The Language and Literacy Spectrum

A Journal of the New York State Reading Association

Volume Twenty Three
2013
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A special thank you to Leslie Lindsey, Instructional Designer at Manhattanville College, who helped us with final editing, formatting, design, and uploading!

*The Language and Literacy Spectrum*, Volume 23, 2013
Published Annually by the New York State Reading Association
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Comments from the Editors

Katherine Egan Cunningham, Ross Collin, Courtney Kelly, and Kristin Rainville
Manhattanville College

Commissioner King visited Manhattanville College in March this year to speak about the changes New York schools are facing including the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). He spoke of his recent visits to New York schools that were tackling complex texts like *Esperanza Rising*, where students used sticky notes to mark supporting evidence for their arguments, and where they then debated their ideas with one another. He talked about his own childhood and how his teachers supported him to read *The New York Times* with purpose. How he cherishes the opportunity he had to play the rose in his class production of *Alice in Wonderland*. He also referenced Manhattanville’s Mother Damman, who in his mind was Common Core before the Common Core. In her essay *Principles Versus Prejudice*, Mother Damman wrote that as educators, “We strove to develop in you, the power to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze. You have a right to these things.” Common Core before the Common Core. Perhaps.

The CCSS are here and they are impacting our lives and the lives of our students. As with any new movement, change fuels debate, reflection, and action. And, of course, anxiety. Some of you may consider the CCSS a new Bill of Rights for children. You may see the promise it creates for children from all backgrounds to have access to new technologies, to engage in lessons that center critical thinking, and to have ongoing opportunities for collaboration and participation as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners. Some of you may consider the CCSS a dismissal of the social and emotional dimensions of children and a step in the wrong direction for individualized instruction. Many of us wonder what will happen to play in our early childhood classrooms as a result of these shifts. Or what will happen to readers below grade level when they are handed a text from the exemplars listed on Appendix B? Many of us are considering whether literacy learning in the Core era can support the next generation of learners to be more empathetic, more democratic, and more responsible towards each other.

The CCSS are here and wherever you land on the continuum of the debate, we believe the articles in this issue offer us as educators the opportunity to once again view “literacy as the language of possibility” (Freire and Macedo, 1987). In our call for manuscripts, we asked whether our schools are ready for this shift and how we can support teachers as they make their way through this new pedagogical landscape. The articles in this issue consider the politicized topics fueling the CCSS debate including what we mean by text complexity and close reading, how technologies can be more than a tool, and how we can support diverse learners. It is our hope that the articles featured in this issue will spark discussion amongst you and your colleagues in New York schools, challenge your thinking, and offer new possibilities for the work you do on behalf of New York’s students.

*Jane M. Gangi* and *Mary Ann Reilly* in their article “Laying Bare of Questions Which Have Been Hidden by Answers: The English Language Arts Standards of the Common Core, K-5” question how children are constructed by the CCSS and the kinds of aesthetic and efferent literacy experiences the new standards will lead to. They question the implied pedagogy of the CCSS and the implications for children of color and children from poverty with a careful look at the text exemplar recommendations made in Appendix B.
Kathleen Gormley and Peter McDermott share their analysis of graduate level teacher candidates’ lessons that incorporate digital literacies and how the children who were engaged in these lessons benefitted in their article “Integrating Digital Literacies into an After-school Program: A Structural Analysis of Teachers’ Lessons”. They suggest that children, even those with difficulties in learning to read and write, can become engaged in learning when they have opportunities to read and write digitally. They offer a road map for how to integrate digital literacies into lessons to support struggling learners in after-school settings.

Theresa Abodeeb-Gentile and Lisa Zawilinski in their article, "Reader Identity and the Common Core: Agency and Identity in Leveled Reading” engage readers in the critical dilemmas of Literacy Specialists--how do we negotiate the standards, literacy strengths, needs, and approaches with the identity of a struggling readers? They offer teachers suggestions that could provide students with access to different texts at multiple levels.

Elena Nitecki and Mi-Hyun Chung in their article “What is Not Covered by the Standards: How to Support Emergent Literacy in Preschool Classrooms” argue that it is imperative to find ways to integrate learning standards with developmentally appropriate play-based methods. Through their examination of literacy coach candidates’ classroom observations they found great tension between how to address conventional literacy skills with developmentally appropriate instruction for our youngest learners in schools. Their article helps us consider what are considered essential early literacy skills according to the standards and what the consequences are of this framework.

Virginia J. Goatley and Kathleen A. Hinchman urge educators to take an activists’ stance in their article “Using Research to Make Sensible Literacy Decisions Within Current Educational Initiatives”. They argue that educators must take time to advocate for research-informed instructional responses to the CCSS and Race to the Top mandates. They offer us four key ideas to support us in our advocacy and provide resources and references for how to effectively address new mandates.

Pamela Hickey and Tarie Lewis in their article “The Common Core, English Learners, and Morphology 101: Unpacking LS.4 for ELLs” look closely at how the CCSS address morphological awareness beginning in kindergarten in that they require students to actively use their expanding knowledge of meaningful word chunks to construct and deconstruct word meanings in text. The authors expound upon the benefits of multilingualism and explore its place in morphology in the instruction of English learners. They offer concrete activities to try out in your classrooms whether you are a teacher looking to better understand morphology or you want to better support the English learners in your class.

Kelly Chandler-Olcott and John Zeleznik outline how they supported ninth graders with the new CCSS Writing Standards with an assignment called the “Gift Essay” in their article "Narrative Plus: Designing and Implementing the Common Core State Standards with the Gift Essay”. They advocate for a broad conceptualization of genre in light of the standards and show how the essay work they did with students allowed for student success and social interaction. In this issue we have two professional book reviews.

Beth Wilson offers her analysis of Fisher, Frey, and Lapp’s Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading, quickly becoming a touchstone text for literacy teachers and teacher educators. Wilson explains how the book frames the standards and how it provides teachers with tools to help them assess the complexity of texts. Her review shares what she believes are the essential take-aways for teachers and she also offers supplemental reading to extend your learning about the complexities inherent in defining text complexity.
Rebecca Benjamin’s review of Beach, Thein, and Webb’s publication *Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: A Literacy Practices Approach for 6-12 Classrooms* describes how adjusting to the CCSS does not need to daunting. She analyzes the strengths of the text and offers a succinct account of each of the text’s parts with enough detail to provide direction for teachers in search of a foundational text.

In this issue, we are also proud to feature an interview between *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*’s Ross Collin and Margaret Ruller, the Curriculum Director of English Language Arts and Social Studies for Arlington Central School District. In this interview, Ms. Ruller offers her perspective on what we mean by “core learner”, balanced curriculum, testing, and the role higher ed plays in preparing teachers to be “core ready”.

As we shift gears from this issue to what’s on the horizon, we want to reach out to all of NYSRA’s members to consider writing for *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*. Please read our call for manuscripts for our next edition and visit us at sessions at the annual NYSRA Annual Convention this fall.

See www.nysreading.org for details.

Enjoy!
“Laying Bare of Questions Which Have Been Hidden by Answers”:
The English Language Arts Standards of the Common Core, K-5

Jane M. Gangi, Mount Saint Mary College
Mary Ann Reilly, Blueprints for Learning

ABSTRACT

The authors question the answer the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) claims. The questions center on the validity of the new standardized tests based on the CCSS and teachers’ evaluations being tied to student test scores on flawed tests. The proposed tests on the CCSS will position children as deficient, and will not recognize the Funds of Knowledge children and their families bring to the educational transaction. The developers of the proposed new tests seem particularly uninformed on much research of how children learn new vocabulary.

The authors question the literary theory (New Criticism) and learning theory (information processing) that undergird the CCSS, which exclude theories and research (transactional theory, critical literacy, Funds of Knowledge, arts-based research) that could be beneficial, especially to children of color and the poor. The authors question the validity of dictating percentages of informational and literary texts, and the lack of emphasis on the emotional lives of children (the word analysis appears 94 times in the CCSS). They question whether the CCSS are truly internationally benchmarked when children are not biologically nor developmentally capable of some of the demands in the early grades, and impose standards not shared by Finland and China that may make American students less competitive, not more.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Mary Ann Reilly is the President of Blueprints for Learning, an organization that helps schools, especially in urban areas. She is the author, with Jane M. Gangi and Rob Cohen, of Deepening Literacy Learning: Art and Literature Engagements in K-8 Classrooms. Her blog, which features award-winning photography, essays on literacy, rhizomatics, and a host of other education-related topics, has over 60,000 followers. She can be reached at maryann.reilly58@gmail.com.

James Baldwin once said “the greatest achievement of art is the ‘laying bare of questions which have been hidden by answers’” (as cited in Leafgren, 2009, p. 110). Although Baldwin is not included in text exemplars of Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) because Chinua Achebe, Maya Angelou, Jim Haskins and other Black authors of Baldwin's stature are included in the recommended secondary readings, presumably he—and questions—would not be objectionable to the authors and promoters of the Common Core State
Standards (CCSS). In this article, we seek to lay bare questions of the almost-national answer the CCSS claim to be. Those questions are: How valid are the new standardized tests based on the CCSS and, indeed, how valid is any standardized test, especially when teachers' evaluations will now be based, in part, on their students' scores? Is the amount of money being spent on new tests worthwhile, or might the money be better spent elsewhere? What kind of reading stance—esthetic and afferent—does the CCSS foster? How do the CCSS construct children? Questions are also asked about the CCSS text exemplars and the roles of close reading and of arts-based literacy.

Standardized tests have become doubly-high stakes with Race to the Top (RTTT) and the CCSS. In those states that receive RTTT money, at least part of teachers' evaluations will be based on their students' test scores. In a move that could, and already has, affected teachers' careers, it would seem that the standards by which they are measured would be valid, reliable, and lock tight. But are they? Consider the New York State Testing Program ELA Common Core Sample Questions for grade 3. Retrieved from Project Gutenberg, where no royalties have to be paid, the story on the test is "The Gray Hare" by Leo Tolstoy. It is about a hare who must cross a road to find food. He must wait for peasants to pass, a dog chases him, and he stops to play with fellow hares along the way. Eventually he finds oats in the granary to eat, then returns home. Perhaps even Tolstoy would suggest this almost plot-less story was not his best work and not likely to interest anyone besides Tolstoy scholars. Bolded are the words: hare, vapor, threshing-floor, runners, caftans, jostled, hoarfrost, granary, kiln, and lair. Proctors of the test are told they may tell third graders what these words mean. It is assumed that all third graders in New York state will know without being told: glistened, squeaking, sleighs, moustaches (note the archaic spelling), snow-drifts, companions, wintergreen, snow-covered, wicker, glimmering, and ravine.

I (Jane) gave this test to my undergraduates in a literacy course in the education program at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York, in the fall of 2012. Nineteen and 20 year old students struggled with it; for some, it was anxiety-producing: they turned red and their hands trembled. At the test's end, they asked, of course, if they had had so much trouble with it, how would third graders do? One young woman wisely said it was wrong to teach new vocabulary when being assessed. And anyone who has studied vocabulary knows children do not learn a new word by hearing the word one time, especially on the day of the test (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2003). Undergraduates answers also differed on this multiple-choice question:

In which scene does the hare reach his goal for the day?
A. when he watches peasants on the road
B. when he plays with other hares in the field
C. when he eats on the threshing-floor
D. when he outruns the dog

The answer, according to the New York State Testing Program, is C. Some students argued, however, that the answer was B; perhaps the hare's goal for the day changed when he had the fun of playing with his with friends. That argument, based on close reading of complex text, seemed logical.

From a critical literacy perspective, Luke and Freebody (1999) insist that being code breakers, meaning makers, and text users is not enough. Readers must also be text critics, which Freebody and Luke define as being able to “critically analyze and transform texts by acting on
knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral—that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people's ideas” (para. 1). It would be wise for the state of New York to take this stance. While telling children the meaning of new words one time on test is clearly bad practice—in this case, 10 new words—who is privileged and who is silenced by words all third graders across the state of New York are expected to know? *Glistened, squeaking, sleighs, moustaches, snow-drifts, companions, wintergreen, snow-covered, wicker, glimmering,* and *ravine* seem to favor those who live in the country or those who have the means to travel to the country during the winter. What is a newly-arrived eight year old from the Caribbean living in an urban area to do? Despite years of claiming to become free of cultural bias, test-makers never have, and never will, be able to write tests free of cultural bias. We have had 20 years of standardized testing; reports from the National Academies National Research Council and the National Center on Education and the Economy conclude standards-based learning and the accompanying tests have accomplished little-to-nothing (Bloomfield, 2011). To impose more standardized tests is an example of doing the same thing expecting to get different results, which is a costly experiment to carry out on the nation's children. We are reminded of Wendell Berry's (2009) commencement speech to the College of the Atlantic:

Understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility. We are not smart enough or conscious enough or alert enough to work responsibly on a gigantic scale. In making things always bigger and more centralized, we make them both more vulnerable in themselves and more dangerous to everything else. Learn, therefore, to prefer small-scale elegance and generosity to large-scale greed, crudity, and glamour (n.p.).

To administer a test on a story by Tolstoy (or anyone) to every child across the state of New York (or all states) is simply not responsible. We must learn to evaluate teachers and students on the local level, acknowledging the resources of the community. Luis Moll's (2010) Funds of Knowledge research could help us here. Moll and his colleagues show in their work teachers who make connections with children's families and communities, with teachers becoming learners about families' expertise. Funds of Knowledge defines “working-class families as possessing valuable cultural resources for instruction, challenging any perception that they would be lacking in such assets, while helping teachers establish relationships of trust with parents on which to base their pedagogy” (Moll & Cammarota, 2010, p. 289). Funds of Knowledge pushes against the deficit views many of us hold about children of color, the working-class, and the poor. When children are cast as “deficient,” they know it, and it impedes their learning. In the Tolstoy story, children who do not know *glistened, squeaking, sleighs, moustaches, snow-drifts, companions, wintergreen, snow-covered, wicker, glimmering,* and *ravine* will be cast as deficient.

The interrogation of Tolstoy's story ("In which scene does the hare reach his goal for the day?") leads to another question. What kinds of literacy experiences does the CCSS want for children? Louise Rosenblatt (1991) explains that readers take a stance along a continuum between the efferent and the aesthetic. In efferent reading, the purpose is to "'carry away'" information (p. 444), like when one is reading directions to a new cell phone. Rosenblatt writes "we can, if we wish, shift gears and pay attention to what we are thinking and feeling as we read"; Rosenblatt calls this an "aesthetic stance" (p. 444). This is not an either/or; readers may have both aesthetic and efferent experiences reading the same text. It is also not genre-specific.
Some children may find aesthetic experiences in informational texts, others in poetry, novels, and drama. Rosenblatt explains:

The reader brings to the text a reservoir of past experiences with language and the world. If the signs on the page are linked to elements in that reservoir, these linkages rise into consciousness. The reader recognizes them as words in a language; the child is often slowly making such connections. All readers must draw on past experiences to make the new meanings produced in the transactions with the text (p. 445).

From a critical literacy perspective, the CCSS seems to privilege efferent experience, for example, in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies Science, and Technical Subjects, grade 1 students will "ask and answer questions about key details in a text" (p. 11). This standard, and others, lead to primarily efferent readings of text; in fact, the word aesthetic does not appear in the CCSS until grades 11-12:

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e. g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact (p. 38).

Even here, the focus is not on the student's aesthetic response. Middle and upper class parents will be able to attain aesthetic experiences for their children outside of school; working class and poor parents may be less able to provide such experiences. And, if efferent reading is the goal of all in-school reading, how likely are students to be motivated to want to read? By privileging efferent reading and marginalizing aesthetic reading, how do the CCSS construct children? Beach (2011) says the CCSS manifest a cognitive-processing model (p. 1). The authors might have chosen from any number of other models to construct children: situated cognition would be our preference for the most productive approaches to literacy (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1968; Gee, 2010; Lave & Wagner, 1991).

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is to be praised for its insistence on adding the "11th" standard before adopting the CCSS, such as in this standard in the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Arts & Literacy for grade 4 students to “recognize, interpret and make connections in narratives, poetry, and drama to other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, personal events and situations" and a "self-select text based upon personal preferences” (p. 19). This addition will make aesthetic experiences more possible in New York state, at least, and it is aesthetic experiences that make it more likely children will want to continue to read.

So will self-selection. The CCSS claims to be internationally benchmarked but does not say which nations. The city of Shenzen, China, a city of 15 million people, emphasizes free and pleasure reading and has the highest university pass rate in the country. The Chinese government is wisely encouraging the rest of China to follow Shenzen's lead. Patsy Aldana (n. d.) writes that Shenzen “incorporates free reading, real books instead of text books, no testing on reading or teaching to the tests, classroom book clubs, excellent libraries, parental involvement, and 7 percent of school budgets for reading promotion mandated for all schools" (n. p.).

If we were to follow Shenzen's lead, we would have to question the CCSS's "special emphasis on informational text" (p. 4). It may be that in the course of self-selection many
students do emphasize informational text. Others, however, may not. In his book *Evoking Genocide: Scholars and Activists Describe the Works That Shaped Their Lives*, Adam Jones (2009) asked 57 genocide scholars and human rights activists to "describe the works that shaped their lives"; for them it was 75% literary and artistic works and 25% informational texts that "evoked" them to their life's work. To write the article "Childhood Readers of the Classics: A Narrative and Biographical Account," I (Jane) read 40 biographies and autobiographies of writers to learn the texts that were most meaningful to them when they were children; for 40 writers, it was 90% literary texts that evoked them to their life's work (Gangi, 2006). Albert Einstein (as cited in M. Taylor, 2012) would say fairy tales are more likely than any other genre to make students college and career ready; Charles Darwin would recommend poetry and music. Darwin wrote:

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive…If I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature (as cited in Sloan, 1983, p. 220).

We don't have standard children; we only have children who are unique and have unique passions and interests. It is those we must nurture, which may mean varying our expectations of genre.

To their credit, Sue Pimental and David Coleman, "architects" of the English Language Arts CCSS, recently published a clarifying web log comment on the informational and literary texts. They write:

By high school, the Standards require that 70 percent of what students read be informational text, but the bulk of that percentage will be carried by non-ELA disciplines that do not study fictional texts. Said plainly, stories, drama, poetry, and other literature account for the majority of reading that students will do in the high school ELA classroom (n. p.).

What questions to that answer might there be? Nine years ago, my (Jane's) daughter allowed me to publish her experience with fiction in a social studies class:

[Her] consistent C grade in social studies throughout her elementary years zoomed to an A grade the semester her teacher used *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt to teach the Civil War. When the teacher went back to the-student-as-empty-bucket method of read-the-chapter-answer-the-questions-at-the-end-of-the-chapter, her grade went back to C. For her to care about the Civil War, she had to connect with real human beings. She had to feel the internal conflicts, which Hunt brilliantly depicts in a family nearly torn apart by the War. Two brothers choose to fight for the North; another brother, although he despises slavery, chooses to fight for the South, in part because he sees the hypocrisy of the North, who had its own brand of slavery in factories. In addition to learning factual
knowledge about the Civil War, readers of Across Five Aprils vicariously experience the heart-rending pain that surrounded the war (Gangi, 2004, p. 185).

For many children, for them to want to learn, their emotions must be engaged; only then will they care about facts. The CCSS primarily focuses on children's heads, not their hearts and minds. The word analysis appears 94 times in the CCSS; the word feelings eight times, the word emotion twice in a clinical sort of way, and the word affect not at all. We do not want to overreach here but wonder, if school-shooters had not been brought up during No Child Left Behind, which positioned children as numbers, not people, if more attention had been paid to their thoughts, feelings, emotions, voices, and unique interests and passions, would we have seen such an increase in violence? What can the leaders of the CCSS do to prevent another Newtown? Walter Mathis (2011) calls the CCSS "No Child Left Behind on steroids" (n.p.); children, and now their teachers, are increasingly seen as digits.

John Dewey, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, once said “knowledge is a small cup of water floating on a sea of emotion” (as cited in Fishman & McCarthy, 1998, p. 21). Although he was probably overstating his case to make a point, neuroscience seems to bear out his intuition: mind, body, and emotion are intimately connected (Caine & Caine, 1991; Damasio, 1994; Hardiman, 2003). On the CCSS, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2011) writes, "of particular concern was the absence of social and emotional development and approaches to learning, although the lack of attention to the whole child was generally noted" (p. 3).

Are kindergartners' little bodies and minds able to attain these standards, as demanded by the CCSS?

Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.
A. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page
B. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters
C. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print
D. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet

and

Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).
A. Recognize and produce rhyming words
B. Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words
C. Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words
D. Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words.* (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /t/, or /x/.)
E. Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words (CCSS, 2010, p. 15).

Finland, to whom we are internationally compared, thinks not; they do not begin to teach children to read until they are seven. Some children's little five-year-old eyes are not developed enough to recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet. Word study expert Kathy Ganske (2000) puts Emergent from Pre-K to 1; Letter Name from grades 1-2; Within Word Pattern from grades 2-3; Syllable Juncture from grades 3-8; and Derivational
constancy from grades 5-8+. Although there will be some kindergarteners who can meet the CCSS expectations for kindergarten, many will not. In their blog comment, "How ed policy is hurting early childhood education," Carlsson-Paige (Carlsson-Paige is Matt Damon's mother), Levin, and McLaughlin (2012) write “Children develop at individual rates, learn in unique ways, and come from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds. It is not possible to teach skills in isolation or to mandate what any young child will understand at any particular time” (n. p.). The teaching of skills in isolation cuts off children from essential processes in reading: syntax and meaning-making (Clay, 1991). Summarizing Halpern, NAEYC (2011) asserts that the CCSS "poses threats to the central ideas in early education as the K-12 system exerts a downward pressure of increased academic focus and more narrowed instructional approaches" (p. 4). What is gained by asking--and testing--children on more than they are capable of? Teaching children to read should be a joyful experience. The word joy appears once in the CCSS:

Children at the kindergarten and grade 1 levels should be expected to read texts independently that have been specifically written to correlate to their reading level and their word knowledge. Many of the titles listed above are meant to supplement carefully structured independent reading with books to read along with a teacher or that are read aloud to students to build knowledge and cultivate a joy in reading (CCSS, 2010, p. 32).

Of the 40 books recommend to cultivate joy, there are four multicultural books, and only one ethnic author, Grace Lin; her Where the Mountain Meets the Moon is recommended for grades 4-5.

To their credit, the authors of the CCSS have recognized the default to Whiteness in the CCSS text exemplars; in November 2012, Student Achievement Partners came to Newburgh, New York, to meet with members of Mount Saint Mary College's Collaborative for Equity in Literacy Learning (CELL) to develop an expanded list of multicultural text exemplars for Appendix B. On the front page of The New York Times, Sue Pimental was quoted, "we have really taken a careful look, and really think there is a problem…We are determined to make this right" (Rich, 2012, p. 1). Meanwhile, because teachers' evaluations are soon to be tied to their students' scores on CCSS tests, the currently recommended CCSS texts are flying off the shelves in bookstores and Amazon (www.amazon.com). Teachers of literacy and language arts must be mindful that the the CCSS is now shifting its emphasis to more multicultural texts. (Please see free resources for multicultural texts from the Connecticut Reading Association at www.ctreading.org/journal/resources, and search Mary Ann Reilly's blog at www.maryannreilly.blogspot.com.) Children must see themselves in books. The proficient reader research shows that, to become proficient readers, children must make text-to-self connections (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Mantione & Smead; 2003; Miller, 2002).

When we leave out children of color and the poor, in addition to reducing their ability to make the connections they need to make to become proficient readers, we are telling them they do not matter. The CCSS ELA standards’ text exemplars privilege class. Less than 7% of the exemplars represent working class people and the poor—at a time when the majority of children are working class or poor (Gangi, 2010); the Annie E. Casey foundation (2011) finds that 22% of children in America are poor. This translates to about 16.5 million children, with poverty being defined as a family of four living on less than $22,000 a year.
We might also ask about the kinds of pedagogies that would best help children of color and the poor. The CCSS answer is close reading for all children, all 12 years; this approach seems to be grounded in the New Criticism of the 1920s and 1930s (Reilly, 2010). It is one way to read text, but not the only way. There is, as already mentioned, reader response, or transactional reading, informed by Rosenblatt and the critical literacy described by Luke and Freebody. We would add to that arts-based literacy and wonder if the authors of the CCSS would expand their definition of close reading to include multiple entries to text—performing, enacting, drawing, and digitally creating. The arts enhance literacy in many ways; we argue that, by staying in the verbal-linguistic system, children learn less than when they are allowed to compose meaning across symbol-systems. In my (Mary Ann’s) work, middle-school English Language Learners used Art Conversations, in which learners conduct non-verbal conversation with paint as the medium (Reilly, 2008). These students' scores on the state tests had historically been zero; after Art Conversations and ways of deepening literacy learning, not test prep, their scores went from zero to a 50% pass rate. Perhaps Art Conversations could be tied to both close reading and the CCSS’s encouragement of illustration of text.

Music is mentioned once and song is mentioned once in the CCSS. Sanacore (2004), in an article called "Genuine Caring and Literacy Learning for African American Children," describes how chants and song enhance the literacy learning of Black children, and it is well-known among experts on phonological and phonemic awareness how powerful music can be (Cunningham & Allington, 2011). In the Common Core, acting out is recommended for vocabulary words: “Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general action (e.g., walk, march, strut, prance) by acting out the meanings" (p. 27). When do the children taking the test on Tolstoy get to act out jostled, squeaking, and wintergreen? Drama has many more potentialities; in fact, Robert Marzano (2003) says that dramatic enactment is more powerful than telling or pictures:

[S]tudents require about four exposures to content to adequately integrate it into their existing knowledge base...The types of experiences students have with content should be varied from exposure to exposure. In fact, it seems to be the case that some types of experiences produce more effective learning than others...The most striking aspect of the findings reported...is the impact of dramatic instruction. It has the effect size of 1.12 immediately after instruction and an effect size of .80 twelve months after instruction. The other two types of experiences, although effective, do not approach this level. Verbal instruction [.74 and .64] involves telling students about content or having them read about it; visual instruction [.90 and .74] involves using pictures and other forms of visual representations. Dramatic instruction involves students being engaged in or observing some dramatic representation of content (p. 113).

Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland (2000) reviewed 11,000 studies on the arts and academic achievement, and are able to make this claim:

Based on 80 reports...a causal link was found between classroom drama (enacting texts) and a variety of verbal areas. Most were of medium size (oral understanding/recall of stories, reading readiness, oral language, writing), one was large (written understanding/recall of stories), and one was small and could not be
generalized to new studies (vocabulary). In all cases, students who enacted texts were compared to students who read the same texts but did not enact them. Drama not only helped children’s verbal skills with respect to the texts enacted; it also helped children’s verbal skills when applied to new, non-enacted texts. Thus drama helps to build verbal skills that transfer to new materials. Such an effect has great value for education; verbal skill is highly valued, adding such drama techniques costs little in terms of effort or expense, and a high proportion of students are influenced by such curricular changes (n. p.).

Storytelling is not mentioned in the common core, yet has limitless potential to develop the oral language required to be able to read (Brand, 2006; Cowen, 2003; Loban, 1963; Morrow & O’Connor, 1995; Trostle & Hicks, 1998). Educators of color have also recommended storytelling as an engaging literacy practice for Latino/Latina students (Barrera, Liguori, & Sales, 1993; Castellano, 2004), African American students (Ford, 2002; Flowers & Flowers, 2008), and American Indian students (Hoffman, 1992; Klug & Whitfield, 2003).

The CCSS asks us to rethink what constitutes important content in American public schools. What question might be asked about this answer? When American students in low-poverty school districts are compared internationally, the United States has the highest rate on the Programme for International Student Assessment, higher than Finland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and Canada (Riddle, 2010). How is it that practice at these schools and quality living conditions that typify these children's lives are not our national priorities? Rather we seek to circumvent the issues of equity through standardization. Baldwin understood that engagements with the arts help us to lay bare questions to answers that the CCSS cannot suitably address.
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Integrating the Digital Literacies Into an After-School Program: 
A Structural Analysis of Teachers’ Lessons

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ABSTRACT

The structure of lessons where teachers integrated the digital literacies is examined here. Twelve graduate teachers participating in an after-school practica were observed over a six-week period. This manuscript identifies the structure of their lessons and describes the kinds of digital literacies children learned when completing them. Teachers used the digital literacies to develop children’s oral reading fluency, help them compose multimedia texts, and provide them extended time to read and write on the web. Our observations suggest that children, even those with difficulties learning to read and write, became engaged in learning when they have opportunities to read and write with the digital literacies. We explain that the digital literacies can be successfully integrated into lessons designed to help struggling learners in after-school programs, and the lessons examined here offer examples of how this can be accomplished.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kathleen Gormley is an Association Professor of Education at The Sage Colleges in Troy, New York, where she teaches graduate courses in literacy education. She has long-standing interest in the digital literacies: she has presented widely at national and regional conferences on the topic and is chairperson of New York State’s Reading Association’s Digital Literacy Committee. In addition, she has special interest in urban education and intervention services for children who find learning to read and write difficult. She is a long-time member of the International Reading Association and is the current secretary of the New York State Reading Association. Kay can be reached at gormlk@sage.edu.

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In the manuscript we examine the structure of teachers’ after-school literacy lessons in which the digital literacies are integrated. Structure plays an important role in everyday life, and research has shown that schools have structural features that are widely associated with students’ learning. For example, school and class sizes (Graue, Hatch, Rao, & Oen, 2007; Jacob & Rockoff, 2012), integrated or discrete curricula (Applebee, Adler, & Flihan, 2007), scheduling of
subject areas and time spent in school (Bloom, 1974; Carroll, 1963; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Walberg, 1988), and single sex or coeducational buildings (Younger & Warrington, 2006) represent some structural features long associated with children’s academic achievement.

Reading lessons have particular structures, too. The Directed Reading Activity (Betts, 1946) is one of the oldest and best-known lesson structures. Directed reading lessons begin with pre-teaching of vocabulary, then eliciting students’ prior knowledge about topics to be read, teaching of a skill, setting purposes for reading, having students read silently, discussing and checking children’s comprehension, and closing with follow-up or extension activities.

Reading Recovery has another well-known lesson structure (Clay, 1985), which is widely used in early intervention programs in the primary grades. Its structure consists of a variety of instructional activities including rereading an old favorite, reading of yesterday’s new book and taking a running record, working with letters, writing a story, reassembling a cut-up story, and reading a new book.

Readers’ and writers’ workshops have their distinct lesson structures, too (Atwell, 1987). The structure of a workshop traditionally begins with “status of the class,” a daily mini-lesson followed by sustained time for reading and writing, as well as teacher-student conferences. Workshops close with students sharing their responses to literature or written drafts with one another. Larson (2007) identifies the structure of a digital workshop for teacher candidates that is patterned on Atwell’s workshop model of teaching and learning: Students (1) read online text; (2) compose in digital journals, (3) participate in online discussions, and (4) produce technology-based multimedia projects.

Structure is also associated with teachers’ lesson planning. Smith and Wilhelm (2002), for example, discuss the importance of using a three-part structure to present literacy lessons to students: frontloading activities include the teaching strategies teachers use to activate students’ prior knowledge and engage them in the literacy topic; guiding activities pertain to those strategies that teachers use to help students comprehend and compose. Finally, unpacking activities are those strategies teachers use to help students analyze ideas and reflect on what they learned during their reading and/or writing.

The Digital Literacies

Ways of reading and writing are changing at a rate not seen since Gutenberg invented the printing press. In fact, use of the new digital technologies might even be considered this generation’s defining moment (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). Prensky (2001) describes today’s students as digital natives who are as comfortable using the new literacies as they are using conventional print and traditional forms of communication (e.g., newspapers, television, and radio). Certainly Prensky’s categorization of the school-age population is not inclusive of all students, but we still find it interesting because many of today’s children effortlessly switch back and forth from digital to conventional reading and writing.

Students having grown up in the digital revolution are likely not to have ever seen library card catalogs, hardcopy indexes of Books in Print, or microfiche readers. In many cases they are more comfortable using tablet readers and other e-readers than reading hardcopy editions of newspapers and books. Today’s students are even leaving conventional television and radio broadcasting networks and viewing their favorite programs on digital devices such as iPhones and tablet computers (Stelter, 2012).
The digital literacies require reading strategies that differ from conventional reading and writing (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Leu, 2011). The digital literacies are multimodal (New London Group, 2000) with users easily switching from one mode of communication to another. For example, readers might change from text-based reading, to listening to a podcast (e.g., mp3), to viewing online graphics and video (e.g., Quicktime) all within a few minutes of time.

The new literacies are fundamentally social (Leu et al., 2011) as users text, instant message, share photos and videos, post responses and ideas to websites and blogs, and coauthor documents on Google Docs or wikis. The multimodal and social elements of the digital literacies are transforming students’ ways of reading and writing when they are out of school. It is inevitable that these same literacies will eventually become a regular part of classroom learning activities.

The new digital literacies are integrated throughout the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010) and as adopted by New York State. Specifically, the digital literacies appear in the New York’s Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) (New York State Education Department, 2011). College and Career Anchor Standard 6 in Writing states that students “use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and interact and collaborate with others” (CCLS, 2011, p. 27), and Anchor Standard 8 asks that students “gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism” (CCLS, 2011, p. 27). Anchor Standard 7 in Reading requires students to “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (CCLS, 2011, p. 18). Today’s students must learn to effectively use the digital literacies effectively if they are to become “career ready” for the twenty-first century. Although we would like to have seen digital literacies appear even more strongly in the CCSS, especially in reading, they are there. Efforts to have students read and write with the digital literacies should not be viewed as supplements to conventional literacy curricula. Instead, the digital literacies are essential to what it means to be a reader and writer in today’s world.

The digital literacies offer potential for improving students’ school performance, and there is accumulating evidence that they might be more engaging for some learners, particularly those who are struggling to read and write with conventional forms of print (Bennett, Pearson, Zimmerman, & Keane, 2011; Leu et al., 2007; O'Brien, Beach, & Scharber, 2007). In this manuscript we describe and explain the lesson structures of an after-school program where the digital literacies were integrated into children’s lessons. Lesson structures have the potential of maximizing students’ attention to specific aspects of literacy (e.g., letter to sound correspondences, comprehension and composing), and for this reason we were interested the structural elements of an after-school digital literacy program serving struggling readers and writers. We were particularly interested in examining answers to the following questions:

- What are the structural elements of an after-school literacy program where the digital literacies are integrated?
- What kinds of digital literacies do children learn in the program?
- What do teachers say about teaching struggling readers and writers to use the digital literacies?
The After-School Literacy Program

The observations presented here are based on an after-school literacy practicum that Kay taught for graduate students. Pete served as an outsider observer of these lessons by describing and explaining their structures and patterns. Afterwards he shared his analyses with Kay, and as such she functioned as a member-check (Mirriam, 1998) of the identified patterns and structures. Such a method is consistent with those of others who work to integrate both “emic” and “etic” perspectives in the study of teaching and learning (Godina & McCoy, 2000). We believe the analyses presented here are sufficiently trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) so that other teachers and teacher educators can make informed decisions about them. Moreover, we hope our analyses will contribute to others’ thoughts and practices about integrating the digital literacies into intervention programs for children with difficulties learning to read and write and preparing new literacy specialists and coaches.

This after-school literacy practicum was part of a required program for teachers completing their master’s degree in literacy education or literacy and special education. Twelve teachers who were previously certified in childhood education and three who were also certified in special education participated in the semester described here. Successful completion of the literacy practica made them eligible to be certified as literacy coaches and specialists in New York State. The State requires teachers to obtain 50 hours of supervised practica experience, and this particular course was the final practicum in the college’s three-part sequence. The first two practica were more conventional in their use of reading and writing, but as the academic year progressed Kay required greater integration of the digital literacies. For the fall and spring semesters the children met after school once a week for 90-minute sessions with twelve teachers. The final semester took place during May and June. During it the same children (N=33) who had participated throughout the year met for two 120-minute weekly sessions. Kay paired the teachers so that they acquired collaborative skills that they might later need as literacy specialists and coaches in schools. The children were similarly placed in pairs, with older and younger children working together. This partnering of children offered an opportunity for the older ones to model and mentor the younger ones in using various strategies for reading and writing.

Many of these teachers taught during the day in surrounding school districts and were experienced in working with children. Several of the teachers said they were skilled with digital whiteboards because they used them in their classrooms during the day. Yet few of the teachers had used digital literacies in their reading and language arts lessons before this practicum.

The after-school program took place at Eisenhower Elementary (pseudonym), which is located in a small northeastern city with 400 children attending it during the day. About 42% of the school population was eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of its children were identified as white, 6% as African American and 4% as Latino. Fifty-four percent (54%) and 67% of the fourth and fifth graders respectively passed the statewide exam in reading and the language arts. First and second-floor classrooms as well as the school library served as the tutoring spaces. Each of classrooms and the library contained four desktop computers (PCs) that were connected to the Internet and used in the after-school program.

Pete observed and collected data twice a week for six weeks, representing nearly 20 hours of lesson observations. The data collection included descriptions of the lessons and notes taken from informal and unplanned discussions with the teachers and children. All of Pete’s field notes were placed into Dropbox (www.dropbox.com) so that they were accessible for Kay to
view them. Kay made additional lesson artifacts from the lessons available for him (e.g., teachers submitted their lessons into the course’s management system [Moodle] and Kay shared them with her students’ permission). These written plans included the teachers’ objectives, their rationales (which included evidence from children’s previous lesson performances and connections to the research literature), standards addressed (including the NET*S technology standards [ISTE, 2007]), procedures for implementing their lessons, ties to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and their personal reflections about the lesson outcomes. The lesson plan structure was influenced by Kay’s expectations that students write objectives that were evaluated to inform instructional choices. Similarly, her requirement for evidenced based practice (Saville, 2009) and concomitant professional peer-reviewed citations required that tutors examine student needs as they consulted the professional literature. She required that students demonstrate their understanding of access based on learners’ needs in a variety of ways through their consideration of UDL (www.cast.org); this consideration might be expressed in a listing of multiple means of expression, representation and engagement or in paragraph form tied to each tutee.

All of the participating children received teacher and parent support for attending the after-school program. The children’s classroom or specialist teachers recommended them to the program. The teachers viewed the after-school program as an opportunity for the children to accelerate their literacy learning. Some of the children lacked Internet access at home and attending the after-school program motivated them to come. Even on the nicest of spring days many of the children eagerly attended the clinic while wearing their baseball or soccer uniforms for games they would play that evening.

Children said they rarely used technology during the regular school day. We learned that Eisenhower Elementary did not have classroom SmartBoards, and the children said they only used the computer lab once each week for practicing test-taking skills for their ELA and math exams.

What is the Typical Structure of a Digital Literacy Lesson?

Although the teachers exhibited variability in how they planned their 120-minute lessons with the children, one lesson structure constituted a consistent pattern identified in Figure 1.

Lesson Openings

When children entered the after-school program they often went to a desktop computer where they worked on the previous session’s webquest (Dodge, 2001). They often answered Kay’s “challenge questions.” Her challenge tasks pertained to a thematic unit about Alaska that all of the children were studying. On the first session of each week the teachers emailed their children to share the “challenge questions” that Kay prepared for them. An example of one of Kay’s challenge questions was one in which children were to search for information about Alaska. It read as follows:

Hello students, I am very proud of your work last week. What is the capitol Alaska? Send me the answer. Then make an Animoto video containing at least four images with title, names, music, and at least four images. These are worth two coupons.
Children worked in small groups to complete their challenge tasks. In this example requiring the children to make Animoto videos (www.animoto.com), two boys watched as their third group member, Jewel (all learner names are pseudonyms), sat at the desktop computer and Googled for the name of Alaska’s capital. Jewel copied and pasted the URL where the answer he was searching for was found into their Word document. Next the children went to the Animoto site. Their teachers sat down at the computer with them, and they created an account in Animoto. Teachers guided the children through the steps of composing an Animoto multimedia video. For instance, one of the teachers asked the children which of the background screens they would like to select for their video. She exchanged seats with Philip who searched for a photo to upload to their slideshow. The children realized, with the tutor’s prompting, that they needed to insert four photos into their Animoto, not just one. So Philip went back to Google images and downloaded three more photos about Alaska. Then he successfully added the four photos to video while the other children watched and guided him in task completion. While Philip sat at the keyboard the other children excitedly pointed to a music file to upload. “Please don’t touch it,” the teacher explained as the video “rendered” on the Animoto site. “Can we see it in full mode?” one of boys asked. “No, let’s send the URL to Dr. Kay first,” the teacher explained. “Can we make a longer one?” one of the boys asked. “Later,” the teacher explained.

After completing challenge tasks such as these, one of the teachers emailed the children’s answers to Kay who awarded coupon points to them on the basis of the number of questions they answered correctly. These points would later be redeemed for prizes during the clinic’s final literacy celebration that was to be held for their families in June.

**Fluency Practice**

The second structural element of teachers’ lessons pertained to fluency practice. Fluency is widely established in research as an essential element of proficient reading (Allington, 1983; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski et al., 2005). Nearly all
of the teachers used technology for assessing children’s fluency and giving them opportunities to practice it. Erika, for instance, brought her personal laptop to school because she had previously downloaded Audacity (www.audacity.com) to it. She used Audacity to record children’s oral reading while other children worked on other clinic activities, such as webquests or silent reading. Children particularly enjoyed Audacity because it provided a visual profile of their voices as they read out-loud.

**Graphica**

The third structural element of their lessons pertained to the children’s composing graphic panels. Kay shared her own interest in graphic novels with the teachers. She discussed recent research of Thompson (2008) as well as articles appearing in *The Reading Teacher* (e.g., Calo, 2011; McVicker, 2007; Ranker, 2007) and *Language Arts* (e.g., Yang, 2008) showing the effectiveness of graphica with struggling readers. Kay received a modest grant from her college to purchase graphic novels, and she made them available to the teachers and children for their literacy lessons. Subsequently, she donated the books to the school library.

An example of a lesson with graphica is as follows: One day two teachers, Beth and Laurie, gathered their four children at a circular table. Beth placed large paper onto it with “KWL” written on the top asked the children what they knew about graphic novels. One of the children replied that he just read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. They were then asked what do graphic novels have above the characters when they were speaking, and one of the boys shyly asked, “Thought bubbles?” “That’s right,” Beth replied, “Is there anything we want to learn about graphic novels?” Jason wondered, “Do they [graphic novels] have to be true?” Laurie then showed some examples of graphic novels and explained that, “They are longer than regular books, and there are thought bubbles in them…certain bubbles mean different things…if the bubbles are jagged, it means there is action. If there is a cloud, it means what they’re thinking.” “Is there one place you see comics every day?” she asked. “Do graphic novels have to have a storyline?” “No, each page can be different,” replied Jason. After they discussed these and other questions Laurie displayed a variety of graphic novels, and she asked the children to select one for silent reading.

After about 10 minutes of silent reading Beth directed the children back to the computer table. Make Belief Comix (www.makebeliefcomix.com) was bookmarked on one of the laptop computers, and the tutor displayed it to the children for them to use. She explained that the children would learn this site to compose their own comic pages; later she explained that she thought this was the most workable of the comic sites for children to learn. The teachers found that the children loved comics and for this reason they taught them how to compose their own graphica. Teachers used the website Kerpoof (www.kerpoof.com) for children’s graphica as well.

**Comprehending and Composing**

During each session students read and composed online while completing webquests about the theme of Alaska. Teachers previously prepared the webquests using Dodge’s (2001) format as their model. At the beginning of the semester the teachers decided on the Alaskan theme because they felt it would interest all the children, who were in second through fifth grade.
Their webquests included a variety of developmentally appropriate reading, writing, and language arts activities designed to meet their students reading levels and writing performance. The webquest activities required students to prepare maps of the Iditarod, read selected websites about Alaska, write answers to teacher questions about Alaskan elementary schools, describe life in an Inuit village, and create an Inuit mask. In one of these sessions the teachers opened-up their webquest and explained to the children that they needed to prepare a PowerPoint slideshow about Alaska’s Denali National Park. Each child was required to prepare a four-slide PowerPoint presentation corresponding to the pages of an alphabet book they were making. The children’s slides needed to contain annotated photos about the park.

In another lesson children took notes from webpages they were reading about Alaska. Each day they needed to write notes pertaining to different aspects of Alaskan culture (e.g. food, houses, clothes, school, etc.). These websites came from the teachers’ webquests. The notes the children composed were often long, sometimes about a half a page in length about each of these topics. The teachers said the children would take the information from their notes and convert it into PowerPoint or Prezi (www.prezi.com) presentations for sharing time and in the Literacy Celebration they planned to hold in June.

Additional Features of the Digital Literacy Program

All of the teachers prepared lessons to fit the perceived needs of the children they tutored. Sometimes they preferred using conventional literacies for this reason. One pair of teachers, for instance, began their biweekly lessons with silent reading of printed books. As their children entered the after school program, they were directed to select yesterday’s novel from their lesson basket and begin silent reading. These teachers placed an “Agenda” sheet on each of the children’s desks to read when they entered their room. For example, one day the “Agenda” revealed the following structural elements:

1) Independent reading of conventional books
2) Acrostic poem about Alaska
3) Challenge question
4) Mini-lesson on graphic novels
5) Reading and writing with the Webquest about Alaska

After silent reading time the boys completed “role” sheets (summarizer, questioner, vocabulary master, illustrator) that organized their literature discussions of Stone Fox (Gardiner, 1980), which would occur another day. One of the teachers displayed her own acrostic poem about Alaska and explained how she composed it with the boys. She explained that they were to make their own acrostics about Alaska and then they would “type them up” on the computers. The teachers then taught a mini-lesson to the boys about inserting “speech bubbles” into their Word documents.

“Are there any more questions you have that we didn’t answer yet?” “Look at your KWL and see if there is anything that you wanted to know and didn’t answer.” After several minutes, Amy asked, “So do you think you are good? You have enough information?” The two girls said, “Yes.” So, Amy said, “Let’s start reading our books.” The moved to the other side of the room and began reading graphic novels.
Which Digital Technologies did the Children Learn to Use?

The teachers required all of the children to use many websites for using the new digital literacies. Several times children were required to produce a digital product with multimedia websites such as Animoto and Glogster (www.glogsteredu.com). Sometimes children edited photos about Alaska through websites such as PiZap (www.pizap.com). Teachers required the children to produce oral reading samples in Audacity, Audioboo (www.audioboo.fm), or GarageBand (www.apple.com/life/garageband), and all of the children participated in the creation of webpages, which displayed their work for other children and their families to view (www.freewebs.com). Additional digital technologies that children used included word processing, PowerPoint, email, blogging, word clouds (www.wordle.net), and other photo editing sites. Figure 2 contains a listing of the digital literacies the children used in the after-school program.

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What the Teachers Said About the Digital Literacies

All of the teachers said that the children were more engaged with the digital literacies than when reading conventional books and writing on paper. Even on the warmest and sunniest spring days children’s attendance remained good. They eagerly participated in the digital lessons presented to them. Teachers said that technology offered the children more choice in how they completed various assignments. Children used Audacity, Wordle, Picnik, PiZap, and Paint. Because everything they do has a lot of choice (e.g., they could select their own images) and with Audacity they practiced their speaking and fluency at the same time. One of the teachers, Jessica, explained that the children were “more attentive and engaged” when using technology instead of conventional reading and writing. “Technology is more interactive… it tests their skills but it is still reading and writing,” she explained.

Teachers capitalized on the social nature of the digital literacies. That is, it was rare to see children working individually. Instead they often collaborated with others as they read, composed, and searched for information on the Internet. The children frequently worked together on PowerPoint slideshows and graphic panels. The children, many of whom would later become comfortable with these digital literacies, would send their compositions off for other children to see. Sometimes the children would email children in the other groups about the literacy projects they were completing.
In June the after-school program closed with a “Literacy Celebration.” About 75 children, teachers, and family members had gathered in the school cafeteria for the event. A large screen connected to a laptop computer was at the front of the room as teacher teams and their children alternated turns presenting their work. The first pair of teachers and their four children presented multimedia compositions about Alaska; the teachers first explained that children composed Animoto videos about well-known Alaskan mushers, and then each of the children’s videos were shown to the audience. These video presentations integrated photos of the Iditarod with text and music. The teachers also said that the children also worked with PowerPoint, Wordle, and Make Believe Comix during the after-school program. The audience clapped as the children proudly stood alongside of the screen. The next group of teachers and children shared their work; this group shared research slides (PowerPoint) about Alaskan animals; the first child presented her slide about Alaskan wolves, the next about polar bears, another about the arctic fox, and the fourth about the Alaskan moose. Each of the slides contained audio narrations that the children had previously recorded. Again the audience applauded with many of the adults in the room taking photos and videos with cameras they had brought to the event. After all the children had presented, the children, their teachers, and family members enjoyed pizza and other refreshments.

**Conclusion**

Teachers in this after-school program integrated the digital literacies throughout their lessons. They used the digital literacies to develop children’s oral reading fluency, to help them compose multimedia presentations and graphica, and to read and compose on the Internet. The after-school program helped children because more skilled with the digital literacies, and it provided the teachers the opportunity to learn to integrate these literacies into their own teaching.

The lessons and structures described here offer one example of how the digital literacies can be used in after-school programs with struggling readers and writers. Furthermore, our analyses illustrate how teachers can replace conventional forms of reading and writing with the digital literacies. Classroom and specialist teachers need to connect literacy activities used outside-of-school with those taught in their classrooms. Our experience with this after-school
program suggests that the digital skills that these teachers acquired will add to their understanding of the processes needed for teaching in today’s schools. Knowledge of these literacies will be helpful in both regular classroom settings and when teaching children with difficulties learning to read and write well.

**Figure 5:**

**Girl’s Personal Invitation to the Literacy Celebration**

Classroom teachers, even those with large class sizes, might integrate the new literacies into their teaching in a variety of ways. Most classrooms offer several operating computers for children. In such cases, children can use the computers as independent learning activities after their regular classroom work is complete. Children can complete webquests and other activities involving Internet research and problem-solving activities. Many children, even those in high poverty neighborhoods, have access to after-school programs similar to the one described here or libraries with Internet access; in such cases children might be given choice in their homework assignments, with at least one of the choices being use of the new literacies. Classroom teachers might find a building colleague with whom they can collaborate in developing strategies for technology integration; collaboration of this kind can be very beneficial in sharing ideas and overcoming challenges with the new literacies. Although we know that these are difficult times for classroom teachers, especially in terms of restricted budgets and pressures of statewide testing, teachers should consider attending conferences where they can learn ideas for technology integration. Ongoing professional development, even of experienced teachers, is long associated with increased effectiveness, enthusiasm for teaching, and improved student learning (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Borko, 2004).

The digital literacies are evolving and changing in form, cost, and ease of use. We anticipate that they will become even more ubiquitous in everyday life both in and out of school (NCM Horizon Report K-12, 2012). Our analyses suggest the digital literacies can successfully be used to engage children in fluency practice, reading comprehension, composing, and multimedia learning activities. In the future we plan to collect empirical data of children’s performance with the digital literacies in after school programs such as the one examined here.
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Reader Identity and the Common Core: Agency and Identity in Leveled Reading

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ABSTRACT

This article moves beyond the common core and leveled literacy instruction to demonstrate how diverse learners in one fourth grade classroom, challenged teacher authority in an effort to position themselves as capable readers. In doing so, they implored the teachers to consider the social context of reading as an essential component to the ways in which we offer readers opportunities to grow. Readers’ identities, were both limited by and grew out of the opportunities pertaining to leveled reading that were made available within the classroom. The vignettes examined contain implications for how a student’s sense of agency and reader identity impacts who they are as readers and how they are viewed within the culture of the classroom.

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have become one of the most hotly discussed topics in education as of late. These standards are being implemented, it would seem, to provide a high quality of education for all students and to address the rigor of what our students read and how they acquire the skills necessary to move into twenty-first century careers. A major focus of this work has been on college and career readiness and in an effort to prepare all students, a great deal of attention to text complexity has become a central consideration in the teaching of the core. Page 2 of Appendix A of the Common Core (201) states:
One of the key requirements of the Common Core State Standards for Reading is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school. By the time they complete the core, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers (n.p.).

The premise that students must read texts of increasing complexity is what many teachers rely on for designing reading instruction that seeks to meet student needs, take them from where they are and support them into grade level proficiency. This refutes the notion that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction. In fact, the idea that a one-size-fits-all curriculum does not work has been widely shared in critiques of the No Child Left behind legislation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004; Ravitch, 2011).

Also refuting a one-size-fits-all approach is the idea of differentiated instruction to meet student needs (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Many well-documented instructional techniques and assessments have been developed to guide teachers to differentiate reading instruction for their students. These instructional techniques and assessments, such as guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), interventions such as Soar to Success (Houghton Mifflin, 1999, 2006), Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, 2012) and performance assessments like the DRA2 (Beaver, 2005) and the Benchmark Reading Assessment (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008, 2011) are widely used in schools and support a leveled reading approach. A leveled approach to reading instruction aligns with the current charge found in Appendix A of the Common Core to ensure students are reading texts with increasing text complexity which are correlated to lexile levels, currently the benchmark cited for measuring text complexity. These reading instructional approaches and materials drive current practice in classrooms with the goal set forth by No Child Left Behind and education reform that all students will read at grade level by third grade (NCLB, 2002).

Another perspective on the idea of leveling, according to Glasswell and Ford (2011), is that reading levels are different than reading needs. For example, students need to be engaged and thoughtful about their reading. Without strong interest and engagement, instruction may be designed to move readers through levels but in the end can result in readers who are disinterested and lack thoughtful sharing of ideas about their reading. Texts that are appropriately leveled but are not of interest to students may actually limit engagement and overall desire to go beyond thinking about more than the surface level of texts. However, best practices in literacy instruction, such as those previously mentioned, promote small groups and leveled reading as a hallmark of meeting students’ reading needs. While helpful on the one hand, these literacy practices present a dichotomy between moving every student toward grade level proficiency and differentiating instruction and also producing thoughtful and engaged readers. In addition, leveled reading may be problematic when it comes to students’ identities as readers since students construct reader identities based on what is valued and recognized in classrooms (Davies, 1993, 1994; Gee, 2000, 2004; Street, 1994).

In this article, I move beyond the Common Core and leveled literacy instruction to document how students in one fourth grade classroom, who read below grade level, challenged teacher authority in an effort to position themselves as capable readers. These students, who participated in leveled reading groups, urged the teachers in this classroom to see them as readers beyond the levels that were assigned. In doing so, they implored the teachers to consider the social context of reading as an essential component to the ways in which we offer readers
opportunities to grow. Readers’ identities, in fact, grew out of the opportunities that were made available within the culture. Though these opportunities initially limited students’ abilities to be seen as capable readers, in the end, students’ sense of self seemed to have a significant impact on who they were as readers and how they were viewed within the culture of the classroom.

What is Reader Identity?

The pairing of literacy and identity is grounded in the notion that literacy is not a set of prescribed skills and promotes the idea that literacy is social and cultural and linked to the values, practices, and beliefs of the larger culture (Barton, 1994; Bloome, 1989; Davies, 1994; Gee, 2000, 2004; Street, 1984, 1995; Weedon, 1997). Literacy identity, from which reader identity is derived, can have multiple meanings (Moje & Luke, 2009). For the purposes of this study, reader identity pertains to a sense of self that is ever changing according to positions that are taken up or resisted (Davies, 1993, 1994; Weedon, 1997), which are linked to membership in a group (Gee, 2000, 2004), and are related to literacy practices, specifically reading. Inherent in this view of reader identity is the idea that social contexts and interactions shape identities, which is important since how we read and write may have social implications for how we are viewed and also view ourselves within a particular group (Davies, 1993, 1994; Gee, 2000, 2004; Street, 1994). In addition, identity is also inherently linked to agency since readers demonstrate a sense of agency when they take up and resist positions or opportunities that are made available within particular social contexts (Davies, 1993). Individuals who resist being positioned in certain ways can be viewed as acting with agency. This is significant when considering that identities can also be viewed as labels (Moje & Luke, 2009); for example, the labels of good reader, poor reader, or leveled reader, have social and learning implications in a classroom and at least, in part, contribute to the shaping of a reader’s identity (Davies, 1994). When a reader acts with agency, he or she is essentially resisting an assigned label such as good reader, poor reader, or leveled reader.

Labels may also be considered positions or opportunities that students have access to. Wortham (2004) points out that students who are consistently positioned in particular ways, i.e. as levels, take up identities that suggest they are a particular kind of student. The construction of identities from this perspective has strong implications for classroom literacy practices and what is valued in the classroom. So while readers are not levels and levels are different than needs, how then do students construct successful literacy identities while also being positioned in the context of everyday leveled literacy practices, and what might teachers need to consider in an effort to meet all of their reading needs?

Reader Identity and the Common Core

The Common Core standards call for students to read texts with increasingly more challenging text complexity. For students who struggle with text, this charge presents additional challenges. One way that schools compensate for students who may struggle with reading texts that are too difficult is to place them in groups where students are reading at what is identified as their need, also indicating their instructional level (Ankrum & Bean, 2007). This level determines what texts students have access to and what they are allowed to read in classrooms. These practices shape individual reader identities in particular ways. Hull and Moje (2012) point out that while the Common Core represents the best efforts from the field to engage students in
literacy practices that represent the practices of the wider society, there is still a particular vision of literacy that is privileged by these standards. This vision of literacy privileges print-based skills and successful participation in a variety of school-based activities. These practices and activities directly impact the construction of reader identities (Moje & Luke, 2009) and successful participation is often used as capital by students, giving those that acquire success advantage over others (Bourdieu, 1982).

**Context of the Study**

The vignettes in this article come from a year-long qualitative study that took place in a fourth-grade classroom at Elk Street School in the Northeast United States. During the study, I was a school reading specialist and was a participant observer two or more days a week during the literacy block. While in the classroom, I worked alongside the teacher, Kate, who had been a fourth-grade teacher for 10 years. As a participant in the classroom, I taught both whole class and small group reading lessons, took field notes, and audio and video-taped classroom literacy events. After several weeks, focal students were identified. These four students, Beth, Alice, Charlie, and Marty, participated in the reading group I routinely worked with and provided extremely rich data since I had frequent and regular interactions with them as I participated in their group.

In this study, I used a combination of ethnographic interpretation through thematic analysis (Ely, Anzul, Freidman, & Garner, 1991) and the methods of discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 1995) to provide a solid framework for the description, analysis, and implications of the study. I coded and categorized several literacy events that took place with the four focal students. These events revealed a pattern of students’ resistance to the routine literacy practices of the classroom and these instances of resistance became the “critical moments” (Fairclough, 1992) that made visible how identities were constructed within the context of the study. The following vignettes detail “critical moments” from the study, in which two focal students, Beth and Alice, resist the identities that have been assigned by their reading group.

“Are We Going to Read that Book?”: A Clash of Identities

This literacy event took place in the context of teacher-led small group reading. The interaction was initiated by Beth who was placed in my reading group based on her DRA scores, which placed her below the expected fourth-grade level. In addition, her records from a previous school indicated that she had received extra help with reading, and the focus of the reading group was to improve comprehension and fluency with the goal of reaching grade level reading by the end of the school year. This goal was determined by our charge under education reform to have all students reading at grade level by the end of third grade and prepared to take the statewide fourth-grade language arts test in May. The following scene illustrates the clash of identities that occurred in the reading group.

My group joined me at the back table where I had the new book we would be starting on the table. Since the practice of “guided reading” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and leveling texts was new to our school, multiple copies of leveled books were not always readily available, and we used the materials we had prior to the start of this school year. While Kate and I used some specifically leveled books (according to DRA level) and others that were not, there were points of trial and error as Kate and I selected books for each group. I often used intervention texts from
the *Soar to Success* program (Cooper, Boschken, McWilliams, & Pistochni, 1999), which did not level texts in accordance with particular assessments but did level texts based on a text gradient from more simple to more complex text structure. This program consisted of several titles that were ordered by difficulty leading up to what was considered a grade level text at the end of 20 weeks in the program. The primary model proposed for use with these materials was a reciprocal teaching model (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Though I did not use the texts as explicitly as it was suggested in the teacher’s manual, I did select the texts for the group in the order of difficulty that they were organized. Many of the first several books in the program were picture books that did not contain a great deal of text, which appealed to me because they were supportive texts that could also be read fairly quickly (in one or two reading group sessions) since I was not meeting with the group every day. While this practice did support many of the instructional needs of the group, and the model of reading instruction that was being implemented in the classroom, it did not take into consideration students’ engagement as readers and did not offer students an opportunity to have any input into what we read.

As an intervention teacher, I was most focused on identifying student needs based on their reading levels and moving students through the levels until they reached grade level proficiency. Both Kate’s group and the independent reading group were reading more difficult texts in the form of chapter books. Kate also selected these texts based on instructional level but had more of a focus on instructing students to think about the deeper meaning of texts and so also selected books that had more sophisticated plots and themes. Beth and the others in our group often paid close attention to what others were reading and as the year progressed, this prompted many questions and concerns from members of our group.

The impetus for the critical moment I describe here was Beth’s inquiry about what book we would be reading next and her further resistance to reading the book that I had selected for the group, which was a routine practice during reading groups. This practice of teacher selection was implemented based on the belief that the teachers chose the books that all groups read in an effort to match both their reading level and instructional needs with an appropriate text. Beth’s resistance to the book that I chose for them seemed to revolve around the fact that it was a picture book and she wanted to read a chapter book which was aligned with what the other two reading groups were reading. The interaction resulted in a conflict between the identity Beth perceived the book signaled and the identity she wanted to construct for herself as a reader. In the following transcript, the conflict is highlighted through questioning, tone of voice, and body language as Beth resisted her assigned identity:

Beth:  *(Speaking to me)* What are we reading today?
Me:  This. *(Points to the picture book on the table.)*
Beth:  Why are we reading this? *(Points to the book and sounds annoyed, disappointed, angry.)*
Beth:  Are we going to read that book? *(Spoken strongly as she points to another group [middle group] who is reading a chapter book.)*
Me:  I don’t know, we’ll see.
Me:  This is the next thing that I chose for us to read. *(There is an emphasis on I and comes across as a little exasperated at Beth and having to justify myself.)*

This interaction demonstrates that Beth and I had competing agendas. My agenda was to select an instructional text that would support the group’s learning needs, and Beth’s agenda was to
portray an identity as a reader that gave her equal status with her peers. This resulted in a clash of identities since Beth was resisting the idea that she needed to read what I had selected and also the identity she perceived I was constructing for her. In addition, this event exemplifies a routine conflict that became a major source of tension within the group. Students, especially Alice and Beth, regularly expressed dislike and disinterest for the books I selected for the group. While they usually went on interacting with the text during group time, they were often only marginally engaged, though they were technically successful during the instruction.

In this classroom, cultural norms were established in the form of the leveled reading groups. Beth and I both seemed to be drawing on the belief that membership in a reading group implied certain criteria for instruction, specifically, who got to read what based on a level. This idea had implications for what counted as literacy and that the book choice had significance for how literacy identities were being constructed both by the teachers and the students. The idea that students were grouped for reading was in place to help support students’ instructional needs, and the decisions about what books we read were also intended to support students’ instructional needs (field notes, October 2). However, it was through these interactions that students came to understand what was valued and expected within the classroom and they did not always signal successful literacy identities.

Beth was keenly aware of the differences between the books that our group was reading and the books that she observed other groups reading. In addition, membership within the reading group itself signified that success was based on the idea that students were able to read at, above, or below grade level with a certain amount of proficiency. This was done according to a predetermined set of criteria that was derived from assessment data (field notes, November 4). The DRA leveling data for the class became the criteria for reading groups, and this data also supported my decision to select a book that was below a fourth grade level. What I had not considered, however, was that also contained in this decision were implications for students’ reader identities.

My interpretation of the group’s capabilities directly impacted the choices that I made about the books we selected (readiness to assimilate skills). Routine positioning of students in this way signaled to Beth that she was a particular kind of student (Wortham, 2004). In essence, she understood that I believed she was not as capable as other readers, which was an identity that she resisted by questioning what I chose for her to read. Though we did not discuss “leveling” with students, they were aware that each group read different texts (field notes, October 5). This awareness and interpretation of what it meant to read a particular text, at least to some degree, influenced Beth’s interactions and her agenda for determining what counted as successful literacy in this culture. Gee (1996) states that literacy can be equated with acquisition and members of a group are apprenticed into particular ways of thinking and acting. Acquisition of what it means to be literate through exposure to cultural models, Gee argued, is what good teachers do alongside of teaching specific ideas about literacy. Members come to acquire literacy and maintain membership in “the literacy club” (Smith, 1998) based on how they view themselves or how others view them. In this case, literacy was acquired by reading texts at a particular level which had strong implications for what counted as literacy in the classroom and for students’ literacy identities.

From the perspective of literacy as acquisition, the fact that the teachers controlled the text selections based on students’ instructional levels directly affected the students’ ability to acquire particular capital within the classroom. The chapter books that other groups were reading signified the capital or “level” that Beth desired in order to position herself as successfully
literate within the classroom. Her resistance demonstrated agency in resisting the identity that was constructed for her within the culture, and over time, this lead to a conflict between the reading groups. In the following episode, Beth and Alice demonstrate how their sense of agency caused a clash among the reading groups and ultimately shifted their identities within the classroom.

“These Are Our Books!”: Reading Groups Clash

The following event took place after Kate finished her morning routine of homework review and spelling or word analysis lesson. The class began to move around and break up into their respective reading groups as I entered and began to set up the video camera. Just as I finished setting up the video camera, I joined Kate to check in and discuss the plan for the day. We previously had lengthy conversations about the issues I was having with my group regarding the books they were reading. I expressed my concern that the constant attention to what other groups were reading, despite my attempts to explain why I chose specific books, was having a negative impact on the group. Kate and I discussed the instructional needs of all of the groups. We carefully considered several texts that might meet the needs of multiple groups and selected a text we thought might meet the needs of two groups though their instructional needs were not exactly the same. I began reading the book with my group before Kate did.

The following transcript represents the interactions that took place as students went to the back table to get the books they were assigned to read. Alice and Beth approached the table where several boys were already seated and beginning to read a short chapter book.

Beth: We need our books! (She was standing next to Alice and spoke to Joey, Greg, and Johnny who were in Kate’s reading group. She addressed them while pointing to a pile of books that they were about to start reading.)

Joey: You’re not having these. (Put his hand on the pile of books)

Alice: That’s OUR book! (Leans forward and raised her voice slightly)

Greg: Oh, you guys are reading this (picks up the book) Sugar Cakes Cyril? (Looks at the girls while smirking.)

Johnny: I thought that was our new book, I already started reading it.

Alice: SO did we.

Stuart: We’re on Chapter 4 already. (Voice is high pitched with emphasis on we’re.)

Beth and Alice: SO are we!

Kate: (Overhears) You all need to share the books! (Girls grabbed 2 copies and boys went back to silently reading their copies. They glanced around at each other and rolled their eyes but said no more.)

Agency and Striving for Successful Identities

In this event, Beth and Alice both demonstrate a sense of agency by resisting their peers’ questions about their assignment to read the same book. In doing so, the girls claimed a shift in their status within the groups and the classroom because they were reading the same text. In other events, such as in the previous event when Beth challenges the book I selected for the group, agency did not result in an immediate shift in her status. In fact, her resistance often resulted in moments of tension, but in this case, the girls’ resistance was awarded with access to the same forms of literacy capital as other members of the larger group. The impact of this event
on the construction of students’ literacy identities is significant because the students themselves determined what and who were considered successfully literate in this event.

In addition to the significance that this event had on students’ literacy identities, there is great significance in the fact that Kate and I were persuaded by students’ agentic moves to think beyond instructional levels and to find common texts that students could have access to. As students challenged what they read, they were also challenging us to seek out ways to meet both their social and learning needs successfully and to see them as intertwined and interdependent. Kate’s support and use of authority in this event when she told students to share, contributed to the shaping of capable and positive identities for Beth and Alice. This contrasted alternate identities that were previously constructed for them in relation to the routine literacy practices of the classroom. In this event, Beth and Alice successfully contributed to the definitions of what counted as literacy and ultimately who was considered literate in this event.

Discussion/Conclusion

Though the Common Core standards do not address the social context of learning or a student’s reader identity as complex factors that should be considered in the development of a reader, states like New York include factors that measure range, quality, and text complexity of student reading such as “matching readers to text and task” (New York State P12 Common Core Standards, p. 41). These tasks, as suggested by the CCSS, include considering a student’s motivation, knowledge and experience when planning high quality literacy instruction. I make the assertion based on the previous vignettes that a students’ identity as a reader has a direct correlation to their engagement, their motivation to read (Glasswell & Ford, 2011), and their knowledge as a reader and may also be experience dependent. The proposed CCSS framework for understanding range, quality, and text complexity of student reading (New York State P12 Common Core Standards, p. 41) urges teachers to consider the social context of literacy and its implications for reader identity and how that impacts student access and overall achievement in reading. The stories of students like Alice and Beth go beyond the Common Core to portray that who we are as readers and how we see ourselves across learning contexts may have as much to do with our success as readers as does the teaching of more rigorous standards.

Furthermore, the consideration of social constructs of learning, such as agency and identity, demonstrate a need for teachers to consider the current practices in literacy learning and strive for pedagogies that include all students by giving them access to multiple ways in which to become successfully literate. The practice of guided reading and use of leveled texts, for example, in many ways allows students to have appropriate time and materials to successfully scaffold necessary instruction in reading and ultimately guide them to becoming proficient readers. These practices, however, can also be limiting unless teachers find numerous ways for students to acquire the necessary capital to construct themselves as successfully literate within classrooms. This means that all students must have diverse opportunities for reading many different texts and for having access to texts at multiple levels (Glasswell & Ford, 2011). This could occur through the use of multimedia, mixed and truly flexible reading groups, and mixed ability literature discussion circles, in addition to instructional level, teacher-led small group instructional reading. Involving students in conversations about what and how they read is also crucial to empowering students to construct strong and positive identities as literate members of a community.
Though the Common Core standards charge us to immerse students in complex texts and assess their reading levels, teachers need to be in tune with students’ strengths and interests as well to help them negotiate multiple texts in a variety of situations. This perspective of literacy learning also includes a definition of curriculum that is fluid and changing and which allows for students to draw on personal experience when choosing and interpreting texts, as well as a diverse perspective on what counts as literacy. As teachers, we must find ways for students to act with a sense of agency in classrooms and ways to express personal voice with regard to literacy learning and the construction of their literacy identities. This perspective also diminishes the notion that leveling prevails over and above consideration of students’ social and learning needs and urges teachers to consider multiple ways to engage students in a wide variety of texts and literary experience such that the common core does promote. In addition, teachers must give strong consideration to the ways in which students are informed by our views of literacy and the implications of our practices in the construction of successful reader identities.
Reader identity and the common core

References


What is Not Covered by the Standards:
How to Support Emergent Literacy in Preschool Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

With our expertise and experiences in teaching language development and early literacy instruction courses at a teacher education college, we argue that it is imperative to find ways to integrate learning standards with developmentally appropriate play-based methods. We examined what literacy coach candidates found in their classroom observations to reveal a tension between developmentally appropriate literacy instruction and addressing conventional literacy skills. We suggest, as do the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (2011), using developmentally appropriate instruction, such as play-based activities in preschool classrooms, to support emergent literacy.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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As we examined the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) for English Language Arts & Literacy (New York State Education Department, 2011), the section entitled “What is not covered by the Standards” really struck us. The section stated that while the Standards address what could be most essential to teach, they do not define how teachers should teach. For example, “the use of play with young children is not specified the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations” and “the aim of the Standards is to articulate the fundamentals…not to set out an exhaustive list or a set of restrictions that limits what can be taught what is specified herein” (p. 4). To us, it was the message that teachers are entitled to enrich curriculum based on the Standards and use appropriate instruction, considering different developmental stages of learning.

However, we started wondering if this message has been clearly communicated with the classroom teachers and literacy coaches, especially for the teachers who teach and guide young
children. The pressures of accountability have dramatically increased in recent years and resulted in more direct instruction, which can be developmentally inappropriate for young children (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). New York recently joined many other states in the national trend to extend the Common Core Standards to preschool when the New York State Board of Regents approved the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core (New York State Education Department, 2011). To prepare young children to meet the demands of the Common Core Standards in kindergarten and elementary school, the Prekindergarten Common Core (PKCC) is being implemented statewide. However, if misinterpreted, all learning standards, including PKCC, may help to produce counterproductive learning exercises, including narrow procedural skills such as word or letter drills, recitations, or chanting letters and sounds, and therefore curtail children’s learning into how to mimic or memorize without meaning attached. Such instruction could “undermine the very goals of improving literacy learning,” which must extend beyond sounding out or decoding, but promoting communication, comprehension, and research (Neuman & Roskos, 2005, p. 23).

There are three key features of the Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening, with heavy emphasis on using various types and levels of text but also with focus on flexible communication and collaboration, including interpersonal skills. We decided to revisit all of the observation notes and reports written by our teacher and literacy coach candidates, whom we have taught for several years, and examine if there is any pattern in terms of how the standards are being implemented in these three areas of literacy and language in real preschool classrooms.

We have been using an observation tool, Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation, or the ELLCO (Smith, Brady, & Anastophpoulis, 2008) in a graduate course in which literacy coach candidates are required to observe early childhood classroom settings and various student learning activities. As we reviewed what the literacy coach candidates had written in their observation notes from four semesters over the last two years, we found both encouraging and concerning patterns in the three areas of Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. We also decided to examine an additional category, the classroom setting, because the learning environment has an impact on early language and literacy development in the other three areas (Owoki, 1999). While the observations included pre-kindergarten through third grade classrooms, we decided to focus on the earlier years of learning: pre-kindergarten, which is recognized as an important foundation stage for later language and literacy development (NAEYC/IRA, 2009; Roskos, Tabors, & Lanhart, 2009).

In this paper, we will discuss what we have found from our review of the ELLCO observations made by our teachers and literacy coach candidates, focusing on preschool classroom observations conducted in 14 different preschool classrooms in New York City and its surrounding areas. This ELLCO tool is used across the country to assess the quality of the classroom environment and the teacher’s practices. Our discussion will be categorized in four areas, including the classroom setting, reading, writing, and speaking and listening. We will argue that there seems to be a tension between meeting standards through direct instruction and play-based, developmentally appropriate methods. We will also suggest some possible ways to balance these demands on preschool teachers because we believe that this tension is unnecessary and not insinuated by any learning standard.
Setting: Balance Organization and Child Initiative

Before we discuss the three areas which the Common Core Standards define, we want to emphasize the importance of literacy environment, defined as the classroom setting, in ELLCO. When young children play in a purposefully designed, literacy-rich environment, teachers can discover and capitalize on teachable moments. Classrooms should embed literacy into various aspects of the environment, from labeling learning centers, to having a diverse and rich library, to infusing literacy into the learning centers. Such an environment invites teachable moments. For example, teachers could purposefully design the dramatic play area to include literacy by creating a theme, like a “restaurant” with menus, specials on a chalkboard, and the waitperson’s notebook. Young children would engage in this type of pretend play that mimics the adult world and want to be involved. Teachers could capitalize on this eagerness to be engaged and introduce relevant concepts in the context of play. Asking simple questions like “What is today’s lunch special?” or “How much do you need to pay for lunch?” at the restaurant could prompt the children to practice spoken language and help to develop relevant concepts, such as print awareness, comprehension, and reading skills. Linguistic awareness is best developed within the context of the child’s work and play. The environment should provide many opportunities to “play” with language (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). Classroom environment sends a message to students about teacher expectations as well.

The observations indicated that most classroom settings, including organization and contents of materials, were developmentally appropriate and literacy-rich. In their notes, the observers indicated that most classrooms had “clearly labeled areas,” “labeled bins and storage,” and centers on the child’s eye level, which make materials accessible for young children. The centers that were not clearly defined existed in two crowded urban schools, which were lacking space. Books in the library were accessible, age-appropriate, and in good condition. Student work was labeled and on display. Classroom organization was the highest rated of the four ELLCO components. This finding is positive since a well-organized classroom will certainly support learning in a preschool classroom.

However, one component of the setting raised concerns. The observers noted that preschool teachers seemed to struggle with offering children the “opportunity for child choice and initiative.” Teachers seemed pressed to “get through the content” and left little time for play or free choice. One observer noted that “the schedule does not allow for ongoing exploration.” Given the benefits of play, especially in preschool, this observation presents a major concern. The PKCC states that play is a valuable activity, yet it is often omitted from the preschool day to “get through the content,” as one observer described. This reduction of child initiative and play is reflective of a larger trend that minimizes free play time, which is necessary to develop self-regulation in young children. According to Bodrova and Leong (2005):

children today have fewer opportunities to learn to regulate themselves because many of the activities that they engage in work counter to developing thoughtful, deliberate action. Television, computer games, even the kinds of toys that children play with tend to emphasize behaviors that lead to more reactive thinking (p. 45).

From a Vygotskian perspective, early childhood teachers must foster the development of self-regulation and thoughtful, deliberate action, which is crucial to later learning and cognitive development. Vygotsky’s model (1977) of constructivist learning, in which children construct
What is not covered by the standards

their own knowledge and understanding through social interaction, calls for adults to “scaffold,” or build on the child’s prior knowledge. Through thoughtful, deliberate action, young children are able to connect new concepts to what they already know. Children are encouraged to think, make choices, and self-regulate, which are internal aspects of cognitive and social growth and developed best in the context of natural play.

Allowing the child to make choices and take initiative in his or her learning can be accomplished through well-organized free choice time, or center time (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). One way to balance the need to meet the PKCC and play would be to allot time in the daily schedule for free play. The centers should be thoughtfully organized to include some of the concepts from the standards. For example, including an “office” in the dramatic play area with phones, keyboards, clipboards, and writing utensils would allow for children to play by practicing writing, speaking, and even reading skills. This would be self-initiated and in the context of social play, so the children would be more engaged. In terms of the classroom setting, the major goal should be creating a well-organized learning environment in which free play is built in and purposefully inclusive of the curricular goals.

Speaking and Listening: Balance a Strong “Culture of Conversation” with Opportunities

As we move into the core literacy areas, we begin with the first set of skills acquired, speaking and listening skills. Between the ages of zero and six, these skills are paramount and serve as the foundation for reading and writing later. Preschoolers, who enter school with some skills in this area, have a window of opportunity for further language development as they develop phonological awareness and the recognition of spoken words and syllables (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Oral language is a cognitive tool used to construct meaning, internalize the language in print, and regulate through thought and activity. Kalmer (2008) argues that language production at age three predicts reading comprehension scores as measured at age nine to 10. Preschool should build upon earlier speaking and listening skills and transition into the more advanced literacy skills of reading and writing. One very easy way to do this is to create a “culture of conversation,” which is an environment that is filled with spontaneous and facilitated conversations, child to child conversations, dramatic play, story reading, and storytelling (Burnam, 2009). As the PKCC suggests, speaking and listening should infiltrate every aspect of the classroom environment.

The ELLCO observations provided many examples of how teachers addressed the standards pertaining to speech and listening. Examples of these attempts were recognized by all of the observers and the majority noted that “students were confident to participate.” Teachers facilitated an open culture of conversation by including expression, encouraging the child to talk, waiting for responses, reading interactively, and most importantly, having fun and making the interactions meaningful by asking about personal preferences or what the children are doing. Again, it is paramount that teachers make efforts create a literacy context that is meaningful and connected to the children’s lives. The troubling part was that this “culture of conversation” was utilized only at basic levels. There was plenty of conversation, but most of it was superficial and most teachers were not observed taking advantage of scaffolding opportunities. For example, the observations noted that despite a combination of small and large group conversations, questioning during stories, and conversation, “the teacher did most of the talking,” or “there was a lack of open-ended questions,” or “teachers used simple two or three word sentences.” There were also very few
examples of helping young children refine their listening skills through purposeful activities. A few observers noted that teachers were more concerned about adhering to the daily schedule. One observer noted that “[the teacher] was more concerned with staying on schedule and moving through daily objectives than in engaging in conversations with students.” Another observer saw that “[the teacher] didn’t even look up when [a child] asked her a question.” Although speaking and listening opportunities were recognized, they were not utilized to their full potential. This lacking depth in conversation not only has literacy implications, but social and emotional implications too, since peer conversations are a major factor in preschool social development (Stanton-Chapman & Hadden, 2011). Simply taking the time to allow preschoolers to speak to the teacher and to one another can meet the PKCC standards in the speaking/listening domain.

Related to building the “culture of conversation” is taking advantage of scaffolding opportunities, such as vocabulary-building efforts. This aspect of speaking and listening also had mixed results, according to the observations. Most observers saw that teachers introduced new vocabulary, either verbally or visually. Vocabulary building was often introduced with pictures, then “reused and repeated vocabulary words throughout the day.” This type of drill and repetition is not appropriate for preschool, and there were few examples of vocabulary building occurring within a meaningful, play-based context. Instead of introducing new words in a detached manner, teachers could incorporate vocabulary building into play. For example, the children playing “office” could be introduced to what a “typewriter” is, and it is meaningful since they are engaged in playing office. Speaking and listening skills are the foundation of the more advanced literacy skills of reading and writing. Preschoolers enter school with skills and knowledge in the area of speaking and listening, which were acquired during infancy and toddlerhood, but this foundation must be built upon in preschool as it was at home: through meaningful everyday conversations about what is important to the children.

Reading: Teaching Reading or “Just” Reading?

Reading is the area in which much tension exists between what preschoolers “should” be learning and what is developmentally appropriate for three to five year olds. Reading achievement in the earliest years may look like it is just about letters and sounds, but it is inevitably clear by grades three and four, it is about meaning (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). The child must be able to attach meaning to new concepts as their literacy skills develop, and meaning comes through their natural play. By integrating literacy in the environment and play, the child will create meaning that is so crucial to reading and writing, in addition to gaining foundational cognitive and social-emotional skills.

The observations noted many positive aspects of emergent reading in preschool, including basic “pre-reading” skills, such as reading aloud, book handling, page-by-page reading, individual time with books, picture naming, flannel boards, story re-enactments, and retelling stories from familiar books. The single most important activity for building these understandings and skills essential for reading success is reading aloud to children (Bus, 2002). The observations noted, for the most part, that books were immersed in the curriculum. Books are for more than reading to class and children looking at alone; they are lead-ins for every subject in the curriculum. Most classrooms contained quality books, which include multicultural characters, realistic characters, attractive illustrations linked to the story, minimum text to keep attention, funny, rhyming or repetitive words, and often served as a lead-in to the curriculum. The characteristics and types of books were consistently rated exemplary to very good in the
What is not covered by the standards

observations. The fact that high-quality children’s books are widely used in the preschool classrooms is a notable strength. In terms of actual activities, preschool “pre-reading” activities build visual literacy skills, allowing children to extract meaning from pictures and build a foundation for reading. The approaches to reading were generally positive, including “reading as an integral part of the schedule,” “asking questions during book reading,” independent reading time, and reading aloud that included questions, reflection and “making the story come alive.” Making reading a fun, consistent part of the preschool day is important.

The tension in the classrooms seemed to arise from teachers trying to more than “just reading aloud,” as noted by one of the observers. Most of the observations noted positive reading strategies in the classrooms, such as reading aloud in an engaging manner and independent reading time, which is consistent with emergent literacy and the PKCC. However, some of the observations also included direct, focused teaching of reading, such as one-on-one instruction, directed strategies to build comprehension, grammar and punctuation, and decoding words, which is more appropriate for kindergarten or first grade. For example, a few observations pointed out concentrated efforts at teaching children to read, such as a “sight word center,” in which students would choose a word out of an envelope, read it, build it, and write it repeatedly, “sounding words out during a story”, “identifying punctuation during a story”, introducing new vocabulary words every week, phonics games, and guided reading. Some observers and teachers separated reading aloud as “just reading,” which was distinct from “teaching reading,” even though reading aloud is the most effective way to teach young children how to read. One teacher commented that these more “direct approaches” to reading would prepare preschoolers for kindergarten. When it comes to reading, we must remember the preoperational cognitive state of the preschool child’s mind (Piaget, 1972). Simple pre-reading activities, like reading aloud, making it fun and interactive, exploring the meaning of the text, and getting children to enjoy reading are developmentally appropriate activities for three to five year old children, whose preoperational minds are often not prepared for the complexity of reading text. Pre-reading activities for preschool children include exposure to a wide variety of literature, reading aloud to children in an interactive way, asking predictive questions, making comments to connect the literature to the children’s lives, and discussing the literature. Word play, such as rhymes, nonsense words, music, and having children “read” their illustrations are other examples of activities that prepare young children for more conventional reading. “Just reading” is teaching young children how to read.

Writing: Fine Motor Foundations First

The last area of literacy explored in the observations was writing. Although reading seems to be a great concern to teachers and parents, most children learn to write before they read around the world (Shagoury, 2009). Although storytelling understanding and communication come first, the physical act of holding a utensil and writing involves developing hand-eye coordination. Motor control peaks in preschool with the maturation of prehension (coordination of fingers and thumbs to grasp) and dexterity (precise movement and coordination of the hands and fingers) (Shagoury, 2009). At this age, the focus should be on perception and eye-hand coordination, which can be strengthened through three-dimensional art, stringing beads, cutting, molding clay and mud, cooking, block building, woodworking, and hammering. This type of fine motor play builds a foundation of motor skill necessary for writing. It was interesting to note that the ELLCO tool did not include this motor play in the writing component, even for preschool
classrooms. It is not surprising that none of the observers noted this type of play as part of writing preparation, even though it is critical in preschool (Beatty & Pratt, 2011; Bodrova & Leong, 2003). The PKCC writing standards involve “using a combination of drawing, dictating, or writing” and do not specifically mention these prerequisite motoric skills. In balancing the standards with play, these prerequisite fine motor skills provide a bridge between play and writing skills.

The ELLCO observations identified several good examples of making children aware of writing, such as print-rich environments, which included labeled objects and centers around the classroom, writing centers with varied writing utensils, and teacher-modeling how to write actual letters and words. As in the case of reading, there was evidence in some of the classrooms that expectations were too high for preschoolers. Some observations noted direct attempts at writing instruction, such as writing in journals and direct teaching of writing letters. Student writing instruction and practice focused more on mechanics of writing, such as “the teacher writing words out for students to copy” and “writing workshops,” but lacked individualized strategies, such as inventive spelling and motoric development.

Writing is a process of discovery in preschool and should be meaningful to the child, like starting to recognize the letters in his or her name. Without meaning, writing is a random set of symbols. Writing can easily be integrated into play, such as having the waiter in the “restaurant” take an order or asking the office worker take a phone message in the “office” from the dramatic play areas referenced earlier. Again, writing should take place in the meaningful context of a child’s play and should be developmentally appropriate, moving from a basic understanding of communication and motoric development to meaningful pre-writing activities. In the case of reading and writing, some teachers and/or parents are pushing preschool children to levels beyond what is developmentally appropriate, or even expected by the PKCC, to “prepare” them for kindergarten and first grade. The PKCC Standards readily recognize that “children develop at different rates and each child is unique in his/her own development, growth, and acquisition of skills” (2011, p. 8).

Suggestions for Preschool Teachers

Many preschool teachers across the nation feel “caught in a tug-of-war between direct instruction and play to nurture the school readiness of young children” (Tullis, 2011, p. 26). Given the state’s adoption of the Common Core Standards and the developmental necessity for play, how can preschool teachers balance these two demands in a developmentally appropriate way?

The first step in meeting both the standards and needs of young children is to understand the developmental context and recognize that play is absolutely essential for preschool children. The field of early childhood education has long recognized that play is a necessity for young children, especially since preschool is their introduction to peer socialization and first experience with formal learning outside of the home (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Elkonin, 1978; NAEYC, 1998; Vygotsky, 1977; Vygotsky, 1986). The foundation of language and literacy in preschool is best developed within the context of a child’s play and natural environment (NAEYC/IRA 2009; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

The “critical period” of literacy growth, during early childhood (ages zero to eight), is fundamental and must be understood in a developmental context. Play allows for open-ended exploration, as opposed to children imitating what the teacher does or says. Bonawitz et al
What is not covered by the standards

(2011) conducted an interesting study in which groups of preschool children either were instructed how to use a novel toy or left to explore the toy in free-play conditions without adult instruction. The preschool children who received instruction learned to use the toy. The children in the exploratory group eventually learned how to use the toy, too, but also used creativity and problem-solving skills when trying to figure it out. Teachers want children to know the facts and be good problem solvers. As Snow (2011) states:

What is striking, though, is an unspoken reality: We want children to be both knowledgeable about facts and details and be creative and good problem solvers. We want young children to know that 2 + 2 = 4, but also use that knowledge across a range of situations beyond answering a single test item. Shouldn’t that mean there is a place for both direct instruction and play? (para. 3)

Play, the activity that fosters creativity and problem solving skills, should be central to any kind of teaching in the preschool classroom. However, many teachers in this study felt the need to address the standards through direct instruction. This tension between direct instruction to meet the standards and developmentally appropriate, play-based methods seems dichotomous, but it does not have to be so. Snow (2012) debunks the play vs. learning dichotomy, stating that it is a “false dichotomy—that both direct instruction and play have roles to play in high-quality early childhood education.” Meeting the PKCC standards and preserving the imagination, creative thinking, positive socialization, and problem solving that comes from play is possible.

Play is a particularly important vehicle for emergent literacy. The early experiences in infancy and toddlerhood provide a foundation for more formalized education in the areas of reading and writing in elementary school. An important part of this developmental continuum is the bridge of preschool. We must remember that preschool is “pre”-school, before formalized schooling. For many children, this is the first exposure to peer socialization and formal education. For three to five year old children, play is absolutely essential. Early experiences in a play-based and developmentally appropriate preschool setting are crucial, not only in terms of literacy, but also in terms of a child’s perspective and opinion of school. A child’s first experiences in school are crucial in building upon earlier experiences and transitioning into formalized schooling (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009). If we make preschool about drills and memorization, we may well damage the child’s natural curiosity and enthusiasm for school. During the preschool years, children need to acquire a set of fundamental cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional competencies that shape their minds for further learning—not just academic learning, but all learning. These skills include oral language, deliberate memory, focused attention, and self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1977). For a true foundation for lifelong learning to occur, young children must develop in all of these areas. All of these positive skills can be developed through play, free choice time, centers, and spontaneous discussion in the classroom. Teachers should strive to integrate the expectations of the PKCC into these developmentally appropriate activities by becoming familiar with the standards and then exploring ways to naturally integrate them in the context of play and other high-interest activities for young children.
Conclusion

Our examination of the four areas pertaining to early literacy setting—Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening—identified several positives. The 14 preschool classrooms in this study demonstrated many positive components of emergent literacy, such as developmentally appropriate books, accessible materials, print-rich environments, various literacy-based lessons, and group and individual activities that were relevant to the students’ prior knowledge and background. These examples should be a part of any preschool classroom and are supported by the PKCC standards. The main area of concern is that some preschool teachers seem to hold high academic expectations for preschool children, and direct instruction seems to be the method of choice when trying to address the standards.

The findings of this study suggest that many preschool teachers are opting for direct instruction as a method to meet the expectations of the PKCC, which are often developmentally inappropriate. We suggest that meeting the standards and managing a developmentally appropriate play-based environment is possible. Environment and setting is the first step. In the classrooms observed, free choice time and play in general was not highly valued, despite the fact that play is the most powerful means to quality early learning experiences (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008; Piaget, 1962; Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Every preschool classroom must include free choice time, in which children can explore independently. Creating well-planned centers that integrate the goals of the PKCC is a way to address the standards and allow the benefits of free play. In terms of literacy experiences, opportunities to develop speech and language were underutilized in the study. Speech and language opportunities were not maximized with scaffolding, missing the opportunity to create a deep “culture of conversation.” Preschool teachers should allow children varied opportunities to practice their speech and listening skills and use everyday conversation to introduce new vocabulary. In terms of reading and writing, some preschool teachers utilized more teacher-directed, direct instruction methods, to meet and, in many cases, exceed what is expected by the PKCC. Play, foundational skills, and the tenets of emergent literacy seemed overshadowed by the emphasis on teaching the nuts and bolts of reading and writing. Reading and writing are multi-faceted skills that take years to master. The focus in preschool should be the foundation exposure to reading, enjoying reading, refining fine motor skills for writing, and most importantly, connecting literacy concepts to the child’s experiences to make them meaningful. Jumping ahead to more advanced reading or writing skills without this critical foundation is not only developmentally inappropriate, but may backfire in the future and result in a child losing enthusiasm for school and learning.

This troubling trend of pushing pre-kindergarten children beyond what is developmentally appropriate to prepare them for kindergarten is in direct contrast to what kindergarten is really meant to be—a “child’s garden,” as Froebel (1899) originally conceived. The PKCC can be balanced with developmentally appropriate expectations for emergent literacy, including play, if the standards are approached as expectations that be integrated within a child-centered, play-based curriculum. Teachers of young children should value the hallmark of the early childhood years—play, a powerful vehicle to refine social, cognitive, physical, and language skills. To balance the PKCC with play, teachers should build on children’s interests and existing pre-literacy skills and knowledge in a meaningful way through play. After all, literacy is best developed within the context of a child’s natural language of play.
References


Using Research to Make Sensible Literacy Decisions
Within Current Educational Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that literacy educators must take time to advocate for research-informed instructional responses in this age of Common Core State Standards and Race to the Top mandates. To that end, it offers four key ideas regarding: (a) what we know about instruction, (b) the need for long-term, continuously revised planning, (c) literacy in our growing technological world, and (d) the nature and origins of literacy teacher expertise. It describes how literacy theory and research connect to the new initiatives, raises concerns about responses that do not reflect literacy scholarship, suggests how to proceed to find the most effective ways to address new mandates, and offers numerous references and resources to assist in the implementation of these new initiatives.

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Many New York State stakeholders claim to want to fix the current educational system, with literacy instruction as a common focus. Politicians, school reformers, parents, and others talk of improving literacy learning for children, a desire leading to New York State’s adoption of the new Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSSO/NGA, 2010) and demanding Race to the Top (RTTT) assessments that evaluate teachers, students, and teacher educators (NYSED, 2010a). In the current political context, with multiple policy initiatives impacting educators in New York State simultaneously, literacy educators are at a crossroads. Our decisions about how to address these demands will have significant long-term impact on what and how students develop literacy in our state.

In this article, we discuss how literacy research informs current educational initiatives and how research raises concerns about those who misuse it for varied purposes. The first grade studies conducted almost fifty years ago (Bond & Dykstra, 1967, 1997), and subsequent analyses (Allington & Walmsley, 2007), have taught us to be cautious about quick fixes and one-size-fits-all programs. Yet consultants and publishers who claim that particular teaching methods or programs solve all problems are proliferating. We need to keep literacy scholarship at the forefront of our thinking as we travel into new educational arenas.

Those of us who spend the majority of our time teaching literacy or preparing teachers to teach literacy may wonder who is best served by such far-reaching policy changes. As literacy
teachers and teacher educators who know the research, we are in an excellent position to advocate for additional research-informed instructional responses to such wide-ranging change. To that end, this article offers four messages that we can promote together:

- We already know a great deal about effective literacy instruction that blends situated practice and explicit instruction, with individual children’s responses as an important focus for instructional decision-making.
- We can take advantage of opportunities in current policy with intentional planning for long-term improvement, yet we need to be cautious and continually revise our plans as implementation progresses.
- We need to continually challenge and improve our understandings of what it means to be literate in a growing technological world.
- We should remember that teachers develop expertise in numerous ways and use this expertise to teach literacy, and that literacy programs, by themselves, do not.

In the sections that follow, we describe how literacy theory and research connect to new CCSS initiatives. We raise concerns about implementation practices that do not reflect literacy scholarship, and we offer suggestions from this scholarship to address new mandates. We use the national term Common Core State Standards (CCSS), rather than New York State term Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) to draw on national conversations about research and the standards that could aid New York State initiatives. We also share numerous references and resources in support of these efforts.

**Message 1: We already know a great deal about effective literacy instruction that blends situated practice and explicit instruction, with individual children’s responses as an important focus for instructional decision-making.**

Research has informed our knowledge of many aspects of literacy development. This includes, but is not limited to, insights about how it emerges (Ehri, 2005) and methods for teaching vocabulary, comprehension, decoding, fluency, and writing across grades (Duke & Carlisle, 2011; MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006; NICHD, 2000). This research is situated in scholarship about the nature of literary (Pearson, Moje, & Greenleaf, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), as well as new literacies that are evolving from our increasingly digitized and social media (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008).

Much literacy research of the last 30 years has been grounded in and offers support for theories of situated cognition. These theories suggest that we learn to communicate with oral and written language through modeling, explanation, and guidance of “knowing others.” These knowing others, including parents, teachers, and peers, lessen their support as expertise is developed (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). The situated nature of literacy means that constituting a successful literacy program in any classroom or school is a context-dependent process that requires understanding of the sociocultural aspects of a community and its uses of literacy (Pearson, 2007).

Local assessments, such as those approved by New York State for teacher evaluation systems or Response to Intervention frameworks, can produce useful comparative data to inform instruction (NYSED, 2010b, 2012b). However, teachers’ daily formative assessment helps them to know their students, monitor their responses to CCSS lessons, and modify future teaching and texts accordingly. Such assessments may include student interest inventories, individual student
conference and classroom discussion anecdotal records, oral reading running records, think alouds, and student writing samples. Explored closely in collaboration with grade level colleagues and reading specialists in light of other assessment results, such data can inform teachers’ day-to-day decision-making in significant ways (Afflerbach, 2012).

However, New York State is hastily implementing several RTTT initiatives simultaneously, potentially creating activity that is so massive we fail to attend to how each student is progressing each day. The CCSS anchor standards are research-based (CCSSO/NGA, 2010), but the learning progressions, especially those related to text complexity, are aspirational with limited empirical support (Goatley, 2012; Hiebert, 2012; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013; Pearson, 2013). This means that teachers may be asked to adhere to grade-level standards that end up being judged as unsuitable. We need to find a way to support teachers’ judgments about the nature of instruction needed by their students as we embark on this new path.

**Message 2:** We can take advantage of opportunities in current policy with intentional planning for long-term improvement. Yet we need to be cautious and continually revise our plans as implementation progresses.

When the Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association first published the Common Core State Standards, there appeared to be many opportunities and great potential for re-envisioning literacy practices, with the Standards opening the door for the development of new curriculum and instruction (see Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Goatley & Overturf, 2011). In leaving behind a decade focused on primary grade Reading First and Striving Reader interventions, there is the promise of renewed attention to such areas as writing, disciplinary literacy, informational texts, comprehension, and technology.

Yet rather than take advantage of new research and development opportunities presented by the CCSS, many educators became cautious—and for good reason—in reaction to offhanded pedagogical recommendations promoted in some communities to explain the new demands. Some of these recommendations too quickly became a focus of attention, sapping energies needed for more measured orchestration of research and development (Gewertz, 2012). For example, the concept of “close reading” became hotly debated, with some arguing against pre-reading work to develop students’ ability to comprehend without such support (Coleman, 2010). In response, researchers cited decades of comprehension strategy research about teaching students to use prior knowledge when they read (Hinchman & Moore, 2013; Pearson, 2013). Similarly, there was much debate about the percentage of time that should be spent on reading informational text, with some educators challenging misperceptions in the discourse (Jago, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). Some of these issues stemmed from early versions of publishers’ criteria, now revised, developed by CCSS developers (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012; Shanahan, 2012-2013). Even educators directly involved in writing the Standards, such as David Coleman and Timothy Shanahan, have expressed concerns about misinterpretation of the intent (Layton, 2012).

Not surprisingly, publishers have been quick to offer professional development and K-12 materials that make vehement claims about addressing the new standards—despite the fact that new CCSS assessments have not yet been released to ground such assertions. For example, the Core Knowledge program was part of a pilot study in New York City, with broad claims made about the effectiveness of the program relative to Common Core, though minimal information is available on the pilot study for the program, or the significance of the results (Core Knowledge, 2012; Phillips, 2012). With the New York State Education Department implying endorsement
by posting Core Knowledge materials for free on the engageny.org website (NYSED, 2012a), we need to be particularly careful about widespread dependence on such materials until there is clear research available. Alternatively, websites such as the What Works Clearinghouse (Institutes for Education Sciences, 2013) require extensive research prior to rating a program.

There are growing resources to support tempered development of long-term research-based and researched CCSS implementation plans in our professional learning communities. For example, the International Reading Association developed a set of guidelines for implementation of the Common Core (see International Reading Association, 2012). These guidelines directly address various key components of the CCSS, especially those that have become controversial. New books for professional development, such as Susan Neuman and Linda Gambrell’s (2013) edited volume, *Quality Reading Instruction in the Age of the Common Core Standards*, outline the research bases for various aspects of the Common Core while also raising issues about current implementation practices. Research projects on thematic units/modules that integrate appropriate texts with content standards include Heibert’s (2012) Text Project Teacher Development Series and IRA’s Literacy Research Panel (2012) Interdisciplinary Unit Project. Initial concerns about the limited nature of the Appendix B text exemplars led to reminders the lists are simply suggestions and not requirements (Goatley, 2011) with subsequent expanded examples of more diverse and engaging texts (Boyd, 2012-2013).

**Message 3: We need to continually challenge and improve understandings of what it means to be literate in a growing technological world.**

Traditionally, those of us who call ourselves reading or literacy educators focused on reading print, and then reading and writing print, with tangential mentions of speaking and listening. English educators have also long been concerned with literacy, but typically with a focus on literary analysis and not early literacy development. As the world moves its communications to digital, social Internet-based media for business, education, politics, and personal life, notions of literacy are expanding and becoming more multimodal (New London Group, 1996). One day some, if not most of us, may read by listening to an application and write by dictating into a transcription application (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2008).

The CCSS provide an imperative, since they target viewing, listening, speaking, and multimodal presentations (CCSSO/NGA, 2010). In addition, pilot ELA test items for both the Smarter Balance and PARCC assessments require students to watch a video and write a reaction to it. Yet digital natives (Prensky, 2001) sitting in our New York State classrooms may be quick to find CCSS-inspired close reading and argumentative writing irrelevant unless tasks invoke new literacies. Answering the following questions may help us to turn toward the future: How can we use the CCSS to transform the various forms of knowledge and curricula that are present in our schools? In what ways do we need to go beyond what the Standards require to help students be the critical consumers and producers of multiple new and ever-changing information sources? What will their college and workplace literacy lives involve, and will they be ready for these demands? Our re-envisioning process needs to occur on an ongoing basis, keeping a focus on ever-expanding definitions of literacy, including viewing and representing, beyond what is now required by the CCSS (Coiro, et al., 2008).

Another rapidly changing realization that should affect our CCSS planning is the role of discipline-specific, or disciplinary, literacy across the curriculum. This refers to those skills and strategies needed to develop precise understandings of a discipline’s key constructs. Disciplinary
literacy, and how to teach it, are the twin foci of much current research within and across disciplines that challenge our notions of literacy and literacy education (Moje, 2008; Sfard, 2005; Wineburg; 2011). At the elementary level, teachers will need to orchestrate more reading and writing of information texts, integrating with content-area studies and encouraging engagement of young readers with high interest topics. It means a seismic shift at the secondary level as content-area teachers come to understand their shared responsibility for literacy instruction pertinent to their disciplines. This does not lessen the responsibility placed on the shoulders of ELA teachers, who are responsible for students’ ability to engage in literary literacies.

Some experts are embracing this change as long overdue, advocating for broader instruction in literacy. Others encourage a continued separation of responsibility so that students do not fall between the cracks as teachers negotiate instruction. They recognize that a major barrier can also be lack of confidence and pedagogical content knowledge for teachers to take on new responsibility (Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013; O’Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). The system-wide nature of state assessments helps to reify traditional separations between ELA and content-areas despite the fact that disciplinary literacies are accounted for in the CCSS, especially when teachers are accountable to Regents or AP curriculum. The compact, detailed nature of curricular concepts required for success on New York State Regents examinations further compound the stress of teacher evaluation systems under Race to the Top when combined with the disciplinary literacy expectations in the CCSS. There is, quite often, a significant amount of content to teach within a limited timeframe, with tests that are quite specific to that content.

Responsibility for attending to such evolving notions of literacy requires systematic, ongoing change. This will only occur when it stems from a combination of teacher preparation, new visions of school scheduling, targeted professional development, and ongoing inquiry that occurs in collaborative and connected conversations. We need to continually recognize these changing notions of literacy and work to address them together.

**Message 4: We should remember that teachers develop expertise in numerous ways and use this expertise to teach literacy, and that literacy programs, by themselves, do not.**

Teachers need significant expertise to orchestrate effective classroom literacy instruction that responds to students’ initiations and needs. They know literacy scholarship, pedagogy, and the families in their community. These insights are typically developed through a combination of pre- and inservice education (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Disciplinary specialists, especially, will need ongoing support as they determine ways to blend needed instruction with other disciplinary knowledge demands (Greenleaf, Litman, Hanson, Rosen, Boscardin, Herman, Schneider, Madden, & Jones, 2011).

In the rush to implement the CCSS on a tight timeline in an age of stingy school budgets, local school officials might feel pressed to skip the rich professional development step. Instead, they may implement rigid use of a scripted published curriculum that purports to address the standards “correctly”, claims that lack significant merit in this age of aspirational standards. Strict requirements to use scripts or particular texts can make it difficult for teachers to make the pedagogical moves any one student needs for forward progress, especially those who diverge from their classmates. When this happens, the students whose needs are aligned with instruction get richer, while the poor get poorer (Stanovich, 1986).
Instead of focusing on such quick fixes, we should turn our attention to teacher preparation programs and professional development/inservice learning opportunities as two key places where teachers develop the expertise needed to provide responsive literacy instruction. The degree to which these contexts are successful depends on many factors, including teacher educators’ and professional developers’ current knowledge of the educational initiatives. In a recent article, Duke and Martin (2011) provided a list of 10 assertions about research that every literacy educator should know, including concerns about misrepresentation and misuse of research. They purposefully remind us “research should be seen as an essential guide to policy and practice” (p. 10). Similarly, an International Reading Association position statement (2011), titled *Researchers and Professional Developers in Literacy Education*, offers suggestions on how researchers and professional development providers might collaborate and share responsibilities to promote research expertise in literacy practices.

Just as K-12 educators are being held to higher standards via a new evaluation system, teacher preparation programs are also being tested with new certification exams and a tracking system to monitor success of student teachers after graduation. The New York State Education Department regulations require teacher preparation programs to have a minimal six credits of coursework in literacy instruction. Compared to other states with 12 credit blocks (e.g., Maryland), we need to not only expand literacy coursework requirements, but also to make better use of the coursework we do have available (National Commission on Excellence in Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction, 2003). Teacher educators in New York State need to advocate for increased time on literacy instruction within teacher preparation programs to produce better teachers, but also to prepare them for the large role of ELA instruction in both the new edTPA teacher certification exams and the K-12 student progress monitoring system.

Professional organizations for teacher educators and institutions of higher education (IHE)’s are quickly searching for a voice in the policy conversations while also asked to participate in professional development to learn about these initiatives. For example, the New York Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (NYACTE), New York State Association of Teacher Educators (NYS-ATE), and the United University Professions (UUP) currently have conferences, committees, and task forces developing responses to the initiatives. Similarly, the State University of New York system developed a local (C-TEN), regional, and statewide Teacher Education Networks (S-TEN) targeting a new approach to teacher preparation and funded by Race to the Top (State University of New York, 2012). The New York State Reading Association’s College Reading Educators Special Interest Group meets twice each year to share information and determine needed areas and methods of advocacy (NYSRA, 2013).

A recent New York State, RTTT-sponsored, state focus on clinically rich teacher preparation has the potential to broaden the amount of literacy instruction experience novice teachers bring to their first year of teaching. However, these placements need to be with highly effective teachers, rather than schools that simply need extra help (Sailors, Keehn, Harmon, & Martinez, 2005). Yet with school districts needing their experienced teachers in classrooms to meet assessment goals and new teacher evaluation formulas that include student test scores and more frequent classroom observations, many New York State colleges and universities are having difficulties finding any kind of placement at all for student interns. Due to the work of several advocacy groups, the New York State Education Department has recognized this difficulty and offered incentives to school districts to collaborate in the development of clinically rich field experiences (King, 2013). Indeed, rich internship opportunities may also be valuable as
an in-service model for practicing teachers; collaborative teaching may be offered as professional development to ease transition to a new population of students, curriculum, or grade level.

The federal government has funded development grants in the past few years for research on the literacy coursework in teacher preparation programs. For example, Kucan, Palincsar, and colleagues (2011) worked with a group of nine teacher educators to develop modules on text-based discussions as a component of comprehension instruction. Similarly, Scanlon, Anderson, and colleagues (Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2010; Scanlon, Anderson, Goatley, & Gelzheiser, 2012) collaborated with faculty from 10 teacher education institutions to transition the Interactive Strategies Approach early literacy intervention program to for use in teacher preparation programs. Carlisle (2012) developed a web-based program to facilitate opportunities for teachers to review and analyze case studies of reading lessons to improve their own instruction. All of these studies, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, make broad use of learning modules, classroom-based videos, digital tools, and resources for teachers to improve literacy instruction to pre-service and in-service teachers. Although federal funding for teacher education is dwindling, the recent funding has increased the availability of materials, drawn from classroom-based research, to improve literacy teacher education.

Teachers and administrators seeking a one-step, quick fix program that will cure all problems are headed down a slippery slope. No one really wants to dumb down what our children need to learn with rote scripts that do not allow responsive interactions and simplistic assessments that endorse the lowest common denominators. Investing in teacher learning and expertise is a career-long process, with each day of teaching contributing to the development of expertise and a focus on the language of teaching as a priority.

Conclusions

In a political climate in which politicians make claims about best practices for education, we educators who know the research need to keep our voices active. We can contribute to the conversation by sharing ideas in our teacher education courses, faculty meetings, curriculum planning sessions, and student instruction, all providing opportunities for making individual choices and advancing research-based instruction and ideas. We need to have clear understandings of why and how a position we take is the appropriate one, and we need to be able to offer research to support it.

As we noted at the beginning of this article, we are at a crossroads. With the reading wars long behind us, and decades of research leading to relatively strong perspectives on what effective literacy instruction involves, we should be taking the best road ahead of us. Yet are we? Literacy instruction is complex. It is not only the texts our students read that need to be more complex, but also the way we define literacy and the systems we develop to assess it. Rote instructional scripts, a limited range of printed texts, and simple multiple-choice and short-answer tests will not accomplish this. We need to encourage literacy tasks with a broader purpose and authentic audience, along with formative assessment that monitors students’ progress and engagement (e.g., designing and performing a puppet show, developing a website to report multiple perspectives on a topic). Similarly, evaluating teachers with quick observations and student test performance will not represent the dynamic nature of the daily orchestration of modeling, teaching, and knowing multiple students with diverse needs that is needed for successful instruction of all students. By our continued efforts to take responsibility to learn the research, draw upon it, situate it in our schools and communities through collaborating with
colleagues within and across K-12 and IHE settings, and find ways to contribute to discussions that have potential policy impact, we build bridges and knowledge, and, ultimately, improve the literacy learning of our students.
Using research to make sensible decisions

References


The Common Core, English Learners, and Morphology 101: Unpacking LS.4 for ELLs

Pamela J. Hickey and Tarie Lewis
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ABSTRACT

The Common Core Learning Standards set forth learning goals for all students, including English learners, but this document does not provide information on effective literacy instruction for English learners or unpack the specific resources and challenges that bilingual students bring to the classroom. Language Standard 4 addresses morphological development across grade levels, a focus that holds particular advantages and issues for second language learners. In this article, we provide an overview of morphology as it is addressed through the CCLS, identify the issues around the development of morphological awareness in English for second language learners, and share effective instructional practices and resources for appropriately supporting the morphological development of bilingual students.

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Introduction

Fourth-grader Araceli reads a science article silently as she sits with a small group of students at a classroom table with her teacher. Occasionally, she uses her highlighter to underline a word. After a discussion about the content of the reading, the teacher inquires about words in the text that proved difficult for the students. As Araceli scans the preceding page, her finger stops on the highlighted word vegetation. Araceli explains to the group, “I didn’t know it, but I remembered the word vegetable and it starts the same. I know lots of words end in tion, so that part was easy for me. My mom is always telling me to eat my vegetales at home, so that Spanish word is almost the same and that made me think it has something to do with vegetables. Since
the article was talking all about the different habitats and things that grow, I think vegetation means stuff that grows.”

In this example, Araceli demonstrated morphological awareness. She was able to use her knowledge about the ways in which word parts work in English to understand an unknown word. Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of morphological awareness in reading, especially in supporting reading comprehension (Carlisle, 2000; Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006). The ability to analyze word parts when reading may support the ability to correctly pronounce an unknown word, to understand the meaning of an unknown word, or to do both. The development of morphological awareness by English learners may be even more crucial than for L1 (first language) English-speaking students because of the importance of English learners’ ongoing acquisition of oral English vocabulary alongside their literacy development (Goodwin, Huggins, Carlo, Alabonga, Kenyon, Louguite, 2011; Kieffer & Lesaux, 2008). Kieffer and Lesaux (2008) assert that if English learners in the intermediate elementary grades “lack the awareness of derivational morphology that their native English speaking peers have acquired through greater exposure to English oral and written language, this may be a source of reading difficulty” (p. 787). Research by Nagy and Garcia (1993) indicates that Spanish-English bilingual students benefit from being aware of the relationship between English and Spanish words with shared roots. These findings support the use of explicit morphological awareness instruction to positively impact the reading comprehension abilities of English learners. However, in a more recent study, Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) found that students, particularly linguistically diverse students, benefitted from explicit morphology instruction, but that barriers to such instruction include a need for teachers themselves to have a greater understanding of morphology, access to curricular materials supporting explicit morphological instruction, and professional support.

What strategies and considerations will be most helpful in supporting the achievement of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) addressing morphological skills? To address this question, teachers need to have a firm grounding in the morphological structure of English; we therefore begin this article with an overview of morphology and morphological awareness. Due to the prominent place that morphological knowledge has in the Language Strand of the CCLS, we next examine the ways in which morphological awareness is addressed in the standards. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the instructional issues around morphology for English language learners and explore a variety of effective classroom strategies for increasing students’ morphological awareness.

**Morphology 101**

*Morphology* is the study of the smallest units of language that hold meaning (see glossary in Appendix A). According to Carlisle (1995), *morphological awareness* is “children’s conscious awareness of the morphemic structure of words and their ability to reflect on and manipulate that structure” (p. 194). In the example in the opening of this article, Araceli employed morphological awareness by recognizing and using the meaningful parts of the word *vegetation* to understand this new-to-her word in the context of the science text she read. Araceli identified two morphemes *veg* and *tion*. She used her knowledge of a cognate, a similar word in Spanish, *vegetales*, to confirm her hypothesis about the meaning this word.

A *morpheme* is a word or word chunk that has meaning. For example, *girl* is a morpheme and a word. We cannot break down *girl* any further and have a meaningful chunk. However, if
we add *s* to *girl* and make *girls*, we have added the *s* to make our word plural. In this case, *s* is a morpheme. However, it is clearly not a word. Another example is *write*, which is a morpheme and a word. We cannot break it down further. However, we can add the morpheme *re* to create *rewrite*.

We call morphemes that are words *free morphemes* because they can be used unattached. Both *girl* and *write* are free morphemes. Morphemes that cannot be used alone are known as *bound morphemes*. Both *s* and *re* are bound morphemes. When added as an affix—either a *prefix* or a *suffix*—to a word, bound morphemes adjust the meaning of the word, but they cannot be used alone as an unattached unit. Words may be constructed from combinations of free and bound morphemes. Compound words, such as *barnyard*, are constructed from two free morphemes. *Unfriendly* is constructed from the free morpheme and root word *friend* and the bound morphemes *un* and *ly*. Table 1 provides examples of bound and free morphemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morpheme Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Word, friend, cup, chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound</td>
<td>Un-, ex-, -ceive, -sist, -er, -est, -ly, -tion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Two Types of Bound Morphemes

Morphemes that are added to words as affixes can be described as inflectional morphemes or derivational morphemes. Inflectional morphemes adjust the meaning of a root word without changing its part of speech. Furthermore, inflectional morphemes do not change the base meaning of the word. For example, both *girl* and *girls* are nouns. The addition of *s* to *girl* changes the word from singular to plural, but it does not change its part of speech. As shown in Table 4, inflectional affixes are addressed by Language Standard 4 beginning in the primary grades. Instruction of inflectional affixes is usually part of the teaching of grammar in the Reading/Language Arts classroom. This is in contrast to derivational affixes, discussed next, which are generally taught through examining the meaning they bring to the new word they construct.

**Inflectional morphemes.** Table 2 below includes the most common inflectional morphemes of English. While learning about the morphological structure of English for the first time can be overwhelming, two facts about inflectional morphemes are helpful to keep in mind: (1) In English, there are a very limited number of inflectional morphemes, and (2) in English, all inflectional morphemes attach to the end of the root word, as suffixes.

**Derivational morphemes.** These morphemes adjust the meaning of the root word and may change the part of speech. Although adding *re* to *write* does not change the part of speech of *write*, it does change the meaning of the word. Therefore, *re* is a derivational morpheme. Table 3 lists some common derivational morphemes, their location as a prefix or a suffix, their etymology or linguistic origin, and their general meaning.
### Table 2:
**Examples of Inflectional Morphemes in English**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inflectional Morpheme</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-s</td>
<td>To make nouns plural</td>
<td>girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-es</td>
<td>To make nouns plural</td>
<td>boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-en</td>
<td>To make nouns plural</td>
<td>oxen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’s</td>
<td>To make nouns possessive</td>
<td>Tarie’s book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-s’</td>
<td>To make plural nouns possessive</td>
<td>the girls’ book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ing</td>
<td>To change the tense of a verb</td>
<td>walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ed</td>
<td>To change the tense of a verb</td>
<td>walked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-en</td>
<td>To change the tense of a verb</td>
<td>written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-er</td>
<td>To show comparison in adjectives and adverbs</td>
<td>happier, faster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-est</td>
<td>To show comparison in adjectives and adverbs</td>
<td>happiest, fastest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3:
**Examples of Derivational Morphemes in English**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morpheme</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Etymology</th>
<th>General Meaning or Function</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ex</td>
<td>Prefix</td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>Out of</td>
<td>extract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dorm</td>
<td>Prefix</td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td>dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti</td>
<td>Prefix</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Against</td>
<td>antiwar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ness</td>
<td>Suffix</td>
<td>Old English</td>
<td>Affixed to adjectives to form nouns</td>
<td>happiness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: See Appendix B for resources that contain tables of derivational morphemes, as well as resources about cognates and shared morphemes between English and other languages.

### Why Morphology?

Why should we attend explicitly to morphology when choosing an aspect of the Standards to unpack for teachers of English learners? One reason is the prevalent role that morphology plays in the CCLS. We first see morphological awareness addressed in the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language under Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Standard 4: “Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate” (NYSED, n.d., p. 35, italics ours). This standard becomes more specific within grade levels. Table 4, below, details the specific grade-level standards within the thread of Language Standard 4 that address morphology.

When we work with teachers around the topic of morphological instruction, many are surprised to learn that the CCLS includes standards that address morphological awareness beginning in kindergarten. From the start, students are encouraged to engage in word solving
Rather than a list of prefixes to be learned by rote, CCLS expectations for morphological awareness from kindergarten through grade 12 require students to actively use their expanding knowledge of meaningful word chunks to construct and deconstruct word meanings in text. At the primary level, teaching focuses on inflectional and derivational morphemes. Later, in grades 4-12, LS.4 includes knowledge about etymology. Specifically, in grades 4-8, students learn morphemes with Latin and Greek etymologies, which construct many academic English words, particularly in the content areas of science and math. Later, in grades 9-12, LS.4 includes independent etymological investigations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Morphological Awareness Examples from CCLS Language Standard 4 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Kindergarten** | 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on kindergarten reading and content.  
   b. Use the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (e.g., -ed, -s, re-, un-, pre-, -ful, -less) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word. |
| **Grade 1** | 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 1 reading and content.  
   b. Use frequently occurring affixes as a clue to the meaning of a word.  
   c. Identify frequently occurring root words (e.g., look) and their inflectional forms (e.g., looks, looked, looking). |
| **Grade 2** | 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 2 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.  
   b. Determine the meaning of the new word formed when a known prefix is added to a known word (e.g., happy/unhappy, tell/retell)  
   c. Use a known root word as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word with the same root (e.g., addition, additional).  
   d. Use knowledge of the meaning of individual words to predict the meaning of compound words (e.g., birdhouse, lighthouse, housefly; bookshelf, notebook, bookmark). |
| **Grade 3** | 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 3 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.  
   b. Determine the meaning of the new word formed when a known affix is added to a known word (e.g., agreeable/disagreeable, comfortable/uncomfortable, care/careless, heat/preheat).  
   c. Use a known root word as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word with the same root (e.g., company, companion). |
| **Grade 4** | 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.  
   b. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., telegraph, photograph, autograph). |
## Table 4:
Morphological Awareness Examples from CCLS Language Standard 4
Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Standard 4 Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 5</strong></td>
<td>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <em>grade 5 reading and content</em>, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., <em>photograph</em>, <em>photosynthesis</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 6</strong></td>
<td>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <em>grade 6 reading and content</em>, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., <em>audience</em>, <em>auditory</em>, <em>audible</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 7</strong></td>
<td>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <em>grade 7 reading and content</em>, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., <em>belligerent</em>, <em>bellicose</em>, <em>rebel</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 8</strong></td>
<td>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <em>grade 8 reading and content</em>, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., <em>precede</em>, <em>recede</em>, <em>secede</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grades 9-10</strong></td>
<td>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <em>grades 9-10 reading and content</em>, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., <em>analyze</em>, <em>analysis</em>, <em>analytical</em>; <em>advocate</em>, <em>advocacy</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses,) both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, or its etymology.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Morphological Awareness Examples from CCLS Language Standard 4 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades 11-12</th>
<th>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11-12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., conceive, conception, conceivable).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses,) both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, its etymology, or its standard usage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Morphology and English Learners

In this section, we first address the benefits of multilingualism, and then explore the particular place of morphology in the instruction of English learners. As the CCLS state, the standards do not include “the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners” while also asserting that “all students must have the opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to access the knowledge and skills necessary in their post-high school lives” (NYSED, n.d., p. 4). Clearly, the standards have created high expectations for all students, including English learners, but they do not offer a road map on how to provide effective instruction and supports for English learners to meet those expectations. In order for teachers to facilitate students’ growth in morphological awareness, teachers themselves must be open to the funds of linguistic knowledge students possess as speakers of their first language (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Additionally, teachers need to be well-versed and confident in their understandings of morphology as well as have access to a range of effective practices for instructing culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Defy the Deficit Orientation

One challenge that many English learners face is that their bilingual abilities may be viewed as a deficit rather than the resource and asset that it is. As noted in the Application of Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners, “many ELLs have first language and literacy knowledge and skills that boost their acquisition of language and literacy in a second language” (n.d., p. 4). Research on bilingualism demonstrates that bilingual students from a range of proficiency levels bring a metalinguistic edge to word and grammar analysis that may give them an advantage over monolingual students (Bain & Yu, 1980; Diaz, 1985; Martin-Beltrán, 2009). Furthermore, Jiménez, García, and Pearson (1996) found that Latino bilingual students who viewed their bilingualism as positive were more successful readers than Latino bilingual students who viewed their bilingualism as damaging to their reading achievement. As
teachers, we have great power in supporting students to view their bilingualism as an asset that can support their academic achievement (Yoon, 2007).

Teachers who do not share the first languages of their students can still use available resources in order to understand morphological aspects of students’ home languages and use this information to guide morphological instruction. Indeed, bringing this information into class discussions not only clarifies linguistic differences for bilingual English learners, but can support the morphological awareness development of English Only students.

**The Importance of Teacher Knowledge of First Language**

Given that English morphological processes differ from other languages in a variety of ways, it is imperative that teachers acquire morphological information about the home languages of their students. When providing morphological instruction for English learners, teachers must be explicit and clear about how morphemes function and behave in English. Understandings about morphology that may be common knowledge for English Only students may be new to or confusing for linguistically diverse students. Teachers can support English learners by providing comprehensible demonstrations of the ways in which English is different from the students’ home languages. In the following section we provide specific examples of some techniques that have been successful with our students.

**Affix instruction.** In English, the only way that bound morphemes construct words are in the form of either prefixes or suffixes. This is not the case in many other languages, which have infixes, affixes that are placed in the middle of a word. For example, to construct an infinite verb in English, one uses the word *to* in front of the verb stem as in *to write*. However, other languages use various morphological processes to construct the infinitive. Tagalog uses infixes so the verb stem *sulat* is *write*, but the infix *un* is inserted to create the infinitive, *sumulat*, which means *to write*. Being aware of the morphological processes of your students’ home languages will help you to better understand and address their errors.

**Derivational morphemes.** While differences in L1 and L2 (target language) morphology can create opportunities for morphological instruction, similarities in morphological structure between languages can also generate teaching points. For instance, many English suffixes have equivalent Spanish counterparts. Thus, adverbs ending in the English suffix *-ly* like *finally* are equivalent to words that contain the Spanish suffix *-mente* like *finalmente*. We have both witnessed our own students experience “Aha!” moments upon realizing that there are comparable derivational morphemes in Spanish and English. One simple exercise to teach corresponding suffixes is to present a short list of words with the target suffix, e.g., *explosion, situation, communication,* then work together with students from that home language group to translate each word.

**Cognates and false cognates.** The majority of English learners in the United States speak Spanish, which is a Romance language, meaning that it has Latin as a linguistic ancestor. Speakers of Romance languages, which include French, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian, and Catalan, come to the classroom with implicit knowledge about Latin-based morphemes because their Tier 1 vocabulary words share morphological roots with many of the Tier 2 and Tier 3 words of English. **Cognates** are words in two languages that share a common ancient root. For example, the English word *different* and the Spanish words *diferente* mean the same thing because they share the Latin root *differre* meaning “to set apart” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). **Different** and **diferente** are cognates. However, these shared roots and meanings with Latin
are not helpful to students unless they are aware of the relationship between words they use in their home and new words they are encountering in English.

When teaching new words, teachers must find out if new words have cognates in students’ home languages and explicitly show the similarities of the written words to students during instruction. We share resources for cognate lists in Appendix B. We have found that including a space for cognates in vocabulary activities such as the creation of personal glossaries or using the Frayer Model creates an opportunity to point out cognates to students and demonstrate the similarities between the words. When a classroom includes many students from a cognate-sharing language, co-creating and posting charts of English-Home Language cognates and referring to it during class discussions can support students in strategically using their home language as a resource.

Finally, be aware of false cognates. False cognates are words in two languages that look similar but have very different roots and meanings. A striking example of a false cognate is the Spanish word *embarazada*, which looks similar to the word *embarrass* in English. However, *embarazada* actually means *pregnant*! We have included resources that address these “false friends” in Appendix B.

**What Can I Do to Support the Morphological Development of English Learners?**

When planning for morphological instruction, keep in mind that there are two approaches. The first approach, unpacking and making explicit the morphological processes and structures of English, will benefit all English learners, regardless of their first language. The second approach, using students’ L1 as a bridge to English morphological development, will depend upon the language distance between students’ L1 and English. Language distance refers to the strength of the linguistic relationship between two languages and their resulting similarities and differences. For example, referring back to the Romance languages, Italian and French are linguistically closer than English and French. However, English and French are linguistically closer than English and Korean. Thus, the difficulty of using students’ L1 morphological processes as a bridge to English language development increases as the language distance increases. However, given that the majority of English learners in the United States are from linguistically similar languages, it is a useful and meaningful approach to pursue. In the following section, we offer both general activities for teaching how English works as well as strategies for instruction based on the morphological processes of students’ L1. Additional resources for instruction are provided in Appendix B. Finally, the guiding principle in morphological instruction for English learners is to provide explicit teaching. What may be implicit, instinctive, and common sense for English Only students may be confusing and unclear to English learners.

**General Activities for Teaching How English Morphology Works**

**Charts for generative activities.** One easy way to begin morphological awareness instruction is through the use of word trees (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2012) or charts that demonstrate the relationships of related words. Begin by writing a Greek or Latin word element, like the Greek *cycl* on chart paper, followed by words that contain this root like *recycle*, *bicycle*, and *cyclone*. Discuss what the example words have in common and support students as they hypothesize the meaning of the Greek roots before revealing the definition,
which is circle. Next, challenge students to brainstorm other words that are morphologically related to add to the chart (some examples are encyclopedia, tricycle, motorcyclist, cyclical). Students can also create personal versions of these charts and make illustrations to help them remember new words.

**Inflectional suffix -ed sort.** Initially, many students are perplexed by the fact that the inflectional morpheme -ed has three pronunciations in English: /t/, /d/, and /ed/. We say /t/ for words that end in an unvoiced phoneme like walked, stopped, and liked. We use /d/ when pronouncing the -ed at the end of a word with a voiced phoneme like turned, grabbed, and stirred. We pronounce the -ed as an additional syllable, /ed/, when a word ends with a /t/ or /d/, as in needed, added, acted, or wanted. This principle becomes clearer to students through word sorting. Start with a list of high frequency words that end in -ed. Select one word as a sample for each category. Say each word with the class, helping the students determine the sound pronounced as well as if a new syllable is added. Then, ask students to work together to sort the remaining words. Help students generate the rules (listed above) that govern the pronunciation.

**Latin word elements.** Once Latin word elements have been introduced, students can practice their morphological skills by playing games. Caeser Pleaser, developed by Hosty and Gips at www.play2read.com, is a game played with a deck of cards, each of which lists an affix like dis-, sub-, and -tion, along with word root like ject and tract. Each card contains the definition for that word element. To play, 16 cards are laid out face up. Students compete to be the first to combine these elements to form words. The greater number of morphemes included in the word, the greater the points earned. With the help of lists that contain Latin and Greek word elements, teachers can produce any number of games to help students practice targeted morphological families. Another student favorite is Latin Root Jeopardy (Bear et al., 2012). Each category for the game consists of a root the students have been studying. For the clues of the category, select five words that contain the same root, and write the definition of the word on a card. The $100 clues are the easiest, while $500 clues are the most difficult. Students collaborate to determine the correct word that matches the definition.

### Teaching Based on the Morphological Processes of L1

The first step to providing instruction based on the morphological processes of students’ L1 is to be aware of what those morphological processes are. Knowing a bit about how students’ first languages work can help you to identify and address errors that may arise when they use their L1 expertise to make sense of new learning in English. Tap the expertise of your bilingual colleagues and friends who can serve as linguistic informants. Knowing the inflectional morphemes present in the first languages of your students will help you understand difficulties they may have with English plurality, tense, and comparatives. This information will provide insights into the reasons behind their errors (Scarcella, 2003).

**L1 as a resource.** Treat the first languages of English learners as a resource rather than a deficit. Use students’ first languages as a source of comparison when analyzing the morphological processes of English. Note that students who speak a Romance language can have an advantage and serve as a resource to their peers regarding morphemes with Latin word elements. Students who speak other Indo-European languages will also likely share a number of cognates with English. When teachers make these connections explicit, such instruction can deepen the understanding of English Only students as well as English learners.
Metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to reflect upon and be explicitly aware of the differences between two languages. The ability to be metalinguistic may support both second language learning and reading comprehension (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010; Zipke, 2008). Lems, Miller, and Soro suggest L1 morpheme study. They provide the example of cumpleaños, the Spanish word for birthday which comes from two Spanish morphemes meaning complete and year. Thus, a birthday is the completion of a year. In English, on the other hand, the word birthday comes from the Germanic roots birth and day, a commemoration of the first day of a child’s life (p. 106, italics added).

Cognates. Consider holding a cognate “treasure hunt” to support students’ awareness of cognates in their L1 and English. Bilingual children’s picture books with text in L1 and in English are ideal for this activity. Preview the text to identify shared cognates. Consult a list that shows cognates in the student’s L1 and English or ask a colleague who is familiar with the language. Note words that are similar in both texts, being wary not to include false cognates. This is more difficult to do in languages, such as Russian, that use a different alphabet, but it is possible, especially with students who have strong L1 literacy skills, as Slavic languages share many cognates with English (зебра/zebra; видео/video – a resource for Russian-English cognates is posted in Appendix B). For students coming from writing systems different from English, cognates may be more identifiable through their pronunciation rather than their appearance. Once you have identified the cognates, have the students identify words that look or sound alike. Have the students create a cognate list.

More cognates. Given that the majority of English learners in the United States speak Spanish, consider creating a cognate list as a classroom resource. Using a Spanish-English cognate list, identify words that students are likely to encounter in the current or upcoming curriculum, and invite students to create a class chart showing the Spanish-English words side by side to highlight their similarities, such as verbo/verb. We include a resource for identifying Spanish-English cognates in Appendix B.

Conclusion

As skilled readers and writers, teachers use their morphological knowledge of English to unpack texts every day. Given the salience of morphological knowledge in the CCLS and its importance in reading comprehension, especially for English learners, it is vital that we provide systematic and explicit morphological instruction for our students. In order to implement such instruction effectively, teachers need to have a strong understanding of morphology, of morphological processes in English, and the issues around supporting English morphological development for language learners. The information shared in this article is just a starting point, but we hope that we have helped to unpack Language Standard 4 for you while simultaneously supporting you as a developing morphological expert.
Appendix A
Glossary of Terms

Affix: Units of meaning, in the form of bound morphemes, that are added on to root morphemes to construct new words.

Bound morpheme: A morpheme that cannot stand on its own. It must be attached to other morphemes to construct a word.

Cognate: Words in two or more languages that have a shared root.

Derivational morpheme: A bound morpheme that adjusts the meaning of the root word and may change the part of speech. Re- in rewrite is a derivational morpheme, as is –ness, in happiness.

Etymology: The linguistic origin of a particular word.

False cognates: Words in two languages that look similar but have very different roots and meanings.

Free morpheme: A morpheme that can be used alone, as a word, without additional affixes.

Infex: An affix that is placed in the middle of the root morpheme. English does not have infxes.

Inflectional morpheme: A bound morpheme that adjusts the meaning of a root word without changing its part of speech, such as pluralizing nouns or changing verb tense. Furthermore, inflectional morphemes do not change the base meaning of the word.

Morpheme: The smallest unit of meaning in a language. A morpheme may be a word or a word unit.

Morphological awareness: The ability to identify, know the meaning of, analyze, and use the units of meaning that construct words.

Morphology: The study of meaningful units of language.

Prefix: An affix that is placed at the beginning of the root morpheme.

Suffix: An affix that is placed at the end of the root morpheme.
Appendix B
Resources for Understanding and Teaching Morphological Awareness

Books


Online Resources, General

- Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) generally has accurate and useful information regarding languages, as well as linguistics, including morphology.
- Frankfurt International School (http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff) has information on 16 languages. This website is designed for teachers of English learners.
- For information about cognate instruction, visit WETA’s educational initiative (www.colorincolorado.org/article/14307).
- Information on False Cognates is at Spanish Learning (www.spanish.bz/false-cognates.htm), Brown University’s Language Resource Center (www.brown.edu/Departments/LRC/pluma/voc_false_cognates.pdf), and About.com’s Guides (french.about.com/cs/vocabulary/a/falsecognates.htm, german.about.com/library/blfalsef.htm).
- Caesar Pleaser Latin Word Elements Card game from Play2Read (www.play2read.com/caesar.html or contact Michelle Gips, MA, CCC-SLP at (301) 509-6263).

Online Resources, Language-Specific


Hindi: Omniglot (www.omniglot.com/writing/hindi.htm)
Online Resources, Language-Specific (continued)

       Omniglot (www.omniglot.com/writing/hmong.htm)

Japanese: About.com Guide (japanese.about.com)

Korean: Omniglot (www.omniglot.com/writing/korean.htm)

Russian: Language Daily (russian.languagedaily.com/wordsandphrases/Russian-cognates)

       Spanish Language Guide (www.spanishlanguageguide.com)
       About.com Guide (spanish.about.com)
       Velazquez Spanish Cognates (spanishcognates.org)

Vietnamese: Omniglot (www.omniglot.com/writing/vietnamese.htm)
References


Narrative Plus: Designing and Implementing the Common Core State Standards with the Gift Essay

Kelly Chandler-Olcott, Syracuse University
John Zeleznik, Nottingham High School, Syracuse City School District

ABSTRACT

The authors of this article describe their inquiry into implementation of the writing-focused Common Core State Standards in a co-taught English 9 class in an urban school. They describe instructional moves designed to increase student success with an assignment called the Gift Essay, with particular focus on planning and other organizational strategies, use of exemplars, and social interactions of varying kinds. Examples of student work and classroom materials to scaffold high-quality writing are provided. The article concludes with a call for interpreters of the CCSS to embrace a broad conceptualization of genre without stigmatizing personal narrative or insisting on genre purity.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kelly Chandler-Olcott is chair of the Reading & Language Arts Center at Syracuse University, where she teaches English and literacy methods courses. A former secondary English teacher, she now conducts literacy research collaboratively with teachers. Kelly can be reached at kpchandl@syr.edu.

John Zeleznik is an English teacher at Nottingham High School in the Syracuse City School District. He is also the author of several young adult novels. Both have worked in the Nottingham Early College Summer Writing Institute since 2010. John can be reached at jzeleznik@scsd.us.

New York teachers are no doubt aware that decreased emphasis on literary texts and increased attention to informational reading and writing are among the “six shifts” associated with the state’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards (http://engageny.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/common-core-shifts.pdf). The writing anchor standards for grades six to 12 recommend teaching text types and purposes—argument, information/explanation, and narrative—that parallel those tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress for more than two decades (Applebee, 2007).

It is likely no accident that narrative is positioned third in the list if the comments of principal CCSS architect David Coleman are any indication. Last year, Coleman said in a presentation at the State Education Department that “the two most popular forms of writing in the American high school today” were “the exposition of a personal opinion” and “the presentation of a personal matter.” In remarks widely reproduced in the blogosphere, Coleman argued that personal writing’s prevalence was problematic because
As you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a sheet about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you’re saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is rare in a working environment that someone says, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood (Coleman, 2011, p. 10).

Although Coleman later claimed he should have chosen his words more carefully (Lewin, 2012), those words—and others related to Common Core priorities—continue to reverberate, for good and for ill, in conversations about writing among teachers, administrators, and faculty. Because of writing’s central place in college and career readiness (Conley, 2008), it is important to identify pedagogical approaches to prepare students for the demands of writing in the twenty-first century.

Recently, we explored these issues while implementing the writing-focused portions of the CCSS in a ninth-grade English class we co-taught. Aware of Coleman’s critique, we were interested in expanding the genre range of students’ writing and in raising expectations for the quality of their work. At the same time, we were determined not to abandon best practice (Graham & Perin, 2007; Smagorinsky, 2007) in a hasty response to new policies, and we did not share Coleman’s dismissal of narrative.

When we conceptualized the first full-length essay that students would polish via multiple drafts in English 9, we wanted them to construct a text more sophisticated than a chronological recount. The Common Core’s emphasis on increasing challenge for all students influenced our thinking. Yet we knew that for struggling or inexperienced writers—most of our class—narrative was familiar. If we wanted to work on revision and peer response, skills we felt were central to increases in quality, we wondered about the wisdom of doing so with a fairly new genre such as argument. Consequently, we designed a hybrid assignment, one that straddled several text types delineated in the writing standards and allowed us to address other standards simultaneously. We learned a great deal about the CCSS and teaching writing from designing, implementing, and inquiring into what John nicknamed the Gift Essay.

In the pages that follow, we describe our classroom context and our collaboration. We explain how we designed the Gift Essay assignment, describe the instructional moves we made to support students’ success, and illustrate the impact of these moves with sample student work. We close with recommendations for future theorizing and practice around writing and the CCSS.

The Classroom Context

From January to June 2012, we co-planned and co-taught a ninth-grade English class at Nottingham, an urban high school enrolling grades 9-12. John was in his sixth year of teaching, following a previous career in communications. He was completing the second of two young adult novels, one of which was being circulated to publishers. Kelly was on sabbatical from her position as a professor at Syracuse University, where she taught literacy methods courses. Our professional relationship began when John participated in writing-focused professional development Kelly facilitated during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. We have also taught together since 2010 in the Nottingham Summer Writing Institute, a three-week initiative to help rising ninth graders develop their writing skills and transition to high school (Chandler-Olcott, Burnash, DeChick, Donahue, Gendron, Smith, Taylor, & Zeleznik, 2012). We both felt
that writing deserved more attention in most English classes, and we made implementation of the writing standards central to our collaboration.

During the first half of the year, John served as solo instructor for the course, entitled Strategic Reading and organized around the Talent Development curriculum for students two or more years below grade level in reading (McPartland, Balfanz, & Shaw, 2004). Students were assigned to the class primarily using their eighth-grade ELA scores, and they received 80 minutes of daily instruction, doubling that received by peers not in the intervention. In January, when Kelly arrived, the course switched from Strategic Reading to credit-bearing English 9 but continued to meet 80 minutes per day with the same roster. We co-designed an English 9 curriculum that balanced attention to novels, plays, and nonfiction; included use of a writer’s notebook to organize and extend students’ thinking; and involved students in a mix of paired, small-group, and whole-group discussions.

At the time we implemented the essay assignment described here, 17 students regularly attended the class, including seven girls and 10 boys. All but one were students of color, mostly identifying as African American. Two were English language learners, the other 15 native English speakers. Students’ surveys suggested that most saw themselves as “good” writers (the midpoint for quality in a list of choices) who tended to frame their goals for improvement around technical skills such as spelling.

The Assignment

To promote critical thinking and synthesis by students as well as differentiate the credit-bearing course beginning in January from the fall intervention, we designed an overarching essential question for English 9: How do our relationships help and hinder us? The Gift Essay assignment (see Figure 1) was intended to help students explore that question personally, but to do so from a more writerly stance than the one emphasized in Strategic Reading. Even though the essential question cued students to think about both help and hindrances, we chose to steer students in their Gift Essays toward help. We speculated that students might be more comfortable allowing others to read their work, as well as revisiting their topics via multiple drafts, if they were discussing experiences with a positive outcome. Several students still chose to focus on painful or difficult events such as running away from home, but the assignment design meant that they did so within an affirmative frame that led to less balking at sharing.

We also chose to limit the topic to a person who offered help because of our awareness that for many, our students’ status as youth of color attending an urban school had a tendency to frame them with deficit perspectives (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009). Designing our assignment to promote students’ discussion of those who supported and valued them was a way of talking back to those negative portrayals so that students’ resilience and resources could be seen and celebrated. We felt such a move was consistent with Delpit’s (2012) recommendations for creating excellence in urban classrooms, including:

- Provide children with the emotional ego strength to challenge racist societal views of their own competence and worthiness and that of their families and communities
- Recognize and build on children’s strengths
- Honor and respect the children’s home cultures (p. xix)

To underscore the importance of the help they received, we gave each student a copy of his or her essay printed on stationery to give to the people about whom they wrote, and we provided class time and cards for them to write an explanatory note to accompany that gift.
The Gift Essay: In English 9 so far, we have explored the essential question: How do your relationships help and hinder us? We have considered this question the context of several texts, including the novels *Tears of a Tiger* and *Of Mice and Men*. Now, you will construct an extended piece of writing (at least 500 words) that connects this essential question to your own life as well as to literature.

Your task is to write an essay in which you explore a specific aspect of a relationship with someone who helped you in a particular way. You must include the following:

- An introduction to the essay that engages and interests the reader
- A clear explanation of who the person is, and how she or he helped you
- Specific details and examples to support your argument that the person’s actions were helpful
- A connection between the help you received and a piece of the literature of your choice from either Strategic Reading or English 9
- A conclusion that ties the essays together

As you write this essay, you will also be working on skills related to revision and providing/receiving peer feedback. Everyone in our class will help each other make these essays as strong as they can be. In addition, they will be shared, for positive comments only, with the members of another English 9 class as part of an in-class writer’s celebration, with refreshments, scheduled for Friday, March 23.

You are strongly encouraged to make a gift of your essay to the person about whom you write, and you will receive special stationary on which to print it when you are finished revising and editing.

To further distinguish the assignment from a chronological recount, as well as increase the level of challenge, we wrote it up using a framework from Smagorinsky (2007), whose writing prompts always include a description of the assignment connecting it to the larger goals of the course or unit, followed by a set of bulleted items for students to address. According to Smagorinsky, the former helps students to link the texts they produce to the “social purposes” for those texts, while the latter provides students “with a clear set of parameters for producing their texts” and “an understanding of how their work will be evaluated” (p. 75).

As we drafted and revised our prompt, referring frequently to the CCSS standards for grades nine to 10, we realized that the essay addressed several standards and combined elements of several text types. We wanted students to articulate clearly how their featured person had helped them, and to develop that idea with examples and details—a hallmark of W2, “Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.” At the same time, we wanted students to use an anecdotal lead to create reader interest, and we expected that they would likely tell a story, or several stories, in the body—elements more closely associated with W3, “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective
technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.” Rather than rewriting the assignment description to address just one standard, we resolved to implement the more blended approach while gathering data to guide reflection on the process. We also committed to designing the high-challenge, high-support instruction that research (Gibbons, 2009) documents as yielding increased achievement among diverse populations.

**Instructional Approaches Designed to Increase Quality**

One of the best indicators of success with the Gift Essay was that everyone completed and submitted it, albeit with varying degrees of attention to required components, in a class where task completion rate tended to be fairly low. Students selected a range of people about whom to write: seven focused on a parent, four on a friend, three on a sibling, one on a cousin, and two on adult mentors in settings beyond the classroom. Their focus and engagement over five days of instruction (see Figure 2 for an overview) were notable not just to us but also to several colleagues who pushed into our classroom. Their final drafts represented most students’ best developed writing to that point in the year, and about two thirds volunteered to read them aloud at our class-wide celebration, suggesting a high degree of pride in their work.

Interested in interrogating these positive indicators in light of CCSS demands, we gathered, read, and discussed the various data we collected during the unit, including classroom materials, John’s plans and writer’s notebook entries, Kelly’s field notes, and copies of student work. This review helped us identify a small set of instructional practices that increased the quality of student work: support for planning and organizational strategies, use of exemplars, and social interactions of varying kinds. We discuss each in turn.

**Supporting Planning and Organization**

Much has been made about Coleman’s argument that inviting students to engage in “cold” close readings of text, with little or no pre-reading support from teachers, is a key component in creating greater independence as readers (Gewertz, 2012). Less has been said about whether teachers should make a parallel move toward supporting greater independence for students approaching a writing task, although the list of strategies appearing in W5, “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach”, implies an expectation that teachers will provide instruction around planning.

John’s observations from the beginning of the school year suggested that it would be disastrous to leave students to puzzle through the planning phase of the Gift Essay alone. Many seemed accustomed to assignment templates specifying what each paragraph in an essay should include—an expectation that did not align well with the bulleted list of overall requirements recommended by Smagorinsky (2007). Because we had committed to increasing challenge for students, we resisted the inclination to provide the linear prescriptions some sought. Instead, we resolved to provide planning instruction that would launch the assignment well while also building skills that would transfer to other contexts.

Our first challenge was to set a purpose for the essay linking to the world beyond English 9. To this end, we showed students the assignment then gave them this prompt: “Think Pair Share: Why do you think we might ask you to do an assignment like this one right now? (2 minutes).”
**Figure 2: Unit Overview**

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<td>• Introduce assignment&lt;br&gt; • Adapted “Deciding What to Say” Activity&lt;br&gt; • Nonstop write (10 minutes)</td>
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<td>• Read and annotate teacher exemplar&lt;br&gt; • Teacher think aloud on graphic organizer completion&lt;br&gt; • Students complete graphic organizers</td>
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<td>No class because of assembly</td>
<td>In computer lab:&lt;br&gt; • Mini-lesson on heading and saving conventions&lt;br&gt; • Librarian book talk on choies for independent reading project&lt;br&gt; • Drafting time</td>
<td>In computer lab:&lt;br&gt; • Continued drafting&lt;br&gt; • Teacher conferences and some peer conferences, guided by rubric&lt;br&gt; • Students revisit connection paragraphs in exemplar</td>
<td>In computer lab:&lt;br&gt; • Continued drafting and revising&lt;br&gt; • Teacher and peer conferences, guided by rubric</td>
<td>In computer lab:&lt;br&gt; • Continued drafting and revising&lt;br&gt; • Teacher and peer conferences, guided by rubric and checklist</td>
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<td>• Romeo and Juliet unit begins&lt;br&gt; • Poll students about willingness to read and Wednesday celebration</td>
<td>• Romeo and Juliet work&lt;br&gt; • Extra time after school in the computer lab for those who want it</td>
<td>• Gift essay celebration</td>
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During the subsequent large-group discussion, we recorded the following ideas and displayed them with our document camera:

1. To make us better writers.
2. To refresh our memories from when we were young.
3. To see our improvement.
4. To show what a good essay looks like.
5. To make us a better person.
6. To think back to what we learned.
7. So we can realize how books related and don’t relate to our lives (field notes, March 15, 2012).

Students’ contributions demonstrated their awareness of purposes for personal writing, including to remember and to reflect. To reinforce the idea that such writing has value, as well as address [school]’s mission of developing college and career readiness, we showed students essay topics from the Common Application used by nearly 500 colleges and universities then asked them to think-pair-share again, this time about which topics most resembled the Gift Essay assignment.

**Figure 3:**

[Author 1]’s Modeled Responses to Help-Focused “Deciding What to Say” Prompts

1. A time when you gave someone advice.
   Mom: “Don’t worry about it if you can’t see it from the road.
2. A time when someone gave you money or a helpful gift.
   Grampie: $20 for a taxi
3. A time when someone showed you how to do something.
   Aunt: Parallel park.
4. A time when someone showed you how to do something.
   Jim: Taught me how to ski.
5. A time when someone showed you how to do something.
   Quinn: VuDu remote.
6. A time when someone encouraged you.
   Mr. Illingworth: Gave me a job so I could go to grad school.
7. A time when someone encouraged you.
   Email from a former student on a bad day.
8. A time when someone helped you do something so you didn’t have to do it alone.
   Putting the wood in with my friends.
9. A time when someone calmed you down or comforted you.
   Michelle: During senior year.

Once we had established a purpose, we helped students generate multiple topics from which to choose. We adapted an activity entitled Deciding What to Say (Bernabei, 2007) that we had used in the summer writing institute. Where the original framing helps students brainstorm
various personal topics, our version helped them brainstorm specifically around the idea of “help.” Kelly engaged students in a shared reading of the dictionary definition for that word, guided them in generating meanings, then demonstrated how she used her notebook to produce ideas in the Deciding What to Say categories we devised (see Figure 3). This approach built academic vocabulary (another of the “six shifts” associated with the CCSS) at the same time it helped students brainstorm nine topic possibilities. They narrowed these to three with the help of a partner, then each chose one as the starting point for a timed free-write.

After 10 minutes, we asked students to count the words they generated. Most students wrote steadily for the time period, yielding a class average of 146 words. Four generated more than 200 words, a third of the total we suggested in the assignment description. Students’ fluency with this initial brainstorming allowed us to introduce the idea that what would make the Gift Essay challenging was not producing enough words but rather choosing the right words, in the right sequence, given what they wanted to convey—a concept most closely linked to CCSS W5: “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.”

During the next class, we offered students a graphic organizer with boxes linked to the various essay components in our bulleted list, and John modeled at the document camera how to transfer ideas from his own free-write to appropriate sections of the organizer. In his think-aloud, he explained which sentences best described how his grandfather helped him learn to be a storyteller. Kelly then showed students how she cut unnecessary material from her free-write as she organized it around a key idea about her aunt’s teaching her to parallel park. During the last 30 minutes, we observed and conferred with students as they compared their free-writes to their graphic organizers and generated more text for sections that needed it. During our planning meeting later that day, we noted that every student showed us some text at his or her initiation (field notes, March 16, 2012).

By the following class, Day 3 of the unit, students were well primed and eager to compose on the keyboard. We had reserved the computer lab on the other side of the building for the first of three days. Although John sent a student ahead with a box containing student folders and writer notebooks, Kelly, who arrived first, could not initially locate it. That students valued the planning and initial drafting they did was clear from their annoyance that their materials were temporarily missing. They wanted to begin typing and not to start from scratch. Not a single student asked what he or she was supposed to be doing at the beginning of class; everyone had a plan for moving forward (field notes, March 30, 2012).

The usefulness of our approach to planning was most apparent with Jonathan, a thoughtful contributor to class discussion but one whose notebook entries were often half-finished and who rarely submitted homework. Jonathan thrived on the carefully structured sequence of activities leading from assignment discussion and exemplar analysis to topic brainstorming. His entry for Deciding What to Say was complete and thorough (see Figure 4), and his 10-minute free-write launched him solidly into his essay about advice his father gave him related to the aphorism, “You can’t fly with eagles [if you’re] scratching on the ground with chickens.” During our second day in the lab, he was so focused on drafting new material for the second and third paragraphs of his piece—where he provided examples of conversations in which his father reiterated the advice—that John made a point of shaking his hand at the end of class. He was able to sustain that focus throughout the unit, eventually volunteering to read his piece at the class celebration.
To signal the authenticity of the Gift Essay, as well as make it easier for us to provide explicit instruction around its dimensions, we integrated attention to exemplar texts into our instructional practice at several points. This choice was supported by research on effective writing pedagogy, particularly Graham and Perin’s (2007) finding of positive effects when students are provided with models of good writing then encouraged to “analyze these examples and to emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models” in their own work (p. 28). Because our class included a disproportionate number of underprepared literacy learners due to district and school tracking practices, we wanted to ensure a closer fit between the exemplar texts we used and the dimensions of the assignment, to ensure accessibility and applicability for students. We also wanted to position ourselves as fellow writers in the classroom community—a practice recommended by Gallagher (2012). Consequently, each of us authored an exemplar text that met the assignment criteria, and we used these in a variety of ways throughout the unit to increase the quality of students’ work.

As we discussed in more depth in the previous section, our own exemplars were embedded in our initial instruction on planning and organization. Kelly modeled how to complete the Deciding What to Say activity for students, then each of us completed a 10 minute
free-write along with students that served as the seed for the full-blown typed essays we shared later. John used his free-write to model how to use the graphic organizer we employed as an intermediate planning tool. Each of these instructional moves was intended to demystify the drafting process and offer strategies students could adopt to select a satisfying and appropriate topic, as well as plan an effective approach to their essays.

Next, before students moved to computer-based drafting, we asked them to read Kelly’s essay and to label the assignment components from the bulleted list. This helped them to recognize that some criteria would be addressed in a section of the essay—for instance, “an introduction to the essay that engages and interests the reader” would likely appear in the first paragraph—while others, such as “specific details and examples to support your argument that the person’s actions were helpful,” would be addressed in multiple places. Although some students struggled with this concept, teacher-guided discussions about Kelly’s essay helped some to get beyond what John called during class their tendency to think “immediately of five paragraphs [in a certain order] when we see ‘essay’” (field notes, March 16, 2012).

Later, as students worked in the lab, we circulated the room to have teacher- and student-initiated conferences that implicated exemplar texts, both our own and, occasionally, student samples that we copied with permission. When students struggled with an aspect of the assignment, we marked portions of the exemplars and asked them to reread those sections before we offered suggestions. This approach was intended to promote students’ independence—to allow them to do as much as they could for themselves, in the spirit of the Common Core—but with enough teacher direction to keep them from disengaging in frustration.

The best example of the latter approach came from students’ attempts to make a connection in their essay between the help they received and a relationship they read about in a piece of literature from either Strategic Reading or the first two months of English 9. This was a small portion of the assignment—just a paragraph in each exemplar—and we did not think that successful performance with it could provide definitive evidence of students’ having met CCSS W11, “Develop personal, cultural, textual, and thematic connections within and across genres as they respond to texts through written, digital, and oral presentations, employing a variety of media and genres.” Nonetheless, we felt the inclusion of this element had the potential to (a) prompt students’ review of previously-read material in ways that would help them later on the essay task for the English Regents examination, requiring students to discuss two texts using a quotation as a “critical lens”; and (b) increase the challenge of the assignment. The dominant mode of the essay was still narrative, but in this case, it was narrative-plus: narrative enhanced by a literary connection that helped the essays transcend chronological recount.

For many students, this was the most difficult aspect. But directing them to the relevant portions of the exemplars usually yielded results in students’ drafts, as this excerpt from Kelly’s notes indicates:

Malik finally has three or four solid paragraphs, though he does not have his connection to literature or his conclusion. I get him exemplars, mark them up, and tell him to read them to give himself ideas about how to approach that part. I make a list of books he can think about using, including Breaking Through, which Elijah, who’s sitting next to him, has open in front of his keyboard as he writes. [Malik] says, “I got this, Miss,” and I leave him. Later, I cycle back because he says he needs help with the conclusion, but I end up just pointing out the final paragraphs in the exemplars, and he says he’s fine again (field notes, March 23, 2012).
Although most of the connections students made were neither deep nor extensive, they tended to be validly grounded in ideas from the text, which we felt was a good start for ninth graders generally inexperienced with this sort of literary analysis.

The benefits of using exemplars were best exemplified by Hadiya, with whom we both had several conferences revolving around the samples. Hadiya’s essay was about the help she received from Saila, her best friend, after learning that her uncle had died from cancer. She explained in the middle of the essay that Saila had calmed her by providing tissues and a drink, by asking questions about the uncle, and by suggesting that Hadiya write about her anger and pain rather than keeping it inside. Then, in her second-to-last paragraph, Hadiya connected Saila’s support to what Andy, the main character of the novel *Tears of a Tiger*, received from his girlfriend after causing his best friend’s death in a drunk-driving accident:

To me this relate to the book “Tears of a Tiger”. My story relate to this book because Andy’s friend passed away he was distraught and his girl Keisha she was trying to help him be strong. It made me think of my friend Saila. And how she was telling me to be strong. Andy was hurt and he couldn’t get his anger over it. But I did and I was ok. I really appreciate Saila and I’m thankful for her and everything she had done for me for helping me get through those situation.

Hadiya’s paragraph could use some additional editing—it retains some characteristic features of writing by ELLs—but other aspects work well, including her recognition that her experiences were both similar to and different from Andy’s. Initially, she struggled to organize this thinking and to link it to the story she was telling. Focused conversation around the exemplars helped her produce a more successful new draft.

**Promoting Social Interaction Around the Writing**

Another CCSS theme is the importance of “an integrated view of literacy” that “links the processes of communication” (p. 2). The document is thus consistent with many postsecondary classrooms and workplaces, where writing is often embedded in social relationships and linked to other language arts, such as talk and reading. Teaching these literacy aspects in conjunction with each other can leverage achievement in one domain to support growth in another.

Despite the CCSS call for an integrated view, however, the curriculum exemplars intended to help New York teachers envision the standards in practice tend to be much more explicit about how to design social interaction around reading than around writing. For example, EngageNY’s sample lesson for grades 9 and 10, centered on the Gettysburg Address, provides considerable detail about text-dependent questions teachers might ask to support students’ close reading of the text. At the end of the multi-lesson sequence, teachers are directed to assign a short analytical essay, but no recommendations are made about how to support that process, aside from this: “Remind students of the work they already completed and encourage them to review their notes and access the information they gathered to craft their response to this prompt” (n.p.). The curriculum exemplar for grades 11-12 is similar in offering a formal essay as assessment while providing limited guidance about how teachers might orchestrate its writing—just these two sentences in a 20-page document: “If teachers assign this essay for homework, they could have a writing workshop the following day, where students provide feedback to their classmates regarding their essay” and “Teachers could also assign the prompt as an in-class
essay, but also use the following day for peer-to-peer feedback.” Nowhere in either exemplar are teachers encouraged to confer with students as they write the culminating essays, to create an audience beyond the classroom, or to promote social interactions among peers over anything but an independently-completed draft. (Nor, hearkening back to the previous section, do the lessons ask students to read model texts in the genres they’re asked to construct.)

Our view, supported again by research (Graham & Perin, 2007), is that social interaction and collaboration throughout the writing process are essential for students to meet the writing-focused portions of the CCSS. For this reason, we built a variety of interactions, both teacher-to-student and student-to-student, into our instructional plans. Our insistence that students would talk about their writing to others was linked to a norm that John made explicit from September on: that the classroom community would be safe for learners to take risks and that no one would judge the topics students chose or the ideas they raised. As the Gift Essay unit began, we reminded students of this norm and linked it to our own experiences as writers who seek feedback from others, as intimidating as that can be. John explained:

Understand that I will never judge you for what you write, and I expect that of you [with each other]. It takes guts to write...It constricts people sometimes...when they feel like people are going to judge or make fun of [them] (field notes, March 16, 2012).

One-to-one conferences with teachers were a key form of social interaction intended to help students increase the quality of their writing. Ahanu, for example, was one of our most engaged writers: he usually began composing quickly and stayed focused, even when others were distracted. His pieces, however, were sometimes under-developed. Neither of us was surprised when he was the first to finish a Gift Essay draft, announcing 10 minutes into our second day in the lab that he was “done!” (field notes, March 21, 2012). During conferences, we insisted that he strengthen his literary connection, make better word choices, and edit his punctuation. Kelly’s field notes indicate how we held him accountable for more precision:

I sit with Ahanu and do one more edit of his essay on his cousin, whom he calls his brother, and the help he receives in the recording studio from him. I help him edit a little of the colloquial language out of it, and then I go through the rubric categories with him, one by one, telling him that I think he’s going to get a 3 or a 4 in everything except the second one, which is about a clear articulation of who the person is and how he helped him. I say he loses that a lot in the middle of the second and third paragraphs, and I challenge him to add a sentence or two to get this clearer. I also ask him if he really needs a sentence in paragraph 2 about his not being so enthralled with the studio, now that he’s used to it, which I say is interesting but not about his brother/cousin. He says he gets this, and he’s willing to delete it, so we do (field notes, March 23, 2012).

That Ahanu internalized lessons from these conferences was clear from his portfolio reflection, where he wrote about learning to include just the details that related back to his brother. His essay became more focused in each draft we collected.

Peer conferences were also part of how we scaffolded increased quality in students’ work. Early on, they conferred informally with each other around the assignment purpose and topic selection. Later, they met more formally over drafts to review the scoring rubric and give each other feedback in each category. Again, Ahanu provides an example of how social
interaction helped us hold students accountable for greater proficiency. He and Bianca, another of our most fluent writers, were the first two students to be approved for a peer conference, so we paired them. After giving them oral instructions and copies of the rubric, we set them up at a table in the lab. Their conversation was over almost before it began; neither seemed clear about what to discuss. Overnight, Kelly created a checklist (see Figure 5) to guide peer conferences that we distributed and John explained the following day. We required Ahanu and Bianca to redo their conference in light of these better elaborated expectations, and they had a more substantive conversation. He even chose his title from among her suggestions.

**Figure 5:**
**Checklist for Peer Feedback**

- Read the draft
- Write a note on the rubric in one of the five areas about something specific you like
- Write a note on the rubric in one of the five areas about something specific that will improve your partner’s grade
- Write at least three different suggestions for titles on the rubric

Finally, we devised opportunities for the work to be shared with multiple audiences. During the celebration we planned, we had copies of Gift Essays from John’s other English 9 class available for students to peruse and offer positive comments to the authors. We encouraged students to share their essays with those whom they featured in their writing. And three students, Ahanu among them, accepted our invitation to read their drafts aloud. After the social interactions described in this section, Ahanu’s essay (see Figure 6) was one of the best we received. In fact, we selected him to read last, to end the program on a high note, and he received the two claps he requested as his form of class-wide appreciation with a wide smile that matched our own pride in what students had accomplished over the unit.

Success for Ahanu and his peers demonstrates for us the potential of sustaining best practices that predate the CCSS adoption while simultaneously working to address aspects of them that can support greater achievement. Students were engaged in the Gift Essay because we created a meaningful experience they valued, articulated a real purpose for the writing, provided them with some choice, promoted social interaction, and employed gradual release of responsibility by modeling the process ourselves, using exemplars, and creating space for independent application. They liked the idea that their teachers were working along with them in the process—that their teachers were writers, too. None of these approaches is specified in the CCSS document, but without them, the CCSS goals will be unattainable.

**Conclusion**

As we designed our writing pedagogy over six months of co-teaching, we immersed ourselves in both the Common Core State Standards for ELA/Literacy and a good deal of supplemental material about the CCSS. As we reflect on our inquiry, there is no doubt in our minds that we asked more of students and worked harder to support them in meeting that
challenge because of our familiarity with CCSS expectations. We want our students’ work to be as good as—or better than—the student writing samples available in Appendix C (National Governors Association, 2012), and we believe that the increased focus on writing and greater consistency and coordination from CCSS implementation, K-12, will help yield that greater proficiency for students over time.

Figure 6: Ahanu’s Final Essay, “Life in the Studio”

My cousin that I call my brother taught me how to engineer in the studio. We were at my dad’s house in Liverpool, using his studio. The room we were in was pretty big, colorful, with a lot of speakers and also two computers in it. There was a little room inside the big room that had a glass window so you can see everything that’s going on. Inside the little room was a mic with foam covering the walls.

That was one of the best times of my life. It was also one of the inspiring times of my life, and fun. I still enjoy engineering other people and working with others’ levels. It’s like adventuring in the woods and finding something new every time you try. I feel my brother was really thoughtful for teaching me and I feel blessed.

I have a new computer now. It’s a Mac. My brother doesn’t know how to use it though. I have to teach him still to this day. So now, it’s like I have to help him do something. He still knows how to use the basics of the engineering. He just doesn’t know how to add effects to the vocals and mess around with the levels.

Even though I know how to engineer I still need more practice. I want to be perfect at what I do. My dad is the one who bought me all of my equipment, he told me to “master what I’m doing and take advantage of what I have.” Then my brother told me the same thing so I really started to bounce back to the court.

When I’m working on one of my projects I always have my brother by my side. Even though he doesn’t know how to add effects he tells me if it sounds clear or not. He taught me to make the double up sound like one voice. Once it sounds like that, it’s perfect like [city name] when it’s 70 degrees outside.

My brother reminds me of the psychiatrist from “Tears of a Tiger” that I read in English. The book was by Sharon Draper. The reason why is because when he taught me to engineer, it was like when the psychiatrist helped Andy with his problem. It’s not in the same category but they both helped someone with a problem they had and taught them how to get rid of the problem.

Everyone in my group requires that I engineer their music. I thank my brother that he taught me what he did because I would have no clue what I’m doing. So always be thankful for people who try to tell you thinks make sure you take heave [heed]. Always make sure you listen because something good can be the outcome of their advice. Also thank them because without them telling you certain things you may not be where you are now.

At the same time, we continue to be concerned about the impact of some interpretations of the writing standards. As Applebee (2007) points out, “curriculum has a tendency to narrow around the types [of writing] that are assessed, often coupled with unintended effects on what
counts as writing well” (pp. 85-86). Seen in this light, the writing standards’ endorsement of just three text types may make teachers less likely to teach forms such as poetry that do not fit easily into those categories but that represent key purposes for writing out of school, including reflection and social critique. Moreover, we worry that comments like Coleman’s will create a backlash against narrative, making teachers less likely to address it thoroughly, despite its explicit inclusion within the text type standards. This is not to suggest our lack of support for increasing students’ opportunities to write persuasively or to communicate the results of their research, valuable forms that CCSS implementation should make more common in classrooms. But stigmatizing narrative, insisting on genre “purity” linked to standards W1-W3, or excluding other forms from the curriculum need not accompany such efforts.

Tom Newkirk (2012) makes a claim about nonfiction that resonates for us: “[N]arrative is the deep structure of all good writing…[E]ven research reports must tell a story” (p 29). According to Newkirk, accomplished informational writers such as Siddhartha Mukerjee in Emperor of All Maladies, his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about cancer, “never leave narrative far behind. Instead, they use narrative in more complex and embedded ways” (p. 32). For writers with emerging skills like those in our class, the use of an anecdotal lead and other narrative structures can eventually be transferred to a more traditionally argumentative or explanatory text, both in English class and in other content areas. First, however, it must be understood and controlled, a process facilitated by students learning the skill in a scaffolded, familiar context. We saw the benefits of such a carefully-sequenced approach ourselves when we asked students to transfer planning, revision, and peer response strategies from the Gift Essay unit to a more purely analytical essay about the impact of relationships on a central character in August Wilson’s play Fences.

Ultimately, we see value in teachers’ viewing the genres on which writing instruction might be centered as more diverse and more hybrid than the discrete standards in the Writing: Text Types and Purposes section of the Common Core suggest. The introduction to the CCSS document itself acknowledges that “several standards can be addressed by a single rich task” (p. 3), although the examples are more focused on how a task might integrate standards from one portion of the document—Writing, for instance—with those from another, such as Language. The introduction is less clear that the assignments teachers craft need not fit neatly into a single column of a genre matrix. The potential for framing the text types as discrete categories is further exacerbated by the singular labels provided for the student work samples in Appendix C.

New York ELA teachers can resist these narrow framings, however, without undercutting the potential improvement to our writing pedagogy of heeding calls in the CCSS for increased rigor in our expectations and greater variety in our assignments. Implementation of the CCSS need not require seeing genre narrowly or banishing narrative to a backseat in the classroom. Our ninth graders’ success in marrying elements of narrative and other genres in their Gift Essays suggests that narrative may indeed be a gift to them as developing writers, one we should not withhold even as we offer them other experiences, tools, and ways of thinking.
References


ABSTRACT

Fisher, Frey and Lapp’s *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading* is an excellent resource for educators seeking guidance in how to implement the text complexity and close reading goals of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This book explains the intent of the Standards and provides teachers with tools to help them assess the complexity of texts. Most importantly, the authors also extend the Standards by presenting a framework that teachers can use to plan curriculum and instruction. Teachers can use the extended examples to visualize how close reading is a part of literacy instruction within a classroom.

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Throughout the book, *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp (2012) provide information about text complexity within the context of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy (CCSS; National Governors Association [NGA], 2010a). Since publication of the Standards, many educators became focused on Standard 10, which mandates “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (NGA, 2010a, p. 16 [K-5] and p. 35 [6-12]). Standards provide a framework for learning, but do not extend to the related curriculum and instruction. Thus, not surprisingly, the authors of the CCSS address text complexity and how to select text, but they did not provide examples of the classroom instruction necessary to scaffold students (NGA, 2010a). As an elementary reading specialist, I have many questions about how to extend this vision of text complexity and close reading into instruction that meets the needs of my students.

In *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*, Fisher and colleagues deliver what teachers need to know, deftly integrating and expanding upon the salient points contained in the CCSS and the pertinent supplemental documents. This is worthwhile for teachers still learning about the Standards, but the biggest value for teachers is that the authors extend the standards to add a framework for classroom instruction. The expanded examples of instruction enable teachers to visualize how close reading of complex texts might be implemented in a classroom. Then after developing a solid understanding of text complexity, teachers can use the framework to plan instruction to insure their students are successful. For me, many of my questions about
instruction are answered with the information and interwoven examples provided throughout *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*.

In addition to the information about Standard 10, the aspect of this book that I liked the best is that these authors explain the roles of the teacher and students. They acknowledge the importance of the teacher to insure that children will learn how to comprehend complex texts, noting, “it takes time to develop the thinking skills necessary to read complex texts. It also takes really good instruction” (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 16). They also acknowledge that the reader is the key, “however, the most important factor, the reader, is what makes a text come to life” (p. 77). This book is a tool that teachers can use to create the appropriate instruction so that their students can bring complex texts to life.

Chapter One is an overview of text complexity and provides an accessible entry point into the topic. The authors clearly state their agreement with the intent of the CCSS. They believe that all children should be exposed to complex text and have numerous opportunities to analyze complex text. Giving struggling readers only easy texts perpetuates their below grade level performance. They assert that children need to struggle a bit with text so that they understand and learn comprehension strategies and can ultimately apply them independently. The authors explain that this means letting students read challenging text and encountering some problems so that their reading slows as they consciously apply strategies to try to solve them. With the assistance provided in appropriately scaffolded instruction supporting strategy development, as outlined in the book, students learn and practice strategies as they find solutions. The authors assert that students will become able to use these strategies independently while reading text of increased complexity.

The CCSS define text complexity as three interconnected dimensions; quantitative dimensions, qualitative dimensions, and reader and task considerations. Believing that good instruction starts with understanding why texts are complex, Fisher and colleagues examine each of these dimensions in depth in chapters two through four, respectively. These chapters begin with the definitions from the CCSS. Then, explanations with short examples are interspersed to provide clear explanations of concepts. The authors provide a list of resources in the references for each chapter so that teachers and literacy leaders can find additional information. To balance the information presented, the authors include a section in each chapter about the cautions and criticisms associated with the aspect of text complexity discussed. Chapter Five provides two in-depth examples of reading a short piece of complex text, one in a fourth grade class and the other in a ninth grade class.

### Assessing the Complexity of a Text

Quantitative measures of text complexity count aspects of word and sentences. First, the authors review the components contained in readability formulas including a brief history of how educators identified these components and what aspects of the reading process they attempt to measure. Fisher et al.’s explanation of the various readability formulas show the differences in what is measured between various formulas to show why readability formulas yield different results. Their example of the difference in the readability level of a passage from a popular book, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), based on the various formulas illustrates this point in an interesting and thought-provoking way. In Fisher, Frey, and Lapp’s view, the use of quantitative measures to assess a text is to provide a starting level to consider the grade level that may be appropriate.
To me, the heart of the book is in the last three chapters which provide tools for teachers to use on a day-to-day basis. In Chapter Three, the authors explain qualitative measures, which are in four categories: levels of meaning and purpose, structure, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands. These categories are further broken down into components and explained in greater detail than the CCSS documents. These facets of text require humans to consider them; therefore, teachers’ knowledge and judgment are keys. The authors assembled resources, many of their own, from various publications that they believe will help teachers understand this dimension of text complexity. In order to help teachers analyze a text and plan instruction, Fisher and colleagues organize this information in an informal tool, the Qualitative Measures of Text Complexity Rubric (pp. 47-48). Teachers would rate the text on the three-point rubric, and they would quickly see which components would “stretch a reader” (p. 47). These areas may require instruction. They give an example of a third grade teacher who had determined that quantitatively the book *Throw Your Tooth on the Roof: Tooth Traditions from Around the World* (Beeler, 1998) was accessible for most of her class. Through using the rubric to examine the book qualitatively, the teacher realized that the unfamiliar cultures and geographic locations placed a knowledge demand that would stretch her students. Further, the book structure was comparative as it explained the loss of a tooth across these unfamiliar cultures. This teacher then took this information to plan instruction that focused on helping her students understand the organizational structure of the book while building knowledge about these cultures and places. The expanded explanations, such as this one, and other short examples of these components provided by Fisher and colleagues in the chapter deliver the necessary information so teachers could easily and confidently use this rubric to assess a text.

As the authors explain in Chapter Four, matching readers to texts and tasks is another facet of text complexity that is highly dependent on teacher knowledge and judgment. The teacher needs to consider what the reader brings to the reader-text transaction. In this dimension, the authors explore the complexity of the types of instructional activities, teacher-led, peer-led or individual, and the questions that would be appropriate. Fisher and colleagues gather information from other sources and give commentary that provide a more detailed explanation than the CCSS. The Checklist for Matching Readers to Texts (pp. 75-76) is another informal tool they created to insure teachers consider each component about the reader characteristics and instructional activities as they plan lessons. I found the information given about accountable talk (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2008 as cited in Fisher et al., 2012) gave me ideas to increase the effectiveness of discussion. I also found the questions about Peer Tasks in the checklist helpful for insuring that I provide the appropriate supports for small groups or pairs to be effective. Using this checklist combined with the information from the rubric in Chapter Three, teachers can decide if a text is appropriate for their students and begin to plan instruction using the framework in Chapter Five.

**The Instructional Framework of Close Reading**

Chapter Five explores close reading of complex text by beginning with a discussion about the importance of the text in the transaction between the text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1985). These authors, as well as others in the field (e.g., Lewis, 2000), assert that personal connections have been overemphasized by some at the expense of comprehending the author’s message. Fisher and colleagues explain a suggested instructional method that they believe will “achieve the balance that we think Rosenblatt was looking for” (p. 108). They recommend using
short pieces of text for instruction to allow for re-readings and scaffolding activities to occur within a class period. In their view, a key instructional component is letting students have the opportunity to notice what is confusing by not providing too much information prior to reading. They also recommend having students read independently the first time, and then begin group discussion and activities, such as modeling and questioning, to scaffold the students.

Since discussion is a key to instruction, Fisher and colleagues provide a wide range of questions in the chart of Questions about Text (pp. 96-97). These questions will encourage discussions around the text in order to foster a deeper comprehension of the text. They provide useful overviews of researched questioning methods, such as Question-Answer Relationships (QAR), that teachers may want to adapt for their classrooms.

The end of the chapter provides two extended examples of classroom instruction using the instructional framework. These include the short text and the step-by-step movement through the lesson. One example is in a fourth grade class and the other is in a ninth grade class. These examples provide a clear picture of the instructional moves of the teacher and the thought process behind them.

After reading these examples, I still wanted to know more about how close reading might look in a primary classroom. A concern of mine is how teachers will balance the needs of the beginning reader to learn how to decode effectively with the need to begin to learn how to think about complex texts. I thought that the book could have included an example in an early primary classroom as well as discussed the needs of beginning readers more. Fortunately, Fisher and Frey (2012) answer many of these questions in a recent article, “Close Reading in Elementary Schools.” In this article, Fisher and Frey explored how to adapt close reading done by exemplary secondary teachers for use in elementary classrooms. In my opinion, this article is strengthened by the voices of the secondary and elementary classroom teachers who discussed close reading and examples from their instruction. In particular, I found the suggested sequence of teaching elementary students the habit of taking notes while reading, beginning in kindergarten with modeling, very informative. I highly recommend reading this article as a companion to the book.

To gain further insight into the CCSS, I strongly suggest that educators read the International Reading Association’s (IRA) white paper, Literacy Implementation Guidance for the ELA Common Core State Standards (IRA CCSS Committee, 2012). Beyond the Standards, additional information about text complexity may be found in these supplementary documents:

- Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA and Literacy in History/Social; Studies, and Technical Subjects: Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards and Glossary of Key Terms (NGA, 2010b)
- Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the CCSS for ELA and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity (NGA, 2010c)
- For New York educators, the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS, NYSED, 2011) can be accessed through the EngageNY website. The additions made by New York State do not change any information presented by Fisher and colleagues. The two additional documents, above, were adopted as is from the national Standards.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter One, this book promises all K-12 teachers a framework to help students be successful in reading complex texts. In my view, as an elementary school reading specialist, they delivered. The Qualitative Measure of Text Complexity Rubric (pp. 47-48), the Checklist for
Matching Readers to Texts (pp. 75-76), and the expanded examples of classroom instruction are the strengths of this book. These combine to give teachers tools to assist them in judging the complexity of a text and then planning instruction to scaffold their students. These go beyond the goals established in the Standards to provide an in-depth and user-friendly guide to assist teachers in understanding and implementing close reading of complex texts in their classrooms. For school literacy leaders, this book would be an excellent choice for a book study.

I had many questions about implementing the CCSS, especially about text complexity. The Qualitative Measures of Text Complexity Rubric and the Checklist for Matching Texts to Readers did provide a framework for me that I will use in my daily planning of instruction. As an elementary reading specialist, I found reading *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading* to be very useful.
References


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**ABSTRACT**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) affect teachers and teacher educators alike, and information on effective utilization of the CCSS is quickly becoming a valuable commodity for everyone associated with the teaching profession. *Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: A Literacy Practices Approach for 6-12 Classrooms*, by Richard Beach, Amanda Haertling Thein, and Allen Webb, provides English Language Arts educators with valuable insights into the development of the Common Core State Standards, as well as examples for successful classroom implementation at the 6-12 level. This review examines whether the material will be beneficial to educators, allowing them to determine the effectiveness of this resource as a possible tool in their own teaching.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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As a result of the new state and federal initiatives in education, active members in the educational community are becoming aware of the adjustments that are necessary to meet new expectations about public school programs. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) affect teachers and teacher educators alike, and information on effective utilization of the CCSS is quickly becoming a valuable commodity for everyone associated with the teaching profession. *Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: A Literacy Practices Approach for 6-12 Classrooms* by Richard Beach, Amanda Haertling Thein, and Allen Webb provides English Language Arts educators with valuable insights into the development of the Common Core State Standards, as well as examples for successful classroom implementation at the 6-12 level. This review examines whether the material will be beneficial to educators, allowing them to determine the effectiveness of this resource as a possible tool in their own teaching.

The authentic quotes, situations, issues, reactions, and situations presented throughout this book make it accessible to teachers, especially those actively seeking information on how to explicitly apply CCSS suggestions in school settings. These lessons are particularly valuable because they employ texts, topics, and activities that are commonly integrated into English Language Arts curricula. For instance, the authors describe several lessons where a teacher engages the students using Harper Lee’s (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a basis for developing...
interactive activities that result in students learning material relevant for CCSS competency. Students were able to actively engage with and make connections to the text when teachers presented literature in conjunction with a variety of multi-modal supplemental materials and relevant activities, including vivid historical accounts, current movie clips exemplifying similar topics and situations, and the provision of multiple opportunities for student response. Several components of the CCSS are met through these activities, as students gain experience in analyzing and integrating information from different sources, considering the point of view of the author and other characters, experience and evaluate different mediums of communication, and determine the meaning and message embedded in text. This unit plan was described in detail, with portions of student transcripts and descriptions of their reactions. The account of this plan, as well as others described throughout the book, exhibits successful implementation of literacy practices that will pave the way for student success on CCSS assessments in components of all four of the identified areas: literature/reading, writing, speaking/listening/media, and language.

This book contains a copious amount of expertly modeled teaching examples that successfully implement CCSS-meeting activities in exciting ways. The realistic nature of these examples will empower educators, as the lesson descriptions demonstrate that successful CCSS teaching is well within their reach. There are also follow-up questions and scenarios provided, which can further guide teachers in their own planning of effective CCSS classroom activities. Additionally, there are activity suggestions at multiple points within each chapter, which include several practical questions for thought and discussion. These suggestions could be effective prompts in teacher education or professional development settings. Just as Beach, Thein, and Webb promote positive results of lesson plans that use authentic projects to actively engage students, these prompts allow in-service and pre-service teachers to experience those same positive results as they explore effective ways to expand and revise their practices.

This book is divided into three parts: Foundations and Theoretical Frameworks for English Language Arts Instruction, Implementing and Exceeding the Common Core State Standards, and Evaluation, Assessment, and Reflection.

The first section of this book provides the reasoning behind the development of the CCSS. There is a superb mix of information provided. This overview explains everything from the rationale for CCSS necessity to the possible problems that could result from CCSS implementation. The book promotes the changing standards with a refreshingly positive slant, emphasizing teacher aptitude and the flexibility afforded them in subsequent curriculum and instruction choices. The authors recognize that the act of standardizing has negative implications. They promote options for providing CCSS-based instruction while still acknowledging the need to differentiate teaching for individual students. As Standards, the CCSS are not intended as a curricula with specific instructional implications. The authors address the perception that the CCSS dictate a formalist instructional orientation, and counter this view with descriptions of several other curriculum models and possibilities.

While this book does an excellent job of describing and promoting the literacy practices framework as a solid instructional model for CCSS implementation, the initial introduction might be interpreted as confusing. The preliminary contrast of the literacy practices framework to less sufficient options already utilized by educators offered direct comparisons of various instructional model specifics. These comparisons were offered in relation to the literacy practices framework, before the literacy practices model had been described in great detail. The authors present some valid reasons for promoting the literacy practices framework over other models,
since they discourage the use of any teaching structure that promotes English Language Arts as a set of skills, shared cultural knowledge, understanding of literacy and rhetorical forms, or as a set of processes or strategies. The direct evaluations of weaknesses in established frameworks to strengths in the literacy practices framework might resonate stronger with readers if a more thorough understanding of the literacy practices framework itself was established before those comparisons were drawn.

Throughout the first section, the authors continually reiterate that the CCSS are more open-ended and less content-focused than traditional school programs, without a required curriculum or method. There is an accompanying list of exemplars, but teacher discretion is advised for determining which materials would provide appropriate and engaging lessons for their students. Recommendations are even given for situations where teachers do not have control over their curriculum or program, with the authors noting that teachers can still select their topics, texts, and the order in which they present material.

This book promotes the critical-inquiry-based literacy practices curriculum model, which focuses on “meaningful issues, topics, themes, activities, experiences, and events that will engage students in learning” (p. 42-43). These meaningful and authentic literacy events are the vehicle through which students develop skills to meet CCSS expectations. Rather than a traditional format of teacher-centered, linear instruction, the collaborative model encourages students to take ownership of their learning, which is just as vital as teachers taking ownership of their curriculum, and synthesize meaningful connections through classroom experiences. Multi-modal, technology-based, and non-linear projects are all recommended, in order to better prepare students for modern and authentic situations. There are also some excellent suggestions for framing lessons in juxtaposition to world events, with the possibility for participation at the community level.

The second part of this book, Implementing and Exceeding the Common Core State Standards, is divided into chapters that address explicit implementation of activities that encourage students to exceed assessment in each focal CCSS area. These chapters refer to many of the explicit teaching examples that are described in Part I. In this section, however, there are greater amounts of contextual details, longer portions of transcripts, more inclusive lists of introductory and follow-up activities, assessment strategies, and extensive lists of materials and resources. Additionally, when the authors mention a lesson plan that results in the acquisition of a particular “literacy practice” they recommended in Part I as an effective progression towards CCSS success, the terms are italicized for reader acknowledgement and connection. These include literary practices such as “enacting an identity” and “framing events.”

A traditional format of teaching consists of introducing the style and features of a genre, then focusing on that genre throughout the course of a unit. In this text, the idea of immediately engaging in meaningful activities spanning several standards is promoted over the aforementioned format. The chapters provide examples of lesson plans from across the country, touching on a variety of current topics. Connections are made across subject matter and time periods, as classic texts are associated with recommendations for addressing modern issues. Beach, Thein, and Webb advocate “weaving instruction into a thematic curriculum focused on students gaining knowledge of important and meaningful content that fosters student choice and includes literacy practice events” (p. 196).

Each lesson plan example addresses students’ personal lives, as well as their relationship to the broader world. They encourage participation in the greater community, and in larger institutions that promote the development of students to become truly “democratic citizens” (one
of the CCSS goals), and to gain an understanding of how to interpret and address issues and tensions in establishments that affect their lives. These lessons are described clearly, with explicitly modeled teaching language. Educators reading this book will welcome the non-intimidating presentation, as it promotes an easy transfer of the ideas portrayed in the pages to the reality of their classroom. Teachers can use the lessons that are described, but the authors also arm teachers with suggestions for implementing literacy practices using their own knowledge and expertise; through plans, materials, and activities that are most relevant to their students and situation. Additionally, there are extensive program and text suggestions provided with many of the lesson and activity propositions. When a particular theme for teaching is discussed, a list of books or resources that might be useful for educators implementing a similar plan is provided.

There are a great number of website suggestions and computer programs mentioned and described throughout this section, in keeping with the authors’ views that there should be even more emphasis on media and digital literacies in the CCSS. Chapter Nine devotes a great amount of the content to the discussion of another companion website, which engages students in “digital worlds” where they can actively participate in projects and exchanges related to traditional school literature (e.g. Lord of the Flies).

While acknowledging the importance of recognizing and incorporating current technology and media into classroom projects and instruction, this book attempts to lead by example through a supplemental website for further reading and discussion activities. Unfortunately, the direct link provided in the book (www.routledge.com/cw/beach) produced only error messages. Upon request, the authors provided an active link: http://englishccss.pbworks.com. There are references to online material throughout the book (such as the digital worlds), as well as references to other websites that could serve as helpful resources for teachers, although their availability over time may be questionable, as Internet content is not necessarily permanent.

In Part III, Evaluation, Assessment, and Reflection, Beach, Thein, and Webb address teacher assessment behaviors pertaining to student work and instructional practices. The authors advocate for constant informal assessment alongside learning. This practice can inform instruction and respond to student needs. The proposed goal is for teachers to instate “ongoing descriptive, supportive, formative feedback to students” which assesses “literacy practices over time, in meaningful contexts, and relative to how those practices effectively function in social ways” (p. 236). This goal, through the teaching methods described in this book, strives for desired outcomes of CCSS implementation: equipping students with advanced thinking skills that will be necessary in higher education and career settings.

Part III builds on the earlier two sections of this book by listing the “literacy practices” described in earlier chapters, along with explanations of effective and appropriate assessment techniques. For instance, readers learn that framing events entails students inferring “ways that goals, norms, roles, and beliefs shape people’s or characters’ actions in a specific event” (p. 244). The literacy practice of framing events can be experienced in the classroom through reading narratives, learning about historical periods, and dissecting character goals and actions based on the circumstances of those characters. Assessment of framing events can occur when a teacher asks students to explain the actions of a character. If a student is able to provide a possible explanation for character actions while considering extenuating factors and conditions that affect said character, they are demonstrating successful application of this literacy practice.
In keeping with their helpful penchant of providing lists of resources, Part III of this text contains suggestions for websites that can assist in providing assessment plans, rubrics, e-portfolios, and class website templates. There is a great deal of information directed towards both pre-service teachers entering the job market and veteran teachers who need to be adjusting to current practices and standards, updating their portfolios, and participating in on-going professional development. The need to engage in continuous self-assessment and action research, integrate modern technology, and remain connected to the professional community is expressed in a compelling manner.

This text provides a comprehensive collection of clear explanations, applications, and assessment teaching strategies that focus on effectively integrating CCSS into the literacy classroom for grades 6-12. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each educator to employ the information and suggestions provided. In doing so, they will almost certainly appreciate the results.
ABSTRACT

In February 2013, co-editor of *LLS* Ross Collin interviewed Margaret Ruller. Ms. Ruller is Curriculum Director of English Language Arts and Social Studies for the Arlington Central School District in New York. Their conversation revolved around Common Core and the ways teachers and administrators are responding to the new initiative. The interview transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

*LLS:* To begin, let's put aside our own personal evaluations of Common Core and just try to understand it a bit in its own terms. In your understanding of Common Core, what characterizes what we might call a "core learner?" And what does good English Language Arts/ Literacy instruction look like in the Common Core?

*MR:* Let's talk about that core learner first. I believe that the new standards are trying to push us to develop a student who is a critical reader and writer, who can think on his or her own feet, who can identify bias in what they read, write, and hear. And we’re trying to develop a student who really looks across disciplines through a literacy lens. Also, technology is critical and sometimes schools are the last to catch on with that. But that's what I see. I see Common Core as helping us "fill the bucket," if you will, with some key resources for kids to draw upon as they move through not just their academic career, but on into a professional career.

*LLS:* Okay. And maybe one of the reasons we have Common Core is that the bucket isn't as filled as we'd like it to be with the sort of critical thinking and interdisciplinary understandings we value.

*MR:* We haven't always necessarily given students the tools they need to move on. Sometimes we have “surface taught,” and therefore there has been “surface learning.” I think the Core is asking us to really push deeper into any text that we engage in, in any discipline.

*LLS:* What's an example of this sort of "surface education" that we might see in English Language Arts or in other literacy teaching?

*MR:* Typically, historically, at the elementary level, we have been over-focused for a very long time on realistic fiction. Because it's a genre students can relate to very quickly. It's easy to make connections, it's easy to understand the experiences of kids who are very much like ourselves, and it’s easy to work your way through those problems and solutions. But the world is much more complex than that. And we've tended to shy away from engaging kids with text that will challenge their thinking, even at the youngest levels. That's what I see as one of the big shifts. And we can help teachers understand that kids can engage in that kind of thinking, if we teach them how.
LLS: So you're saying we have an over-reliance on realistic fiction, which isn't the same as saying, “Let’s get rid of all fiction.”

MR: No. There has to be a balance. I know certainly for my ELA teachers at the secondary level who are content specialists, they see themselves as teachers of literature. And they looked at the Core standards, and they looked at the shift toward more nonfiction, and they said, "Uh-oh, what happens to To Kill a Mockingbird? Does this mean we have to move completely away from the great American novel?” And I don't see it that way at all. I see it more as a balance. I think the opportunities exist for us to really teach—to stay on To Kill a Mockingbird—to really teach students at the high school level why this novel is still important fifty years later. There's so much non-fiction that can be taught parallel to the book that really enhances understanding of the text and tells us really why the text was written.

LLS: And that's very different from saying, “Let's throw out To Kill a Mockingbird.”

MR: Right. I don't believe that’s the intention of Common Core.

LLS: Yes. This gets us to the question of Common Core’s 70 percent/30 percent breakdown of informational and fictional texts. Can you say a little bit about your understanding of how that breakdown works and what it will look like in the classroom?

MR: I think the folks who wrote the Core intended for the 70/30 breakdown to work across disciplines, because there is a very intentional tactic of bringing in the content area teachers to the teaching of literacy. I think we need to realize that's part of the 70 percent. In science, I am engaging my students in reading and writing. In social studies, I am engaging my students in reading and writing. It's not just up to the ELA teacher to be the guardian of reading and writing in any grade level. Where we see the shift to 70 percent informational texts is at the secondary level, because the content specialists bring their own forms of reading and writing into play. So, content specialists come to be seen much more as a part of literacy teaching.

LLS: At Manhattanville College, we have a class called Literacy in the Content Areas. One of the purposes of the course is to prepare science teachers, social studies teachers, gym teachers, and so on to teach the unique forms of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking in their disciplines.

MR: It would be great if the teacher education colleges would get on board with all of that and really help teachers prepare for that reality. Right now, we're caught burning the candle at both ends, if you will. We're hoping new teachers are coming to us with better skills in that sense, but we also have to work with the folks that we have. And I have to say, our secondary teachers are crying out for help with content area literacy instruction. They want to do this. They just don't know how, because it wasn’t part of their training. So, in my district, we've had more conversations with content area instructors. The point isn’t to turn them into teachers of reading and writing. But what we want to be able to do with them is to really open up the way they view text as a disciplinary expert working with
students new to their discipline. There is an underlying assumption among teachers that kids can do a lot of things that kids can't do. And we try to help teachers share their understanding in a way that opens the text up to that ninth or tenth grader. Sure, as the teacher, you're passionate about your subject and that's why you became a science teacher or a math teacher. But you need to show students how to engage in the work of the discipline so they can absorb what you’re teaching.

Also, teachers are looking more closely at their test results. I'm talking about Regents’ results at the high school level. Teachers are saying, “Wow. Students can't write. Students often don't know what that question is asking them and, therefore, their response to the question is so totally off base.” So, how much writing are we doing in content classes? How much real writing? We want kids to engage in the big questions.

Even before Common Core, we were raising these questions with Understanding by Design and building your curriculum backwards from essential questions and enduring understandings. That's really what we want kids to grapple with. I understand, though, that the secondary folks have been caught in between, because while a lot of them see the importance of posing the big questions and long to teach that way, they are caught in a trap where the assessments focus on minutia. And so they feel conflicted. “Do I go after the big questions and leave behind the little details that may catch my kids up on the test?” It’s a tough place to be for our high school content teachers.

**LLS:** Yes, it takes a lot of time and attention and energy to go after the big questions. So if you take that time, you're not going to have as much instructional time for skill and drill and test preparation.

**MR:** And I'm afraid that the skill and drill is still a primary focus of the assessments teachers and students are being held accountable for. So it's a really tough place to be right now. When that next generation of assessment comes out, then we can see if the test makers and policy makers have really put their money where their mouths are. Only when the assessments finally go there and ask students to grapple with the enduring understandings and essential questions of a curriculum will we finally give teachers the freedom to go there.

**LLS:** This seems to be one of the big contradictions right now. We have standardized tests teachers have to get students prepared for. As you said, this test pressure oftentimes drives teachers and students towards a sort of short-term recall of a lot of facts. So high-stakes testing pushes teachers in one direction. Pushing in a very different direction are these parts of the Common Core that emphasize taking time to explore the big questions. It seems to me something's got to give. Do you have a prediction of what might give?

**MR:** I don’t. As a Curriculum Director, I have been following the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. They are the creators, if you will, of the next generation of assessments for us. We can get a glimpse into what their thinking is and right now it appears we are headed in the right direction. But many moons ago when the current generation of test design was starting, way back in the late ‘90s, the best of
intentions were what was on the table first. And what ultimately was published was a very different version of where people initially were. I think it started with much loftier goals—more of a performance task—and it boiled down to, you know, “Well, how will we evaluate this? What does it look like to score an assessment like this?”

**LLS:** As so often happens in education policy, you can start with very lofty and progressive goals, but then to get it through the policy process into something that looks feasible from one perspective, oftentimes things get watered down or changed. But maybe there are other possibilities for assessing students in ways we’re more comfortable with.

Let’s bring in our evaluations of Common Core as we understand it at the moment. On the positive side, how do you think the standards would help an ELA or Social Studies teacher or a literacy teacher define what's important to literacy learning today? On the negative side, what do you think is missing from the standards? Or are there any standards that are unhelpful?

**MR:** Well, overall, I'm pleased with what I see. I believe it provides us with a good direction for writing curriculum because it isn't curriculum. Common Core provides an understanding of where the work should be and how it scaffolds from one grade to the next so that you have vertical articulation.

My district in Arlington is interesting because we did not have ELA maps until now. So we are writing fresh with the new Common Core as our guide. And that has helped us a great deal because we stayed very closely aligned to what the expectations are at each grade level. We were very careful to articulate in our maps that we were moving kids across skills and strategies that are embedded in the Core.

I very much think the focus on writing is helpful to our district. I don't think that we do enough writing in classrooms at any grade level in any content area. Deep writing. Not worksheet writing, not change-the-verb-tense or pick-the-noun-out-in-a-sentence. Common Core has shifted the focus to expository writing and away from almost an exclusive focus on narrative writing. And I think that that makes sense.

So I see lots of positives in curriculum writing when you lean on the Common Core. It does support a strong vertical integration if we follow it. And the standards are pretty broad in the sense that they take into consideration, as the old standards did, listening, speaking, and language use. So you're looking at how you function as a student of literacy across all aspects.

Do I think there are negatives to it? Well, again, testing is always on everyone’s mind. What will this look like when they come out with the new assessments? I also have teachers at the primary level who are terrified that we will eventually have K-2 assessments. So, you know, there are scary things that sometimes are implied in the new reforms.
Initially, what teachers were worried about is how drastically the reforms would change what they're doing. As we moved through this year, we've developed a comfort level around where we're headed now as a district. Districts are adjusting now, after they've had a chance to digest the reforms.

When Common Core was first published, the whole conversation was around the focus on text. Many thoughtful educators in the field of Reading felt as though we had taken a step backward. We had spent so many years advancing the power of matching students to texts. This new focus on complex text needed a great deal of conversation. I do think it got a great deal of conversation from all of the right people. And I believe now when we think about the use of complex text, we think about it in terms of balance. There are times in our classrooms when we have to push kids into complex text and we have to build that kind of self-sustaining strategy because we can't be with readers all the time. There have to be moments in our classrooms when children are engaged in leveled text that will meet their needs appropriately so that they don't feel as though they are not and cannot be a reader.

So there has to be that balance. I'm not the first person to say this—there's no "how" in the Common Core. It's just a set of outcomes that we need to attend to as kids move K-12. This gives you lots of freedom in your own district, as a teacher, as a curriculum writer. That freedom, however, can be a double-edged sword. We can certainly identify one indicator and I could watch a lesson in one classroom that would be very powerfully connected to that indicator. And I could watch a lesson that would be not so powerful, but still connected to that indicator. So it's not enough to just say, “The expectation is that children will understand character motivation across multiple texts.” That's a nice statement, but now it's the job at the district level, and indeed at the classroom level, to determine what does good teaching look like aligned to that expectation? And that's a big conversation.

LLS: So it doesn't say how to do X, Y, or Z. It says that this is the direction we're going.

MR: Right. It just says, “Here is what we expect sixth graders to know and be able to do.” How you get students there is still a decision that's made locally, and I do believe that that's appropriate.

LLS: You mentioned just a minute ago that there was some trepidation among teachers when Common Core was first launched, and especially among language and literacy teachers. There was a lot of concern about what the 70/30 breakdown would mean in classrooms, and some of those fears have lessened a bit. What do you hear when teachers discuss their concerns about Common Core? Many of these concerns are legitimate, although some may be based on misinformation. What do you hear?

MR: I often hear, "Well, but I love doing what I’ve been doing, using my favorite texts, and so on, but I'm not sure it still fits with what Common Core is looking for. So does that mean I have to throw everything I've done away and start over?" And it's really been coaching teachers to see that some of what we were doing and loved will fit in the new standards.
But we also have to understand that there are some things that don't have a place anymore. And we have to be willing to forego those units of study, or favorite texts, or find a different way to use them. So I think there's always a struggle with, as an individual teacher, "But I feel that I've been successful this way." And now the Common Core says, "Okay, but we really need you to turn your focus in a different direction."

Teachers are in a transition period. They're trying to make sense of what they need to do, what they've always done, and wondering if there is a place where these two converge.

**LLS:** So there may be some resentment of being told to go in a different direction. Teachers may feel something’s being imposed. However, there might be some kind of balance we can strike between the old and the new. And it's certainly not throwing out everything that you've ever done. We want to keep what we've been successful with.

**MR:** Right.

**LLS:** Okay. How about the other side of it? Some teachers are expressing, if not excitement, then some more positive feelings about possibilities Common Core might open up. What have you heard?

**MR:** At the elementary level, we have a lot of teachers who are breathing a little easier, because it's almost given them permission to bring more content into their literacy block. So we're looking now at the ability to really teach deeply in science and social studies. And teachers can take, for instance, a social studies lesson, a unit on the American Revolution and really teach it through literacy. The feeling among some teachers is that I've gotten a little bit more time back in my day because I'm not compartmentalizing everything I do with kids. We have to read and write. There has to be something that we're putting our eyes on and something that we're constructing. So helping teachers understand that we can pull that in and give you more freedom to work at the K-5 level, I think that's been a big plus.

And we're certainly seeing the curriculum is being written for the state, which isn't mandatory, but if you look at what Expeditionary Learning has done, they have very much brought social studies and science to the forefront in the literacy units of study they have written so far.

At the secondary level, where we see each other mostly as teachers of literature, what's exciting teachers is the ability to see paired text in a way that they've never seen before. And certainly, some of the exemplars that were put out earlier in the conversation that focused on the Gettysburg Address and "Letter from Birmingham Jail" really began to shift people's thinking. They started to ask how they could take a book they’re already using and that they love and show kids contextually what may have fed into its development, or what it touches on and connects in the world around us. It allows students to understand why a text is still important. So that paired text piece, I hear more and more of my teachers looking for paired texts.
LLS: That's become one of their major concepts in talking about informational texts?

MR: Right. Because they see it as addressing the 70/30 split. They see it as not having to give up texts that they love. But if I find a way to match it with something that lives in the world of non-fiction or current events, then I’ve addressed one of the major shifts of Common Core. And it helps to make the reading and writing relevant for the adolescent learner who is so focused on what's happening in the world.

LLS: So students have a powerful context for the text. This is something English teachers have been doing for a while. And that might come as a relief to some teachers, to see it's not reinventing the wheel, it's just sort of doubling down on some of the good stuff they've already been doing. What resources do you use when working on curriculum? What resources help you make standards meaningful?

MR: Well, right now in our district, we're actually working with AUSSIE coaches and although their focus is pedagogical. They have also really helped us focus on non-fiction and how non-fiction can be exciting for kids and how it can connect to our content areas. Our coaches have helped teachers become more comfortable saying, "Yes, I can do that, I can see why the kids are so interested in the text, and can't wait to get back to their seats and write about it." They also work with us on our mapping.

The resources on EngageNY have been very helpful. They have the latest curriculum modules posted. Even if we choose not to use them, I find reading through the modules, understanding the structure and the thinking behind it is very powerful to the work that we're doing on our own.

Expeditionary Learning has a lot of videos up that will show teachers different techniques. Everybody's interested in what it means to do a close reading. “What is this new language about and is it something I've already done and they've just given it a different name?” So these resources have been helpful in terms of accessibility and not having to gather people together to deliver it because it's out there online. I can say to people, “Look—here’s a link to something I need you to look at.” Or, “Here's a video that may help you in your department meeting this month.”

Technology plays an increasingly significant role in helping us get this work going in a way that we couldn't have if it had to be just me moving to each building and each grade level.

LLS: So, there are good resources that are available.

MR: And I think teachers have done a good job of trying to use Expeditionary Learning as effectively as they possibly can. It's kind of like a warehouse for us, and it sometimes takes a little reading through. But there are good resources there for us to reference.
When you work with teachers and use these resources, do you typically work with individual teachers, teachers who are gathered in a learning group, or do you do this work at the departmental level?

It's really all of the above. You know, at the elementary level, we typically work on grade level, but at the secondary level, we work in departments. And teachers may also meet in smaller groups, like just the sixth grade ELA team. We have worked individually with teachers, gone into classrooms and coached people, followed up. So it's really in all different fashions. It depends on the learner. Teachers are learners, and for me to know who my learners are and what they need from me next doesn't mean that I tackle the whole 12th grade, because there are different needs there. And the more that I can address that and differentiate the professional development I offer, the more people I bring into the fold. That's critical.

It sounds like part of the approach is starting with where teachers are.

Right. I need to respect who you are, so if you are someone who could teach this approach, then I'm insulting you if I bring you into a three-hour workshop where I'm talking basics. I need to know that you're ready to be pushed to a different level, yet I don't want to leave the people who don't know what I'm talking about behind and talk over their heads. So we need to be very careful of how the professional development is delivered as well.

When you think about the big picture of Common Core, is there anything that we haven't touched on yet that you think is really critical to address?

I think teachers are surprised that there aren't recommended texts. Some teachers might have expected an Appendix A that said, "Here are the books you must teach." So it gives teachers a great deal of freedom in making some new choices about materials, which is a good thing.

Some of the teachers I have been speaking with still have some misgivings about Common Core. At the same time, they said that if Common Core can be used as a lever to pry us away from drill-and-skill instruction, then that's all for the best for us and ultimately for kids.

I believe that's true. I think we still have a way to go to see how this plays out. But in interpreting it into our maps and into our teaching, I've seen some very talented teachers do some very powerful teaching because they've seen the freedom that it gives them to do deep work with kids. Not just surface-level work, but really pushing kids to push their thinking.

As you said earlier, too, how this plays out is going to depend so strongly on what the assessments are.

Yes.
Interview: Ross Collin and Margaret Ruller

LLS: What is your advice is for educators, for teachers, administrators, and teacher educators? What do you think we can do to make sure the assessments play out in a positive direction? Because that ball is rolling, do we just have to hope it rolls our way? Or can we advocate through NCTE or through other organizations?

MR: Those are good questions. We’re always told that teachers are part of these conversations about assessment, and yet on occasion, we get an assessment and we look at it and say, “Who selected that passage or question? What fourth grader could answer that question?” So you do have to wonder sometimes how some assessments get developed and how they get vetted.

It's a very stressful time. It's sort of like the perfect storm. There's all this Common Core and there's all this APPR, and teachers' heads are imploding with all of the changes that they're trying to cope with simultaneously. And I understand that. I think the smart thing, although it's always hard, is to help teachers see how all these pieces fit together and that they're not separate entities. But we really have to help teachers figure out what these changes mean for them day-to-day. Because it can be—I hate to use this word, but it can be overwhelming.

LLS: That's true. That's the word.

MR: So our job, the role that I have, is to help teachers and building administrators see where the focus needs to be first, and not have people try to wrap their arms around the whole thing in one shot.

LLS: I think that underscores just the critical role of administrators and, especially, curriculum developers. It's not just teachers on their own working this out. This is a team effort.

MR: I think one of the helpful things for our teachers—I hope they feel this way, anyway—is having new maps this year and knowing that the new maps are already aligned to the Common Core for them. I've had lots of conversations with teachers who, as this change process was evolving in our own district, they were calling and saying, "Well, I need to know what the standards are going to be. I have to put that in my lesson plan." And I kept reassuring them, saying, "Please know that whatever you teach next year, we've already done that work for you." The links have been made, if you will, and if your principal asks you what standards a lesson is addressing, it's already in the map for you to show it to them. You don't have to stop and think about that. And I said, "What you need to think about is how you can develop strong mini-lessons that will get your kids to the enduring understandings of the unit. That's what your role is." But we've tried to take away those "Have I made all the links?" questions for them as we wrote the curriculum. It's one less thing for them to have to worry about in terms of their own teaching.

LLS: Right. They can actually focus on teaching rather than making every single little link that has to be there.

MR: And they were worried about that, they really were, as we shifted into the new standards.
Yes. That's an understandable concern. Margaret Ruller, thank you very much for your time. I appreciate your insights into the Common Core.

My pleasure.
NYSRA is currently accepting proposals for our 2013 conference:

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We are especially encouraging practicing educators to submit proposals to share what works for you and your students as you strive to meet the rigorous goals of the Common Core Learning Standards. Proposals should address the question: as we teach to the common core learning standards, how can we meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classrooms and libraries?

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The editors of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*, the New York State Reading Association’s Journal, invite submissions of manuscripts for peer review. This issue is drawing from the 2013 theme of the New York State Reading Association’s annual conference “Literacy for All Learners”. Who are the diverse learners in our classrooms and libraries? Are we meeting their needs in the Common Core era?

We are seeking manuscripts that consider:

- the complexity of how we define “diverse learners”
- classroom examples of differentiation to meet the needs of all learners
- how we foster connection, community building, and identity formation through literacy learning
- stories of innovative uses of technology to tap into students’ interests and strengths
- what’s changing in your classrooms and schools including new standards, new evaluations, new technologies, and shifts in demographics; how you are responding; and what you need to meet the needs of all learners

While theoretical and research articles are invited, please keep in mind that this is a journal for the NYSRA memberships, which consists primarily of practicing teachers and literacy specialists. We encourage articles from K-12 practitioners as well as articles written by authors and presenters from the 2013 conference. We welcome book reviews of relevant professional texts as well as children’s literature.

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**Submission Guidelines**

- Manuscripts, abstracts, and cover letters must be sent electronically.
- As a separate attachment, include a cover letter that specifically outlines how your paper addresses the call for manuscripts.
- Your name and institutional affiliation should only appear in the cover letter.
- Only original manuscripts that have not previously been published and are not currently under review at another journal will be reviewed.
- Manuscripts are ordinarily between 10-20 pages long and must be submitted as Word documents that are double-spaced in 12 pt Times New Roman font. Abstracts should be 125 words or less.
- All submissions must adhere to APA format.
- All submissions should include an author biography of 50-75 words that includes an email address where readers can contact them.

Manuscripts may be submitted to:  
tlalspectrum@nysreading.org