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Text Complexity and Close Reading: Teachers' Perceptions of the Language Arts Florida Standards and Curriculum Implementation

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Text Complexity and Close Reading: Teachers' Perceptions of the Language Arts Florida
Standards and Curriculum Implementation

By

Clare Diaz-Davila

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Elementary Education
in the College of Education and Human Performance
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at the University Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Taylar Wenzel

ABSTRACT

The Florida Department of Education revised the Common Core State Standards into what are now known as the Florida Standards in February 2014, approving 99 revisions to the original standards that were accepted in 2010 (Dunkelberger, 2014). The purpose of this research was to identify current teachers' attitudes towards the new Language Arts Florida Standards (LAFS), specifically regarding teachers' perceptions of text complexity and close reading as enacted in the reading curriculum. Additionally, this study will attempt to identify how teachers' attitudes impact their implementation of the new standards. This research used a self-administered survey to collect the teacher perceptions of the LAFS in six different categories. The sample entailed the participation of 21 practicing teachers from the Central Florida area.

The survey revealed that, although teachers don't necessarily dislike the construction of the standards, they feel that they are not knowledgeable in some integral areas of the LAFS, such as text complexity and close reading. The implications of the results are discussed, and some improvements for the future of the LAFS are given.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of Study	1
Relevance of Study.....	2
Research Questions	3
Summary	3
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Aim of Review	5
Common Core Standards	5
No Child Left Behind.....	6
Language Arts Florida Standards	8
Text Complexity.....	11
Close Reading	14
Opinions of Common Core State Standards	15
Chapter Summary.....	17
METHODOLOGY	18
Research Focus.....	18
Participants	18
Data Collection.....	19
Data Analysis	19
Limitations	20
RESULTS	22
Response Rate	22
Survey Analysis.....	22
Professional Development.....	24
Perceptions	25
Effect on Teacher Implementation and Practices.....	26
Student Achievement	28
Close Reading	29
Text Complexity.....	30
DISCUSSION	32

Teacher Perceptions Related to Close Reading and Text Complexity.....	32
Perceptions of the LAFS.....	32
Perceptions of Close Reading.....	33
Perceptions of Text Complexity.....	34
Teacher Perception of Preparedness to Teach the LAFS.....	34
Professional Development Needs.....	34
Teachers’ Self-Reported Implementation of the LAFS.....	35
Limited Creativity.....	35
Overemphasis of Standardized Testing.....	36
Implications for Text Complexity and Close Reading.....	36
Future Research.....	37
Conclusions.....	37
Appendix A.....	38
Survey Results.....	38
REFERENCES.....	43

LIST OF TABLES

Figure 1: Lexile Table..... 14

Figure 2: CategoryResults..... 23

Figure 3: LAFS Opinion Results 24

INTRODUCTION

The success or failure of any set of standards rests on how teachers implement them (Darling-Hammond, 1990). When faced with a new set of standards that are designed to incorporate different practices and strategies, it can be expected that teachers may not feel prepared for standards implementation. The change to the Florida Standards is bringing many alterations to the classroom. Changing the focus of standards that have remained largely the same will require teachers to modify their instructional strategies in the classroom, which has the potential to cause negative feelings towards the new standards that may not reflect on the effectiveness of the Florida Standards.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to identify current teachers' attitudes towards the new Language Arts Florida Standards (LAFS), specifically regarding teachers' perceptions of text complexity and close reading as enacted in the reading curriculum. Additionally, this study will attempt to identify how teachers' attitudes impact their implementation of the new standards.

This survey research does not focus on the standards themselves, as many publications have offered (Boser Center for American Progress, 2012; The Aspen Institute, 2012; Shanahan, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012); rather, this study aims to help determine the opinions of practicing teachers on the new standards and how their perceptions may or may not be impacting their own implementation of the standards in their classrooms. Further, this research is intended to help to uncover pitfalls in the implementation of the reading standards that may have been previously unknown.

The researcher's interest in this study is to identify the opinions of experienced, practicing teachers regarding how the new standards will affect education. This research will also take into account current teachers' opinions on whether the standards will work with struggling readers, and if the goals set are realistic.

Relevance of Study

This topic has great relevance to the education system and how it has changed recently due to the newly adopted curriculum. The new standards are affecting both current and future teachers in many ways, and the better that teachers understand how to unpack and use the standards, the easier the transition will be into fully implementing them properly. The Florida Standards are being fully implemented in all grades (K-12) in the 2014-2015 school year; however, some research suggests that during the initial stages of implementation, an alarmingly small amount of the public and teachers were knowledgeable about the new standards (Achieve, 2012). Misconceptions, such as the lack of importance of background knowledge, have become prevalent, causing the standards to be used inappropriately (Hirsch Jr., 2010). The misunderstanding that has occurred in the LAFS has caused some imperative lessons to go untaught (Hirsch Jr., 2010). It is important for the success of teachers and schools that educators have deep understanding of this new curriculum. Further, it is important for future teachers to be part of a team that is effective at meeting the high demands of the Language Arts Florida Standards.

Even with growing support, many teachers are not supportive of the Common Core Standards. There are many reasons that cause this lack of backing, such as how they are evaluated (Achieve, 2012). Additionally, many people in the community feel that the Florida

Standards will lead to a loss of control over education by the state government (Stotsky, 2012). Even though states are allowed to make revisions, some feel that it is not enough (Stotsky, 2012). It is important to understand if these negative feelings are represented in the sample population of this study and to identify if and how they may be impacting the implementation of standards.

Research Questions

There is a notable change from the previously implemented Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS) and the new LAFS, especially given the focus on close reading and text complexity. To meet the objectives of this study, I will need to know what the general attitudes towards the new standards are and what areas are considered positive or negative.

The primary research questions in this study are as follows:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the new Language Arts Florida Standards, specifically related to the practice of close reading and complex text?
2. How well do teachers report having been prepared by their administration to tackle the Florida Standards?
3. How do teachers' perceptions of the new Language Arts Florida Standards affect their classroom implementation of the standards based on teachers' self-reports of enacted instruction?

Summary

In summation, this paper will not just address the change in standards, but will help to address the opinions and perceptions that teachers have in the Central Florida area about the Florida Standards. This study will not reflect on all of the Florida Standards, but will focus on newer concepts within the reading standards such as text complexity and close reading. This

research is relevant both to me as a future educator and to teachers throughout Florida who are facing a large change in curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aim of Review

The aim of this literature review is to present unbiased information about how the Language Arts Florida Standards were created, why they were created, and what they entail. It is organized starting with the basis of the LAFS, what the LAFS are, text complexity, close reading, and current opinions of both Common Core and LAFS, as reported in the current literature.

Common Core Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a comprehensive set of K-12 standards that specify what K-12 students should know in reading and math. The new standards were created due to the discontinuation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and are included as one of many initiatives in the Obama Administration's Race to the Top legislation (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

The English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core State Standards, besides being a guideline of what students should master, also include types of texts that students should be exposed to in the classroom. The ELA standards do not affect the content of subjects such as history and math in the K-6 environment, but do impact how the texts are used in those subjects (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). The Common Core Standards are designed to allow more freedom to design a personalized lesson rather than a specific lesson that must be taught a certain way to reach an end point.

The standards incorporate best practices, and are based on national and international research (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association Center for

Best Practices, 2010). The goal of the CCSS is to prepare students for a global economy and society where application of knowledge through higher order thinking skills is imperative. The standards build on previous state standards and incorporate new evidence and research (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010).

No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was one of the most extensive education policies to have been created in the past 40 years (Dee & Jacob, 2011). NCLB was the initial set of standards to bring about state designed school accountability systems (Dee & Jacob, 2011). A review of the previous decade shows that the standards used in No Child Left Behind did not help to significantly increase academic performance, nor did they significantly reduce achievement gaps, even when measured by the standardized exams that were heavily incorporated (Center on Education Policy, 2010; Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012). For example, in the 2008-2009 school year, 77% of Florida's public schools did not meet the adequate yearly progress that was their goal (Center on Education Policy, 2010). In fact, the effects of these standards negatively affect poverty stricken families and Title I schools (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012).

NCLB has also caused damage to educational equality and value because of the increased usage of standardized testing (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012). The Government Accountability Office outlined that states would be required to produce approximately 433 tests to meet the NCLB standards (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012).

Due to the way the previous standards were designed and implemented, some critics claimed that schools were forced to focus on test preparation rather than giving students a well-

rounded education (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012). Even though being able to compare schools in different states was given as a positive to these standards, it became clear that many states measured proficiency in different ways (Blank, 2011). Because of the difference between state tests, the skills and knowledge necessary to pass the different tests can vary widely.

While reforms in the form of waivers for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2002) were provided, some critics suggested that they did not help to correct any of the major flaws (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012). No Child Left Behind relied on standardized tests for most of its data. Many education reform efforts that have been put in place to combat the standardized testing were unsuccessful due to NCLB.

Other studies have shown that while NCLB may look like a villain in the education system in some publications, many of the outcomes are not necessarily as bad as they appeared. Data has shown that student achievement increased from 2002 forward, when NCLB was enacted (Center on Education Policy, 2007). It was stated in those reports that even though there was an increase, several variables could have caused it such as individual state enacted policies. The Center on Education Policy also discovered that even though the achievement gaps are concerning, they did not widen.

Some critics claim that NCLB may have over relied on the use of standardized tests that commend students who use more superficial approaches to problem solving (Shepard & Bliem, 1995). To fix this problem, Guisbond and Schaeffer (2012) suggest that the educational system should move away from standardized testing and focus more on teacher preparation and

development. They also suggest that Race to the Top does not seem to be moving away from high stakes testing, but just testing different features (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012).

Language Arts Florida Standards

Florida revised the CCSS into what is now known as the Florida Standards in February 2014, approving 99 revisions to the original standards that were accepted in 2010 (Dunkelberger, 2014). The new Language Arts Florida Standards (LAFS) are different from the previous Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS); yet not significantly different from the CCSS, as many of the revisions for the state focused on mathematics standards, not English Language Arts (ELA). Very few revisions were made to the ELA standards, most dealing with Kindergarten. The Florida Department of Education decided to add the phrase ‘with prompting and support’ to the beginning of the Kindergarten standards to allow teachers to provide assistance to students when answering questions (Florida Department of Education, 2014). They also added in the standard asking students to explain an author’s reasoning to corroborate specific events in a story (Florida Department of Education, 2014). Skills are introduced in Kindergarten, and built upon through each grade level, helping students to have a strong foundation before adding more to it. The work involves exposing students to complex texts that increase with grade level. Students are expected to preserve the previous year’s skills and then add on to them. While there are other standards that are included in the Florida Reading Standards, this research will focus on the LAFS.

The LAFS for Reading Literature and Reading Informational Text are based on 10 anchor standards that are consistent across grades K-12 (NGA, 2014). The first anchor standard is to “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from

it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text” (NGA, 2014). This close reading is essentially a group or class discussion of the text and what the author is saying. The second standard is to “Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas” (NGA, 2014). This is similar to previous standards on finding the main idea, theme, and supporting details but differs in how it is taught. Because of the differences in the other standards, students are encouraged to apply this standard to more complex texts and to be able to support their answers and discussions using textual evidence. Because of the first standard, students are not necessarily given background information on the story before reading it. The third standard is to “Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text” (NGA, 2014). It is supported by multiple readings of the same book to discover previously hidden ideas that may be revealed through word usage, literary devices, and so on. This practice is called close reading. The fourth anchor standard is to “Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone” (NGA, 2014). This standard, while self-explanatory, is begun in the early grades such as Kindergarten and first grade instead of the intermediate grades.

Appropriate text complexity must be used when starting this standard in the primary grades. It is a skill that is built on and developed as the students grow. The fifth standard is to “Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole” (NGA 2014). Allowing students multiple readings of a text along with the other skills of close reading

will help reveal how parts of the text relate to each other. This skill is also begun in the primary grades. The sixth anchor standard is to “Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text” (NGA 2014). The seventh, “integrating and evaluating content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (NGA 2014). The eighth anchor standard deals with how to “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence” (NGA 2014). The ninth standard asks students to “Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take” (NGA, 2014). The tenth is to “Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (NGA, 2014). Without close reading and appropriate text complexity, many of these standards are not possible.

Informational text is also very important in the new standards. The LAFS now mandate that by fourth grade, fifty percent of all text in elementary school classrooms should be nonfiction, also referred to as informational text (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010). This includes a wide variety, such as biographies, speeches, opinion pieces, graphs, charts, and more. Because students are more likely to be exposed to nonfiction in their careers or in college, it is necessary that students understand how to read and analyze these types of texts (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014).

There has been backlash by some against the increase of informational texts in classes. Many parents and teachers feel that reducing classic literature in classrooms will negatively affect students’ ELA education (Stotsky, 2012; Huffington Post, 2012). There is also no

empirical research that supports the claims that nonfiction work in high school will in any way promote college readiness (Stotsky, 2012). In addition, many English teachers at varying grade levels are worried that their students will become bored with the nonfiction material (Huffington Post, 2012).

In reality, students in elementary grades are only expected to have an even amount of nonfiction and fiction texts within their instruction. This does not mean that teachers must focus solely on informational texts in their language arts and reading instruction (Rix, n.d.). This means that teachers can use nonfiction passages and books in tandem with teaching math, science, and history. Fiction stories and passages will still be used and expected when teaching areas such as English and Language Arts.

Text Complexity

Text complexity is another significant issue that is brought up in the new standards, described in detail in the English Language Arts Appendix A. The Common Core State Standards prescribe a specific text complexity band for each grade level (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010). A focus on increased text complexity is designed to help the United States education system contend globally and would challenge students more with advanced concepts, as well as make students show and explain their work and thought process (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010).

Previous studies have shown that if students are unable to read complex, nonfiction texts when they graduate, they are not as likely to read at all (Aspen Institute, 2012). Because of this, there is a possibility that they may become uninformed members of society. Evidence has shown that students have not had enough experience working with nonfiction pieces, causing a gap

between what they should be able to read after graduation and what they can actually comprehend (Aspen Institute, 2012; Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010). It has also been shown in studies that students who score at the benchmark or above have a 75% chance or higher of earning a C or better in freshman classes, such as Psychology or U.S. History (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010).

The standards used qualitative and quantitative markers to determine the complexity of a text. The quantity markers would include topics such word frequency, sentence length, text cohesion, etc. while the qualitative points would include type of words, topic of the text, etc. (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts 2010; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). However, nowhere in the standards is it explained or shown how teachers should evaluate their own or new texts to determine the complexity level. Teachers are encouraged to begin with the quantitative and move towards the qualitative to reach the right complexity. Likewise, the reader is asked to use their attention, knowledge of the topic, and motivation when working on increasingly complex pieces (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014; Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010).

Because text complexity can be subjective, computers were used to help pick the levels more objectively. Creators of different programs agreed to participate, allowing the NGA to compare six different systems and how they measured the features that were necessary to decide text complexity (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010). The six programs used were ATOS, Degrees of Reading Power, Flesch-Kincaid, Reading Maturity

Metric, SourceRater, and Easability Indicator (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 2010).

There were two components when testing these different programs: to compare the program's ability to predict the text complexity of a script, and to see how well it was able to predict the appropriate grade level of those complexities. The first component was tested by comparing the levels the program got to norm referenced reading tests. The second was compared to an educator's evaluation of what grade level a book might be.

The text complexity could take on many different forms. One may be where all grades receive a proportional raise in text complexity, while another may be where certain grades receive more emphasis than others on text complexity (Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013). Because of this, schools and teachers have more flexibility with how they want to work with it. This can backfire and cause confusion on what complexity level a student should be on at a certain time.

Some of the pitfalls of the text complexity bands in the standards were that the recommendations did not explain how the trajectory for text complexity was formed before it was given to teachers. Further, it does not explain how students should be grouped for differentiated instruction beyond reading level, based on their own skills (Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013). Many scales, such as Lexile scales, have been adjusted to match the LAFS, giving teachers some sort of rubric to guide their decisions. The scale also provides a 'stretch' area, showing where students should start increasing their text complexity to get to the appropriate level in the next grade. The Lexile scales are as follows:

Grade Band	Current Lexile Band	"Stretch" Lexile Band*
K-1	N/A	N/A
2-3	450L-730L	520L-820L
4-5	640L-850L	740L-1010L
6-8	860L-1010L	925L-1185L
9-10	960L-1120L	1050L-1335L
11-CCR	1070L-1220L	1185L-1385L

Figure 1: Lexile Bands

(Text complexity grade bands and Lexile bands: The Lexile® framework for reading, 2014).

Close Reading

Close reading, a skill that is emphasized by the CCSS and the Florida Standards requires students to reread a text, looking for different elements each time (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). Students reread a text several times to allow them to first understand what is being said and recall the events of the story, then later look at other text features such as how the text was organized, identify literary devices that may have been used and why, and apply the text to the reader's world by evaluating its effect. This reading process differs from previous standards because instead of the teacher providing background knowledge and information or reading about it, students are encouraged to discover it for themselves through discussion and higher order thinking skills, which are stressed in the new standards. Opponents are worried about just how much background knowledge will be removed. Critics suggest that neglecting background knowledge can hurt a student's comprehension (Hirsch Jr., 2010). Others suggest that it is still important for teachers to assess what background knowledge students have before continuing with a topic or story. If there is no background knowledge at all, continuing with close reading could be difficult.

Opinions of Common Core State Standards

The CCSS have been highly debated ever since they were introduced (Shanahan, 2012). Despite the controversy of the standards, there was widespread agreement that many students coming out of the U.S. education system needed additional training after high school, whether vocational or university training to be career ready (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014; Achieve, 2012). The goal of the standards is to help prepare students for graduation and is bipartisan and supported by many in politics (Achieve, 2014). However, others have declared that both parents and politicians are starting to raise objections about the Florida Standard's constitutionality (Stotsky, 2012).

A group known as Achieve has monitored awareness and support of the CCSS through a poll since August 2011, with a second poll released in May 2012. The findings found that many voters and teachers strongly support the CCSS, and this support does not change with age, race, political party affiliation, or education level. Many support the idea of continuing education for young adults in skill or trade if college is not in their future plans. The idea is to help a generation that is plagued with unemployment to have useful skills that translate well to a profession. This widespread support helps to illustrate the necessity of change in the educational standards in the United States.

There has also been a large increase in how aware educators are of the new standard since 2011 (Achieve, 2012). This is to be expected since the standards were starting to be implemented in Florida during the 2011-2012 school year. Regardless of how much educators know about the new standards, voters haven't had the same amount of exposure. The numbers of voters changed insignificantly between August 2011 and May 2012. Those that had heard of

it were quite even in their opinions of it, and many supported it after reading a short description (Achieve, 2012). This information has helped to support the theory that the more people know about and understand the standards, the more likely they are to support them. Teachers like that the results will be available shortly after the students take the test, allowing them to modify their teaching.

Even so, others are concerned that the Florida Standards Assessment will be completely on the computer for fourth and fifth grade, except for the writing sections. Some are concerned that bad results may be an effect of lack of computer skills rather than not knowing the correct answer. Despite those concerns, support still increased after voters and teachers were informed fully on the standards (Achieve, 2012).

Even though there has been growing support since 2010, many parents and teachers are still concerned. Parents feel unsure of how to approach the new learning material, many stating that “I can’t find the answers anywhere” (Mizzoni, 2014). This shows a misunderstanding of the standards (Mizzoni, 2014). The student should not be able to just find the answer. With the new LAFS, students are expected to take previously learned information and apply it to a new problem. As parents become aware of the new expectations, they are finding ways to help their children complete the assignments (Mizzoni, 2014). This shows that although there is widespread support for a college and career ready student population, some portions of the public do not feel comfortable with how students are being brought to that level.

Despite the claims of preparing students for college and careers, some critics are still concerned because the CCSS still utilize a top-down approach, which has been previously shown

to be ineffective (Lee, 2011). Many school climates resist changes that are designed by outside professionals with no input on their school's relationships or needs (Lee, 2011). Because these mandates are handed down for schools to use, side effects of implementation can lead to misunderstandings as well as feelings of resentment. The Council of Chief State School Officers (NCSSO) and the National Governor's Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices created the CCSS in 2010 with feedback from current teachers, parents, business leaders, and content area experts. Despite being involved in the revision process and giving feedback, teachers were not involved in designing the standards (Stotsky, 2012). The reasons behind this are unclear, although many practicing teachers are more involved in solving the daily challenges they face rather than designing complete new systems that are years in the making (Lee, 2011).

Although the process of creating the Common Core standards has seemed thorough, the workshops, resources, and tools on how to teach such a new and different approach has not been so consistent (Best & Cohen, 2013). There have been multiple concerns over not displaying the differences between the new standards and old, and ignoring the distinct challenges individual teachers face (Best & Cohen, 2013). This leaves teachers to devise new lessons and approaches that will best work with their students on their own.

Chapter Summary

The Florida Standards are a version of the Common Core that was adopted by Florida in 2010 and revised in 2014. Its main goal is to help prepare students to be college and career ready by their high school graduation. The standards have brought in extensive focus on text complexity, informational texts, and close reading which were not seen previously. The new standards are highly debated, and awareness has increased immensely since 2011.

METHODOLOGY

Research Focus

The purpose of this study was to evaluate teachers' perceptions of the Language Arts Florida Standards and how those perceptions are affective the implementation of the standards according to teachers' self-reports. Because teachers' opinions are so important, it is necessary to know where teachers stand on this issue and how their perceptions will impact the implementation of the Florida Standards.

The primary research questions in this study are as follows:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the new Language Arts Florida Standards, specifically related to the practice of close reading and complex text?
2. How well do teachers report having been prepared by their administration to tackle the Florida Standards?
3. How do teachers' perceptions of the new Language Arts Florida Standards affect their classroom implementation of the standards based on teachers' self-reports of enacted instruction?

Participants

The participants of this study were chosen through a convenience sampling of graduate students at a large public university in the southeast United States who are currently practicing teachers, as well as previous acquaintances with teachers practicing in the Southeast United States.

Data Collection

A survey was distributed through the use of a free online survey website, which also facilitated data collection. The participants in this study answered 38 questions relating to six areas related to the LAFS: 1) professional development, 2) the effect on teacher implementation and practices, 3) teacher perceptions, 4) close reading, 5) text complexity, and 6) student achievement. The survey item distribution in each category is as follows: professional development: 5 questions, practices, etc.: 8 questions, perceptions: 8 questions, close reading: 9 questions, text complexity: 6 questions, and student achievement: 3 questions.

A survey format was selected to allow the researcher to look at the current condition of events and gather relevant information and opinions about it (Creswell, 1994). The self-administered online survey used allowed for direct quantitative data to be collected and analyzed.

The online survey was chosen both for the convenience of the participants but also for the assistance in reaching a wider sample. By allowing participants to take the survey at home or a place they were comfortable, participants may have felt more at ease about being honest when answering the questions. The study was anonymous to help ensure the validity of the research, and participants were assured that knowledge of the new standards was not necessary.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed based on the relevance to the three research questions in this study. To interpret data, questions were organized into the six survey categories previously identified. Using this method, the percentages of positive and negative feelings can be easily analyzed for each section, as well as the percent of people who felt unsure in each category.

Data was also analyzed based on how each question answered the three primary research questions. This will not be shown in graphs or charts, but rather discussed at length using specific questions to illustrate correlations.

Limitations

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, many teachers may have felt uneasy about admitting any sort of negative feelings towards the Florida Standards. To ensure the validity of this study, teachers were guaranteed discretion and anonymity if they chose to participate to help alleviate any feelings of discomfort about the nature of the questions.

Also, to help teachers feel more comfortable in responding, it was clearly stated that it wasn't necessary to be knowledgeable of the new Florida Standards. Even if teachers were not well versed in them, it would still provide helpful feedback in how they can be helped through professional development. Teachers were also encouraged to share the extent of their knowledge of previous standards, to help shed light on the differences between the different sets of standards and how this also may affect implementation.

This research comes with many limitations. It isn't very likely that teachers will be reached throughout the state of Florida. It will also not include any data or teacher attitudes from other states across the nation. Because of time and geographical constraints, the data collected will most likely be kept within one or two school districts. No two schools are alike, and the population of the area causes many of the differences such as school culture. There was not an opportunity to interview teachers from all possible areas, meaning the data will not necessarily reflect the opinions and needs of every school district in Florida. It is also not guaranteed that there will be a variety of schools represented, such as Title I or charter schools. Because some

schools in certain locations departmentalize subjects, it may cause some problems. Some teachers may not be teaching reading, which most likely means that they will not be well versed in the standards at the time that data is being gathered. If they participate in the study, this may skew data.

Some schools will have greater opportunities for professional development and more funding for more support staff, while others will not. This research will not necessarily show any differences between urban and rural areas, nor will it report the funds or funding sources for professional development based on the new standards.

Gathering data from teachers about the new standards, while an important part of this thesis, may also be the largest limitation. Because data will be gathered through a self-administered survey, it is not possible to be sure that all answers given will be honest. It is also suspected that some teachers may believe that they are effective at utilizing the new standards but are not actually using them correctly. Teachers may be unwilling to admit being unprepared for the new standards. Many teachers may feel that admitting this will impact their jobs. Thus, the credibility and validity of the findings will depend on how honest the answers given are, and whether they are given without external influences such as pressure from others.

RESULTS

Response Rate

Thirty-five responses were received through the survey. However, due to age and the requirement that participants must be in-service or practicing teachers, only 22 responses were used to analyze the data. Some participants exited the survey before finishing, leaving some questions with only 20 or 21 responses.

Survey Analysis

Because this research focused largely on the perceptions of the LAFS, the data was judged based on whether it showed a positive opinion, negative opinion, or one that was unsure. Percentages were taken in each of the categories to show a comparable number in each section, as well as a graph to show the overall opinions of the LAFS when all the categories represented were combined.

The answers given by the participants in this survey did help to expose teacher perceptions (See Appendix A). What it does not do, however, is offer or explain any correlations due to the limited population and research design. This research did not intend to find out the reasons behind the answers, and as such, in this study, the research can only speculate about the reasons for participants' responses.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentages of positive, negative, and unsure answers given in each category. Percentages were used to allow the data to be compared more effectively.

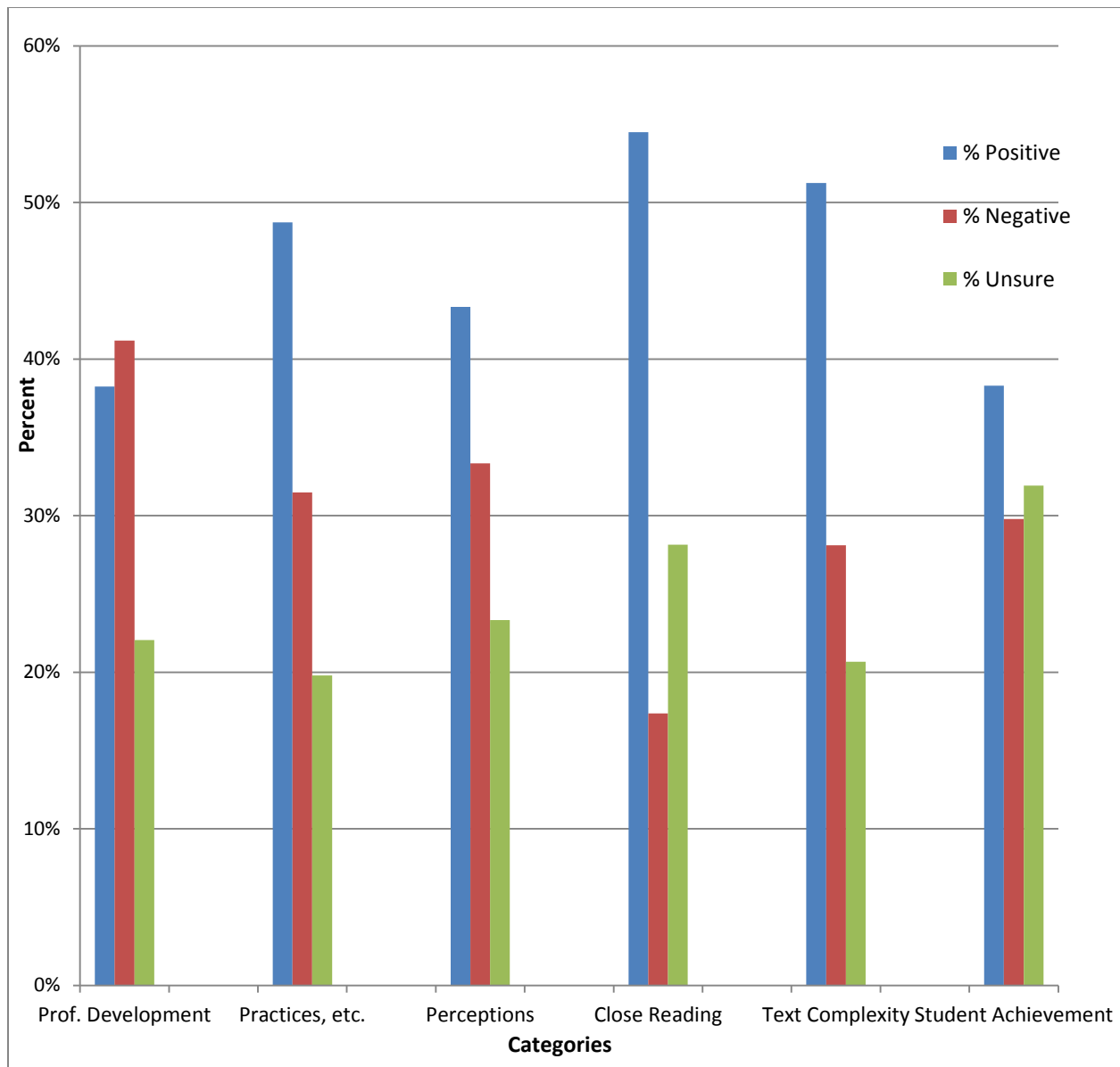


Figure 2: Category Results

Figure 3 takes into account all positive and negative answers given in the survey, and averages them all together to show an overall view of the LAFS. The answers to the questions that were phrased in a negative fashion were collected appropriately so as to recognize the proper category.

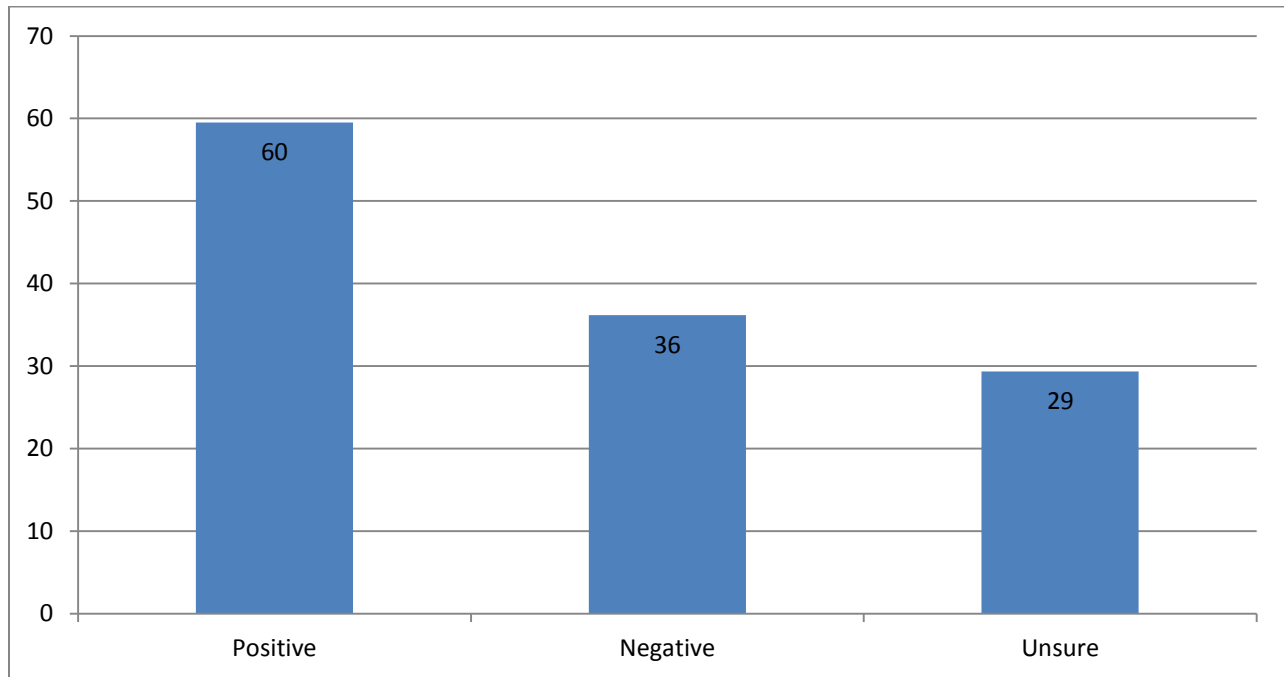


Figure 3: LAFS Opinion Results

Professional Development

The data in this study showed that there were very mixed feelings about how prepared participants felt for the LAFS based on the professional development they received. 38% felt that they had been sufficiently prepared. This does not necessarily mean that the way the standards have been implemented is effective, but that the teachers perceived that the state, district, and school have done a good job helping them to unpack the standards. There were still 41% of respondents that did not feel adequately prepared by professional development to properly implement the standards. This was the only area that had a greater percentage of negative responses than positive.

67% of the participants responded in disagreement when asked if they had attended two or more workshops or professional development opportunities about the Florida Standards. This shows that while many educators feel that they have been sufficiently prepared, it has not been through school implemented workshops or professional development opportunities, but more likely through personal research and interpretation of the standards.

Another area of concern is that 48% of respondents did not feel adequately prepared by professional development opportunities or workshops that they have attended. This brings to light the question of how teachers are supposed to teach students using standards for which they are not prepared. 29% of the participants were not sure whether the standards were easier to understand than previous standards, which suggests there has not been enough contact with the new standards to form a complete opinion.

Perceptions

The perceptions of the Florida Standards and the LAFS were quite positive, with 43% of participants responding favorably. 33% of participants had negative opinions of the LAFS, while 23% was still unsure. When asked if the Common Core was a positive step in education reform, 55% answered that it was. This shows that despite concerns and problems teachers are facing with implementation, they do not necessarily think the curriculum itself is faulty. This was further supported when participants were asked if the Florida Standards help students to learn to think critically and apply knowledge. A very high percentage (85%) agreed with that statement. Those who did not agree were unsure, which was only 15% of participants. No participants disagreed with this statement.

In fact, when asked about the previous standards, 43% disagreed with the statement that NCLB was a positive step in education reform. 33% percent of participants felt it was. Even though the new standards are not seen as worse, there was no consensus that the previous standards were negatively affecting education either.

It is interesting to see that only 29% of respondents reported that the new standards were easier to understand. This data does not necessarily mean that teachers lack understanding, but are spending more time making sure their instruction complies with the standards. This is most likely not an efficient use of time when simply wording the standards differently or giving more professional development on how to unpack the standards may have been more beneficial.

Effect on Teacher Implementation and Practices

As discussed in the review of the literature, there are many changes between how the previous standards were taught and how the LAFS should be taught. The data showed that 49% of teachers felt that the effect of the LAFS on their educational practices would be positive and that implementation would be a positive step for education reform. 31% felt that the effect on both their practices and the educational system would be negative. Only 20% did not have a firm opinion on this matter.

The effect on teacher implementation and practices was the only section shown that had more negative perceptions than positive, though the response difference between positive and negative opinions is very close. An overwhelming 68% felt that their creativity and the types of instruction they may use would be damaged. Sixty-four percent also felt that too much time would be spent ‘teaching to the test’ than actually teaching the entire curriculum. What was especially interesting is that participants were asked twice about how concerned they were with

preparing students for testing. Even though the question was essentially the same, more teachers answered negatively the second time. 64% felt that too much time would be spent preparing for standardized testing the first time they were asked, but that number jumped to 76% the second time. 14 out of 22 participants answered negatively in the first question, while 16 out of 21 answered negatively in the second. This data is curious, considering that 55% of respondents felt that the Common Core was a positive step in educational reform. Forty-three percent also felt that NCLB had a negative impact on education. This helps to show that while Common Core and the Florida Standards may be an improvement over previous standards, it is not necessarily what teachers would like the education system to be.

The percentage of those who felt their creativity was being restricted may also be affected by complying with mandates. 65% of respondents felt that they would be using more of their time to comply with mandates rather than focusing on how best to teach their students. Complying with mandates may in part be a reason why teachers are worried that they will be forced to depart from creative lessons. It is also possible that many districts and schools, not the standards themselves will require teachers to use a specific set of materials and restrict supplements.

Another area that showed concern was the amount of testing the Florida Standards would lead to. Many of the items that teachers felt negatively towards had to do with testing. Forty-one percent felt that their administration has helped them to become proficient with working with the standards. It was unclear why 27% felt that this question did not apply. This may be due a lack of administration involvement. 82% of respondents felt that the LAFS would impact their

everyday practice, showing an understanding that the new standards are very different than how the previous standards were written and implemented. Fifty-seven percent of participants felt that collaboration and sharing instructional materials would be more efficient because of the Florida Standards. In theory, this should be true due to many states now sharing the same framework for their standards.

While there are both positive and negative aspects, 48% of teachers remained unsure about whether the standards would help them to become a more effective educator. When analyzing the results, 5% more of respondents actually felt that it would not help their effectiveness as a teacher. This does not necessarily mean that they feel it will negatively impact their effectiveness; rather it will not benefit it in any way.

It must be said that despite these clarifying questions, there were still a significant portion of the respondents who answered neutrally (unsure) in many of these questions. This may be due to teachers wanting to see the first few years of implementation before sharing a clear opinion of the LAFS.

Student Achievement

Teachers also had a largely positive viewpoint for student achievement, with 38% of participants saying that the LAFS would boost student achievement. 30% felt that it would negatively affect student achievement, and 32% were unsure of the results the LAFS would have on student achievement. Most likely due to the lack of time the standards have been in use, respondents erred on the side of caution when answering questions about student achievement. In another question, 35% disagreed when asked if they felt that the Florida Standards would negatively affect student achievement. In every question asked about student achievement, the

percentage of participants who felt positively towards the standards was the same as those that were unsure.

Close Reading

Support for close reading was largely positive, at 54%. The biggest concern seemed to be that participants were not sure how to actually implement it, with 13 participants out of 19 saying that they did not feel knowledgeable about the topic of close reading. 17% felt negatively towards close reading, while 28% were unsure about close reading.

The data shows that even though there are still very mixed opinions of the Florida Standards themselves, it is not necessarily due to components such as text complexity or close reading. The actual practice of close reading was largely positive. However, 62% respondents felt that they were not knowledgeable about close reading, and only 30% of respondents felt comfortable teaching the topic of close reading.

It seems that the basis around close reading is understood, but not the steps that should be used to teach students how to do it independently. 77% of participants felt that close reading helped students to follow an author's thoughts and reasoning. None disagreed, though 23% were unsure. 65% also felt that close reading helped students to 'dig deeper' into a text, while only 10% felt that it did not help. A larger amount, or 25%, was unsure.

Also, 68% disagreed when faced with the statement that close reading does not offer any extra comprehension. 9% agreed and 23% were unsure. 57% also felt that close reading did not diminish background knowledge, while only 19% felt that it did. This statistic may show why 9% felt that comprehension was not given through close reading. All of the participants who felt

that comprehension was not benefitted also felt that background knowledge was being diminished. This is unusual, since there would seem to be a connection between understanding an author's thoughts and reasoning and comprehending the story. 52% of respondents disagreed when asked if close reading was not necessary to be a good reader. This shows at least a basic understanding of close reading, and that even before the LAFS, we have strategies similar to close reading.

Another concern that was seen with close reading was time. 30% of participants felt that there would not be enough time to implement close reading correctly. 20% felt there would be, while 50% were unsure. This worry about time could possibly be caused by the lack of knowledge about close reading, and how to implement it efficiently.

Text Complexity

Text complexity was also viewed quite favorably, with 51% of participants marking positive answers, 28% with negative opinions, and 21% reporting to be unsure. The biggest problem that was seen was many educators were worried that text complexity would be difficult to achieve with such differentiation in the classroom.

Many participants were not very sure about the trajectory of text complexity. 60% were unsure when asked if they felt the trajectory for text complexity moved at a reasonable pace. This is understandable, as even though some scales are available, it is something that is described on lexile.com and may not have been discussed in professional development or training.

It was almost unanimous that text complexity would challenge students, with no one disagreeing and 85% agreeing and 15% unsure. This once again shows that there is a clear

understanding of what text complexity, if used correctly, can do in a classroom. It is just unclear to teachers what scale they should use to find the appropriate text complexity. Even though most participants were unsure about what the trajectory was, 45% felt that it was unrealistic for students' reading comprehension to progress at the rate required. This means that while it was shown that many did not possess proper knowledge of the trajectory, they still deemed the rate of reading comprehension as too much for a student to realistically achieve.

DISCUSSION

The previous chapter illustrated the findings of the survey and what areas are of concern. This chapter will focus on an examination of how the findings relate to the three research questions, as well as the results' implications for the LAFS. Additional considerations for future research will also be explored.

Teacher Perceptions Related to Close Reading and Text Complexity

The first research question related to teachers' perceptions of the LAFS, specifically relating to the practice of close reading and considering text complexity. The data showed that the perceptions of the LAFS were generally positive. Many of the educators surveyed felt that the standards would help with student achievement. Many teachers felt that it was a better phase of educational reform than the previous standards were, but it was not clear whether teachers felt the standards were easier to understand than the previous ones.

Overall perceptions of the LAFS were positive, with most of the concern focusing in areas such as implementation of the standards and how they would affect teachers' instruction. Most teachers seemed to find certain integral areas, such as close reading and text complexity, attractive.

Perceptions of the LAFS

While it is certainly positive that teachers seem to find the different aspects of the LAFS, such as text complexity and close reading appealing, it is somewhat worrisome that there was no clear consensus on whether the standards were easier to understand. This implies a lack of understanding by the teachers on what to teach, which can only negatively affect student performance. Teachers are not necessarily at fault for this, as data has shown there has been a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers as well.

Teachers showed concern in how the standards would be implemented. Because the standards are new and differ greatly from previous standards, many educators are unsure of what to expect. Although the LAFS were designed to allow teachers more freedom in their instruction, many teachers seem concerned that their schools or districts will determine what they feel is the best way to teach the new curriculum.

It is also assumed that the approach of standardized testing will remain the same or similar, as shown by the data. Teachers are concerned that too much time will be focused on preparing students for testing instead of working on making sure students receive a well-rounded education that involves multi-faceted learning opportunities.

Perceptions of Close Reading

Close reading was viewed as a largely positive instructional approach, although it is clear from the data that many teachers are unsure what is involved and how to implement it effectively. Still, the description of what close reading should achieve, such as helping students to clearly comprehend the author's ideas by studying one literary element at a time seems to be a popular strategy.

The data suggests that more professional development to help further knowledge about close reading may be warranted. Many participants struggled with understanding how to make time for close reading and even where to begin teaching it. If sample lessons were demonstrated in a realistic classroom schedule, teachers may feel more confident in fitting close reading in effectively. Providing at least a framework on how teachers can start to use text complexity and close reading in their classes can act as a springboard to further their own ideas on how to best help their students.

Perceptions of Text Complexity

The perceptions of text complexity were also seen as largely positive. Teachers liked that knowledge of text complexity can be applied in text selection practices to challenge even their lowest readers and can be used at any level. Many concerns stemmed from how to use it when there is such differentiation needed in the classroom. This worry may come from using materials such as the basal and other whole group lessons. These lessons may be too easy for the high performing students and too challenging for low performing students. Teaching mini lessons on reading strategies and then using differentiated materials in the necessary groups may offer a solution to this challenge; however, this process also faces the challenges of limited time.

Teacher Perception of Preparedness to Teach the LAFS

The second research question in this study was based on teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach the LAFS. The data has shown that, while larger portions of participants have felt properly prepared to use the standards efficiently, there is still a large population that is clearly worried or uncomfortable that the amount of professional development they have received is not enough to properly implement the standards. Teachers seem to feel that support from their administration is not expected or necessary, as shown through a 'not applicable' answer.

Professional Development Needs

Even though some teachers felt adequately prepared to unpack the LAFS properly, most indicated that the professional development given was not sufficient. More professional development, some in general knowledge such as a basic overview of the 10 anchor standards, how they can be used in a variety of ways, and more specific workshops about certain areas that encompass all standards such as close reading and text complexity would make a large

difference. Even teachers who feel knowledgeable can benefit from an overview, and may still fix misconceptions that were previously unknown.

Teachers' Self-Reported Implementation of the LAFS

Teachers' beliefs on how their instruction will be affected can most certainly affect implementation. Many educators do realize that the LAFS will have a large impact on their instruction and will change the way they teach certain areas. Different strategies are emphasized and will not include a 'mile wide, inch deep' approach to education.

It was shown that many educators might not yet realize that the use of a similar, nationwide curriculum will allow teaching supplements that are available through sharing websites such as "Teachers Pay Teachers" to become more relevant to their classroom. Because the standards are similar in most states, teachers are able to draw from teachers in other states without as much concern for editing to fit different state standards.

Limited Creativity

Data suggests that teachers feel that their creativity will be restricted, which may foster the belief that there is no point in trying new or innovative lessons. Research supports using differentiated strategies to reach students of multiple learning styles (Hanafin, 2014). It is suggested that that creative lessons designed to reach multiple intelligences help to foster student interest and motivation, and can even help improve self-esteem and deeper comprehension (Hanafin, 2014). The Common Core State Standards, from which the Florida Standards were derived, are described as allowing teachers more time to dig deeper into topics and concepts without giving them restricting objectives and standards to meet.

It is very possible that schools and districts may insist on certain practices being used to ensure the standards are being met. This is apparent through the push that many teachers should use every single page of given resources instead of supplementing their own materials and lessons. This concern is very hard to address effectively without a widespread change in views. Without districts and schools trusting teachers to use effective strategies, there will be no change. It is convenient and helpful to have suggested lessons on hand to compare and draw from, but it can quickly become an inconvenience when teachers are forced to use supplements.

Overemphasis of Standardized Testing

Teachers have also stated that testing is emphasized too much. This statement implies that areas such as science, social studies, and the arts that are not tested as frequently or at all will be neglected. This becomes apparent when there are no Florida Standards (except for the previous NGSSS) for social studies or science in the primary grades. Because many teachers' pay is based on their standardized scores, it is very possible that teachers will change their instruction to emphasize certain tested materials and neglect other areas that are still important to a student's well-rounded education.

Implications for Text Complexity and Close Reading

Whole group instruction that meets differentiated student needs seems to pose a specific curriculum challenge, where the time and money spent on preparation and having books that are the 'right fit' for every student may be difficult. It would certainly be harder to achieve than using the basal, which may not meet all the needs each student has in text complexity. This may also tie in with the opinions of professional development. It is possible that additional

professional development on the topics of close reading and text complexity would help to diminish this discomfort.

Future Research

Future contributions to this topic can be varied. This study can be replicated with a larger sampling with a more varied group of districts and schools. This study can also be furthered through looking at the correlations between administration involvement, parent involvement, and the types of schools teachers work at. The length of a teacher's career and their perceptions of the LAFS can also be studied. So many factors can influence the reasons for the discussed opinions in this study that it is very complicated to discern the complete reasoning behind why someone has formed a certain opinion. An analysis of curriculum materials may also offer how classroom materials such as basals and math workbooks affect how the standards are being taught.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the LAFS are seen as an overall improvement from previous standards, but still leave a lot that can be improved further. More professional development will help teachers to both feel more confident in their abilities to implement the standards effectively and to help increase student achievement.

Appendix A

Survey Results

The survey below was adapted from the thesis of Albert Cheng.

The adjusted sums may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A	Adjusted Sum: Agreed	Adjusted Sum: Disagreed
Perceptions								
1. The implementation of the Common Core is more of a positive step than a negative step in education reform. (n=22)	5%	23%	18%	36%	18%	0%	55%	27%
2. The LAFS are easier to understand than previous standards. (n=21)	5%	19%	43%	29%	0%	5%	29%	24%
3. In hindsight, NCLB was more of a positive step than a negative step for education reform. (n=21)	14%	29%	24%	24%	10%	0%	33%	43%
4. The Florida Standards help students to learn to think critically and apply knowledge. (n=20)	0%	0%	15%	65%	20%	0%	85%	0%
5. I would encourage others to enter the teaching profession at this time. (n=21)	19%	24%	5%	33%	19%	0%	52%	43%
6. I feel that the new standards are a step backwards when compared with the Sunshine State Standards. (n=20)	5%	45%	30%	10%	5%	5%	15%	50%
7. There is a lack of support from my administration to comply with LAFS. (n=20)	0%	20%	15%	15%	5%	45%	20%	20%
8. I feel that the Florida Standards help teachers and administrators work	10%	25%	40%	20%	5%	0%	25%	35%

together more efficiently. (n=20)								
Implementation and Practices								
9. My administration has helped me to become proficient at implementing the Florida Standards. (n=22)	0%	14%	18%	23%	18%	27%	41%	14%
10. The Florida Standards have little impact on my everyday practice. (n=22)	36%	45%	5%	5%	9%	0%	14%	81%
11. I am concerned that the Common Core will restrict my creativity and the types of instructional strategies that I may use. (n=22)	9%	23%	0%	36%	32%	0%	68%	32%
12. I am concerned that under the Common Core, I will spend too much time preparing students for testing. (n=22)	5%	18%	14%	36%	27%	0%	64%	23%
13. The Florida Standards – as a single, common set of curricular standards – will help to make collaboration and sharing of instructional materials more efficient. (n=21)	5%	14%	24%	43%	14%	0%	57%	19%
14. The Common Core will help me become a more effective teacher. (n=21)	5%	24%	48%	19%	5%	0%	24%	29%
15. I feel that I am spending more effort to comply with mandates rather than to teach students to the best of my ability as a result of the Florida Standards. (n=20)	10%	5%	5%	25%	40%	15%	65%	15%
16. I feel that too much time will be spent	5%	5%	14%	33%	43%	0%	76%	10%

preparing students for the Florida Standards Assessment. (n=21)								
Student Achievement								
17. I believe that the Florida Standards will negatively affect student achievement. (n=20)	5%	30%	35%	25%	5%	0%	30%	23%
18. I believe that the Florida Standards will be able to better prepare students for college or careers at high school graduation. (n=20)	0%	20%	40%	30%	10%	0%	40%	20%
19. I believe that the Florida Standards will help to raise student achievement. (n=21)	10%	5%	43%	38%	5%	0%	43%	
Professional Development								
20. I am well informed regarding what the LAFS are for my grade level. (n=22)	5%	0%	23%	45%	14%	14%	60%	5%
21. I have attended more than 2 workshops/professional development opportunities about the Florida Standards. (n=21)	14%	52%	0%	19%	10%	5%	29%	67%
22. Transitioning to the Florida Standards will require new or substantially revised curriculum materials and lesson plans. (n=19)	5%	21%	16%	26%	32%	5%	58%	26%
23. I did not feel adequately prepared by workshops/professional development to transition from previous standards to LAFS. (n=21)	5%	10%	24%	33%	14%	14%	48%	14%
24. The effort to prepare								

and revise lessons to be ready for the Florida Standards will be worth it. (n=20)	0%	15%	25%	45%	10%	5%	55%	15%
Text Complexity								
25. Text complexity is unrealistic due to the differentiation done in the classroom. (n=21)	5%	43%	19%	14%	19%	0%	33%	48%
26. I feel that the trajectory for text complexity moves at a reasonable pace. (n=20)	5%	10%	60%	25%	0%	0%	25%	15%
27. I feel that the text complexity will help challenge students. (n=20)	0%	0%	15%	75%	10%	0%	85%	0%
28. It is unrealistic for students reading comprehension to progress at the rate the Florida Standards require. (n=20)	0%	35%	20%	35%	10%	0%	45%	35%
29. The text complexity is scaled appropriately to each grade level. (n=21)	5%	19%	43%	29%	0%	5%	29%	24%
30. Finding appropriate books at the correct text complexity level will help even low performing students reach higher reading levels. (n=21)	0%	14%	10%	33%	38%	5%	71%	14%
Close Reading								
31. Close reading helps students to follow an author's thoughts and reasoning in a story. (n=22)	0%	0%	23%	50%	27%	0%	77%	0%
32. Close reading does not offer students any extra comprehension when studying texts. (n=22)	14%	55%	23%	5%	5%	0%	10%	68%
33. Close reading diminishes the use of background knowledge.	5%	52%	24%	19%	0%	0%	19%	57%

(n=21)								
34. I am concerned that under the Common Core, I will spend too much time preparing students for testing. (n=22)	5%	18%	14%	36%	27%	0%	64%	23%
35. I do not feel knowledgeable about the topic of close reading. (n=21)	5%	24%	10%	43%	19%	0%	62%	29%
36. Close reading helps students to 'dig deeper' into a text. (n=20)	0%	10%	25%	55%	10%	0%	65%	10%
37. Close reading is unrealistic based on the time in the classroom. (n=20)	5%	15%	50%	30%	0%	0%	30%	20%
38. Close reading is not necessary to be a good reader. (n=21)	5%	48%	38%	10%	0%	0%	10%	52%
39. I feel comfortable teaching the topic of close reading. (n=21)	14%	19%	33%	19%	10%	5%	29%	33%

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