K-12 reading teachers from the Mississippi Delta participated in the MVSU NCLB 2012 Summer Reading Institute’s program on Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Teachers acquired basic knowledge of the CCSS, its implementation in the classroom and student learning assessment. Pre- and post-test results indicated significant gains in understanding of CCSS, increased confidence in its implementation and greater appreciation of how to evaluate learning progress, as well as the use of technology to enhance teaching. The program provides a timely, highly relevant professional forum for the development of understanding and use of the CCSS by teachers in the Mississippi Delta.

Key words: reading education; professional development; Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
Common Core State Standards: The New Focus of the MVSU NCLB 2012 Summer Reading Institute

Dana played a patient yet persistent Mrs. Jewls. Her colleague, David, clad in a curly wig, performed as Joe, a boy who learned to count in an unusual fashion. Their performance as the main characters in a chapter of Jim Trelease's Hey! Listen to This (pp.31-33) elicited great laughter from the audience. It was one of the most enjoyable moments of the 'morning reading aloud' sessions at the Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU) No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2012 Summer Reading Institute.

In 2010, the Mississippi Reading Journal published an article examining the effectiveness of the MVSU NCLB 2008 Summer Reading Institute that focused on expanding teachers’ knowledge, skills, and theory in reading. The authors (Wang & Rose, 2010) found that after twenty days of professional development activities, the teachers improved significantly in content knowledge and teaching pedagogy. That study also addressed the needs of local in-service teachers to cope with the dynamic conditions of today’s classrooms. This year, the focus of the institute’s program of professional development was on the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (ELA CCSS).

Like other teachers in the state of Mississippi, the teachers of the Mississippi Delta are facing the transition from the use of the Mississippi Language Arts Framework to the ELA CCSS. The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) is one of the 46 states to adopt the ELA standards. A full implementation from K-12 will be required by the 2014-2015 school year (The Mississippi Department of Education, 2012).

The implementation of ELA CCSS will affect the teaching of reading in a dramatic way. It will influence how we teach reading and what resources we use to optimize teaching and learning outcomes. The ELA standards clearly specify required learning outcomes. It is, however, the responsibility of teachers to determine how to reach these goals and objectives in the classroom and in the instructional programming of the school in general. In the past, Mississippi Delta teachers used the highly structured language arts framework to guide their teaching. The language arts framework was restrictive in that it provided precise guidance for teaching. While the ELA CCSS goals and objectives are straightforward, there is greater flexibility and freedom in determining how to reach the goals and objectives in ELA CCSS. According to the ELA CCSS, teachers are “free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards (The Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012, p.4). This presents a new challenge to teachers and administrators—what instructional practices and resources would be most helpful for meeting these goals? The purpose of the NCLB Summer Institute was to help teachers in the Mississippi Delta answer this question.

Mississippi Valley State University received funds to provide NCLB Summer Reading Institute in July 2012 through the Mississippi Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) and the United States Department of Education No Child Left Behind Act of 2001-Title II, Part A Improving Teacher Quality State Grants. The institute recruited 20 K-12 reading and language
arts teachers from local school districts within a 50 mile radius of the university to participate in 20 days of professional development and two follow up sessions, one in the fall of 2012 and one in the spring of 2013. The focus of this year’s program was to provide an opportunity for participants to study the ELA CCSS, identify resources to use in implementing strategies designed to reach the goals and objectives of the ELA CCSS, and to study the assessment model developed by the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The PARCC model guides the evaluation of student progress in reading under the ELA CCSS. Other areas of focus of the program included effective practice and the use of technology in the teaching of reading. The ultimate goal of the institute was to improve reading achievement by enhancing the preparedness and quality of reading teachers who participated in the program.

It is widely recognized that teacher quality is a key component of student achievement. A teacher’s content knowledge, their pedagogy, and their cognitive abilities are closely correlated with the effectiveness of their teaching and associated with an increase in student achievement (Heimel, 2003; Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2008; Langer, 2004; Sullivan & McGonigle 2010). Teachers’ continuous learning is an important component in the process of improving the quality of teaching and enhancing student learning outcomes. Part of that process is their professional development that is critical in building the capacity of teachers. As mandated by the NCLB (2001), every child should be taught by a highly qualified teacher in core academic areas such as reading. Because of its significance to academic success in all academic areas of study, reading has become a widely discussed issue in research and in education in general.

Professional development is a well-documented means of improving teacher quality. In today’s knowledge-based society, professional development for teachers is a significant way to sustaining and improving the quality of teaching. Janssen, Kreijns, Bastiaens, Stijnen, and Vermeulen (2012) examined the effects of professional development on a group of Dutch teachers who received guidance on teaching through their professional development programs. They found that guided teachers are more capable of identifying their strengths and formulating learning goals than un-guided teachers. In addition, guided teachers are more capable of developing rigorous plans of action for instruction.

Well-designed professional development activities help optimize teaching and learning. Quick, Holtzman, and Chaney (2009) examined practices of teacher professional development in the San Diego school district and the impact of these practices on literacy instruction. They found that professional development was effective when it was “based on the needs of teachers and students, connected to broader school goals, and focused on content” (p. 65) and when it focused on increasing teachers’ use of instructional practice that was associated with student achievement. However, Buttweiler (1988) suggested that teacher professional development programs that use incentives to increase participation, must also include an evaluation process. Otherwise, it would be less likely to achieve the goals and the objectives of the program.

Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons (2009) studied the effects of professional development on scientifically based reading instruction. Four teachers and 33 students participated in 35 hours of training on phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency. The results
indicated “teachers can improve their knowledge concerning explicit reading instruction and that this new knowledge may contribute to student growth in reading” (p. 403).

Professional development activities nurture educational networking among teachers. Hofman and Dijkstra (2010) stated that teachers who work through collaboration increase student achievement. The goal of the study was to identify the components of successful networking for teachers. The results showed that the most promising structure for professional development involving teacher networking was for teachers to use (self-) reflection, participate in small groups and networks with specific content focus to address their concerns and problems, and use these networks to encourage each other, promote further network growth, and identify and facilitate the use and application of new materials/methods in the classroom.

Wang and Rose (2010) reported that MVSU NCLB 2008 Summer Reading Institute successfully implemented a scientific research-based professional development program that incorporated a related evaluation process. During the intensive four-week summer program and two follow-up sessions, a series of activities that included research in reading, effective reading strategies, and technology training was presented to the teachers who participated in the program. The results of the evaluation showed that participants gained confidence and competence in their ability to teach reading.

The challenges associated with the implementation of the ELA CCSS include familiarizing teachers with the standards, and then providing them with strategies that effectively deliver content specific instruction to facilitate student achievement in reading. Previous research has suggested that clear specification of goals and objectives, coupled with the provision of rich resources and the opportunities for professional development may facilitate the attainment of ELA CCSS goals and objectives. Self-reflection and enhanced networking are helpful in promoting the improvement in a teacher’s ability to take advantage of activities and resources that promote the attainment of reading goals and objectives under the ELA CCSS. The program design of the MVSU NCLB 2012 Summer Reading considered these issues and provided participants with the resources and information useful for understanding and implementing the CCSS in the teaching of reading.

Method

Participants and their teaching context

Twenty teachers from four school districts located within a 50-mile radius of MVSU participated in the institute. To be a candidate for the program, teachers had to be teaching reading and language arts in the Mississippi Delta in the targeted school districts. They had to agree to teach in the State of Mississippi for at least one year after the program. Participating schools and school districts endorsed their participation in the institute. Participating teachers taught in historically underrepresented and underserved school districts with nearly 69.64% of 8th grade students reading below the recommended proficiency level (MCT2, 2011). In contrast, the statewide eighth grade reading scores were 60% at or above proficient level (46.5% at the proficient level and 13.5% at the advanced level). Ninety-seven percent of students in the Mississippi Delta, and in the targeted school districts received free lunch and reduced lunch (The
Mississippi Department of Education, 2012). Historically, numerous researchers have found that poverty has a negative impact on test results (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007; Pretorius & Currin, 2011; Wang & Falconer, 2010; Williams, Ari, & Dortch, 2011).

The Institute

The institute provided an intense professional development program structured along the guidelines provided by the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning. This program design included a 20-day workshop in the summer 2012 and two follow-up sessions. The focus of the institute was on ELA CCSS. Five areas were addressed: (a) to expand knowledge of reading, (b) to improve teaching strategies to meet the needs of poor readers, (c) to learn to use assessment to inform instruction, (d) to enhance technology skills in the reading classroom to promote learning, and (e) to help teachers develop an interest in research to make informed decisions on what to teach and how to teach.

Following the participant recruitment and identification process, the Institute sent out a welcome letter to each accepted teacher who was to participate in the institute. The letter detailed schedules and procedures for the upcoming professional development program, provided campus directions and regulations, and indicated that they would receive $80 per day stipend payment for their participation.

The program. Each day, the institute began with a Reading Aloud session from 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Participants chose a story from the book: Hey! Listen to this: Stories to read aloud by Jim Trelease (1992). The purpose of this activity was to provide an opportunity for the teachers to engage in children’s literature. Research has indicated that teachers’ personal reading habits are linked to the use of best strategies to encourage reading “... those with more knowledge of children’s literature were more likely to use best practice techniques” (Burgess, Sargent, & Smith 2011, p. 88). It is important to support and nurture a teacher’s reading interests. The author believes that without a love of reading, reading teachers could hardly teach reading with passion. For the same reason, among the over five hundred dollars worth of instructional materials provided to each participant by the institute were fiction books such as Classic Fairy Tales (The Greenwich Workshop, 2003), To Kill A Mockingbird (Lee, 2010), The Help (Stockett, 2009), Once Upon A Time, When We Were Colored (Taulbert, 1995), Winnie-the-Pooh (Milne, 1954), My Very First Mother Goose (Opie, Ed.1996), The Ugly Duckling (Andersen, 1999), A Wreath for Emmett Till (Nelson 2005), Dark Sparkle Tea & Other Bedtime Poems (Myers, 2006), The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Twain, 2008), Uncle Tom’s Cabin Young Folks’ Edition (Stowe, 2011). In addition, based on the feedback from the previous year’s participants in the institute, the institute provided a hard copy and an electronic version of The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language for participant use. Equally important the institute provided timely CCSS teaching materials, CCSS Curriculum Maps, and other resource information received from the IHL funding agency.

The balance of the days provided a variety of content and activities for the participants. Activities involved with CCSS emphasized the balance of literature, informational text, text complexity, and higher order thinking. Discussions related to these topics would include such issues as whether non-fiction books were present in the Mississippi Delta K-3 classrooms, or
even K-6 classrooms, whether text complexity was increased based on the student’s performance, and whether inferential questions were asked to train higher order thinking skills.

To introduce and facilitate familiarity with the ELA CCSS, the institute included two days of workshops on the informational text and text complexity. A workshop on Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) instructed teachers on how to ask higher-order thinking questions, and provided an assessment tool to evaluate student comprehension. An additional five days of technology workshops provided the teachers with new ways to make learning more intriguing and inviting. The teachers developed lesson plans and thematic units using their newly acquired knowledge of the CCSS for use in their classrooms, a supervised activity that they found most beneficial.

The institute also provided a field trip. This trip had two themes: ‘A Delta Blues Experience Tour’ and ‘A Proud Downtown Greenwood Tour’. The site visits included Baptist Town, Bryant’s Grocery, Sony Boy’s B & B, Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden, Club Ebony, and B.B. King Museum. The exposure of the participants to the historical and local cultural settings, many of whom have not previously visited these sites, provides a meaningful and relevant dimension of a teacher’s awareness of their student’s background and environment of the Mississippi Delta.

The institute paid each participating teacher $80 per day for costs of mileage, possible baby-sitter costs for their children and lunch to enhance the likelihood of their full participation in the institute’s activities.

The NCLB 2012 Summer Reading Institute’s schedule is below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
<th>THURSDAY</th>
<th>FRIDAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Orientation Day</td>
<td>3 Pretest</td>
<td>4 Independence Day</td>
<td>5 Discussion on CCSS</td>
<td>6 CCSS: Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luncheon</td>
<td>CCSS: Reading</td>
<td>Lesson Plan</td>
<td>Thematic units</td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 CCSS: Reading</td>
<td>10 Blooms’ Taxonomy</td>
<td>11 Reading in the Content Area</td>
<td>12 Reading Education for All:</td>
<td>13 Field Trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher Order Thinking Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mississippi Soil &amp; Water Conservation Commission</td>
<td>Delta Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td>CCSS: Language Arts</td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td>PARCC: Diagnostic reading</td>
<td>Field Trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td>Lunch Provided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Reading Content Area Reading</td>
<td>17 Workshop CCSS: Informational Text</td>
<td>18 Technology Microsoft Word</td>
<td>19 Technology Excel</td>
<td>20 Educational Research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Analysis and Results

To assess each participant’s awareness of ELA CCSS and their growth in knowledge related to the teaching of reading, pre- and post-tests assessed critical content areas. Institute faculty and staff developed the test items. Each test contained 10 multiple choice questions on reading education and fifteen essay questions on knowledge of the CCSS. A rubric developed by the institute was the key for scoring participants’ responses. Responses on the pre- and post-tests were the basis of comparison.

A correlated t-test determined if there was a difference between pre- and post-test results. The mean on the pretest was 22.1 with a standard deviation of 7.38. The mean on the posttest was 77.03 with a standard deviation of 10.69. The difference between the means was statistically significant ($t = 18.198, df = 19, p < .005$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

**Paired Samples Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pretest</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>44.50</td>
<td>22.10</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posttest</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>55.00</td>
<td>93.00</td>
<td>77.03</td>
<td>10.69</td>
<td>2.39</td>
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</table>

**Paired Samples Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SD/Error</th>
<th>95% Conf. Interval</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Post</td>
<td>54.92</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>48.61--61.24</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>$p \leq 0.05$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the posttest mean was 55.2 points higher than the pretest mean, the results of the analysis strongly suggested that there were significant gains in understanding of the CCSS from the teacher’s participation in the institute. The posttest standard deviation indicated increased disparity of participants’ learning outcomes, indicating perhaps that differentiated instruction would be beneficial for future programs.

Program evaluation: When participants were asked ‘What aspect of the institute was most helpful?’ the majority (65%, n = 13) indicated that the CCSS workshop was the most helpful. Participants indicated that other workshops were beneficial. For example, 11 participants indicated that the teaching strategies workshop was helpful and nine participants felt that they benefitted from the technology workshops. When asked what they liked the most about the institute, the participants responded by listing the CCSS workshops, the speakers, the instructional materials, the free lunches and free Continuing Education Units (CEUs). When asked what they liked the least about the institute during the summer was somewhat inconvenient especially for those who had children, but also noted concerns that some participants would show up late, and that some would not participate in group discussions. Overall participants viewed the program very positively, using words such as ‘wonderful’, ‘a great time’, ‘a good learning experience’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘warm and inviting’, ‘a good forum for sharing ideas and networking’, ‘awesome’, ‘informative’, ‘worthwhile’ and ‘friendly’, to describe their experience.

The responses to two program evaluation were scaled on a four point Likert Scale with Poor = 1, Fair = 2, Good = 3 and Very Good = 4. The first question dealt with the efficiency of management. Participant responses to this question were as follows: 50% (n = 10) felt that the efficiency of management of the institute was very good, while 45% (n = 9) expressed it was good and 5% (n = 1) indicated it was fair. The second question concerned the overall quality of the program. Eighty percent of the participants (n = 16) considered the overall program very good, while 20% (n = 4) said it was good.

Aligned with the CCSS goals and objectives, the teachers developed four thematic units and 20 lesson plans. They published on the MVSU NCLB website.

Discussion and Conclusions

For many years, the Mississippi Language Arts Framework has governed the teaching of language arts in Mississippi. When the state of Mississippi voluntarily decided to adopt the CCSS and aggressively promote its use, many teachers felt overwhelmed—they were unfamiliar with CCSS and had serious concerns about how to implement it in their classrooms. The MVSU NCLB 2012 Summer Reading Institute specifically addressed both these issues for a select group of teachers recruited from nearby school districts. A pretest demonstrated that the teachers participating in the program had little knowledge of CCSS and were at a loss as to how to implement it.

To introduce the teachers to CCSS and inform them about strategies and resources to help implement CCSS, the program at MVSU used a rule-oriented approach to structure their learning experience. The goals of the program were to not only introduce the teachers to the CCSS, but to
have them develop thematic units and lesson plans with learning outcomes as specified by the CCSS.

This program was a success. At the end of the institute, each participant showed evidence of learning about the CCSS. The post-test results showed considerable gains in understanding of the CCSS in this group of teachers. In addition, by the end of the institute participants were able to develop four thematic units related to instruction using CCSS and lesson plans for classroom teaching. Participants prepared and submitted a formal presentation proposal to the Mississippi Reading Association 2012 annual conference. The proposal was accepted and the teachers traveled to the conference and conducted a well-received and appreciated 75-minute workshop.

The program was a success in other ways as well. By having participated in the program, teachers developed an enhanced sense of self-efficacy in how to implement CCSS in their teaching. Their experience afforded them the opportunity to establish a new support network focused on the CCSS and its implementation. The program also provided information on content area reading and technological skills that were useful in supporting their efforts in implementing CCSS. The teachers considered several other activities within the program beneficial: For example, they clearly liked and were interested in the morning reading aloud session. This session promoted a positive attitude towards reading that would transfer into their teaching of reading and language arts when they returned to the classroom. In addition, the field trip was exciting for this group of teachers—it provided additional exposure to the historical, and current cultural and societal experience of the students they were teaching in the classroom. Teaching never stands alone from the context in which it occurs. To a teacher, it is always meaningful to understand where their students come from. The field trip helped establish this understanding and provided a basis for considerable discussion as to how to implement CCSS in this context.

The MVSU NCLB 2012 Summer Reading Institute provides a model of a successful, positive rule-governed and goal-oriented program to provide and promote awareness of CCSS and foster its implementation in the classroom. It provided a timely, highly relevant professional forum for the discussion and identification of strategies for effective implementation of the CCSS.

References


