



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 literacy (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/in-service 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.



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