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Common Core-less?: A Critical Review of the Common Core State Standards Research

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Review of Research in the Classroom

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Neither David Coleman nor Susan Pimentel is an experienced educator, researcher, or reading specialist, yet these two individuals are considered chief architects of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (NGA/CCSSO), 2010). According to Ravitch (2013), almost every state agreed to adopt the CCSS even though the standards had never been field-tested (p. 315). States that had adopted the CCSS have now reconsidered and either delayed or abandoned the CCSS; some parents are either pulling their children from public schools or protesting the CCSS and high-stakes testing; teachers' professional evaluations are linked their students' achievement of the CCSS. This Review of Research in the Classroom will critically examine the reading research cited in the ELA and Literacy CCSS in an effort to invite teachers and teacher educators to seek contemporary research from education professionals, not policymakers, to determine best practices to ensure students are not only "college and career ready" but also motivated, engaged and avid readers pre-K through life.

The CCSS ELA Reading Research

If you haven't already done so, download and open Appendix A of the English language arts and literacy CCSS and scroll to the reading and reading foundational skills reference section. You will find forty-one references, which include the following: 11 policy documents; 17 books; 2 papers presented at conferences; and 11 peer-reviewed journal articles. The CCSS includes no references to the *International Reading Association Standards for Reading Professionals—Revised 2010* and does not cite any reading research published in and handbooks on reading research, the *Reading Research Quarterly* or the *Journal of Research in Reading*. Only one peer-reviewed journal from the International Reading Association is cited in this less than thorough review of the seminal reading research.

College and career readiness is clearly a main focus of the CCSS, but what are the best ways to prepare *all students* K-12 for future college and career readiness? Only two of the reading references address early childhood learners; the majority focuses on high school learners and college readiness. There are no references that address diverse learners, such as students with individual differences, English language learners, or culturally or linguistically diverse. “The English language proficiency development” (ELPD) framework, which was released after the CCSS were developed, “appears to lack a common underlying theoretical orientation and has uncritically incorporated some notions of language and literacy development that go against decades of literacy scholarship” (Wiley, T. G. & Rolstad, K., 2014). The eight reading foundational skills references focus on phonics, vocabulary and spelling, which may address some instructional needs of early learners and struggling readers, but where is the foundational research on fluency,

comprehension, as well as young children’s cognition and development? This review of Appendix A exposed the inadequate review of the literature grounding the ELA CCSS and gave me pause as a teacher educator striving to prepare the next generation of ELA teachers to incorporate the CCSS in lessons and unit plans.

According to the CCSS initiative website on the ELA standards, there are three key shifts students will need to demonstrate to succeed in college and careers: 1) regular practice with complex texts and their academic language; 2) reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational; and 3) building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). Next, let’s review two recent research studies that critically look at two of the three key shifts—text complexity and close reading grounded in evidence from texts—to better understand the CCSS ELA research foundation and to learn ways to teach our students effectively during this time of politically-based standards and high-stakes testing.

Text Complexity

Text complexity is a major shift in the CCSS/ELA standards. In the last decade, teachers and parents have focused on finding the leveled text for students—not too hard, not too easy, just right. According to Gamson, Lu and Eckert’s study (2013), the “CCSS purport to be grounded in research studies that unambiguously signal the sharp need for increases in academic standards” (p. 381), citing that “K-12 texts have, if anything, become less demanding” (NGA/CCSSO, 2010, p.2). Gamson, Lu, & Eckert (2013) questioned, “...what if this narrative of the decline and fall in the

textbook quality is inaccurate? We suggest that the story is incomplete at best and, worse yet, it may mislead and distract us from more compelling educational concerns” (p. 382). In order to examine the issue of text complexity and the veracity of the CCSS/ELA claims, Gamson, Lu, & Eckert (2013) “attempt[ed] to step back from the hyperbole of constant curricular decline that is persistently evoked by the CCSS/ELA authors, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel” (p. 383) and located samples of third- and sixth-grade reading textbooks from approximately the 1890s to 2008. They used measures of lexical difficulty and readability. Their results showed a “distinctly different pattern of historical shifts in text complexity than the simple declines reported by the authors of the CCSS” (p. 388).

Gamson, Lu, & Eckert (2013) suggest five implications for their study, which I hope you will share with your colleagues and district education leaders:

1. The claim made by the CCSS authors that school reading texts have ‘trended downward in difficulty in the last half century’ is inaccurate (Appendix A, p. 2).
2. Increasing text complexity in elementary reading materials seems unnecessarily, even irresponsibly, rushed.
3. Overemphasis on text complexity distracts us from educational problems that are arguably more pressing.
4. CCSS equates higher text complexity with greater academic rigor; whereas, higher complexity, in and of itself, is not always better.

5. Text complexity is important but only one dimension of what works for an excellent, robust and engaging reading program (p. 388-389).

Next, let's review the findings of Kathleen A. Hinchman and David W. Moore, two well-respected reading researchers, who share a cautionary interpretation about the CCSS views on close reading.

Close Reading

Hinchman and Moore (2013) have been unable to “locate individual empirical studies that overtly investigate [close reading] use with youths” (p. 443). They state that as veteran literacy educators, they were surprised close reading became a “principal aspect of reading in the CCSS because it has received little notice in recent professional and research literature devoted to adolescents’ literacies” (p. 443).

In their review of the reading literature, Hinchman and Moore (2013) found that “close reading gained prominence in the scholarly literature in the 1930s through the 1960s” (Davis & Womack, 2002 as cited in Hinchman and Moore, 2013). This discovery is quite telling. The methodical interpretation of text, rather than more current theories of close reading, such as Reader Response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) and critical theory (Appleman, 2009), are dominant.

Common Core-less Glass Half Full

Hinchman and Moore (2013) see close reading as an important opportunity for adolescents in addition to other 21st century competencies such as critical

thinking, information literacy, flexibility, and collaboration (National Research Council, 2012). They suggest the following research-based practices to bridge students to reading complex texts:

1. Use teacher judgment and student input to match readers and texts.
2. Provide multiple entry points to reading complex texts, such as themed text sets, backward mapping, and scaffolding
3. Foster student motivation and engagement in reading
4. Help student choose texts they are enthusiastic to read
5. Connect students' out-of-school literacy with school literacy practices

Like Hinchman and Moore, I have seen the pendulum swing toward right and left education reforms over the many years I have been an educator and very much agree with their recommendations. I am reminded of the expression, “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater,” that was prevalent in the reading field during the great debate of the 1980s—phonics vs. whole language. I can say with experience and research-based knowledge that we must critically examine the research base of the education reform du jour and then use our guiding principles and teaching experience as the compass to guide what is best instructional practice for *our* students.

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