On Merging the Common Core State Standards into
Existing Literacy Practices in the Earliest Grades
A Case Study of the Core Knowledge Language Arts New York Edition for Pre K- 2

Introduction

The development of a comprehensive Pre K-2 free literacy program specifically designed to meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is an important turning point in New York State's efforts to ensure College and Career Readiness for every student in its schools. The resources developed must offer teachers the means and materials to develop *every* student's capacity to read and comprehend complex text independently and well (CCSS Reading Standard 10). To do so, materials need to address with equal strength foundational reading skills and the development of academic language (vocabulary and syntax), background knowledge and engaged reading, all essential to reading success. Both materials and professional development must be coherent, clear and thorough. The Pre K – 2nd grade Core Knowledge Language Arts New York edition (CKLA NY edition) curriculum is designed to do these things and to ensure that children entering third grade are able to learn from grade level complex text with proficiency. It is being built upon a solid research and practice base and from a record of success in a variety of settings. Once CKLA NY edition is launched in New York State, it will also be made available to other states and districts for use.

It is vital for teachers to be able to envision how the components of such a comprehensive program can fit into their current classroom practices. Through this brief paper, we seek to support educators in an examination of current models for early literacy so that they are better prepared to determine which aspects of their current practice are inherently aligned with the CCSS and which aspects of existing models must be adapted or shifted altogether. In so doing, educators can make thoughtful decisions regarding how to adjust their practice and schools and districts can consider rationally and carefully whether to adopt this comprehensive free resource.

The table below describes the different components of the CKLA NY edition and the ways in which it maps to current literacy practices. The remainder of the paper follows this chart in exploring these connections and shifts.

Components of Comprehensive Literacy Program Core Knowledge Language Arts New York Edition Program for CCSS Grades P-2		
Foundational Skills and Small Group Instruction = CKLA NY Skill Sequence with student readers	Read Aloud and Shared Interactive Reading = Listening and Learning Strand	Additional Book Time, Independent Reading = Guided Reading and Accountable Independent Reading (GRAIR)
• Addresses needs of all students by providing: • Systematic exposure and reinforcement of reading skills differentially • Engages through: student-friendly, largely contemporary literature at various reading levels • Builds community of readers	• Provides lively, content rich read-aloud with opportunity to question, discuss, and share ideas • Focuses on academic language • Develops background knowledge in science, social studies and the Arts • Provides diverse text • Builds community of readers and learners	• Occurs outside and in addition to CKLA NY block • Allows for student and teacher choice from existing leveled libraries based on interest, availability and readability • Builds reading volume • Develops reading stamina and persistence • Strengthens community of readers and learners

CKLA NY edition Strands

CKLA NY edition includes two "strands" in its work: The Skills Strand and the Language and Literacy Strand. New York State is encouraging teachers to maintain or include a guided reading and accountable student reading strand (GRAIR) in addition.

Building a Foundation - CKLA NY Skill Sequence with Student Readers

The CKLA NY edition Skills Strand addresses foundational reading skills through a series of appealing leveled student books and carefully crafted instructional materials. The materials engage students in the sound-symbol relationships of the English language through study, games, songs and activities.

The text complexity demands of the standards make the development of accurate and automatic decoding abilities in these early grades even more essential, as students will be asked to read significantly more complex text once they enter third grade and ever after. The CKLA NY edition Skills Strand is a strategically designed, carefully sequenced foundational program with frequent, built-in opportunities to assess student progress and adjust instruction accordingly. Studies going back to the National Reading Panel (NICH 2000; Stuebing et al 2008) clearly show this type of approach to be optimal in developing reading abilities in the early grades, especially when it appropriately integrates phonological awareness and letter recognition (Bus, Adriana G. and van IJzendoorn, 1999). This capacity and the confidence it engenders in young readers can bring all students into the rewards only literacy can provide. In truth, the efficacy developed by being *able* to read fluently and well is, in and of itself, hugely motivational.

The New York State Education Department is serious in its intent for *all* students to achieve this level of proficiency. Those students who do not reach proficiency levels on the first exposures to the foundations of reading will need more exposures and experiences. Otherwise, they risk becoming the students reading five or more years below grade level in high school – the ones who rarely graduate. (Hernandez, 2011). It is imperative to stop this cycle and reverse the cumulative effects of early reading problems. To do so, there needs to be an understanding of what might cause additional difficulty for some students.

Reading "Deficits": Why just being exposed to good text isn't enough for everyone

For many young students, participating in a text-rich environment where they are constantly surrounded by opportunities to read and write meaningfully is enough to spur, strengthen, and develop a foundation for literacy that will bring them into third grade ready to read-to-learn. For many students, however, this is not enough. There are a number of learning and circumstantial "deficits" which directly impact the kind of literacy instruction students require and which demand a conscious and careful progression of skill and knowledge acquisition *in addition to* that exposure to meaningful texts.

The Rapid Naming Deficit

Rapid naming is a measure of how quickly students (or anyone) recognize a known stimulus (any common object: e.g. pictures of dog, cat, fork or the letter “S”). For years it has been known that students who take longer to do this have a rapid naming deficit and are more likely to have trouble learning to read (Georgiou et al, 2008; Lervag and Hulme, 2009). This reflects the fact that letters and letter combinations once learned still need to be *recognized,* and recognized efficiently, before they can be connected to their associated sounds (Adams, 1990). Thus, these students need more (in at least

some cases far more) opportunities to work with letters and letter-sound associations in order to reinforce these connections.

The Phonological Deficit

Some students who may quickly recognize and identify learned letters or letter combinations have trouble connecting them to their associated sounds. This is called a phonological deficit (or sometimes phonological processing deficit) and has also been shown to be associated with early reading difficulties (Georgiou et al, 2008; Lervag and Hulme, 2009). Similar to the process for strengthening rapid naming, these students need more opportunities to work with letters and letter-sound patterns, sometimes far more, in order to reinforce these connections. Unfortunately, some students have both these deficits, sometimes referred to as double-deficit (Tanaka et al, 2011; Wolf and Bowers, 1999; Cronin, 2011), and these children undoubtedly need far more opportunities both to learn letter patterns and to reinforce letter-sound associations.

Limited Vocabulary – Potential Poverty Deficits

Many students who are born into households where there is less access to text and where language stores are not as rich or varied arrive in kindergarten with a massive gap in the numbers of words they know, use, and can recognize, possibly having heard as many as 30 million words less than some of their peers between birth and age 5 (Hart and Risley, 2003).

So some children could potentially be facing a *triple* threat. It is not unusual for schools to have significant populations of students who may be facing such a triple threat to their language and reading development.

It is important to know and remember that these deficits, whether they present by themselves or in combination, are *in no way* connected to intelligence. Students who present with these deficits can learn to read and can comprehend text as well as any of their peers if they are given adequate, targeted, research based, and appropriate opportunities to strengthen their areas of weakness.

With financially strapped districts sometimes needing to delay identifying lagging students for additional services, it becomes imperative for early childhood teachers to have the materials and guidance to address and support these needs in a timely, efficient, and engaging way within their classrooms.

Fluency

To assure that all young readers achieve fluency, well-developed materials need to provide frequent and differentiated opportunities for students to listen to fluent reading while following along in the text**.** This is particularly true when what is being read is the more complex text called for by the CCSS (Benjamin, 2010). They also need to be given the opportunity to read aloud material they have first listened to and followed on the page. The emphasis on fluency instruction must include expression (prosody) as well as accuracy and a chance to develop one's own sense of a reading rate *appropriate to the text being read*. All of this must be clearly and strongly connected to comprehension. Texts read to fluency also offer an authentic opportunity to apply a broad range of cueing systems- grapho-phonemic, semantic and syntactic- while reading. To ensure differentiated needs are being met and fluency is being achieved, this element of a good language arts program needs to be *systematically* assessed, results monitored, and further work done as needed. These elements are embedded in the CKLA NY edition Pre K-2 foundational skills strand.

Shared Interactive Reading - Learning and Listening Strand

In this strand, teachers read aloud rich text while students engage in a range of speaking and listening activities. Students have the opportunity to build knowledge within and across topics, and teachers have the opportunity to act as guides to the world for their students.

It is important to remember that the CCSS insists on a wide range of texts types, as well as more complex texts (R.10, all grades beginning in second). Reading, whether instructed, heard read aloud or accessed independently, cannot be limited to just informational text, stories, poems, or *any* one type of text. This broadened definition of text types is an opportunity to engage all learners in every classroom as they discover the universe of texts types and topics.

But there is far more opportunity inherent in Standard Ten than students exercising their own full range of reading choices. There is room within it to return the reading of scientific topics and social studies, to the early elementary classroom – to allow early childhood educators to bring the wider world into their classrooms. This is cause for celebration. Implementing Standard Ten fully requires that both time and space be created for extending reading across the curriculum.

The Listening and Learning Strand fulfills Standard Ten in just this way. It also allows room for what should probably be obvious by now: if *all* students are going to be capable readers of grade level complex text by third grade, early grades teachers need more time and space within the school day to address the full spectrum of reading skills and abilities of *all* their children. If part of the daily reading instruction also amply provides part of the daily social studies, arts, and science instruction, then teachers can feel assured they are giving their students both the time they need to become solid readers and the exposure to the world of ideas they need to build strong foundations in the content disciplines. An additional benefit to doing so is that it also ensures teachers are fulfilling the mix of informational text to literary text (50/50) called for by the CCSS for ELA in the elementary grades.

CKLA's "Listening and Learning" Strand brings the world inside the early elementary classroom in a rich and egalitarian way. It allows all children to learn a wide array of knowledge about the artistic, historical, literary and scientific spheres. The readings and activities are designed carefully to build on one another and create a coherent knowledge base for all children, as called for in the CCSS ELA on page 33. The materials do not presume a large pool of background knowledge for children, nor do they oversimplify their language or their content. Instead, they expose all children to rich academic language while they open doors to experiences and ideas all children deserve to think about and all teachers deserve the time and opportunity to share with their students. Of particular note is the equity built into the coherence of the Listening and Learning strand. Jumping from topic to topic and landing briefly on each privilege children who know something about those topics from elsewhere. These children tend to be the more affluent children. Others can't make much sense of the topic because they are lacking the background knowledge necessary to make the new information meaningful. Systematically building knowledge for everyone, as the CCSS ELA calls for clearly on page 33, and the Learning and Listening strand does, levels the playing field.

Academic Language and Background Knowledge

A well-sequenced foundational skills program with frequent and built in assessments and careful attention paid to students' fluency (such as the CKLA NY edition Skills strand) are essential to a comprehensive ELA program designed to meet the complexity demands of the Common Core. But they are not enough, something teachers of English Learners have long known. Academic language, which

consists of both syntax and vocabulary features (Wong-Filmore and Snow, 2000; Bunch et al 2012; Nelson et al, 2012) and background knowledge (Hirsch, 1987; Hirsch, 2006; Gough et al, 1996; Tunmer and Hoover, 1992; Hoover and Gough, 1990; Carver, 1998, Catts et al, 2006, Saamio et al, 1990) are also essential to success with comprehending text. This is especially true with complex informational text now comprising 50% of what elementary students will be required to read (*CCSS for ELA*, 5).

Students from less affluent families often come to school with significantly less-developed vocabulary (Biemiller, 2010; Hart and Risley, 1995). Expanding these students' vocabularies and developing the vocabulary of all students cannot primarily be done from texts early readers are able to read themselves. It must also come from rich texts read aloud. Exposure to varied and sophisticated syntax – the other ingredient of academic language – must also come from excellent works heard read aloud until students can access them for themselves. Though both syntax and word work can and should also be addressed in other ways, high quality and diverse texts read aloud, enjoyed, discussed and analyzed, are the richest pathway to develop robust language capacity in all students. Background knowledge, vocabulary's close first cousin, is also best grown through read aloud designed – as the standards clearly call for (CCSS for ELA, 33) – to develop wide and deep content knowledge.

The CKLA NY Listening and Learning strand is designed to do exactly that. The texts selected and developed for reading aloud develop content knowledge, contain rich academic words, and, especially in the informational domains, contain complex syntax as well. The texts in this strand are strategically spiraled so that background knowledge can build upon itself and grow over time, supporting young students in their growing understanding of complex semantic and syntactic patterns as well (Adams, 2011).

<u>Additional Book Time, Independent Reading – Guided Reading, Accountable Independent Reading (GRAIR)</u>

In this strand, which allows for additional literacy time within the school day, teachers can touch base with their students in developmentally appropriate groupings. During this period, teachers can have additional time to work with struggling readers to reinforce and cement learning that many in the class may already have mastered. They can touch base with accelerated readers to encourage continued progress. Whenever students are away from their teacher, they can engage with texts of their choosing, whether those are old favorites, materials from other parts of the day, or the classroom or school library collections.

Students need the opportunity to read a volume of texts: texts that engage them, at least some of which are based on individual choice, that they can read independently or with some support from their teachers or each other. These opportunities are where stamina and persistence are practiced, where vocabularies and knowledge bases can be expanded through contextualized exposure to lots of words, and where students learn the sheer pleasure of becoming lost in the printed world of ideas.

Students will not come to thrive as independent and capable readers unless they also get a chance to practice: to follow their own interests and read texts of their choosing, whether those are at their current individual comfort level or higher because they become so invested in a topic or read with partners.

Guided Reading and *Accountable* Independent Reading (GRAIR) can provide the opportunity and space for all of this. Students can read texts of their choice *and* get the small group time with their teacher and peers that will encourage them to stretch to higher levels. Those stretches can be common when students are following their own interests deeper into a subject or text type, and are getting the pinpointed instruction they need to prosper as readers. At the same time, this gives teachers the time they need to work with students in smaller groups to provide the specific support and instruction everybody needs to excel.

These processes can take place for all students during a time devoted to Guided Reading and Accountable Independent Reading. Those students needing even more support with leveled readers can get this help with their teacher or in extra interventions as necessary, without losing the opportunity to read texts of their own choice, either individually or in groups, when they are away from the teacher's supportive presence.

Learning is further reinforced, differentiated and strengthened in this GRAIR block. Students get the practice and materials they need to progress as readers moving at varied speeds. They get these opportunities with a wide variety of texts of their own choosing available to them. All the texts already in the classroom can be pulled into play for GRAIR.

An additional benefit of this shift is the coherence it allows to students and teachers alike. Since the core instructional materials provided by the CKLA NY edition are themselves rich in practice opportunities, students can continue to work with the same suite of related materials when they are getting additional reinforcement at this time. Teachers may also decide to use other texts which they have found to be successful for these purposes in their previous practice. Teachers and intervention specialists do not need to cast a wide net to pull in support materials. They have access to a full array of materials rich enough to use *and re-use*– that last being a valuable and too often neglected tool for bringing all students to an ability to handle text that is difficult for them.

It is critical to notice that this GRAIR block functions within and adjacent to the learning experiences provided by a foundational skills program as well as a rich read aloud progression carefully crafted to build student background knowledge and academic language. GRAIR is not enough to meet the learning needs of all students on its own.

Conclusion

The Achievement Gap persists stubbornly despite the best intentions and many vigorous efforts to address it for over half a century. Too many of those efforts have contained only some of the essential ingredients, but not all of them. Positions - about which subset of ingredients is the right subset, which classroom structure is the proper structure, which set of materials is the most authentic -have calcified into defensive postures, and without meaning to, educators have taken to protecting turf rather than ensuring that each and every student gets the full spectrum of reading exposure. A foundation of solid reading skills that includes fluency, the development of strong academic language (vocabulary and syntax), building stores of background knowledge, opportunities to choose and read engaging texts alone and with others – all of these are essential for reading success. The CKLA NY edition brings all the ingredients together in a comprehensive way while acknowledging the rich structural and cultural variety already in place throughout the early childhood classrooms of New York State.

The approach being adapted by Core Knowledge Foundation to develop the CKLA NY edition has already shown positive results in school districts around the country, including a New York City pilot program, where the NYCDOE conducted research over a three-year period. Student results from K-2 classrooms in these 10 pilot schools were compared with the student results in 10 matched schools that were not using CKLA. The CKLA students did better in the third party analysis (NYCDOE, 2008-2011; results available at http://www.coreknowledge.org/language-arts-program-pilot).

CKLA NY edition is built on these results – while making improvements that will align the NYS version more closely with the CCSS, will further diversify the trade books and authors being studied, and will focus on the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

Eliminating the great disparity in ELA capacities between students, between neighborhoods, between districts, is something few – *especially* classroom teachers – would fail to celebrate. Nor would anybody disagree that addressing and eliminating these disparities in the early grades would have an enormously positive ripple effect on the remainder of a child's education.

Although successfully developing students who are sturdy and flexible readers by the end of second grade does not guarantee the elimination of the gap, oh, what a wonderful start it would be to doing so!

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Note: Rebekah Benjamin discusses the research presented in this article in a podcast from the “Voice of Literacy”: http:www.voiceofliteracy.orgposts41784.].

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