

Journal of Research Initiatives

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 11

3-7-2017

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Recommended Citation

Jackson, Karen T.; Wallin, Penny; and Lee, Anna K. (2017) "Educators Voices from Integrated Writing and Problem Solving Common Core Workshop," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol2/iss3/11>

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Educators Voices from Integrated Writing and Problem Solving Common Core Workshop

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Keywords

accountability, educator perspective, college and career readiness, testing, K-12, common core, professional learning communities



Journal of Research Initiatives (2017) 2(3)

Available online at: <http://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/>



EDUCATORS VOICES FROM INTEGRATED WRITING AND PROBLEM SOLVING COMMON CORE WORKSHOP

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Abstract

This article provides an opportunity to discuss and examine information gathered during a focus group of K-12 educators involved in an integrated writing and problem-solving workshop. Findings demonstrate that some educators are frustrated by the culture of testing versus the culture of learning that exist because of the Common Core Standards implementation. Educators are eager to learn and implement new ways of learning in order to promote deeper learning and critical thinking skills. Strategies and recommendations for educators provide guidelines and resources that will help prepare students to be college and career ready.

Introduction

The Common Core Standards Initiative (CCSI) was developed out of a desire to provide students with a well-rounded education and to prepare them for college. The CCSI has adopted the ACT's definition of college and career ready, which is "acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first year courses at a post-secondary institution without the need for remediation" (College Readiness, 2010). As a result, states that have implemented the Common Core Standards (CCS) have taken on the task of preparing students for college using the CCSI approach.

While the intent of CCS, is to engage educators in implementing a common set of standards and curriculum and developing assessments that measure learning using a common scale, as sensible, it is also controversial. Some states have adopted the standards others have chosen to implement an adapted form of the standards or not to adopt the standards. The states that have adopted the CCS or some adaptation of the CCS face an unintended consequence in that educators, who are presented with the challenge of engaging students in problem solving and thinking critically, are torn between focusing on student learning and teaching students to take tests.

Teaching Students to Think Critically

In an effort to understand educators' feelings regarding the CCSI, the researchers gathered a focus group of K-12 educators involved in an integrated writing and problem-solving workshop. These were a diverse group of educators representing five school districts in a southeastern state. They provided their thoughts regarding school policy, organizational policy, and additional political implications of implementing the CCS. One school administrator, two substitute educators, and twenty-two educators engaged in a workshop where an integrated writing and problem-solving process was introduced. The participants are employed in middle schools and high schools in the southeastern part of the United States. Two of the participants

worked as substitute educators and the administrator served in a junior high school.

Three of the educators taught inclusion, two taught science courses (Biology & STEM applications), four were math educators, five English or ELA educators, one teacher was listed as teaching all subject areas, and two educators taught social studies. The administrator and educators had years of education experience ranging from four to twenty-three years. Eight participants had advanced graduate degrees, one participant had a doctorate, thirteen participants had undergraduate degrees, and two did not list their education background. The workshop and data collection were performed in a theater style classroom on a university branch campus in the southeast.

Gathering Data

We used intensity sampling to collect the data to answer the research question because this sampling method allowed us to collect rich information regarding educator thoughts and perceptions of policy and political implications of Common Core Standards implementation in this southeastern state (Creswell, 2012). In order to answer our research questions, educators participated in a focus group session. Prior to participating in the focus group, the educators were assigned to read an education opinion blog. The article highlights the experiences of educators in high-poverty schools who chose to be early adopters of standards. These four educators were actively changing their teaching practices to incorporate performance assessments, which challenged their students to conduct research, plan for, and lead debates about real world problems and communicating their ideas in multi-media presentations. The educators in the article felt that while the CCS promote deeper learning, the state multiple choice tests only test discrete knowledge rather than application. The article ends by presenting information about assessments that require deeper learning and critical thinking in order to be successful. After reading this article, the focus group was ask to consider the following questions:

1. What observations do you want to share regarding Common Core Standards and Common Core Testing in light of this article?
2. What positive thoughts do you have about Common Core Standards and Testing after reading this article?
3. What negative thoughts do you have about Common Core Standards and Testing after reading this article?
4. What feelings do you want to share about Common Core Standards and Testing after reading this article?

Analyzing the Data

We used a qualitative constructivist approach to analyze the data (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002). In order to understand the perceptions of these participants, the focus group responses were sorted into a spreadsheet by question. Responses were read with the goal of identifying patterns and the emergent patterns were coded. The items for the emergent themes identified were organized and analyzed again for similarities and differences. Once the coded emergent themes were analyzed for similarities and differences, redundant themes were removed and the resultant themes were identified. The resultant themes that emerged from this focus group regarding their thoughts and perceptions regarding policy and political implications of the Standards implementation are further discussed in the next section.

Understanding the Data

Based on the responses from the participants, the following recurring themes that emerged from the concerns that educators had about the Common Core Standards and testing were: (a) culture of testing versus culture of learning and (b) traditional content teaching method

and pedagogy.

Culture of Testing versus Culture of Learning

One teacher said, "Is it about the kids?", when the subject of Common Core Standards and Common Core Tests was broached. Others shared a similar sentiment in that they thought it was "insane" to have culture of testing. The educators were especially concerned that the Common Core Standards adopted by the states were designed to encourage and promote deeper learning, which is counterintuitive to teaching to a test. There was a volley back and forth across the room on the discussion of cultural differences that existed within school district. In some cases, where there is a city school district and a county school district in the same county the district approach to the Common Core Standards differed. As a group, the educators agreed that this discussion revealed that some school districts have a culture of testing while other districts have a culture of learning.

One teacher in the focus group lamented, I wonder what would happen "if we take the pressure off students from thinking about testing?" Other educators felt that by providing students with an opportunity to succeed using multiple measures, students may begin to develop a false sense of security that they could pass a performance assessment or pass the test. Both group of these educators' concerns are valid.

During the collection of this data, states were transitioning from one assessment of student knowledge to another. Educators wondered why their state had chosen to create tests that was limited to discrete knowledge in multiple-choice format. Several educators were under the impression that assessments like the ones developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, which were designed to give students an opportunity to apply their knowledge and explain their answers in short and constructed response items, were readily available but not systematically used. Some educators felt that tests were not synchronized with traditional methods of teaching and learning, while others felt strongly that they lost valuable teaching time by spending time "prepping for the test".

Traditional Content Teaching and Pedagogy

Educators also wondered how they could contribute to educators in their school embracing the deeper learning approach that is touted by the Common Core standards. Educators shared that some colleagues including some in the focus group had taught the same way for so long that they did not know where to begin in order to help students learn at a deeper level and think more critically. After reading the blog, another observed that the educators had a positive attitude about what the standards can do for student learning.

A computer is required for students to take the test, and teachers were concerned that student access to computers was insufficient. Students also need equitable time to become comfortable with technology. Teachers expressed that this can be accomplished by integrating technology during content lessons rather than simply using computers as a test prep strategy. Additionally, many educators felt that they did not have enough training to apply the standards in a manner that also engaged students in authentic learning coupled with relevant use of technology.

An approach embraced by this focus group, which they practiced during the workshop, combined evidence based writing with problem solving and critical thinking. This writing coupled with problem solving and critical thinking approach orchestrate opportunities for educators to explore models of deeper learning (Parks, 2014). The approach focuses on equipping educators to enable students to strengthen their higher order thinking skills while fostering student creativity and deeper levels of understanding. By creating a culture where

students are expected to read critically with the goal of understanding a problem and engaging in solving the problem using writing as the central tool that enables them to think critically about the problem is one model that may meet the characteristics described by the educators in this focus group.

In the focus group educators talked about different models of education that promote critical thinking, problem solving, and deeper learning. One model discussed was a “science-based model”, a problem-based approach, where educators present a problem and students listen to a teacher model on how to solve the problem. Afterwards, students are given ample time to develop questions and receive answer to their questions. Each time students are required to show and talk about the evidences they use to support their answers to the problem; the teacher serves as facilitator. This approach is founded in constructivism and discovery learning. The overall tenor of the discussion during the day was that time for collaborating and training are essential to success with standards based teaching. Supportive processes that provide time for teachers to build efficacy and teacher accountability will promote college and career readiness.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Communication of Standards & Common Expectations.

Much of what has been offered in the way of professional development has dealt with helping educators understand the standards (Walters, Smith, & Ford, 2015). States and districts have provided website resources, district-based professional development within and across schools, and regional meetings in order to provide opportunities to share resources. However, educators, like the ones in this focus group, felt they are only somewhat prepared to implement CCS; this aligns with other colleagues who felt they needed more time to plan, collaborate, and understand expectations prior to implementing CCS (Walters et. al., 2015).

Collaborative Design of Instruction for Depth of Learning

Educators have interpreted this challenge to engage students in deeper learning activities in a variety of ways, and see collaboration as essential. The days of isolated planning, assessing, and evaluating students have been replaced with the professional learning communities model (PLC), which is being used with great success and is required in many states. A PLC may be a grade-level teaching team, a content area team, an interdisciplinary team, an online network, a school committee, or an entire school district (DuFour, 2006). PLCs are structured around three big ideas as critical components to establish classrooms and schools that can deliver content in relevant, engaging ways to meet the needs of every learner. The three ideas are: (a) that learning is for all students in every classroom, and that every student is monitored and receives support that is appropriate, timely, directive, and guaranteed; (b) that there must be a culture of collaboration that ‘guides the ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning, which leads to higher levels of student achievement’ (DuFour, 2004); and (c) that there must be a focus on results that utilizes data to measure progress toward mutually-determined goals (DuFour, 2004).

Pedagogical 4 E's: equity, expectations, engagement, and efficacy

Students are now in a position to take over 100 standardized tests during their K12 career (Center for American Progress, 2013). Despite the rise in national graduation rates, entrance examination data and first year post-secondary student performance rates indicate students are not college ready (United States Department of Education, 2016). While a multi-billion-dollar test-making industry could be driving a “test and punish” model of assessing students, some states and districts have chosen to adjust their policies to take the pressure off students. For example, some districts provide pre-graduation testing but have removed the pre-graduation test as a requirement for graduation.

A focus on instructional strategies that promote learning rather than testing could establish rigor that some educators are concerned about losing and relieve the pressure that educators recognize students are under to perform better on assessments. Some of the instructional strategies recommended are to provide educators with time to understand the alignment of state standard expectations with college and career readiness standards, (b) provide educators with time and resources to develop, implement, and formatively assess instructional tools that promote problem solving and critical thinking, use of formative assessment data to individualize student learning experiences, and (c) establish comprehensive formalized teacher collaboration, teaching critical thinking in context with subject/discipline, create opportunities to continuously model the use of critical thinking to solve problems and provide opportunities for students to practice often (ACT, 2010; Willingham, 2007; Whitmore & Lomax, 2015).

The PLC model is possible in an atmosphere that builds collective capacity (Fullan, 2010). Educators contributing to PLC suggest creating a relationship-based classroom where every student's voice and needs are important; where assessments are used to guide instruction and self-knowledge of content understanding; where students develop ways to dialogue about their data; where students partner with educators and peers to find new and more relevant ways of learning; where the CC Standards are used to suggest specific collaborative strategies from the college readiness approach for all educators to use to support student growth (Retrieved 2016). College and career readiness depend on the mindset and preparation of educators and culture within which this mindset is cultivated.

In order for students to learn to think critically and to solve problems, students need to be presented with opportunities within the context of a normal learning environment. Application and modeling of the processes involved in examining information to find solutions to problems will lead to students using these processes in multiple settings. Students also need time to practice the processes and techniques involved in using information to find solutions to problems. Educators require time and the formalized training provided in programs like the Teacher Mentor Training study in order to meet the needs of students.

Instructional Resources and Supports for using Evidence to make Decisions about Change

A study that provided data on a variety of important aspects of the Teacher Mentor Training lends itself to the educators' discussion regarding supporting educators during the implementation of common core (Wallin, & Boggan, 2015). Veteran educators in the Teacher Mentor Training study commented that collaboration with new educators was essential in the process of learning about Common Core. Specifically, the findings demonstrated that collaboration was strong (98%) around this expectation, with comments such as:

- *It was informative to talk together about the Standards and brainstorm ways to meet them.*
- *We attended the Common Core district training together and have worked together for our formative and summative evaluations.*
- *The days of the closed door and working in isolation are over*

The voices of the educators in this focus group indicate that consideration must be given to the supports and resources that K12 educators need in order to prepare students for the recently established college and career readiness expectations (ACT, 2010). Teacher education programs may benefit from developing and teaching a course on effective PLCs as well as a course on teaching students to think critically and to problem solve where writing is integrated (Parks, 2014; Youngs, 2013). Additional strategies that may alleviate some of the teacher concerns are teacher professional development on supportive, data-driven professional learning

communities that examine student growth data and teacher evaluation data in conjunction with indicators that describe how the implementation of Common Core Standards are impacting school culture, district culture, and students' perceptions of how to be successful in school. (ACT, 2010; Militello & Jackson, 2013; Youngs, 2013). Researchers should continue to study educators who successfully integrate innovative ways to teach students to thinking critically and solve problems with the expectations for performance assessments and share helpful findings with educators and administrators.

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