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Making the Common Core Come Alive Through Inquiry: Lessons Learned

The Common Core State Standards are a big deal. . . . The Standards represent the most sweeping reform of the K–12 curriculum that has ever occurred in this country. . . . It must be teachers and principals who figure out methods for implementing these standards. . . . You and the others who know your school well will, in the end, need to be the ones to determine your particular pathway to implementing the Common Core.

— Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and
Christopher Lehman (2012, pp. 1, 14, 197)

While there is clear consensus across the country that the Common Core is a big deal and that it must be teachers and principals who figure out methods for implementing them, what is

less clear is how. We have been fortunate to work alongside teachers and administrators at Woodson Elementary School in Jacksonville, Florida, as they have used the process of inquiry, both teacher and student, to begin Common Core implementation. While there is still much to learn at this school about the ways the Common Core plays out in practice, the process of inquiry has proved fruitful to begin the Common Core implementation journey. It is for this reason that this book was written—to share the process of inquiry as both a mechanism for teacher professional development to help teachers delve deeply into the standards as they relate to their personal practice as well as a pedagogical approach to teaching that creates the space for Common Core standards to be integrated into the fabric of everyday classroom instruction.

While there is still much to learn, we *have* learned much already. We end this book by sharing five significant lessons about teacher inquiry and student inquiry, respectively, and their relationship to the Common Core that we have learned through our work with the teachers and administrators at Woodson Elementary School.

Lessons About Teacher Inquiry and the Common Core State Standards

Lesson 1: Effective Common Core implementation means teachers must be involved in the process. Inquiry is one way to actualize that goal.

Because they are so new, there exist no definitive experts on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and their implementation. Hence, creating opportunities to cultivate knowledge about the Common Core within the four walls of a school is essential. Rather than solely relying on outside expertise to help with Common Core implementation, teachers and administrators must look inside themselves and rely on each other and their accumulated professional wisdom to pose and solve problems of practice related to Common Core implementation. Teacher inquiry can be a powerful vehicle for cultivating expertise about the Common Core from the inside of a school out rather than solely from the outside of a school in.

The faculty at Woodson Elementary had been using the process of teacher inquiry as a mechanism for their professional learning prior to the introduction of the Common Core. When news of impending

Common Core adoption began to spread, many of Woodson’s fellow educators felt trepidation related to the task. In contrast, Woodson teachers and administrators embraced the challenges Common Core adoption would bring to their school by attacking the adoption of these standards through the process of inquiry they had become so familiar with. Woodson administrators understood the importance of involving teachers in Common Core implementation from the start, and because a foundational component of the inquiry process is that teachers are placed in the driver’s seat of their own professional learning as they pose and solve real problems of practice that emerge within the four walls of their classrooms and schools, inquiry was a natural way to involve teachers in Common Core implementation from Day 1.

Calkins and her colleagues (2012) write,

The real work on Common Core reform needs to revolve around creating systems of continuous improvement that result in teachers teaching toward clearer and higher expectations and doing this work in more transparent, collegial, and accountable ways (pp. 14–15).

The real work of Common Core reform must begin and end with teachers as they work with one another to learn in and from their own practice.

Lesson 2: Creating a culture of collaboration unleashes learning potential and plays a vital role in Common Core implementation through inquiry.

In Chapter 3, we exemplified the process of teacher inquiry into the Common Core through the story of Lareal Haslem, a first-grade teacher at Woodson Elementary. One of Lareal’s key learnings from her study was the importance of collaboration in planning for and effectively implementing the Common Core. Her meetings with the reading coach and members of her grade-level team pushed her thinking and helped her to formulate new realizations about her teaching as she inquired.

Lareal’s learning about the critical importance of collaboration in her work illustrates an equally important aspect of Common Core reform:

Planning is collaborative, and every teacher draws on—and eventually contributes to—a knowledge base that is bigger

than any one individual. This does not mean that teachers do not need to think critically or make sound judgments based on their classrooms and their students—they do. It means that this thinking and reasoning does not occur in a vacuum. It is the result of excellent teachers opening up the doors of their classrooms, creating an environment where not just one classroom, but an entire school, benefits from shared best practice. . . . The real goal is for people at the school to learn how to learn together. (Calkins et al., 2012, p. 186)

Learning how to learn together is not something that can be assumed or taken for granted. Woodson administrators understood the importance of collaboration and that collaboration doesn't just happen on its own. It takes systematic planning, structures, time, and commitment to make meaningful collaboration a reality in schools.

Fortunately, Woodson Elementary was able to begin Common Core implementation collaboration-ready. The school had spent time and professional development energies creating the structures necessary for collaboration to unfold in meaningful ways in both grade-level and vertical professional learning communities. In turn, these professional learning communities served as the containers for inquiry into the Common Core to unfold schoolwide.

As members of learning communities studying different questions about Common Core implementation, Woodson teachers learned with and from each other on a regular basis. Furthermore, twice during the school year, in December and May, the Woodson administrators transformed a regularly scheduled faculty meeting and professional development time into an inquiry showcase extravaganza, where teachers shared their learning-community work schoolwide so all could benefit from the knowledge individuals and smaller groups of teachers were gleaning about the Common Core through inquiry.

In sum, collaboration is critical. If you do not already have structures in place and time set aside for collaborative endeavors, it will be important to invest the time in creating a culture of collaboration for teachers to discuss their work with the Common Core. Three wonderful organizations to help create a culture of collaboration are Learning Forward (<http://learningforward.org/>), School Reform Initiative (www.schoolreforminitiative.org/), and National School Reform Faculty (www.nsrffharmony.org/). All these organizations provide access to materials that can be used to structure collaboration among teachers, including protocols that guide powerful professional conversations to unfold in an efficient time frame. And we learned from

our work at Woodson that powerful professional conversations yield powerful inquiry experiences for teachers. Furthermore, powerful inquiry experiences for teachers yield powerful learning experiences for the students they teach.

Lessons About Student Inquiry and the Common Core State Standards

Lesson 3: Effective Common Core implementation means abandoning a one-standard-at-a-time approach to teaching and looking for ways to seamlessly integrate multiple standards into a single rich task. Inquiry can help to actualize that goal.

The era of high-stakes testing and accountability and laser-like focus on test preparation that resulted from it often led to teachers' concentrating on a long list of individual state standards and checking off their teaching of those standards one by one to "cover" the material necessary for students to know to pass their state's exam. In contrast, the Common Core provides fewer standards, but those standards interrelate and speak to one another to create opportunity for students to develop higher-level and critical-thinking skills necessary to be college or career ready in the twenty-first century. This requires a shift in thinking about the ways standards inform instruction. Rather than thinking about standards in isolation of one another and using individual standards to plan instruction lesson by lesson, teachers must consider standards holistically, with multiple standards being incorporated simultaneously into rich learning tasks. As we illustrated in Chapter 5, student inquiry can be a powerful vehicle to integrate multiple Common Core standards seamlessly into instruction.

Both Woodson Elementary School teachers represented in this book, Lareal and Mary, were cognizant of the interrelated nature of the CCSS. For example, in Chapter 3, Lareal realizes through a conversation with her reading coach that although she had been drawn to the integrated nature of the Common Core and was excited about the opportunity the Common Core created for her to deepen her teaching of reading, she had fallen into old habits of tackling one standard at a time. For her first-grade learners to make meaningful connections to nonfiction text, the subject of Lareal's teacher inquiry, Lareal learned that she must integrate a number of CCSS

into her use of nonfiction, and take a more holistic approach to reading instruction.

Similar to Lareal's focus on standard integration, in Chapter 5, Mary reads the following about the Common Core anchor standards for reading and writing:

While the Standards delineate specific expectations in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, each standard need not be a separate focus for instruction and assessment. Often, several standards can be addressed by a single rich task. For example, when editing writing, students address Writing standard 5 ("Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach") as well as Language standards 1–3 (which deal with conventions of standard English and knowledge of language). When drawing evidence from literary and informational texts per Writing standard 9, students are also demonstrating their comprehension skill in relation to specific standards in Reading. When discussing something they have read or written, students are also demonstrating their speaking and listening skills. The CCR anchor standards themselves provide another source of focus and coherence. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012d)

Reflecting on this passage from the standards, Mary realizes that the rich opportunity engaging her students in a conservation inquiry project will have to meet multiple Common Core standards within this single task. At the end of her conservation unit, Mary reflects that her inquiry-based unit had not only covered almost every anchor standard but multiple standards specific to Mary's grade level as well.

We learn from Mary that actualizing the Common Core standards in practice equates with the provision of rich, engaging learning tasks for students. One task that is naturally rich and engaging is inquiry, as students wonder about their own questions related to the curriculum and investigate their questions with the teacher facilitating this learning process.

Lesson 4: Creating a culture of wonder unleashes learning potential and plays a vital role in Common Core implementation through inquiry.

In Chapter 5, we exemplified the process of student inquiry through the story of Mary Wright, a fourth-grade teacher at Woodson Elementary. Recall that while Mary had dabbled with inquiry as a pedagogical approach to her instruction in the past, she had decided to go “whole hog” with inquiry this year in the name of implementing the CCSS. Yet before diving into teaching her students the inquiry process and involving them in their own learning investigations, Mary realized the importance of taking the time to establish a culture of wonder in her classroom, and she spent the first month of school engaging her students in activities that would help them learn to pose productive questions about a variety of topics.

Unfortunately, it has not been common practice in schools for students to wonder and pose their own questions to guide their learning. The focus on high-stakes testing and accountability has led to students most often being positioned as passive recipients of knowledge that must be memorized and recalled to pass tests rather than active consumers of knowledge that must be analyzed and synthesized to create something new, a product that students use to show both what they learned and provide evidence to justify their learning. When learning through inquiry is demonstrated by a student-created product, students learn “to value and appreciate the thought and discipline required to produce excellence and to feel the pride that comes with making something with their own hands and minds” (Wolk, 2008, p. 121).

Yet when students are used to being recipients of knowledge and test taking to demonstrate learning, the hard work of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating knowledge to produce something new can come as a shock to the system. Furthermore, the learning products that result from students’ being engaged in inquiry can be only as good as the questions that led to them. Therefore, developing good questions that will lead to rich learning opportunities is a skill that must be cultivated with time and heavily scaffolded by the teacher. Mary’s beginning-of-the-year actions were critical to laying the foundation for inquiry-based instruction.

If you plan to use inquiry as a pedagogical approach to teaching, it will be important to invest time in creating a culture of wonder for your students and teach important skills such as how to frame a good question for investigation. Expert on the student inquiry process Stephen Wolk (2008) goes so far as to state that what is really required for powerful learning to occur in a classroom through inquiry is a beautifully intricate and intertwined web of teacher and student learning:

More than merely engaging students in authentic inquiry investigations, we want to immerse them in a *culture* of inquiry.

I can't reduce the essence of inquiry to a recipe. A culture of inquiry happens when teachers breathe inquiry as a part of their lives. . . . The best teachers I know aren't good just because of what they do in their classrooms for six hours a day; they're good teachers because of how they live their lives 24 hours a day. These teachers live a life filled with learning, thinking, reading, and debating. Because inquiry is an important part of their lives, inquiry becomes an essential part of their classroom. (p. 119)

Through engaging both teachers and students in inquiry, Woodson Elementary School has created that intricate student and teacher web of learning as its pathway to implementing the Common Core.

The Most Important Lesson

Lesson 5: When it comes to Common Core State Standards implementation, attitude is everything!

Perhaps the most important lesson we learn from the educators at Woodson Elementary School about the CCSS and their quest to actualize these standards at their school through teacher and student engagement in inquiry is the attitude they took toward the Common Core in the first place. While other educators were complaining about the Common Core standards and were approaching them with fear and trepidation, Woodson teachers and administrators embraced them, seeing the Common Core as a chance to make school a more meaningful place for the students they served and teaching a more respected and enjoyable profession.

In the opening pages of this book, we discussed the accountability mind-set framed by No Child Left Behind that privileged subject matter over pedagogy and took most of the important decisions about teaching out of the hands of teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). We further stated that as a result of this mind-set, it is no wonder that teachers would approach the Common Core with fear and trepidation.

Coming full circle, we end this book as we began it by reminding the reader that the CCSS have great potential to be different. Teachers were and continue to be involved in their development, and the standards are not meant to tell teachers exactly what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it. Rather, the standards are meant to serve

as a guide for teachers to understand the end results they need to achieve to develop students who will be college and career ready and able to fully function in the twenty-first century. Teachers determine the details of achieving those end results based on the particulars of their individual classroom context and meeting the unique needs of the learners they teach.

Hence, the CCSS provide an opportunity for teachers to take back the profession of teaching and have the power once again to make their own instructional decisions in the best interest of children. In this way, the Common Core is a gift to the profession of teaching.

But choosing whether or not to accept that gift is up to us. We can approach the CCSS as curmudgeons or we can approach them as if they were gold (Calkins et al., 2012). If we choose to approach the CCSS as gold, we have learned from the teachers at Woodson that inquiry is a powerful tool to mine the Common Core for all that it is worth.

In the end, it will be attitude that makes all the difference. The choice is yours. Seize the day.