Author Monographs

Common Core Standards and Reading Programs at the Elementary School Level

By

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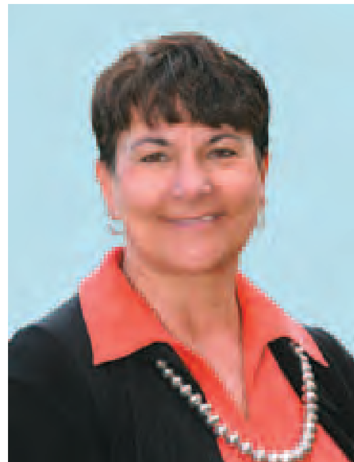

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, or Common Core) have ushered in a new era in the field of literacy. This new era has the potential for improving education in this country. Alternatively, the era could end with a quiet thud. What happens depends on many things, the most important of which is how teachers will come to know, understand and implement the Common Core successfully. Without teachers' knowledge and expertise about the Common Core and how they can implement them in their classrooms, the CCSS have little chance of success.

As teachers learn about the CCSS, they are filled with questions. "Does this mean we have to throw out everything we have been doing?" "Are we back to whole language?" "Are we just adding more to our plate?" "Didn't we do this twenty years ago?" "What about my students who can't read?" "Do we now have to make up our whole curriculum?" "Do we have to find all new materials for our students to read?" "What about strategies?" "Are we supposed to stop teaching them?"

Thus, professional development has never been more important in the literacy field than it is now. While teacher education institutions can begin to assist teachers in understanding the Standards, it will ultimately be left to the school districts themselves to educate the almost three million elementary teachers currently working in American schools.

School districts will need help. That help and assistance can come from materials and reading programs that teachers use to organize their literacy blocks around the CCSS. There is no inherent expectation in the Common Core that teachers create their own curriculum. Further, it is unrealistic and unfair to expect teachers to develop their own curriculum around the Common Core. Teachers have neither the time nor energy, and many do not have the expertise, to develop a new reading curriculum from scratch. Besides, there are many positive and evidence-based practices in current use by teachers and recommended in reading programs—these practices need to continue.

In addition, no instructional recommendations should be inferred from the Common Core. The CCSS explain only what students have to know and be able to do. How teachers teach students to know and be able to

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do what is required in the CCSS is up to them as literacy professionals. Here is where reading programs can assist districts and teachers in their efforts to successfully implement the CCSS in schools and classrooms.

The purpose of this white paper is to assist administrators, literacy coaches and teachers in how they can assure that the materials and programs they purchase will, in fact, support teachers in meeting the Common Core. This paper begins with an explanation of some basic principles behind the Standards, and then discusses what professionals in literacy should look for in a reading program to make sure it has the qualities that support teachers as they teach to meet the CCSS.

> **"Fortunately for us all, nothing has changed in these early foundational skills that children have to learn to read successfully."**

Basic Principles Behind the Common Core

Implied by the Common Core are several principles that are central to the mission of the CCSS. These principles underlie the standards and will need to become a regular part of classroom instruction if the CCSS are to be met. This list is not meant to be an exhaustive one; readers can infer other principles that are not mentioned here.

Strong Foundational Skills. The critical beginning reading skills that provide the underlying foundation for teaching children to read remain strong in the new CCSS. Fortunately for us all, nothing has changed in the early foundational skills that children have developed to learn to read successfully. A now large body of research supports the explicit teaching of these skills to all children at grades Kindergarten through 2 (NICHD, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 2000). Three of the "big five" that the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) identified—phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency—all continue to be taught as teachers implement the CCSS in their classrooms. The mastery of these skills is critical for children to be able to read critically and analytically in later grades.

Writing about Reading|Argumentative Writing. One important principle that comes out loud and clear in the CCSS is the focus on writing about what students are reading. The importance of writing in general, and writing in response to reading, has never been clearer.

A core principle in the CCSS is that students write consistently about topics and ideas related to their reading and provide text evidence to support their ideas. There is extensive research that confirms the importance of writing to support reading. In his review of the research on writing to learn, Newell (2006) cited several studies that demonstrate that students comprehend text at a deeper level when they have opportunities to write about what they read.

In addition, argumentative writing takes priority in the new CCSS. Writing stories is no longer enough. The CCSS expects students to produce more informative and persuasive writing. To meet the new CCSS, students will need to be able to draw on evidence from the texts to describe, analyze, and reflect on what they have read.

Importance of Vocabulary. Another focus of the CCSS is the integration of vocabulary into the Comprehension Standards. While vocabulary has its own space in the Common Core, it is also integrated into the Reading Standards. The underlying assumption is that vocabulary and comprehension are intricately related. Historically, reading researchers have always known the strong relationship between vocabulary and comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1979; Anderson & Nagy, 1991). It is also intuitively obvious—the more words we know, the better our comprehension is going to be. The CCSS require students to meet benchmarks in vocabulary knowledge and to use that knowledge to comprehend better.

There are two kinds of vocabulary that the CCSS address. First, general Tier 2 words are targeted for students to learn. For example, the Reading for Information Standards for Grade 4 ask students to "determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text relevant to a Grade 4 topic or subject area." Tier 2 words are words that mature, adult learners know and use as part of their everyday vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). For literature selections, Tier 2 words can be targeted for instruction, e.g., a character may be irascible or petulant. For informational texts, domain-specific words

central to the text can be targeted for instruction, e.g.. independence, Constitution.

A second kind of vocabulary is academic vocabulary. Academic vocabulary consists of words that are needed to understand the academic language used in literacy classrooms, e.g., words like realistic fiction, confirm, predict, and summarize. It is important to teach Tier 2 words as well as academic vocabulary to help students accomplish their academic tasks proficiently.

Focus on Informational Texts. Research has demonstrated that narrative texts are easier to read than informational texts. This holds true for adults as well as children (Graesser, Golding, & Long, 1991). There is something about the power of a story that resonates with all human beings, and therefore stories are relatively easy to process compared to informational texts. In general, researchers have found that adults take longer to read and process the information in informational texts and that they recall and retain less information from informational texts than they do from narrative texts. This is largely due to the more often than not well-formed story structure of narrative texts and the more often than not ill-structured nature of informational texts.

However, learning how to read informational texts must become a priority for students. After all, much of what adult readers read is informational rather than narrative. Until fairly recently, though, most elementary teachers taught reading with narrative texts. That began to change in the reading programs of the early 2000s. Slowly, more informational texts have been added to reading programs and materials. With the new CCSS, the change from reading mostly narrative to reading a combination of narrative and informational text will continue and accelerate. This is because researchers have begun to acknowledge the important role that informational text plays in adults' lives and the importance of teaching students to read these types of texts from an early age on (Duke, 2000; 2004).

Access to Complex Text. Another critically important underlying assumption of the CCSS is that students need to learn how to read more complex texts than they currently read. The CCSS cite research on high school students that shows that, as they exit high school, twelfth-graders are not ready for the level of text complexity of college and career texts (ACT, 2006; 2009; Adams, 2010–2011). Therefore, students need access to more complex text earlier in their school years.

Text complexity has been characterized in three different ways. First, text complexity can be characterized quantitatively as vocabulary difficulty and sentence length increase. Text with longer sentences and low-frequency or multisyllabic words is generally considered to be more difficult than text with shorter sentences and high-frequency or monosyllabic words. Examples of quantitative measures are seen in the old Fry and Dale-Chall readability formulas as well as the now common Lexile levels.

Second, text complexity can be defined qualitatively along a number of different dimensions. An author's purpose can make a text complex, such as when an author uses irony or sarcasm. The genre of a text can make it complex; an informational text, such as a procedure to operate a toy, is often more complex than a narrative text related to a folktale. The organization of a text can lead to difficulty in understanding a text; flashbacks in narratives typically give young readers difficulty when first encountered in texts. The specific vocabulary within a text can make it complex; a typical domain-specific textbook like chemistry or physics is extremely complex to read and understand. The amount of prior knowledge needed to understand a text can make it complex; if authors assume too much prior knowledge on the part of their readers, then comprehension suffers. How ideas and concepts are connected can make a text complex; even if readers understand the ideas and concepts, they may not understand their relationships and how they are connected. This can lead to comprehension breakdowns. Finally, the sentence structures within a text can make it complex. For example, compound, complex sentences are more difficult to understand than simple sentences. In general, sentences in novels for older readers that are ten to fifteen lines long are harder to understand than shorter sentences; paragraphs that are two pages long are harder to understand than shorter paragraphs.

Last, complex text can be characterized by reader and task conditions. The amount of prior knowledge and interest readers have for a given topic will influence how complex a text may be for those readers. In addition, the tasks assigned to readers can render a text more or less complex. For example, assignments that require

readers to compare and contrast ideas from two texts will render those texts more complex than assignments that require readers to summarize each text.

These variables all contribute to making one text simple and easy to understand, while making another one complex and therefore difficult to understand. Helping teachers understand text complexity is an important goal for CCSS professional developers.

Close Reads. A final principle of the new CCSS is "close reads." Close reading is a reading and rereading of segments of text in order to discover what the author says, how the author says it, and why the author says it. Close reading depends critically on providing evidence from the text to support what readers say about a text. Readers are expected to provide examples of key ideas and details within a text. Readers are expected to provide information about the author's craft and structure. Finally, readers are expected to integrate knowledge and ideas within and across the texts they read. Overarching these three key skills and understandings is the idea that students are able to provide evidence from the text to support their arguments and ideas.

Reading Programs that Address the Common Core

What do all these underlying principles and assumptions mean for those who are involved in the selection and implementation of new reading programs? Should educators expect these programs to change completely? Should they expect reading programs to drop everything they currently do and replace those practices with new ones that mirror the CCSS? The answer to all these questions is a resounding "No!" There are many excellent features of reading programs that need to stay in place. These features appear in reading programs because of years of basic and applied research in the field of reading that recommend their use. These features should not be thrown out—it can be likened to "throwing out the baby with the bath water."

At the same time, there are important changes that educators should look for in new reading programs so that the skills and strategies needed to meet the standards of the Common Core will be covered. These changes mirror the principles of the CCSS laid out earlier in this paper.

1) Strong foundational skills. Reading programs should continue to assist teachers in teaching the strong beginning reading skills that support children learning to read. These include phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency skills. Questions educators should ask include: Does the program teach phonemic awareness and phonics skills, especially those important blending skills, at early grade levels? Does the program contain early decodable texts so children can practice the phonics skills they learn in the texts they read? Does the program teach fluency skills through modeling and repeated reading?

2) Writing about Reading/Argumentative Writing. Reading programs should assist teachers in assignments that ask students to write about what they read. Questions educators should ask include: Does the program ask students to write about what they have read? Does the program ask students to conduct research by reading and writing about topics? Does the program ask students to speak and write using evidence from a text they have just read? Does the program show students how to make an argument and defend it with ideas and examples from the texts they read?

3) Importance of Vocabulary. Reading programs have come a long way in their treatment of vocabulary instruction based on established and new research on vocabulary teaching and learning. Educators should ask: Does the program directly teach Tier 2 vocabulary words that will be useful in students' comprehension of the text they read? Does the program teach academic words as well? Does the program use more than one approach for vocabulary instruction? Is there sufficient repetition for vocabulary review and practice?

4) Focus on Informational Texts. Informational texts have increased significantly in numbers in trade books as well as reading programs over the last dozen or so years. Educators should ask: Does the program provide an increasing number of informational texts as students move through the grade levels? Does the program assist teachers in teaching students the differences between narrative and informational texts? Does the program assist teachers in showing students how to read those texts?

5) Access to Complex Texts. The expectation that teachers ask students to read increasingly complex texts is a critical part of the CCSS. Educators need to ask: Does the program provide information about Lexile levels? Does the program assist teachers in teaching critical components of complex text, such as different purposes, genres, organization, and structures of texts? Does the program discuss how to assist students in accessing more complex text?

6) Close Reads. Finally, reading programs should assist teachers in conducting "close reads" of segments of text. Educators should ask: Does the program assist teachers in asking questions that require students to provide evidence and support from the text? Does the program ask students to answer mostly text-dependent questions? Does the program ask students to integrate knowledge and ideas from different parts of a text and across more than one text?

Conclusion

The Reading Common Core has the potential to change how reading is taught in many positive ways. But teachers will need professional development as well as reading programs and materials that can help them. If these programs and materials adhere to the principles of the CCSS, teachers will have the texts their students need and the tools to help students learn to read those texts. That will go a long way towards assisting students in meeting the high bar set by the CCSS.

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