

## Common Core State Standards and Early Childhood Literacy Instruction: Confusions and Conclusions

**Abstract:** With adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) virtually the whole of the United States is involved in aligning curricula, lesson planning, implementing, and professional development. However, only a small fraction of CCSS activity or commentary focuses on early childhood education at the preschool and kindergarten levels. Thus, it is crucial to examine closely the links between the standards themselves and applications in practice so that teachers and administrative personnel have a clear understanding of both what the standards imply and do not imply for aligning classroom practices to accomplish the CCSS in early childhood. This paper focuses on clarifying issues that have been especially subject to confusion or misinterpretation with respect to curricular and instructional practices in preschool and kindergarten. It begins with a brief account of alignments between the CCSS and developmentally appropriate practices currently common in early language and literacy instruction and supported by research, followed by in-depth analyses of four issues that have generated some or considerable confusion for early childhood educators: pedagogical approach, text choices, understanding developmental progressions, and performance assessment.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) are the biggest thing to hit school curriculum/instruction policy in recent memory. Despite recent ‘backlash’ from both the left and the right (e.g., Layton, 2013; Strauss, 2013), schools and teacher education programs are awash in “Common Core.” However, only a small fraction of what has appeared in curricular or policy discussions focuses on early childhood education at the preschool and

kindergarten levels. The relative lack of attention to preschool is perhaps to be expected since the CCSS begin at kindergarten. Yet, there is a stepped up level of academic rigor expected at kindergarten as a result of CCSS implementation that has not received very widespread or deep attention. And, the CCSS clearly have implications for preschool in terms of content and skills expected for success upon entry to and during kindergarten and beyond.

As educators with a combined total of almost 60 years spent in early literacy research, early childhood teacher education, and early childhood classroom teaching, we feel we have considerable experience viewing young children’s

language and literacy education from a number of perspectives. And, from that experience, we must say that we believe the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy (CCSS-ELA) certainly have the potential for positively impacting early childhood language and literacy instruction, primarily because they place greater emphasis on the authentic and higher-level literacies required in later grades and into adulthood (e.g., interpreting complex meanings in texts, composing real texts for real purposes). Key early childhood education professional organizations have expressed approval of the standards, but the approval

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has not been exactly enthusiastic. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in conjunction with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NACES-SDE) issued the *Joint Statement on the Common Core Standards Initiative Related to Kindergarten through Third Grade* (2010), concluding that the standards are "...age appropriate for kindergarten...", but later (2012) noting concern about the narrow focus on only mathematics and English language arts and about how children's progress toward meeting the standards would be assessed.

### Why the CCSS Matter to Preschool and Kindergarten Teaching and Learning

The CCSS are already showing evidence of 'push down,' a trend that will likely only increase. For example, opportunities for federal Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge funding (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallengindex.html>) have resulted in numerous states aligning existing early learning (preschool) standards to CCSS kindergarten standards (e.g., Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011; North Carolina State Board of Education, 2012), attempts that have prompted concern in the early childhood education community (e.g., Meisels, 2011; NAEYC, 2012; Zubrzycki, 2011). In their position statement on CCSS, NAEYC specifically warns

*Aligning standards for K–12 with early learning standards presents a number of challenges, including the very real potential for "push-down," where the K–12 standards may exert pressure on states to modify their oftentimes well-developed early learning standards to align with those for programs serving older children. The early childhood field should not allow for alignment to flow only downward but should advocate for the "push-up" of early childhood standards to inform ongoing development of K–12 standards.... (2012, p. 6)*

In addition, popular press articles and online blogs express similar concerns that the CCSS could lead to developmentally inappropriate practices in early childhood education, in particular in preschool (Maxwell, 2012; Nemeth, 2012; Rose, 2012).

We, too, recognize the concern for what can go wrong (and historically has gone wrong) in implementing instruction and assessment intended to foster the academic achievement of young children in U.S. schools. But we also believe that while a number of the concerns regarding the CCSS and early education are well founded, others seem to arise because certain aspects of the CCSS-ELA related to curricular and instructional practices in preschool/kindergarten are either not well understood, or are fundamentally misinterpreted. Our purpose in this article is to examine critically a number of key links between the standards themselves and applications of them in practice in order to promote an understanding of what the CCSS-ELA imply (and do not imply) for designing appropriate classroom practices in preschool and kindergarten. Implications for various preschool programs may differ slightly as a function of the program type (i.e., Head Start, state-funded pre-K, private preschools) because the children they serve often bring with them different learning needs. However, in today's early childhood education climate, it is increasingly common for different program types to align with the same state early learning standards and be evaluated using the same program standards (e.g., in Ohio, all state licensed early childhood facilities, including Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and private preschools, follow Ohio's Step Up to Quality standards [Early Childhood Ohio, 2013]). Thus, we see the discussion of CCSS-ELA as relevant to a wide range of early childhood professionals. Our discussion of the CCSS-ELA begins with a brief account of alignments between the standards and developmentally appropriate early language and literacy practices supported by research and then goes on to examine four issues that require deeper consideration or clarification for early childhood educators.

### General Content Focus of the CCSS-ELA: Alignment with Current Evidenced-based Practice

In general, we see three ways in which the content of the CCSS-ELA aligns well with the body of quality research currently informing early childhood instruction and thus can be accepted by both teachers and administrators.

### Overall Content

The overall content of the CCSS-ELA in the early grades conforms to the findings of the National Early Literacy Panel recommendations (NELP, 2008) and the

earlier *Report of the National Reading Panel* (NRP, 2000), as well as with practice common in high quality programs (NCCIC, 2011). For example, the CCSS-ELA specify goals for print concepts, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and phonics, reading fluency, oral language, and reading/listening comprehension. These are areas widely recognized as central to early education—see, e.g., the Head Start Guidelines (USDHHS, 2011), NAEYC’s position on curriculum and assessment (2003), and the International Reading Association’s *Pre-school Literacy Collection* (six volumes described at <http://www.reading.org/marketing/landing/Preschool/index.html>) as well as its *Essential Readings on Early Literacy* (Strickland, 2010).

### Centrality of Higher-level Meaning Making

One clear improvement of the CCSS-ELA over most existing state early learning or kindergarten standards is the importance placed on making meaning with texts (Reading: Literature and Informational Texts; Writing) in relation to the more typically emphasized code of written language (Reading: Foundational Skills). We applaud the CCSS-ELA suggestion that meaning making with texts is more complex and requires greater emphasis in instruction than that accorded to the foundational literacy skills related to decoding and encoding written language (e.g., phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, phonics skill). This is manifested in the CCSS both in the number of standards and in the order in which they are presented. Foundational Skills, for example, appear after the standards for Reading: Literature and Informational Texts instead of first, as is the case in all other standards documents that we have encountered. Such an approach connotes an early literacy curriculum that aligns well with the skill development trajectories presented by Paris (2005, 2009) and the approach to early literacy education that we have argued for previously (Teale, Paciga & Hoffman, 2007). Paris contrasted constrained skills—like letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, and phonics, which develop rapidly and reach saturation rather quickly—with unconstrained skills—comprehension, oral language, writing, and so forth—which feature more slowly-developing learning trajectories across the lifespan. When we applied the concepts of constrained and unconstrained skills to early literacy curriculum and instruction, we suggested that an early childhood program focused essentially on foundational skills resulted in a “curriculum gap,” especially for children who grow up in under-resourced communities and schools. This curriculum gap means that many young children “are

being shortchanged” and will suffer the consequences in later grades “when what it takes to be a good reader depends on vocabulary knowledge, domain knowledge, and the ability to comprehend a variety of genres of text at a deep level” (p. 346).

Thus, we view as positive the fact that CCSS-ELA make numerous explicit efforts to include higher-level literacy practices not only in later grades but at young ages as well. For example, the Reading Standards “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas” for Literature and for Informational Text are especially focused on higher-level meaning construction, rather than on basic level comprehension. Kindergarten indicators like “With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories,” (p. 11) move beyond the mere (and more typical) identification of characters to directing young readers’/listeners’ attention to analyzing their interpretations of different characters in order to better understand the story. For informational text, the indicator, “With prompting and support, identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text,” (p.13) prompts an early form of critical reading through analysis of the author’s argument to consider validity and logic. Such an emphasis promotes child involvement in the complexity of the reading process, and emphasizes its true purpose—making meaning.

The CCSS-ELA thus have the potential to promote more holistic literacy instruction than many previous state standards or existing curricular programs—positioning literacy as centrally being a process of meaning-making rather than a set of discrete skills to be mastered.

### Prominence of Writing

The prominence of writing at the earliest age levels in the CCSS-ELA is also well supported by research and is something to be welcomed by teachers and administrators. One criticism of the highly influential *Report of the National Reading Panel* (NRP, 2000) and the K-3 Reading First program (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html>) that arose from the *Report* was that it included virtually no attention to writing. In addition, during the past decade, a number of states abandoned standardized testing of writing in grades 3 or 4 (e.g., Ohio and Illinois), contributing to a relative lack of writing instruction as compared to reading instruction in early childhood education (Teale, et al., 2007). Finally, in cases where early writing instruction has occurred for

young children, it is often narrowed to focus on letter formation, sentence completion, or even copying words or text. The CCSS-ELA, in contrast, stress young children's engagement in written composition, and they value various forms of children's communication (e.g., "Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose...."). Teachers should also embrace the emphasis on the creation of real, purposeful writing (e.g., "compose informative/explanatory texts", "narrate... events...and provide a reaction to what happened"), rather than merely defining early writing as journaling or reading responses, much less focus on the name writing and letter formation activities that frequently constitute early writing instruction.

### **Concerns: Issues in Need of Deeper Consideration and Clarification for Application**

As we have worked with experienced and novice teachers in urban preschool classrooms since the 2010 introduction of the ELA Common Core State Standards, helped a large school district with its initiative to align its assessment program and pre-K/K report cards to the CCSS, spoken with early educators at numerous conferences, and read the professional literature and blogs, we have repeatedly come across certain issues that teachers and administrators find challenging to implement and others that are enveloped in confusion because they receive varying interpretations from different quarters. We identified four that are especially important to early childhood practice, ones that our experiences indicate will be especially problematic if the field does not get them "right" for children in the classroom: pedagogical approach, text choices, understanding developmental progressions, and performance assessment.

#### **Designing a Pedagogical Approach**

The CCSS-ELA, as a set of standards for student learning outcomes, do not prescribe how a teacher should actually *teach* each standard. Thus, the increased rigor of the CCSS-ELA overall has the potential to lead to a pedagogical approach in early childhood literacy education that relies too much on didactic instruction and thus misses opportunities for what should be the focus for young children: engaging in authentic instructional practices that involve written language learning experiences. For example, it is commendable that the CCSS-ELA require young children to compose informational texts; however, there are valid concerns with how this standard

might be taken up in practice. Ideally, composing informational texts in preschool and kindergarten involves children working with teachers and peers at a classroom writing center or in a small group guided writing activity to communicate growing understandings of their world through drawing, independently writing words (either emergently or in conventional script), and dictation. Yet, as we have observed, such a standard may easily be misinterpreted by teachers or administrators to require a certain time of day when the entire class sits down for a formal lesson about informational text, with all children writing about the same teacher-chosen topic, or worse yet, copying some informational text to get the proper level of 'practice' with letters for children this young. Such a misconceived pedagogical approach is a manifestation of the idea that there are certain basic, low-level skills that must *first* be mastered in order for young children to focus on higher-level understandings.

Similarly, the discussion in the CCSS-ELA related to how ELA goals should be reached is under-specified. For instance, the kindergarten standards frequently use the phrasing "with guidance and support..." or "with prompting and support..." Teachers may easily interpret these vague statements in very different ways. Some may apply such standards appropriately, for example, by encouraging open-ended, collaborative interpretations of texts during group read aloud discussions; others may inappropriately enact rigid, close-ended question-and-answer sessions focused mostly on practicing particular strategies.

The lack of specificity about pedagogy also has implications for play in early childhood classrooms. Substantial research (e.g., Roskos & Christie, 2000; Christie & Roskos, 2009) indicates that opportunities to engage in literacy embedded in play are both powerful and productive. Nevertheless, the amount of play in early childhood classrooms has been steadily declining for years (Miller & Almon, 2009). There is reason for concern that the increased rigor of the CCSS-ELA could, in the absence of sufficient guidance for instructional application, result in even greater decreases. Teachers and administrators well-grounded in early childhood research and theory can readily apply the CCSS-ELA using play as a meaningful pathway to literacy, embedding early literacy experiences in authentic contexts like centers-based play as discussed by Wohlwend (2007), Dyson (2003), or Rowe (1998). Through our work in Early Reading First preschool classrooms over the past seven years

(<http://www.uic.edu/educ/erf/>), we have found that when authenticity of literacy practices becomes a goal, play-based instruction emerges as a motivating and effective alternative to skill and drill activities (DeStefano, Rempert, Lemons, & Innes, 2013). It is important to remember, however, that to achieve authenticity and rigor, it is necessary for teachers to design play-based instructional activities connected to meaningful curricular themes, embedding language and literacy interactions in the play scaffolded by adults (Casbergue, McGee & Bedford, 2008).

Consider the following vignette from a preschool during a unit focused on “From Farm to Table” in which the essential questions being examined by the children were: Where do different foods come from? How do foods get from their source to stores and to our tables? What do farmers do and how does their work serve the community?

Ms. Tatum is about to begin a second reading of Grace Lin’s *The Ugly Vegetables* (1999). Prior to the reading, she reviews the vegetable names by using Quick Response codes she has embedded on the book’s end papers that link to the author’s website and provide oral pronunciations of the vegetables’ names ([http://www.gracelin.com/content.php?page=uv\\_chinese\\_lesson](http://www.gracelin.com/content.php?page=uv_chinese_lesson)). Ms. Tatum then reads the book aloud and supports vocabulary and students’ comprehension through discussion. Afterward, she previews with students the free-choice centers in the classroom, each of which is designed with rich language and literacy experiences to extend students’ background knowledge on processes of getting food from the farm to the table. At Blocks, students may access a photo stream on an iPad to review garden designs. The teaching assistant will be there to help discuss vocabulary (e.g., raised beds vs. container gardens, rows, trellis, root vegetables vs. vine vegetables) and to assist them in planning their block center garden. She will encourage the children there to apply phonological awareness and phonics skills to emergently write signs and labels for their beds. At the Art center students can sculpt foods from clay. They are encouraged to look at the samples of foods there and attend to their size, weight, texture, and color. At the Science table students can check on the compost process, observing and taking notes related to their seedlings growing in both composted soil and in ground soil (started earlier in the unit). The teacher will be there to help students record their observations in science journals. Students can also play a game matching previously discussed foods to their sources (e.g., egg to chicken), in either a digital format or as a card game. Many informational and storybooks related to the “Farm to Table” theme are available at the book-browsing center. In Dramatic Play, students can create and work in a farmers’ market with signs to advertise the produce and logs to track inventory and income. During the unit, students will also visit an operating farm to observe first-hand the sources of various foods and document their observations through digital photography. They will then compose and publish a digital class book related to food sources on the farm,

presenting information to readers such as the principal, children in other classes, and family members

Thus, all children have varied opportunities to extend their developing language and literacy skills through authentic applications in play and life experiences. When teachers support children’s emergent understandings of curricular content in such developmentally appropriate ways, meeting the requirements of CCSS-ELA is less problematic, and play remains central to learning content. Without content-rich explorations and teacher-scaffolded interactions, however, it is difficult to ensure that the language and literacy outcomes central to the CCSS-ELA are met in developmentally appropriate ways in early childhood instruction.

### **Texts in the Early Childhood Classroom**

To nurture young children’s understandings of literacy as having a variety of purposes and functions, classrooms should be rich repositories of texts: high-quality, wide-ranging picture books representing a variety of formats and genres, narrative and informational -books and apps; purposeful signs, labels, and other environmental print; child-created texts; and more. The CCSS-ELA have quite a bit to say about the texts children should be engaging with (see Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading). Three issues, however, have led to concerns about the impact the standards may have on the texts early childhood teachers select and children’s interactions with those texts: (1) the use of “challenging texts”, (2) the inclusion of both narrative and nonfiction, and (3) the use of digital texts.

**Challenging Texts.** A central platform of the CCSS-ELA is that students need engagement with more challenging texts in order to be college and career ready. This idea stemmed largely from findings that over recent decades there had been a “dumbing down” of the curricular texts at the high school level (Stotsky, Traf-fas, & Woodworth, 2010), and this principle has been assumed to apply to the standards from grade 12 all the way down to K. However, as Hiebert (in press) has shown in her analyses and as the International Reading Association points out in “Literacy Implementation Guidance for the ELA Common Core Standards,” textual standards for reading should be raised only for grades 2 and above and even at those ages this is “a complex instructional issue and one that will not likely be accomplished successfully without a nuanced and thoughtful approach” (2012, p. 1).

It is especially complex to interpret the implementation of more challenging texts for kindergarten and for preschool. We recommend, first, that with regards to text complexity these two age levels be considered separately. For one thing, most preschools in the United States today do not engage in formal reading instruction, but the majority of kindergarten classrooms do. In classrooms where reading is deliberately taught, it is most important that teachers *not* replace high quality “easy reading” texts with more complex texts (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2010; International Reading Association, 2012; Shanahan, 2013). Central facets of learning to read conventionally involve cracking the alphabetic code and developing good word recognition skills. The texts most useful for enabling children to gain sufficient practice with these aspects of early literacy development are those with features like high percentages of decodable words, common sight words, and predictable language, rather than those exhibiting highly complex ideas or language.

By the same token, both preschool and kindergarten children *should* have many opportunities to engage with complex texts in order to build early comprehension skills, academic vocabulary, and critical thinking. At these ages levels, interactions with complex texts best take place in the context of classroom read alouds—whole class, small group, or even one-to-one (Hoffman, 2011). Read alouds enable children to process language that is considerably more difficult than they could read independently. In addition, the language and social interaction that surround the words and illustrations of the text in well-conducted read alouds can foster discussion of quite sophisticated conceptual information, literary understandings, and thematic issues among 4- and 5-year-olds (e.g., Hoffman, 2011; Pappas, Varelas & Rife, 2004; Sipe, 2008).

The following example illustrates how early childhood teachers can engage young children with complex texts.

In Hoffman’s (2011) work with kindergarten teachers, one teacher shared *When Sophie gets Angry, Really, Really Angry...* (Bang, 1999), a book with minimal text on the child-significant theme of the difficulty of sharing possessions and managing

emotions. Despite its simple language, the book involves a complex text-illustration relationship that warrants close reading and deep discussion. The teacher supported students in thinking beyond basic plot comprehension and even personal connections to the character and theme, instead focusing discussion on interpreting symbolism. To do so, she intentionally guided students’ attention to visual aspects of the text such as line, color, and perspective, all the while leaving space for students to articulate their evolving meaning-making in collaborative discussion. Through their discussion, the teacher and students collaboratively interpreted symbols of Sophie’s emotions in the interplay between text and image: anger appearing as red and jagged lines that formed images like fire and exploding volcanoes, which in subsequent pages cooled along the color spectrum into calming purples and blues in the soft curves of wind and water. The children drew on background knowledge of the relationship between the symbols of fire and water to recognize the relationship between these emotions as well.

Discussions of complex texts such as this one apprenticed these students into an understanding of literacy as constructing interpretive meanings with texts (as emphasized in the CCSS-ELA), pushing far beyond literal plot comprehension.

#### **Informational as well as narrative texts.**

The traditional diet of texts used in early schooling has been stories, narrative texts. Story is an essential part of what makes us human—one means by which we have passed along the traditions, values, and beliefs of various cultures for millennia. In addition, stories help children explore issues and interpersonal relationships through which they learn about living with others in the world.

The importance of young children’s engagement with both narrative and informational texts is well grounded in research (e.g., Purcell-Gates, Duke & Martineau, 2007), and the CCSS-ELA emphasis on this is something to be embraced by teachers and administrators. Achieving such a balance would mark an improvement in early childhood literacy instruction that has tended to over-emphasize narrative texts (Teale, Hoffman & Paciga, 2013; Duke, 2000).

But as Teale, et al. (2013) point out, what children need to succeed in early literacy *and beyond* is not only gaining control over a set of important foundational literacy skills (phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, decoding, word recognition, and comprehension strategies) but also developing deep and rich content knowledge. To read well or write well, one draws

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continually on what one knows. Thus, opportunities to engage with informational texts are fundamental to children's preschool and kindergarten experiences. Again, informational texts will most often be encountered in the context of read aloud experiences. Publishers are increasingly making high quality, age-appropriate informational texts available for 4- and 5-year-olds (Teale, Yokota & Martinez, 2008), some of which could be profitably used independently by children who are beginning to read conventionally.

**Digital texts.** Unlike most previous standards, the CCSS specifically discuss the importance of technology in literacy learning. Digital texts, which have become a dominant factor in publishing for adults in the United States, are now beginning to carve out a significant space among early childhood consumers (e.g., Guernsey, Levine, Chiong, & Severns, 2013; Shuler, 2012; Yokota & Teale, in press). We believe that specific reference to the importance of technology in early ELA education is something to be welcomed. But also, because of the warm reception that digital texts for young children (i.e. e-picture books and apps) have begun to receive, we feel it is extremely important to point out what recent content analyses have shown about such texts.

As Teale (2012) has discussed, the digital texts currently available for young children come from three sources: (1) researcher-designed eBooks intended to teach young children early literacy skills, (2) commercial children's (print) book publishers, and (3) apps developers. Researcher-developed digital stories have embedded supports designed to help children build phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (as found in the work of Bus and colleagues [e.g., Smeets & Bus, 2012], Korat & Levin [2012], or Korat & Shamir [2007], for example). Such texts, however are, for all intents and purposes, currently in research and development phases and not readily available to teachers for classroom use.

Digital texts designed for young children in the form eBooks and apps for either tablets or computers are, on the other hand, proliferating, and they are increasingly found in early childhood classrooms. Yokota (2013) has conducted extensive reviews of such digital texts and,

through content analyses, makes the case that while such texts can be valuable resources for supporting young children's comprehension or emerging literacy, much of what is currently available is not well designed to do so. She calls for rigorous evaluation and selection procedures when considering digital texts for use in conjunction with early literacy and language instruction and provides guidelines for doing so. Our experience with early childhood teachers indicates that they have had few opportunities to learn about what digital texts are available for use and even less opportunity to learn about criteria for evaluation and selection.

### **The Structure of CCSS and Developmental Learning Progressions in Early Childhood**

**Structure of CCSS.** The CCSS follow an organizational structure different from most previous standards, which stated grade level expectations in isolation from end-of-schooling goals. For most other standards with which teachers and administrators are familiar, each grade level has its own established discrete set of skills to be mastered within one year. In contrast, CCSS first Identified end knowledge/goals for college and career readiness to establish "Anchor Standards," and then back-mapped each goal downward to create aligned grade level standards (Pearson & Hiebert, 2013). This process was designed to create a spiraling K-12 curriculum in which each grade level contributes to the same set of goals and in which attainment at each level contributes to preparation for the next grade's corresponding goal.

We find this process fundamentally sound, but also see two main issues that teachers and administrators need to consider carefully with respect to the developmental learning progression present in the CCCS. First is one that a number of scholars have addressed (e.g., Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012; Pearson, 2013) and that applies to every grade level covered in standards, from K to grade 12. Unlike other aspects of the CCSS that, as the developers point out, "are (1) research and evidence based" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 3), there is no firm research evidence supporting most of the descriptors provided for each of the grade-specific standards that students "are expected to meet... and retain" (p. 3). Instead, as Pearson (2013) has documented,

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these grade level learning progression descriptors were arrived at through a process of professional consensus (using information from research, best practice, and experience) rather than being based on validated empirical evidence. Thus, both researchers and teachers should approach the descriptors as ‘best conclusions’ based on current knowledge that are subject to reconsideration in light of additional research and classroom evidence.

**Developmental Learning Progressions in Early Childhood.** The second issue related to developmental learning progressions is perhaps more subtle and certainly more related to young children, owing to the nature of learning development from ages 3 through 6. A fundamental feature of any CCSS grade level standard is that it represents a goal for *independent* content mastery to be demonstrated by the end of the school year. Such individual, independent performance is useful for enabling formative progress monitoring, planning effective instruction and scaffolding, and designing any necessary interventions. That said, teachers and administrators must critically consider the ways that early childhood development differs from development in later grades, ways that impact the effectiveness of an approach to curriculum development that privileges goals for individual and independent performance like the CCSS.

Current research-based practice in early childhood literacy is rooted in theories of emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) and learning from a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as traditional cognitive theories (e.g., Ehri, 1995; Paivio, 1986). From these perspectives, young children require many models of, and collaborative practice with, the complex tasks of literacy before they demonstrate proficiency independently. That the CCSS almost exclusively describe standards for independent mastery by the end of the school year may not be particularly problematic for some kindergarten standards, namely the “Foundational Skills,” in the English Language Arts. Foundational ELA skills (i.e., constrained skills) are relatively easily conceptualized in terms of component parts that follow a fairly linear trajectory and furthermore are comprised of constituent tasks that most children can perform independently as they move through the early grades. Not all components of language and literacy development fit this mold of independent performance so neatly, though. For the most part, the CCSS do not include instances when other collaborative, scaffolded experiences should occur. Instead, they tend to either: (1) not include early grade level standards for some anchor standards, or (2) “dumb

down” what children are expected to do in the early grades, even with adult support, by describing grade level standards that may not align well to the anchor standards.

In the case of (1)—not including certain standards for young children—the CCSS-ELA state that a particular anchor standard is not relevant for that grade level, with a simple “begins in grade X.” For example, the Language anchor standard 3 reads, “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening” (p. 25); yet for kindergarten teachers are told that this “begins in Grade 2” (p. 27). Research, however, supports preschool and kindergarten teachers’ modeling and guiding such understandings as analysis of the formal/informal uses of English, or the idea that authors carefully choose words to craft meaning and style. This can be accomplished in contexts such as literary discussion during read alouds (as described previously, e.g., Hoffman, 2011) and shared writing (e.g., Gibson, 2008; Roth & Guinee, 2011).

Or, consider Writing anchor standard 4: “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (p. 18) which is said to “begin in Grade 3.” This, too, makes little sense to ignore in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Our point is that if teachers plan curriculum solely around expectations for children’s independent mastery, they may erroneously conclude, “Oh, I don’t have to model producing clear and coherent writing or how to develop, organize, or edit for style across various tasks, purposes, or audiences. That will happen in third grade.” Yet if preschool, or kindergarten teachers, and certainly first and second grade teachers, do not model how to draft and organize a statement that summarizes knowledge of a topic, or stance on an issue, students in later grades will likely have little understanding of why and how to compose purposeful and effective texts and make little progress at that time. And this is especially true for students whose ‘academic’ literacy and language development is mainly dependent on their experiences in school.

In other cases (2), the CCSS-ELA include a standard for early grades supposedly aligned with the anchor standard, but which is a kind of “dumbing down,” resorting to a lower level, sometimes relatively unrelated instantiation. For example, Reading Standards for Literature standard 6 calls for readers to “Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a

text” (p. 10). At the kindergarten level, the standard reads, “With prompting and support, name the author and illustrator of a story and define the role of each in telling the story” (p.11). This standard does refer to support from the teacher and may have been intended to prompt discussions of relationships between text and image in constructing meaning in picture books. However, our observations in a wide variety of early childhood classrooms lead us to conclude that most kindergarten teachers will apply this standard in practice with two questions that begin every read aloud: “What does the author do? What does the illustrator do?—to which children reply, “Write the words. Draw the pictures.” This exchange, especially when it occurs daily for the entire year, does almost nothing to prepare children to accomplish the true goal of “assess[ing] how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.” Most preschool and kindergarten students will not be able to analyze point of view independently; however, they also will not spontaneously reach this goal in a later grade without guided, collaborative engagement in the process in preschool and kindergarten.

Consider, on the other hand, how an early childhood teacher might intentionally, authentically, and appropriately address such anchor standards as illustrated in the following vignette.

Ms. Maddox has chosen a children’s picture book to share with her kindergarten classroom read aloud as a “mentor text” (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007) modeling rich descriptive language. As she reads *Poinsettia and Her Family* (Bond, 1985), she stops strategically at examples of description to have the children discuss different uses of language. For example, they examine the figurative use of the word *butter* and how figurative language contributes to the construction of setting and mood.

Text: If the sun was coming in the window just right, it would spread like warm butter across the pages of her book.

Ms. Maddox: Why do you think that the author said that the sun spread like warm butter?

Kia: ‘Cause it feels so hot that it can make you melt.

Ms. Maddox: I like that, Kia. . . . So, maybe that’s why the author said it spreads like warm butter. When you put butter on a piece of toast, and the toast is hot and the butter what?

Student: Melts.

Ms. Maddox: The butter melts. When you put the sun, and the sun starts to spread, it starts to give you more light, and it looked like it was doing what across the page?

Student: Melt.

Ms. Maddox: Spreading or melting across the pages.

Here, Ms. Maddox clarified the figurative language use through

the simile *the sun is like butter*. Through this simile, she touched on the intentionality of the author’s word choice to appeal to the aesthetic response of readers—the comforting and relaxing sensation of the sun’s light and warmth—to construct understandings of the setting and mood with her students.

Later that morning, Ms. Maddox engaged her class in a shared writing activity to compose a descriptive piece about their own classroom independent reading area. She began by explaining how authors make very careful decisions about which words to use and how to create pictures with their words. She modeled how to brainstorm pieces of description about the reading area, and then how to transform those into sentences. She also supported students to create their own description using figurative language, “Our reading chair is *pillowy* soft and comfortable like a *cloud*.” After this, students began work on an independent piece of descriptive writing and drawing of their own favorite place.

As this vignette illustrates, preschool and kindergarten teachers can appropriately and authentically support development toward anchor standards like Language anchor standard 3, “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening” (p. 25) and Writing anchor standard 4 “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (p. 18) through rich interactions like these during read alouds of quality children’s literature and shared writing.

To be sure, breaking down a progression of higher-order thinking skills is important to developing curricular scope and sequence. However, when the standards state explicitly that young children should not be expected to demonstrate these understandings, the over-emphasis on what young children should be expected to do independently (or with minimal support) can easily translate into classroom practice that narrowly focuses on very basic skills (often unrelated to the anchor standards), with few of the higher-level foci of the CCSS-ELA anchor standards being modeled and supported in early education.

## CCSS and Performance Assessment

We are limited in our commentary on assessment by the fact that there is not yet sufficient, large-scale implementation of the student assessment systems aligned to the CCSS (PARCC and Smarter Balanced) to estimate their effects on language and literacy instruction. Moreover, these ‘official’ systems, underwritten by the U.S. Department of Education, apply only at grade 3 and above. Therefore, what happens over the coming few

years, at least in preschool and kindergarten, will largely be the decision of individual states, school districts, or even schools. Given such a situation, it is critical for teachers and administrators to consider carefully how language and literacy development are assessed with young children—an exciting, yet daunting, undertaking.

As explained previously, the CCCS grade-level expectations focus on measurement of individual, independent mastery. It is also relevant to note that measurement of the “Foundational Skills” is fairly straightforward because there is a set number of items or concepts to understand (Paris, 2005; 2009). For example, there are 26 letters of the English alphabet, and each commonly represents a limited number of sounds. Once those correspondences are learned, that skill is fully mastered. There already exist several valid, reliable measures of foundational skills such as concepts of print, phonological awareness, and phonics appropriate for preschool and kindergarten. In addition, for teachers, the data from these measures tend to be reasonably straightforward to gather and interpret, and teachers can fairly readily learn how to use the information from these measures to differentiate instruction for young children (citation removed, 2012). Therefore, we see few concerns with measurement of these CCSS-ELA constructs.

However, for other components of literacy development—language acquisition, vocabulary, text comprehension, and written composition—measurement is much less straightforward (Hoffman, Teale, & Paciga, in press). These aspects of early ELA learning continue to develop throughout life, thus having no measureable point of mastery (we never stop learning vocabulary, for example). Second, they are considerably more complex to acquire than the foundational standards. For example, what is involved in “comprehending” a text? Reading comprehension relies on fluent decoding of the written words, breadth and depth of vocabulary, understandings of a variety of language structures, and background knowledge and experiences relevant to the text, in addition to application of strategies for making meaning, such as determining importance and inferring; making active connections among background knowledge,

experiences, and a text; and analyzing and evaluating an author’s purpose—all of which occur almost simultaneously in the construction of meaning. Complicated indeed to measure—and even more complicated to measure a young child’s progress toward accomplishing such a goal.

In addition, young children are notoriously unreliable in performance on independent assessment measures in isolated instances (Epstein, et al., 2004; National Education Goals Panel, 1998). In order to glean an accurate picture of what young children know and are able to do, teachers must gather data from a variety of contexts, over time. Such a task simply cannot be accomplished by relying on formal assessments popularly employed in early childhood education.

Currently, assessment policy has resulted in a considerable amount of teachers’ time spent administering assessments with rigid data collection procedures to individual students (e.g., Harriman, 2005; Harrison-Jones, 2007), almost all of which focus excessively on Foundational CCSS-ELA Skills (e.g., PALS; DIBELS; Get it, Got it, Go!), with very little assessment of the standards that make up the remaining (and vast majority of) the

standards. In the multitude of early childhood literacy assessments available and used in schools, our field has still failed miserably to develop high-quality and age-appropriate measures of other important aspects of early literacy development (Hoffman, et al., in press). Teachers and administrators must recognize that valid, reliable assessment of young children’s achievement of more complex aspects of language and literacy development requires different, less formal forms of assessment. Some alternatives include information conducted in collaborative group settings as well as informal measures such as checklists, observational notes, rubrics, and portfolios of student work. It is also important to stress that just because the standards are separated into Reading, Speaking & Listening, Writing, and Language, teachers should *not* think about these as separate areas to be assessed. Language arts learning is inter-connected, and so should assessment be, especially in early childhood.

A skilled teacher’s critical evaluation of a series of real, purposeful demonstrations of learning in the

**...the over-emphasis on what young children should be expected to do independently (or with minimal support) can easily translate into classroom practice that narrowly focuses on very basic skills....**

classroom can meaningfully measure what a particular student does or does not yet know about a wide variety of standards. For example, reflect back on the vignette of Ms. Maddox's reading of *Poinsettia and Her Family* (Bond, 1985). According to CCSS-ELA, a child's understanding of the simile *melts like butter* would not be assessed until 4<sup>th</sup> grade; however, Kia is demonstrating progress toward this goal in meeting the Kindergarten standard, "With guidance and support from adults, explore word relationships and nuances in word meanings." Ms. Maddox also supported the children to apply simile or metaphor in writing, which will supply further evidence of their learning of this standard.

To use informal assessment data like these, however, teachers must make some efforts to analyze and record the data more systematically. For instance, a teacher or trained classroom assistant can record notes on children's individual contributions to read aloud discussions on multiple occasions across the school year. The teacher can then analyze those notes after the read aloud to note evidence related to Standards for Reading, Speaking and Listening, and Language. When Mrs. Maddox read *Poinsettia and Her Family*, she could have noted examples of discussion that could later inform her understandings of individual students' progress toward many different standards. When one student volunteered a text-text connection to a theme in a recent episode of a popular children's television show, Ms. Maddox could later mark that contribution as evidence related to "Reading Standard 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take." When another student inferred Poinsettia's emotional reaction to being alone, she could consider that as evidence of Reading Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it..." And when two students argued with each other over several turns of discourse about how Poinsettia should have reacted to her frustrations with her family, Ms. Maddox could document their progress toward "Speaking and Listening Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively."

For examples of writing and language assessment, reconsider the vignette about Ms. Tatum's farm to table theme (see pp. 4-5 of this article). Ms. Tatum could collect and annotate children's writing samples, both independently and collaboratively composed (and repeatedly across the school year) to document progress in

Standards for Writing and Language. In Ms. Tatum's science center, one child documented the composting process by drawing a picture from her observations. Another used labels in writing a piece called "Compost" in which one page reads, "WORMS R ETG GRBJ AND MAKEG R." [Worms are eating the garbage and making air]. From this, it is evident that this particular child is making progress toward meeting kindergarten benchmarks for Writing Standard 2, "Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic. Moreover, the child is providing evidence of applying words from books (Language Standard 6) as well as much evidence for Language Standards 1 and 2 (addressing the conventions of standard English). These kinds of authentic assessment approaches allow teachers to observe and evaluate individual children's learning over time, as well as plan and modify instruction throughout the year to meet the end-of-year goals specified in standards.

## Conclusion

As scholars, we three authors live in the intersection between literacy education and early childhood education. We haven't; but from our collective experiences over the past four decades, we feel like we have seen it all: from popping M&M's in the mouths of 4-year-old Head Start children each time a "correct" response was given to the DISTAR question "What is this?" to reading readiness workbooks to learning to read naturally, to invented spelling to emergent literacy to whole language to Phonics First to NCLB and Reading First, to evidence-based curriculum to Early Reading First to Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge. A long-standing tension among early childhood educators is perhaps even more pronounced when situated in the world of literacy education in the United States, where the roles of academic learning and intentional teaching in preschool education are continually and hotly debated.

Along come the Common Core State Standards, bringing with them a number of concerns for early childhood educators, some new and some very familiar. Perhaps most fundamental among these concerns is that the "skill areas" English Language Arts and Mathematics are privileged over other areas of importance in early development (e.g., social-emotional learning, motor development) (Zubrzycki, 2011), and therefore that intentional teaching of skills will become the predominant mode of instruction of preschool and kindergarten

classrooms, pushing play-based learning and a focus on “topics that matter to children” (Teale, 2013) to the perimeter (Ginsburg & AAP, 2007; Halpern, 2013).

Every development or initiative in early childhood education has brought with it opportunities and challenges. Our feeling is that the implementation of the CCSS raises the stakes associated with these opportunities and challenges significantly. One reason is because of the ‘reach’ of the CCSS (forty-five states and the District of Columbia). Also significant is the coalition of governmental, business, and educational forces in favor of them. Thus, even with the current pushback against CCSS-related assessments (Florida) and certain states threatening to (e.g., Michigan Missouri) or actually (e.g., Indiana) disassociating themselves from CCSS, we suspect that the impact of the standards will continue to be a major factor in American education.

Overall, the content of the CCSS-ELA clearly signals more rigorous expectations for early childhood, quite appropriately emphasizing emergent reading and writing of real texts in addition to stressing the importance of developing foundational knowledge about the alphabet, alphabetic principle, and concepts of print. Furthermore, we believe that the strengths of the CCSS—ELA discussed earlier can result in better language and literacy learning for prekindergarten and kindergarten children.

We understand the concerns expressed in the early childhood education community and sympathize with many of them. But we also firmly believe that attention to, and intentional instruction in, language and literacy is of critical importance for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, especially for children who experience economic poverty in their homes and communities. We also recognize that the devil is always in the details and believe it is clear from our analyses and discussion of the four issues we detailed that the path to achieving improved instruction and resulting learning will not be easy. It is especially tricky to implement curriculum and instruction aligned with CCSS in preschool and kindergarten because of the nature of young children’s typically irregular learning patterns and trajectories, which make differentiating instruction a challenge and assessing language and literacy growth difficult to do in ways that truly inform instruction.

That being said, we believe that there are practical steps early childhood educators can take to appropriately prepare students to meet the CCSS’s high expectations:

- *Careful design of pedagogical approach* – design engaging experiences for children that involve intentional instruction, but that emphasize authentic literacy practices (real reading and writing of real texts) integrated with play that is organized around rich and interesting themes.
- *Text choices* – scaffold children’s experiences with challenging texts (i.e., high quality children’s literature) through interactive read aloud discussion that helps children interpret the more complex features of texts (e.g., author/illustrator craft, symbolism, theme). Include literature from a variety of genres and in digital formats.
- *Understanding developmental progressions* – In the more complex tasks of literacy, focus instruction on providing models and collaborative practice through think alouds and guiding questions for students in shared reading and shared writing activities. Remember that students will require much collaborative practice with complex literacies in early childhood before they will be able to demonstrate proficiency independently in later grades.
- *Performance assessment* – Employ holistic, informal, integrated, and ongoing assessment—e.g., information gathered in collaborative group settings, checklists, observational notes, rubrics, portfolios of student work—for the more complex aspects of language and literacy development. Also, revisit report cards and progress reports and revise as necessary to ensure that the more complex, difficult to assess skills (i.e., vocabulary and comprehension) are represented in a way that reflects their importance in early literacy learning.

So, while we feel that the opportunities for young children in schools and preschools implementing the CCSS are both welcome and multiple, we wrote this article because of the conflicting information, misinformation, confusions, and strange (dare we say inappropriate?) interpretations and implementations that currently exist in early education settings in public, private, and charter schools and even in some child care centers. This appears to be a pivotal time for early childhood education in the United States, and we believe it is critical for educational scholars to closely examine what is said and done in the name of the Common Core State Standards so that issues of implementation can be identified and discussed with teachers in ways that promote what the

evidence indicates is the most sensible way to proceed. To date, there has been too little attention to preschool and kindergarten specifically; instead, they have largely been considered as part of the overall conversation about K-5 or considered when discussing ‘primary grades.’

Additional guidance and support related to the concerns we have raised about pedagogical approaches, text choices, understanding developmental progressions, and performance assessment will be required in order for teachers and administrators to implement early language and literacy instruction and assessment successfully. The question remaining, perhaps, is “how can we overcome the challenges of CCSS for preK and K classrooms?” It is “on the ground,” in classroom practice that the Common Core State Standards will either serve or fail to serve the early literacy needs of young children. The considerable distance from the language of the standards to the appropriate instruction and assessment in the classroom needs to be bridged by administrators and early childhood teachers who are informed and motivated to create even better early literacy education for preschool and kindergarten children. That will be accomplished through high quality, local professional learning experiences. We hope that the issues outlined in this article help provide direction for some of those experiences.

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