Quality Reading Instruction
in the Age of
Common Core Standards

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CHAPTER 1

Challenges and Opportunities in the Implementation of Common Core State Standards

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010) for English Language Arts represent a shared and consistent vision of what students should know and be able to do. These Standards are designed to foster higher achievement among U.S. students, allowing them to compete more successfully in our global society, and striving toward equitable educational opportunity for all of our students. They represent a high bar but one that we should reach for in the field of reading and literacy learning for students across the grade levels.

Certainly there will be challenges in their implementation. By 2014–2015, current state assessments will be replaced by one of two consortia—Smarter Balanced, or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)—that will include new methods of assessments with new expectations for proficiency and achievement levels. Curricula will be needed to address these new Standards because they reflect different theories of reading comprehension and differentiated instruction than past standards, as well as a different style and organizational structure, which will make them more challenging for schools to implement. At the same time, while these Standards demand more from teachers and far more from students, they are essential if we are to enable students to be successful in developing 21st-century skills.

Simply put, this means that we will need to understand these challenges and create opportunities for students to learn. In this chapter, we highlight a number of these challenges and provide suggestions for how we can turn these issues into professional development opportunities that may ultimately lead us to a richer and more thorough understanding of the reading process and higher quality instruction in reading.

Key Design Changes

Designers of the CCSS began their effort to create world-class standards by developing a working definition of what it means to be college or career ready. Their portrait included both important skills and dispositions: Students must demonstrate independence in learning; build strong content knowledge; and respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline in their communication. They need to comprehend well, value evidence in their oral and written interpretation of text, and understand other perspectives and cultures. Most reading educators would strongly endorse this view.

Based on their definition, designers then “back-mapped” to the lower grades, identifying specific targets at various grade-level spans. For example, in the Reading Standards for Informational Text K–5, fifth-grade students are expected to “integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 14). Looking at this same standard in kindergarten, students are expected to “with prompting and support, identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures)” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 13). Given that more than half of children in the United States will not have received the benefit of high-quality preschool, and that many states do not have mandatory kindergarten, or that many kindergartens are still only half-day (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011), one could argue that this Standard stretches all credulity for many children, particularly for low-income children. While it is important to support challenging goals for children, at the same time, the goals must be achievable.

Back-mapping has been seriously criticized as an approach to identifying targets because it often leads to developmentally inappropriate goals or unrealistic expectations (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003). Rather, as professionals, we need to carefully examine these Standards from the other direction, starting first at kindergarten to identify the requisite skills children will need to have to meet these Standards. School professionals and curriculum developers will need to “unpack” many of these Standards and create instructional opportunities with appropriate scaffolds in place to reach these targets.

Furthermore, these Standards will require a greater breadth of knowledge in literacy. Although they are divided by grade level, there is the assumption that teachers will understand the learning progressions of a skill. This term—learning progression—describes the path that children might follow as instruction helps them move from initial learning to more
sophisticated understanding (Nichols, 2010). This means that teachers will need to understand the antecedent skills that are necessary for developing more complex skills. For example, it is impossible to teach problem-solving skills without the requisite knowledge of inquiry and comprehension. Similarly, teachers will need to know how to build upon important skills to support higher order thinking in all domains. This means that we will all have to become more proficient in understanding the full spectrum of skills and strategies in reading to promote career- and college-ready thinking among our students.

**Challenging Text**

In the past, the conventional wisdom was to gear the text to the student’s current reading level. Teachers would strive to find a book that was on children’s *instructional level*, assuming that if students could read about 95 out of 100 words, they could successfully use the context of the paragraph to gain its meaning (Durrell & Catterson, 1980). If the text proved too difficult to comprehend, teachers would find a slightly easier text, one that would include shorter sentences and less complex words, easing students over time as they became more successful into more difficult text. *Leveled text* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006) was based on the same premise: teachers would select text based on students’ current skill levels in efforts to help them gain proficiency and move up the reading ladder.

In the CCSS, the notion is that students should grapple with grade-level texts, with a specified definition of *text complexity* clearly identified in Reading Standard 10 (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 10; see also Cunningham and Hiebert chapters, this volume, for more detail). Text complexity is measured across three factors:

1. A qualitative evaluation of the text (e.g., its levels of meaning, knowledge demands)
2. A quantitative evaluation (e.g., lexile levels or other readability measures)
3. The matching of reader to text and task (e.g., motivation, knowledge, purpose for reading)

Here, the view is that teaching children with more challenging text than before will stretch their capabilities and engage them to meet the demands of reading more difficult text.

We have been down this road before. Previous experiences suggest that we could run the risk of alienating students to the degree that they lose all motivation to read. No one likes to be placed in a position...
where they feel like a failure. Consequently, we must take the concept of “close reading” seriously. The CCSS assert that students must acquire the habits of reading independently and closely and undertake the attentive reading that is essential for deep understanding of text, which are essential to their future success. The term close reading also implies efforts on our part to help students pay close attention to the text and to provide evidence for their interpretations. For example, Neuman and Wright (in press) recently worked with a group of students who were having difficulty understanding a complex text. In this study, text was broken into paragraphs, and students and the teacher engaged in a think-aloud task. After each paragraph, students shared their understandings of what the text was about. They focused on what expert readers do, creating a working hypothesis about what the text was about, looking for evidence to confirm or disconfirm their developing understanding, modifying their hypothesis if necessary with additional information, and finally coming up with a coherent interpretation of text. Notice in this description that students were strongly guided to use the text as evidence for understanding. This is in contrast to relying on prior knowledge, or generalized procedures like comprehension strategies that are thought to be transferable across different texts. In this response, each text reading is a unique experience that requires close reading of the text and supporting evidence, weighing such things as the author’s diction, grammar, and organization to make meaning from the text.

**Informational Text**

Probably one of the most profound changes involved with implementing the CCSS is the shift toward greater emphasis on informational text. Duke and her colleagues (Chapter 4, this volume; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003) have written extensively about the paucity of informational texts in the elementary grades in particular. The focus on informational books is an important one because it signals that book reading builds knowledge through text (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009; Mazzoni & Gambrell, 1996). At the same time, we must be careful of the pendulum shifting too much in one direction over the other. Many storybooks, beloved by young and old alike, contain information that is highly memorable in ways that these expository texts could never convey (Malloy & Gambrell, 2013; Neuman & Roskos, 2012).

The CCSS emphasize the importance of engaging children with informational texts on an equal basis with literary texts in grades K–5; attention to literature then falls to 25% in the upper grades. This means
that elementary teachers need to raise their comfort level for working with informational text. It also will require adjustments in the read-aloud strategy. For example, depending on the book and its features, teachers may choose not to read a book from beginning to end, but instead might select certain sections or pages for a close reading. Teachers working with preschool and kindergarten children often read only several pages at a time, recognizing that the density of information and the vocabulary load may call for a greater focus on discussion and interpretation (Malloy & Gambrell, 2011).

Studies have shown that informational (or expository) books tend to differ from traditional storybooks in the diversity of vocabulary they include (Price, Bradley, & Smith, 2012). Informational books will generally contain more technical words associated with a topic (e.g., echo-location), and will often include generic nouns that represent categories of objects and things (e.g., puppies bite). They will have certain types of visual and design features like graphs, scale diagrams, and glossaries, all of which are intentionally linked to convey meaning to readers. These features, therefore, will need to be taught more deliberately if we are to make the most of these types of texts. Given that children are likely to be less familiar with these texts—even when they come from homes where shared reading is a familiar routine (Yopp & Yopp, 2006)—it will be important to highlight these features during our read-aloud activities.

Disciplinary Literacy

For years, we have attempted to convince content area specialists that every teacher is a reading teacher, recognizing that content text places high demands on the reader, especially those who struggle in reading. Most anecdotal accounts suggest that we have been less successful than we would like in this endeavor—content area teachers still believe that their responsibility is to teach content, not reading per se. Consequently, reading instruction has been left to the reading teacher or the literacy coach, particularly at the middle and upper grades.

The past emphasis in these instructional contexts, then, had been to help students develop strategies that they could then apply to any content area text. Studies, for example, focused on text structures, and how these could be applied to science, social studies, and other disciplines (Armbruster, Anderson, & Osterag, 1987). However, recent studies suggest that these skills may not be all that transferable (Clark, Kirschner, & Sweller, 2012). Rather, different disciplines require specialized reading emphases in certain content domains such as history/social studies, science, and other technical subjects.
This means that the content Standards will need to be shared with subject-matter specialists, not necessarily to ensure that all teachers are reading teachers but to enable all teachers to provide instruction that will enhance students' knowledge of the domain. There is the recognition that the CCSS are actually disciplinary standards, and that to meet these benchmarks of content, students will need to understand the unique uses of literacy required by the disciplines.

This will represent a challenge for all educators. It will require us to engage more fully with disciplinary specialists, and to determine collectively how their approaches to disciplines may be translated into instruction for secondary students. In a recent study, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) reported the benefits of having conversations among disciplinary experts, literacy experts, high school teachers, and teacher educators. Instead of trying to convince disciplinary teachers of the value of general reading strategies developed by reading experts, they formulated new strategies that would directly and explicitly address the specific and highly specialized disciplinary reading demands of chemistry, history, and mathematics. Such a strategy benefits all constituencies, especially the students as learners.

**The Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

As adult readers, we are likely to read multiple accounts of important events that especially interest us. Each account helps to build our knowledge in ways that allow us to broaden and deepen our understanding of the world. Given its focus on developing knowledge through text, the CCSS recognize that the interpretations of multiple texts throughout all the grade levels are integral to this process. Children will need to be able to delineate and evaluate specific claims in a text, including its veracity, as well as the relevance and sufficiency of its evidence.

From the beginning, children are expected to review arguments in texts and to create intertextual linkages between them. For example, they will be asked to analyze how two or more texts that address similar themes or topics compare and contrast to one another. Furthermore, they will be expected to develop some understanding of genre features in the course of making these comparisons. Even in the early grades, students are expected to understand the relationship between illustrations and the story, why certain illustrations are depicted, and in what moment they are depicted.

There are a number of important ways in which we can enhance the likelihood that our students will succeed with such challenging tasks.
First, underlying these Standards is the assumption that students will need to acquire story grammar (Stein & Glenn, 1979), an understanding of the essential features of a story, early on. It will facilitate their ability to compare and contrast the advances and experiences of characters if they can easily identify the settings and the characters of a story, sets of events, and the resolution of a well-structured story. In addition, it will be critically important for teachers to identify ideal models of stories. For example, some text illustrations may not enhance story comprehension or contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story. Beck and her colleagues many years ago found that there is sometimes a mismatch between the words on the page and the context of the illustrations (Beck, Omanson, & McKeown, 1982). Third, as students begin to compare and contrast across genres, it will be important to clearly identify genre features as critical markers in interpreting text. It is clear, therefore, that teachers will have to consider building knowledge of genre and across genres early on. Approximately 10% of the Standards mention multiple texts in particular.

To support these goals, teachers will need to rely on text sets—collections of books that focus on a particular concept or a topic. For example, a recent study used text sets to engage children in learning about the life sciences as a way of integrating reading and science instruction (Neuman & Wright, in press). The intention was to spend two weeks on the topic, focusing on the content-rich vocabulary and the big ideas associated with the topic of living things.

Text sets are unified by the topic they explore (Neuman & Roskos, 2012). At the same time, they are differentiated by their genre and their format. The topic of flight, for instance, can be a focal point for a collection of books that could include a biography of the Wright brothers as well as an informational book on the basics of aerodynamics of flight. Text sets need to be coherent—narrowly focused on a set of key ideas to ensure that children will have repeated opportunities to hear and develop an understanding of a common set of words and concepts throughout the readings (see examples in Figure 1.1).

Text sets are organized to engage children with increasingly complex text and to learn some of the key genre features of each type of book. This is accomplished through scaffolding children's experiences with text, starting with more familiar genres before introducing the less familiar genre. Because we work with young children, we often start with a predictable book on a topic, which typically has a memorable rhyming or repetitive word pattern that enables children to anticipate words, phrases, and events in the story. We then move toward introducing storybooks, and focus on the story grammar features of the book. We can then compare
Figure 1.1. An Example of a Text Set

Topic: Weather

Concepts to Teach
• Weather conditions are constantly changing.
• There are weather patterns associated with each season.
• Various types of weather conditions are associated with temperature, precipitation, and wind conditions.
• There are tools to measure temperature, precipitation, and wind speed.
• Meteorologists use weather patterns to forecast weather.

Text Set
• Predictable
  A group of children are playing in the park when it starts to rain. They stay to enjoy some rainy-day fun.

• Fiction
  When Geoffrey oversleeps on Groundhog Day and misses his forecast, nobody in town knows what type of weather to expect.

• Informational (Narrative)
  This book explores the weather on a single day in locations around the world.

• Informational (Expository)
  Weather Watchers series
  This series of simple informational texts published by Looking Glass Library includes It’s a Thunderstorm (Higgins & Ward, 2010) and It’s Hailing (Higgins & Ward, 2010). Each book includes accurate information about weather patterns, including what they are like and how they form. Books have engaging illustrations and fun facts.

• Informational (Expository)
  Using engaging illustrations, this text provides information about key terms related to weather, including temperature, air pressure, moisture, and wind.

and contrast across these two types of books. Following a number of examples of storybooks, we then move toward informational books. We find that informational book reading at this point becomes deeper and more meaningful because children now have at least a beginning network of words and concepts from which to draw. Combining genres in text sets gives children a rich opportunity to engage in learning the
vocabulary, concepts, and information in many different contexts, building new knowledge about the similarities and differences between texts on the same topic. A recent study using this scaffolding procedure reported striking gains in children's vocabulary, concepts, and knowledge about the topic (Neuman & Wright, in press). In addition, the scaffolding of text enabled children to learn the genre features of informational text significantly better than children in the control group.

In the CCSS, students are also expected to write about the ideas learned from text. Traditionally in elementary school years, teachers have placed greater emphasis on personal writing and opinion pieces (Stotsky, 1995). However, the Standards shift from children writing stories to writing about what they learn from text. This means that writing becomes more closely integrated with reading comprehension by helping to consolidate children's views and understandings. It will also place greater emphasis on synthesizing information in one's own words, and in using the text to make an argument or opinion.

**Technology**

We have often assumed that technology will have a prominent place in education. Regardless of the technology (e.g., radio, television, computers), those who are advocates have sometimes claimed a “new literacy” (Compaine, 1983); on the other hand, Luddites have forecasted the “death of print” (McLuhan, 1962). Neither projection has rung true. In fact, as Cuban (1993) reported in his influential book, there has been more talk than action. Even though the technologies exist, it has hardly revolutionized teaching or learning.

As most teachers would attest, the emphasis on technology has been minimal in the past standards. Rather, it was assumed that the skills and strategies children developed through traditional print could be applied to other contexts or technologies. In other words, technology was seen merely as the delivery mechanism without any inherent benefits.

This time it may be different. Today, the sheer quantity of mediated information that is available has increased by an order of magnitude from about 100 mediated words per minute in 1960 to about 1,000 words per minute in 2007 (W.R. Neuman, 2010), available through the Internet at any time in any place where a Web connection is available. As Leu and Kinzer (2000) have argued, there are new affordances created by this technology that we have only begun to imagine. In this new technological world, students will need to be their own reference librarian: they will need to know how to search, read, evaluate, and use information drawn
from the Internet. And here, the digital divide that persists virulently in low-income communities is likely to place many of our poor students at a disadvantage (Neuman & Celano, 2012). For example, Neuman and Celano (2012) found only three computers available after school in public areas for every 100 students in these low-income communities. Internet throughout these areas in homes was sporadic, with little opportunity for students to complete their homework assignments other than the library, which closed at 6:00 p.m.

We must also recognize that many students lack the reading skills to use these online resources effectively. In the Neuman and Celano (2012) study, for example, one teacher asked the students to do a Google search of an African American hero. However, what had been intuitive for the teacher was not intuitive for the students, who struggled with the assignment and had difficulty even with the rudimentary skills we would assume to be natural. Therefore, we need to step back and consider the skills and strategies children will need to use the technology for information gathering. Some students, for example, still struggle with word processing and will need other technological supports in their writing.

Consequently, these new literacies need to build on more foundational literacy skills. We must also not take for granted that students will know how to use these new tools wisely. Considering the wide range of experiences that students are likely to have outside of school, we must prepare them more deliberately in school to take advantage of these astonishing new resources.

Conclusions

The challenging new Common Core Standards represent the culmination of an extended, broad-based reform effort to identify the skills students need to become career and college ready. Surely there will be bumps along the road. Successful implementation of the CCSS will require a good deal of new teacher preparation and professional development, as well as quality materials to support these new instructional practices. However, we believe it is an exciting time for the field of reading. These new Standards support the development of content knowledge and learning through text. They recognize that children need to read increasingly complex text and be able to read closely, looking for evidence to support their contentions and understandings. In our knowledge-based economy, the CCSS convey that students will need to adapt their ability to communicate in relation to audience, task, purpose, and the particular
disciplines they address. Perhaps for the first time, we have standards that embrace technology, recognizing that digital media can support learning in ways that we've never considered before. Rather than the "push" of previous technologies, these new digital technologies focus on "pull"—creating platforms that help people to mobilize appropriate resources when the need arises. If we do our job well, it will encourage children to develop self-learning techniques that will support their independence as readers and as lifelong learners.

**TRY THIS!**

- Using Figure 1.1 as a guide, come up with your own topic for a text set you can use in your classroom. Then, come up with at least four items for concepts to teach. For each category of the text set, list at least one example of an appropriate book.
- Again, use Figure 1.1 as a guide. Now, brainstorm and come up with at least 20 topics for possible text sets. List the pros and cons of each. Once complete, you should have at least 10–15 possible topics for text-set lessons. Continue the steps in the first "Try This!" idea for one or two of your ideas.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Neuman and Gambrell assert that "while it is important to support challenging goals for children, at the same time, the goals must be achievable." Discuss how the CCSS can be a double-edged sword; that is, on the one hand, pushing students to read complex texts is good, but on the other, if these texts are inaccessible to students, the benefits are lost.

2. Discuss how technology can assist students in reading more complex texts as advocated by the CCSS.

**REFERENCES**


