

CHAPTER 1

Identifying the Critical Pieces of Literacy Instruction

A great education begins with great literacy skills. Students who are competent readers, thinkers, and communicators will be able to access the education and resources necessary for success both in school and in their future life endeavors. This is indeed the goal of schooling. Our nation has spent an enormous amount of time and money to make this goal a reality for all students, but for the most part, we have been unsuccessful (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). A literate citizen must be able to read, write, speak, and think with purpose and ease. Therefore, literacy instruction must prepare students to enter adulthood and the world of work able to function as a part of a global economy and successfully as a part of a democratic society. Our common literacy goal must be to improve the literacy achievement of all students, including the gifted, the English learners, and the special-needs students. All children deserve the opportunity to grow into literate, functional adults. Although the levels of achievement will vary based on the capabilities of each child, the goal is still the same: to develop literacy skills in each student to his or her highest potential.

Educators must be keenly aware of the myriad factors that affect literacy instruction and the importance each piece plays in planning, delivering, and assessing literacy learning. First, the school, district, or state must establish standards for language arts that students need to learn or be able to do at each grade level. This requires that teachers have a comprehensive knowledge of the required grade-level language arts standards as well as content area standards as they scaffold and extend instruction based on student needs and established benchmarks. After the standards have been established, the curriculum needed to support these standards must either be developed or purchased. The literacy curriculum provides a scope and sequence, required texts, and suggested activities; the curriculum serves as a road map for teachers as they deliver instruction.

Perhaps the most important piece of the literacy puzzle is the delivery of the curriculum and its effect on teaching and learning. This includes infusing evidence-based best practices and selecting the most effective instructional venues needed to deliver the curriculum. Finally, assessing students to provide the data necessary to guide and adjust instruction to meet the needs of individual students is essential. The success in assembling all of these critical pieces of literacy instruction ultimately rests on the shoulders of teachers who make the critical day-to-day instructional decisions that directly affect the literacy development of their students.

Along with the lofty goal of developing high literacy levels for all students comes the task of addressing the diversity of abilities in every classroom. This is perhaps the

most challenging obstacle that teachers currently face. From my observations across the United States, there is typically a three- to four-year grade-level difference in reading levels among students in any given elementary classroom. This requires teachers to be able to adapt instruction to meet these diverse needs on a daily basis. Differentiating literacy instruction to meet the needs of a wide range of learners is most certainly an important piece of the literacy puzzle. Figure 1 outlines the framework for examining the critical pieces of literacy instruction. Although each piece is introduced and briefly discussed in this chapter, the detailed discussion of the planning and implementation of these pieces in the classroom is addressed in the later chapters of this book.

Establishing the Literacy Standards

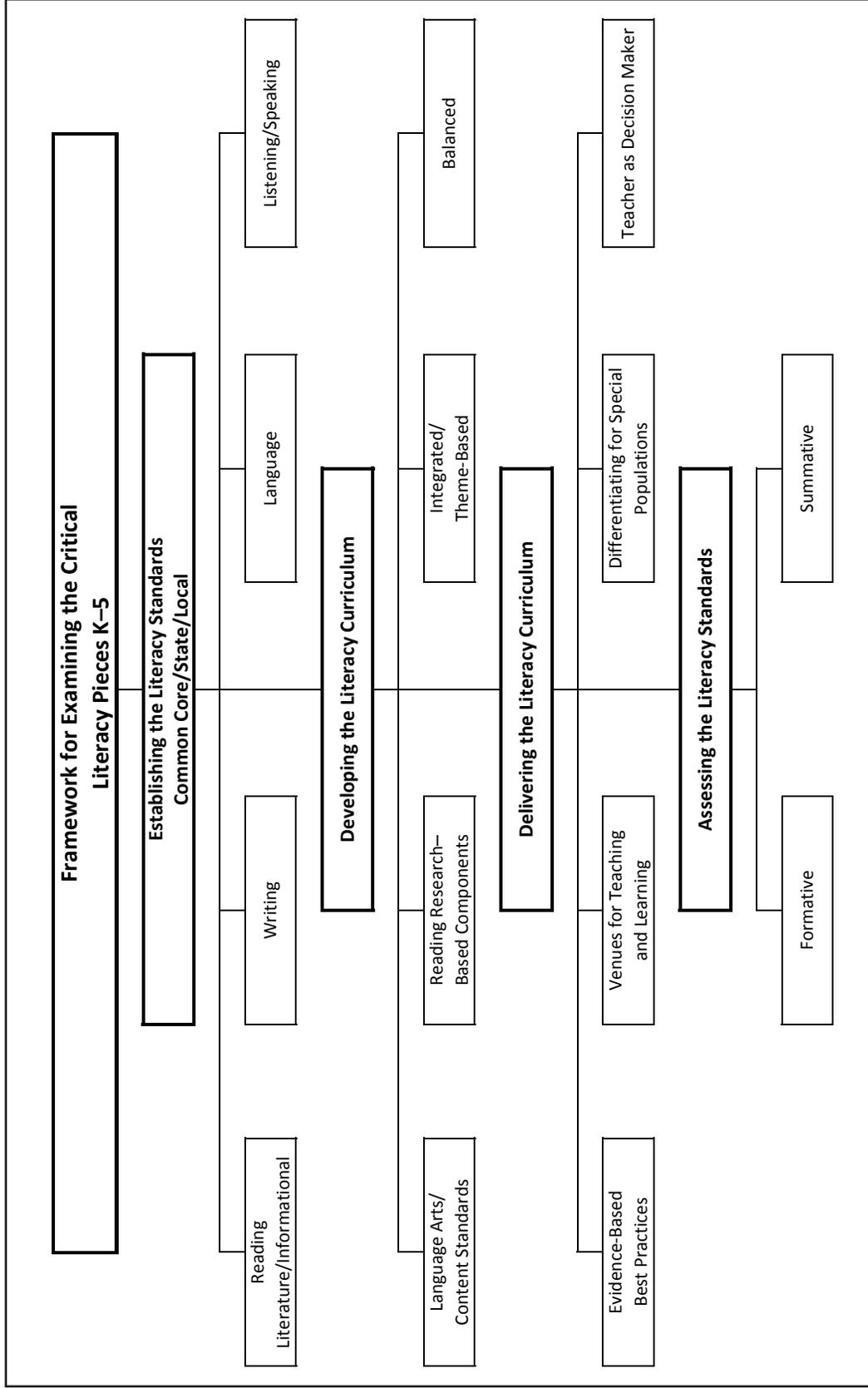
The first part of planning for effective literacy instruction is to determine what we expect students to know, understand, and produce as it relates to language arts. These are the standards that all students are expected to master at each grade level. Although these standards do not tell us how to teach, they outline what is to be accomplished with students in the language arts areas. Standards can be developed locally or from a common set of standards that have been created on the local, state, or national level. At present, most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). However, the states or local schools that have not adopted these standards have developed similar language arts standards that serve as learning benchmarks. Regardless, these standards hold the same level of importance as the language arts curriculum is developed and delivered to students within those states or local schools.

Before we move further into this discussion of Common Core standards, I want to clarify that this text is not intended to be a road map for the CCSS. Instead, this book addresses the planning and delivery of any high-quality standards-driven literacy program. So discussing each area of the Common Core standards in detail broadens the scope of this book beyond its intended measure. In the following sections, I briefly summarize the implications for curriculum and instruction presented by the CCSS. You can read further details about each standard and see how the standards are structured across grade levels by visiting the website of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (www.corestandards.org). You can also download full PDFs of the standards documents to become more familiar with them.

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts provide a clear framework to help teachers prepare students for the successful matriculation from high school to the future world of college and careers, laying out a vision of what it looks like to be literate in the 21st century. The CCSS are designed to provide learning that is both rigorous and relevant to the real world. These grade-specific standards define end-of-year expectations and cumulative progress. Achieving the standards involves shared responsibility among teachers in varying grade levels and subject areas.

An emphasis on these required literacy achievements allows educators to use their professional judgment and experience to decide how to reach these goals. The standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or an all-inclusive list of texts

FIGURE 1
Framework for Examining the Critical Literacy Pieces



that students need to read; that is best left to individual schools and school districts. The adoption of the CCSS is, however, a critical piece for consistency in an attempt to prepare students for college and their future careers. Further, the standards guide the revision of curricula and state assessments to make learning more uniform across the country. The bottom line is this: Consistent standards provide common benchmarks for all students, regardless of their location.

The Common Core standards present an interdisciplinary approach to literacy that recognizes the need to use these important literacy skills across content areas. For planning purposes, teachers need to look beyond the traditional reading block as they seek to connect reading, writing, listening, and speaking experiences across content areas. This initiative, in my opinion, is long overdue. Over the last two decades, states, school districts, and even individual schools have spent millions of dollars and untold time developing standards only to have them rewritten or sitting on a shelf gathering dust. In the past, many teachers became so confused with the turnover in standards that they had difficulty even identifying the most current standards document. The CCSS bring consistency for teachers as they plan and deliver instructions that support common goals.

Most states have chosen to adopt the Common Core State Standards, with each state adapting up to 15% of the standards for their own state. How then will the standards affect the nature of everyday classroom instruction? The implications for educators are both exciting and daunting. Teachers need to shift what they teach, how they teach, and how they assess students. Although the CCSS do not tell teachers how to teach the standards, they provide an important starting point in identifying the knowledge and skills that all students must be equipped with upon graduation.

Clearly, the standards will not, in and of themselves, guarantee success with students. It takes well-prepared teachers armed with a plethora of powerful strategies to ensure that students reach these lofty goals. However, the standards provide a clear vision of the end product, which makes it easier to design instruction that produces the desired results. The sections that follow summarize the major implications or changes that the Common Core standards will have on both curricula and instructional practices.

Balancing Literature and Informational Text

Obviously, reading literature has always been a high priority in any language arts standards program. Perhaps the biggest shift seen in the CCSS is the inclusion of informational text as a part of the language arts curriculum. This represents a substantial change in the way reading has been taught. Informational text now holds an equal place in text selections used for reading instruction. Teachers need to reconsider their roles because reading will be taught across all content areas. Implications for how the school day is organized are a natural outcome of implementing these new standards across the curriculum.

The need for a curriculum that makes sense with this balance in literary and informational text must be addressed. Theme-based instruction that supports both text types provides the framework needed to address these issues. Teachers need to plan beyond the traditional reading block to integrate instruction. For example, a second-grade class

might be studying a unit on animal habitats, and there are numerous informational texts available to support this study. Additionally, poetry, songs, picture books, and fables are appropriate literary text examples to support the theme. Embedding a variety of genres in both literary and informational text provides the necessary balance.

The Importance of Foundational Skills

The foundational skills highlighted in the CCSS have been shown by research, time and again, to be crucial to literacy development (see, e.g., Morrow & Gambrell, 2011; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). These foundational skills, including print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency, underpin the necessary knowledge for students to access the other standards. Many teachers have traditionally viewed these foundational skills in isolation, and in recent years, some of these foundational skills have been taught out of the context of reading for comprehension. For example, fluency in some instances has focused solely on speed to the extent that students felt that it was more important to read fast than to read to understand. The CCSS clearly identify these skills as foundational and should be quickly mastered to get to the ultimate goal: using these skills in the real reading process. By placing these foundational skills in their own strand within the Common Core, teachers can gauge the importance of these foundational skills to the reading process.

Writing to Demonstrate Comprehension

Perhaps no other area in literacy will change more because of the Common Core standards than writing instruction. The kinds of writing that students are now expected to produce will change substantially.

Writing in the elementary grades has traditionally focused heavily on personal narratives. Much of the writing now focuses on written comprehension, demonstrating a deep understanding of what the students have read. Writing about reading includes presenting evidence from the text to support an opinion or argument. Here we begin to see the important connections that must be made between reading and writing. Without a skilled reading of the text, students are unable to respond with the appropriate text evidence. Students should be able to write in response to a variety of text types and purposes across the content areas.

By nature, writing takes time, especially well-thought-out pieces. Teachers now need to readjust time allocations to allow for this kind of extensive writing. Workbook pages and ditto sheets will not get the job done. Rather, fewer and more in-depth written assignments that might be completed over a number of days will become the norm. These rigorous writing standards require teachers to begin in the early grades to build the reading and writing processes necessary for success as students matriculate through the grades.

Incorporating Speaking and Listening

The speaking and listening strand encompasses the need for students to be able to use oral communication and interpersonal skills interchangeably. Students must learn to

work together and listen carefully to ideas shared by others, a skill that all job holders use on a daily basis. Although this standard at first glance seems to be easily achievable, these opportunities in most classrooms have been lacking. Much of this can be attributed to time limitations in that teachers have felt that they just could not get it all in. Again, we see an opportunity for integrated instruction, with speaking and listening becoming integral parts of the curriculum as students share information. Technology, including digital text features that are embedded in video and audio, is becoming increasingly important for students to acquire and share information.

Embedding the Language Standards

The language standards encompass conventions, effective use, and vocabulary, which means students are expected to adhere to the essential rules of standard written and spoken English. In the past 10 years, the teaching of language skills (grammar) has occurred outside the reading block, which has led to isolated instruction in grammar with little application to the writing process. The CCSS require that this grammar instruction be embedded, as much as possible, in the writing process. Vocabulary instruction needs to grow exponentially, especially across content areas, to increase disciplinary literacy. Without a doubt, this area provides the most important vehicle to access complex text. It is interesting to note that vocabulary and language conventions are presented in a separate category. This was done intentionally to emphasize the need to teach these two elements concurrently in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, not in isolation.

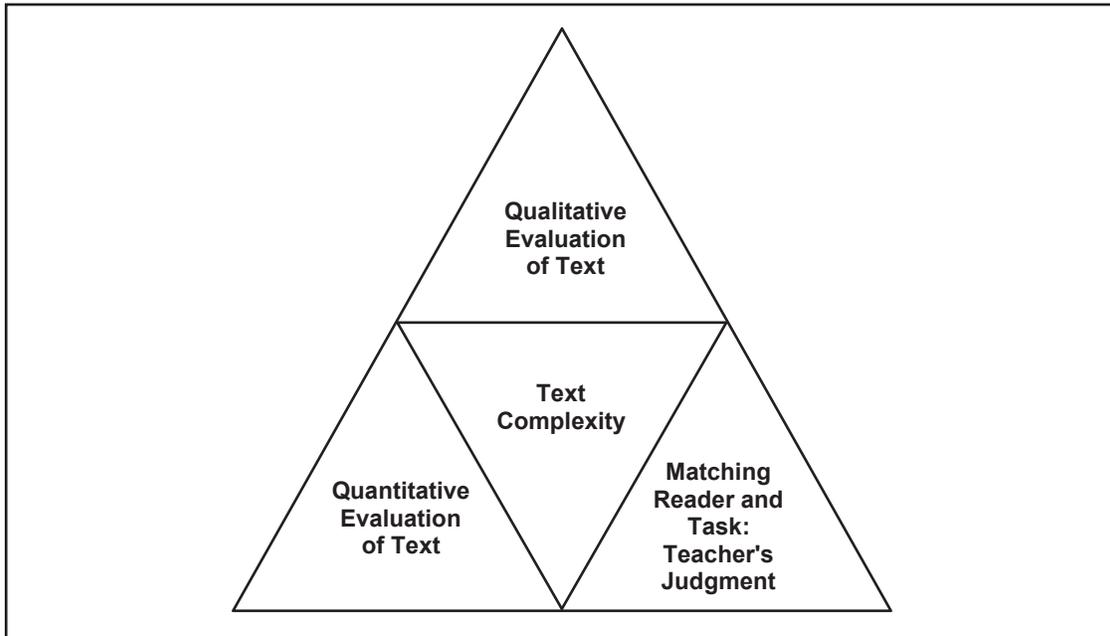
Determining Text Quality and Complexity

Perhaps the most controversial of the Common Core State Standards relates to the requirements for texts. Lack of exposure to high-quality and complex texts has been associated with the failure of some students as they enter college. Two critical keys are needed to address this issue. The first is to identify texts with these attributes: What makes a text high quality or more challenging? The second challenge is to then prepare and support students to navigate this more complex text.

To make these determinations, the text is evaluated in three specific ways: qualitative considerations, quantitative considerations, and reader and task considerations. Each of these three components are equally important. Figure 2 demonstrates the equal importance of each component of text complexity and the need to balance each measure in an appropriate way.

Qualitative measures of text complexity require teachers to examine four factors when making appropriate grade-level text selections: levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands. These factors can only be established through careful examination of the text, beginning with the levels of meaning in literary texts and the purpose in informational texts. The complexity of the text structure is also a consideration. Additionally, teachers must carefully evaluate language conventionality and clarity to determine the appropriateness of the text for a specific group of readers. Finally, teachers must recognize the amount of background knowledge

FIGURE 2
Components of Text Complexity



necessary to adequately understand the text's message. These qualitative measures are to be used in addition to the quantitative measures that I describe later in this chapter.

A computerized program that is consistent in measuring the complexity of text best determines quantitative measures. It is important to keep in mind that complexity is not necessarily the same as difficulty. Research is currently being conducted so recommendations for programs that are consistent in predicting text complexity are available to educators. A program that is currently available is the Pearson Reading Maturity Metric (www.readingmaturity.com).

The third component of the complexity triangle requires teachers to apply professional judgment of the reader and task; this measure holds equal weight with the other two components. The teacher must consider, first and foremost, whether the student will be able to read and understand the book with or without the support of the teacher. Reflection by the teacher on the context that the book will be used in is important to this process. As teachers examine a text, they must consider whether the text is worth student and instructor time, attention, and effort. With a variety of text choices available, teachers must determine whether the particular text is the best text available for the instructional purpose. Although the text may address the specific content, is the style and tone appropriate to the age of the student? Along with this, the teacher must consider the alignment between the task and the text so the readers reach the desired learning outcomes.

Along with the overarching standard that requires students to read texts at high complexity levels is the need for teachers to scaffold the support necessary to make the

text accessible to a wide range of readers. Striking a balance between providing enough support but not too much is critical. Traditionally, teachers have given too much away as they struggled with this issue. In other words, in some cases, teachers have resorted to spoon-feeding, including reading the text to the students. This is no longer acceptable. Students are not only expected to read the text but also to read the text closely and think critically while reading, including making connections among ideas and between texts. There is no place for spoon-feeding as we address the rigor of the Common Core standards. This requires a comprehensive effort to change the way we teach reading in the early grades so students are capable of reading and understanding complex text in later grades. This also supports the need for teachers in the elementary grades to be grounded in the standards in subsequent grades. If teachers continue to view specific grade-level standards with tunnel vision, we will continue to miss the mark.

The task of moving students through increasingly difficult text complexity is easier said than done, of course. This has significant implications for text selections for whole-group, small-group, and independent practice. Differentiating reading instruction in small groups will be the necessary venue for fostering the most struggling reader and the most advanced. To support students in their growth with more complex text, students need to read text at the appropriate instructional level: the text that a student can read and understand with some support by the teacher. In some cases, we have perhaps set the bar too low when determining this instructional level, usually at 90–95% accuracy (Rasinski, 2010). If we expect students to read text below these levels, teachers must actively instruct and support students. This has special implications for beginning readers who require closely leveled text. As students move out of the decoding phase of reading, there is more leeway in text selections. Make no mistake: If we continually present texts to students at a level that causes frustration, the goal of moving students through increasingly difficult levels of text complexity will be all but lost.

On a personal note, let me share with you my experience with my daughter. As a first grader, Jennifer struggled in reading. The basal story for the week was a stretch, and she was clearly frustrated. When I returned home from work one day, Jennifer called me to her bedroom and announced, “I am reading the best book that I have read in my whole life!” I was thinking, “It’s the only book you’ve read by yourself in your whole life.” Imagine my surprise when I looked down and found *Fun With Dick and Jane* neatly tucked in her lap. A lesson learned: Children enjoy reading when they are presented with books that they can read. My fear is that teachers will embrace text complexity and reject the notion that there is an important place for books that can be read successfully, without frustration. These books will not always be the books that are grade-level appropriate. Keep in mind the purpose for each text shared with students.

Developing the Language Arts Curriculum

The responsibility for developing or purchasing a curriculum that supports students in reaching these rigorous standards falls to individual schools, school districts, or states. A large part of this book addresses the ways in which this curriculum is addressed and

delivered. We must consider the place that the CCSS, or any state or local standards, hold as the curriculum is addressed. The standards are not the curriculum. The literacy curriculum embraces the standards and allows educators to shape and sequence the topics, appropriate textbooks, and materials needed to address the standards. A strong literacy curriculum brings clarity to our schools' endeavors and brings consistency within and among schools. Curriculum may best be defined as an outline of what will be taught. The literacy curriculum specifies literacy works, periods, genres, themes, and ideas. It should then be up to the teacher to decide how to present the material and how to structure class time to best meet the needs of students. A good literacy curriculum offers both structure and flexibility. Teachers need the flexibility to devote extra time to certain topics or to pursue a topic spontaneously here and there, but it should be done judiciously and sparingly. An established curriculum allows teachers to plan in advance and build their resources over time. Without a defined curriculum, we risk confusion, inconsistency, loss of common knowledge, and loss of integrity.

A comprehensive literacy curriculum requires great thought and time; therefore, curriculum development has mostly been left to textbook companies. It is not enough, however, for a textbook company to say that they have indeed incorporated the standards. The questions that must be answered are How are the standards presented and embedded in integrated literacy instruction? and Are the activities well thought out and rigorous? Most textbook companies tout that their materials are theme based. However, on careful examination, the themes are so loosely contrived that they often have no instructional merit.

If we are to learn from the past, we will view these boxed materials with a fresh set of eyes: wiser in our purchases and wise enough to plow through the sales pitches and free materials that can be distracting. Even with the purchase of a state-of-the-art packaged literacy curriculum, there will always be a need for teachers to pick and choose as well as supplement the curriculum to meet the needs of individual students. Teachers are indeed the critical decision makers who are most capable of adapting and delivering literacy instruction that will ultimately gauge the success of that instruction.

The Importance of an Integrated Literacy Curriculum

The Common Core standards require teachers to go deeper into the content, in contrast to the breadth currently seen in an overcrowded curriculum. Integrated instruction addresses this need. Integrated instruction is not necessarily theme based; there is a subtle difference. For example, the teaching of language arts can be integrated as students read then write about what they have read. The writing assignment might also include focusing on a particular writing style, such as a friendly letter. Here we see an integration of reading, written comprehension, and writing style. For comparison, theme-based instruction goes one step further: It provides the format for addressing a particular theme, usually in a content area that includes reading and writing that supports the theme in a seamless flow of instruction.

Integrated instruction has been shown to increase student achievement (Bean, 1997; Kovalik, 1994). It should, therefore, be given more than lip service in a comprehensive

language arts curriculum, especially in light of the interdisciplinary approach to literacy instruction that is necessary to achieve the CCSS. Research on brain-based teaching has explained that the brain learns, and recalls learning, through patterns that emphasize coherence rather than fragmentation. The more teachers plan for these connected patterns in explicit and meaningful ways for students, the easier the brain will integrate the new information (Hart, 1983). This supports the need for both an integrated and theme-based curriculum. Students engaged in meaningful learning experiences in an integrated curriculum that includes connections to students' lives are all aspects of brain-compatible teaching and learning (Caine & Caine, 1994). This allows students to connect and assimilate ideas in authentic contexts, taking into consideration their perceptions of real-world problems (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Kovalik, 1994). Using technology to further research and solve problems in real-world settings also enhances student learning (diSessa, 2000).

A truly integrated curriculum gives the glue necessary to hold the curriculum together for both teachers and students. It gives substance to the teaching and relevance to the learning. Furthermore, as teachers strive to address the standards, this theme-based approach creates learning foundations for key concepts to be integrated. The overall goal is to select themes that are engaging and motivating for students that also address the standards in content areas.

The purpose for developing the curriculum is to address the standards in a meaningful and powerful way. Yet, in a knee-jerk reaction to respond to these high-stakes standards, some educators are turning to a curriculum that resembles a checklist of the standards. It is important to keep in mind that this kind of instruction will be a dead end for students who are in desperate need of high levels of integrated literacy experiences. Only when the standards are addressed in an integrated and meaningful way will they be most likely digested by the students.

An integrated curriculum with embedded standards also has implications for how students are assessed. Disconnected, meaningless instruction that can be regurgitated on a closed-response assessment is no longer the norm. Along with major standards revisions, assessments to measure the standards will change to reflect the deeply integrated thinking that the current literacy standards demand.

The Importance of Balance in the Literacy Curriculum

As educators begin to develop or investigate purchased language arts curricula, the goal should be to maintain balance. Balancing the literacy curriculum requires respect for research and responds to the individual needs of students as teachers respond to their developmental levels with the purpose of reading for pleasure, joy, and comprehension.

There are at least three reasons to support the use of a balanced approach to developing and delivering the curriculum. A balanced approach (1) is respectful of a wide range of research findings, (2) supports the wisdom of best practices, and (3) recognizes that no single approach is best for all students. This approach includes research from many areas and also best practices from reading research. This could quite possibly

represent the voice of reason to a continuing pendulum swing in views on reading instruction that have characterized much of the 20th century.

Although most people agree that the literacy curriculum should be balanced, there has been no research indicating how time should be allocated among reading, writing, comprehension strategy instruction, vocabulary instruction, oral language development, and phonics instruction. The classroom teacher best makes these critical day-to-day decisions.

Additionally, balance must be respectful of the inclusion of a variety of literacy genres. Much like a well-balanced diet, the literacy diet should include various literary genres, such as fairy tales, myths, folk tales, and novels. This also applies to balance in informational text selections, such as content material, newspaper articles, speeches, and biographies—especially for achieving the Common Core standards.

Perhaps Pressley (n.d.) has best described true balanced literacy instruction:

It involves explicit, systematic, and completely thorough teaching of the skills required to read and write in a classroom environment where there is much reading of authentic literature—including information books, and much composing by students. Balanced literacy instruction is demanding in every way that literacy instruction can be demanding. Students are expected to learn the skills and learn them well enough to be able to transfer them to reading and writing of texts. Yes, this is done in a strongly supportive environment, with the teacher providing a great deal of direct teaching, explanations and re-explanations, and hinting to students about the appropriateness of applying skills they have learned previously to new texts and tasks. As children learn the skills and use them, the demands in balanced classrooms increase, with the goal of the balanced literacy teacher being to move students ahead, so that every day there is new learning; every day students are working at the edge of their competencies and growing as readers and writers. (p. 2)

This balance must also be respectful of teacher-led versus student-led discussion. Historically, the teacher has been viewed as the dispenser of knowledge as students listen attentively to consume the information. In a balanced classroom, student talk is as important as teacher talk. Rather than have students work independently, they routinely should be working with other students to research, explore, and discuss while learning. In a balanced instructional setting, the teacher also acts as a facilitator.

All aspects of developmental literacy instruction must be viewed with balance in mind. If we are to learn from past mistakes, we recognize that going too far in one direction or another has never proven to be successful in moving student achievement forward. Teachers must remain vigilant and open to establishing and maintaining balance in both developing and delivering instruction.

The Importance of the Essential Components of Reading Instruction

With eyes squarely focused on the new Common Core State Standards movement, it is important that the work completed by the National Reading Panel in researching the essential components of reading instruction not be overlooked (NICHD, 2000). There are five components associated with the process of reading that work together to create the

reading experience: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and fluency. As children learn to read, they must develop and orchestrate these skills to become readers who are capable of high levels of literacy learning. It is imperative that we review and reflect on what has been learned about the process of learning to read and how these components intersect with the CCSS.

Fluency

Fluency is the reader's ability to read with enough speed, accuracy, and expressions to understand the text's meaning. Students' abilities to read fluently and automatically in decoding text is linked to higher levels of text comprehension (Bell & Perfetti, 1994). Typically, comprehension breaks down when students are asked to read text that is too difficult for their reading abilities. This has special implications as we address text complexity.

The Common Core language arts standard for fluency is found in the standard for foundational skills. It is important to note that accuracy over speed is the focus in fluency development in the CCSS. This is a welcome change from an emphasis on speed and should bring the voice of reason back to effective fluency instruction. Substantial research has supported multiple rereadings of a text to build fluency (e.g., Meyer & Felton, 1999; Rasinski, 2010).

An important point that must not be overlooked when focusing on fluency is that it must be developed with text that students can read comfortably, so it would not be appropriate to work on fluency with text that students find too difficult. Teachers need a deep understanding not only of the importance that fluency plays in comprehension but also of the level of text complexity appropriate for building fluency.

Phonics

The Common Core standards cite the need for phonics and word analysis in the foundational skills standard, requiring that students "know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010b, p. 16). Assessment of an individual student's knowledge of phonics features is instrumental in guiding phonics instruction. Small-group instruction may be the best way to differentiate phonics instruction based on student assessment (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). Without opportunities to apply what they are learning about phonics, students will not become fluent readers or writers. Therefore, they should not be restricted to the teaching of isolated phonics skills. Highly decodable text is often overused in the early grades; teaching phonics as it relates to reading does not mean that students must only use purely phonetically based readers (Allington, Woodside-Jiron, 1998). On the contrary, a variety of texts that includes sight-word-oriented texts should also be incorporated. Again, the word balance can be used to describe the role between phonics and appropriate instructional strategies.

Phonemic Awareness

The National Reading Panel has recognized phonemic awareness as a research-based component in effective reading instruction, and it is addressed in the CCSS in

foundational skills. Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of success in learning to read, which supports the need for its focus in the early grades (Ehri & Nunes, 2002; NICHD, 2000).

Children enter school with varying degrees of phonemic awareness, and assessment best guides teachers in determining its emphasis in both whole-group and small-group instruction. For struggling readers, the small-group venue provides more support (Cunningham, 2007). Recognition of phonemic awareness in the CCSS is addressed specifically in kindergarten and early first grade. Beyond that point, only the most struggling readers might need additional support in this area.

Vocabulary

Few would argue the importance of vocabulary as it relates to effective reading instruction, and it has been identified as the most critical cause of the lack of reading comprehension (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is addressed in the Common Core standards in the language standard. Many children learn to word call and have no knowledge of the meaning of some of the words. A quality literacy curriculum includes multiple opportunities for all students to learn new words. Teachers should build a word-rich environment in which students are immersed in words for both incidental and intentional learning and the development of word awareness (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2009; NICHD, 2000).

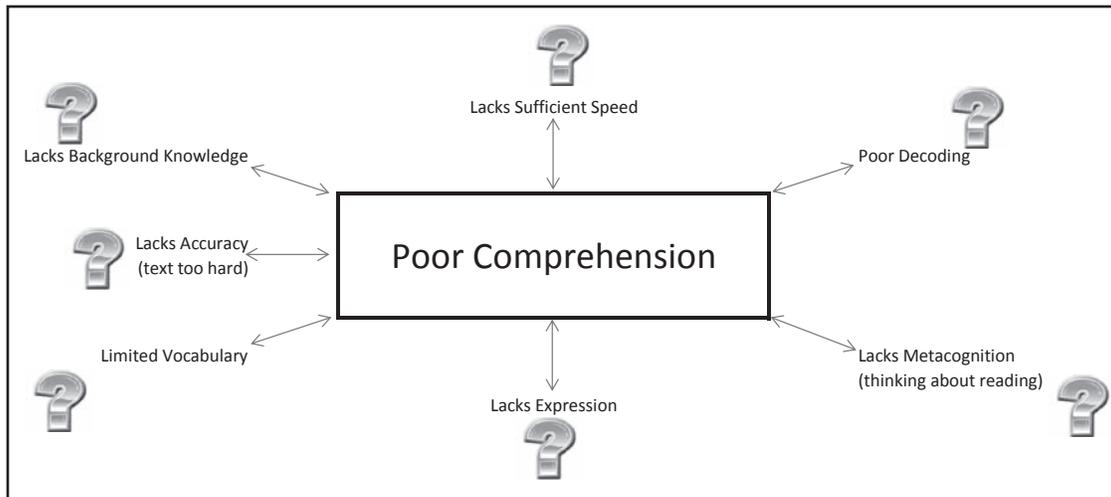
Wide reading is the hallmark of word learning (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2006). For many students, especially young or struggling readers, developing an extensive listening vocabulary is the precursor to gleaning new words in their own reading. Reading aloud is essential so students have the opportunity to be introduced to words that may be too difficult for them to read and understand on their own (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998). Even in the early grades, exposure to complex text through read-alouds is critical for vocabulary development.

Comprehension

One of the most challenging issues in implementing the Common Core standards is the need to require students to read and comprehend complex text. To accomplish this, teachers need to fully understand the comprehension process and how best to assist students in reaching this high standard. Comprehension does not stand alone; it is embedded in decoding, vocabulary, and fluency. Therefore, a lack of comprehension could be the result of fluency deficits, decoding issues, or limited vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, without adequate comprehension skills, students might lack the inability to think while reading or lack the background knowledge to thoroughly understand the text's message. It is important for teachers to understand the integral relationship between comprehension and the other major components of reading (see Figure 3).

Reading texts at high levels of complexity is beneficial if and only if a student is able to read the text with around 98% accuracy (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). A teacher's lack of understanding of research in this area can lead to frustration for the teacher and students as text is presented at unattainable levels. Teachers need to adjust instructional

FIGURE 3
Contributors to Poor Comprehension



delivery to address this issue. Additionally, the CCSS require students to write to demonstrate deep comprehension, which requires focused instruction and a major shift in how students are assessed on comprehension. Traditional short-response comprehension assessments no longer suffice as the primary means to assess comprehension.

Delivering the Literacy Curriculum

In a truly balanced literacy approach, how you teach is just as important as what you teach. We can be cognizant of literacy standards as well as research-based components and still miss the mark if we fail to consider the how in delivering everyday instruction. Teachers must continue to use research and evidence-based practices to gain an understanding of the strategies that are most effective in delivering instruction. Additionally, teachers must consider the most appropriate venue or format to present that instruction. Maintaining the best teaching practices without ignoring the current research and evidence requires balance. Much too often, education swings too far in one direction or the other.

The Importance of Evidence-Based Best Instructional Practices

Evidence-based best instructional practices are critical considerations as the literacy puzzle is assembled. What is an evidence-based best instructional practice? Simply put, it means that when this practice is used with a specific group of students, improvement is documented. In other words, these instructional practices have a record of success that is both trustworthy and valid (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). Certainly, there is no one best practice; teachers must be diligent in keeping abreast of the most current research, which allows teachers to pull from a variety of evidence-based practices to best meet

the needs of their students. According to Whitehurst (2002), evidence-based instruction involves teachers making decisions using “professional wisdom integrated with the best available empirical evidence” (slide 3). Thus, evidence-based practices must be included in every comprehensive literacy framework.

Currently, there is a plethora of evidence-based best practices and principles to consider, and educators must be diligent in searching for and implementing these practices. There are numerous resources available that detail the latest research and evidence-based practices. The recent edition of *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzone, 2011) identifies 10 evidence-based best practices for comprehensive literacy instruction:

1. Classrooms should reflect a culture that fosters literacy motivation. The teacher should foster literacy by creating a community of literacy learners.
2. Students learn best when they read for authentic meaning-making purposes: for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task.
3. Teachers should provide appropriate scaffolded instruction in the five core skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) to promote independent reading.
4. The school day should include time for self-selected reading.
5. Providing students with high-quality literature across a wide range of genres will build a love for reading and address the Common Core standards.
6. As themes or topics are explored, multiple texts should be used to increase background knowledge, connect concepts, and increase vocabulary.
7. The classroom should reflect and encourage community and collaboration.
8. A balance of teacher- and student-led discussions of texts is important to build lifelong learners.
9. Students need ample opportunities to use technologies that connect and expand concepts.
10. Differentiate instruction based on student assessments to accommodate the needs of individual students.

These practices are, in fact, the pieces that most teachers agree on as important to a quality literacy experience. Knowing how to make this happen in the classroom is what becomes overwhelming for many teachers. As this book was developed, I gave careful consideration to addressing these practices in a practical way.

The Importance of Multiple Instructional Venues for Teaching and Learning

A variety of instructional delivery venues provides the vehicles for delivering a strong literacy curriculum. These teaching venues begin in whole-group instruction with modeled and shared literacy experiences. Differentiating literacy instruction in small-group settings provides all students with the opportunity to grow in their literacy endeavors as

well as opportunities to navigate more difficult texts. Additionally, students need opportunities to practice and orchestrate their literacy skills individually, with partners, and in small groups with other students. Individual feedback to students provides valuable support for growth. These teaching venues support the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), which supports the theory that the teacher must first model literacy skills while students observe. Then, the teacher and students share the responsibilities needed to complete the literacy tasks. Finally, the students orchestrate these literacy skills with the sideline support of the teacher. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to seamlessly orchestrate their literacy skills without the support of the teacher.

Deciding what to focus on in whole-group versus small-group instruction and what students practice and produce as they work with partners or individually is instrumental in the success of the language arts program. These venues are important pieces of delivering the literacy plan and are addressed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

The Importance of Differentiating Literacy Instruction

The diversity in every classroom presents perhaps the biggest challenges for classroom teachers. Providing appropriate instruction for this diverse group of learners requires different instructional strategies. At its core, differentiated instruction provides all students with the appropriate level of challenge and the appropriate supports to help them reach learning goals. Students learn best when they are presented with challenges that are obtainable—not so difficult that the learner feels overwhelmed or so simple that the student is not having to think (Bess, 1997; Tomlinson, 2003). Technology is also an important key to supporting diverse learners by creating avenues for individual access to content and expression.

The CCSS were written so that as many students as possible have access to these rigorous standards, including students with special needs and English learners. This is critically important as the issue of text complexity is addressed and instruction adapted. Teachers need to alter instructional strategies so all students have the opportunity to access increasingly difficult text. This text complexity must be tempered with the needs and unique capabilities of each student. It is important to create instructional opportunities based on what students know and what comes next in the developmental sequence. A differentiated classroom requires a skillful teacher who creates many opportunities for students to access the curriculum.

Although standards are established for grade-level attainment, the instruction necessary for individual learning must not be one size fits all. Differentiation allows for multiple paths to reach the learning goals. Key implications for curriculum instruction require teachers to use varied grouping strategies based on the goals of the lesson. In other words, teachers need to recognize when homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings are the most optimal for learning. Differentiating literacy instruction for special populations, including English learners and students with exceptionalities, is instrumental in addressing their special needs. There is no other choice if educators are sincere about providing a quality education for all students.

The Importance of Teacher as Decision Maker

Research findings and assumed best practices must always be tempered with the fact that a finding may not be a best practice if, for example, instruction is not adapted to fit the strengths and needs of a particular group of learners. All children enter the schoolhouse with unique personalities and background knowledge that must be respected. Individual students will typically respond differently to the same instruction. Simply put, research and best practices must fit the students; teachers must understand their students' strengths and needs and adapt instruction to promote optimal learning and literacy. Effective teachers must be keenly aware of their students' knowledge levels and constantly self-question, reflect, teach, and reevaluate to inform the most powerful instruction. In other words, teachers are literacy designers, equipped with knowledge of literacy instruction and the individual literacy needs of each student. Quality literacy instruction can only be achieved when skillful, knowledgeable, and dedicated teachers are allowed the latitude to use their professional judgment to make instructional decisions that enable students to reach their highest literacy potential.

In the past decade, there has been an unprecedented move to require teachers to use a prescribed, boxed literacy program with fidelity. Unfortunately, trained, knowledgeable teachers have, in some cases, been reduced to mere robotic-like instruction. Effective teachers cautiously guard against the tendency to teach reading and language arts as a series of skills or components to be taught in a prescribed, linear format. They recognize the importance that each literacy piece plays in the overall literacy development of their students.

The teacher is undeniably the most important ingredient in the literacy jigsaw. The pieces are easily identifiable, but the assembly requires a knowledgeable and skilled teacher. What happens between the classroom walls on a daily basis ultimately determines the fate of our students' literacy growth. The teacher must understand literacy learning well enough to adapt the learning environment, materials, and methods to particular situations and students. Others can provide training, require plans, monitor assessments, or dictate the literacy curriculum, but the reality of its success or failure rests squarely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. The teacher is the cornerstone for building a successful literacy program.

The Importance of Assessing Literacy Achievement

A significant part of the assessment process is the documentation that ensures that students are on track to meet the standards. Therefore, assessments must reflect and support effective instruction and include all students from the outset, including English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. As a result, students will not only learn from a more rigorous and relevant set of standards but also be introduced to new types of assessment that are significantly different from most current state tests.

Obviously, assessments have always been an integral part of the instructional process, but assessments of the next decade will center on more rigorous requirements. These assessments will focus on more real-world relevance and present interdisciplinary situations.

Students will be asked to perform at the evaluation and synthesis levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Forehand, 2010), which are in the top tier of performance. Assessments that include performance-based tasks rather than closed responses, such as multiple-choice responses, which are typically at a low level of rigor, will be the norm. In a performance-based task, students are asked to create answers or products to demonstrate knowledge and skills.

Without question, assessment will remain at the forefront in evaluating and determining the growth of students in their literacy journeys. It will continue to guide instruction as well as measure the progress that students are making toward established grade-level benchmarks. Many teachers now have their income partially tied to the gains that students make under their direction. Determining the best way to assess and matching the purpose of the assessment are critical pieces of a comprehensive literacy program. Chapter 6 addresses both formative and summative literacy assessments and their value as teachers make critical literacy decisions.