USING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO BOLSTER COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION

Katherine A. Dougherty Stahl

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) make clear that comprehension instruction must be the focus of literacy instruction, beginning in prekindergarten. However, a survey of 40 state education agencies determined that 37 states are struggling to provide the professional development (PD) needed to implement the CCSS (Kober, McIntosh, & Rentner, 2013, p. 7). It is unlikely that state budgets will increase to provide additional personnel, materials, or the financial resources for PD. The CCSS recommendations "leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how these goals should be reached" (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4). Therefore, schools must look for ways to provide sustained, job-embedded PD that will support high-level comprehension instruction and student achievement with their existing resources.

One way to provide PD without additional resources is to form school-based professional learning communities (PLCs; Hord, 2004; Taylor, 2001). Although it is essential for the school to have a clearly articulated shared vision, most of the reflective

Katherine Stahl is a clinical associate professor at New York University, New York, USA; e-mail kay.stahl@nyu.edu.

Table 1   Professional Learning Community Resources

Professional Learning Community	Topics	Featured Research Into Practice Columns
Whole School	Constrained Skills Theory Reading and emotions Fruitful test preparation	Stahl (2011) Grasser and D'Mello (2012) Stahl & Schweid (2013)
Prekindergarten to Grade 1	Inference generation Using instructional videos for comprehension and vocabulary development	Stahl (2014) Hall & Stahl (2012)
Grades 1–3	Introducing complex texts with shared reading High-level discussions	Stahl (2012) Zhang & Stahl (2011/2012)
Grades 3–5	Disciplinary literacy High-level discussions Writing in response to text What Counts as Evidence	Shanahan & Shanahan (2014) Zhang & Stahl (2011/2012) Harris et al. (2013) Dougherty Stahl (2014)
Special Populations	Using videos Discussions and the English learner Writing in response to text	Hall & Stahl (2012) Zhang & Stahl (2011/2012) Harris et al. (2013)

inquiry and data analysis occurs in collaborative work groups consisting of grade-level teams (Hord, 2004). Some states are building PLC models into their new high-stakes teacher evaluation systems (e.g., Minnesota Department of Education, 2013).

Over the last three years, I have sought to bring attention to recent reading comprehension research and to share the resulting instructional implications in the Research Into Practice columns of *The Reading Teacher*. The CCSS provide guidance regarding *what* to teach, while the research addressed in these columns has provided readers with guidance in *how* to teach comprehension effectively. This article is a response to an invitation by the *Reading Teacher* editors to describe how schools might use the information in recently published Research Into Practice columns. I will describe how the columns published during my term as Section Editor might be used as a

springboard for implementing a PLC model of PD. First, I will describe the structure of the PLC sessions. Then, I will specify the key ideas, readings, and tasks for the PLCs within each of three elementary grade-level bands.

Structuring the PLC

Initially, a school administrator or literacy leader begins the PD series with one or two whole-group sessions that articulate the school vision. School data is often used to demonstrate a need for PD in a particular domain. In other cases, policy or curriculum changes cause schools to update their practices. However, student data *always* plays a primary role in evaluating and continuing to refine the effectiveness of the PD process. In an era of increasingly high-stakes teacher evaluations, embedded PD functions as a vital tool for both administrators and teachers.

Once the school vision and goals have been established, it is most

productive for smaller groups of grade-level teachers to work together. Specialists might join their grade-level cadre or form their own group to focus on in-depth areas of inquiry that will help them meet students' needs that extend beyond general education. PLCs should facilitate both group and individual PD goals (Hord, 2004).

Components of the PLC Sessions

Discuss Articles. PLCs gather to discuss selected readings. The articles within each grade band of Table 1 are related to some aspect of comprehension. Meeting schedules will vary by school ecology and will determine the PLC's agenda. Taylor's (2001) effective Early Intervention in Reading program evolved and expanded over time to include monthly two-hour PLC sessions. If you engage in monthly meetings that range from 60 to 120 minutes, then reading multiple articles or book chapters before the meeting may work best. If you use a team-planning block during the school day (about 45 minutes) twice a month, it might be best to focus on one article or chapter. Most schools find it helpful to have a literacy leader (any teacher who has literacy expertise) serve as facilitator for each meeting.

The PLC members identify, collectively or individually, one or two targets for instructional refinement. As members continue probing their practices, it is likely that some of the original research cited on the reference list of the Research Into Practice articles will be retrieved for more details. Additional *Reading Teacher* articles on each topic can also serve as resources that PLCs should consider incorporating into their agendas.

Appendix A includes some teacher-friendly books that describe the articles'

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instructional recommendations in more detail. Grade-level teams will find these books useful for sustained professional growth. They contain detailed explanations for implementing instructional techniques that are introduced in the articles. These books are procedural how-to guides that include step-by-step guidelines for conducting different types of read-alouds, using multimedia effectively and effortlessly, integrating fluency and comprehension, or teaching children to write responses to a variety of texts.

Video Sharing. Many PLCs devote about 15 minutes of each session to a single five- to seven-minute video clip of a group member applying the targeted instructional practices (Taylor, 2001). For example, a kindergarten or first-grade teacher shares a video of her questioning practices during an interactive read-aloud, or a teacher in the intermediate grades shares a video snippet of a small-group writing lesson. Peers in the PLC provide structured, low-inference feedback in response to the video. *Low-inference feedback* is stating what behaviors are observed without expressing judgment about those behaviors. A template, like the one in Appendix B, is useful for keeping the conversation focused and non-evaluative.

Tasks. The PLC can serve as a collaborative group that shares responsibility for creating high-quality materials that will enhance instruction or standardizing assessment processes for the team. It is

also the site for collaboratively analyzing classroom data such as writing samples and student retellings. In turn, this data is used to set new goals for the members of the PLC.

Setting the Stage
Constrained Skills Theory is a reconceptualization of how reading develops (Paris, 2005). Skills that have a limited number of items and are learned to mastery levels over a short period of time are highly constrained (letter recognition and phonics). However, unconstrained skills such as comprehension and vocabulary are learned across a lifetime, and competency depends on content, purpose, genre, and instructional context. Stahl's (2011) discussion of the theory and the instructional implications is a good place for a school to start PD because the theory influences schedule allocation, instructional decisions, and the schoolwide assessment system. Similarly, the articles on engagement (Graesser & D'Mello, 2012) and fruitful practices for getting all children ready for the tests that measure their ability to meet the CCSS (Stahl & Schweid, 2013) have schoolwide implications.

Boosting the Power of Read-Alouds in the Primary Grades
Big Ideas
Interactive storybook and informational-book reading is the primary way that children in the early grades are prompted to think about texts. Young children need opportunities in one-on-one settings or small groups to discuss the texts that are read to them. These contexts should include opportunities for children to retell the entire story from start to finish. This allows for teachers to gauge what children perceive as important, to make the connections between text episodes, and to trace the development of characters across a story. However, it is equally important for teachers to ask high-level questions to prompt inferences that children may not generate spontaneously.

The same discussion and questioning practices used during interactive teacher read-alouds may be applied with short videos clips and wordless picture books (see Hall & Stahl, 2012; Stahl, 2014). During and after watching a short video of a story with a comprehensive story structure or information related to a disciplinary integrated unit, the teacher asks the students literal and inferential questions about the video. During a wordless picture book reading, the teacher provides prompts to support the generation of an oral narrative that incorporates story grammar elements and has a causal sequence that connects the episodes.

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Assessing Development

A child's ability to retell a familiar story, answer questions about a read-aloud, and create an oral narrative provide a pure measure of comprehension development. Neither decoding nor complex content tend to interfere at this stage. Therefore, it is useful to trace how a student performs these tasks over time. The Sulzby scale (Sulzby, 1985) is a research-validated scale of reading behaviors that quantifies the characteristics of a child's ability to pretend-read a familiar story. Similarly, Paris and Paris (2003) used a wordless picture book to assess how children create a narrative during a picture walk. They created a scale for scoring the story elements that were included in the child's initial picture walk and in an immediate retelling, and they created a rubric to score the answers to explicit and implicit questions.

PLC Tasks

Stahl (2014) emphasizes the need to have lesson plans with preplanned questions for the interactive read-alouds. A grade-level team might select a collection of high-quality read-aloud texts (or videos) to support the disciplinary and literary themed units. Next, the team divides the books among the members who are assigned the task of creating explicit and implicit questions for each book. A grade-level cadre of four teachers can reduce the workload

by 75% when sharing tasks in this way. Furthermore, the use of deliberate well-crafted questions is likely to improve student comprehension. Some teams may want to dig more deeply into the literature that describes how to generate good questions. Creating thoughtful questions to accompany each book creates the potential for dividing the classroom into smaller groups for the read-aloud experience. Rather than reading to a group of 25 kindergartners, teachers can now divide some classrooms into two groups. Classrooms that have co-teachers, a teaching assistant, a student teacher, or a less-skilled adult in the room can distribute the read-aloud responsibility between the adults and rotate the groups each day. The formation of smaller groups increases engagement and opportunities for student participation while further decreasing the teacher workload.

In order to increase the reliability of the Sulzby scale (Sulzby, 1985) and the wordless picture book task (Paris & Paris, 2003), it is a good idea to generate scripts for administering the two tests. For the wordless picture book task of narrative comprehension, identify two or three wordless picture books that have simple diagrams but tell a story that includes all of the story grammar elements. Create a script for administration and create five explicit and five implicit questions for each book. If you undertake this task, retrieving the original research would be extremely useful. Paris and Paris (2003) provide wonderful scripts and scoring guidelines for scaffolding the picture walk, scoring the student's retelling after the picture walk, and then asking explicit and implicit questions. By examining comprehension in systematic ways in the primary grades, we are more likely to identify children with comprehension difficulties

in the early years, enabling us to provide immediate intervention.

Shared Reading: Beyond Big Books

One of the most controversial components of the CCSS is the difficulty level of books that elementary children are expected to read. This burden is initially experienced in late first grade and second grade. At this developmental stage, it is important for children to transition from a reliance on listening to texts to independently reading complex texts. Instructional scaffolding is important because children at this age have not reached their peak in automaticity of word recognition processes (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). It is likely that teachers will need to provide high levels of support to help children stretch from their instructional reading levels to the Lexile readability levels specified in the CCSS (www.lexile.com; NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). Based on Lexile data and CCSS targets, Table 2 provides text-level estimates for the supported reading contexts in a typical literacy block.

In order to ensure that we do not return to the days of round-robin reading or teachers calling on the "best readers" to read challenging texts aloud in class while other children listen, shared reading needs to play a more dominant role during the classroom literacy block (Stahl, 2012). Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI) and Wide Reading FORI have a strong evidence base (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009). FORI and Wide Reading FORI provide a week-long protocol of various forms of repeated reading of stretch text. Because the text is read multiple times across the week with highly supportive instruction, these protocols are best matched with complex text that is a bit more difficult than the students'

Table 2   Minimal Lexile Estimates for Supported Reading Contexts

Grade	CCSS Lexile (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010)	Read-Aloud	Shared Reading
1		300L–530L	200L–420L
2	420L–820L	400L–650L	300L–500L
3	420L–820L	700L–820L	500L–775L
4	740L–1010L	800L–940L	700L–875L
5	740L–1010L	900L–1010L	825L–975L

traditionally identified instructional level. Throughout the week, students engage in repeated reading of the texts using techniques such as echo reading, choral reading, and partner reading. Comprehension extensions include writing in response to text and small-group discussions (see Harris, Graham, Friedlander & Laud, 2013; Zhang & Stahl, 2011).

This model of shared reading works beautifully with the integrated disciplinary approach suggested within the CCSS. The shared reading selection serves as an anchor text for a community literacy experience. It serves as a model for examining literary genres or for building conceptual knowledge with informational texts. These texts have rich vocabulary that calls for explicit instruction. Revisiting the text and the comprehension extensions provides multiple exposures to facilitate learning academic vocabulary.

PLC Tasks
At these grade levels, the primary task of the PLC is to select powerful texts at the right readability to support the integration of reading development and conceptual growth. After four to six anchor texts have been selected for each themed unit, the PLC could divide up the task of planning explicit comprehension strategy lessons for overcoming the

meaning-making hurdles of each text, writing activities, and discussion formats for each of the texts. Both the units and the plans for assessing students should be aligned with the CCSS. Even if a school is using a particular program, teachers need to refine that program to meet the needs of their students.

Emphasizing Disciplinary Literacy
Essential reading strategies are the underpinning of general understanding (monitoring, summarizing, prediction, question generation). However, according to Shanahan and Shanahan (2014), "disciplines are cultures of practice, and each has its own norms for how knowledge should be created, shared, and evaluated." These differences result in disciplinary differences in how knowledge is communicated in reading, writing, and language that need to be explicitly taught. These differences also yield unique criteria and processes for evaluating the knowledge expressed in texts within the field. The instruction of

science and social studies can no longer be squeezed into intermediate-grade classroom schedules in the afternoon as time allows. Additionally, the CCSS suggest a distribution of 50% literary and 50% informational texts. As a result, integrated disciplinary units must be the vehicles for reading, writing, language and conceptual development.

Comprehension is an invisible, in-the-head process. Therefore, teaching students how to express their comprehension through discussion and writing using the discourse of the disciplinary community must be an instructional priority. Discussion formats such as Collaborative Reasoning (Zhang & Stahl, 2011) and the writing structures in Self-Regulated Strategy Development (Harris et al., 2013) are good starting points, and both can be easily integrated into any existing literacy program.

PLC Tasks
The development of meaningful, cohesive content units requires time and ongoing refinement. The primary task of the PLC is to work collaboratively to continuously increase the sophistication of the integrated disciplinary units.

Additionally, the PLC is the setting where teachers gather to evaluate student writing two or three times a year using the same writing rubrics that are being used by their state's ELA test (Stahl & Schweid, 2013). The prompts for the writing samples should be in response to reading, consistent with the type of prompts used on the state high-stakes ELA test, and consistent within

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a grade-level cohort. This student data should be used to inform classroom writing instruction.

Closing Thoughts

High-level comprehension instruction is never easy. The pressure of simultaneously incorporating new standards, preparing students for new tests, and adjusting to new systems of teacher evaluations only adds to the tension. However, developing professional bonds with our peers as we increase our instructional effectiveness helps eliminate the isolation that is often an unexpected aspect of being a teacher. Don't forget to bring some snacks to nurture (and sweeten) the process!

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Appendix A

Teacher Guidebooks
Schoolwide
Taylor, B.M., & Duke, N.K. (Eds.). (2013). *The handbook of effective literacy instruction: Research-based practice K–8*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Prekindergarten to Grade 1
Bennett-Armistead, V.S., Duke, N.K., & Moses, A.M. (2005). *Literacy and the youngest learner*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Hamilton, C.E., & Schwanenflugel, P.J. (2011). *PAVEd for success: Building vocabulary and language development*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Morrow, L.M., Shanahan, T., & Wixson, K.K. (Eds.). (2013). *Teaching with the Common Core standards for English language arts, PreK–2*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Grades 1–3
Rasinski, T., & Padak, N. (Eds.). (2013). *Effective instruction for fluency and comprehension*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Grades 3–5
Harris, K.R., Graham, S., Mason, L., & Friedlander, B. (2008). *Powerful writing strategies for all students*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Special Populations
Dove, M.G., & Honigsfeld, A. (2013). *Common Core for the not-so-common learner*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Harris, K.R., Graham, S., Mason, L., & Friedlander, B. (2008). *Powerful writing strategies for all students*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Appendix B

PLC Video Sharing Format
(Adapted from Taylor, 2001)

1. One member of the PLC video records her instruction and selects a 5- to 7-minute clip depicting an aspect of instruction that has been the target of PD.

2. Before showing the clip at the PLC meeting, the teacher provides 1 minute of lesson background. In groups where there is trust, the teacher describes a specific lesson challenge that she would like the group to discuss after viewing the video.

3. The PLC take notes on the form below during video viewing.

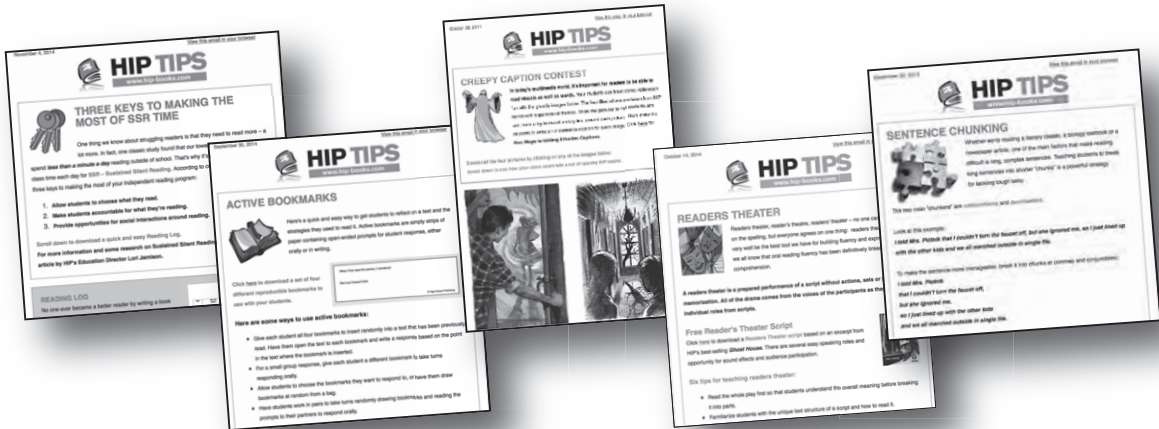|	Observations & Comments
What were the children doing well?	
What was the teacher doing to help the children that was related to the PD focus?	
What additional steps, related to the PD focus, might have been taken in an effort to support the students?	
What did you learn from this video, and how will it cause a shift in your own teaching?	

4. An 8- to 10-minute discussion of the video follows the viewing.
5. The teacher receives all of the notes recorded by the other PLC members.