Deepening Common Core State Standards Understandings

Through Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

As schools across the nation make the transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), many educators find that it is difficult for a school staff to develop shared understandings of the new standards and their instructional implications. The lack of shared understanding can impede instructional coherence and lead to unfocused professional development. At Lighthouse Community Charter School, I found that teachers and administrators did not yet have a shared understanding of the instructional demands of the CCSS for writing. Research has shown that people need to feel psychologically safe to make the kinds of transformational instructional changes recommended by the CCSS. Many of the key indicators of a psychologically safe community are present in effective professional learning communities (PLCs). I facilitated a PLC, consisting of teachers and administrators, that explored the CCSS for writing. We learned about the standards through experiences like using exemplar pieces, analyzing student work, and doing the writing ourselves that the CCSS demands of our students. Through surveys, PLC meeting minutes and classroom observations, I studied increases in shared language, vision, and instructional practices consistent with the CCSS. Through the work of the PLC, the participants used increased shared language, and also had more aligned visions of the instructional implications of the CCSS. Teachers began or continued to align their writing lessons to the CCSS. Lastly, implementing varied participation structures within meetings and shorter lesson observations proved effective.

Context and Problem of Practice

Lighthouse Community Charter School (Lighthouse) is an autonomous, K-12 public charter school in Oakland, California. Lighthouse uses the Comprehensive Literacy Model (also sometimes referred to as the Arkansas Model) as a framework for our reading and writing program. While we've seen our students make growth in their reading achievement through the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System, we haven't seen the same level of growth in our students' writing achievement. Twice each year students in Kindergarten through fourth grade are assessed on their narrative writing using the 6-trait rubric. Overall we've seen minimal growth in some areas like conventions and ideas, but almost no growth in other areas like organization and word choice.

Kindergarten through fourth grade students at Lighthouse have multiple opportunities to write throughout the day. Teachers facilitate a Writer's Workshop block for 30-50 minutes each day, although our staff members have varying degrees of experience with the workshop model and teaching the writing process. Through conversations with teachers at Lighthouse, I've learned that many did not have a rich learning experience in teacher training programs, when it comes to writing instruction. Teachers have also expressed that they've spent more time learning about reading instruction than writing instruction. This may be due to school-wide professional development goals, the emphasis of reading on high stakes state tests, or a number of other factors.

Like the staff at most schools, we are in the midst of shifting away from the California State Standards towards the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). We

chose to spend the 2013-2014 school year digging into the CCSS math standards. We are in the process of analyzing the standards and their instructional implications. We have acknowledged that we will be making some curricular shifts based on our findings. The K-4 staff has committed to a focus on the English Language Arts (ELA) standards for the 2014-2015 school year; however a small working group of teachers was interested in starting this work in early 2014.

Even without formal training or a school-wide focus, many teachers have already begun making shifts in their reading instruction in response to the CCSS. In my work as a coach, I've seen teachers place a stronger focus on nonfiction reading and text dependent questions. I've also observed teachers employing structures like guided reading and literature discussion groups, which provide opportunities for the deep reading and thinking the CCSS demand.

However, I haven't seen the same shifts in curriculum and instruction when it comes to writing. The CCSS place a large emphasis on writing, not only as its own subject, but across content areas. The larger goal of the CCSS, college readiness for all students, hinges on students being effective writers.

Based on observations and conversations with teachers, and our writing assessment results, I have concluded that **teachers and administrators don't yet have a shared understanding of the instructional demands of the CCSS writing standards**. I designed an intervention that leverages our CCSS ELA working group to explore these instructional demands. If teachers and administrators have more clarity regarding not only the standards, but also the implementation of the standards, I believe writing

instruction will improve. Improved writing instruction will lead to increased student ability to express thinking and more opportunities to learn through writing.

Literature Review

Introduction

As schools nationwide make the shift to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), educators have an opportunity to examine not only how the standards may affect our expectations for student performance, but also how the standards may affect our instruction. In the following review I examine the literature related to the importance of writing, the Common Core State Standards in writing, how people learn in times of transition, and professional learning communities. I argue that engaging in a professional learning community will help teachers and administrators build a deeper, shared understanding of the instructional implications of the Common Core State Standards in writing.

The Importance of Writing

The importance of writing in everyday life is demonstrated by studies in a variety of areas. At its most basic level, writing is key in helping individuals communicate information, thoughts, ideas, and opinions. Engaging in writing can also help develop analytical skills, that are needed both across the disciplines within school and beyond the classroom. There is also evidence that writing effectively can help students learn to read (International Reading Association, & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2011).

Writing is an important way for people to express feelings and emotions (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges [NCWAFSC], 2003). There have even been studies that suggest that writing about stressful situations can help lower health care utilization in healthy people (Harris, 2006).

While it has been estimated that only 145,900 Americans earn their livings as full time writers, most jobs have an element of writing embedded within (NCWAFSC, 2003; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In 2001 Richard Light surveyed college graduates and found that more than 90% of midcareer professionals said the need to write effectively was of "great importance" to their daily work (Light, 2001).

With an abundance of evidence regarding the importance of writing, it would seem that writing proficiency would be strong in students and adults. Overall, that is not the case. Students in 4th, 8th, and 12th grade who had their writing assessed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrated only partial mastery of grade-level expectations in writing. (Graham & Perin, 2007). In a 2002 survey 74% of college professors said their freshman and sophomore students had poor or just fair spelling and grammar skills and 75% said their students had poor or just fair skills in writing clearly. Similarly 73% of employers within the study who hire students straight out of college said their employees had poor or just fair skills in spelling, grammar, and writing clearly (Public Agenda, 2002). Another study found that more than 50% of college freshmen were not able to write papers relatively free of language errors (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, 2002).

Elementary, middle and high school teachers must take on the responsibility of preparing students to be successful writers in college and beyond. There seem to be many factors that lead to this lack of writing proficiency. One factor is the low priority writing is given in high stakes state tests. For example, the California state test (CST) emphasized reading and math over writing. Most high stakes tests only ask students to write in 1-2 different genres thereby prioritizing some genres over others and limiting the range of writing students can show mastery of in an assessment (Graham et al., 2012).

Another issue is that students are not spending enough time writing. A 2008 survey showed that in a typical elementary classroom students have only half an hour each day of dedicated writing time (Cutler & Graham, 2008). The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance recommends a minimum of one hour of writing time for all students beginning in first grade, with 30 minutes dedicated to learning writing skills, strategies, and techniques; the remaining 30 minutes should be spent applying the skills students learned (Graham et al., 2012).   This writing time can also occur across different content areas. Beringer's study showed that students who received extra writing instructional time improved their writing quality relative to students who did not receive the extra instruction (Beringer et al., 2006).

Lack of teacher training is another factor leading to low writing proficiency. Most teacher preparation programs don't emphasize writing instruction and in fact very few states require a course in writing instruction for teacher certification (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Harris et al., 2012). Teachers also get very little professional development in writing instruction and rarely get the opportunities to see themselves as writers (NCWAFSC, 2003; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Harris et al., 2012). While some

organizations like the National Writing Project and its regional offshoot, the Bay Area

Writing Project, offer intensive professional development for teachers, not all teachers

are able to take advantage of such opportunities (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). Teachers

are also rarely taught how best to reach English language learners through writing

instruction, so many teachers with a basic writing background are not able to fully meet

the instructional needs of their students (NCWAFSC, 2003).

Lastly, nationwide writing standards have not been very consistent. The National

Commission on Writing argues that standards, curriculum, and assessment must be

aligned if we are to see real growth in writing proficiency (NCWAFSC, 2003).

The Common Core State Standards in Writing

In 2010, partly in response to some of the issues addressed above, a group of

researchers and educators drafted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). 45 states

have committed to using these standards to ensure that students across the country are

being held to the same standards that promote college and career readiness (National

Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers

[NGA & CCSSO], 2010). In addition to the College and Career Readiness Standards, the

CCSS include standards for students in grades Kindergarten-12th grade in English

Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. Within the ELA standards, there are standards

for reading literature, reading informational texts, foundational skills in reading, writing,

speaking and listening, and language.

Within the writing standards there is an emphasis on students writing three

different text types: narrative, informational, and argument/opinion (NGA & CCSSO,

2010). There is also a focus on the elements of the writing process, specifically idea

generation and planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing.

       While the Common Core State Standards are a good jumping off point for

teachers of writing, the standards themselves do not tell the whole story. The CCSS

contain the "what" to teach, but not the "how." Instructional decisions are left to the

interpretation of states, administrators, and teachers. The writers of the CCSS also

included an appendix of student writing samples to help illustrate the standards (Mo et

al., 2013). While this can be a confusing time for educators, many experts in the field of

elementary writing have spent time analyzing and interpreting the CCSS for writing and

offering advice on instructional decisions (International Reading Association Common

Core State Standards (CCSS) Committee [IRACCSSC], 2012; Calkins et al., 2012). For

example many literacy experts have recommended that educators learn about the CCSS

for writing by analyzing the sample student pieces in Appendix C of the CCSS and also

by engaging in writing the text types themselves (Mo et al., 2013; Calkins et al., 2012;

IRACCSSC, 2012).

       However, the shift to the CCSS will be a transformational change for many

educators since it doesn't just require learning new content and strategies (enhancement),

but also unlearning previous content and strategies (transformations). This kind of

transformational change can be very difficult and often painful for those involved

(Schein, 2004). However, the benefits can outweigh the costs, if schools consider how

people learn when developing transition plans.

How People Learn in Times of Transition

With the shift to the Common Core State Standards, most educators are in a time of transition; not just a change in the standards they teach, but also a change in the way they teach. This kind of transition can be stressful for people and can make it difficult to learn new content. In 2004 Schein wrote about a conceptual model for managed culture change. In the midst of change many people experience survival anxiety or guilt when they see data that confirms that they need to make a change. The survival anxiety can encourage them to make changes. However, once that decision to change is made, people experience learning anxiety. Leaders must reduce learning anxiety, but not eliminate the survival anxiety that first inspired change. The way leaders can reduce learning anxiety is by increasing psychological safety (Schein, 2004, Edmondson, 2008).

Schein writes that leaders must consider the following eight conditions to create the psychological safety necessary for transformational learning and change: a compelling positive vision; formal training; involvement of the learner; informal training of relevant "family groups" and teams; practice fields, coaches, and feedback; positive role models; support groups in which learning problems can be aired and discussed; and a reward and disciple system and organizational structures that are consistent with the new way of thinking and working (Schein, 2004).

One of these conditions, formal training, is often thought to be one of the most important factors in teacher learning. Formal training can take the form of professional readings and professional development sessions. While there is debate over whether this training should be presented from outside sources or within a school, there is relative consensus regarding the importance of content inputs when learning something new

(Corcoran et al., 2001; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Schein, 2004). Many educators and researchers have found that training from an outside expert can actually be most helpful because educators are forced to consider strategies from outside their current repertoire and consider research beyond what they already deem as "good" (Corcoran et al., 2001, Hawley & Valli, 1999, DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Stand-alone, one-off workshops have not been shown to produce lasting professional growth in educators (Danielson, 2009, Chappuis et al., 2009). However, workshops that focus on research-based instructional practices and include active-learning experiences for teachers can be effective (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Practice fields, coaches, and feedback are another set of conditions that help lead to transformational change. While formal training is very important while making content changes, teachers need the opportunity to put what they've learned into practice within the classroom, with the support and feedback of others (Chappuis et al., 2009).

Another condition to create the psychological safety needed for transformational change is the existence of support groups in which learning problems can be aired and discussed. Hawley and Valli argue that teachers learn best when they are collaboratively solving authentic problems, the problems being the gaps between expectations for student achievement and actual student achievement (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Learning collaboratively can help solidify understandings in all learners (Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, 2000).

Some of the biggest factors in teacher learning are collaboration coupled with a self-directed, authentic focus (Hawley & Valli, 1999). While teachers often learn best when working collaboratively together, they are also more motivated by a focus that they

helped identify and that seems relevant to their work with students (Hawley & Valli, 1999). While these two factors may seem at odds, professional learning communities seek to capitalize on them both (Louis, 2008).

Professional Learning Communities

The ultimate goal of professional learning communities (PLCs) is to promote student learning and achievement (Louis, 2008) and there have been countless studies that have shown that a teacher's participation in a PLC can lead to academic gains for his/her students (Louis & Marks, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1996; Langer, 2000). Working in study groups and professional learning communities in a focused area of interest can be powerful because teachers have more ownership over their learning (Danielson, 2009). In 1995 Kruse and colleagues developed a framework for school-based professional communities that include the following characteristics: shared values, a focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and collaboration (Kruse et al., 1995).

The characteristic of shared values is especially important in PLCs. This is one reason why an intention of PLCs is that whenever possible, membership is voluntary. All the members of the PLC should have opted into the group (Chappuis, 2009). If all members of the group don't share some of the same core values, like the belief that collaboration can lead to collective and personal success, the group can be riddled with miscommunication and mistrust (Kruse et. al, 1995).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) argue that shared values are not enough; members of a PLC must also align their mission, vision, and goals. They describe a group's mission as

their purpose, answering the question "why do we exist?" (p. 58). A group's vision is a

response to the question "what do we hope to become?" (p. 62). Co-creating the vision

for a professional learning community can be very effective because "a vision will have

little impact until it is widely shared and accepted and until it connects with the personal

visions of those within the school" (p. 65). A PLC's values are created to answer "how

must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?" (p. 88), and goals are a

response to "which steps will we take first, and when?" (p. 99). According to DuFour

and Eaker, these four building blocks to professional learning communities are integral to

positive results.

Another key feature of PLCs is a focus on student work and performance (Louis,

2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This is closely tied to shared mission, vision, values, and

goals because it focuses on how a group is achieving its goals. Research shows that

teachers are often more motivated to learn when analyzing student work is a regular part

of a group's time together (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Group members can analyze

standardized test results, student portfolios, writing-on-demand pieces, audio recordings

of student conversations, and reading running records, just to name a few. The

assessments and artifacts that can be examined within a PLC are numerous, however a

focus on students' thinking is important, as is an emphasis on formative assessment

(Little, 2006). When group members are able to analyze student work together, they can

also consider what led to the results they see and maintain or adjust their course (Little,

2006).

Professional learning communities should also be places where participants can

engage in cycles of inquiry partnered with reflective dialogue (DuFour & Eaker, 1998,

Kruse et al., 1995). This cycle of inquiry often begins with identifying a problem of practice, then developing and implementing an intervention. Then teachers can analyze the results of the intervention through collaborative, reflective dialogue. This is one practice that helps deprivatize practice, one of the hallmarks of professional communities (Kruse et al., 1995, Little, 2006). Another practice common within PLCs to deprivatize practice is peer observations. Members of the community are encouraged to observe each other teaching and provide feedback since members have a collective responsibility to improve instruction and student learning (Little, 2006).

Deprivatization of practice is can help build a trusting community, which is essential to the success of a PLC (Kruse et al., 1995). Another strategy to foster a trusting community is collaboratively creating group norms. This practice can help alleviate uncertainty and make difficult conversations safer (Chappuis et al., 2009).

Schein speaks of the importance of organizational structures in creating the psychological safety that leads to transformational change (2004). Within a PLC those organizational structures are essential in ensuring that activities that lead to learning are possible (Little, 2006, Chappuis, 2009). For example, principals must be committed to the goals of the PLC to allow teachers to have release time to attend trainings or observe in peers' classrooms.

Much has been written about the pitfalls or dangers of implementing PLCs (Louis, 2008; Guskey, 1995). If PLCs are seen as mandated programs that are added to a teacher's workload instead of complementing the work he/she is already doing, the PLC can seem like a burden instead of an authentic part of his/her ultimate job: increasing student learning (Louis, 2008). Seeking to change too much during a time of transition

can be a detriment to teacher learning. Guskey (1995) writes, "In fact, if there is one truism in the vast research literature on change, it is that the magnitude of change persons are asked to make is inversely related to their likelihood of making it" (p. 119).

Another potential pitfall of PLCs is the often-unintended promotion of contrived collegiality or pseudo-community (Hargreaves, 1991). Some features of a group exhibiting contrived collegiality include compulsory membership, and a focus on mandates that are administrator-driven (Hargreaves, 1991). This again highlights the importance of PLCs being voluntary and having a teacher-generated focus (Chappuis, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Contrived collegiality may also lead some teachers to keep silent when they have views that seem to differ from the group or when they question they efficacy of what they are being asked to do (Hargreaves, 1991).

Leaders must also balance the collective and individual needs of those involved in the PLC to ensure teachers are fully invested (Louis, 2008). Little recommends schools shift their purposes for professional development from "individual knowledge or change" to "individual, collective and school goals," illustrating that even within collaborative work, individual goals are important (Little, 2006).

Conclusion

Based on this review of literature, I conclude that preparing students to be effective writers in elementary school is of upmost importance. The shift to the Common Core State Standards is an opportunity for teachers and administrators to analyze students' current writing performance and make plans to improve student writing by making instructional changes. Making changes, which involves learning new strategies

and unlearning ineffective methods, can be difficult. In order for people to learn in these

conditions, they must feel psychologically safe. Professional learning communities

provide opportunities for teachers and administrators to implement the changes

demanded by the CCSS writing standards in a safe, trusting environment.

Theory of Action

As our school transitions to the CCSS for writing, teachers and administrators will

need to build their own understanding of the standards and their instructional

implications. We will also need to develop a more shared understanding to help build

instructional coherence. Based on the research above, I theorized that a PLC would best

foster the psychological safety required for teachers and administrators to make the shift

to the CCSS for writing. By focusing on learning through the PLC format, I hoped to see

an increase in shared understanding of the new standards as evidenced by shifts to more

common language, more aligned visions of the transition, and increased teacher

implementation of instructional tools and strategies aligned to the CCSS for writing.

Theory of Action			
Problem/Challenge of Practice	**Literature Review**	**Intervention/Innovation**	**Expected Change**
• Teachers and administrators do not yet have a shared understanding of the instructional implications of the common core writing standards.	• Writing is important • Schools are in the midst of a change to the CCSS • Psychological safety is essential during times of transition • Professional learning communities can help build	• A voluntary PLC/seed group of teachers and administrators focusing on the CCSS ELA standards • 10 total meetings (4 dedicated to writing standards)	• Shifts to more common language • More aligned visions of the instructional implications of the CCSS writing standards • Teachers starting/continuing to implement instructional strategies

	psychological safety		aligned to CCSS writing standards

Intervention Plan

My intervention plan consisted of an initial survey, an initial classroom observation, four PLC meetings, a final observation, and a final survey.

The initial survey was an online Google Forms survey that we completed during our first PLC meeting (Appendix B). The purpose of the initial survey was to gauge participants' views of writing instruction and their visions for transitioning to the CCSS for writing. We also discussed some of our responses in the first group meeting so that participants could add to what they had written.

I also completed writing lesson observations of the four classroom teachers who participated in the intervention. I created an observation tool that would help me focus in on the teacher and student practices that were aligned to the CCSS for writing (Appendix B). I was hoping to observe writing lessons after each PLC meeting, but because of scheduling difficulties, I was only able to observe each teacher twice.

The main part of my intervention was the four PLC meetings that we referred to as "seed group" meetings. There were a few common components present in each meeting. We always began with a check-in and ended with an evaluation where we discussed aspects of the meeting that worked for us and aspects that we would like to change for our next meetings. We also grounded each meeting in shared readings and discussions.

During our initial meeting we began by setting some norms and vision for our group. Then we took the survey, discussed some of our responses, agreed on a scope and

sequence for the rest of our meetings, and tried out argument writing for ourselves as we wrote about the prompt, "do you think a focus on the Common Core State Standards is a good direction for American education?" In our initial scope and sequence we planned on spending one meeting each on the following topics: process standards, narrative writing, informational writing, and argument writing.

During our second meeting we looked at the writing process standards and their connection between to the new California English Language Development standards. We also went through the writing process ourselves by writing a "small moment" narrative from our lives. We then discussed some readings, including the CCSS, a chapter from *Pathways to the Common Core*, and a Teacher's College writing process learning progression.

We focused on narrative writing for our third meeting and we spent time reflecting on our own narrative writing experience. We also did some reading and discussion of Appendix C of the CCSS, which includes examples and exemplars of narrative writing. We ended the meeting by looking at some Lighthouse student examples of narrative writing and examining how they did or did not meet the expectations set by the CCSS.

We had planned to focus on informational writing during our fourth meeting, but we after a discussion on depth over breadth, we decided to spend our remaining two meetings focusing on one kind of writing. Since argument writing was new to most of us, we chose to focus our attention there. We spent some time looking at the CCSS and Appendix C before starting to look at student work. Again, we used a Teacher's College learning progression to help us see the strengths and weaknesses in our students' writing.

During our fifth meeting, we continued to look at the CCSS standard focused on argument writing. We grounded our analysis of student work in a discussion on the vertical alignment of the standard. At the end of the meeting we reflected on what we had learned about writing throughout our seed group experience.

All participants also completed a final survey (Appendix C), to help me discover if our understanding of the standards had grown and whether we had come to a more shared vision of the instructional implications of the standards.

Intervention Action Plan

	Component	Activities	Purpose	Data to be Collected	Type of Data
FIRST WEEK	STEP 1: Survey	Group members complete initial survey (Appendix B)	Gather baseline data on group members' knowledge base regarding CCSS and writing instruction	• survey responses	Process/Impact
	STEP 2: SW observes writing lesson	Observe writing lesson using observation tool (Appendix B)	Gather baseline data on teachers' current writing instructional practices	• observation notes • reflective journal	Process/Impact
	STEP 3: Initial meeting	• Set norms and group vision • Collaboratively create sequence of remaining meetings	Establish norms, vision, and sequenced goals that will help us gain an understanding of the instructional implications of the CCSS writing standards	• meeting minutes • norms & vision statement • reflective journal	Process

EACH MEETING	STEP 4: Semi-weekly PLC meetings	• Begin each meeting by revisiting norms and group vision
		• Based upon the group's needs/thoughts, meetings could include:
		  o Analyzing student work
		  o Reviewing co-observation data
		  o Writing within the genres ourselves
		  o Formal training, including webinars, workshops, or readings
		• All meetings include an opportunity to co-create next steps
		• All meetings conclude with an evaluation of what worked well and what we would like to change
			Co-create learning experiences that will help everyone in the group come to a deeper understanding of the CCSS writing standards and their instructional implications	• meeting minutes
				• reflective journal
				• student work samples
					Process

FINAL WEEK	STEP 5: SW observes writing lesson	Observe writing lesson using observation tool (Appendix B)	Gather information on teachers current writing instructional practices	• observation notes • reflective journal	Impact
	STEP 6: Survey	Group members complete final survey (Appendix B)	Gather information on group members' knowledge base regarding CCSS and writing instruction	• survey responses	Impact

Research Methods

The participants in my intervention were all volunteers who were interested in both learning more about the CCSS and helping to plan for the whole-staff transition to the CCSS. Four teachers elected to be part of the group: Addie, teaching 2nd grade in her second year at Lighthouse with three total years of experience; Tom, teaching Kindergarten in his third year at Lighthouse with four total years of experience; Lena, teaching 4th grade in her sixth year at Lighthouse, with ten total years of experience; and Theresa, teaching 4th grade in her twelfth year at Lighthouse with sixteen total years of

experience. Two administrators also chose to be a part of the group: Carrie, in her first

year at Lighthouse; and Brooke, in her twelfth year at Lighthouse.

I collected data from a variety of sources to measure both the impact of my

intervention, as well as the efficacy of the implementation of my intervention. I collected

data through participant surveys, selective transcripts of meeting minutes, researcher

reflective journal entries, participant evaluations at the end of each meeting, and

classroom observation notes.

Impact Data

I collected impact data through three sources: participant surveys, selective

transcriptions of meeting minutes, and classroom observations. I developed the

participant survey to get initial and final information on each participant's level of

experience and comfort with the CCSS, and his/her views on the instructional

implications of the standards. Carrie was not at our first session and wasn't able to take

the initial survey afterwards, so I did not include her final survey results in my analysis. I

coded the responses, looking for evidence of both growth in the understanding of the

CCSS, but also a more shared and aligned vision of the standards among the participants.

I audio recorded all of our meetings and selectively transcribed parts of each

meeting. Instead of transcribing the whole of each meeting, I chose to focus on the

participant discussions of the CCSS. I then coded the statements and questions

participants had made to look for evidence of increased understanding of the CCSS for

writing, as well as more aligned vision and increased shared language.

As mentioned above, I created an observation form that focused on how students and teachers were learning and teaching in ways that aligned with the CCSS for writing. Twice I observed each teacher facilitating a writing lesson and took notes on the form. I then reread the notes to look for evidence that teachers were starting or continuing to adjust their writing instruction based on the expectations of the CCSS for writing.

Expected Change	Data Source 1	Data Source 2
Shifts to more common language	Participant Survey	Meeting Minutes
More aligned visions of the instructional implications of the CCSS writing standards	Participant Survey	Meeting Minutes
Teachers starting/continuing to implement instructional strategies aligned to the CCSS writing standards	Observation Data	Participant Survey

Implementation Data

I also gathered implementation data, or process data, throughout my intervention. I used a researcher reflective journal, transcriptions from audio recordings of meetings, and observation data to help me continually refine my intervention. After each meeting I spent a few minutes writing in my researcher reflective journal about what went well in the meeting and what could be improved the next time. Many of those reflections also stemmed from the verbal evaluation the participants gave at the end of each meeting.

Listening to and coding the audio recordings of each meeting also helped me make changes to my intervention along the way. I tried to pay attention to levels of participation, and verbal evidence of deeper understanding of the CCSS to assess the efficacy of our meetings throughout the process.

The initial classroom observation data also helped me ensure that my intervention was as effective as possible for the growth of the teachers. Observing classroom lessons helped me to see a teacher's current writing practices. This helped me to see both strengths that could be leveraged to increase the instructional efficacy of other teachers, as well as areas for growth, that could be addressed in seed group meetings.

Design Element	Data Source 1	Data Source 2
Observations	Observation notes	Researcher reflective journal
Group Meetings	Meeting Minutes	Researcher reflective journal

Analysis and Findings

Impact of the Seed Group

I theorized that the participants in our group would shift towards more common language surrounding the CCSS, have more aligned visions of the instructional implications of the CCSS, and start or continue to implement instructional practices and strategies tied to the CCSS. At the close of the PLC sequence participants both used increased shared language surrounding the CCSS and had more shared visions of the instructional implications of the CCSS and best next steps for the Lighthouse staff. Most participants also grew in their comfort and ability to change their classroom instruction based on the CCSS. There was also evidence of increased relational trust within the group.

Common Language and Shared Vision

Throughout the work of the PLC there was some increase in shared language and vision, especially in regards to analyzing student work. In the initial survey, no one

mentioned using exemplar pieces as an experience that could help our staff deepen

understanding of the CCSS for writing. However, in the final survey 4 out of 5

participants specifically named using exemplar pieces of writing as an important

experience for our staff. At the end of both meetings where we looked at student work,

participants named that practice as something that went well in the meeting. At the end

of the first meeting Carrie said she "appreciated having the concrete examples" and

Theresa liked "looking at the Common Core anchors as well as [her] own student work."

In the next meeting, Carrie again appreciated looking at student work and the exemplars

in the CCSS appendices, but referred to the pieces as "Common Core anchors" the way

that Theresa had in the previous meeting.

Another example of increased shared language and vision was that most

participants valued depth over breadth when learning about new standards. Midway

through the intervention, we had a discussion about our scope and sequence of meetings

to revise the schedule if necessary. All participants voted to revise our meeting topic

schedule to spend more time studying one type of writing (argument writing), as opposed

to touching upon two different types of writing. In our final meeting when we talked

about what we learned, all the participants agreed that they had learned the most about

argument writing because we had spent the most time in that area. Brooke, Theresa, and

Tom all mentioned the importance of argument writing in their final survey as well. All

of the participants, except for Tom, agreed that narrowing our focus next year when

learning about the new standards would be the best approach for our staff.

These data points show me that our team developed more shared language and

vision surrounding the CCSS.   One potential reason for this outcome is that participants

were able to collaboratively learn about the CCSS through a PLC structure that allowed

them to read about, discuss, and do work related to the standards. Much of the shared

language was built through our common readings of the standards, appendices, and

Pathways to the Common Core. The discussions after the readings helped solidify the

language of the standards and helped participants reflect on how the readings related to

their own students and contexts. Getting the opportunity to learn about the writing

standards by doing the writing themselves and analyzing student work helped the

participants put what they had read and discussed into action through an authentic

learning experience. Sharing these common experiences helped the participants of the

PLC come to more shared language and vision surrounding the CCSS.

Relational Trust

Another outcome of the work of the PLC was an increase in psychological safety

and relational trust. There were a number of indicators that led me to this conclusion.

First, participants readily brought in student writing from their own classrooms for the

group to study. Participants felt comfortable deprivatizing their practice and sharing their

own classroom experiences and results with their colleagues. Keeping an authentic focus

on student work (Louis, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little,

2006) helped our team develop a trusting, psychologically safe environment where we

could learn more about the standards. Participants may have been more comfortable

bringing in student work after we looked at the exemplar pieces from the CCSS

appendices because they saw the value in that process.

In addition, Addie and Lena, who have never held leadership roles at our school,

volunteered to be inquiry group leaders next year to lead our staff in groups similar to our

PLC. One potential reason for that outcome is that Addie and Lena saw how much the group set the agenda and tone for the meeting and they realized that they did not have to be experts in the content to facilitate a successful PLC. Having the two administrators in the group as participants, not necessarily leaders, may have also helped to set the tone that everyone is a learner. Changing course midway through the group and deciding to spend more time on one kind of writing may have also helped build Addie and Lena's confidence that they could lead. They saw evidence that one of the roles of a PLC facilitator is to be responsive to the needs of the group while also keeping the initial purposes and goals of the group in mind. That level of co-construction may have increased their confidence in leading.

Instructional Practices

All teachers who participated in the seed group either began to or continued to use instructional practices tied to the CCSS. Through my observations, I saw that Addie, Tom, Theresa, and Lena used both instructional strategies and resources that helped their students write in ways consistent with the CCSS. This was validated when participants brought students' writing samples to seed group meetings. For example, Lena and Theresa brought in samples of students' literary essays. The student work exemplified progress towards the first Common Core writing standard, which sets expectations for argument writing.

Participants who had initially been the most uncomfortable making changes to instruction based on the CCSS, grew the most in their comfort levels at the end of the intervention. In the initial survey, participants had a range of comfort levels in making changes to their writing instruction based on the CCSS. Brooke rated her comfort as a 2

out of 5 on a Likert scale, with 5 being the most comfortable. Theresa and Addie both rated their comfort as a 3, Lena as a 4, and Tom as a 5. In the final survey, all the participants rated their comfort level a 4 out of 5, which means that Brooke, Theresa, and Addie all grew more comfortable implementing changes to their instruction, Lena remained at the same comfort level, and Tom grew seemingly less comfortable.

One explanation for this outcome is that those participants who were less comfortable initially grew in their knowledge and skills throughout their participation in the PLC. This is consistent with what I saw in my observations. In my initial observation of Addie, her students were engaged in the lesson, but didn't get the opportunity to produce CCSS-aligned student work because her teaching went long. In our next meeting Addie focused her reflection on the engagement of the students and didn't address the lesson's tie to the CCSS. However, in my final observation, Addie used a new CCSS-aligned resource to plan her lesson. While the lesson still had some areas for growth consistent with the needs of many newer teachers, Addie grew in her willingness to try a lesson structure that we had discussed in our seed group.

Meanwhile, Tom's seeming decline in comfort could actually be attributed to a deeper understanding of the standards, which may have caused him to more accurately assess his level after learning more about the standards. This is consistent with what I saw in my observations. In my initial observation after the initial survey Tom was beginning to use a new CCSS-aligned resource to teach his lessons. He taught the lesson as it was written and I could sense his discomfort with the format. In the follow-up meeting, Tom expressed that the lesson structure had felt "weird" and that it "wasn't' necessarily how [he] would teach a minilesson." However, he acknowledged that the

students had been flexible with the process and had produced "lots of really interesting ideas." This shows that Tom's seeming decrease in comfort may stem from him learning about different approaches to the CCSS. While Addie's comfort increased when she felt successful and supportive in trying a new approach, Tom's comfort may have decreased because he realized he still has so much to learn about the new standards.

Implementation Results

Throughout the intervention I used my researcher reflective journal, meeting minutes, and observation data to help me refine the process. Some of my findings were related to the length of observations and participation structures in meetings.

While participants were very open to me coming in to observe whole writing lessons, scheduling the observations proved more difficult. After both the first round of observations and my first reflection in my researcher reflective journal, I consulted research and decided that shorter observations could still be useful (Marshall, 2009). The shorter observations in the second round allowed me to complete all the observations and I was still able to see evidence of alignment to the CCSS.

After reflecting on the first seed group meeting and transcribing the meeting minutes, I also thought more about participation structures. While everyone participated in the first meeting, three participants, including myself, had most of the airtime. I utilized some facilitation strategies in the next meetings to help ensure that all participants were getting the opportunity to share their ideas and learn from each other. I found that "making space" for and "encouraging" discussion from all participants helped to balance the airtime (Kaner et. al, 2007).

Implications and Conclusion

Reflections and Implications

As addressed above, participating in a voluntary PLC focused on the CCSS for writing helped teachers and administrators come to a more shared understanding of the standards and their instructional implications. There are a number of implications that stem from these results that can inform the work of other administrators and teachers making the shift to the CCSS. One of the factors that led to the effectiveness of the design was the voluntary status of the participants (Chappuis, 2009). All the participants in the study chose to spend time outside of their daily work as teachers or administrators to learn more about the CCSS. In other contexts where teachers and administrators may not choose to learn about the CCSS in a collaborative environment, the results could be quite different. However there are some key elements of the design that could have a positive impact in various settings even if learning about the CCSS is not voluntary.

Instructional leaders should also consider the various elements of the designs of meetings that help to build the trust necessary to make transformational changes. Defining the purpose and norms of the group collaboratively and revisiting them in each meeting helped to create buy-in and build trust within the group (Chappuis, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). We also built in a connection question to the beginning of each meeting to help us learn more about each other as writers and teachers of writing. In addition, grounding our work in reading the CCSS, appendices, and books about the standards helped us to develop more common language and a common vision of our staff's direction. Lastly, including administrators as participants, not necessarily leaders, of the group may have helped lead to trust within the group.

As an instructional leader, this action research helped develop my thinking mainly
in the areas of teacher observations and meeting structures. Throughout the process I saw
the benefits of being realistic about time management and scheduling mini-observations.
I was able to complete my observations with some time to reflect afterwards as a result of
the shortened observation. In the future, I can see using this structure to allow me to
observe in classrooms more frequently. I also acknowledge the benefit of a PLC meeting
after observing a teacher in the classroom. Almost all teachers informally reflected on
the lessons I had observed during the meetings. That gave the teacher an opportunity to
reflect, but also the other teachers and administrators chances to learn from the
reflections. In the future, I imagine keeping this structure and also looking for
opportunities to build more peer observations into the design.

Suggestions for Future Action Research

There are some potential areas for further action research using a similar design to
the one I've described above. One area for further research is using the same design with
a group of participants who are engaging with this work as a part of their school's
mandatory professional development program and who did not all volunteer to be a part
of a group studying the CCSS. A researcher could see if participants still experienced
growth in shared language, shared vision, and implementation of instructional practices
tied to the CCSS, even if they did not volunteer to focus on this topic.

Researchers could also examine the concept of depth over breadth when it comes
to learning about the CCSS. If a researcher chose to use the same intervention design,
but narrow in on only one aspect of the CCSS (like informational writing, or using

evidence to support claims) could that focus lead not only to improvement in the focus

area, but other areas as well?   For example, do the professional benefits of an emphasis

on one type of writing transfer to growth in other types of writing? Conversely, a

researcher could study the impact of touching briefly upon all the different aspects of the

CCSS in a PLC setting and narrowing in through coaching cycles.

Conclusion

  As educators across the country make this transition to the CCSS there will be

many opportunities for further research. As I help lead Lighthouse through this

transition, I will continue to both learn from future research and refer back to the research

and intervention design that led our team to the outcomes of increased shared language,

shared vision, relational trust, and ability to implement instructional strategies aligned

with the CCSS. I sought to help develop a shared understanding of the CCSS for writing

through the work of a PLC and found that a PLC was an effective setting to build the

psychological safety needed for this transition.

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Appendix A

Revised Design

	Component	Activities	Purpose	Data to be Collected	Type of Data
FIRST WEEK	STEP 1: Survey	Group members complete initial survey (Appendix B)	Gather baseline data on group members' knowledge base regarding CCSS and writing instruction	• survey responses	Process/Impact
	STEP 2: SW observes writing lesson	Observe part of writing lesson using observation tool (Appendix B)	Gather baseline data on teachers' current writing instructional practices	• observation notes • reflective journal	Process/Impact
	STEP 3: Initial meeting	• Set norms and group vision • Collaboratively create sequence of remaining meetings	Establish norms, vision, and sequenced goals that will help us gain an understanding of the instructional implications of the CCSS writing standards	• meeting minutes • norms & vision statement • reflective journal	Process

EACH MEETING	STEP 4: Semi-weekly PLC meetings	• Begin each meeting by revisiting norms and group vision
		• Based upon the group's needs/thoughts, meetings could include:
		   o Analyzing student work
		   o Reviewing co-observation data
		   o Writing within the genres ourselves
		   o Formal training, including webinars, workshops, or readings
		• All meetings include an opportunity to co-create next steps
		• All meetings conclude with an evaluation of what worked well and what we would like to change
			Co-create learning experiences that will help everyone in the group come to a deeper understanding of the CCSS writing standards and their instructional implications	• meeting minutes
				• reflective journal
				• student work samples
					Process

FIN	STEP 5: SW observes	Observe part of writing lesson using observation tool (Appendix	Gather information on teachers current	• observation notes • reflective journal	Impact

	writing lesson after each meeting	B)	writing instructional practices		
	STEP 6: Survey	Group members complete final survey (Appendix B)	Gather information on group members' knowledge base regarding CCSS and writing instruction	• survey responses	Impact

Appendix B

Initial Survey Questions

What has been your experience teaching writing?

In what ways have you learned about the Common Core writing standards?

What training or experiences have informed the way you teach writing?

In what ways have you changed your writing instruction to reflect the CCSS?

How comfortable do you feel implementing changes to your writing instruction based on the CCSS?

What experiences could help our staff deepen understanding of the Common Core writing standards next year?

Is there anything else you want to add? Comments? Questions?

Final Survey Questions

What has been your experience teaching writing?

What training or experiences have informed the way you teach writing?

In what ways have you learned about the Common Core writing standards?

In what ways have you changed your writing instruction to reflect the CCSS?

How comfortable do you feel implementing changes to your writing instruction based on the CCSS?

What experiences could help our staff deepen understanding of the Common Core writing standards next year?

What instructional and/or curricular changes do you anticipate having to make to ensure your students meet the expectations of the Common Core writing standards?

Observation Tool
Teacher:

Observation Date/Time:

Objective:

Kind/Genre of Writing:

Tie to CCSS standards:

Tie to skills/topics discussed in seed group:

Specific skills being modeled/kids are working on:

Skills tied to the writing process:

Meeting Agendas and Notes

Initial Meeting: Thursday, January 30, 2014 3:45-5:00

Purposes of the Group:
- Deepen our understanding of the standards
- Begin to think about the instructional implications of the standards
- Try out some PD activities
- Create a roll-out plan for the 2014-2015 school-year
- Think about/consider how the new ELD standards relate to the ELA standards (JB)
- Find out more about the available resources

Norms:
- Have readings ahead of time
- Keep discussions focused on referring to resources (evidence-based)
- Find the balance between what we're doing now in our classrooms and what we're doing next year for PD
- Be ok with ambiguity

Context:
- 2012-2013 Math Seed Group
- Pathways to the Common Core
- CCSS and the appendices
- draft frameworks
- Action research

Survey: click here

Potential Sequence of Meetings:

Date	Topic	Activities
1/30	Initial Meeting	
2/13	Writing: The Writing Process	• look at ELD standards • look at standards 4-6 (writing process)
2/27	Writing: Narrative	• appendices
3/13	Writing: Information	
*3/26	Writing: Argument	

4/17	Speaking & Listening/Language	
5/1	Reading	
5/15	Reading	
5/29	Reading	
*6/16	Planning for 2014-2015 PD	

Let's try it out! Argument writing about the CCSS
Is a focus on the CCSS a good direction for American education?
http://www.npr.org/2014/01/28/267488648/backlash-grows-against-common-core-education-standards

Writing Overview/The Writing Process: Thursday, 2/27/14

Check in: What was something interesting that you saw/experienced in writing this week?

Purposes of the Group:
- Deepen our understanding of the standards
- Begin to think about the instructional implications of the standards
- Try out some PD activities
- Create a roll-out plan for the 2014-2015 school-year
- Think about/consider how the new ELD standards relate to the ELA standards
- Find out more about available resources

Norms:
- Have readings ahead of time
- Keep discussions focused on referring to resources (evidence-based)
- Find the balance between what we're doing now in our classrooms and what we're doing next year for PD
- Be ok with ambiguity

Let's try it out! Going through the writing process
Write a small moment from your life and try to go through all the steps of the writing process

Reading/Discussion:
- CCSS Writing standards K-4 (standards 4,5,6)
- ELD connection (p. 17 "Learning About How English Works")
- Pathways to the Common Core (p. 105-106)

- TC Writing Process Learning Progression

Let's try it out! Going through the writing process (again!)
Write another small moment from your life and try to go through all the steps of the writing process

Evaluation
+variety of resources
? how does this align to the 6-trait rubric
*perhaps more context around major shifts in ELA standards

Narrative Writing: Thursday, 3/13/14

Check in: Check out our small moment narratives here.
What was the on-demand narrative process like for you last time? Was anything challenging? Fun? Were there implications to how you taught/thought about writing these last two weeks?

Purposes of the Group:
- Deepen our understanding of the standards
- Begin to think about the instructional implications of the standards
- Try out some PD activities
- Create a roll-out plan for the 2014-2015 school-year
- Think about/consider how the new ELD standards relate to the ELA standards
- Find out more about available resources

Norms:
- Have readings ahead of time
- Keep discussions focused on referring to resources (evidence-based)
- Find the balance between what we're doing now in our classrooms and what we're doing next year for PD
- Be ok with ambiguity

Reading/Discussion:
- CCSS Writing Standards K-5 (standard 3)
- CCSS Appendix C
- Pathways to the Common Core (p. 113-126)

Let's try it out! Looking at student work

Evaluation
+concrete examples from appendix and our own student work
*would like to revisit the same student across assessments to see growth

Argument Writing, Part 1: Friday, 3/28/14

Check in: When's the last time that you had to convince someone of something?

Purposes of the Group:
- Deepen our understanding of the standards
- Begin to think about the instructional implications of the standards
- Try out some PD activities
- Create a roll-out plan for the 2014-2015 school-year
- Think about/consider how the new ELD standards relate to the ELA standards
- Find out more about available resources

Norms:
- Have readings ahead of time
- Keep discussions focused on referring to resources (evidence-based)
- Find the balance between what we're doing now in our classrooms and what we're doing next year for PD
- Be ok with ambiguity

Reading/Discussion:
- CCSS Writing Standards K-5 (standard 1)
- CCSS Appendix C (p. 6, 15-16, 25-26)
- Pathways to the Common Core (p. 127-141)
- Writing Pathways Learning Progression (p. 82-85)

Let's try it out! Looking at student work
- Jeremiah's persuasive letter
- Markus's persuasive speech

Evaluation
+more time was nice
+common core anchor pieces and our own students' work
-use the progression document together before breaking off

Argument Writing, Part 2: Thursday, 4/16/14

Check in: If you had to/got to write and publish a book, what genre would it be?

Purposes of the Group:
- Deepen our understanding of the standards
- Begin to think about the instructional implications of the standards
- Try out some PD activities

- Create a roll-out plan for the 2014-2015 school-year
- Think about/consider how the new ELD standards relate to the ELA standards
- Find out more about available resources

Norms:
- Have readings ahead of time
- Keep discussions focused on referring to resources (evidence-based)
- Find the balance between what we're doing now in our classrooms and what we're doing next year for PD
- Be ok with ambiguity

Reading/Discussion:
- CCSS Writing Standards K-5 (standard 1)
- CCSS Appendix C (p. 6, 15-16, 25-26)
- Pathways to the Common Core (p. 127-141)
- Writing Pathways Learning Progression (p. 82-85)

Let's try it out! Looking at student work
- 2nd and 4th grade student pieces

Closure/Evaluation
What did we learn about the writing standards?
- more streamlined than previous standards
- need for significant interpretation of what that works like (appendix, our own expertise)

What did we learn about writing in general?
- kids need a lot of opportunities to write for different reasons, in different forms, differing degrees of complexity
- kids need time to write in time that's set aside for writing, not just in service of content
- we need to think about how we'll need to restructure curriculum
- we need to think about how this might be a shift in planning/instruction for staff

What did we learn about the ways we learn?
- look at/read something and share about it to hear different ideas and then applying that to student writing

What are we wondering/thinking about for next year?
- looking at this with another school
- outside organizations/experts/training
- read/analyze/apply cycle
- investing time to doing the writing ourselves if we want to understand the experience (authentic tasks)

Evaluation

Writing Closeout/Speaking & Listening: Thursday, 5/1/14

Check in: If you could have a conversation with anyone, living or dead, who would it be?

Purposes of the Group:
- Deepen our understanding of the standards
- Begin to think about the instructional implications of the standards
- Try out some PD activities
- Create a roll-out plan for the 2014-2015 school-year
- Think about/consider how the new ELD standards relate to the ELA standards
- Find out more about available resources

Norms:
- Have readings ahead of time
- Keep discussions focused on referring to resources (evidence-based)
- Find the balance between what we're doing now in our classrooms and what we're doing next year for PD
- Be ok with ambiguity

Writing Survey

Reading/Discussion:
- CCSS Speaking & Listening standards
- Pathways to the Common Core (p. 162-170)

What are we thinking about?
- partnerships, diverse level of skills
- new TC units of study for reading have more opportunities for deeper conversation sooner (starting in K)
- skill: multiple answers to a question and how that improves conversations (getting beyond just being right)
- philosophy: if people disagree in a conversation we can learn from that
- culture is foundational to develop a safe space to converse
- speaking within different contexts (formal and informal language)
- standard 5...we'll need to make changes (time, structures)
- how can we incorporate technology into GLAD strategies (pictoral input charts)
- what technology do we have available?

Evaluation
+time to read/look at standards
-want to look at video/webinar in future meetings