LIFTING KINDERGARTENERS’ WRITING TO MEET THE COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS: A COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT
The advent of Common Core Standards in New York State has forced a revisitation of past practices. With a goal of ensuring that all students are college and career-ready by the end of high school these standards call for increased rigor and higher expectations at all grade levels. The purpose of this study was to analyze through collaborative inquiry/action research student writing in kindergarten classrooms across a school, to identify common challenges and to develop and implement strategies to lift the level of work being produced by kindergartners according to the common core standards.

INTRODUCTION
The standard movement in the United States harkens back to the sixties and the seventies. However, many researchers and educational historians view the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education) in 1983 as a seminal event. This report that deplored the state of American education led to a national debate on how to raise expectations for students and teachers performance (Wixson, Dutro, & Athan, 2003). Since the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, the requirement for standards and aligned assessment has been a feature of federal legislation. Its centerpiece, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 signed into law in January 2002, represents a
milestone in the evolution of a movement that had been in place for more than a decade before the law’s enactment (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2008).

The original purpose of the standard movement was to identify what students should know and be able to do at a specific grade level and measure whether they were mastering the content. Overtime the movement took on the additional purpose of applying consequences to schools whose students did not show mastery in the content subject. It soon morphed into test-driven accountability (Jennings, 2001). Standards advocates argued that all students needed to achieve proficiency in basic knowledge e.g., ability to read, write and compute etc. Opponents of the standards movement challenged the initiative on several grounds including but not limited to the appropriateness of the standards with respect to child development, children with learning disabilities, English Language Learners, the content of standards, their implementation etc. More important, opponents of the movement saw in these standards a danger of standardizing students for the sake of economic competition. There was and still is a lack of consensus on the features of high quality standards.

Some researchers have argued that standards accompanied by curriculum reform efforts can change the content of instruction, but standards alone are unlikely to influence practice in a significant way. Other researchers suggest that teachers maintain a high level of autonomy in how they teach and that standards-based reform typically does not produce fundamental changes in pedagogy (Hamilton et al., 2008). Last, proponents of standards-based reform realized that it was easier to develop standards in mathematics and sciences and that it was quite a challenge to develop them, for example, in social studies.

The advent of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) in New York State has forced a revisitation of past practices. With a goal of ensuring that all students are college and career-ready by the end of high school these standards call for increased rigor and higher expectations at all grade levels. While the foundational work remains all-important to later success, kindergarten students are now expected to do more.

In terms of writing, the CCLS explicate the need for students to compose opinion and informative texts by the end of their kindergarten year. When compared with former standards, the CCLS demand a shift in pedagogical practices. What must teachers do to lift the level of student writing in kindergarten classrooms? What challenges stand in the way of student growth within the writing process? Moreover, what support systems exist within individual schools to make sure that the expectations set forth in the CCLS can be achieved? In fact the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1998) believe that achieving high standards of literacy for every child in the US is a shared responsibility of schools, early childhood programs, families and communities.

With these questions in mind we set out to investigate through collaborative inquiry/action research student writing in kindergarten classrooms across a school, to
identify common challenges and to develop and implement strategies to lift the level of work being produced by kindergartners according to the common core standards.

**Literature Review**

The alleged decline of academic performance of students in the United States as compared with their international counterparts has been the cause of grave concern for educators for some time. Although significant federal, state and local funding is channeled into schooling, the return on investment is poor. The challenge faced is that of equipping students with the skills necessary to compete in an increasingly competitive global society. The entry point for this work is an analysis of standards and the outgrowth of extensive effort in this area of educational reform is the CCLS. Focused on college and career-readiness, these standards represent an attempt to unify expectations for student outcomes nationwide and to enable students from the United States to compete more successfully with peers around the world. The CCLS prompt reflection on what is taught in K-12 classrooms across all curricular areas and highlight what is needed to bring student performance up to par. While standards differ from one grade to another, change must take place at every level. Perhaps what is most striking within the CCLS is the expectation that students across the grades will accomplish more sooner.

Until recently, pedagogical practices reflected the widely held belief that children entering kindergarten were not yet ready to write. Meaningful instruction in writing was reserved for the first grade when the act of teaching writing was considered developmentally appropriate. As a result, kindergarten students spent much time engaged in drill and practice, learning to form letters correctly and to copy isolated words onto paper. While letter formation is important, an overemphasis on such activities denies children the opportunity to think about the purposes and processes of language and does little to motivate their growth as writers (Bouas et al., 1997).

Until recently, research on writing was shortchanged as reading dominated the research agenda. Furthermore, writing was defined narrowly as spelling or as writing that addressed teacher-specified topics (Sulzby, 1992). However, the definition of what constitutes early writing has now broadened and the connection between reading and writing is widely accepted (Calkins & Peck, 2005). Through the reading of relevant literature, salient themes have emerged. These themes will be discussed and the implications outlined.

Significant research has centered round identifying the conditions that foster growth in writing. Bouas et al., argue that immersing students in a print-rich environment is critical to success. This environment includes a labeled classroom with job and weather charts, daily graphs, examples of interactive and shared writing, along with a quality, well-stocked classroom library. It also includes an alphabet and sight word chart for personal reference. Such tools place writing within the students’ grasp but, as research indicates, much guidance is needed before students use these tools independently.
The importance of a print-rich environment comes to light once more in the work of Reid & Schultze (2005). While in agreement with Bouas et al., about the components of a print-rich context, these researchers claim writing from classmates provides the most powerful model. Thus, in order to scaffold students’ growth as writers, teachers need to share with students the work of peers. Reid & Schultze emphasize the importance of publicly acknowledging student success while labeling the learning that has taken place. They encourage teachers to hone in on these opportunities to remind students about strategies learned and to promote the widespread use of these strategies within independent writing activities.

Research addressing the modeling of student work lies alongside research that advocates teacher modeling. Fields & Spangler (1995) state, “adult demonstrations play an essential role as children learn to write, with adult demonstrations emphasizing the thinking involved in writing (p. 179).” This argument is certainly evident in the work of kindergarten teacher, Lucy, as documented in Singh’s research (2010). Singh explores Lucy’s journey to develop students’ independence in collaborative writing and highlights the critical role played by teacher modeling within this process. Lucy modeled writing everyday throughout the year. She used the morning message, interactive and guided writing as vehicles to illustrate explicitly how thought drives the written word. Believing that writing should be rooted in authentic experiences, Lucy wrote thank you letters or get well soon letters as students dictated. She wrote letters to senior citizens and to the school principal. These practices provided a conventional form of English for students to imitate during independent work.

If students are to grow as writers they need to develop an identity as a writer from the start. This idea challenges the notion of writing as being synonymous with the production of conventional print as students begin their writing journey long before they are able to produce a text that can easily be read by an external audience. In documenting work in her kindergarten classroom, Hipple (1985) notes that all graphics were termed writing so that students would perceive themselves as writers from day one. As students wrote in all curriculum areas throughout the day, writing was considered to be important. This consistency helps students expect writing, value it, and look forward to it (Routman, 1994). Practice is important and Smith’s (1992) comment, “Writing is learned by writing, by reading and by perceiving oneself as a writer (p. 199)”, adds further weight to this claim.

Cress’ (1998) work on interactive journal writing pushes further in this regard as teacher feedback is manifested in writing rather than through the spoken word. Situated within a kindergarten classroom where students were provided with opportunity to write since the beginning of the school year, Cress hones in on their work in interactive journal writing where the teacher responds briefly in writing after each student entry. Most significant about these responses is their purpose to encourage students rather than to evaluate their performance. Where students were yet unable to read their teacher’s feedback, this response was read to them at the beginning of the next writing period. In essence, these young writers benefited from their engagement in a written dialogue that supported their developing sense of story.
Although focused primarily on the impact of written feedback provided by the teacher, Cress also emphasizes that peer interactions and interaction with self are essential to writing success. She claims that writing is a social act where, “children benefit from interaction for the purposes of planning, rehearsing, revising, providing information, helping peers, evaluating, and storytelling (p. 16).”

Of particular interest to these authors was research on low-income children that share challenges similar to our focal kindergarten students. Sulzby’s (1992) discussion of a longitudinal study involving low-income children suggests that these children declared more readily their inability to read or write. However, when provided with support and encouragement, they showed the same emergent literacy patterns as more affluent peers along with a greater use of complex oral language patterns in rereading.

Similar findings are reported in Gutman & Sulzby’s (2000) study of the writing behaviors of 20 African-American kindergartners from a low-income suburb of Detroit. This work investigated the role of autonomy-support versus control in the emergent writing behaviors of participants. What was most significant was the environment that supported students’ progress from emergent to conventional writing. When provided with guidance that was informational rather than controlling student writing flourished. Writing behaviors included the ability to maintain a flow of writing, to keep an attentive eye on the paper, and to sound out words effectively. Critical to student success was the provision of choice in writing topics and consistently supportive teacher language within the learning environment.

Withmore et al., (2005) synthesized what was learned during the past several decades of research about how young children become literate members of society, summarized critical lessons from the research and shared a transactional view of early literacy development. A transactional view of reading and writing means that we see literacy as a meaning construction process and that within a given literacy event, both the text and the reader/author are changed.

Literacy is individual, social and cultural. Children assume agency for their own learning since birth and actively construct knowledge about literacy. No two children’s path looks the same (Whitmore et al., 2005). It is a social activity in that the child is engaged in collaborative activity within specific social environment (Moll, 1990). It is a cultural activity because no child can be viewed as independent of her socio-cultural identity, political status or linguistic heritage.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In 1953 Corey referred to collaborative inquiry/action research as the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems systematically in order to evaluate, correct, and guide decisions and actions (1953, p. 6). This definition still holds true today. An essential element of action research is collaboration whether with students, teachers,
school staff, small groups or school wide. Tillotson (2000) describes school wide action research:

Teachers or administrators focus on a specific, significant problem in the school. The action researchers ask questions about the problem, develop a plan for gathering informative data, and carefully analyze the data to make the most informed choices about how to resolve the issue. (p. 31)

When undertaken as a collaborative process, collaborative action research allows for the building of relationships by bringing partners together, decreasing isolation among teaching professionals (Guajardo, 2008) and bridging the gap between classroom teachers and university researchers (Churcher, 2007; Conway & Jeffers, 2004; Watkins, 2006). The collaboration process also increases interpersonal capacity by supporting participants in forming and sustaining collaborative relationships (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000) rather than engaging in “contrived collegiality” (Hargreaves, 1991).

In a seminal study of successful and unsuccessful schools, Little (1982) found that critique and collaboration intersected in the successful schools:

- Teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice.
- Teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful (if potentially frightening) critiques of their teaching.
- Teachers plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together.
- Teachers teach each other the practice of teaching. (p. 331)

Collaborative action research empowers teachers by putting decision-making back in their hands providing them with a forum for collaboration around practice to better reach students. It can help teachers see the connection between instructional practices and students outcomes. It offers the opportunity for teacher teams to be reflective and willing to change their approach to teaching in the interest of students’ growth.

At the root of teacher empowerment is the creation of new knowledge, new abilities and new capacities. “Action research is emancipatory: it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2). Action research builds the school’s problem-solving capacity (Hughes, 2003) and empowers the school to create change (Gardner, 2004). Collaborative inquiry resonates with Dewey’s pragmatism that views experience as the sine qua non condition of learning, a function of individual interacting with their world. For Dewey, human experience is central for arriving at knowledge, and truth is found in the consequences of action. Bray et al., (2000) write, “Only when the changes made through action are reflected upon and involve a change in the person in the form of learning is activity transformed in significant experience.” (p. 21).
RESEARCH METHOD

Sample
The study sample was composed of four kindergarten classes of a PreK-5 school located in a low-income neighborhood. One hundred and twenty students participated in the study. More than fifty percent of the school pupils qualify for free lunch or reduced price lunch. Three of the classes are mainstream while a fourth is a self-contained Special Education class. Students in all four classes participated in a daily 50-minute writing workshop and engaged in writing in other curriculum areas across the day.

The Inquiry Team
The inquiry team was composed of five teachers including the first author of this paper who led the inquiry team. She instructed the team on the procedures for collaborative inquiry, organized meetings with the team to discuss and share their observations, encouraged the participants to self-reflection and led the conversations on changes that needed to be made in their pedagogy.

Tools for Data Collection
To collect data the team used three tools: observation, focus groups and interviewing. These techniques provided useful information for understanding instructional practices and helped move the collaborative inquiry process forward.

The inquiry team conducted observations of the students writing process and took notes. One of the benefits of observation as a data collection tool is that it offers the researcher the opportunity to learn directly from a personal experience of the setting. As participant observers, the team members worked with students, listening to their concerns and helping them with their writing. These observations were essential insofar as they provided direct insight into what constituted writing instruction within the context studied.

A second tool used for data collection was the focus group. Twice a month inquiry team members came together to analyze student writing, reflect on instructional practices and brainstorm ideas for promoting student growth. As questions were addressed, participants listened to and built on opinions voiced. In this way, team members were able to both air their perceptions and also to challenge them as a result of the conversations that took place. Being part of an inquiry team provides teachers with opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions in a collaborative, risk-free environment. The focus group became an opportunity to reflect on what the team observed, to analyze the notes taken and make sense of the challenges students were encountering in the writing process.

A third tool for data collection was interviewing. The purpose of the interviews was to garner student opinions about their work as writers, to know how they perceived their role and the role of their teacher within the learning environment and to elicit what they believed was working for them in their journey to becoming better writers.
The author conducted student interviewing. She made sure that the interviewing took place in a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere. She selected at random one kindergartner from each class for a total of four. Interview took place in the designated conferencing area within the student's classroom and was approximately 7 minutes in duration. When called to the conferencing area, each interviewee was asked to bring a piece of writing in progress as well as a writing folder containing additional student work. Although the interviewees likely had different experiences depending on individual teacher styles, they have all been exposed to the architecture of the writing workshop and to the units of study delineated in the Teacher’s College model. She started her interview with each of the four kindergarten writers with one or two closed questions. This strategy also allowed her to generate rich, detailed data.

Analysis
The analysis of data was ongoing and grounded in students’ data and writing. Writing field logs, conducting interviews with students and the teachers’ focus group meetings provided critical information in making sense of students’ progress. Teachers read, coded their notes, and summarized their observations. They also used memoing throughout data analysis. Memoing is a technique in qualitative investigation in which the researcher determines how patterns relate as relationships emerge during coding. Memoing is one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hands (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Focus group meetings provided a unique opportunity for teachers to discuss their observations, to identify their challenges, to reflect on their collaboration and to seek help from each other. They also worked toward reaching consensus on the meaning of data collected. This process of exchange served as a professional development where teachers agreed that genuine learning took place.

Findings and Discussion
The preliminary findings have identified the following issues: word spacing, the absence of fluency, the power of teacher’s feedback and the need for foundational work.

Word spacing. A problem identified earlier during the inquiry was word spacing. The implementation of a finger-spacing strategy to address a challenge uncovered during early analysis of student work met with positive results. When compared with baseline writing samples, later samples revealed that the strategy helped resolve the spacing issue for all but one student whose poor fine-motor skills hampered her use of the tool provided. Although consensus was reached in terms of using a manipulative as a tangible reminder to leave a space between words, the actual manipulative used varied across classrooms. Two teachers provided their students with a lollipop stick; another guided students in the use of a cardboard cutout hand with one outstretched finger, while the fourth teacher provided a similar cutout hand and set aside time for students to personalize their ‘hand’ using crayons.

In all cases the teacher modeled the use of the manipulative during interactive writing experiences and reminded students to use it during independent practice. Classroom
observations confirmed that the finger-spacing tool was integral to the students’ writing toolkit. While some students used the tool independently, others were prompted to do so by their teacher. Thus, student behaviors support the claim by Bouas et al., that students need teacher guidance in using materials as support when writing.

Students across classrooms were able to articulate the purpose and to model correct usage of the manipulative. They frequently reminded each other to use their ‘hand’ during writing activities. One interesting finding was the level of enthusiasm displayed by students who had been allowed to personalize their ‘hand’. These students gravitated naturally toward the tool provided when beginning to write and were anxious to share the significance of the colors and designs used to decorate it. One wonders if allowing students to personalize their ‘hand’ promoted ownership and independence.

**Lack of fluency.** Further analysis of student writing gave rise to concern over a lack of fluency. As teacher discussions revealed dominance in the use of teacher-specified topics for writing, team members wondered if instructional practices contributed to student challenges. Having read and discussed research advocating the grounding of writing in personal experiences, they decided to initiate change. Teachers introduced interactive journal writing as a means of building fluency via an ongoing dialogue that helped emergent writers create a story. This strategy was implemented on a daily basis during literacy center time when four or five students engaged in independent journal writing activities. During this time all entries were accepted as writing and teachers provided brief written feedback on each, the purpose being to inform rather than to evaluate performance.

Data collected from classroom observations suggests that interactive journal writing boosts student engagement. The amount of time spent on task during this activity exceeded what was observed as students worked within units of study in writing across the grade. Teacher discussions during bi-monthly focus groups support this finding and analysis of student entries over a three-month period highlight increased fluency.

Student interviewees spoke enthusiastically about interactive journal writing. When questioned about their role within the process, three of the four students commented that they write a story *with* their teacher. This finding is significant insofar as these students see themselves in a writing partnership during journal-writing time. They value the interaction that takes place with teachers and suggest that the feedback provided furthers their work. Interview data also reveals that time spent writing in interactive journals is the students’ favorite writing activity because students themselves have opportunity to choose what they want to write about during this time.

**Teacher feedback.** In terms of teacher-student dialogue within journals, data suggests that teachers were consistent in their use of feedback as a forum for providing encouragement and support. However, student responses highlight differences in how feedback was acted upon by recipients. While some students responded directly to teacher-provided prompts to further develop their story, others either continued their story without evidence of
reaction to teacher feedback or started working on a different story with each subsequent entry. What was consistent, however, was an increase in fluency across kindergarten as evidenced in the journals analyzed.

Need for foundational work. As the collaborative inquiry process extended into another school year, analysis of kindergarten writing from September identified new strengths and challenges. By and large, student writing was incomprehensible to teachers and when asked to read their writing to teachers most kindergartners were unable to do so. The need for foundational work in letter and sound recognition was immediate. Having discussed individual teacher practice, it was decided to apply consistency via the implementation of Foundations, a research-based phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling program, across the grade. Three days each week, teachers dedicate twenty minutes of instructional time directly to this program.

Data collected during classroom observations indicates that, six weeks into implementation, student recognition of letters and their corresponding sounds has increased. Students are engaged in phonics activities and are utilizing individual alphabet charts for self and peer assessment. Team members have decided to continue implementing Foundations through early January when, it is hoped, students will be ready to take greater leaps in terms of writing growth.

This research highlights implications for future writing instruction. Clearly, the collaborative inquiry process offers much in terms of helping teachers see the connection between their practice and student outcomes. Through inquiry teachers have learned to look at student work with a new lens. Analysis of writing begins with an identification of students’ strengths as writers rather than honing in on what they cannot do. Furthermore, teachers are deciding for themselves what they can do to further the progress of their emergent writers. Such work leads to empowerment.

Future work with this collaborative inquiry team needs to investigate how current kindergartners can be guided in the composition of narratives and opinion pieces. Perhaps teachers will, once again, delve into interactive journal writing in an attempt to develop their students’ sense of story. As they become more familiar with students’ needs they might decide on a more fitting alternative. One thing certain is teachers will continue within the inquiry cycle in their effort to support improved student achievement and the lessons learned to date will become increasingly embedded in practice.

Reflections
The collaboration process had its challenges. Teachers were not always on the same page when deciding about which intervention works best for which students. These challenges required extra work from the facilitator in her attempt to bring the team to a consensus on how these issues needed to be addressed. Another problem that emerged during the process was the tendency from teachers to use a deficit model when analyzing children’s work. They focused on errors in students writing drawing attention to what students were not able to do. The facilitator challenged this approach suggesting instead that they
identify the positives at work. A third problem was time constraint that was discussed when team members met and brainstormed ideas about how to best implement instructional strategies that seemed to be workable for all.

On the plus side this research confirmed what most teachers already know: learning to write is a complex, multifaceted process that requires a variety of instructional approaches. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) of the National Academy of Sciences reached a similar conclusion. Each child acquires reading skills and understanding differently. “Children are active learners drawing on direct social and physical experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them” (Bredekamp & Couple, 1997, p. 13). However, good teachers make instructional decisions based on their knowledge of reading and writing, current research, appropriate expectations and their knowledge of individual children’s strength and needs.

Teachers were free to use various interventions. In some circumstances, however, suggested interventions were discussed during focus group meetings. Once team members decided to adopt an intervention, the group facilitator sought out research-based reading materials relevant to the proposed intervention and engaged the teachers in discussing the selected articles. Teachers were free to modify or adjust their intervention based on their knowledge of students. The interventions undertaken generally produced positive outcomes for students and the value of collaborative inquiry became apparent as implementation resulted in improved writing practices among kindergarteners. Being able to listen about other teachers’ experiences encouraged the teachers to try out new strategies.

The Common Core Learning Standards formed part of the toolkit for each focus group meeting. The children’s writing samples provided a basis for discussion around standards and prompted teachers to reflect on their instructional practices in order to identify possibilities for raising the level of writing being produced. The teachers believed that the CCLS were appropriate to children’s early development because they encouraged teachers to consider the four aspects of literacy and stress the importance of competency in each area of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Teachers also felt that the standards are attainable and that modeling was essential to students’ success at all levels.

REFERENCES


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