

TEACHING WRITING:
OKLAHOMA ENGLISH TEACHERS AFTER
THE COMMON CORE REVERSAL

By

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In June 2014, Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin signed a legislative repeal of the Common Core State Standards that required the state school board to adopt new standards approved by the legislature for English/language arts and math by 2016. The repeal reversed the state's early adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and its four year-long mandate requiring teachers and school districts to transition fully to CCSS by Fall of 2014 (Eger, August 9, 2010). Teachers and schools who had spent enormous amounts of time, energy, and capital preparing for the new standards now faced the onerous task of returning to the state's old standards, which they had been transitioning away from since 2010. Fallin herself had been a strong proponent of CCSS before the legislature or the ill winds of politics changed her mind. In January of 2014, she gave a speech at the National Governors Association meeting extolling the standards as the tools needed for helping students succeed in college and careers and defending them from the charges that the federal government had forced them on the states. In a statement following the repeal, she claimed that federal overreach had tainted the standards and vowed that Oklahoma would develop better standards (Ujifusa, 2014).

Teachers across Oklahoma now faced the quandary of abandoning curricula in English language arts and mathematics they had spent years developing in anticipation of the imminent implementation and returning to the Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS), which teachers had been instructed to phase out over the last four years. Common Core was developed in

response to the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001), which left a mark on nearly every aspect of public education, but none more so than writing instruction. The law's focus on reading, mathematics, standardized testing, and low-performing students moved many areas of language arts curricula, including writing, down the list of priorities as teachers concentrated on preparing students to "close-read" passages and answer multiple choice questions (Darling-Hammond, 2007; McCarthey, 2008; Brimi, 2012). Some states, including Oklahoma, still have structured response writing tests in certain grades, but these tests reward formulaic writing because it is easier to grade (Brimi, 2012). According to scores on the ACT test in 2014, nearly a third of Oklahoma students did not meet the benchmarks in English Language Arts and were not considered college-ready (ACT, 2014). The same analytic and critical thinking skills required for college-level writing transfer to the workplace, where employers continue to complain that workers do not have the writing skills necessary to perform well on the job (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013, p. 346). The time spent preparing for standardized tests under NCLB has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum and increased pressure on teachers. Formal writing curriculum has become marginalized under NCLB and may be practically nonexistent in districts where writing tests end at the 8th grade (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Language arts instruction has always included a split focus on reading and writing as the two primary skills needed for proficiency. Writing instruction from the 1970s forward has included five types of writing –descriptive, narrative, expository, creative, and persuasive—described and outlined in most curriculum and textbooks. Teachers have taught each type of writing in isolation, guiding students back and forth through the various steps of the writing process—brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The desired result was nearly always a structured five-paragraph essay because state writing assessments valued and

rewarded this format. Although the process was part of instruction, the tendency was to focus on the generation of a product rather than the process of writing itself (Brimi, 2012, p. 53). This kind of writing instruction does little to prepare students for the analytic writing required of them in college courses or the workplace, and it does not prepare them to engage in the civil discourse that future citizens will need to explore solutions to the significant problems facing our world. Students who write to strict formulas and structures have little experience “writing for authentic and diverse...purposes” (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013, p. 346), and they do not develop the “robust conceptual and strategic knowledge that transfers to new composing situations” (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2013, p. 45).

One of the primary goals of public education in the United States, from the very beginning, has been to prepare the next generation of citizens to make informed, critical decisions about the progress and continued success of a democratic society. Critical theorist Jürgen Habermas describes a process of ethical discourse in which “all are heard, no one is excluded, all are equal in making a decision and reaching a conclusion, coercion is excluded, and the only power exercised is the power of the most reasonable argument” (Murphy & Fleming, 2010, p. 8). Looking at the process of teaching writing and particularly argumentation through the lens of Habermas’ ethical discourse and communicative action might prove useful for understanding how best to prepare students for solving problems and communicating in a modern, global world. Students who learn to examine all sides of an argument and choose the most reasonable course of action will be poised to solve the problems that plague society and the world. The current impasse in the American federal government and many state governments may be directly attributable to an inability on the parts of leaders (and everyone else) to listen and to reason ethically with one another. Noddings (2013) calls for “teaching deliberative

participation” (p. 22) in schools “organized to provide opportunities for students to practice democracy as a mode of associated living” (p. 24). A vibrant, functioning democracy depends on citizens who have the wisdom and the critical thinking skills to examine all viewpoints and arguments and make reasonable decisions based on sound evidence. “A primary purpose of schooling in a democratic society is to produce thoughtful citizens who can deliberate and make wise choices” (Noddings, 2013, p. 25).

In 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers introduced the Common Core State Standards. The standards addressed K-12 knowledge bases and expectations of students at each grade level in primary and secondary schools as well as in college, in career, and in civic readiness upon graduation (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2014). States began voluntarily adopting CCSS almost immediately, and Oklahoma adopted CCSS in June of 2010 with expected full implementation in the 2014-2015 school year. The Common Core State Standards called for writing skills focused on three types of writing, including narrative, expository, and argumentation. These three forms of writing prepare students to be lifetime writers, but expository and argumentative skills in particular help build a foundation for college and career writing where students are expected to communicate effectively and persuasively, demonstrating their knowledge and their ability to analyze. CCSS demands “significant time and effort to writing” (NGA Center, et al, 2014). Under the new standards, students produce numerous pieces of writing over both shorter and longer time frames in the course of a school year. Argumentation represents a significant piece of the writing domain, but it also plays a large role in the speaking and listening domains of the standards. Students develop argumentation skills through large and small group discussions as well as in one-on-one conversations, learning to build on the ideas of others as well as expressing their own

ideas in clear and persuasive language. With the implementation of the new standards, education leaders hoped to significantly change the playing field and restore some emphasis on writing, particularly the kinds of writing that colleges and employers expect students and workers to be able to do.

Of all the iterations of school reform implemented over the last four decades, none has stirred more controversy or dissension than the CCSS, primarily as a result of social media (Ferguson, 2013). Even though 44 states, the District of Columbia, and several territories adopted CCSS and worked together beginning in 2010 to develop curriculum, tests, and teacher training in preparation for the rollout, anxiety about CCSS and opposition to what seems to be a “national” set of standards led to political wrangling in several states to reverse the adoption of the standards (Ujifusa, 2014). In Oklahoma, the name CCSS disappeared from the Department of Education website, and the standards were renamed Oklahoma Academic Standards (OAS), even though clicking on the link took a visitor directly to a PDF document of the Common Core State Standards until just a few days before the repeal of the standards. In spite of the political disarray, many Oklahoma school districts moved forward with implementing the standards because of the limited time frame leading to the expectation of full conversion in 2014, and the state expended significant funds to provide professional development to help teachers make the transition. In June of 2014, these same districts faced unexpected new challenges and choices to make. The legislation repealing Common Core did not ban the standards outright, but it did require districts to meet the old Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) objectives, which teachers had begun moving away from in 2010 (Ujifusa, 2014).

Problem Statement

Oklahoma adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010 and mandated that school districts implement them fully by the 2014-2015 school year. Then in spring 2014, the legislature repealed Common Core and the governor signed the legislation into law. Districts that spent enormous amounts of time and money preparing new curricula in order to be ready for the switch were left in a quandary. The English language arts standards under Common Core directly addressed some deficiencies in writing instruction that may better prepare students for college, employment, and citizenship. At the time, it was unclear how teachers would respond to the political maneuverings, but standardized tests under NCLB had reduced the amount of writing students in public schools were asked to do. Colleges, employers, and an informed citizenry require significantly higher levels of skills in all areas of writing, and teachers looked towards restoring and recalibrating writing curricula to meet those needs. School districts and teachers in the 2014-2015 school year were not required to drop CCSS but had to make adjustments to ensure that PASS skills were covered, as well. At the start of the year, they had no idea what kinds of testing their students would face, and they lacked direction and a clear mandate from the State Department of Education, which was roiled in the midst of political wrangling and the almost certain replacement of an unpopular State Superintendent of Public Instruction in the fall elections.

This study examined the unique experiences of a group of Oklahoma teachers as they navigated the school year after the repeal of CCSS. Teachers in Oklahoma faced unique challenges with the sudden reversal and understanding how teachers face political and personal challenges in the classroom as they prepare their students to meet requirements for the end of the year standardized tests, the expectations of the teachers in the next grade levels, and the demands

of both career and college readiness could inform professional development for teachers in similar situations. This study offered a unique opportunity to develop a more complete picture of the challenges that English language arts teachers face in teaching writing and argumentation skills in a political climate. Applying the lens of Habermas' theory to this specific case illuminated the need for ethical discourse and deliberative communication that provides a clear and concise argument for change across all aspects of education reform including the myriad demands made upon teachers by both state and federal mandates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this naturalistic inquiry with a case study design is to explore the experiences of secondary English language arts teachers in Oklahoma, specifically in light of the recent legislative rejection of the CCSS that they had been anticipating and beginning to implement the previous four years. This dissertation research was undertaken to examine how teachers in Oklahoma classrooms responded to and adjusted for the sudden switch in standards after significant preparation and professional development to prepare for different ones. I wondered how teachers in different phases of their careers might respond and what steps they might take going forward to adjust their curriculum. I wanted to examine attitudes of teachers who are new to the classroom as well as those with significant experience already. CCSS restored some emphasis on writing skills and in particular, argumentation. The teachers in this particular district intended to continue to address Common Core even after the repeal, and I was interested in if and how these teachers planned to teach argumentation and the ways they envisioned speaking and listening skills playing into the development of effective arguments that include clarity and rationality based on best evidence. I anticipated teachers have already encountered some professional development and begun the process of developing or finding

curricula to support lessons that will effectively teach the skills required by the Common Core standards. Now that adoption of the standards has been repealed, how will they respond and adjust their plans?

Research Questions

In order to illuminate the current challenges teachers in Oklahoma face, the following research questions are posed:

1. What are Oklahoma English Language Arts teachers' experiences and perceptions of the Common Core State Standards after their repeal last spring?
2. What steps had teachers taken to implement Common Core State Standards in teaching students to develop arguments and critical thinking skills in the domains of writing and speaking? How have teachers proceeded in teaching argumentation in light of the standards repeal?
3. What kind of professional development might help them in preparing students in developing necessary writing skills?
4. How do middle and high school teachers see language arts curriculum alignment going forward and how might they help each other in developing a curriculum for argumentation and other writing skills?

Importance of the Study

The intent of this study is to examine how teachers respond to the challenge of reform efforts that constantly demand adjustments due to political maneuverings and changes beyond their control. What adaptations are most effective in helping teachers cope and, in practical terms, how do they move forward individually and as a unit within a particular district? This study was designed to help elucidate the strategies that teachers in real classrooms use to ensure

students move forward and acquire the skills needed to be successful on mandated tests as well as to prepare them for college and careers. The two sets of skills differ dramatically with the current standardized tests that focus on reading comprehension primarily and have little emphasis on writing skills. Common Core put particular focus on argumentation skills in the domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening; the repeal of Common Core in Oklahoma did not reduce the need for these skills in both the workplace and in college writing, so this study explores how one particular group of teachers moved to meet those standards in spite of the repeal. This study analyzes the teachers' experiences in light of Habermas' theory of deliberative communication and his concept of argumentation as a means for reaching consensus in solving problems. Understanding how teachers perceive the need for these communication skills and how they prepare students to write argumentatively may provide some insight into what kind of professional development would be most useful in helping other teachers be successful. Examining the teachers' experiences through the lens of Habermas' theory could offer valuable insight as to the kind of training and professional development that would be most useful in building on what teachers already know and do in teaching argumentation and other types of writing skills that will help prepare young people for work or college and to become active participants in a democratic process that works towards a more equitable and just society for everyone.

Description of Claremont Middle School (Pseudonym)

Claremont Middle School took up an entire block in a very settled older part of this small rural community of just over 10,000 people. Old church buildings and low-income housing surrounded the campus on all sides. The school had the look and feel of a 1950s building that had evolved over the decades into its current state of slight dilapidation and disrepair. The

classrooms in this building were grouped by grade level. The first hallway from the attendance office was lined with 8th grade classrooms, and the administrative office bookended the hall on the west end. To get to Mary's mixed classroom and Norah's sixth grade classroom, I had to hike around the library, through the cavernous, hot, and dark gymnasium and all the way down to the end of a long, narrow hallway dotted with classrooms and hung with posters of student work.

In the 2014 School Profile from the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, the middle school had nearly 400 students enrolled in 6th through 8th grades with very little ethnic diversity in evidence and no identified English Language Learners. 73% of students were Caucasian, 3% Black, 1% Asian, 6% Hispanic, and 18% were Native American. 64% of students qualified for free and reduced lunches, and 19% of students took advantage of special education opportunities. Classes met for 55 minutes each day, and the academic year divided into four equal terms of nine weeks each. The 30 or so teachers in this particular building had on average 15 years of teaching experience each and 40% held advanced degrees. Like most public schools in Oklahoma, the teachers organized by curricular area and each group operated under a department head appointed by the administration. The English teachers at the middle school shared a common plan period during the 2014-2015 academic year, making it possible for them to work together. The English department consisted of one language arts teacher and one reading teacher for each grade level, and a remediation language arts teacher who taught students in all three grades who had failed their reading test the previous year.

In the 2013-2014 academic year, middle school regular education students met the state benchmark for 6th and 7th grades. 70% of all 6th and 7th graders scored proficient or above on both their math and reading tests; however, only 58% of students scored proficient or above on

the 8th grade writing test, well below the state average of 65% (the state as a whole had problems with the writing test). Interestingly, the same 8th graders performed quite well on the math and reading tests with 95% and 92% at proficient or above. They also scored above the state average on the history and science tests that year with 83% proficient or above in history and 81% proficient or above in science. The abysmal writing test scores prevented them from meeting the state benchmark in 8th grade and caused serious consternation that dogged teachers throughout the year of the study as they anticipated the importance of the writing test in determining the school's grade according to the state's complicated rating system. Student test scores also impacted classroom teachers in tested areas directly as they tied to annual teacher evaluations, a source of much resentment and unease.

Description of Claremont High School

The high school campus sat on a patch of land that included a small pond, a large parking lot, and the football stadium. The high school was a complex of buildings that included a performing arts center, a gymnasium, and the one story classroom building that also housed the library media center and the administrative offices. The front of the building faced north and opened onto a student commons area with the library on one end. The main office consisted of a counter facing the commons area with a set of smaller offices circling around behind the main desk. It had a very open feel to it, and I quickly became acclimated to walking in, declaring my presence, and heading off to the classroom I had come to visit. No one paid me any mind, and there seemed to be no rituals to observe such as sign-in sheets or name tags. A hallway lined with painted blue metal lockers circled the office, which formed a hub in the center of the one story building. Every few feet along the hallway solid doors indicated classrooms, with the English teachers' rooms grouped together about halfway around on the far side of the office.

Throughout the year, signs and posters appeared and disappeared as each sports season rolled around. The Claremont teams contended for state titles all year long and provided a common cultural focus for the community as well as the school. Faculty and students celebrated athletic achievements and team successes as evidenced by posters, banners, and personal signs on student lockers.

Claremont High School, comprised of grades 9-12, had an enrollment of approximately 500 students in the 2013-2014 academic year. The School Report Card for the 2013-2014 academic year at the high school showed minimal changes in the demographics from middle school to high school. The ethnic makeup shifted slightly toward less diversity. Caucasian students made up 84% of the student population, with only 1% Black, 4% Hispanic, 11% Native American, and 0% Asian. 52% of students qualified for free and reduced lunches.

More than 30 teachers worked at the high school, and 40% of them had advanced degrees with an average of 14 years of experience in the classroom. The senior graduation rate came in slightly higher than the state average, and more than 70% of the 2014 seniors participated in a Career Technology Occupationally Specific Program, and over 60% completed the Regents' College Bound Curriculum, although only about 40% of students eventually attended college either in state or out of state. 82% of students scored proficient or above on the English III End of Instruction test which fell slightly below the state average at 87%.

The poverty rate in this rural community stood at only 17%, the average household income averaged \$52,884 (\$8500 less than the state average income), unemployment remained high at 9% compared with 7% statewide during the same reporting period, and 39% of students came from single parent households. Only 13% of the community population graduated from

college compared with 23% across the state. 65% had high school diplomas, but 22% had less than a 12th grade education, a significantly higher number than the state average of 14%.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation contains six chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction to the study, a description of the problem statement, a list of research questions, and a detailed description of each of the two sites including physical and demographic details. The review of pertinent literature comprises Chapter 2, and Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study in detail, the researcher's theoretical perspective, the design of the research including sampling techniques, descriptions of the sample including a demographic table, and the steps and procedures used in data collection and analysis. In Chapters 4 and 5, I present my findings and a summary of those findings. In Chapter 6, I conclude by analyzing and interpreting the findings through a Habermasian lens and by making recommendations for future research and practice.

Acronyms and Terminology

AYP—Adequate Yearly Progress—Measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under No Child Left Behind.

CCSS—Common Core State Standards—a set of academic standards in mathematics and English language arts that outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. They were developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to establish consistent standards across the states. Adopted by the state of Oklahoma in 2010, the standards were called C3 Standards (College, Career, and Civic Life) and briefly they were the OAS or Oklahoma Academic Standards which are now associated with PASS (see below).

EOI---End of Instruction—Standardized assessments given to secondary students in Oklahoma in various subject areas. Students must pass a minimum number of these tests in order to graduate.

NCLB—No Child Left Behind—2001 federal law reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and mandating specific reforms in education

OCCT—Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests—Criterion-referenced tests given to all students in grade 3-8 in Oklahoma public schools.

OSDE—Oklahoma State Department of Education

PASS—Priority Academic Student Skills—Broad set of educational objectives developed and implemented by the state of Oklahoma in the 1993-94 school year. Revised in 2010 and restored as the preferred curriculum after the repeal of Common Core in June of 2014.

SLO/SOO—Student Learning Objectives/Student Outcome Objectives—A measurable academic goal based on available data that a teacher or a group of teachers sets for a student or a subgroup of students. The results convert to a quantitative score that accrues to the teacher’s evaluation.

TLE—Teacher and Leader Effectiveness—The name of Oklahoma’s teacher evaluation method.

VAM—Value Added Measure—A quantitative measure of a teacher’s contribution to students’ academic growth based on student performance. The measure is included in Oklahoma’s TLE.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In order to provide a research-based understanding of each of the concepts explored throughout the case study, I provide the following critical literature review that defines and examines the history and current understandings of each of the thematic topics that emerged in the course of this research. I began the research with an examination of the literature surrounding the Common Core State Standards, argumentation in the secondary classroom, and the role of effective professional development in helping teachers navigate reforms. After I entered the field, several other topics emerged in the course of my conversations with teachers, and I returned to the literature to examine accountability and the role of Value-Added Measures and the role of curriculum alignment in improving student achievement.

The purpose of the literature review is to show how the emergent concepts have evolved, to elucidate why these particular themes have relevance for teachers in today's English language arts (ELA) classrooms, and to identify gaps in the literature to which this study can potentially contribute. In this review, I examine the relevant research available on the topics of the impact of standardized testing on writing instruction, the history of Common Core and standards-based education, Common Core and the emphasis on argumentative writing, curriculum alignment, teacher accountability through value-added measures, teachers' responses to reform, and

effective professional development. Previous research on each of these components contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Oklahoma English language arts teachers in the throes of reform and change, and it provides context and background for the findings in this case study. Through this literature review, I also identify gaps where this study could be most illuminating.

Effects of Standardized Tests on Writing Instruction

The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation redirected the focus of public education to raising student achievement levels in reading and math and made lower achieving students including students with disabilities and English Language Learners a central concern. NCLB required schools to test students in reading and math every year in grades 3-8 with the goal of reaching 100% proficiency or 100% of students at grade level by 2014. Each state defined for its schools what constituted proficiency, and they measured schools in terms of “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). Schools who failed to make AYP for more than one year in a row faced improvement plans, corrective action, restructuring, and even closure (Darling-Hammond, 2007). As 2014 approached, it became apparent to nearly everyone that the goal of 100% proficiency would prove unattainable, and a waiver system from the federal government took the sting out of the requirements for states who applied for them including Oklahoma (McNeil, 2014). Nevertheless, the standardized, multiple-choice tests implemented under NCLB became the defining measure of student learning and teacher effectiveness.

NCLB has negatively impacted writing instruction in English Language Arts classes since its implementation, according to the few studies that exist in the literature (Brimi, 2012; McCarthy, 2008). McCarthy (2008) interviewed eighteen voluntary third and fourth grade teachers in Utah and Illinois in both high and low income schools about their attitudes toward

NCLB and the changes in writing instruction they have made since implementation of the legislation. The researchers also observed in classrooms resulting in extensive field notes. Four themes emerged in the interviews and the field notes: Teachers felt compelled to focus on preparing students for the standardized tests required by the law; they expressed concern about the narrowing of the curriculum through the elimination of some subjects and the loss of creativity in instruction to focus on test preparation; they commented about their own raised awareness of and increased focus on low-achieving students; and teachers with English Language Learners voiced “strong, negative feelings about the inclusion of their test scores in determining AYP” (McCarthy, 2008, p. 483). McCarthy concluded that “many teachers are experiencing NCLB as a repressive means of regulating curriculum through the technology of testing” (p. 499). As schools increased the focus on test results and ultimately tied graduation and teacher evaluations directly to the tests, teachers felt compelled to spend more and more time on test preparation pushing untested skills out of the curriculum. Student populations who traditionally did not perform well on standardized tests became the subject of increased scrutiny. All students encountered increased pressure to do well on high stakes tests, all the while knowing that failing to do so could result in dire consequences for school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2007). These aspects of NCLB caused consternation on the part of educators and have resulted in an almost constant re-evaluation of the law practically since its implementation. Darling Hammond (2007) suggested,

...the law’s focus on complicated tallies of multiple-choice-test scores has dumbed down the curriculum, fostered a ‘drill and kill’ approach to teaching, mistakenly labeled successful schools as failing, driven teachers and middle-class students out of public schools and harmed special education students and English –language learners through

inappropriate assessments and efforts to push out low-scoring students in order to boost scores (p. 13).

In a case study, Brimi (2012) looked at the effects of standardized writing tests on teachers' perceptions and classroom writing instruction. He interviewed five teachers about their process of teaching writing and found that they focused almost exclusively on persuasive writing as required for the standardized tests. They reported a lack of college preparation for teaching composition and indicated they relied on trial and error, conference presentations, and other professional development to learn appropriate strategies for teaching writing. The difficulties they encountered in teaching the writing process made it palatable for the teachers in Brimi's (2012) study to rely on the simple, concrete, five-paragraph model required for success on the standardized writing tests. They also limited the types of writing they taught in deference to the kinds of writing the tests required. These teachers focused on the types of writing that prepared students to pass tests rather than developing quality writing instruction aimed at producing better writers. Manzo (2001), in an earlier study, found similar results among teachers in California. He suggested, "...many teachers...are simply adapting or reducing their writing instruction to a formula for success on state exams" (p. 1-2), even though research indicates narrow test preparation in writing does not necessarily result in higher test scores for students. In fact, Manzo (2001) found that students actually perform better on the writing tests when they receive a broad, rich curriculum of comprehensive writing instruction.

The dominance of multiple choice tests focused on reading comprehension skills under NCLB served to push writing instruction out of the curriculum for many ELA teachers, but new standards proposed by the National Governors' Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and adopted by most states in 2010 seemed poised to restore

writing to a place of prominence in the curriculum with requirements that students develop skills in at least three types of writing--expository, narrative, and argumentative.

Teaching Argumentative Writing

An examination of composition and writing instruction in public schools reveals a longstanding emphasis on structures and types of writing. For decades, textbooks focused on the writing process providing scaffolding for multi-paragraph essays that typically fell into one of four categories: explanatory/informative, narrative, descriptive, or persuasive. Students learned the rules and produced essays using the appropriate formula and language for each type of writing. This formula played a key role particularly in state writing tests where the rubrics and scoring rewarded standardized responses that followed the formulas and de-emphasized critical or creative thinking (Hillocks, 2010).

The kind of formulaic writing that garners positive results on standardized tests in public schools has not prepared students for the kind of writing required of them in college coursework. Composition classes in colleges and universities have come to rely on British philosopher Stephen Toulmin's model of argumentation outlined in his classic work, *The Uses of Argument* (1958). Toulmin's model for an argument contains several key components including a claim, supporting evidence, and a warrant that explains how the evidence supports the claim. Backing provides support for the warrants and strengthens the argument. Arguers using Toulmin must also address counter arguments or rebuttals and describe any qualifications that might limit the power of the argument (Hillocks, 2011).

Several recent studies (Andrews, Torgerson, Low, & McGuinn, 2009; Klein & Rose, 2010; Rex, Thomas, & Engel, 2010; Schmoker, 2007; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Wingate, 2012) examined the teaching of argumentation in public school classrooms to determine both benefits

and obstacles to preparing students for college writing. Studies that included middle school, high school, and university undergraduate programs indicated students from about fifth grade benefited from a balanced, inquiry-based argument writing curriculum that also served them well through high school and into their early college careers. Andrews, Torgerson, Low, and McGuinn (2009) reviewed 11 true experiments or quasi-experiments from 1990 until 2006 and determined that 7-14 year olds could successfully write arguments with certain conditions in place including: A writing process model that included planning, drafting, revising, and editing; training in cognitive reasoning; peer collaboration or dialogue; strategies that included oral argument, counterargument, and rebuttal to inform their written arguments; explicit goals including a specific audience; teacher modeling of argumentation; and scaffolding or procedural facilitation that leads them through a series of steps (p. 291). The authors concluded that in order for students to successfully master argument writing, teachers must reposition themselves and become expert practitioners modeling good practice as writers themselves instead of just facilitators of learning; finally, teachers in other disciplines must also facilitate the development of argument skills. “Argument has an important role to play in the History lesson, for example, or the Science laboratory” (p. 293). They advocated for professional training for teachers in all curricular areas to help them develop skills in modeling good argumentation writing and in coaching students in the most effective writing procedures.

Similarly, Klein and Rose (2010) looked at whether students who learned argument writing could use the argumentation model to learn more about a particular content area as they read to collect evidence, explore and address counterarguments, and make inferences about how new information related to a claim. The researchers designed an experiment in which the students in the experimental group received extensive instruction that included the following

elements: Frequent writing in various content areas, conception of writing as a means of learning, specific detailed training in writing arguments and explanations, nurturing intrinsic motivation to write, constructive use of sources, individual evaluation and revision, assessment designed to support self-evaluations, and remediation in punctuation and spelling (p. 436). The two groups consisted of 19 girls and 15 boys in mixed classes of 5th and 6th grade. The experimental group received explicit instruction in the above elements over two units of study that culminated in two major writing assignments, an argument and an explanation. Students in the experimental group did improve in their ability to employ the various moves of argumentation including looking at both sides of an issue instead of just one. They had difficulty learning new concepts in the content area and the new moves of argument at the same time, so the researchers concluded they needed more extensive descriptive dialogue on the topics and additional writing activities prior to writing arguments about the material presented (p. 432).

Ultimately the researchers concluded that writing to learn is a complex process that includes the need for dialogue with others as well as material resources, but they found small gains resulted from students writing regularly in particular content areas (p. 433). These conclusions matched findings in another study in a high school setting where Rex, Thomas, and Engel (2010) discovered a similar need for conversation and dialogue to lay the groundwork for effective argument writing. The three researchers implemented Toulmin's model of argumentation in an alternative high school setting and found that students who struggled to write coherently could articulate orally an argument with good reasoning behind it, but it took one-on-one guidance and lots of group work for students to learn to write the same arguments. Students worked out the claims, data, and warrants in managed class discussions before they wrote. They could only have the floor to speak in these discussions if they could state a clear

stance and then provide evidence that supported their stance. The discussions resulted in a high level of noisy participation, but they dramatically improved the students' abilities to coherently frame their arguments in writing. "To learn to write well-reasoned persuasive arguments, students need in situ help thinking through the complexity and complications of an issue, making inferences based on evidence, and hierarchically grouping and logically sequencing ideas" (Rex, Thomas, & Engel, 2010, p. 61). The students in the study needed teachers to provide targeted guidance, and they needed copious amounts of conversation with both teachers and peers to organize their thoughts and refine their arguments. The researchers also discovered that students' severe problems with grammar, punctuation, and syntax improved through the process of learning to reason. The authors concluded that even the least likely students can articulate a claim, provide supporting evidence, and connect the two with a warrant when they have time to practice verbally and when they receive targeted practice to help them (p. 61). Students who have ample opportunities to practice arguing verbally in a controlled environment using a Toulmin framework, can more easily learn to write a powerful argumentative paper, laying out a stance/claim, supporting it with convincing and powerful evidence, and justifying claims with well-reasoned warrants. Adolescents already understand and respect argument as a tool for persuasion, but they need help in developing an argument in written academic language.

Schmoker (2007) examined language arts programs in two secondary schools that made curricular changes to include argument writing. In both schools, the implementation of a rigorous curriculum of reading high quality texts and writing multiple thesis-driven, argumentative essays improved test scores tremendously. Schmoker identified two crucial obstacles that schools must overcome in order to implement a curriculum that promotes argumentative literacy. The first obstacle is the curricular chaos that occurs when schools do not

have set guidelines and teachers make all the decisions about what is taught in their own classrooms. Schmoker insisted that teachers and administrators must define what students will learn, what texts they will read, how they will be assessed, and how many written assignments they will complete. With a set curriculum and a plan, it becomes imperative for administrators to establish some kind of accountability system to make sure teachers adhere to the guidelines. A second obstacle preventing schools from implementing rigorous writing curriculum is the misconception that students who do not intend to go to college lack the intellectual skills to handle a more challenging curriculum. Both obstacles require a change in mindset on the part of educators and administrators, and neither obstacle has anything to do with students' actual abilities to learn the skills of argumentation.

Two studies that examined attitudes of incoming college freshmen towards academic writing also presented some compelling data for secondary teachers preparing young people for college writing. Wingate (2012) conducted a case study of incoming undergraduates and found through survey data that incoming freshmen had narrow, partial or even inaccurate understandings about what constituted an argument. Interviews revealed that many freshmen writers struggled with the very basics of argumentation including positioning, choosing relevant, precise evidence, and organizing and structuring papers (p. 152).

Sommers and Saltz (2004) conducted a longitudinal study that explored how college students developed as writers over the course of four years. They concluded that students who wrote papers in college engaged more deeply with the material, students benefited from scaffolded instruction, and they made the greatest gains as writers when they began positioned as novices and developed expertise over time and through experience (p. 145). The process of developing expertise as writers enabled students to see writing as a form of critical thinking that

evolved through the process of appropriating texts that they read and putting them to use in their own writing. They reported feeling less invested in courses where they did not write about the material.

VanDeWeghe (2006) examined Sommers and Saltz's (2004) study, and arrived at several implications for secondary writing teachers preparing students for college writing. He advocated promoting writing as a way of thinking and learning and modeling an attitude that recognizes writing is hard work and celebrates students' efforts. He suggested, "We ought to think about the transition from high school writing to college writing as a *continuation* of high school learning rather than a radical paradigm shift" (p. 65). Writing in high school should precede and prepare for the writing students will do in college and beyond. It should have relevance as a way of learning.

But when students are able to see what they can 'get' and 'give' through writing, they speak passionately about writing as the heart of what they know and how they learn; writing is not an end in itself but is a means for discovering what matters (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 146).

Standards-Based Education and Argumentation

The new Common Core State Standards restored a strong emphasis on writing skills and particularly argumentation. In the key points under the English Language Arts portion of the standards, Common Core requires students to develop the ability to "write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence" (National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices & Council for Chief State School Officers, 2014). By 12th grade, students should proficiently:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.1.A

Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.1.B

Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases (National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015).

The language and vocabulary in the standards matches nicely with Toulmin's (1958) model of argumentation which frequently grounds the writing in college composition classes (Hillocks, 2011). This kind of argumentative inquiry also forms the basis of excellent literary analysis as students begin by collecting data and move "organically to questions of interpretation" (Horger, 2013, p. 10). Common Core provides scaffolding from approximately first grade where students begin with opinion/persuasion language and prompts until fifth grade when the vocabulary and components of argument become the explicit method for analysis and interpretation. The shift from persuasion to argument signals an important recognition that argumentation requires a more sophisticated level of skills. Writers of persuasion rely on their own opinions and beliefs as the basis for their writing, while writers of argumentation look to facts to support their claims. Well-developed argumentation skills lead to stronger critical thinking that deepens a student's ability to analyze all kinds of texts and to write more coherently and logically. The authors of *Everything's an Argument* (Lunsford, Ruskiewicz, & Walters, 2007) asserted, "...all language--including the language of sound and images or of symbol systems other than writing--is in some way argumentative or persuasive, pointing in a direction

and asking for response” (p. vii). Govier (2013) suggested even narratives can be analyzed as arguments by extracting the explicit topic, identifying the implied abstract topic that the more concrete story represents, and then articulating claims as a conclusion for the argument (p. 588). Moving through these steps require students to work out an interpretation of the story through class discussion or critical analysis and higher order thinking. Marzano (2012) noted the inclusion of argument skills in the Common Core math standards as well as language arts, suggesting argumentation should play more of a role in the classroom every day and not just emerge in the curriculum when students write formal papers. “Argument not only makes subject matter more interesting; it also dramatically increases our ability to retain, retrieve, apply, and synthesize knowledge. It works for all students--from lowest-to highest achieving” (Schmoker & Graff, 2011, p. 31). Ultimately, Common Core advocates believe the skills needed to argue well best ensure students’ readiness for college level work or for a career in the 21st century workplace (Hillocks, 2011; Marzano, 2012). .

The Common Core standards for English language arts provide a baseline for teaching argumentation skills to students, but they also present teachers with some interesting challenges. Troia and Olinghouse (2013) identified several strengths and weaknesses in Common Core. The succinctness of the language makes it easy for teachers to isolate specific skills. Because the standards avoid repetition, teachers can easily “sift” to “isolate kernels representing core knowledge and skills expected of students” (pp. 346-247). The standards refer to specific content on average less than twice at any grade level, ensuring consistency across all standards but allowing for broad interpretation by local districts. Teachers, administrators, and local school boards can choose the specific texts students will read, and they can also choose the specific instructional strategies for meeting the standards. Common Core appears to be consistent

in expectations across the grade levels; once a concept is introduced, it carries through with increasing sophistication so that the standards scaffold upward in expectations of student outcomes. The earlier grades address a higher number of writing conventions as logic suggests students need the skills in conventions to learn the more complicated processes of writing and to understand the components of written texts that populate the standards for later grades. The expectation is that once students master conventions in earlier grades, those standards do not require repeating again and again.

Troia and Olinghouse (2013) found the same aspects of Common Core that they identified as strengths could also easily be viewed as weaknesses. Common Core does not seem grounded in the most recent research that identifies certain strategies and processes for teaching writing that have shown success in developing student writers. The standards address the “what” of instruction without specifying the “how” (p. 348). This gives local districts control over how to go about providing instruction, but it does introduce the possibility that the most recent research will not necessarily drive those decisions. While Common Core provides for feedback on writing in kindergarten and first grade, it does not address feedback in later grades where it can have an enormous impact on the quality of students’ papers; however, scaffolding instruction might look the same with more support and guidance in the earlier grades and less guidance as students become more skilled. Troia and Olinghouse (2013) also noted that the standards do not reference the many teaching strategies that support the writing process, and while the standards emphasize teaching grammar in kindergarten through fourth grade, they do not address teaching grammar in the context of writing in any grades (p. 347). The standards also fail to address the basics of text transcription including handwriting and keyboarding, and after third grade, spelling is only referred to in general terms. Common Core lacks any mention of motivation for writing

including goal setting and self-efficacy. Finally, Troia and Olinghouse (2013) suggested because the standards' benchmarks do not explicitly state what students should be able to do and when, they are insufficiently precise and accurate" (p. 348). All of these deficits seem less alarming when educators recognize that Common Core represents the minimum that students should attain at each grade level. They constitute a floor not a ceiling. "These standards offer an opportunity to rethink what counts within the high-stakes environment in which schools and teachers now function" (Newell, et al., 2013, p. 4), but they also provide sufficient latitude for continued local control and teacher autonomy in the classroom.

Curriculum Alignment

The school reform movement that started in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation focused attention on increased student achievement and teacher accountability in order to ensure that students arrived at graduation either college or career ready with the requisite skills needed to succeed. As a means of meeting these goals, educators developed content tied to specific standards and directed instruction to mastering that content. Standardized assessments quickly rose in both credibility and importance as the easiest, most accessible measure of both student achievement and teacher accountability. As teachers devoted more and more time to test preparation to maximize scores which correlated to their own perceived effectiveness, they recognized the need to match their own instruction and curriculum very directly with state standards and the assessments based upon those standards. As Roach, Niebling, and Kurz (2008) define it, alignment as "the extent to which curricular expectations and assessments are in agreement and work together to provide guidance for educators' efforts to facilitate students progress toward desire (sic) academic outcomes" (p. 158). The authors identified standards, written curriculum, and instructional content as the components that must align to meet

curricular expectations. Squires (2012) suggested “Alignment is an agreement or a match between two categories, such as state standards matching the content of a district curriculum” (p. 129). He cited three specific components, the taught curriculum, the written curriculum, and the tested curriculum, that when aligned well, can show positive results in student achievement. When districts align all three components to state standards and assessment specifications and spend time and effort to assure all teachers adopt and teach the content, ostensibly student achievement will improve. Polikoff (2012) indicated “alignment of instruction with the content of standards and assessment is the key mediating variable separating the policy of standards-based reform (SBR) from the outcome of improved student achievement” (p. 341).

Valdez and Marshall (2014) identified the vertical nature of most curriculum alignment in their definition. Curriculum alignment that involves a process of

...designating what students should know and be able to do at the completion of each grade level or course equips educators to set targets by which students climb a ladder of ever-increasing demand and proficiency toward college and career readiness (p. 47).

Setting targets is only the first step in developing a curriculum that enables students to move up a progression of skills. Teachers must also develop instruction and formative assessments that meet the demands of the targets and provide the support for student learning.

The requirements of NCLB pushed educators in the direction of alignment with its reliance on common standards and standardized assessments, “Schools, districts, and states are not considered to be in compliance with NCLB until they have demonstrated that the assessment tools used in their state accountability system...are aligned with standards” (Roach, et al., 2008, p. 159). Polikoff (2012) examined several survey studies that included data from over 27,000 teachers in three different subject areas including language arts. He found the majority of

teachers report efforts to improve alignment; however, problems with this kind of data include how teachers interpret or define the term alignment and the tendency of people to overestimate the amount of change compared to what actually happens in practice. As an example, Polikoff (2012) referenced a case study of elementary teachers in Arizona who reported significant alignment efforts when, in fact, they had not aligned their core curriculum but had created separate classes for test preparation to improve student achievement. He concluded, “While the results...indicate that teachers are responding somewhat to the content of standards and assessments and aligning their instruction, these results do not indicate whether or not instruction is improving in the sense of shifting to content and methods that promote deeper student understanding” (p. 363).

In another study, Polikoff (2013) looked at the measurable characteristics of teachers that influenced whether or not they engaged in curriculum alignment. He found that teachers with 6-8 years of experience in the classroom or those who had taken significantly more content area courses during their college training were statistically more likely to use aligned instruction than those with no experience or who had taken an average number of content-related courses. “The results also suggest that curricular alignment increases with experience to a point (approximately 8-11 years) and decreases thereafter, with brand-new teachers exhibiting the weakest alignment” (Polikoff, 2013, p. 223). Content area knowledge and classroom experience played significant roles in whether teachers saw a need for aligned instruction in their classrooms.

Research shows that curriculum alignment can make a difference in student achievement, and alignment between written standards, assessments, and instruction remains a goal and a requirement for compliance under NCLB. More and more teachers report attempts at aligning their curriculum although evidence suggests understanding and implementation vary widely from

teacher to teacher (Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008; Squires, 2012; Polikoff, 2012; Polikoff, 2013; Valdez & Marshall, 2014). Several rigorous models or frameworks for alignment have been developed and several have the endorsement of a number of state agencies and professional organizations, but they are relatively new and the application of these tools is still not widespread (Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008). Implementation of frameworks that ensure alignment with state standards and assessments as well as the written and taught curriculum through measures of accountability could make a significant difference in the success of alignment processes at the local school level.

Accountability for Teachers in the Form of Value Added Measures

NCLB raised the bar on holding teachers accountable for their students' achievement by demanding that all teachers be highly qualified and that districts show evidence of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) through a variety of measures. The Obama administration made teacher quality a key aspect for districts to qualify for particular incentive grants, and as a result, the teacher evaluation system came under heavy scrutiny (Grossman, Loeb, Cohen, & Wyckoff, 2013). Districts looked for ways to more accurately measure teacher quality and effectiveness, and another acronym gained purchase in the educational lexicon--VAMs or Value Added Measures. For supporters, VAMs provide a way to quantitatively measure a teacher's effectiveness and formalize and improve the teacher evaluation system, but for detractors, they represent a highly suspect measurement that does not take into account significant variables that can impact results. One of the most common VAMs involves taking student standardized test scores each year and converting them to a number that can be attached to a teacher's performance evaluation. In this way, a teacher's effectiveness is judged on how a cohort of students performed after a year in his/her classroom. Since student learning is the primary goal

of all educational efforts and student test scores represent an already captured set of data, many districts have sought to employ that data as an additional and quantitative means of measuring teacher performance. The results may then factor into decisions about teacher retention, raises, bonuses, and other employment related incentives or disincentives (Condie, Lefgren, & Sims, 2014; DiCarlo, 2012), but most education experts recognize that VAMs offer some unique benefits and challenges in terms of the kinds of information they can provide.

Value-added measures based on standardized tests are useful when teachers “teach the content appropriate for the scope and sequence of the district or state standards, the curriculum is coherent and good student outcomes can follow” (Ritter & Shuls, 2012, p. 36). The same measures become less reliable when teachers narrow the curriculum to match expected material on the test and/or focus on test-taking skills specifically, although teachers who choose to teach to a test might also make poor pedagogical decisions without standardized tests. While not foolproof, if a teacher has aligned his/her curriculum with state standards which usually align with the standardized tests, student scores could reflect the contribution to student learning that a particular teacher makes in a given year, and could provide some meaningful information for evaluative purposes (Ritter & Shuls, 2012).

Many critics find fault with VAMs because they claim the measures lack validity and reliability, but such criticisms can apply to nearly every kind of measure including the traditional method of deriving teacher evaluations through classroom observation. Most teacher evaluation systems involve simple ratings of satisfactory or unsatisfactory, principals have no problem identifying the best and the worst performances but differentiation in the middle rarely happens, and the research shows “a weak correlation between the principals’ ratings of teacher performance and actual student achievement” (Goodwin & Miller, 2012, p. 81). Research

(David, 2010; DiCarlo, 2012) suggests the complicated nature of VAMs requires special considerations and awareness of potential pitfalls before using them to make decisions about employment or incentives, but they offer one more tool for determining a teacher's effectiveness and ability to impact learners positively.

Goodwin and Miller (2012) identified several pitfalls that administrators need to keep in mind when using value-added measures to evaluate teachers. Many non-teacher effects may impact student achievement in immeasurable ways. Family situations, motivation, prior knowledge, and many other outside variables impact student achievement in ways over which teachers have no control. Small class sizes can produce data that provides an inaccurate portrait of a particular teacher by fluctuating too much statistically. Schools tend to place students in classrooms in non-random ways which means a teacher can end up with a class of accelerated learners or the opposite which can skew the test results. Previous very effective or ineffective teachers can have residual impacts on students that may either give too much credit to the current teacher or diminish his/her effect on student learning. Finally, teachers' year to year scores vary so much that it is difficult to put much stock in the test scores as value-added measures because of their lack of consistency. Grossman, et al., (2013) also identified several problems with VAMS. Test scores can provide important measures, but effective teachers do more than just improve test scores. For example, improving writing, critical thinking, and rigorous discussion skills represent significant and important expectations in language arts classes. "Some aspects of good teaching...may not be captured by multiple-choice measures typical of standardized tests" (p. 448). VAMs also provide a measure of teacher effectiveness in a way that gives little guidance to teachers on how they can improve, and VAMs based on tests only apply to teachers in tested grades and subjects (Grossman, et al., 2013, p. 448).

Even with these significant pitfalls, VAMs can provide useful information about teacher effectiveness as long as administrators remain mindful of the problems. DiCarlo (2012) suggested some key measures to take to ensure VAMs are used responsibly. Administrators should avoid mandating high weights (35-40%) but set lower weights (10-20%) with the option of going higher if the evidence supports it. They should pay close attention to all components of a teacher's evaluation and score them as fairly and as accurately as possible. For example,

If an evaluation is composed of value-added data and observations, with each counting for 50 percent, and a time-strapped principal gives all teachers the same observation score, then value-added measures will determine 100 percent of the variation in teachers' scores (p. 40).

Errors should not be ignored but addressed. Like all statistical data, VAMs have margins of error that vary significantly depending upon the number of students. Because of the imprecise nature of VAMs, it is "at least defensible to argue that these estimates...have no business driving high-stakes decisions" (p. 40). DiCarlo (2012) suggested administrators should collect at least two to three years of accumulated data on a teacher before adding the score toward their evaluation, and they should monitor and analyze the results of VAMs, including how they match up with other evaluation components and whether "value added estimates (or evaluation scores in general) vary systematically by student, school, or teacher characteristics" (p. 41). All of these steps can mitigate some of the problems with VAMs while preserving the valuable information they can provide in terms of teacher effectiveness. Ritter and Shuls (2012) suggested,

...if developed thoughtfully and implemented carefully, value-added models can serve as key components in improved teacher evaluation systems by providing important

information on the extent to which classroom teachers have fostered learning gains...Moving in this direction would represent a giant step forward in better identifying which teachers need assistance, which ones need a new assignment, and which teachers (or schools) are highly effective and should be models for the rest of us (p. 38).

One problem not addressed in the literature concerns the development of VAMs for teachers in content areas or grade levels that do not have a standardized test associated with them. Oklahoma addressed this deficit in the 2014-2015 school year with the introduction of Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)/Student Outcome Objectives (SOOs). The Oklahoma State Department of Education defines these concepts as follows: “An SLO/SOO is a measurable, long-term, academic goal informed by available data that a teacher or teacher team sets at the beginning of the year for all students or for subgroups of students” (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2015, January 2). The OSDE website contains a wealth of materials about SLO/SOOs including considerable research into their effectiveness and professional development materials for preparing teachers to use the templates. For the few months that the system was in place in the second semester of the 2014-2015 school year, teachers filled out a template in which they described baseline data, student population, the interval of instruction, standards and content, assessments, growth targets, rationale for growth targets, and instructional strategies. The expectation was that SLO/SOOs would be tallied for each class and the data translated into a score which would comprise 35% of quantitative data on each teacher’s evaluation. Another 50% of their evaluation would come from the traditional principal observation method, and the final 15% from other academic measures such as Advanced Placement exams, awards, or some other item chosen by the teacher.

On March 3, 2015, OSDE announced a delay in the implementation of SLO/SOOs until an unannounced future date:

As a result of current recommendations from the TLE Commission on February 19 and a decision by the State Board of Education on February 26, SLOs/SOOs will be **postponed** for the 2014-2015 school year. Student Academic Growth measures for teachers of non-tested grades and subjects (SLOs/SOOs) will not be reported to the Oklahoma State Department of Education for the 2014-2015 school year (OSDE, 2015, March 3).

As of September 2015, the materials on the OSDE website concerning SLO/SOOs had not been updated.

Value-added measures have an important role to play in measuring teacher effectiveness, but administrators and education leaders need to recognize the many pitfalls and problems with this kind of quantitative data. Grossman, et al. (2013) suggested that these measures “do not stand up to scrutiny when individuals fail to retain their job or receive a salary increment” (p. 466). We need a much better understanding of how these measures work in combination with other means of determining teacher effectiveness and how best to utilize them to improve teacher performance before they are used for high stakes decisions such as teacher retention or raises.

Teachers and Reform

Over the last few years, researchers have directed some attention to how teachers respond to mandated educational reforms. In light of the many mandated reforms since NCLB, several researchers have directed attention to how teachers respond to these reforms and efforts to encourage them to change their practice. Several studies have focused on barriers to change and what factors might increase the chances of successful implementation of required reforms (Knight, 2009; Terhart, 2013; Thornberg & Mungai, 2011; Zimmerman, 2006). Inevitably, time

constraints and lack of leadership topped the lists of barriers. Additionally, Thornberg and Mungai (2011) reported teachers complained that previous reform efforts have failed, and many of the new required reforms have actually been tried and abandoned in the past. Teachers also objected to what they see as the economic and political sources of reform efforts, considering them outside forces that fail to consider the needs of students (p. 213). Zimmerman (2006) identified additional barriers: Failure to recognize the need for change, habit or a sense of security in the familiar, fear of the unknown, perceived threats to expertise and power relationships, and perceived threats to resource allocations. Teachers, not unlike many other workers faced with change, preferred what they already knew. They feared losing status and material resources as well as the security of the familiar. The keys to implementing changes and reforms effectively, according to Zimmerman (2006), required school administrators to develop a culture of shared decision-making, to enhance teachers' self-efficacy by including them in the process, to create a sense of urgency and recognized need, to develop and implement a vision, to reward constructive behaviors, to aim for short-term success, and to create Professional Learning Communities among teachers to address long-term possibilities (pp. 239-240). Teachers responded more positively to implemented changes when they had some voice in the process.

Knight (2009) suggested powerful, easy to implement ideas or tools, demonstrations of new techniques before implementation, and hands-on experience with new approaches greatly benefit teachers faced with reforms, and they can be crucial in changing attitudes and beliefs about reforms (pp. 509-510). Administrators and/or professional development leaders who want teacher buy-in also need to recognize and respect the knowledge and expertise that teachers already have. "Ignoring teacher autonomy often ensures that teachers don't implement new practices" (p. 511). Knight (2009) identified another destructive pattern in implementing school

reform that often results in teacher resistance. He called it the “attempt, attack, abandon cycle” where leaders introduce reforms but fail to provide support to ensure the reforms take hold. Some teachers attempt it poorly or ineffectively while others refuse to implement the changes at all (p. 511). Before new methods have an opportunity to take hold, individuals begin to attack them, and eventually everyone abandons the reforms entirely. Abrami, Poulson, and Chambers (2010) also found teachers have to expect they can succeed before they will even entertain the idea of implementing educational innovations. Self-efficacy can act as a vital component for giving teachers the confidence and the impetus to make changes in their practice, but administrators must recognize and affirm their expertise and then provide adequate support.

As indicated above, often experts view teacher reactions to reforms in terms of agreement or resistance, but Luttenberg, van Veen, and Imants (2011) reported teachers use a variety of ways to understand the reforms as they seek “to construct a workable relationship between their own frame of reference and the perceived frames of reference of the reforms” (p. 289). The authors described four approaches that teachers take: Assimilation in which the teacher adapts the perceived frame of reference of the reform to fit his/her own frame of reference; accommodation in which the teacher seeks to fit his/her frame of reference into the perceived frame of reference of the reform; toleration where the teacher puts up with the perceived frame of reference and allows it to predominate even though he/she disagrees with the ideas and the methods prescribed by the reforms; and distantiation where the teacher completely rejects the perceived frame of reference of the reform in favor of his/her own frame of reference (p. 294). As a result of these varied approaches, implementation of reforms becomes multilayered and multidimensional with teachers acting as critical agents of interpretation. The success or failure of reform becomes very hard to predict or to steer. Reform becomes something of a moving

target when subject to the strong influence of “the ongoing dynamic interaction of various processes and factors at the levels of the school and the individual teacher” (p. 291).

Effective Professional Development

Professional development can play an important role in preparing teachers to implement new standards and other reforms, but it can also fail miserably when teachers perceive it as ineffective or a waste of time. Several studies indicated sustained, on-site, long-term professional development that focused on content provided the best opportunities for changing teacher practice (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013). The preliminary results of a longitudinal study (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004) found that 77% of the 779 participant teachers did change at least one aspect of their practice as a result of long-term professional development (p. 46). Kennedy and Shiel (2010) interviewed four classroom teachers and 20 students multiple times about on-site professional development that occurred every two weeks and spanned nearly two years. The teachers reported increased confidence and self-efficacy, a professional learning community formed at the school, and all teachers wanted to continue the work at the end of the study. Teachers also indicated they had higher expectations for their students. Students reported increased motivation and engagement, and 50% of them could identify and define specific comprehension strategies they had learned (p. 379). Student test scores also rose significantly. Pomerantz and Pierce (2013) found that after two years of professional development grounded in knowledge-building, co-teaching, and coaching, 35 of the 36 participating teachers demonstrated an improved ability to teach comprehension strategies in post-professional development observations (p. 108); more importantly, student test scores improved at the school in both English and mathematics for the first time in nine years (p. 112).

A mixed-methods study in the 2004-2005 school year, (Quick, Holtzman, and Chaney, 2009) examined reform efforts in San Diego City Schools. They concluded that teachers found useful a process that allowed all voices some kind of collective participation through an active learning environment over an extended period of time based within the context of the school itself. Interviews with teachers revealed that they valued most the opportunities to collaborate with one another and to learn from the expertise of their peers. They felt safe and comfortable in their own classrooms and schools, and they appreciated the opportunity to ask questions and collaborate in a non-evaluative environment. Both teachers and leadership team members cited trust as a “critical aspect of an effective learning environment” (p. 57).

Hochberg and Desimone (2010) noted contextual factors that ensured success in bringing about change through professional development. Trust between administrators and faculty, effective leadership, and a set of protocols or norms can reduce teachers’ feelings of vulnerability and stress and can open the possibilities of building a community of educators dedicated to “improving instructional practice, aligning instruction with content standards, and addressing the needs of diverse learners” (p. 101). Poulsen and Avramidis (2003) affirmed that a combination of collaboration and expertise offers a creative tension that gives educators both an opportunity to learn coupled with the space to navigate the challenges inherent in learning something new (p. 557).

Theoretical Framework

Education reform in the United States has taken a number of turns in the last sixty years, but few as highly anticipated and simultaneously dreaded as the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) developed by the National Governors Association for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) and set to fully engage sometime in

2014. Advocates of the CCSS claim the standards promise consistency in expectations, a clear focus, local flexibility, and increased rigor that will ensure all students are college-career ready upon graduation from high school. This readiness requires students be equipped with critical thinking skills and strong communication skills to enable them to work together with fellow citizens to resolve differences and solve problems that inevitably arise in a democratic society.

The Common Core State Standards have much in common with philosopher Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (1992), including a strong emphasis on formal argumentation skills. Habermas (1992) envisioned schools as public spheres where political and ethical considerations and practices come together. These two roles often conflict with each other, but it has become increasingly important for the conflict to be resolved, and communication through argumentation may provide a solution by teaching students to recognize and consider all sides of an issue. Problems remain unresolved when people take sides and refuse to yield or compromise with those of opposing views. The education system may provide the way out of an impasse in the public sector if children of the next generation learn the vital skills of argumentation as Habermas envisions it, including effective listening and speaking. In the public space that educational institutions provide, it may be possible that "all are heard, no one is excluded, all have equal power to question the justifications of others, to ask questions, all are equal in making decisions and reaching conclusions, coercion is excluded and the only power exercised is the power of the most reasonable argument" (Moran & Murphy, 2012, p. 174).

Habermas' theory of communicative action develops from his paradigm shifting idea of a philosophy grounded in language rather than consciousness. Rationality emerges out of argument built on good reasoning that leads to understanding and consensus. A rational person can present an argument and defend that argument in communication with others. "We use the

term *argumentation* for that type of speech in which participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation” (Habermas, 1992, p. 18). The strength of an argument depends on the soundness of the reasons attached to it and its ability to sway or convince other participants. In a strong argument, the claimant tries to support a claim with good reasons or grounds; the opposing side can question the quality and the relevance of that evidence. The claimant must meet objections and at times modify his original claim. Each participant recognizes the other as an equal ---“an autonomous individual who is able to raise and redeem validity claims, and each aspires to respect and recognize the worthiness of the claims raised by others” (Sarid, 2013, p. 930). Ultimately, consensus comes about as a result of “the unforced force of the better argument” (Sarid, 2013, p. 930). Habermas’s theory provides theoretical support for grounding writing and speaking skills in a deliberative communicative discourse. Deliberative communicative discourse offers new possibilities in educating a generation skilled in effective argumentation and interested in consensus-building that leads to the solution of problems, and CCSS weaves those skills into the English language arts in both oral and written capacities.

Englund (2006) suggested that Habermas’s theory of deliberative communication directly develops from the pragmatic tradition of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. He describes the potential for an education system where students engage in deliberative communication in order to create meaning, displacing traditional teaching models where schools tend to reinforce the values and priorities of the home or local community. In this kind of external and public space, all ideas and viewpoints receive a fair hearing, and opinions form after significant opportunities for dialogue and exchange. Students trained in this kind of deliberative democracy understand and respect three primary principles: Reciprocity (mutual respect for everyone’s

views), publicity (everyone knows everything), and accountability (everyone is accountable to everyone else). Deliberative communication in schools makes room for different views, tolerance, respect, collective will-formation, and conversations and deliberation among students without teacher control (Englund, 2006, p. 512).

John Dewey recognized that students' interests propel their learning through experiences, reflection, and imagination, and teachers guide them toward "warranted assertions, democratic values, meaning construction, and aesthetic satisfaction" (Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 66). In this way, teachers help students move from an elementary understanding of how the world works to a more mature, adult comprehension. "Dewey's work is basic to the idea of deliberative communication in schools. This is also true of his view that one of the central tasks of education is to develop the capacity of every individual for intelligent deliberation and balanced consideration of alternatives through mutual communication" (Englund, 2006, p. 508).

Lev Vygotsky (1978) posited the zone of proximal development as "*...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers*" (p. 33, italics in the original). Instructional scaffolding as a pedagogically sound method in education is one result of Vygotsky's thinking. Scaffolding provides support for the student's initial performance of a new task and distinguishes it from a subsequent effort without assistance. Benko (2012) identifies three primary aspects of scaffolding that make it a useful tool in helping students develop and improve as writers. A critical step in scaffolding student writing is selecting an appropriately challenging task that allows an opportunity for student ownership through personal interest and involvement, and that allows students to be "recruited" to the assignment through participation in "creative and

enjoyable experiences” before beginning the difficult task of thinking critically about the text (p. 295). The teacher’s instruction can help scaffold student completion of a writing task by simplifying a task and letting the student perfect the components he can manage, but then it is important to move beyond the simplified task and not allow it to become the goal. Providing written feedback that gives students specific guidance on how to revise rather than just make “surface level” corrections, using graphic organizers or resource maps to guide note-taking during class discussions, teaching mini-lessons for specific issues students have, and modeling through the teacher’s own writing all provide significant scaffolding during instruction. Finally, the teacher who takes a stance supporting student writing by creating a caring, nurturing classroom where students work is valued and read with interest provides a positive and meaningful community for reluctant writers where they can grow and share without fear (Benko, 2012, p. 297).

All of these concepts provide a unique and appropriate lens for examining the case at hand. These concepts, including Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action, Dewey’s experiential learning, and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, along with relevant literature outlined in this chapter will both ground and illuminate the interpretation of the findings in Chapter 5.

Summary

This literature review examined the relevant research on each of the major components that emerged in the course of the study. From the reviewed literature on NCLB and its impact on writing instruction, I can conclude that the reform law resulted in a narrowing of the ELA curriculum leading to the reduction of writing instruction as teachers spent more classroom time on test preparation, in spite of the recognition that students need writing skills for both college

and career paths. Common Core standards, launched in 2010, reintroduced the importance of argumentative writing instruction into the ELA curriculum with scaffolded skills from approximately 5th grade up through 12th grade. Oklahoma quickly adopted Common Core, and then repealed it four years later leaving teachers who had transitioned in a quandary. The standards emphasized the need for curriculum alignment, a process mandated by NCLB as well.

The scrutiny on the teacher evaluation system and the introduction of quantitative measures into that process also resulted from NCLB mandates. Value-added measures can offer valuable information about teacher effectiveness, but they can also be error-ridden and require careful monitoring and systematic implementation.

Research shows teachers have very predictable reactions to reform efforts and to particular kinds of professional development; however, because of the suddenness of the repeal of Common Core in Oklahoma and the short time frame between the repeal and the start of the following school year, no research exploring how Oklahoma teachers responded to the changes existed at the beginning of this study. Teachers in Oklahoma faced mandates under NCLB including the emphasis on testing and the increased scrutiny of teacher accountability. In addition, they recognized the need to prepare students with 21st century skills that would enable them to be leaders and effective citizens in the future. This study examines how one small group of teachers responded to these difficult problems. The literature reviewed here provides background and support for the study, and the theoretical framework provides a unique lens for examining and interpreting the data. Links between the literature and the data analysis and interpretation will be explored when and where applicable.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how English language arts teachers in Oklahoma responded to and adjusted for the repeal of the Common Core State Standards after four years of preparation and anticipation of their implementation in fall of 2014. I observed and interviewed middle school and high school teachers from a relatively large rural district in Oklahoma in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Oklahoma English Language Arts teachers' experiences and perceptions of the Common Core State Standards and their recent repeal?
2. What steps had teachers taken to implement Common Core in teaching students to develop arguments and critical thinking skills in the domains of writing and speaking? How did the repeal of the standards impact their teaching of argumentation skills?
3. What kind of professional development might help them most in dealing with the changes?
4. What can middle and high school language arts teachers learn from each other?

This chapter provides an overview of the rationale, approach, and methods I used for the research design, criteria for and description of the sample data collection, methods of data collection and analysis, my strengths and biases as a researcher, trustworthiness issues and solutions, and a brief concluding summary.

Theoretical Perspective

In contrast to quantitative research which is primarily concerned with testing hypotheses to establish facts or describe relationships between variables, qualitative research takes a constructivist approach and seeks to examine and understand social situations and how participants experience them. Constructivism highlights the unique experience of each individual and how they make sense of the world and their experiences within it. The researcher gains access to the world of the participants and delves for rich data that can help him/her understand how each participant experiences the situation under exploration. “We...conduct qualitative research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people...and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 40). In qualitative research, the focus stays squarely on the participants’ meanings and experiences with the problem or situation. The researcher goes directly into the field and has “direct and personal contact with people under study in their own environments” (Patton, 2002, p. 48). A naturalistic design for qualitative research often emerges as the study progresses, and all pieces of the process remain subject to change once the researcher enters the field. “Design flexibility stems from the open-ended nature of naturalistic inquiry as well as pragmatic considerations” (Patton, p. 44). Qualitative inquiry qualifies as both interpretive and holistic. The qualitative researcher interprets his findings based on what he/she sees and hears after “reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 39).

As an interpretivist, I assume that understanding comes through the interaction of human beings and that each individual constructs his/her own meaning based on social and cultural

experiences unique to that person. I believe that reality is socially constructed, and there can be multiple, valid understandings of truth or knowledge. What we know is negotiated and depends upon our social interactions and relationships with other people in culture and society. In order to interpret the experiences and understandings of secondary language arts teachers with the standards reform enacted by the Oklahoma legislature and governor, I entered into the field to gather data directly from my participants in an instrumental case study. I constructed and interpreted the participants' meanings and understandings as carefully and as thoroughly as I could while always remaining aware of my own biases and intrusion into the field. Using critical theory as a base for exploration, I approached the data attempting to explain what I found, identify the problems inherent in the current structures in secondary English classrooms in Oklahoma, and illuminate possible goals for transforming and improving those structures for Oklahoma teachers. I examined the data with a critical theorist lens, specifically that of Habermas and his theory of communicative action and deliberative discourse within the framework of education reform and the teaching of argumentation skills in English language arts classrooms.

Rationale for Case Study Design

Case study is a qualitative methodology developed in the social sciences and designed to capture the complexity of a single case or multiple cases, depending upon the intent or purpose of the study. This approach to collecting and analyzing data calls for in-depth exploration of a particular person, program, institution, neighborhood, culture, critical incident, or any single bounded or fenced in entity (Stake, 1995; Merriam 1998; Patton, 2002). In particular, Stake (1995) identifies instrumental case study as one in which the researcher attempts to gain insight into a specific question(s) or need for understanding by studying a single, particular case or

defined group of participants. In the current study, I sought insight into how middle and high school language arts teachers perceived, responded to, and adjusted for the repeal of CCSS just months prior to their full implementation, and how these particular teachers attempted to continue to teach using Common Core in spite of the repeal and its lack of alignment with mandated tests. The boundaries of the case included the participants themselves and the context: One administrator, three teachers from the middle school, and three teachers from the high school in one school district in rural Oklahoma who elected to attempt to teach English language arts using Common Core for the 2014-15 school year.

In a well-designed qualitative case study, research questions typically drive the study giving shape and form to the research. Stake (1995) suggests the questions may evolve once the researcher enters the field, but identifying questions remains an important step in design. He proposes writing a set of 10-20 potential questions based on early contact in the field, personal experience with the issue, or relevant literature that might indicate what others have found confusing or controversial about the issue. I began this study with approximately 10 potential questions based on my own experience as a secondary language arts teacher, my reading of the CCSS for language arts, and my reaction to the reform efforts. Once I began looking for a specific site and group of teachers, I refined my questions to the four listed at the beginning of this chapter. My final questions concerned the interaction between two different potential levels of schooling as well as the teachers' individual responses to the reform. I also added an administrator as a participant at the suggestion of the other participants, and I adjusted my questions somewhat to accommodate her role as the curriculum expert in the district. Sometimes emic issues emerge in the course of the study that bring to the surface new questions. The list of questions should remain flexible (as does the rest of the design), and the researcher continually

refines and redefines the issues as he/she progresses in make sense of the case. “The researcher’s greatest contribution perhaps is in working with the research questions until they are just right” (Stake, 1995, p. 19-20). Good research questions ground a case study.

Researcher as Instrument

As the researcher, I functioned as the primary instrument of data collection in keeping with the constructivist nature of qualitative research. Since the purpose of qualitative research is to examine social situations and interactions by sending the researcher into the world of the participants, it is assumed that the researcher and the participants will influence each other in many ways (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998). As a qualitative researcher, I constructed interpretations and findings influenced by my own background, knowledge, experience training, and personal bias toward the issues. As a former high school English teacher and middle school library media specialist, I shared common knowledge and experiences with my participants; I tried to be aware of any ways that my biases and experiences influenced my analysis. Through my own careful reading of the Common Core State Standards, I formed opinions and developed an understanding prior to entering the field that made it necessary for me to bracket my own experience with Common Core and focus on what the participants said. My interest in Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action and Toulmin’s Model of Argumentation and their possible contributions to teaching writing and communication skills in secondary schools led me to this study initially. It also seemed obvious to me that these theories “fit” nicely with Common Core. These various opinions, experiences, and biases impacted the way I understood and interpreted the data even though I made every effort to suspend them and accurately represent the participants’ own meanings. My presence undoubtedly had an influence on the subjects, as well. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) indicate that while researchers can never

eliminate all the ways they impact their subjects, “(t)hey can, however, understand their effect on the subjects through an intimate knowledge of the setting, and use this understanding to generate additional insights” (p. 47). I often stopped myself from contributing to conversations, and I realized many times that the participants hesitated before asking my opinions as we engaged in a kind of formal dance, getting to know one another quite well over the nine months of the study but maintaining certain boundaries of behavior. They looked to me as an expert because of my role at the university in secondary English education. I tried to maintain Patton’s (2002) “empathic neutrality” by staying in that middle ground where I avoided too much personal involvement to prevent clouded judgment and also too much distance which might limit understanding (p. 50). In the end, I hope my common knowledge and experiences worked as an advantage in that my inherent understanding of their situations added depth to my interpretation of the findings.

Sampling

Sampling procedures in qualitative research usually involve non-probability sampling since generalization is not often the goal. Instead the researcher seeks information or understanding about a particular phenomenon. Merriam (1998) explains, “ Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Patton (2002) gives us the term “purposeful sampling.” “The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research...” (p. 46).

With case studies two levels of sampling occur. First, the researcher identifies the case, and then chooses a sample from within the case for specific data collection. Merriam (1998) suggests establishing basic criteria and selecting a case that fits within those established boundaries. I used the following criteria to select the site that became the case in this study:

1. The site needed to have invested significant time and effort into transitioning to the CCSS prior to the repeal.
2. The site should have a significant number of teachers in the area of English language arts so enough willing participants can be selected.
3. The site needs to be somewhat accessible and open to participating in the research process.

I contacted three different potential school districts and purposefully selected a site that had not only transitioned to Common Core but planned to continue using the national standards for the 2014-2015 school year. My interest in how they taught argumentation based on Common Core developed out of the similarities I saw between the standards and Habermas' theory and Toulmin's framework for argumentation. The principals at each site exhibited enthusiasm for participating in the research and offered access to both the teachers and the classrooms.

The following criteria aided in selection of specific participants:

1. Research participants should be language arts teachers in the district chosen for the case.
2. Teacher participants should willingly contribute their experiences and viewpoints through conversations and interviews.

3. Teacher participants should be willing to allow classroom observations as needed and share curriculum documents.

I selected participants who had a broad array of experience in the classroom and at that particular site in terms of years. Teacher participants also represented a variety of grade levels and experience with Common Core. These multiple perspectives allowed me to achieve a more holistic picture of the case and strengthened the relevance of this qualitative study.

I initially made appointments with each of the building principals to explain the study and to ask for their assistance in securing participants. Both principals agreed readily to allow the study and provided me with email contacts for the teachers in their language arts departments. During my initial visit, each of them introduced me to one teacher in their building they thought might willingly participate. Immediately upon receiving IRB approval, I contacted the teachers via email, and received an invitation to attend a high school departmental meeting to present my study. The middle school teachers invited me to come and explain the study to three teachers who expressed interest in participating. All of the teachers at the high school read and signed consent forms at the meeting allowing me to attend their weekly meetings throughout the year. These consent forms provided details of the study including their right to withdraw at any time and assuring them of confidentiality. Three of those teachers eventually agreed to be interviewed and to allow me to observe in their classrooms. All three teachers from the middle school who attended the explanation meeting agreed to participate and signed forms before I left that day. After several casual conversations with some of the participants, two of them suggested that I also talk to the new Director of Student and Instructional Services whose duties included professional development as well as curriculum development. She also readily agreed to participate, signed a consent form, and I added her to the study about two months after I

entered the field. Sample selection in this study was constrained by the number of teachers available and willing to participate. Both departments were small (one teacher per grade level), and some teachers early on elected not to participate. I did solicit and secure the number of participants that I initially wanted, and fortunately, their teaching experiences gave me the diversity in the sample that I sought.

Participants

The principals at both sites volunteered their teachers and provided me with email addresses and immediate access to the teachers. At the high school, Principal Lockwood took me immediately across the library to meet the department head. Her enthusiasm for the project left me ill-prepared for the reluctance I encountered later with some of the other teachers, but ultimately, I convinced six teachers and an administrator to participate in the interviews and allow me to observe in classrooms and at departmental meetings. The teachers who agreed to participate in the study came from a variety of backgrounds and experience levels. All but two of the teachers who participated had more than ten years of experience, and had taught in the district for several years.

The following table gives demographic details on the participants and their self-reported experiences with the standards prior to the beginning of the study:

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Total Number of Years Taught	Number of Years at Claremont	Age Range	Position in 2014-2015	Experience with CCSS (self-report)
Ali	16	6	35-44	9th ELA, Pre AP	Uses CCSS regularly in writing lesson plans
Jenna	4	1	22-29	10th ELA, Pre-AP	New from Texas. Has not used CCSS before this year.
Laura	20	20	45-54	12th ELA, AP Literature (11th grade)	Uses CCSS but standards do not drive her teaching
Mary	26	26	45-54	6th, 7th, and 8th ELA Remediation	Says materials are CCSS, but the tests are PASS. Doesn't believe her students are ready for CCSS level work.
Norah	1	1	22-29	6th ELA	Prefers CCSS based on limited experience with it.
Tanya	11-15	11-15	35-44	8th ELA	Uses CCSS regularly in writing lesson plans.
Shannon	16-20, 1 year in current position	16-20	35-44	Director of Student and Instructional Services	

Data Collection Methods

I employed several data collection methods to achieve triangulation, rigor, and depth across the entire study. Patton (2002) suggests that triangulation provides a process of testing for consistency. Rather than seeking similar results from different sources of data, the researcher looks for inconsistencies in the findings that deepen understanding and illuminate the topic more fully. In this case study, interviews comprised the primary method of data collection supplemented by classroom and meeting observations and documents provided by the teachers. Merriam (1998) indicates that in qualitative case study research, often these three types of data collection are used because “(u)nderstanding the case in its totality, as well as the intensive, *holistic* description and analysis characteristic of a case study, mandates both breadth and depth of data collection” (p. 134). Patton (2002) observes, “By using a variety of sources and resources, the evaluator observer can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing the weaknesses of any single approach” (p. 306). The data collection process in this case study lasted from early September until mid-May. During that time, I observed in classrooms, attended departmental meetings, engaged in casual conversations, collected documents for analysis, and conducted interviews.

Observations

I began my data collection with observations that continued throughout the nine months of the study. These observations were meant to supplement the interview data, but ultimately, they provided details and different kinds of information that allowed for a more holistic understanding and interpretation of the case. Patton (2002) indicates direct observational data can benefit a study as it provides context for both the reader and the researcher. It allows the

inquirer to be “open, discovery-oriented, and inductive,” and it gives the researcher an opportunity to notice things that may “routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting” (p. 262). Field observations gave me the opportunity to thoroughly examine the physical environments of both schools and to see participants engaged in teaching in their own classrooms as well as working and communicating with one another in departmental meetings. These direct observations also enabled me to engage with participants, get to know them, and become familiar to them prior to the formal interviews. They allowed me the opportunity to get “close to the activities and every day experiences” of my participants in the words of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995, p. 1). I also collected data that participants might not share directly in an interview that helped round out my understanding of the case.

I requested two classroom observations with each participating teacher, and all six teachers agreed to invite me to come and observe when they taught writing or argumentation. I asked for an invitation to avoid disruption of their daily routines, but ultimately, I had to initiate most of the observations in classrooms. Classroom observations gave me an opportunity to record physical descriptions of classrooms and to see participants engaged with students. Some participants taught a lesson in sequence and allowed me to see a typical classroom experience, but others clearly prepared special activities that occurred in isolation presumably for my benefit. This experience highlighted one of the limitations of field observations described by Patton (2002). “Limitations of observations include the possibility that the observer may affect the situation being observed in unknown ways, program staff and participants may behave in some atypical fashion when they know they are being observed, and the selective perception of the observer may distort the data” (p. 306). Ultimately, I decided that the classroom observations

did not provide much additional information besides context descriptions, and I ceased scheduling them early in the second semester.

The department chair at the high school put me on her email list and invited me to all weekly departmental meetings until they became increasingly less frequent sometime in the second semester. These observations allowed me to see the high school teachers working on curriculum and communicating with each other. I attended and observed one departmental meeting at the middle school late in the semester when they had spent some time on a curriculum alignment project. These group meetings proved much more fruitful in providing information about how the teachers responded to the change in standards and how they fared throughout the school year. In addition, I observed in the hallways while waiting to conduct informal conversations with participants, and I took time to drive around both campuses and take notes about the physical environments surrounding each school. These observations of the environment provided a deeper understanding of context including each school's culture and values.

I took handwritten descriptive notes on a legal pad while observing, and then returned to my computer to compose detailed field observation notes. I included a summary of each observation, my impressions and concerns, and my analytical reflections in the typed notes. I also wrote multiple memos about what I observed throughout the course of the study.

Documents

Documents provided another source of data that helped shape the study and move the research in different directions. Patton (2002) describes documents as “a particularly rich source of information” and “a stimulus for paths of inquiry” (p. 293-294). Lincoln and Guba (1985)

cite their easy availability and low cost as primary reasons for including documents in data collection. They also note the stability of documents over time, their contextual relevance, and the richness of the information a researcher gleans from documents that are “grounded in the contexts they represent” (p. 277). I collected both public and personal documents over the course of the study primarily for corroboration purposes and to provide additional context. I obtained the school report cards for the two sites in the study from www.schoolreportcards.org for the 2014 school year. I also examined a set of progression charts provided by the Oklahoma State Department of Education that the teachers received in May right before the school year ended. These charts put PASS objectives into grade level skills tables similar to the tables used to present Common Core. The teachers provided various lesson plans and activity worksheets that they used throughout the year, and the middle school teachers gave me the curriculum map they began developing in the second semester of the school year.

Some of these documents provided much needed context and helped me understand the district characteristics on a statistical level. Others outlined activities that the teachers saw as useful for teaching certain concepts, and the curriculum mapping documents helped situate the development of a course of action that the teachers planned to implement in the future. The major limitation inherent in these documents is that teachers produced or discovered them for particular needs at the moment not related to the research, and what shows up on the page may not reflect what happened in the classroom. They also often have little to do with my research questions, but since I used them for verification and corroboration purposes only that particular fit is less of a concern than it might be otherwise.

Interviews

Interviews procure rich, detailed data that is consistent with the needs of qualitative research. Stake (1995) indicates in case study research, “each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences, special stories to tell” (p. 65). The major source of data for this study came from interviews that enabled me to hear and record the participant’s perceptions, opinions, and recollections of experiences with the subject of interest. Interviews can be highly structured, semi-structured, or unstructured in nature. I chose to prepare a protocol of questions to guide our conversations that still allowed me the freedom to elicit individual responses and to follow-up on unique, unusual, or unexpected responses. I developed a separate but similar protocol for the administrator directed towards her role. Both protocols are located in Appendix A.

The interview questions mostly pertained to personal experiences with the two sets of standards over the course of this school year, but I also asked several questions about the teaching of writing, particularly argumentation. I asked each participant to respond to a typed set of demographic questions in a multiple choice format at the beginning of each interview. I arranged the interviews individually with each participant via email. All of them except one chose to be interviewed in their classrooms during plan time. In each case, we agreed upon a day most convenient for them, working around testing schedules as much as possible. The administrator gave me an appointment to come to her office. One teacher asked to meet me for coffee when she came to the town where I live to grocery shop after school one day. The interviews occurred towards the end of the school year after I had visited on a nearly weekly basis for approximately eight months. Each interview lasted between 38-45 minutes with the exception of the coffee shop interview which lasted 75 minutes. Because the interviews occurred during plan periods, they often ended when the bell rang for the next class. While

conducting the interviews, I tried to minimize my own talking to allow the participants space and time to think and to respond fully to my questions. I also attempted to stay focused on the questions in the protocol to elicit the most substantive information pertaining to the research questions I posed initially for this study. Immediately after each interview, I wrote a memo detailing the process including some observations that I made before, during, and after the interview. I included my own reflections on each interview in these memos.

All participants agreed to allow me to audiotape the interviews with assurances about security and confidentiality. I used two digital recorders at each interview, and transcribed each interview fully using Oliver, Serovich, and Mason's (2005) naturalized transcription "where utterances are transcribed in as much detail as possible" (p. 1275). Full transcriptions, while more difficult and time-consuming, offer the richest possible data and helped ensure depth and breadth for analysis purposes. After the interviews, I transferred each interview from the digital recorder to my password protected desktop computer at home and placed the files in a software program called Express Scribe. This program allowed me to slow down each interview enough audibly so that I could type almost verbatim and speeded up the transcription process considerably. Once the transcriptions were complete for a total of nearly 250 pages, I listened to each audio recording at normal speed and noted any mistakes in my transcription before deleting the recordings from the digital recorders. This step also allowed me to hear the inflections in voices again and recall the overall tone of each interview. I prepared a checklist of ideas, information, and interpretations from each transcription. I sent each participant an electronic copy of their own transcript and the correlating checklist via email as a member check. Two of the seven responded; one to tell me it "looked fine" and another to ask me to remove three points

from the checklist, not because they were inaccurate but because she regretted saying those things. I complied immediately.

Data Analysis

The process of analysis in qualitative research involves sifting through massive amounts of collected data, organizing that data, reducing it into themes through a coding process, and finally representing it in figures, a table, or a report (Cresswell, 2007). Merriam (1998) describes data analysis as a “complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (p. 178). Merriam (1998) suggests, “The final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 162). The meaning and understanding derived from analysis becomes the findings that explain the data. Because of the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry, data analysis most likely begins during the data collection phase of the study and continues throughout and beyond the entire fieldwork process, but “because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique” (Patton, 2002, p. 432).

I began the analysis process with the first field observations using a variety of coding methods outlined by Saldaña (2013). I started with open coding with the first field observations using *in vivo* codes to try to stay as close to participants’ own language as possible and then worked through the data multiple times using a variety of coding techniques including descriptive, affective, dramaturgical, and process coding. Different coding methods enabled me to identify “repetitive patterns of action and consistencies” (p. 5) that emerged naturally out of

the data and to sort data into categories. I used some of the same coding techniques with the interview transcripts as they became available. Through this process, I constantly compared new data with existing data in order to refine and confirm or disconfirm my understanding and interpretations. I focused particularly on my research questions as I read and reread the field notes and transcripts looking for relevant sections. I spent time examining and making marginal notes. After several readings through the transcripts and field observation data, I generated ten categories that reflected the purpose of the study and derived directly from the research questions in keeping with Merriam's (1998) suggestion that "In effect, categories are the *answers* to your research question(s)" (p. 183). I set up a table with a column for each category and began sorting data into the table to determine if my categories were mutually exclusive, clear cut enough to satisfy an outside reader, and conceptually congruent or characterized by the same level of abstraction, as Merriam describes (1998, p, 184). I examined the categories to determine how well they fit conceptually with the purpose of my study and the questions I sought to answer. I reduced the number of categories to seven by combining some that overlapped, and then I began transferring data to index cards for further analysis. After significant analysis arranging and rearranging the index cards, I attempted to reduce the number of themes, but ultimately, I concluded that each of them warranted full and individual interpretations. I explored seven prominent themes to interpret the data and determine my findings.

I also used a continuous process of creating memos throughout data collection and analysis. Memos helped me make sense of the field notes and the interviews, and they also gave me a place to provide context and rich descriptions. Code memos helped me get ideas and insights down on paper, and later integrative memos helped me narrow and focus the analysis for theme identification. Reflective writing through memos helped me "carry forward analysis

contemporaneously with the collection of field data” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 126). This reflection also led to further observations that developed and supported or disconfirmed specific analysis. As data collection and analysis proceeded together, I actively looked for alternative experiences or different explanations for certain data, I searched for links and patterns in the data that would support my understandings of the contextually bounded case, and I began to lay a foundation for interpreting my findings.

Ethical Considerations

I completed the Responsible Conduct of Research online module required for all graduate students at Oklahoma State University, and my certification is on file. Prior to beginning the study, I completed the Institutional Review Board process and received approval for all aspects of my study. I prepared an informed consent form that provided my contact information, ensured confidentiality, explained the study thoroughly, outlined conditions for the interviews, and detailed the participants’ rights and access to feedback from the study. I got signed consent forms from principals at both sites as permission to do the study prior to submitting the IRB, and I secured signed consent forms from all participants before I started observations. I transcribed all interviews myself, and I conducted member checks via email with each participant individually providing them with both a copy of the interview transcript and a list of assertions that I created based on what I heard them say. They had the opportunity to read over transcripts, make any adjustments, deletions, corrections, or clarifications they deemed necessary. One participant asked for three deletions to the assertions list, not because I got something wrong, but because she preferred not to have said what she said. Other participants indicated the interview transcripts were accurate. Most did not respond at all. I mailed each of the seven participants a \$15 gift card to Amazon and a handwritten thank you note in return for their time and trouble.

IRB Modification

Originally, I intended to interview six teachers one time each and to hold one focus group session with all of them at the end of the first semester of the 2014-2015 school year. As the observations proceeded, however, several participants suggested that the new Director of Student and Instructional Services might provide some additional helpful information, and I decided to add her to my study. I also realized that many of them would not address argumentation until later in the year just prior to testing, and so I determined that extending the study for the entire school year provided me with additional information about how teachers implemented both sets of standards in preparation for end of the year testing, and how they prepared to align the curriculum for the following year. Extending the study also allowed me more time to engage one on one with each of them and gave me many more opportunities to observe in classrooms and in departmental meetings. In November, I modified the IRB to reflect these changes in the study, and all modifications were approved by the IRB board. I also dropped the focus group meeting because of the difficulty of getting them all together at one time. When I wrote the initial protocol, the teachers intended to meet as a group on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day to plan alignment together, but this meeting failed to materialize and the opportunity to hold a focus group dissipated. At the end of the school year, several anticipated building moves caused the school board to end the year more than a week earlier than scheduled, and time ran out for any sort of group meeting.

Assumptions of the Study

Each of the participants taught English Language Arts in either a middle or high school classroom during the 2014-2015 academic year. It is assumed that each participant reconstructed

their experiences with the standards and the curriculum correctly and responded to interview questions candidly and truthfully.

Limitations of the Study

Because the context of this case study was limited to two sites in one school district, I drew naturalistic generalizations based on a particular understanding of the specific case at hand. Stake (1995) defines naturalistic generalizations as “conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves” (p. 85). To that effect, I have attempted to include enough raw data in the report to ensure readers can draw their own conclusions or generalizations based on rich, sensory descriptions and a narrative account, as well as considering and accepting or rejecting my generalizations. I have made efforts to include participants with differing perspectives on Common Core State Standards and the teaching of argumentation, but the majority of participants in this case had a positive view of the phenomenon under study and approached it with enthusiasm, at least at first. Because of the small number of participants and the limited scope of the study, transferability may be limited. As suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), I provided as much detailed information as possible including thick, rich descriptions so that readers can decide for themselves whether the findings transfer to other similar settings and situations.

Trustworthiness

Maintaining a high level of rigor is vital in any research including qualitative inquiry. From the beginning of this case study research, I have been cognizant that I must make sure my results are valid and reliable through the use of a variety of strategies outlined by other researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posed several activities that establish trustworthiness and

credibility in qualitative research findings including: Prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation, triangulation through the use of documents or other data sources, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checking. I remained engaged in the field throughout the entire 2014-2015 school year or a period of nine months. I met with one or more of my participants or engaged in some kind of observation at least once a week as consistently as possible. As a result, I have field notes from multiple conversations with each participant, at least one observation in each participant's classroom, and multiple sets of notes from departmental meetings at both sites. I collected documents including lesson plans, curriculum maps, worksheets, essays, and rubrics from multiple participants throughout the study. I shared notes and memos with peers as I began data analysis and sought their input to ensure that I considered diverse interpretations throughout analysis. As Cresswell (2007) suggests, I used self-reflection in the form memos and journaling over the course of the study to contribute to the validity of my work. To minimize my own influence on the study, I acknowledged and disclosed my biases and tried to remain aware of them throughout the study. I also sought Cresswell's "corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or a perspective" (p. 208). I provided all participants with copies of interview transcripts and checklists from the interviews as member checks before leaving the field. Throughout the data collection process, questions arose that enabled me to check with participants along the way to be sure I was understanding and interpreting events and participants' meanings accurately throughout the study. In addition to establishing trustworthiness from the researcher's perspective and the participants' perspectives, I considered the importance of accuracy of findings from the standpoint of the readers of the study as well. I recorded all data and maintained copious files so my work can be retraced if needed. I used thick, rich description so my readers can make

informed decisions about the transferability of my findings to other settings, and so readers can come to their own conclusions about the case study described.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a rationale for qualitative case study as a methodology. I established my own interpretivist stance and critical theorist approach to the data in this study. I acknowledged my possible biases as a researcher, and I detailed the methods I used for data collection and analysis. I reported procedures for selecting participants, described the participants selected, addressed ethical considerations (including assumptions and limitations), and outlined the strategies used for achieving trustworthiness. I established the context and the boundaries of this instrumental case study and provided a guide for how I proceeded throughout the study based on Stake's (1992) explication of case study research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: POLITICS, TESTING, AND STANDARDS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the first round of findings in this case study and discuss the results of the research. I develop a descriptive narrative detailing the case based on the major themes/components that emerged over time driven by a chronological approach to how the components arose and evolved. In this chapter, I address three of seven major themes or components as each participant perceived it and responded to it in both observations and dialogues. The first three themes pertain to factors that remain primarily outside of the teachers' immediate control. They are daily impacted by the politics surrounding education that emanates from the state legislator and the OSDE, they must comply with reform measures and testing requirements even though they have no real voice in the matters, and ultimately, they have no say in the standards by which their students will be tested. The final four themes, argumentation, alignment, accountability and professional development, pertained to specific topics that directly affected these teachers locally within their own particular district. I then analyze how each component impacted the participants and the case as a whole.

Case Description

In this case report, I describe in detail seven different components or themes that emerged from the data in the analysis phase of the study. Three of them will be detailed in this chapter and four will be described in chapter 5. Each theme provides significant information about how

participants perceived and experienced the issues surrounding the standards in their own English language arts classroom. The first three themes pertain to factors that remain primarily outside of the teachers' immediate control. They are daily impacted by the politics surrounding education that emanates from the state legislator and the OSDE, they must comply with reform measures and testing requirements even though they have no real voice in the matters, and ultimately, they have no say in the standards by which their students will be tested. The final four themes, argumentation, alignment, accountability and professional development, pertained to specific topics that directly affected these teachers locally within their own particular district. This method of case study reporting enables readers to experience the phenomenon vicariously, to see the case through the eyes of the researcher and to assess the evidence used for analysis themselves (Merriam, 1998). I will explore in detail each theme by site as it developed over the course of the nine months of the study through my observations and discussions with each of the participants. In this chapter, I will examine the themes of politics, reform and testing, and standards-based education in Claremont. In Chapter 5, I will explore the themes of argumentation, curriculum alignment, teacher accountability, and the role of professional development as they related to the Claremont teachers.

Politics

The presence of politics in the educational process negatively impacted the teachers as they endured frequent changes and shifts in direction from the Oklahoma State Department of Education while a lack of leadership at the state level left them in a quandary about how to fulfill expectations amid constantly shifting mandates. They also sensed a lack of respect for the profession of teaching on the part of legislators and politicians even as the demands for accountability continued to rise. From the very beginning, in most of my conversations with

people in Claremont, the subject of politics continually entered into the dialogue. When I first approached Principal Lockwood at the high school about working with his faculty, he stated emphatically that they would continue to use Common Core because they liked it and believed the new standards would provide a more rigorous instructional base for students. “There wouldn’t be a problem with Common Core if the governor didn’t hate President Obama” (T. Lockwood, personal communication, September 2, 2014). Over the course of the study the same governor who had advocated adopting Common Core only to sign a repeal four years later ran for re-election, and a very unpopular State Superintendent of Public Instruction lost her re-election bid in a Republican primary prior to the November election (Willert, 2014). Lockwood and others at Claremont took the governor at her word when she stated at the time of the repeal, “Unfortunately, federal overreach has tainted Common Core. President Obama and Washington bureaucrats have usurped Common Core in an attempt to influence state education standards” (Ujifusa, p. 26). The middle school principal also wanted to talk about the teacher shortage in Oklahoma and the politics of Common Core. He, too, revealed that the district planned to stick with Common Core although he admitted they probably would not share their plans with the OSDE. The Claremont administrators and faculty planned to take advantage of the fact that the repeal did not explicitly ban Common Core but put a hold on things until the state could write new standards for adoption and implementation. For these and many other reasons, the political nature of public education in Oklahoma played a prominent role in how several of the participants viewed their roles as public educators and frankly, their livelihoods.

Middle school

The middle school teachers expressed some reluctance to participate in the study as a result of their fear and discomfort with the politics surrounding education in Oklahoma. I met

with the middle school teachers for the first time in September to discuss the possibility of their participation in the study. The principal had given approval and seemed certain they would want to be a part of the study, so I contacted them via email. I received one response from the department chair at the time, Mary Travis, indicating she was responding for everyone. “I did not exactly ask them if they were in agreement, but I really don’t see any problems. I know two of us will gladly work with you” (M. Travis, personal communication, September 10, 2014). She invited me to come present to the language arts teachers during their common plan time on September 16. This meeting turned out to be incredibly tension-filled as they explained all the reasons why they might not want to participate. In the end, the three who met with me signed consent forms, but the frustration they expressed that fueled their reluctance focused primarily on the changes from the state and the pressures they felt because of testing and accountability. Mary stated emphatically, “It’s not the pay so much that is driving people out of teaching. It’s the circumstances. I used to love teaching, and I hate it right now. I hate what I am expected to do” (M. Travis, personal communication, September 16, 2014). All three of them had new situations this year. In her first year teaching, Norah Smith wanted to help but she felt completely vulnerable at the idea of observations. She relaxed somewhat when I explained that I would not observe students. Tanya Carothers had significant experience both at the high school and middle school levels, but she moved to the 8th grade for the first time this year and felt pressured by the upcoming 8th grade writing test. Mary moved from 8th grade to an all-remedial assignment where she worked with 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students who failed their reading tests the prior year. None of them felt completely comfortable about having an observer watching as they worked through the upcoming year.

In a second meeting with the middle school teachers, I had an opportunity to talk to Mary and Tanya privately and discovered that both of them were in the process of trying to get out of education after decades of teaching. Mary signed up and took the Graduate Record Examination in an effort to get into a graduate program in psychology, and Tanya applied for several positions at a local university after completing her master's degree in administration and failing to crack into what she perceived as the male-dominated administrative network at many rural schools in Oklahoma. Both teachers treated me like a potential resource at this second meeting, asking questions about the GRE, entrance requirements for various programs at the university, and processes for applying for adjunct positions or ways of networking through conferences and workshops (M. Travis, T. Carothers, personal communication, September 30, 2014).

During my private conversation with Tanya, she mentioned the upcoming election and asked my opinion of the two candidates for State Superintendent of Instruction. I remained as neutral as possible, but I did mention that one of them had suggested a significantly higher raise for teachers than the other one. Tanya responded, "Mr. Randolph [middle school principal] says the raises won't happen as long as the public dislikes and disrespects teachers so much" (T. Carothers, personal communication, September 30, 2014). She told me she thought the testing had gotten out of hand. She was shocked to learn that the testing company used a recycled AP test for the high school biology End of Instruction exam last year. She did not explain where she acquired this information, but she wondered how the testing company could "get away with it." She blamed the State Department of Education and expressed concern that they did not address such issues. "I wonder who's in charge" (T. Carothers, personal communication, September 30, 2014).

Tanya's concern about the politics surrounding the standards and state expectations continued throughout the year. In her final interview, she told me that while she knew the new State Superintendent wanted to do the right thing, she did not believe the person in that position could make all the decisions by herself. She stated, "It's time for our state to quit jumping in so many directions. We've got to decide what we're going to do and move that way" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). Tanya expected the legislature to continue to demand testing as a means of making teachers accountable, and she wanted standards to use as a roadmap to ensure she covered what the state expected students to know for the tests.

Mary also expressed great distrust of the process and the decision makers. "The people who are making decisions for us, I've lost faith in them...the legislators, even the people making the textbooks now. I'm not really sure they know what they're doing" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). She found it difficult to accept mandates from people who had no experience in a classroom and who do not know about "students who come to school hungry or beaten or abused" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). Mary asked if it were possible that the legislature did nothing about teacher pay and conditions because they could count on teachers to stay in their classrooms and not strike for the sake of the students. "We don't even take the changes seriously anymore cause we can see that they're not going to work when they come down the pike" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). She admitted teachers might need to be more involved, but her own experience talking to legislators had not proven fruitful. "I don't feel like they listen to us anyway...they've told us that even though they agree with us, there's a lot of give and take, and they have to give this to get that, and we seem to be the ones sacrificed all the time" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

Mary's disgust with the politics motivated her to think about getting out of education and into some other kind of career after 26 years in the classroom. She applied to a graduate program but did not get accepted. At the end of the school year, she knew she would teach again the following year, but she still anticipated retiring from teaching within the next five years and going to work as an office manager for her daughter. The birth of her first grandson in March of 2015 reinvigorated her to work with students she believed needed care, concern, and someone who would just listen, but her clear distrust of the systems and her negativity about all the changes had somewhat isolated her in her remedial classroom. She did not see herself staying in education for much longer at all.

High school

The high school teachers seemed less fearful and uncomfortable, but they took extra precautions to ensure they covered every possible contingent expectation from the state. Ali expressed some resentment when she explained that she dutifully noted both PASS and Common Core standards on her lesson plans to make sure she covered everything that the state might eventually test, but she described the process as “taking too much power away from the people who are trained to do the work” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015). She resented the lack of respect for the profession exhibited by both politicians and parents, but her confidence in her own skills and performance remained intact. For the most part, she ignored what she perceived as out of her control and focused her efforts on teaching the skills she believed her students needed. She did not face a test at the end of the year, as 9th graders do not take an English language arts End of Instruction test. She faced less pressure from outside sources, but she pushed herself and her students to cover as much material as possible. She expressed extreme frustration when the school board shortened the school year by a week in the

middle of May because of the lost time and the last unit that she would not have an opportunity to share with her students.

In contrast, Laura seemed disconnected from the politics. She said she tried to address both sets of standards in her lesson plans, but in the final interview, she admitted that she probably met more standards than she included in the daily plans. She taught seniors, another grade level that did not take either a reading or a writing test of some sort at the end of the year. She also did not have to prepare students for the next grade level but considered preparing students for college or career writing and addressing a survey of British literature as her primary goals as a teacher. She had less of a stake in the politics of the standards because she did not have to worry about testing or another teacher noticing skills she might have missed.

New teachers and administration

The two new teachers took very different approaches to the politics surrounding the standards. Norah worried all year about missing possible skills that she ought to be teaching, and Jenna went straight to the test materials to develop a curriculum that would ensure student success on the End of Instruction test in April. Norah pleaded ignorance since in her first year in a classroom she had very little experience or knowledge of how the State Department of Education operated. “I’m still just trying to figure out how that works and the chain of command, and what choices are we allowed to make” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). She had familiarized herself with both sets of standards and preferred Common Core, but she, like many of the others, tried to meet both sets in her lesson plans. Jenna’s arrival from Texas coincided with the governor’s repeal of Common Core, and she had no experience with the new standards. She did not discuss the politics although she continually indicated that she

thought Texas had a better education system, and her frustration at the lack of guidance from the state department was a constant theme in our conversations.

As an administrator, Shannon communicated frequently with her local state representative and other members of the legislature about issues that impacted the teachers in her district. She believed teachers needed to advocate for themselves. "...we have to advocate for ourselves...we have to demand to be treated like professionals...and we have to let people know what our qualifications are" (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Shannon recounted a conversation with a legislator who told her that teachers do not vote, and until they do, no one will listen to them. "They don't take us seriously. They don't think we'll act on it, and we haven't and that's our fault" (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Her passion for education and her teachers came through as she described their conundrum: "We're always going to have to acquiesce to whatever it is they want, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be our only source of information. We can do better in that aspect because teachers know!" (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). She went on to explain that teachers know their subject matter, their students, and how to teach. They know what needs to happen in a classroom, even though they have to pay attention to the demands of those outside the profession who continually offer suggestions and mandates for improvement.

All of the teachers to some degree or another felt the intrusion of politics into their classrooms. Most of them resisted where they could but recognized that they had to follow the state department's instructions to a great degree because of the tests. They resented the lack of respect for their profession that they perceived from outsiders, but mostly they acted powerless to do anything but comply with the ever-changing demands. In spite of their decision to stick with Common Core at the beginning of the year, all of them addressed both sets of standards and

paid close attention to PASS in anticipation of the tests that would be PASS-based. The teachers who did not face a mandated test at the end of the school year, Laura and Ali, tended to be less concerned about the State Department of Education and the evolving demands. Both Laura and Ali expressed confidence in their own agendas for their classes and their abilities to move their students forward to accomplish the goals they set for them. With their significant classroom experience, both Tanya and Mary had grown weary of the constant changes and sought different careers. The two new teachers, Norah and Jenna, navigated as best they could, but both of them found the lack of a coherent plan from the state disconcerting and confusing. It made their jobs much more difficult.

The Impact of Reform and Testing

Standardized tests drove most of the curriculum in Claremont as teachers worked desperately to raise end of the year test scores to meet the state averages. Inadequate test scores in the past reflected negatively on the district, and teachers felt pressure to improve and meet Adequate Yearly Progress as well as the demands of reforms. Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind law in 2001, testing students at the end of the school year has become the primary means of providing accountability and determining how well both students and teachers perform. In Oklahoma, mandated tests occur at nearly every grade level. Tests include a variety of Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests (OCCTs) including reading for grades 3-8 and seven End of Instruction tests (EOIs) for secondary students. All 8th graders also take the 8th Grade Writing Test, usually in February. According to the most current ACE Graduation Checklist (OSDE, August 22, 2014), in order to graduate from high school students must demonstrate mastery on four EOI subject area tests. English II and Algebra I are required as well as two of the following testing areas: English III, Algebra II, Geometry, Biology I or U.S. History.

Middle school

The middle school teachers, particularly Tanya and Mary, found the testing very stressful. Tanya moved to 8th grade from 7th grade in the fall of the year of the study. The previous year, the 8th graders performed poorly on the writing test, and she feared this year's group would not fare well either. In October, she told me she felt tremendous pressure about the 8th grade writing test. Students seemed to remember nothing from 7th grade, and she had already asked the principal to move her out of 8th grade if at all possible the following year. "I told him if he hires anyone new next year to give the position to the new teacher" (T. Carothers, personal communication, October 30, 2014).

In January, I visited with Tanya, and she described a videoconference that she and her student teacher had attended on the 8th-grade writing test. The video concentrated on argumentative writing even though the PASS objectives referenced persuasive writing. In Common Core, students concentrated on persuasive writing techniques until they got to middle school where the emphasis shifted to argumentation, but PASS focused exclusively on persuasive writing. "PASS is all about persuasive writing, but the main thing the video talked about is argument which is Common Core. So, we're working on argument not persuasive so much" (T. Carothers, personal communication, January 15, 2015). The state department provided an argumentation rubric that they indicated would be used to grade the 8th grade writing tests, and Tanya and the student teacher planned to practice grading students' work using the rubric before the test. Tanya also learned at the conference that 8th grade writing students would take a field test in addition to the regular test.

We just found out the state plans to give the students two tests on two different days.

One of them will be graded and the other one is a field test. We won't know which is

which. I don't want to tell the students because I know they will be angry about it. It's not fair. The second day they will be so worn out from writing the first day. And I know they are going to be angry. They are already stressed out about the testing (T. Carothers, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

Tanya already had concerns about the sheer number of tests the 8th graders have to take (they take four OCCT tests in four content areas including reading), and now another had been added to the list. She seemed more hopeful in January that they could do well on the writing test, and expressed enthusiasm for having a student teacher to help prepare them.

When I returned in February two weeks before the writing test, Tanya excitedly told me that the new State Superintendent had notified the school that she had cancelled the field test for both 5th and 8th grades, and the prompt on the actual test would be a fictional narrative one, not argumentative as they had been led to believe all year long.

I don't know that my comment had anything to do with it, but the day before Hofmeister announced the prompt would be narrative, I posted a comment on her Facebook page saying it would be nice if we knew for sure what kind of writing to expect. I know it's silly, but it almost seems like she's really listening (T. Carothers, personal communication, February 12, 2015).

Tanya felt relief, and her hope for her students' eventual success on the writing test rose because she believed that everyone could write a story. In our last conversation in April, she told me she had admonished the other teachers not to overdo the testing preparation and wear the students out before they got to the tests themselves. At the middle school where all three teachers had OCCTs, they made a conscious effort to avoid the "drill and kill" approach described by Darling-Hammond (2007), recognizing its potential to do more harm than good.

After the writing test, Tanya seemed more relaxed. Reports from the test monitors reassured her that her students took the test seriously, spent significant time brainstorming and writing, and one parent told Tanya that when asked if she was scared about the writing test, her daughter replied, “No, because I’ve had Mrs. Carothers for two years” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April, 9, 2015). The knowledge of the type of prompt to expect had relaxed her somewhat prior to the test; afterwards she told me that she hoped in the future the state would allow teachers to prepare for the writing test by indicating the kind of prompt to expect, but she “highly doubted” it would happen (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015).

Mary’s stress about testing stemmed from the fact that historically her students performed poorly on state tests, and their presence in her classroom meant they had failed their reading test the previous year. Mary used a structured format called a four square to teach her students argumentation which I observed on a visit in early November. When I returned in December and asked her about the essays the students produced using the four square approach, she said, “Never again. They just can’t do it. After Christmas, I’ve ordered these workbooks with mini-lessons on grammar and mechanics, and we’re going to watch some Youtube videos and do some things that are fun for them. None of them are going to pass the tests anyway” (M. Travis, personal conversation, December 11, 2014).

Mary’s 8th graders had to take the same writing test that Tanya’s students took, and while Tanya expressed relief at knowing the prompt would be a fictional narrative, Mary’s reaction was anger. She showed me the Oklahoma State Department of Education website page that provided several examples of graded argumentative essays. She could not find a set of narrative essays to provide the same kind of guidelines. She showed me the grading rubric that required students to use figurative language and other skills that she thought would be difficult to put into

practice in a short essay. “If you’re not a strong reader, this kind of test can be so hard. I’m looking for ways they can help themselves. I’m trying to raise their self-confidence” (M. Travis, personal communication, February 12, 2015). Mary had little hope that her students could pass the 8th grade writing test or the OCCT reading tests (6th, 7th, and 8th), and she felt a little blindsided by the late change in the writing prompt for the 8th grade test. After her experience in February with the writing test, by April when the OCCTs rolled around, she chose to focus on raising self-esteem by encouraging all students to take pride in improvement rather than worrying about specific scores. “In here, I’m telling them I don’t really care if they pass the test or not. I tell them, ‘I want you to improve on your last year’s score’” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). Mary confidentially told me that the administrators had told teachers not to worry about tests this year. “Our superintendent, our principals have pretty much decided that the state department does not really know what they are doing, and we’re not going to worry about it this year” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

Mary’s years of experience had an impact on how seriously she took reforms and the focus on the tests. She described how ten years into her teaching career, she thought she did “a pretty good job. It was well-rounded, I taught what needed to be taught, and we took time to worry about how we treated each other. Then two years ago, I found myself stressing over the fact that we had a pep assembly that meant lost time in the classroom preparing for tests” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). She found she hated her job, resented any intrusions on class time, and she had to learn to let some of it go. In her mind, no matter how well students did on the tests, the state would just juggle the scores and increase the requirements. She longed for a day when “we could go back to the understanding that these (tests) don’t mean anything,” ask the students to do their best, and take the data for what it is

worth (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). This year she did not even mention the tests until after Christmas, and she tried to downplay her emphasis on the test by only mentioning it in passing as they discussed skills they learned.

Norah felt lucky in her first year teaching to be paired with a reading teacher for 6th graders. Both Norah and her reading counterpart, Mrs. Hall, spent 50 minutes each day with the 6th grade students so students benefited from a double dose of English. Norah focused on writing and grammar, and Mrs. Hall taught students reading strategies and comprehension skills. For some reason unknown to Norah, the 6th grade OCCT reading test results accrued to her Teacher Leader Effectiveness (TLE) evaluation. “That’s another strange thing that it’s the reading test, but the scores are tied to me, and they’re not tied to her, even though I’m teaching language arts and she’s teaching reading” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). Norah said she had not thought much about the test until just a few days before students took it. She had confidence that they would do well--”if anything, it’s just going to make me look awesome, because these kids have these things down” (N. Smith, personal conversation, April 16, 2015), but she worried about the fairness aspect of her taking credit for teaching Mrs. Hall had actually done. “It’s like getting a grade for a group project. I feel like she and I worked together on this, she’s done more work in the group, and I’m getting her grade for it” (N. Smith, personal conversation, April 16, 2015).

High school

Ali and Laura did not have direct experiences with giving the End of Instruction tests or the OCCTs, so their concerns about testing took a slightly different turn. Ali taught 9th grade, an untested grade, but she still rued the tests. She believed mainstreaming occurred because of the fact that all students regardless of ability must take the same End of Instruction test in 10th

grade. “Students who have previously never been in a regular English class are thrown in...and that’s the reason they were thrown into this class because they’re going to have to take the same test in English that everybody else is taking...I’m having to find a middle ground” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Ali’s concern directly related to the state requirement that all students pass a certain number of tests including the English II EOI in order to graduate from high school. Because of this requirement, students who struggled to read or had significant cognitive disabilities moved into the regular classroom for instruction in 9th grade. Ali pointed out that a student who cannot read will not benefit from sitting in a classroom full of students who can read.

If you can’t read something, it doesn’t matter if there are 50 people in the room or two, you still can’t read it. I see both sides of the situation, but hopefully if we’re going to recognize disabilities then we need to have accommodations for those disabilities and not penalize a child as far as them graduating from high school (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015).

At the time of our final interview, Laura described helping a student with his final portfolio for graduation. The student had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and so the project replaced the test he failed but it still required significant abilities to read and write at grade level. Laura questioned the wisdom of forcing the student to meet high benchmarks in a content area where his weakness directly resulted from his disability. In spite of the fact that this student most likely would not attend college, the state expected him to meet the same high expectations as other students, one of the many results of NCLB’s requirement that 100% of students read on grade level. She also mentioned the fact that students on IEPs had to take the EOI tests without the benefit of someone reading the test to them if they could not read

themselves. “If it’s in an area where they struggle, why are you doing that to them? That’s just something that frustrates me, maybe because I’m not a good test taker myself” (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015). In an earlier conversation, Laura decried the unfairness of what the tests did to students who struggled to survive in school. “The tests aren’t what matter anyway. I want to increase rigor without setting them up to fail” (L. Mathis, personal communication, December 11, 2014). Both she and Ali acknowledge the necessity for meeting certain standards, but both expressed the need for more flexibility, and in regard to these standards, Ali suggested, “...there are certain strengths educators have that they should be allowed to explore,” and she referred to the requirements as “hoops we have to jump through” until the state repeals the hoops and invents new ones” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015).

Jenna had a completely different approach to the upcoming tests. In Texas where she taught prior to coming to Claremont, testing played a huge role in assessment of both student learning and teacher effectiveness. Jenna expressed pride in her test scores in Texas and her ability to help students pass. Even in our earliest conversations, Jenna had her eye on the tests and what she needed to teach in order to ensure her students’ ultimate success. Since passing the English II test is required for graduation, Jenna’s concern seemed well-placed and appropriate. She began the year frustrated by the lack of a curriculum map that spelled out what she needed to teach to prepare students for the EOI in sophomore English, but she proactively gathered previously released tests and scores from Claremont students in the last few years to determine what might be on the test and areas of weakness in this particular district. She then focused her curriculum on those areas. “I’ve pulled previous state standardized tests off the website looking at the questions for what kind of concepts. I’ve pulled data from their 8th grade reading tests,

and I've pulled previous 10th grade tests to see what they scored low on" (J. McArthur, personal communication, March 24, 2015). Jenna described herself as "test-driven." She knew that knowing how to take the test could make a difference in how well they performed. She admitted that after January, they worked exclusively on test preparation.

I want to teach a novel, but I don't think it will help them with the test. They need to be able to read and answer questions about passages, so I think we'll focus on that and question strategies...They need to be able to figure out which two answers are correct, and then choose the 'best' answer, according to the test makers (J. McArthur, personal communication, December 15, 2014).

Jenna's singular focus on test-taking strategies and the exact English language arts skills tested served her well in ensuring success in her previous teaching positions in Texas and in Oklahoma. She told me in December that her students always did well on their standardized tests, and she has taught 6th, 7th, and 10th grades prior to taking the classroom she has now. She regretted not having time to do other things, but since administrators measured her effectiveness by the test scores of her students, she knew if they performed well on the tests she would be judged successful; however, even Jenna realized the tests lacked something. "In a sense, it's measuring something, but I don't think you can measure intelligence or how much they learn by standardized tests" (J. McArthur, personal communication, March 24, 2015). For this relatively new teacher, the tests have always taken a prominent role, and while she wanted to read novels and spend class time on other more interesting activities, she knew that ultimately the test scores determined her success or failure. She came from a three year stint in Texas classrooms where the state provided an aligned curriculum, and she did not have to wonder what she should be

teaching. She wished Oklahoma had similar materials that helped align her curriculum to the state-mandated tests.

Overall impact of testing

The end of year tests profoundly impacted the teachers at Claremont in a variety of ways depending upon how they perceived their roles in preparing students for tests and how the test results affected their TLE evaluations. Jenna focused exclusively on test preparation particularly after the Christmas holidays, because her 10th graders had to pass the English II test in order to graduate from high school two years hence. Tanya also put a significant amount of effort into preparing students for both the 8th grade writing test in February and the OCCT in reading that those same 8th graders took at the end of the year. While she resented the number of tests they ultimately took including four OCCTs, she gratefully took advantage of all help offered by the State Department of Education in the form of professional development (that turned out to be misleading and erroneous) and later the proffered tips on what to expect that enabled her to drill students on writing a narrative prompt for two weeks before the test.

Mary had little hope that her remedial students could do well on the OCCTs or the 8th grade writing test, and as a result, she approached the tests completely differently. Instead of asking her students to work harder to achieve competency or satisfactory on the test, she set them a goal of performing better this year than they had on last year's test. She focused on self-esteem and student confidence over competency in the skills needed to pass the test. She minimized the importance of the test as often as she could in an effort to avoid adding to their stress and to mitigate the likelihood of disappointment in the results. "We're getting them so stressed out and so panicked, and it doesn't matter to them. It only matters to us" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

Mary expressed great concern over the problems and challenges her students faced in their lives outside of school. “I can’t fight the fact that some of these kids have nobody in the world who cares about them at home. So if I were in that situation would I come up here and give language arts my 100%? Probably not. Probably not” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). In addition, she contended that as soon as students began to show improvement on the standardized tests, the state or the test makers moved the bar and raised expectations. In her mind, the testing system is rigged against both students and classroom teachers. “The kids are never going to score high enough; they’ll always change it; if more people are successful, they’ll make the tests harder, whatever” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). Mary hated the way the tests controlled classroom teaching, and she advocated reducing the importance of the tests. For her, the overemphasis on end of year standardized tests lacked common sense and went against what she believed is best for students.

The reforms including NCLB that led to the emphasis on end of year tests negatively impacted all of the teachers in this case study to varying degrees. Most of the teachers had a sense that the tests impacted both the students and the classroom teachers more than they should, they required significant special preparation beyond just developing skills in the content area, and they did not mean much in terms of what they measure. In spite of their awareness that the tests may not adequately reflect student learning, they knew that their own careers depended upon student success on end of year measures, and those same tests could have significant negative impacts on students’ futures as far grade retention, placement in remediation classes, or even graduation. Jenna and I talked at length about how the students understand that they must pass a certain number of EOIs in order to graduate, and they stop trying once they’ve

accomplished the minimum number of tests, even though failing tests can impact their teachers negatively.

Several teachers expressed resentment that teachers in tested areas have their scores posted publicly, and Shannon talked about how such a system pitted teachers against one another. Teachers in untested subjects had greater latitude in their own assessments, and they did not face public shaming if test scores fell short. “It’s vastly unfair. It’s just two completely different monsters...and you know, we’re alienating two groups of teachers that are very important and that are hard to replace” (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Meanwhile, for the teachers required to administer them, tests remained the focus of most of the latter half of the school year. Clearly, the need to focus on test-taking skills narrowed the curriculum significantly after the holiday break, a problem McCarthy (2008) identified. The last minute changes to the 8th grade writing test including a switch in prompts and the elimination of a field test coupled with the repeal of Common Core the summer before gave indicators that the state remained somewhat disorganized, and the administrators at Claremont told teachers to worry less about tests and focus on skills and student learning instead. Even then, the teachers could not ignore test scores that would eventually comprise a large portion of their own evaluations, and most of them worried and fretted anyway, but the erosion of the state’s authority mirrored the frustration that teachers and administrators in Claremont had with the constantly changing expectations.

In the end, Claremont teachers I spoke with after the administered tests seemed pleased with the anticipated results. Shannon described how using Chromebooks for every test at the middle school had saved a tremendous amount of time, particularly since students had used the tablets all year long and familiarity made it easier for them. She estimated they will save seven

instructional days next year by using tablets for testing purposes. Tanya had confidence that her 8th graders performed well on the 8th grade writing test based on descriptions of their activities while taking the test and the reports of parents. Others still faced upcoming OCCTs and EOIs but expressed confidence that they had prepared their students well for the exams even with all the changes and flux in the process.

The tests drove the curriculum in Claremont classrooms to a degree. When the prompt on the 8th grade writing test changed from an argument to a narrative, Mary and Tanya both switched plans immediately to prepare students for the type of writing they could expect on the test. As Brimi (2012) reported is common, they focused writing instruction on the type of writing that might appear on the test rather than developing a quality writing program aimed at producing better writers; however, after the writing test, these same teachers worked diligently to align curriculum so that all types of writing would receive equal emphasis in grades 5-8, and students would receive adequate instruction in all areas. The tests drove the curriculum for a few months, but the middle school teachers also recognized that students needed well-rounded and scaffolded instruction to become good writers. The tests seemed to interfere with what these professionals knew was best practice, but their long-term plans indicated they had good intentions to provide the kind of instruction that would benefit students more. At the high school, Jenna put aside novels and drilled for her EOI test, but Ali and Laura, who faced no tests, felt somewhat autonomous in their classrooms to teach the skills they deemed important for student learning.

Common Core State Standards and Priority Academic Student Skills

Although most of the teachers in Claremont professed to prefer Common Core, most of them were afraid to ignore PASS because of the demands of the end of the year standardized

tests and fear of failing to teach necessary skills that might reflect poorly on their practice. I chose to conduct the study in Claremont because of the district's early decision to stick with Common Core as much as possible for the school year 2014-2015. Teachers and administrators had no idea what the state might do in writing new standards, but many suspected they would settle on something that at least resembled Common Core. "I feel that the state may combine Common Core, couch it under a different name, and we will still use some of those same standards, so I changed minimally. I went back and checked the PASS skills to determine what was not being met by Common Core and combined them for this year" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). In preparation for the expected launch of Common Core in fall of 2014, Claremont teachers participated in several professional development sessions both within the school and at other schools. Tanya professed that even with the training, she did not think anyone in the school system felt completely prepared for Common Core; however, they had determined to embrace it and stick with it as much as possible.

The two principals told me they and their teachers planned to stick with Common Core instead of returning to the Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) that preceded Common Core and that the governor had suggested be resurrected for this school year, but over the course of the study, it became apparent that opinions differed somewhat among the teachers.

High school

Jenna came from Texas, a state that refused to adopt Common Core State Standards when most other states embraced them. She liked the Texas standards and the curriculum alignment that went along with them. She arrived back in Oklahoma the summer after the repeal of Common Core, too late for any professional development, so Laura provided her with a book covering the standards and suggested she prepare to use them. Jenna did use PASS in her first

year teaching at a high school in Oklahoma where she performed long-term substitute duties. She admitted openly that she “knew nothing about Common Core” when she got here (J. McArthur, personal conversation, March 24, 2015). She looked them over and found them to use verbs that seemed to require higher level thinking from students. Laura told her to combine Common Core with PASS and try to make sure she met both of them for this first year. Jenna eventually went to the data from previous tests including the ones her students had taken in earlier grades and the released 10th grade End of Instruction tests on the State Department of Education website to gather information about what she should be covering rather than relying on either set of standards. Beginning in January, she focused primarily on test-taking strategies to give her students the best possible chance to succeed on the EOI; this kind of approach had proved successful for her in previous years when she taught in Texas.

Ali and Laura did not face tests, but they made an effort to incorporate Common Core into their daily lesson plans. Early in the study, Ali told me that she used both sets of standards to make sure she could justify her curriculum. “I don’t think Common Core is specific enough, but I like what it asks them to do and how it builds. I don’t care about the state department. I know I’m covering everything I need to cover. I just wish it could be fun again” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, December 11, 2014). She talked about how prescribed and scripted practices were a result of efforts to pass tests and meet expectations. She looked back nostalgically to the days when she as a teacher had more control in her own classroom even though without an end of year test, she remained fairly autonomous. Ali admitted that she really liked Common Core because “it took a lot of things that we were way too detail-oriented with and kind of broadened our scope a little bit. It was much easier to attach standards to lessons with Common Core” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015). She noted both

sets of standards on her daily lesson plans, and she kept in her curriculum particular skills that she did not think Common Core addressed as specifically as she would have liked. She expressed confidence that she covered everything she needed to cover to address both sets of standards.

Laura found Common Core slightly more rigorous than PASS, but the specificity in PASS appealed to her. Ultimately, she continued to note both of the standards because she did not see much difference between the two, and she consulted neither of them to determine what to teach. As department chair, Laura encouraged all high school language arts teachers to use Common Core while also referencing PASS. Department meetings often revolved around how teachers used the standards to develop curriculum early in the year, but by the middle of the second semester, the meetings had dwindled from weekly to rarely; by March, the teachers primarily discussed tests, problem students, and summer professional development opportunities. Those teachers required to test had specific methods in mind for preparing students for the tests that had little to do with the overall requirements of either set of standards. The ones who did not have to test focused their concerns on preparing students for the next grade level.

Middle school

At the middle school, views about the standards diverged quite a bit. Mary had significant doubts about Common Core based on years of experience and what she perceived her particular students could achieve. She did not see that much of a difference in Common Core and PASS. “Is there a huge difference? No, maybe some vocabulary differences, and the ways you think about how to answer the questions are different” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). Her 6th, 7th, and 8th graders failed a previous OCCT and found themselves in her classroom for remediation purposes. Most of them had learning difficulties or reading

deficiencies of one kind or another. As a result, she had extremely small classes (usually fewer than 10 students per hour), but her students typically struggled in both reading and writing.

“Early in the year, I realized that because of being in a special education classroom, my kids were not ready for Common Core” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

For Mary, the benefits of Common Core remained unrealized and some of the problems with it troubled her. She liked the idea of “going deeper” with Common Core as opposed to her perception that PASS “skimmed the surface of a lot of things” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). She particularly liked the idea of reading across all curricula, so that “say, the science or the history teacher would also focus on the reading part and not just their own subject matter,” but she found the Common Core focus on informational texts troubling. “You take a poor reader who struggles and try to get them to read something boring and informational, and you’re stacking the deck against yourself and the student” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). She also emphatically believed that Common Core could not be tested because of the subjective nature of responses to questions.

It’s like when you ask a kid an open-ended question--what’s written in the teacher’s edition is one response, but it doesn’t mean that half the class’s answers are wrong because they said something different. There isn’t always just one specific answer...I never thought Common Core could be tested...EVER (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

In the end, Mary declared that she was not against the idea of Common Core itself, but ultimately the 8th grade writing test and the OCCTs for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders meant she had to focus on PASS and put the texts aside for the latter half of the year. “Well, we are Common Core, our books are Common Core, but the tests are going to be PASS, so I haven’t done

anything out of a textbook for over a month” (M. Travis, personal conversation, March 31, 2015).

Norah as a new teacher experienced some ambivalence and felt somewhat conflicted about the two sets of standards. “I didn’t know whether I was teaching PASS or Common Core officially until one week into the school year, and that was difficult because I really like to be prepared, and it’s my first year teaching” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). Her college courses in elementary literacy preceded the introduction of Common Core in 2010 and focused on PASS. In spite of her experience, she preferred Common Core: “I was fully prepared to embrace it, and I’m kind of an enthusiast about it...but we’re going back to PASS, and I feel like I’m straddling a fence” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). Norah found PASS more skills-based and Common Core more application-based, and so she felt somewhat comfortable using Common Core to write lesson plans because she thought she probably met PASS in the process.

She worried that she might miss something that would show up on a test, so she described a process of

...looking at Common Core when I’m creating my lessons, and then, for better or worse, taking out the PASS standards and just tacking them onto it...I feel like maybe I’m not preparing them for the test like I should because I’m not preparing my lessons with PASS standards in mind, but I feel like I’m a better teacher if I’m aligning myself with Common Core (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015).

Norah believed that by meeting Common Core, she took skills to the “next level” and would surely easily meet PASS as well. Still, she worried a little.

Tanya approached Common Core indirectly for the most part. She expected the state department to eventually come up with some sort of blend of Common Core and PASS and then name it something completely different to avoid the political maelstrom of Common Core. Tanya consulted Common Core first, and then checked PASS to make sure she addressed all standards that students might encounter on a test. She expressed frustration at the lack of leadership from the state department and a strong sense of hope that the new superintendent would provide some guidance and direction for teachers in classrooms across the state.

Administration

Shannon admitted that when the governor repealed Common Core, she seriously took a second look at accepting her new position as the person in charge of curriculum and alignment. She believed for most of the year that the state would revise Common Core, call it something else, but move forward with standards that matched most curriculum materials and most other states. “I mean who’s going to make textbooks just for Oklahoma?” (S. Stewart, personal communication, November 6, 2014). At the end of the year, she expressed doubt that Common Core would survive the political fallout over standards. She anticipated an English language arts textbook adoption in the fall of 2016, and she worried about the process of choosing without standards in place. “I’m waiting on them (OSDE) to land on standards. I’m concerned about the fact that we’re going to have an adoption next year and not have standards ready. I don’t know politically if Oklahoma will do anything that even resembles the Common Core right now” (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Shannon regretted the time and money spent preparing to transition to Common Core, and she hesitated to lead her teachers into “another Common Core disaster.” She encouraged them all year to stick with Common Core up to a point, but refrained from completely embracing the standards that the state repealed. “I’ve been

telling them all year to do this to the point where we have the information we need, but we don't want to put so much into it that we feel heartbroken if they (OSDE) come back with something completely off the wall" (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015).

At the beginning of the school year in August, the Claremont administrators and most teachers committed to sticking with Common Core as a district in spite of the state repeal and rejection of the nationally developed standards. Many of them believed the state would end up with standards that looked very much like Common Core if only because of the prevalence of Common Core materials in both English language arts and mathematics and the vast majority of states that had elected to stay with the standards. Claremont had newly purchased materials based on Common Core, and they saw no reason to move away completely from what they viewed as superior, more rigorous standards.

While the teachers viewed Common Core as ultimately better organized, aligned, and applicable, they also recognized some value in PASS. Several of them mentioned the specificity of PASS and the focus on skills that they believed Common Core tended to gloss over or ignore (grammar skills in particular). Several teachers including Ali, Laura, Tanya, and Norah claimed to note both sets of standards on their daily lesson plans; others paid less attention to the standards but focused on the skills students would need for the upcoming OCCT and EOI standardized exams. Jenna returned to the data driven process that had served her well in Texas and focused on gaps she perceived in her students' previous test scores, and areas of concern based on the Claremont's 10th grade EOI scores from the previous couple of years. Mary decided her remedial students had little chance of passing, so she turned their attention to improving their previous test performances as a means of raising self-esteem and giving them a reachable aspiration. Neither Jenna nor Mary worried much about which standards they met as

they sought ways to improve test performance or ameliorate the effects of the tests on their students.

As it became clear that the OSDE had no immediate plan to develop local state standards, the teachers became somewhat disengaged from any concerns about either set of standards and devoted their attention to specific skills they wanted their students to acquire for a variety of reasons including what they might need to be able to do at the next grade level. Some of this disengagement had to do with the overwhelming responsibilities of grading and keeping up with a minimum of 120 students per teacher. They did not have time to constantly return to the two sets of standards as they moved through their days with students. Teachers with testing responsibilities turned their attention to test-taking skills and pushed all other curricular activities to the side while they prepared students for close reading passages and answering multiple choice questions. By the middle of the year, all the teachers and the administrator questioned the OSDE's commitment to provide them with clear goals for the future, and they had put aside the day to day efforts to address either of the two sets of standards.

Summary

Politics infiltrated the classrooms of the Claremont teachers whether they wanted it or not. Because of the nature of the political environment in Oklahoma, the teachers found themselves subjected to radical and systemic changes that barely took shallow root before politicians ripped them out and replaced them with something else because of changes in the political winds. Governor Fallin blamed President Obama when she repealed Common Core for embracing the standards and making them unappealing to Oklahomans who did not vote for him. Teachers who cared very little for or about politics found themselves constantly buffeted about and required to shift gears and change their plans, curriculum, and approaches to educating their

students even as they faced a loss of tenure and new mandates that they prove themselves highly qualified and effective. All of these so-called reforms arose and disappeared at the whim of a group of legislators who had little or no experience in education whatsoever except for their own days as students. The teachers in Claremont shifted direction to the best of their ability to meet the demands, but they experienced tremendous frustration and demoralization as a result. The political factors muddied the processes and made their jobs much more difficult.

The effects of testing impacted how teachers approached the curriculum and ultimately how they implemented standards. Although most of them began the year committed to implementing Common Core in spite of the state repeal, the demands of preparing students for PASS-based tests derailed those efforts. Teachers in tested areas focused on test preparation while the others tried to cover both sets of standards. Ultimately, the politics of reform efforts and the standards implementation frustrated teachers' due to lack of clear guidelines and leadership from the OSDE.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: ARGUMENTATION, ALIGNMENT, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Four other important themes emerged over the course of the study. These themes had more to do with the day to day teaching activities and personal experiences of each of the teachers in Claremont, and to a certain extent, they had more control over these factors. All of them attempted to teach argumentative writing with varying degrees of success, and all of them participated in efforts to align the curriculum across all grades. Ultimately, they all faced new and frustrating accountability measures that distracted from their work with students. Finally, all six participants looked to professional development for new ideas, skills, and strategies that would help them be more effective and improve their practice in the classroom. All of these factors contribute to an understanding of how this school year progressed for these teachers in these two sites.

Teaching Argumentative Writing

The teachers in Claremont intended to teach argumentation at the beginning of the school year, but their lack of clear curricular goals and a full understanding of the process of writing a formal argument derailed their efforts practically before they had a chance to begin. They ultimately engaged in a trial and error effort that ended mostly in error and abandonment of the attempt to teach the skills. Common Core heralded a return to writing instruction after the

reforms of NCLB pushed writing out of many school language arts programs. In the spring of 2014 before the repeal of CCSS, the state writing tests surprised teachers with an argumentative prompt, and a field test for Common Core that asked students to close read, compare, and contrast two passages on the same topic. They had to write an argument supporting one or the other using evidence from the articles themselves. College composition courses had already transitioned to argumentation as the primary kind of writing required of freshmen students since many professors believed all writing in college (and perhaps all writing) constituted an argument of some kind or another (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Hillocks, 2011). Many educators including the teachers at Claremont noticed the focus on argumentation and approached it with enthusiasm.

High school

The teachers at the high school started the year with argumentation lessons. At my first visit with the high school teachers, Ali invited me to come back in a couple of days to observe her teaching a lesson on argumentation based loosely on Toulmin's (1958) model of argumentation. She had some materials she found online, and she planned to introduce the concepts after her freshmen read a short story called "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" by James Thurber, a selection in their textbook. She passed out a template (Appendix B) that included a section with lines for each of the following: Claim, data, and warrants. It also included a quote about dreams. She gave them definitions for each of the parts of the argument, and then she asked them if they agreed or disagreed with the quote. She then tied the quote to the story of Walter Mitty, and she asked students to make a claim about the story, provide evidence (data) from the story, and then try to make connections between the evidence and the claim with a

lengthier warrants section by explaining the what, why, and how. They worked quietly as she walked around the room answering individual questions.

Later in a departmental meeting, all of the high school teachers discussed this particular exercise. Most of them regarded it as a failure. One teacher declared it a disaster and said her students referred to the claims or thesis statements as “feces statements.” Ali thought that her freshmen “did not mind trying the assignment,” but the evidence they produced lacked specificity. She expressed disappointment in the student efforts (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, September 9, 2014). This theme continued for a couple of months at departmental meetings as the teachers tried to teach argumentative writing using a version of Toulmin’s model; however, most of them had little to no training in the model (some had never heard of Toulmin) and the students continued to disappoint them. At a meeting late in September, Laura asked everyone how the Claim-Data-Warrant teaching was progressing. Jenna mentioned her students had confusion about warrants, and Jenna told them to think of them as the conclusion to their paper. Ali inserted at this point that she explained to her students, “You have your claim or thesis, your examples support the claim, and the warrant is how it applies” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, September 30, 2014). I realized they were not working from the same definitions which could pose problems for students later. A special education teacher who happened to attend the meeting asked specifically if they were using Toulmin’s model, and Ali responded hesitantly, “Yes, sort of a modified one.” I realized at this point they had little knowledge of the theory behind what they were teaching. Laura admitted to me much later that the vocabulary was new to her, and she felt ill-equipped to teach skills she had not been taught herself, much like the teachers in Brimi’s (2012) study who reported a lack of preparation for teaching writing and composition skills.

The argumentation lessons might have ended at the high school at that point, if I had not interjected and offered to loan them some books. Both Laura and Ali expressed interest in using the materials I lent them, but by the end of October, most of them had given up on making much progress with argumentation, at least for this school year. In a departmental meeting on October, 30, Laura admitted that she threw her students' last efforts with the Claim Data Warrant templates away without grading them. Ali indicated she might try giving students informational articles to pick out the claims, data, and warrants, but she had no plans to ask for anymore argumentative writing. Laura offered to order copies of one of the books I loaned them at several departmental meetings, but to my knowledge no one expressed an interest.

Each of the high school teachers had different experiences with teaching argumentative writing in the end. Ali's freshmen never mastered argumentation for which she blamed their lack of prior experience. "They were still doing a lot of narrative writing, and so just a thesis statement--I had to spend so much time just on developing a strong thesis statement that made sense...I feel like I kind of had to start at the bottom" (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015). She expressed hope that things would improve in the future because she knew the middle school teachers had introduced argumentation at 6th, 7th, and 8th grades this year. She looked forward to building on previously learned skills rather than starting from scratch. "I think it's going to be different now because I know the middle school has focused on it quite a lot, too" (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015).

Ali identified counterarguments as the weakest area for her students. "Because their argument skills aren't so strong to begin with, it is hard to make that transition to look at the other side, and we've had to spend a lot of time on 'Well, that's just dumb,' and that's not a

strong counterargument” (A. Crenshaw, May 13, 2015). She attributed the weakness in their ability to address the counterargument to both lack of training and immaturity.

Laura admitted in the final interview that she did not attend to argumentation as she had intended to at the beginning of the year. She introduced it at the beginning of the school year using the claim-data-warrant template, and then when that exercise did not prove successful, “...it kind of fell to the way side, which was not what I intended to do” (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015). This corroborated a fear I had when I spoke with her in December in a casual conversation. She mentioned the books I loaned her, and said, “I’m really looking forward to trying some of these things next year” (L. Mathis, personal communication, December 11, 2014). I had not expected her to give up so early and so easily on argumentation after our first conversations in September. When we spoke at the end of the year, she confessed that she did not assign a single argument paper to her Advanced Placement Literature students, “and I feel like that is some kind of disservice” (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015). In the same interview, she acknowledged that she had not learned the skills of argumentation in her own teacher training and she would have to educate herself before she could teach her students.

Jenna had very little to say on the subject of argumentation. She taught persuasive techniques and rhetoric, and her students wrote one argumentative paper before they began test preparation in January. She used Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and a convocation address by Steve Jobs to teach rhetoric and persuasion. The argument paper she assigned asked the students to evaluate the differences between the movie version and the written text of *Lord of the Flies* and to write a paper arguing for whichever one they deemed “the better of the two” (J. McArthur, personal communication, March 24, 2015). This conversation took

place in March just a month prior to the 10th grade EOI test, and Jenna hoped to have them write one more argument before they took the test although she had nothing specific planned at that time.

Middle school

The middle school had different challenges in teaching argumentation, and they approached the topic very differently. Last year the 8th grade writing test featured an argumentative prompt, and the students in Claremont did not meet the state average on this particular test. The disappointing test results had teachers feeling pressured to prepare the students well this year and to focus on argumentation since that seemed to be the direction the state pointed through specific professional development leading up to the test this year and through the materials provided on the website.

Mary and Tanya both taught 8th graders and began early in the year to think about argumentation. Mary's remediation class provided unique challenges for her because many of them had reading deficiencies, and most of them struggled in writing as well. In November, I observed Mary teaching a group of six 8th graders to write an argument using a graphic organizer called a four square. She used the Smartboard to draw the four-square diagram (Appendix C). After working through three examples with the students including "snacks," "Oklahoma," and "spaghetti," Mary assigned them the task of creating their own four-square organizer based on one of the following two prompts: "It is important to have friends" or "My family is very special." They worked quietly for the last couple of minutes of class, and then she took up their papers telling them, "You'll never keep up with these until Monday." I spoke with her approximately a month later, and she declared the four-square an absolute failure.

After thinking about the various prompts that she used, it became apparent to me that she modeled three very concrete nouns and had students work through the four-square template providing adjectives that described the nouns or other nouns that related to the subject before they then created sentences; however, the two prompts she gave them to work out on their own were much more abstract and did not lend themselves to following what she modeled on the Smartboard. Understanding how the assignment went awry could help her teach it more effectively in the future.

In her final conversation with me, Mary still remembered how much their four-square products disappointed her. “I thought we were doing really well. I used the four-square method. I modeled it, I did it step-by-step, I felt really good about it, I was pretty pleased; and then I had them write one all by themselves, and I cried for two days” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). This last conversation took place after the 8th grade writing test as Mary looked back on the entire year. She still felt resentful about the OSDE’s announcement of the change in the prompt to a narrative one two weeks before the test. She had worked hard to prepare students for an argumentative prompt. In the end, she expressed pleasure in what they did accomplish. “They did ok with giving their reasons and supporting those reasons that they chose for their side, but when we got to the paragraph where we were supposed to argue for the other side or show the other side’s point of view, that really wasn’t something that they could do...these kids don’t switch well” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2014). She admitted that the 6th graders struggled the most with counterarguments, and she believed they probably had not been introduced to the concept prior to this year. “The 7th and 8th graders have really matured, and where they are now from where they were at the beginning of the year is phenomenal” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2014).

Tanya approached argumentation with a certain amount of trepidation based on the previous 8th grade test scores. She moved to 8th grade from 7th grade in August of 2014, and she told me at the beginning of the year that she could not believe how little students remembered from the previous year. Even before December, she reported to me that she had already asked the principal to move her to another grade as soon as this school year ended, if at all possible. In January, she took on a student teacher from a local university and just having another teacher in the room seemed to boost her confidence. They attended a state-sponsored videoconference on the 8th grade writing test together where they gathered information about expectations and rubrics. "PASS is all about persuasive writing, but the main thing the video talked about is argument which is Common Core...I am really happy to have Scott to help me prepare them. He's teaching them to write thesis statements and helping them organize with outlines" (T. Carothers, personal communication, January 15, 2015). Tanya and the student teacher tackled argumentation together with a courtroom activity that required students to take opposing sides and debate specific issues. In our last conversation, Tanya reported that the activity "worked well because some students have a hard time writing a counterclaim, and I believe it helped them to be able to see the other side even though they didn't want to be on that side" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). The oral arguments helped them in examining claims on both sides of an argument for evidence/data and then preparing warrants to support those claims. As Rex, Thomas, and Engel (2010) reported, Tanya also found that oral arguments and dialogue served as a useful precursor to writing arguments, but students needed help transitioning their verbal skills to paper. Tanya recognized that she needed to work more on that transition step.

Even with the emphasis Tanya placed on argumentation and the efforts she put into preparing students for an argumentative prompt on the 8th grade writing test, she expressed relief when the state department changed the prompt to a narrative one. “I felt relief because I felt like most people can write a story” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). She had changed her mind about moving from 8th grade by the end of the year and suggested that she would continue to teach argumentative writing but differently. “I plan on teaching more in spurts, learning about it before we just go diving into the process, try to do more throughout the year teaching argumentation--not just making it one big assignment that I spend six weeks on” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). She also saw a need for students to work on academic writing skills because they struggled to transfer their oral arguments to paper. She wanted to find a way to help them transition from talking and arguing out loud to organizing and expressing their points with evidence in strong written arguments. “I’m looking for a way to combine those things and make it easier for them” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015).

For Norah’s sixth graders, argumentation involved entirely new concepts and terminology. In elementary school, students learned persuasive writing where they expressed an opinion and then attempted to support that belief with evidence. The switch to argumentative writing added several additional expected skills including warrants that directly connected and explained the data that supported the claims, and in particular, argumentation required students to address opposing arguments or potential counterclaims.

At a departmental meeting in March, three teachers including Norah and Tanya discussed argumentation. Norah described giving her students a formula that included writing a thesis, developing a number of points, presenting the counterclaim, and then finishing with a strong

conclusion. She indicated her students performed well with the formula, and they also broke away from it fairly successfully. “I provided the sources, so I made them wait to formulate their claim until they had read all the resources. They understood that you have a number of points that you need to make your argument, but not necessarily a set number of points” (N. Smith, personal communication, March 11, 2015).

In April, Norah described teaching sixth graders argumentation as a “learning experience.” She admitted the counterargument gave them the most trouble, and she did not think they ever fully grasped the point of it. “It ended up becoming a formula. You say a claim, and then give me a counterclaim. It became very AB, AB, and I had to really map it out on an outline, and some of them could follow that, but I don’t think they saw the use for it in their essay...in their writing you could tell there was a disconnect” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). She had better success with personal narratives at the end of the year, but she gained confidence through the processes of teaching each kind of writing and anticipated things would improve the next time she taught them.

None of the teachers except Norah addressed the speaking and listening skills associated with Common Core. Norah’s sixth graders presented their arguments orally, and they evaluated their peers on preparedness, effectiveness, and transitions which directly addressed several Common Core standards. When asked, the other teachers had either not taken time away from test preparation or they assumed that certain speaking and listening standards were met in the course of interacting and participating in class every day. Tanya and her student teacher probably addressed several of the standards when they conducted the courtroom activity, but they did not overtly note the speaking and listening skills on their lesson plans.

All of the teachers had some awareness of the importance of argumentative writing because of the test prompts that surprised everyone the previous year. All of them made at least limited efforts to address those standards over the course of the year, some more effectively than others. Overall, the instruction failed for a variety of reasons. The template the high school teachers found and used probably overly simplified the concepts. Without prior experience, students filled in the lines with no clear idea of what they were doing and why. The teachers quickly got frustrated with the products, and most gave up after one or two tries. They went back to what they had used before, or they did nothing at all to address the Common Core standards. Laura sheepishly admitted that her AP Literature class probably wrote nothing argumentative all year, at least formally. I suspect nearly everything they wrote in the class constituted an argument of some sort, albeit one that failed to follow the formal style, but Laura did not recognize their writing as argumentation and did not present it to them as such. Ali struggled with basics which she blamed on students' previous experience. She spent the vast majority of her class time covering sentence structure and thesis statements, so other skills did not get addressed. Jenna tackled argumentation like she did everything else, through the lens of the tests. She had them write one argument which really consisted of an opinion paper supported with preferences (which do you prefer? The movie or the book?). After Christmas, she moved into test preparation mode and focused on teaching test-taking skills almost exclusively.

Mary made a heroic effort to teach her remediation students how to write a formal argument using a highly structured format with a graphic organizer. As I reread my field notes from this observation, it became clear that she modeled three very concrete topics in class and then assigned an abstract one for homework. Students easily came up with descriptive adjectives and then sentences to fill in the organizer on the Smartboard with topics like "snacks" or

“spaghetti.” Explaining “Why my family is special” takes a different kind of thinking and descriptive ability. The assignment probably failed because the students could not connect what she asked them to do at home with what they had done together in class.

Tanya and Norah did teach argumentation formally and skillfully. Both the sixth graders and the 8th graders at the middle school produced formulaic papers based on the Common Core standards and a simplified version of Toulmin’s model. They developed claims, pulled evidence from supplied sources, and supported their claims with that evidence. In both classrooms students also honed oral argumentative skills on at least one formal assignment.

Ultimately, argumentation remained a viable strategy into the second semester at the middle school due to misdirection from the OSDE about the prompt on the 8th grade writing test. The high school teachers, particularly Ali and Laura, continued to bring argumentation to the surface long after they had stopped trying to teach it, probably because of my study and my interest in the topic. Laura asked about it at each departmental meeting, and they at a minimum feigned interest in the materials I loaned them for several months after the initial attempts to engage students had failed. The differences in definitions for the various components hints at the problem; they need more instruction themselves in order to teach argumentation effectively. Laura admitted freely that she did not understand the structure well enough to explain it to her students. Ali probably did understand it, but she quickly became frustrated by the deficits in her students’ writing skills, so she focused her attention on the basics she felt they needed before going on to tenth grade where they faced another required EOI exam.

As a tool for teaching, Toulmin’s (1958) model provides a valid and solid basis for scaffolding students as they learn to develop strong, effective arguments, but its effectiveness is easily blunted when teachers themselves do not understand each of the components and their role

in the argument process. If teachers provide students between the ages of 7-14 with a process for writing that includes planning, drafting, revising, and editing with opportunities to dialogue and respond to copious feedback, they can learn to write effective arguments (Andrews, et al., 2009). They need the luxury of beginning as novices and growing into experts with lots of practice over years of writing, speaking, and listening to arguments, identifying the parts, and rebutting with counterarguments to develop the skills (Sommers & Saltz, 2004; VanDeWeghe, 2006). Targeted professional development could solve many of the problems the teachers in Claremont dealt with in trying to teach this difficult process. They need to see argumentation as a long-term process and avoid the one-shot attempts that plagued the Claremont students and resulted in disappointment for their teachers.

Curriculum Alignment

The middle and high school teachers in Claremont spent much of the school year at least thinking about the importance of vertical alignment as a logical next step for improving student achievement. The teachers I worked with each taught a single grade level and represented the only faculty member who taught that particular grade and subject. Shannon, at the administrative level, had concerns about horizontally aligning the elementary grades, but the subject of horizontal alignment did not come up with the other participants. Each of them recognized the need to close skill gaps and adequately prepare students for the next grade level, but they did not necessarily see the developmental benefits of scaffolding skills over a long period of time and helping students move from novice to expert. Most saw alignment as a way to ensure students had the skills necessary to enter their particular grade level ready to move forward with the curriculum for that grade.

The teachers in Claremont began the school year with a meeting about curriculum alignment. Alignment formed the subtext of nearly every conversation in which I participated for several months. Most of the teachers realized it was the next natural step in improving student performance and moving forward in all curricular areas. The high school teachers (Ali, in particular, as the freshmen teacher) talked often in departmental meetings about the skills that students lacked when they arrived at the high school; they hoped alignment would fill many of the gaps they observed by specifying which skills should be taught at each grade. If nothing else, they would know who to blame if students continued to arrive at the next grade unprepared. The district invested in the alignment process by hiring Shannon to oversee its implementation from preschool to twelfth grade, but somehow over this school year, alignment did not go as smoothly as the teachers hoped when they started out the year.

The teachers told me from the first day that they planned to meet for the second time as a large content area group on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in January, the next professional development opportunity on the schedule. This distant date indicated they might not be as serious about aligning together as they professed, but the high school teachers started the year with weekly departmental meetings that often revolved around the alignment question. About the time the high school teachers ceased meeting regularly, the middle school teachers took up the alignment issue and began meetings of their own. The results of both situations proved interesting.

First alignment meeting

An examination of the agenda and the handouts (Appendix D) from the first district-wide alignment meeting on August 19, 2014, which happened prior to the beginning of the study, revealed some of the problems that manifested later and made it difficult for the district to move

forward as a whole. Shannon apparently ran the meeting as the new Director of Student and Instructional Services. In the hour long meeting, Shannon shared a set of common terms for writing instruction that she hoped they would use across all language arts classes. They began with a short fill in the blank form where each teacher listed “The three things that all students should know when they come to my class” and “The three things all students should know when they leave my class.” She passed out a copy of PASS Standard 5 for fifth grade and PASS Standard 4 for 11th grade, both dealing with research and information skills. She also passed out the Common Core standards for each of the two grades that most closely correlated to the PASS standards for comparison. For approximately 40 minutes, she and the teachers apparently engaged in an exercise to deconstruct the standards both at the building/grade level and also at the district level. She finished with a brief discussion of the common terminology and a call for “setting the stage” and “moving forward” by answering specific questions. She asked teachers to email responses directly to her and reminded them that “this is a collaborative process,” and they “are the experts in their content and grade level.” They scheduled a second meeting for January when they next had a professional development day on the calendar, but by then an eternity had gone by and no one even remembered much about the first meeting. In October when I asked Tanya about the alignment process, she said she had heard nothing since the August meeting, and she declared, “We are like remote islands” (T. Carothers, personal communication, October 30, 2014).

High school

The high school teachers started the year with weekly meetings ostensibly to move ahead with the alignment process. Laura invited me to attend them, and I did so with great interest as often as possible. Each week Laura brought a topic for them to discuss, and she valiantly

attempted to interest everyone in reading a professional book together. After several attempts to choose something the democratic way, Laura finally announced they would read a book on children in poverty and education that Shannon had recommended. Laura and Ali both purchased the book, but the meetings themselves dwindled away before they had an opportunity to discuss it. I do not think anyone else even attempted to read the book, but both Ali and Laura admitted later that it had become a slog and they found it disappointingly dry. The failed effort to read a book together metaphorically represented the problems the high school teachers encountered in finding a way to work together on the alignment process.

I noted at the November 18, 2014, meeting that the departmental meetings were turning negative. At every meeting, Jenna busied herself with her phone or laptop and did not pay attention. When Laura asked her a question often the entire conversation had to be repeated to catch her up. Another teacher used the meetings as a platform to complain about everything from the attendance program to the football players who disrupted her fifth hour. Laura came to the lunch meetings less and less prepared to run a concise discussion that stayed on topic. By January, they no longer met weekly, and often Laura cancelled scheduled meetings at the last minute. When they did meet, they rarely talked about the curriculum alignment.

In December, in a casual conversation, I asked Ali what needed tweaking to make things better. She responded,

Alignment. But that is going to take time. I think it will get better when the elementary schools go to grade centers next year. They teach research but not grammar. Somewhere between kindergarten and 9th grade, it is breaking down. We need to fix us, not the kids. They don't even adopt the same books at the elementary level (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, December 11, 2014).

The teachers looked toward the administration to spearhead the alignment process and provide leadership for both horizontal alignment across each grade level and vertical alignment from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Ali and I met again in January, and she expressed deep disappointment in one teacher she believed would never come around on the alignment issue. This teacher had derailed the weekly meetings with her complaining, and she continued to have a negative impact on all of the high school teachers by refusing to work collaboratively.

The all-district language arts alignment meeting on Martin Luther King Day did not materialize, and Ali expressed extreme frustration about this turn of events. She had serious concerns about students' lack of skills and basic knowledge when they arrived in her class. "I don't feel I should have to explain what a noun is before I teach gerunds" (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Unfortunately, the state had developed a new quantitative measure for teacher evaluation called Student Learning Objectives/Student Outcome Objectives (SLO/SOO), and Shannon spent the professional development day training teachers who did not face an end of year test to fill out the template and develop their own quantitative evaluation measure. Interestingly, the middle school teachers whose quantitative measure would be the OCCT their students took in April met by themselves to begin their own alignment revolution.

At the end of the year in the final interviews, both Laura and Jenna indicated they expected Shannon to lead the alignment process, but while Jenna looked forward to some kind of alignment in the future, Laura had doubts. Jenna believed a lack of a curriculum map hindered her in this new job and made it more difficult. She wanted to identify holes or gaps in the curriculum from elementary to high school and work to fill them, and she wanted to know what other teachers had already covered that might need a different approach for some students. She

believed alignment would provide the map she felt she needed. “I think there’s going to be holes no matter what, but it’s good to know if something’s already been taught--it’s a process, and it’s kind of slow” (J. McArthur, personal communication, March 24, 2015). Jenna cited the support of administrators and co-workers who had helped her navigate this year which she described as almost as difficult as her first year teaching. She looked forward to having better tools next year when she returned for her second year at tenth grade.

Laura, who began the year as a huge cheerleader for the alignment process, no longer tried to cover her doubts and misgivings. At the end of the year, she realized how hard it is to bring a group together and move them forward, and she did not like the idea of asking other teachers to give up some of their autonomy. She still believed alignment would help students, but she had less enthusiasm for the process. “I know if we can get some vertical teaming going on then things are going to go smoother...and it’s something I see a need for, but I have to be honest, I’ve never ever seen a need for it before” (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015). These statements surprised me because Laura always exuded enthusiasm for the process. She admitted that one of the teachers struggled all year with her grade level assignment, and “some of the teachers have really had a struggle this year, and it was just easier not to deal with it” (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015). She described the difficulty of getting the teachers to work together because most of them “are set in their ways.” She appreciates the autonomy she enjoys in her job, and she hates to be the one to take that away from others. “I don’t want to dictate what we teach because that is so much what I enjoy about where I teach...Claremont doesn’t dictate, and I’m grateful” (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015). She and Ali worked closely together over the course of the year, and she developed good relationships with both Jenna and one of the other teachers, but the fifth teacher’s resistance

prevented them from making the progress on the alignment that they hoped to make when the year began.

Middle school

Meanwhile, the middle school moved in the opposite direction. The teachers started the year somewhat anxious about letting me or anyone else see what happened in their classrooms. They all had new placements including one who had not taught in a classroom of her own before this year. They reluctantly agreed to participate in the study, and I observed in their classrooms several times in the first semester. On Martin Luther King Day, they met together with one other teacher from their building, and they began the process of aligning their own curriculum beginning with fifth grade, expected to move to the middle school in the fall of 2015, and ending with eighth grade. They developed a chart and began to meet weekly in thirty minute chunks to fill in the sections on the chart. They specified the types of writing and then filled in skills at each grade level to give teachers a roadmap of what to teach and when. As they worked together, their enthusiasm grew. The chart, shared in Google Drive, acted as a living document that all of them contributed to over the course of the second semester. They left many blanks in the fifth grade column in anticipation of consulting directly with the fifth grade teacher once she moved to the middle school. “We want to bring in the fifth grade teacher and give her lots of say about what skills are placed at her grade level” (T. Carothers, personal communication, February 12, 2015). During the same visit, Norah explained to me that this alignment process helped her “see the big picture” and that she could teach a skill up to a point and then let it go because someone would take up the same skill the following year and move students forward (N. Smith, personal communication, February, 12, 2015). Norah looked physically relieved as she described the weight of responsibility she had let go as a result of their meetings.

In our final conversation, Tanya echoed Norah's enthusiasm. "I think it's going wonderfully. I'm so excited. We have moved through almost every type of writing now, we started on grammar...I feel like we're making leaps and bounds every time we meet with aligning our curriculum" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). Tanya returned to her island analogy in our final conversation when she told me that this group of teachers wanted to help each other and no longer treated their own classrooms as island retreats. She enjoyed leading a team of people who wanted to share with each other and who "don't have egos about it" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). She hoped to meet a couple of times with her middle school teachers over the summer, but she had definite plans to visit with Ali at the high school to make sure she understood the skills Ali expected her students to have when they started 9th grade. Tanya also mentioned some professional development they expected to receive in the fall where she hoped the middle school and high school teachers would have an opportunity to work closely together on alignment. She taught at the high school before she moved to middle school, and she remembered the grumbling about the gaps and holes that left students unprepared for the upper grades. "We've got to learn to support each other. We've got to learn what each other needs" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). Tanya also had high hopes for the effect of moving the elementary schools to grade centers. "We've got to build from the bottom to the top or vice versa, and it will really help us" (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015).

Norah kept the organizational chart of skills that the middle school teachers developed over the second half of the year in their weekly meetings. She worked in Google Drive so that all teachers had access, but she primarily recorded as the others discussed. Her enthusiasm for the process stemmed from her own lack of experience in the classroom and her feelings of being

overwhelmed at the beginning of the year because she did not know specifically the scope of her responsibilities as the sixth grade language arts teacher. The alignment process helped her realize that she did not have to teach everything. “That has helped me probably more than anything else this year, just realizing...they don’t have to know everything before they get to 7th and 8th grades...it takes a lot of the burden off of me” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). She recognized that the standards helped them scaffold things, but gaps existed because “things got brushed off” and often the skipped skills turned out to be foundational. “It’s a battle for time, so what’s important not only for the state tests, but for what you want to do with them in your classroom” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). Norah celebrated the unexpected skills her students had mastered in earlier classrooms that saved her time, but she also recognized that some of the skills that they lacked really slowed down her ability to move them forward. “I thought I would spend two days teaching them how to map things out and brainstorm, but they knew it. They were pros at it, but there were other things I thought they would know...my students didn’t know what nouns were” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015).

Mary did not attend most of the alignment meetings. She taught remediation classes and had all three grades, but her plan period differed from those of the other language arts teachers. She attended the group meeting at the beginning of the year, and in the final interview she expressed a strong endorsement for the alignment process. Her experiences this year showed her the importance of consistency and careful planning to make sure skills get scaffolded properly as students move up in grades. In the final interview, she talked about the problems that occur when teachers choose different textbooks and the academic language varies even slightly. “Now that I have 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, I’ve realized it’s really important that we pick the same book

company for every level. They use the same language, and it's just better for students...we teach the same things, but we don't always call it the same thing" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

Mary also discovered in talking to other teachers at the first alignment meeting that decisions she made about what skills to teach impacted other teachers in ways she had not recognized. "I am a language arts teacher, but the test is a reading test, so I have let some of the language arts things go, like parts of speech. I let them go because the elementary schools let them go, so when they got here, it was no longer a review but a lengthy ordeal to teach...but when we actually started talking, I realized those things are tested at the high school level, and if we don't cover them here, then it's a nine weeks process for them" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015). She admitted that it bothered her that the test determined what she taught, and she left out some important material because the OCCT at her grade level did not address those skills. She described everyone working in isolation and only concerned with the specific test each of them faced at the end of the year. "It's a disservice to the kids is what I think" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

For Mary, the conversations that happened at the beginning of the year as the teachers began thinking about alignment provided some much needed illumination. She realized how little they knew about what went on in other classrooms, and she welcomed learning some skills she could let go because others already taught them in-depth. She welcomed the expectation that they no longer would remain isolated and alone but could work together to make things more manageable. She expressed great confidence in Shannon's ability to make things happen. "She's like a dog on a bone. When she gets on something, she makes it happen, so I do think

next year will be much more productive as far as the alignment goes” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

Despite Mary’s confidence, Shannon herself expressed reluctance to move forward with the alignment process in English language arts. In our first conversation together, she told me she hated to devote much time and energy to aligning until the OSDE settled on ELA standards. “I don’t want to put a lot of teachers’ time into this just to have to throw it out” (S. Stewart, personal communication, November 16, 2014). Her attitude did not change much over the course of the year as the state failed to provide any leadership on ELA standards before the end of the year. The middle school teachers shared their Google document with Shannon in March, and she indicated to me that she liked what they had done. She recognized that most of the work had taken place because of Tanya’s leadership in her new role as departmental chair. Shannon planned to ask Tanya to lead professional development for the other language arts teachers. In the meantime, Shannon hoped that providing aligned materials and moving the elementaries to grade centers will start a natural process of alignment by eliminating discrepancies across grades without having to put much more time into mapping and meeting with teachers.

Everyone is doing their own thing. Someone doesn’t like a particular book, they choose not to use it, and who knows? No one. They close their doors and teach what they want. I’m sort of directing the alignment through purchasing new materials and physically moving the grade together so they can work with each other. It will make a huge difference in a few years (S. Stewart, personal communication, January 22, 2015).

Teachers’ responses and their career and educational experiences correlated directly to their willingness and ability to align curriculum (Polikoff, 2013). The high school teachers waited for leadership from above, but their lack of commitment to the process as a group

hampered their ability to make any progress. Laura, tasked with leading them in the meetings, hesitated to dictate curriculum, two new teachers waited for others to step up, a third revolted against the process, and Ali accepted overtures from Tanya at the middle school to work with her on aligning their two grades. Meanwhile, Shannon hoped the alignment would result naturally from moving the grades around and purchasing aligned materials. Research indicates a more formal framework in which the district works with teachers to document and manage the alignment process with accountability procedures built in provides a more likely model for success (Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008; Squires, 2012). First year teachers, in particular, could benefit from a strongly aligned curriculum that allows them to focus their energies on other first year concerns such as classroom management (Polikoff, 2013). Jenna's dismay over the lack of a curriculum map after her experience in Texas and Norah's evident relief when the middle school teachers began alignment attest to the importance of providing new teachers with additional alignment support.

Polikoff (2013) also found that teachers with more than 11 years of experience showed reluctance to engage in curricular alignment. Teachers like Mary and Laura with 26 and 20+ years in the classroom respectively could benefit from a formal framework that supports their efforts to implement standards and provides measures for accountability. Professional development directed towards clear, manageable strategies for alignment that teachers can implement immediately might help Mary and Laura see the need for everyone to buy-in and support the alignment effort.

Accountability

A state mandated set of forms for developing a Value-Added Measure for the teacher evaluation system created significant angst and distraction about the middle of the year. The

VAMs required significant effort with little evidence that they provide reliable or valid data, and they created tension between teachers in untested areas and those who faced end of the year tests. In effect, this mandate represented an excellent example of Hargreaves' (1992) intensification where teachers are loaded with paperwork and additional tasks that keep them occupied while distracting from the business of teaching.

Value added measures (VAMs) became one of many stressors that the teachers in this case study dealt with over the course of the nine months. Teachers in tested grades and content areas had no choice. In addition to the traditional principal observations in their classrooms, the state employed a complicated tallying system with student test scores on the OCCTs and EOIs to come up with a quantitative measure that eventually comprised approximately 35% of a teacher's evaluation. During the study in 2014, the Oklahoma State Department of Education developed Value Added Measures (VAMs) in the form of Student Learning Outcomes/Student Learning Objectives (SLO/SOO) templates/worksheets to address the disparity in how teachers were assessed. SLO/SOO templates supposedly provided a quantitative measure of up to 35% for the Teacher Leader Effectiveness (TLE) evaluations for teachers in untested curricular areas. This paperwork left it up to individual teachers to decide the criteria by which they would be measured if they were not responsible for an end of year test. The Oklahoma State Department of Education website describes SLO/SOO as "a set of goals that measure educators' progress in achieving student growth targets" (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2015. January 2). Using the template, teachers described their own Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) and Student Outcome Objectives (SOOs) based on their curriculum and plans. Teachers identified standards, skills, assessments, growth targets, rationale for growth targets, and outcomes based on students' demonstrated knowledge and skills at the end of a particular interval. Ali assured

me she would certainly choose outcomes in areas of student strengths and would have no trouble “gaming the system” to make sure she looked effective. The SLO/SOO paperwork (Appendix E) surfaced from the state department around December before the new State Superintendent took office, and after significant professional development and teacher efforts to prepare for it, it quietly disappeared around March, although the forms remain available at the website as of August of 2015. According to Shannon, the state put the SLO/SOO variables aside for at least a year, leaving “a gaping hole” in the quantitative side of the TLE for teachers in untested areas.

The teachers at Claremont received news of this new set of policies at their professional development day on Martin Luther King Day in January. All teachers in untested grades or content areas attended a meeting with Shannon where she passed out the paperwork and explained that they would need to figure out what content they would track and monitor to eventually be tallied into a score. The middle school teachers did not attend this meeting because they all faced tests with accompanying student test scores that would comprise the quantitative measures on their teacher evaluations instead.

I became aware of this new wrinkle in a conversation with Shannon late in January. After several mentions of SLO/SOOs, I finally asked Shannon to explain. The state mandated that part of the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness evaluation would include SLO/SOOs. Each teacher not in a tested area would fill out a template on each of their classes detailing the population and establishing learning objectives and outcome objectives for each student. 35% of their TLE would depend on how well they met their own written goals. The SLO/SOO tallies would convert to a score would be added to their observation score (50%) and an additional score chosen by the teacher (from other test scores, Advanced Placement scores, awards, etc.) would complete the last 15% for a total of 100%.

Shannon found all of this troubling. She indicated this kind of reform often falls by the wayside depending upon how the politics works. “If Janet Barresi [previous State Superintendent of Public Instruction] had stayed around to drive that bus that’s exactly where it was headed. People who want this kind of reform typically have four years to get it done, and they cram it through and try to push everyone to adopt. Then they don’t get re-elected” (S. Stewart, personal communication, January 22, 2015).

High school

The departmental meeting at the high school on the same day in January that I met with Shannon also centered on the VAMs and the SLO/SOO templates. Ali reported that she had come to work early in the morning because her son had an athletic practice to attend, and she worked through one of the SLO/SOO templates for her pre-AP class. She admitted it was not hard, and they could share most of the data, but they would each need to analyze their own individual classes. Ali felt that in her planning she already accounted for the progress of her students and took steps to measure how much they learned and how they improved over time. She resented the introduction of new methods that did not survive the year but sucked up significant time in training and preparation when she already had what she considered an adequate system in place for her classes.

Middle school

Tanya welcomed the efforts at making teachers accountable, but she recognized an inherent unfairness in what the state required. “TLE (Teacher and Leader Effectiveness) is actually one of the best things to happen; however, is it being used effectively? Probably not” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). She admitted that strengthening the observation method made sense, but only if principals implemented the process correctly. She

imagined problems with a principal using the evaluation process as a lever to get rid of teachers he does not like, but it can also provide the means for getting rid of ineffective teachers, too. “We’ve basically lost tenure because we are not guaranteed jobs anymore, but at the same time, it is good for someone who is not doing her job. Principals can actually document it more effectively now” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). She did not fear the process for herself, but she certainly could see how it could be abused from either side. She preferred a fair system of accountability but worried about the lack of protection inherent in the reliance on one person’s observations and the lack of recourse for unfair assessments. Tanya particularly objected to tying evaluations to test scores as occurred with VAMs. “How could you not teach to the test? How could you not?” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015).

Norah, as a new teacher, had many concerns about the evaluation process and the effect of testing on her position. She admitted that she thought little about the tests until near the end of the year. She had plenty to keep her occupied trying to figure out what to teach and how much depth she needed to provide at the sixth grade level. She struggled with low self-confidence, and she longed for opportunities to observe other teachers or to talk to a mentor. “I’m really hard on myself, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing...I’m kind of floating around doing the best I can, and hoping that it’s good. The feedback that I have gotten is positive” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). When Norah realized that at least 30% of her evaluation would come from student test scores, she worried that something she really had little control over, a test on one day, had so much to say about her worth as a teacher. For some reason unknown to Norah, the reading teacher actually prepares the 6th graders for the test associated with Norah’s evaluation. Norah expressed great confidence in the other teacher, but it bothered her that she

got the credit for what the reading teacher accomplished, and if things went horribly wrong, she would take the blame as well. She found it particularly scary that the school report cards which are published online make it clear “which teachers got which scores, and I thought, ‘I don’t want anyone to know that about me.’ It’s almost like putting report cards out in the hall for students. You just don’t do that! And of course you have to do that to hold educators accountable, I guess, but it makes me feel really vulnerable and exposed almost” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015).

Norah believed that she truly offered her best effort in the classroom, and she believed that, for the most part, most other teachers felt the same way. I think a majority of us are here because we really, really want to be here” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). As a new teacher, Norah experienced all of these accountability measures in very personal terms. She worried about the public nature of test scores, and she worried that her best efforts would still fail. Her relief that a more experienced teacher prepared her sixth graders for the reading tests that accrued to Norah’s evaluation was tempered by the knowledge that their roles could easily be reversed.

Mary also did not mind the accountability. She believed she did her job, and principal observations would confirm her skills and her dedication. The use of test scores as VAMs bothered her. She particularly resented the fact that teachers in other untested curricular areas did not face the same scrutiny through the public display of scores. “Language arts and math are always posted up on the board or an A, B, or C--whatever we got. That’s fine. I should be held accountable for my job; however, I’m getting the same amount of money that the people who teach science and history, and they have nothing to tie their scores to” (M. Travis personal communication, March 31, 2015). She also resented the SLO/SOO system which she understood

only vaguely. “My understanding is that the teachers are coming up with their own tests---well, why would they not make a test that their students are going to score really well on?” (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015).

Mary’s resentment showcased the way VAMs serve to drive a wedge between teachers from different content areas. While in effect, the SLO/SOO process gave teachers in untested areas almost total control over 35% of their evaluation, as Mary pointed out, while teachers in tested areas had virtually none. The inequity of this situation was bound to cause problems at some point, particularly if a teacher deemed ineffective due to test scores lost his/her job. When administrators use different techniques to judge teachers’ effectiveness, problems can arise if teachers perceive things as unfair or tilted in favor of one group or another. Mary exhibited little to no hope that her students could perform well either on the 8th grade writing test or the OCCT reading test. She knew their placement in her classes resulted from their poor performances on earlier tests, and she had a heavier lift getting good test results than any other teacher in the building. She provided a perfect example of Goodwin and Miller’s (2012) contention that non-random placement of students can make VAMs based on test-scores unfair.

Norah’s situation also emphasized the problems with accountability based on test scores. Her students’ reading test scores accrued to her evaluation, but another teacher actually taught the reading class. Fortunately, she believed her partner teacher excelled in her effectiveness which eased her tension somewhat about the tests, but she also expressed discomfort about “taking the credit” when the other teacher had done the preparation. This situation seems illogical and may be unique to Claremont. As a first year teacher, Norah also faced the probability that value-added measures of her effectiveness could skew one way or the other because of a lack of accumulated data and/or statistical fluctuations (Goodwin & Miller, 2012),

although the other teacher's experience may impact her positively, essentially giving her too much credit.

The teachers in Claremont expressed mostly positive sentiments about the need for accountability. They had a hyper-awareness of students who arrived in their classrooms at the beginning of the year lacking certain skills or with gaps in their knowledge. They blamed ineffective teachers who failed to do their jobs by skipping over difficult to teach material. They wanted those gaps filled, and all of them committed themselves to a certain degree to curriculum alignment in an effort to hold everyone more accountable. They wanted ineffective teachers out of the system to make their own paths to increasing student achievement smoother. Still, they perceived the VAMs process as unfair and inaccurate. They hated publicly displayed test scores that called out only those teachers in tested areas, and identified them as failing or succeeding without taking into account the myriad of factors that might impact how students perform on a particular test at a particular time and on a particular day (Goodwin & Miller, 2012). They welcomed additional scrutiny to improve the profession, but Tanya expressed out loud the fear that loss of tenure meant teachers could become victims of less than scrupulous principals with vendettas against them. Tanya also pointed out that for most teachers the most obvious response to the importance of the test meant teaching to the test and the subsequent narrowing of the curriculum (Ritter & Shuls, 2012).

Finally, the OSDE made the classic mistake of assigning a fairly heavy weight (35%) to the VAMs whether they came from converted test scores or the SLO/SOO paperwork. This kind of emphasis ensures that the inequities in the system will matter more and teachers will fear the process especially if they happen to be in a tested area. It also makes the inaccuracies and the unreliability in the measures even more damaging if principals use them to make decisions about

retention or incentives (DiCarlo, 2012). The teachers in Claremont wisely recognized that as teachers in tested areas they could do their best to prepare their students, but they could not control every aspect of their students' lives. The teachers with the SLO/SOO option (Laura and Ali) were less stressed about accountability, but they wanted their own students to arrive in their classrooms with the requisite skills to move forward, and they knew that ineffective teachers in earlier grades could negatively impact their own ability to move forward.

Professional Development

The teachers in Claremont engaged in frequent professional development but had little to show for their efforts. They brought back activities and lesson ideas that proved ineffective when presented to students in isolation and without a clear context or applicability to the curriculum. Teachers did not ground the activities in authentic and meaningful curriculum and often the activities failed to have the impact they hoped for or expected based on their experience in the professional development workshop.

The English language arts teachers at Claremont participated in multiple professional development opportunities throughout the year, particularly in the summer. At the high school, they began planning their summer Advanced Placement workshops in January. They tried to travel as a team and participated in different levels and content areas (literature or language) each summer. They also attended the one and two day AP workshops that occurred during the school year, and in fact, at the first departmental meeting I attended in September, the high school teachers made plans to travel together to a workshop the following week.

Both the middle school and the high school ELA teachers and students participated in a long-term professional development opportunity that facilitated the teaching of writing over a two year period. They allowed facilitators access to their students at certain points in the year. In the

second year of the project, the teachers expected to receive several hours of professional development geared specifically for their students' needs to help them establish a curriculum to teach writing. This professional development was scheduled to begin the summer after my study ended and continue into the fall 2015 semester.

High school

In addition to these ongoing professional development opportunities, the teachers often talked about the kind of professional development that worked best for them or that they liked. Jenna indicated in several conversations that the professional development she experienced in Texas helped her a great deal in her development as a teacher. She cited professional development on vocabulary and inclusion, as well as sessions devoted to the works of educational writer Sean Cain and researcher Robert J. Marzano as particularly helpful. She told me that she always looked for ways to improve questioning in the classroom, and she would love to have some professional development on analyzing texts with students and higher level thinking. Jenna planned to attend a Pre-Advanced Placement course in Tulsa over the summer of 2015, and she indicated she had approached her co-workers about bringing someone in from the Oklahoma Education Association to provide some professional development. She wanted to incorporate more technology into her classroom, and she advocated using Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers, two widely-known websites, as a means of gathering new ideas and approaches in the classroom. She definitely had a positive attitude about professional development and viewed it as a productive means of improving her practice.

When asked specifically about professional development, Ali cited the Advanced Placement Summer Institutes she attended every summer. All of the English language arts teachers in Claremont were expected to make an effort to attend one each summer; the teachers at

the high school spent considerable time in the departmental meetings after the winter holiday talking about the various possibilities and who planned to go where. Ali also suggested that the entire faculty could never get enough professional development on writing across the curriculum.

Laura attended Advanced Placement Summer Institutes every year, and she mentioned the National Writing Project month-long summer institute as well, but she had not yet found the time to attend it. She looked for practical, hands-on ideas that she could take directly back to her classroom and adapt quickly and easily with just a little tweaking. The teachers talked about professional development all the time, but little evidence existed to indicate they used what they learned in their classrooms. My own observations indicated the teachers tended to implement activities from workshops in isolation from the rest of the curriculum, and often they were disappointed with the results.

Middle school

The middle school teachers looked for somewhat different things in professional development. As a first year teacher, Norah looked for training in techniques that she had heard about but had no training to implement. Her elementary education degree did not prepare her to use a Writer's Workshop (Atwell, 1998) with middle school students, and she wanted to try it. She also wanted more information and professional development in how to write and implement student-centered lessons.

I was able to create maybe four lessons that I'm really proud of that were student-centered and real discovery learning...and I could see a big difference in them. They were motivated, they were engaged--whenever the bell rang, they didn't want to get up...And that's such a good feeling, those are really good days when you're driving home and

thinking, “I am an awesome teacher!” (N. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015).

Tanya also mentioned the Advanced Placement Summer Institute when she talked about effective professional development. She particularly liked that she could take the hands-on strategies into any classroom and easily adapt them for students of all levels. She appreciated that they can attend the AP workshops for free and as often as they like. She did not benefit as much from the professional development that prepared them to transition to Common Core. “A lot of people just...talking about the standards and a couple of things, that’s not helping me at all” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). Tanya also specifically suggested that she would like to get lesson plans that work and that she can tweak out of professional development. As Knight (2009) reported is common with teachers, Tanya appreciated practical help with new approaches to teaching and viewed explanation or expert talk with disdain, dismissing it as useless.

Tanya looked forward to the training in writing instruction they anticipated in the fall. She anticipated embracing professional development that recognized and implemented her expertise and treated her with respect as a professional (Knight, 2009). The upcoming training represented the long-term, site-based professional development that Quick, Holtzman, and Chaney (2009) found teachers valued because it encouraged collaboration and opportunities to try things in the safety and comfort of their own classrooms. The extended time frame gave them multiple opportunities to learn new strategies and implement new ideas while reducing the tension and stress involved (Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013).

Shannon also looked forward to implementing more professional development for her teachers in the upcoming year. Administration created her position to spearhead the alignment

process among other things, and she had long-term plans in mind. After the success of the middle school alignment meetings, Shannon intended to ask Tanya to lead some professional development meetings for the other teachers and share how they got started. “The middle school has done a fantastic job of driving this thing on their own” (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). She also hoped to pilot Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in second through fourth grades in the 2015-2016 school year. She anticipated asking administrators to give teachers in those grades common plan times so they could meet and work together on aligning curriculum and filling gaps. As Kennedy and Shiel (2010) reported, teachers develop confidence and increased self-efficacy through these kinds of efforts in addition to developing higher expectations for students; Poulsen and Avramidis (2003) referred to the creative tension that results in positive growth for all teachers who participate in long-term, collaborative work that draws on the expertise of all.

Shannon also wanted to focus efforts on developing formative assessments that could help the school identify and support specific students instead of always looking at summative assessments where they could fill gaps and holes over time but have less of a direct impact on students who need help. “We can look at big picture stuff like cohort trends across time and point out big, gaping holes, but those little detail things that matter to kids, that’s in formative assessment” (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). She hoped the PLCs would work specifically on developing formative assessments at each grade as one of their first tasks.

Summary

The teachers in Claremont began the year with high hopes for teaching argumentation and aligning their curriculum across all grade levels. They engaged in professional development that they hoped would move them forward in both of these endeavors, but they found themselves

tripped up by new demands from the OSDE to measure teacher effectiveness with new detailed accountability paperwork. Argumentation failed for a variety of reasons, and the curriculum alignment had little possibility of successful implementation as long as the standards remained in flux. The accountability measures, both the test scores and the SLO/SOO paperwork, added to teacher stress levels and workloads and held almost no promise of providing accurate and usable information. In every instance, beleaguered teachers attempted to fulfill mandates and requirements without adequate explanations or cogent arguments to help them understand and to solicit their commitment.

In the final chapter, I will examine these findings through the lens of Habermas' theory to draw conclusions about the efficacy of using argumentation as a means for providing meaning and value for proposed changes in practice and curriculum and in the areas of educational reform.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore with a group of teachers from one Oklahoma school district their perceptions and experiences with Common Core standards and teaching writing, particularly argumentative writing, in both a high school and middle school setting. I believed that understanding how they responded to changes and reform mandates from the Oklahoma State Department of Education and how they implemented standards in their classrooms would provide an informed perspective that could help other teachers faced with the same challenges.

For this study, I collected qualitative data by conducting in-depth interviews with seven participants including six teachers and one administrator. I collected supporting data through multiple and frequent field observations and by analyzing documents used by the teachers throughout the course of the study. I coded, analyzed, and organized the data based on the research questions that I started with and then by the prominent themes that emerged out of the data. The study began with the following research questions which were answered in detail in the findings outlined in chapter 4:

1. What are Oklahoma English language arts teachers' perceptions and experiences with Common Core in light of their repeal in the summer of 2014?
2. What steps had teachers taken to implement Common Core in teaching students to develop arguments and critical thinking skills in the domains of writing and

speaking, and how did the repeal of the Common Core standards impact their teaching of argumentation skills?

3. What kind of professional development might help teachers most in dealing with the changes?
4. How can middle and high school teachers help each other?

For this study, I used Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action and his concept of argumentation to guide my analysis. Habermas, a member of the second generation of Critical Theorists, sees language and communication as the primary medium for reaching understanding in society and strengthening democracy (Englund, 2006). The quality of communication and the ability of the individual to come to his own informed understanding through dialogue and social interaction is key for reconciling differing factions and solving problems within his theory. "The concept of communicative action presupposes language as the medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to the world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested" (Habermas, 1992, p. 99). Although not explicitly defined, validity claims are those ideas that represent the truths or rightness about which good members of society disagree that require deliberative communication or reasoned argumentation before consensus can be achieved. The key to communicative action is the ability to argue reasonably, and change one's viewpoint when the argument is sufficiently convincing and rational. "We try to support a claim with good grounds or reasons; the quality of the reasons and their relevance can be called into question by the other side; we meet objections and are in some cases forced to modify our original position" (Habermas, 1992, p. 31).

Public education provides an environment where a generation of young thinkers can learn to communicate effectively through strong skills in argumentation which includes the ability to

listen to the views of others as well as presenting a cogent and strong case for one's own views. Englund (2006) suggests schools should be "potential public spaces in which there is a preference for pluralism"(p. 504), and deliberative communication provides a space "in which different opinions and values can be brought face to face" where each side takes a stand, listens, deliberates, evaluates and ultimately seeks collective consensus about what is best (p. 504-505). Toulmin's (1958) practical model for argumentation has become a standard in college composition courses across the country, and research indicates middle and high school students can use it effectively to develop their own arguments when they have sufficient time to practice and develop the skills (Rex, Thomas, & Engel, 2010).

Unfortunately, the kind of meaningful engagement required to teach children to effectively employ argumentation is usually limited in classrooms and often overshadowed by pressure to prepare students to pass standardized tests and time constraints due to a variety of distractions. For many teachers, the tests control the curriculum by narrowing it and forcing teachers to focus on the limited skills students need to perform well on multiple choice tests (McCarthy, 2008). In addition, the complexities of argumentation require scaffolded skills so that students begin as novices and develop their skills over time to achieve expertise (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). Curriculum alignment across all grade levels that lines up standards, instruction, curriculum, and assessments helps facilitate student progress, but often fails through lack of leadership and accountability across all areas (Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008). The OSDE muddied the situation by repealing the Common Core standards and not replacing them immediately; they implemented mandates and dropped them without explanation, and they continued the laser-like focus on end of the year standardized tests that forced teachers to teach to particular skills. Beleaguered teachers in Claremont were asked to implement changes in a

variety of instances without adequate and convincing arguments to explain the need or the purpose for the changes.

The teachers in Claremont began the year committed to teaching argumentation as they interpreted and understood it from the Common Core standards. They recognized the need for curriculum alignment to ensure skills developed over years, and they looked forward to taking positive steps towards improving student achievement. They fell victim to the demands of the standardized testing and the usual lack of time to devote to complicated and difficult material, and they became sidetracked by additional mandates and demands from the Oklahoma State Department of Education that took time and energy to address. In this chapter, I argue that the teachers in Claremont could not succeed in making positive changes on their own because of the traditional lack of leadership and consistency from the structures above them and because of the demands made upon their time and energy that had little to do with what happened in their classrooms.

Teachers' Perceptions of Common Core and Its Implementation

All of the teachers who participated in the Claremont study professed to like the Common Core standards very much. They quickly identified strengths and weaknesses that they saw in the standards, and for the most part, they indicated they planned to teach according to the standards as much as possible. However, complete implementation of the standards proved to be more difficult than anticipated. One of the most obvious reasons for abandoning the standards midway through the year had to do with the standardized tests required by the state near the end of the school year. At some point, it became obvious that the tests would not derive from Common Core but from the previous set of objectives, PASS. Teachers felt compelled to address the tests directly and nearly exclusively after the first of the year. No other curriculum

had a chance once test preparation began in earnest in January for many of the teachers in Claremont.

Teachers prepared students for tests by giving them practice tests, focusing on eliminating wrong choices in multiple choice questions, and drilling them on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills. Mary stated emphatically, “We are Common Core, our books are Common Core, but the test is going to be PASS--so I haven’t done anything out of a textbook for the last month” (M. Travis, personal conversation, March 31, 2015). As Jenna put it in mid-December, “They (the students) need to be able to figure out which two answers are correct, and then choose the ‘best’ answer, according to the test makers” (J. McArthur, personal conversation, December 15, 2014).

Two of the participants had to prepare 8th graders for the 8th grade writing test in February, and after months of assurance from the state that the prompt would be argumentative, they found out a few weeks prior to the test that it would ask for a fictional narrative. Both teachers quickly abandoned any efforts to teach argumentation and drilled students on writing a narrative instead. The long-term needs of the students to prepare them for college or for a career that required specific kinds of writing skills were abandoned for the short-term demands of a single test. Incentives for teaching particular skills may include testing, but tests should not drive the curriculum so directly. Teachers should feel comfortable devoting time to all important skills outlined by the appropriate standards without undue pressure to focus on tested skills only.

Teachers in untested classrooms attempted to teach according to Common Core, and for the most part, succeeded in attaching Common Core standards to their lesson plans, but no one, tested or untested, implemented Common Core exclusively. Most participants had doubts about ignoring PASS or they felt Common Core did not sufficiently cover skills they believed students

needed. Tanya admitted that even though they had attended several workshops on Common Core, most of them were not prepared to teach using the new standards. Even though the teachers had great intentions at the beginning of the year to implement Common Core and teach according to what they considered much more rigorous standards, in the end, they caved in to the pressure of time constraints and the need to prepare students for standardized tests.

The process of addressing standards in the development of lesson plans was interesting, as well. Teachers in Claremont attached standards to their lesson plans primarily as an afterthought or after a lesson had been prepared. The standards themselves did not determine the curriculum presented in Claremont classrooms. Norah described a process of checking both sets of standards to see which ones she might meet after she had prepared the lesson for the day. Ali's process sounded quite similar. Laura declared without hesitation, "The standards don't drive my teaching" (L. Mathis, personal communication, April 20, 2015).

In Claremont and possibly other Oklahoma schools, the lack of respect for standards could result from the upheaval and political changes going on at the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The Claremont administrators viewed the repeal of Common Core as a political maneuver, but teachers may have seen it differently. They may have disagreed with the adoption of the standards in the first place, or like Jenna, their experiences may have left them with little regard or concern about the standards as a map for curriculum. For career teachers like Laura and Ali, the sudden interest in standards is new and not particularly relevant to the teaching they have done for many years. Ali remarked several times that she knew what she needed to teach, and she attached the standards to the lessons that she had already prepared. The tendency to backwards engineer by creating a lesson and then checking for standards it might meet is an area

not widely explored in the standards-based education literature and might prove fruitful for further study.

Barriers to Teaching Argumentation

Habermas identifies argumentation as a central piece in the process of learning to engage in deliberative communication. Englund (2006) defines deliberative communication as “an endeavor to ensure that each individual takes a stand by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments, and evaluating, while at the same time there is a collective effort to find values and norms on which everyone can agree” (p. 503). The educational system can lay the groundwork for deliberative communication by opening a space where differing viewpoints and ideas receive a fair hearing, and students engage in critical thinking and argumentation to come to consensus. We are rational beings when we are capable of engaging in discourse, learning from our mistakes, and refuting and accepting ideas when the evidence presented is convincing. Argumentation, as framed in Toulmin’s model and advanced by Habermas’ theory, is a complicated process that requires ongoing instruction and ample opportunities to engage in experiential learning through both verbal and written opportunities to practice developing strong cases for one’s position before students can become adept at implementing it.

Common Core provides a progression of skills, but when gaps or holes exist or when teachers do not adhere to the standards, the entire process is likely to break down. In Claremont, some teachers attempted to teach argumentation with graphic organizers and in one-shot efforts that inevitably failed. Failure resulted in abandonment, and teachers returned to more familiar curriculum and instruction as time constraints and other pressures weighed on them. Others had greater success when they attempted to teach the skills through a more authentic task such as that

of writing a paper based on research. Ultimately, argumentation is not something easily taught in a short space of time or in once a year writing assignments.

For the most part, teachers in Claremont did not have a clear understanding of the parts of Toulmin's model, and definitions varied among participants. In some cases, they blamed their own preparation programs for failing to teach them certain skills. "That is not something I was taught in college...I'm going to have to teach myself to teach the kids" (L. Mathis, personal conversation, April 20, 2015). This echoes Brimi's (2012) findings among teachers who reported relying on what they could pick up along the way to teach types of writing and usually settling for formulas such as a five-paragraph essay. Making sure everyone uses the same definitions for each part of the argument and students receive consistent instruction from the earliest grades means teachers have to understand the process well and know how it works themselves before they can teach it.

Research suggests that students can begin learning to argue effectively from the age of seven (Andrews, Torgerson, Low, & McGuinn, 2009) with an adequate writing process in place and direct instruction that includes considerable verbal practice as well as opportunities to write. Teachers must also model good practice as argumentative writers themselves, and the process must include ongoing coaching, instruction, and practice in all curricular areas. Teachers at neither site in Claremont viewed argumentation as such an integral part of the ongoing curriculum. Each teacher taught the skills in isolation and one time only. Dialogue and verbal skills played a minimal role in their efforts; primarily, students wrote papers and either provided or received written feedback in the form of peer reviews. As Klein and Rose (2010) described, students need extensive "descriptive talk," a kind of Deweyian experiential opportunity, prior to putting arguments down on paper. One middle school teacher asked students to present their

papers verbally, but this assignment came after the written paper as a way to show students the differences in giving a speech and writing a paper. She did not formally employ dialogue or conversation to help them develop their arguments. Finally, to my knowledge, the English teachers made no effort to connect with teachers in other curricular areas to ensure students had opportunities to argue in other classes. Without some kind of collaboration, a lack of consistency would doom most efforts, but in all likelihood, students were not asked to write arguments in their math classes at Claremont.

Teachers in Claremont did not see argumentation as anything more than just one other kind of writing to include in the curriculum. While they recognized its importance in college writing and possibly as a prompt on a standardized test, they were unaware of the theory and the research underlying the process. When other factors interfered, teachers found it very easy to return to previous curricular concerns and leave argumentation for another day. Some professional training in the importance of deliberative communication and the various parts of an effective argument might help increase teacher buy-in and commitment to teaching the process. As a good lesson does for students, establishing the meaning, value, and purpose for the process (in this case, argumentation), might make a difference in how teachers approach it in the curriculum. While the literature thoroughly explores how secondary students respond to argumentation, further examination of how teachers approach it and understand the underlying framework for it might be an illuminating topic for further research.

Leadership in the Process of Aligning Curriculum

The zone of proximal development first proposed by Lev Vygotsky (1978) is defined as the difference between what a student or learner can do without assistance and what he or she can do with the aid of an adult or teacher. This concept, widely accepted in education circles,

has had considerable influence in the development of scaffolded instruction in which teachers build skill upon skill rather than asking the child to perform a complicated task all at once. Alignment of curriculum that depends upon scaffolded skills to set up expectations at each grade level also has its grounding in the zone of proximal development (Benko, 2013), but Polikoff (2013) reports that the alignment of teacher instruction to state standards is weak to moderate at best. This weak alignment may explain poor test scores and low student achievement in many districts across Oklahoma including Claremont where test scores had consistently disappointed in the last few years.

Common Core, with a nod to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, sets up a progression chart of skills that provides for scaffolded instruction where each grade level builds on previously taught skills. The middle school teachers used this progression chart to develop one of their own that might serve as a model for other grade levels in the district. However, as Sleeter (2005) argues, standards are a set of guidelines or topics but not a full curriculum. Teachers still have to prepare lessons and develop curriculum to cover the various topics.

The Claremont English teachers, tasked with aligning curriculum at the beginning of the year, made some efforts to meet and discuss how to go about closing gaps and ensuring students arrived at each grade level with the requisite skills to succeed and move forward; however, progress stalled early in the year for several reasons. The teachers at the high school faced resistance from among their own ranks. Negative comments and input in departmental meetings derailed efforts to discuss the alignment process. One teacher (not a study participant) simply refused to participate in alignment measures, and nothing moved forward at the high school. The teachers who were on board looked forward to a second district-wide alignment meeting in January where they hoped the Director of Student and Instructional Services would give them

guidance. When the meeting did not materialize, teachers expressed disappointment. Instead of focusing on alignment as anticipated, Shannon met with teachers in untested areas to review and explain a new mandate from OSDE to create Value-Added Measures for their own evaluations through the SLO/SOO templates. These mandates disappeared three months later at the behest of the new Superintendent of Public Instruction at the OSDE, but for a short period of time they consumed the time and attention of the high school teachers they impacted.

A few of the teachers perceived a lack of commitment and leadership from the top as a result of the change in the meeting. Some expressed confidence in Shannon and their own belief that the alignment plan would become apparent eventually, possibly the following year, but others were disappointed that alignment meetings did not happen sooner. Mary had great confidence in Shannon's ability to lead them when the time was right, but Ali considered the SLO/SOO professional development a waste of time when they could have been working on alignment as they had planned. "We spend a whole in-service day learning SOO/SLO,...and now I think it's been taken off the agenda...I've found that we're just going to have to take on the vertical teaming ourselves" (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015). In this comment, Ali referred to the alignment process that began before school started in August at their first faculty meeting as vertical teaming and used the term interchangeably with vertical alignment.

Much of the desire to align curriculum at the high school centered on closing holes or gaps the teachers perceived in student skills. They expressed intense frustration with students who arrived in their classrooms every fall lacking skills in grammar and composition that forced them to back up and remediate when they had so many things to teach themselves. It is unclear if vertical teaming in order to make demands of the teachers in the grades below will ultimately

succeed. Polikoff (2013) indicates a more effective approach would be to rely on teacher leaders and administrative leaders who fully understand the purpose and the benefits of curriculum alignment to lead the process. Roach, Niebling, and Kurz (2008) suggest leadership from a state agency such as the OSDE in the form of some kind of framework or model to build upon might be necessary to ensure an effective alignment process. Of course, in order for the state to lead on alignment, they must first settle on standards upon which to base an alignment.

Shannon hesitated to ask the English teachers to align their curriculum without a decision from the state concerning the standards. She did not want to waste their time or put them in a position of having to start over when the state finally did make a decision. She knew they had spent an enormous amount of time in professional development preparing for Common Core only to see the standards repealed, and she did not want to spearhead another frustrating and ultimately fruitless effort, so she waited. She also put her hopes in the physical moves that would take place in the fall of 2015. She hoped by moving the elementary classes from independent K-5th grade buildings into grade centers and purchasing aligned materials, a natural alignment might occur, but the problem of the standards remained. All of the purchased materials aligned with Common Core, but the state tests were based on PASS. Alignment, under the circumstances, seemed a waste of time and effort until the state settled on specific standards and provided some guidelines for the district.

Squires (2012) reports serious misalignments between state standards and state assessments as well that make it difficult for schools to align curriculum and instruction. The 8th grade writing test prompt changed just a few weeks before the test was administered, and teachers did not have a lot of faith in the process advanced by the state. The state had provided significant materials and some professional development towards an argumentative prompt and

then changed their minds at the last minute. Test scores for 2015 remained flat and near 2014 levels (OSDE, 2015, OSTP Results). The reasons for the poor scores remain unclear, but the confusion surrounding the test prompt could not have helped.

The middle school teachers, in spite of the standards and testing dilemmas, decided to move forward using the skills identified by both PASS and Common Core to set up a progression chart for their three grades and the grade below them. They also consulted with Ali at the high school since 9th graders move into her class directly from the middle school. Progress in the form of a skills chart gave everyone much to feel good about, but significant work remains in order to completely align curriculum from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Polikoff (2012) reminds us that alignment includes not only standards but also instruction and assessment. Administrators must also implement some kind of accountability system and means of assuring teachers participate fully and work together to ensure the skills assigned to each grade level are taught and assessed effectively. Developing instruction in the form of lesson plans and both formative and summative assessments will require effort and knowledge on the part of all teachers in the district. Teachers can work together to accomplish much, but all of these steps can only be accomplished with strong leadership from both the administration and knowledgeable and willing teacher leaders. A formal framework developed or endorsed by the state could add rigor and consistency to the process (Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008).

Common Core provides a progression of skills from kindergarten all the way up to 12th grade, but when students do not have the skills assigned to earlier grades, it becomes almost impossible not to be in a constant state of remediation. Teachers at every level complained that students did not have the requisite skills to allow them to move forward with the standards for their grades. Ali could not teach claims because students did not understand a thesis statement.

Without the alignment necessary to ensure students receive ongoing training and practice in all grades and without some kind of accountability at every level, students cannot develop strong argumentation skills and the ability to engage in deliberative communication as Habermas envisioned it. The kind of alignment necessary requires ongoing leadership and accountability across all levels. Claremont made a small start towards alignment but little progress was possible until the state developed appropriate state standards and assessments to which teachers could align curriculum and instruction. Even with standards in place, the chances of success remain slim unless teachers have clarity on the purpose and incorporate all components necessary including standards, instruction, and assessment, and administrative leadership provides accountability measures at all grade levels. In addition, setting targets for skills acquisition is only the first step. Valdez and Marshall (2014) point not only to the necessity of developing instruction and formative assessments to meet targets, but also the need for administrative leadership and accountability in this process both of which were glaringly absent in Claremont. At the end of the year, Laura admitted that while she could see a need for alignment in some cases, she was not particularly in favor of it. As department chair, her role is crucial in making organic changes that affect everyone. Research indicates curriculum alignment can play a vital role in closing gaps and raising student achievement, but no one had presented a convincing argument in Claremont to bring the teachers to consensus.

The Distractions of Accountability and Value-Added Measures

New demands from the OSDE derailed the alignment process when professional development over Value-Added Measures (VAMs) replaced alignment meetings in Claremont in January. Teachers in untested curricular areas and grades faced filling out new paperwork and establishing some kind of measure of their own effectiveness in the classroom that could equate

with standardized test results and convert to a quantitative score for evaluation purposes. For approximately three months of the school year, these new procedures consumed time and efforts from teachers and then were essentially scrapped by the new Superintendent of Public Instruction. As quickly as they popped up, they disappeared. Once again, the state mandated something and failed to follow through after the teachers had made significant efforts to comply.

The demand for accountability and evidence of excellence among teachers has resulted in some rather ridiculous efforts to measure effectiveness. The reliance on test scores converted to a VAM does not take into account many important variables that can impact results and often pushes teachers to narrow the curriculum and teach directly to the test (Ritter & Shuls, 2012).

In Claremont, the SLO/SOO paperwork layered new demands on already overworked teachers and distracted the high school teachers from the alignment process they hoped to begin. The two strongest leaders at the high school, Ali and Laura, taught in untested grades and faced filling out the paperwork for SLO/SOO. As they diverted their attention to the templates, their plans for aligning the curriculum vanished. The VAM process allowed teachers to choose what areas of the curriculum to use for data collection, and teachers recognized that choosing an area where they could show significant growth or strength was to their own advantage. No one who understood the system would choose a curricular topic they felt insecure about or had not taught before, no matter how necessary or important the topic, because of the potential negative effects on their own evaluations. Lack of time and energy to devote to so many different reform efforts along with several other factors caused them to lose sight of their initial goals of teaching argumentation and aligning their curriculum. Meanwhile, at the middle school, all three participants taught in tested grades and avoided the SLO/SOO debacle. As a result, two of the three participants moved forward on aligning their own curriculum with a third teacher in weekly

meetings from January through the middle of May. They also had some success in teaching argumentation because they had time to devote to the topic, weeks in fact.

The OSDE and school administrators certainly have a vested interest in determining teacher effectiveness for evaluation purposes. However, poorly thought out procedures that require significant time and energy from teachers, produce unreliable data, and eventually get scrapped merely frustrates an already overworked and undercompensated workforce and contributes to the impression that the OSDE is disorganized and arbitrary. This particular situation is reminiscent of Hargreaves' (1992) description of intensification theory where teachers are "expected to respond to greater pressures and to comply with multiplying innovations under conditions that are at best stable and worst deteriorating" (p. 88). All of the participants wanted accountability and repeatedly indicated their willingness to prove their effectiveness in the classroom through a fair and accurate evaluation process. None of them viewed the VAMs as fair and accurate. In fact, this process pitted two different groups of teachers against each other with vastly different measures for determining effectiveness. Participants in tested areas expressed great resentment about the choices that untested teachers had in selecting the area for analysis. As Mary exclaimed, "The teachers are coming up with their own tests--well why would they not make a test that their kids are going to score really well on?" (M. Travis, personal communication, March 31, 2015), and as Shannon put it, "You and I could come up with a better system" (S. Stewart, personal communication, May 13, 2015). Viewed through a Habermasian lens, the OSDE failed to prepare and present an effective argument for the SLO/SOO process to convince teachers of its necessity and its fairness. Without adequate and convincing evidence, the mandate failed.

The experience in Claremont with the VAMs dovetails with the literature that indicates over the long-term such measures may provide additional evaluative information, but data should be accumulated for years on a single teacher before it becomes a part of the evaluation, and the VAM data should be analyzed carefully in light of other evaluation components (DiCarlo, 2012). Short-term attempts at quantitative measures do not work and simply exasperate overworked teachers. The shift to learning the SLO/SOO process for the months of January through March at Claremont High School took a tremendous amount of time and effort away from curriculum the teachers might otherwise have developed or taught. “I’m frustrated...every day there’s a new hoop we’re supposed to jump through, and then once we jump through it, it’s repealed. The SLO/SOO...I just wanted to scream. We spend a whole in-service day learning SLO/SOO, we spend all this time writing SLO/SOO, and now we turn it in, and it’s taken off the agenda” (A. Crenshaw, personal communication, May 13, 2015).

SLO/SOO was introduced to the teachers in January and consumed their attention until March when the state cancelled it. The teachers affected directly expressed intense frustration at the new mandates and time consumption. Although the OSDE website contains significant research about VAMs, the argument for the measures did not reach the teachers in a convincing way. Those required to fill out the paperwork resented the intrusion, and those whose VAMs came from student test scores resented the perceived bias in the two different methods of measuring. They had little say in the conversation, although one might argue that the sudden elimination of SLO/SOO resulted from teacher complaints.

The Role of Professional Development in Instituting Change

The teachers in Claremont had a heavy investment in professional development as a means of improving their practice. They attended workshops with regularity and often as a

group, but scant evidence existed to indicate any of the activities had a lasting impact or changed anyone's practice permanently. In many ways, Claremont provides a classic example of several different kinds of wasted professional development in terms of time and effort versus outcomes.

The English teachers in Claremont at both the high school and the middle school levels attended week-long Advanced Placement Summer Institutes nearly every year as a team, and yet, according to Laura, the AP test scores did not seem to improve. Based on what I observed, the teachers latched onto strategies presented at the workshops and used them primarily in isolation. For example, I observed Laura using an inquiry-based strategy to teach concrete and abstract concepts that she picked up at an AP workshop. I did not hear her explain the definitions of "abstract" or "concrete" so her subsequent disappointment in the student writing did not surprise me. Without some kind of explanation and context, students could not connect the dots. All of the teachers in Claremont cited these kinds of hands-on, easy-to-implement ideas or techniques as what they looked for when they attended professional development opportunities. Knight (2009) suggests these techniques or approaches can greatly benefit teachers attempting to implement reforms, but as clearly indicated in Claremont, the professional development must also include clarity on how to embed the strategies into the ongoing curriculum to maximize effectiveness and avoid confusion. Teachers need to take the time to understand the larger curricular structures and instructional approaches in which these practical, smaller techniques or lessons might work.

Norah referred to these kinds of active strategies as student-centered. She realized that the few times she attempted lessons that engaged her students in hands-on activities, they learned more and enjoyed the learning. The teachers craved experiential learning types of strategies because they believed students learned so much more quickly and easily, but if the activities lack

authenticity or grounding in the day-to-day curriculum, they can be just as ineffective or confusing as a more didactic approach. The Claremont teachers, as the teachers in much of the research on professional development, wanted activities and strategies that they could implement immediately, but the strategies did not have the intended effect because they were not embedded in a curriculum in a way that made them meaningful and valuable to the students and their learning.

Tanya described several workshops teachers attended to prepare them to implement Common Core. The district sent all Claremont teachers to at least two days of workshops in other communities and to opportunities at the OSDE. These consisted of informational meetings provided by the OSDE that explained the standards but had little in the way of practical applications. Tanya remarked at the end, “I don’t think anyone in the school system felt completely prepared for Common Core” (T. Carothers, personal communication, April 9, 2015). The experiences of the Claremont teachers reflected the existing research that indicate one-time, informational type efforts do not have much practical effect in helping teachers make or sustain changes in their practice (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011, Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013). Long-term, on-site professional development holds better promise in changing teacher practice over time, but it can also be ineffective if teachers lack context, clear goals, and knowledge of purpose.

Claremont also participated in a multi-year professional development opportunity, but the effects of the program at the one year mark when this study took place were not clear. In the first year, the program provided grant money to purchase materials and sent facilitators to collect samples of student writing. The local teachers anticipated professional development training to instruct them in teaching argumentation in the second year of the program, but for the most part,

they had a murky understanding of what the program intended and how it worked. Many of the teachers viewed the visits from facilitators as interruptions to their own teaching and test preparation. To be fair, two of the six teacher participants had just arrived in Claremont in August and had no idea what the program intended; others professed patience with the process in the hope that the professional development would be worth the wait.

Without further data about the professional development activities that occurred after my time in the field ended, it is not possible to do a fair program evaluation. Possibly, the professional development the teachers anticipated in the upcoming fall of 2015 clarified everything and greatly benefited them. In Claremont, the teachers who had not had a hand in the professional development from the beginning viewed the facilitators with suspicion and resented the intrusion into their class time. Even teachers who had participated from the beginning could not explain the program or its purpose. This study indicated that when new teachers come into a district engaged in long-term professional development, it is imperative to bring the new teachers up to date on the purpose of the professional development and make sure that they have enough background information to participate and benefit fully from the experience. All teachers need information about context and purpose, and they probably need reminders along the way to retain the focus and ensure maximum benefits from the efforts of both the facilitators and the participants.

Short-term professional development did not work to prepare the teachers in Claremont for Common Core. They received information, but all of the participants stressed the need for applicable lesson plans and strategies that would help them teach skills. The long-term, on-site professional development they were engaged in had greater promise, but a lack of information threatened to derail its potential benefits. New teachers to the district did not receive adequate

information about what had already taken place, and all of the participants lacked a clear understanding of the purpose and a roadmap for what lay ahead. Long-term professional development can be most effective in impacting and changing teachers' practice, but in order for that to happen, all teachers need adequate information and plans need to be in place for informing and including new teachers as they enter the district. In yet one more instance, the lack of a clear, well-communicated argument in favor of the program and evidence to support its effectiveness meant teacher buy-in was minimal and the overall impact significantly reduced.

Summary

This chapter provides my interpretation of the findings detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. In summary, the discussion above illustrates the many challenges English language arts teachers face in trying to prepare and deliver lessons that meet specific standards, ready students for standardized exams, respond to ongoing mandates from the state department, and engage in professional development with the intent of improving practice. This chapter reveals the many reasons teachers may not follow through on initial plans for curriculum development and presentation, and it explores some of the many barriers that get in the way of school improvement plans.

The limitations of this study warrant some degree of caution when considering the analysis of the findings. First, the study consisted of interviews from only seven participants from two school sites in one district. The study focused on a group of teachers committed to sticking with Common Core in spite of the state repeal and who anticipated teaching argumentation as outlined by Common Core in the upcoming school year. The perceptions and experiences of this group of teachers is unique and any implications that can be drawn from the study are specific only to them.

In addition, it is important to remember the subjective nature of the researcher's interpretation of the data. In addition to the potential biases that may occur with the researcher as instrument, I also acknowledge that my own experiences as an English teacher and my understanding of Common Core may result in further bias in my analysis. I have engaged in critical conversations with colleagues and critical reflection through my own journaling and memo-writing to minimize this limitation as much as possible. I fully expect that other researchers might interpret the data presented here differently, and ultimately these conclusions represent how I make sense of and understand the data.

Implications

The following section details several implications that emerged in the course of this case study research. These conclusions reflect my understanding and interpretation of what the participants said and what I observed over the course of my time in Claremont. Other researchers might arrive at a different understanding, but these implications represent my best interpretation of what happened in Claremont during the 2014-2015 school year.

Standardized tests not standards drive the curriculum

The Claremont teachers began the school year verbally committed to using Common Core to determine the course of the year, but in reality, teachers in tested grades became very quickly consumed with preparing students for tests. The high-stakes attached to the tests created an environment of fear and anxiety. Teachers felt pressured to teach to the test thereby narrowing the curriculum and ignoring standards that could not be tested in a multiple-choice manner. Once teachers realized the state assessments would be PASS-based, they made sure to check PASS to see that they covered appropriate skills, but for the most part, the standards did not really play a prominent role in developing curriculum until the middle school teachers began

to align curriculum towards the middle of the year. As Nichols and Berliner (2008) stated, “Unknowingly, high-stakes testing has easily slipped into our everyday life as the solution for the misguided goals of advanced achievement for all students in a narrowed curriculum” (p, 44). Teachers in Claremont faced the real possibility that poor test scores would accrue to their own performance evaluation in the form of a quantitative measure, and they reacted with fear and an overemphasis on test preparation based on materials provided by the OSDE for just that purpose.

For career teachers in untested areas, both sets of standards were guidelines for making sure the lesson plans they developed fit somewhere in the big picture. They typically wrote their lesson plans or an outline of the day and then consulted the standards to determine which they had met or could meet with the day’s activities. PASS, a broad and detailed listing of skills with little scope and sequence, lends itself to this kind of pattern, and most of these teachers had worked with PASS for years before Common Core came along. They easily fell back into a pattern of preparing lessons and then consulting the standards instead of developing lessons from the standards.

Standards provide an important guideline for helping teachers develop effective instruction when they align with the proposed assessments and with the curriculum materials purchased by the district. The OSDE needs to quickly settle on English language arts standards that teachers can use with confidence to create lessons that will adequately and effectively prepare students both for the inevitable tests and for the grades and experiences to follow; however, it will be important to carefully vet the standards they settle upon and give teachers adequate input into the process and a voice in the conversation to achieve consensus and maximum commitment. This kind of guidance from the state and input from stakeholders will take some of the pressure off of teachers, give them much-needed tools for succeeding, and

provide a framework for helping all students reach the levels of achievement needed for success in the future while ensuring all viewpoints receive a fair hearing.

Teachers need a framework and strong leadership to achieve alignment

Almost all of the participants recognized the need to align curriculum in the district although most of them had very personal reasons for wanting it to happen. Experienced career teachers expressed great frustration at the gaps they perceived in student skills when students arrived in their classrooms. Some did not necessarily want to be dictated to themselves or to dictate to others, but they definitely saw a need to put some sort of framework in place. New teachers wanted detailed guidelines so they knew the expectations they had to meet. Both of the new teachers in Claremont were overwhelmed by the lack of a curriculum map in the district, and while one had more experience and set out to figure out what she needed to teach, the first year teacher struggled nearly all year with the fear that she might miss critical skills.

In Claremont, teachers began the year with an alignment meeting that proved unproductive. Administrators hesitated to engage language arts teachers in a full-on effort without specific standards in place. Teachers looked to the administrators to guide the process and were disappointed when they saw no further movement from above. Some of the teachers moved forward with their alignment focusing on the grades in their building only, but for the most part, the alignment process died after that first meeting for many reasons detailed earlier in this chapter.

Teachers need leadership from both the local administrators and from the state department for a curriculum alignment process to succeed. The Claremont teachers looked to Shannon, whom all of them considered very competent and effective, for guidance in this area and were disappointed when she did not provide much input after the beginning of school. She

hesitated to waste their time and efforts until the state settled on standards and provided the necessary guidelines. Everyone looked for leadership to make this process successful and found it lacking this year. Until the state establishes standards, alignment of curriculum is not possible. The state could make the process a smoother one by providing standards that have a scope and sequence and that naturally establish a general outline for alignment. Administrators can move the process forward by planning and scheduling meetings, providing expectations, and implementing accountability measures to ensure that teachers pay attention to alignment across all grades. Some of the career teachers in Claremont did not see the need for alignment, especially those in untested areas. Others viewed alignment as a way of making sure they did not have to remediate skills they believed belonged in lower grades. Again, teachers need to understand the arguments that support such efforts so they can embrace and help move the process forward instead of acting as a hindrance. Critical discussions that lay out the evidence and provide the supporting data may serve to bring resisters to the table to participate.

Teachers do not fully understand argumentation or the theory behind it

Argumentative writing forms the basis of much college writing and is the central focus of most composition classes at universities across the country. Students who come to college or go into the workforce able to communicate an effective and well-developed argument are better equipped to solve problems and work collaboratively with others. Common Core standards emphasize the importance of argumentation and provide scaffolding for scoped and sequenced instruction, but they do not provide the instruction itself or the theory underlying the framework and the components.

The participants in Claremont began their year fully intending to focus on argumentation as a necessary skill for all students. They understood the importance of it for future success, but

most of them did not have the training to develop an instructional curriculum and teach it effectively. Teachers need to model both verbal and written argumentative skills, which means they need to understand Toulmin's framework and possibly the theory of deliberative communication as outlined by Habermas. They need a working knowledge of the definitions of various parts of an argument and skills in identifying them accurately.

College education preparation programs may need to look at creating coursework that specifically teaches future teachers how to teach writing and particularly effective arguments from elementary through secondary. Speaking and listening skills did not get much attention from the Claremont teachers either, and verbal argumentation can provide much-needed practice, feedback, and skills development to help students as they attempt to develop strong arguments that can be transferred to writing. Both college preparation courses and focused professional development can train teachers by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach argumentation more effectively in all four domains of understanding--listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Value-Added Measures are a distraction with few obvious benefits

Teachers acknowledge the need for accountability, and the participants in Claremont expected observations and evaluations of their work. Often they told me they had no fears because they knew they were doing their jobs, and they appreciated the fact that the accountability measures were intended to make sure everyone else did as well. However, the Value-Added Measures introduced in Claremont to add a quantitative measure to teacher evaluations distracted everyone from the work of teaching, created anxiety among the participants, and frankly contributed little in the way of real data. The participants perceived the two methods of collecting data as grossly unfair. Teachers whose students' standardized test

scores converted to a measure had little control over too many variables that impacted how students performed, and teachers who filled out the SLO/SOO templates had complete control of what got measured and then converted to their VAM score. Neither method provided consistent, accurate data on teacher effectiveness without long-term data collection to factor out anomalies and errors in calculations. If VAM scores are used to measure teacher effectiveness, then administrators need to realize their shortcomings and take steps to ensure as much accuracy as possible and avoid using VAMs to make critical decisions that negatively impact teachers.

Another problem with SLO/SOO as it manifested in Claremont was the lack of commitment on the part of OSDE to the process. OSDE provided a half day of professional development for a new mandate that few understood or accepted as necessary. Then they cancelled the program when it became apparent that they could not follow through and enforce the mandate and when newly-elected officials deemed it not ready for implementation. The additional paperwork and effort did not come with a fully developed argument explaining its importance and its relevance which could make all the difference in how teachers perceive it and how administrators use it. Future efforts to implement VAMs should include clear and convincing evidence of their relevance and accuracy in measuring teacher effectiveness to ensure teachers participate fully and enthusiastically.

Explanations and context are vital for professional development to be effective

The participants in Claremont were engaged in long-term, on-site professional development to prepare them to teach argumentation. Despite the multiple year commitment, most participants had little knowledge about the purpose of the program, and no one could adequately explain it to me. Some participants had missed the first year of the professional development, but others just did not have enough information to outline it fully. Long-term

professional development often works best in effecting change in teacher practice. The experience in Claremont clearly indicates that teachers need full explanations of purpose, direction, and expected results in order for sustained professional development to take hold and make changes in practice. In addition, teachers need context for activities and strategies that help them ground and embed them into their own curriculum so they are not just one-shot efforts that have no relation to the rest of instruction. Facilitators of professional development must provide protocols that take into account newly-arrived participants, and thorough explanations of the purpose and intent of the professional development could help teachers make sense of the information and more readily make changes to practice. They need to provide well-reasoned arguments in favor of the changes they advocate and engage in dialogue with teachers to ensure their commitment and support, to enlist their expertise, and to build confidence and knowledge from the beginning and all along the way.

Recommendations for Further Research

The limitations of this study leave room for much further exploration. Further studies examining how other Oklahoma teachers and school districts responded to the standards dilemma and the role of argumentation in curriculum across the state might produce different and interesting results. Many schools elected to return to PASS as recommended by the governor and ignore all their hard work preparing for Common Core. The response of teachers in such circumstances could provide illumination on what happens when teacher self-efficacy and their efforts are negated or ignored by both the district leaders and the state. The tendency of teachers to attach standards to lessons after writing them instead of using standards to develop instruction is an area for exploration to determine if it is a widespread issue or unique to this district. This “backwards engineering” where teachers create the activities and the components of a lesson

first, and then look back to the standards to determine which ones they have met has interesting implications for how teachers operate and how they view standards.

The lack of specific knowledge about argumentation that led to confusion in instruction and eventual failure to implement particularly at the high school could also yield some enlightening research results. Additionally, the tendency of educators to focus on the domain of reading exclusively for ease of testing purposes might provide some interesting insights into the narrowing of the curriculum in response to standardized testing requirements. The role of VAMs in the accountability process has yet to be settled and will require much additional data to assess effectiveness and fairness before they should be widely used. An exploration of how each of the stakeholders perceives VAMs might prove interesting, as well. Finally, the need for context and meaning for long-term professional development may warrant additional exploration.

Concluding Remarks

Englund (2011) asks the question, “Could schools contribute to a deliberative mode of communication in a manner better suited to our own time and to areas where different cultures meet?” (p. 236). Dewey, Vygotsky, and Habermas assure us that schools can make such positive contributions when students learn to think critically, respond to a variety of viewpoints and ideas, and develop effective arguments of their own that take into account the most powerful evidence. Ideally, schools should act as public spaces where pluralism flourishes and all points of view are welcome. In this kind of environment, young people develop an ability and willingness to engage all perspectives in deliberative communication and to change their own perspectives based on well-reasoned arguments. The ability to express one’s own viewpoint, to hear the views of others with discernment and tolerance, and to weigh the evidence to reach the best possible conclusions are all skills greatly needed to solve problems and create a peaceful and prosperous

world for all. It requires a broader conceptual framework of public education that includes all four domains of understanding, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The current model's focus on reading only (the one skill that can easily be assessed with a multiple choice test) is not sufficient to produce the thinkers the world needs in the future. Training students to argue effectively prepares them for both college and career writing and sets them on a path to success whatever they choose to do after high school. One of the best possibilities for raising such a generation of well-reasoned individuals may depend on reforming our school curriculum to include both verbal and written argumentation skills as Habermas envisioned and Toulmin outlined.

Deliberative communication from facilitators and education leaders could effectively impact teacher buy-in and commitment to changes in strategies and approaches. All of the various issues that arose in the course of this instrumental case study might have looked completely different had well-reasoned arguments preceded efforts to move teachers to change. Better yet, a conversation where all stakeholders including teachers, parents, students, and administrators have some opportunity to present strong evidence with eventual consensus in mind may offer the best path forward for reforming both education and society in the future. The institution of education and society as a whole could benefit from a broader view of the educational process that includes an awareness of the importance of developing students' skills in all four domains and preparing them to think critically about issues and ideas in preparation for expressing the best of those ideas in well-evidenced arguments that move everyone towards consensus.

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Appendix A--Question Protocols

Interview Questions to Consider for Teachers:

1. Prior to the repeal of Common Core last June, what were your experiences and perceptions of those standards?
2. What kinds of preparation (professional development) for implementation fo Common Core did you have over the last few years?
3. How did the repeal of the standards just as they were about to be implemented fully impact you personally in the classroom?
4. What adjustments have you had to make as a result of the repeal?
5. In detail, tell me about this year and experiences teaching writing to your students.
6. Highs?
7. Lows?
8. Have you taught argumentation? How did it go? What domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) did you address and how did you address each one?
9. What will you do differently next year in the area of teaching writing/argumentation?
10. How do you feel about what has happened over the last decade or so with school reform? How has it impacted you as a classroom teacher?
11. What will you do differently next year?
12. What kind of professional development would help you most in teaching writing and argumentation at your grade level?
13. Tell me any plans/goals you and your colleagues have for the upcoming year/future for teaching writing.
14. What efforts have you made toward curriculum alignment, and what are your plans for the future?
15. What can middle school and high school teachers learn from each other?

Specific Questions for Curriculum Specialist:

1. What were your experiences and perceptions of the Oklahoma Academic Standards/Common Core State Standards?
2. How do you feel about the repeal of the standards just as they were about to be implemented fully?
3. How has the district responded to the legislative repeal?
4. Highs this year?
5. Lows?
6. What will you do differently next year?
7. What kind of professional development might help you and your team most in addressing standards, preparing students, and aligning curriculum?
8. How do you feel about what has happened with the standards and with school reform?
9. Tell me about any plans you and your colleagues have for future curriculum alignment.
10. What goals do you have for next year in the area of curriculum alignment?

Appendix B—CDW Template

CDW Quote Write

Name_____

C=Claim/Thesis

D=Data (Specific examples that prove the claim)

W=Warrant (The big so what? What, Why, and How does the data prove the claim and why is it significant in a global view?)

Quote writes must be completed in class, in a timed response. To score a “C” or higher, the response must include at least TWO specific examples in support of the thesis. A response that only explains the meaning of the quote will receive an automatic “F”. You must use the quote to prove something.

“Unlike any other form of thought, daydreaming is its own reward.”

---Michael Pollan. A Place of My Own: The Education of an Amateur Builder---

Claim/Thesis:_____

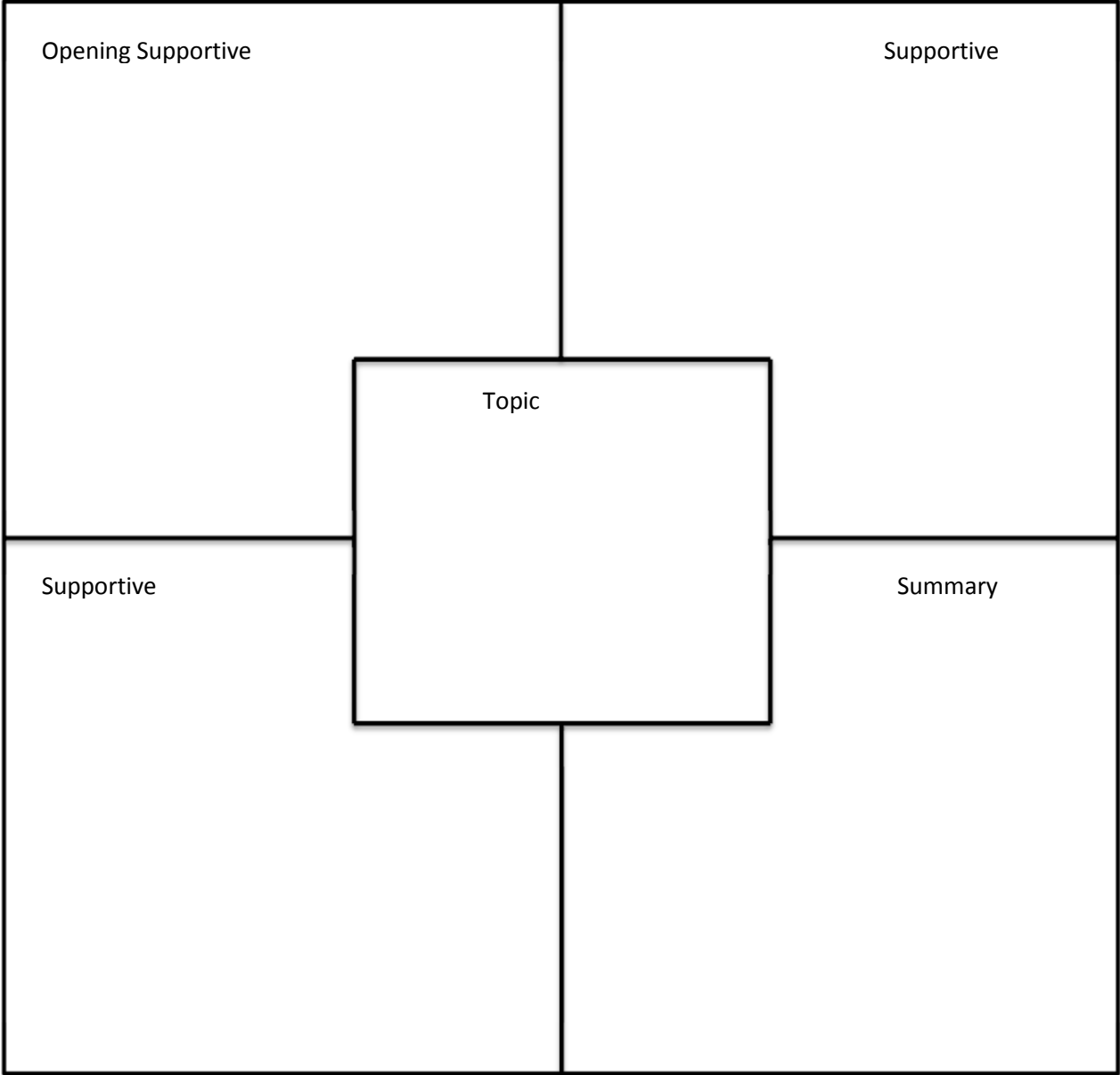
Example 1:

Example 2:

Warrant:

Appendix C—Four Square Template

Four-Square Writing Method



Appendix D—Vertical Team Meeting Agenda

English Language Arts Vertical Team Meeting, August 19, 2014

Welcome/Three Things 10:00-10:10

Breaking Down Standards 10:10-10:50

 Building/Grade Level Team
 20Minutes

 District Wide Team
 20Minutes

Common Terminology 10:50-10:55

Setting the Stage 10:55-1 1:00

The three things all students should know when

they come to my class: 1.

2.

3.

The three things all students should know when they leave my class:

1.

2.

3

Setting the Stage:

1. What would be the logical next step in this process?
2. Which skills are only introduced in your class?
3. Which skills do you spend the most time on in your class?
4. Which skills should only be reviewed in your class?
5. What CCSS and PASS skills do you think would be included in new state standards?

Moving Forward:

1. What would be the best way to continue this process during the school year?
2. How often should the team meet?
3. What resources would be important to help facilitate this process?
4. What is the most important thing I should know about helping you through this process?

Please e-mail your responses to me at melissa.amon@cushing.k12.ok.us. I would like to have your responses to the Moving Forward questions as soon as possible to help me in planning. Please have your Setting the Stage questions to me by September 9, 2014.

Please remember that this is a **collaborative** process. **You are the experts** in your content and grade level. There are no right or wrong answers, simply your professional opinion. Your honest answers and input will be invaluable in helping me to facilitate. Thank you for your time today!!

I look forward to working with you in the coming year.



Appendix E—SLO/SOO Templates

Student Learning Objectives/
Student Outcome Objectives (SLO/SOO) Sample Template

TEACHER and
LEADER EFFECTIVENESS
(TLE)

Teacher/Leader Name	Position	Year
School District	School	
SLO/SOO Title		

What are the most important knowledge and skills I want my students to attain by the end of the interval of instruction?

1. Focus/Content The focus/content component describes the content of the course that the SLO/SOO will cover. Consider the standards, skills, outcomes, or content that students should master by the end of the course.

2. Interval of Instruction From ___/___/___ To ___/___/___

The interval of instruction is the start and end date of the SLO/SOO, which the teacher or teacher team identifies. Typically the start date will be close to the beginning of the school year. The end date can vary based on the assessment selected. The length of the interval of instruction must match the length of the course so the SLO/SOO can be approved (not applicable for 2014-2015 because of the late implementation of SLO/SOO).

What are the standards, skills, outcomes or content that will be the focus of this SLO/SOO?

Where are my students now (at the beginning of instruction) with respect to the objective?

3. Student Population Identifies which students are covered in the SLO. Describe the student population included in the SLO. In addition to identifying the students. Teachers should be able to describe the student population and acknowledge any factors that might affect a student's growth over the interval of instruction.

Which students will be included in this SLO/SOO? What student characteristics might affect this SLO/SOO?

4. Baseline/Trend Data The baseline/trend data section is where the teacher or teacher team identifies and analyzes the data related to the student population included in the SLO, describing student strengths and weaknesses.

What does your available student data tell you about the skills, characteristics, and knowledge of the SLO/SOO student population.

How will students demonstrate their knowledge and skills at the end of the interval of instruction?

5. Assessment(s)/Evidence Describe the assessment(s) or other evidence that they will use to measure student growth on the SLO. The assessments must align with the Focus/Content of the SLO.

What assessment(s) or evidence will be used to show student growth? Why did you select this/these assessment(s)?

Based on what I know about my students, where do I expect them to be by the end of the interval of instruction?

6. Growth Target(s) The growth target should articulate the amount of growth that is expected for all students over the interval of instruction. All students in the course or focus area must have a growth target (i.e. you cannot leave students out of the SLO). Writing growth targets can be challenging, especially the first time. It requires teachers to rely on baseline data, their knowledge of students, and their professional judgment to create targets that are rigorous and attainable.

What amount of growth is expected for all students to demonstrate during the interval of instruction?

7. Rationale for Growth Target(s) The rationale for growth targets section explains why the growth targets for the students covered by the SLO/SOO are rigorous and attainable. This section should describe why the growth target is appropriate for each student or group of students and the student characteristics that make it appropriate. It should discuss how the baseline and trend data show that these targets are rigorous and attainable.

Why are the growth target(s) appropriate for each student or groups of students, as determined from student characteristics and baseline or trend data?

To be completed upon submission and approval of the SLO/500:

Teacher/Leader Signature

Date

School Team Initials (if applicable)

Date

Evaluator Signature

Date

To be completed after the interval of instruction when all data has been collected and calculated:

Final Score

SLO/ SOO Score	Percentage of Students Who Met or Exceeded Their Growth Targets	Earned SLO/SOO Score
5	90-100	Evidence/Comments
4.5	85--89	
4.0	80-84	
3.5	75-79	
3.0	70-74	
2.5	65-69	
2.0	60-64	
1.5	55-59	
1.0	54 or less	

VITA

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