategies that will better meet the needs of gifted children.
The implementation of CCSS has the potential to affect the nature of programming for gifted learners. For this to take place, teachers of the gifted, gifted education program supervisors and other professionals in the field of gifted education must actively embrace the adoption of CCSS and begin a process of identifying how gifted programs at the state, district, and school levels will assist with the implementation by making direct curriculum connections with the general education curriculum. This process will necessitate that districts and schools assess their programs in light of the adoption of CCSS. Gifted program personnel must review the requirements and components of their existing gifted programs and compare them to the CCSS. I have proposed a set of guiding questions and a model that teachers in gifted programs can use when conducting this assessment.

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