

Chapter 72

Informational Text and the Common Core

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ABSTRACT

Currently, teachers of reading and language arts are being asked to look closely at what materials are being used in their classrooms. As of today, 45 states have become proponents of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). These standards have been created to “ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive” (NGA, et al., 2008, p. 24). These standards mandate a higher percentage of what has come to be termed informational text. The first question that needs to be answered is what exactly is the definition of informational text and why is it important? The largest change noted in the shift to informational text is the percentage of text required. Informational text covers a very broad spectrum of reading material including biographies and autobiographies: “books about history, social studies, science, and the arts”; “technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps”; and “digital sources on a range of topics” (Maloch & Bomer, 2013, p. 209). In the upper grades, the different subject areas are generally taught by a variety of teachers. These content area teachers are experts in their fields and much of their information is strictly informational in nature to begin with. The problem is that “Most teachers are not taught how to teach reading” (Gewertz, 2012, p. 1). This leads to the question of how teachers are utilizing informational texts in their classrooms. This chapter explores informational texts and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

INTRODUCTION

The United States is currently seeing a paradigm shift in the teaching of reading to students from kindergarten through high school. This shift is requiring teachers to rethink the materials used in the teaching of not only ELA, but also throughout

the content areas including, but not limited to, social studies and science. As of the 2013-2014 school year 45 states have become proponents of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In an effort to raise standards, the National Governors Association (NGA) recommended that the United States adopt a “common core of internationally

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benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K-12 to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive” (NGA et al., 2008, p. 24). The CCSS mandate English Language Arts (ELA) standards that reflect several foundational changes from previous state standards. One shift in the curriculum is an increased emphasis on what has come to be termed informational text. “These new standards demand better analysis and argumentation skills, a greater emphasis on academic language, and greater attention to students building content knowledge and reading skills from independently tackling informational text” (Neuman & Roskos, 2012, p. 207). ELA teachers as well as content area teachers have been using many different forms of reading for years, but this represents a shift in text complexity.

The implications for English Language Arts teachers are many, including how to define informational text, what are the different types of text that are considered informational, how to incorporate fiction and not lose the integrity of a broad-based language arts curriculum, how to get the “buy-in” from content area teachers, as well as the differing strategies needed for teaching informational texts. The Common Core State Standards are divisive and theoretically going to improve literacy achievement of US children going forward into college and careers.

A major concern of many literacy experts is that the push for increased exposure to informational text will leave students lacking in basic literary knowledge and critical thinking skills. This paper will explore the relevance of informational text, its implications in language arts classrooms, the importance of content area buy-in, and teaching using informational texts while not allowing important fictional literature to go unnoticed. The Common Core State Standards emphasis on informational text is beneficial, yet controversial in the language arts classroom.

BACKGROUND

For many years the focus of ELA has been narrative literature. Prior to the CCSS, Florida has focused on the Sunshine State Standards, which placed a greater emphasis on narrative text. The standards are constantly changing. Moving further into the 21st century, universities and employers are recognizing that the current generation is not well-versed in tackling materials relating to their studies and occupations. With this revelation comes new ideas regarding fixing this deficit in the ability to read and understand complex, informational text. The implementation of the Common Core State Standards is seen as the magical elixir to combat this growing problem. Research being done is identifying a split between the narrative (fiction stories) being taught in the younger grades and a decline in test scores beginning in the fourth grade when testing incorporates mostly non-fiction, informational text. This creates a dilemma for ELA teachers who recognize the value of fictional literature in creating critical thinkers.

The necessity for schools to promote cooperation between ELA and content area teachers is paramount to success. Content area text is informational in nature and with proper guidance content area text could help bridge the gap between narrative and informational text. This would leave the door open for ELA teachers to continue using narrative text in their classrooms without jeopardizing student achievement.

The importance of informational text cannot be downplayed as it is noted that the vast majority of text found on the Internet today is informational. This Common Core concept is being implemented to “ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive” (NGA et al., 2008, p. 24). The goal is to keep US children competitive in the growing global workforce.

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