Beginning Reading

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What should kindergartners be able to read?

What kind of books should teachers read aloud to beginning readers?

What are good books to use with beginning readers?

With texts should children be able to read at the end of kindergarten in the Common Core era? First-grade?

Overview

A text—whether it is on a sign or in a book—is central to reading. The texts in school can be thought of as a diet for beginning and struggling readers. To get a good start in reading (or restart, in the case of struggling readers), texts need to give students core and critical information about written language.

Educators' concerns are addressed in this issue of *TextProject Answers.*

What should kindergartners be able to read?

Many educators and parents are asking this question in response to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In many states, the CCSS represent the first standards where kindergartners are expected to be reading conventionally.

The foundational standard states that kindergartners should be able to "read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding." (p. 16). The kindergarten texts given to illustrate Standard 10 (p. 32) include ones with readability levels of second grade. The expectation of the CCSS is that children should be able to read conventionally by the end of kindergarten.

The CCSS's rationale for increased text levels is the claim that K-12 texts have been "dumbed down" over the past 50 years. If high school students are to be college and career ready, CCSS writers believed that text levels needed to be accelerated at all grade levels, beginning with kindergarten.

There are two problems with this assumption. First, kindergarten texts cannot have been dumbed down over a 50-year period[1] because, until No Child Left Behind, kindergarten texts were not part of the core reading programs, which form the mainstay of American reading instruction. Second, research shows that an earlier start does not increase average levels of fourth graders, much less ensure college and career readiness for high school students. Indeed, an earlier start widens the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

What research does show is that kindergartners need exposure to many, many texts—texts that are read to them, texts with which they can follow along, and texts that they can hold in their hands and examine. For the kindergartners whose first book experiences occur primarily in school, these "on-my-own" texts should be ones that represent familiar concepts and have regular letter-sound matches. That is why, in BeginningReads—the program that TextProject offers for free download—texts begin with familiar, concrete words that have regular letter-sound matches. Steadily, students are introduced to more and more letter-sound patterns in words representing familiar, concrete concepts. In BeginningReads, students learn to read with cats and dogs, seeds and trees.

[1]Hiebert, E.H. (2010). *Have the texts of beginning reading been dumbed down over the past 50 years?* Frankly Freddy blog post. Retrieved on March 4, 2014 from http://www.textproject.org/frankly-freddy/have-the-texts-of-beginning-reading-been-dumbed-down-over-the-past-50-years/

What kinds of books should teachers read aloud to beginning readers?

The read-alouds within CCSS-oriented early primary-level classrooms aren't just "any" book. The read-alouds of kindergarten and first-grade classrooms should be carefully chosen for their content and the quality of language.

There are literally thousands of outstanding books from which teachers can choose and the recommendations on the Internet for outstanding books are many—and can be confusing. The question of what should be read becomes especially critical when considering the precious hours of classroom time for students whose primary literacy experiences occur in school. Time is precious and knowledge is extensive.

What follow are several principles for choosing read-alouds which ensure that both the world knowledge and the literary knowledge of kindergartners and first graders are enhanced.

• Ensure that read-alouds have a subject area emphasis: Students' background knowledge can be extended substantially through read-alouds. Figure 1 illustrates just a few of the many outstanding texts that deal with topics in history, math, science, geography, and music/visual arts. As Figure 2 illustrates, read-alouds should also involve young children with a variety of genres. As they hear contemporary and classic stories, children are being introduced to a host of characters. Some of these have stood the test of time (e.g., *Gingerbread Man*, *Ferdinand*), while others are endearing from the point of introduction (e.g., *Olivia*).

- Ensure that read-alouds have compelling language: As teachers read aloud texts with memorable language, phrases and expressions become part of classroom talk (e.g., "Millions and billions and trillions of cats" from *Millions of Cats*). And, yes, there are informational texts that meet this criterion (e.g., "Seasons melt into seasons on her parents' farm" from *Through Georgia's Eyes*).

Figure 1
Examples of read aloud books that develop literary knowledge
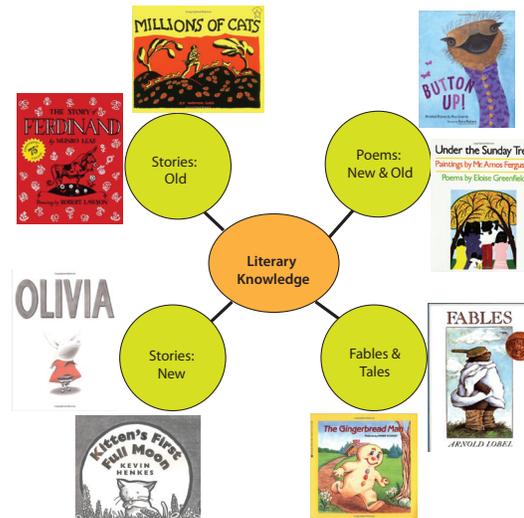
- Develop content by reading aloud books that have interrelated content: Rather than reading a single book on the orchestra (e.g., *Zin, Zin, Zin, Violin*), additional books such as *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed,* and *Ah, Music* can create a strong foundation of knowledge about orchestral music.

Figure 2
Examples of read aloud books that develop world knowledge
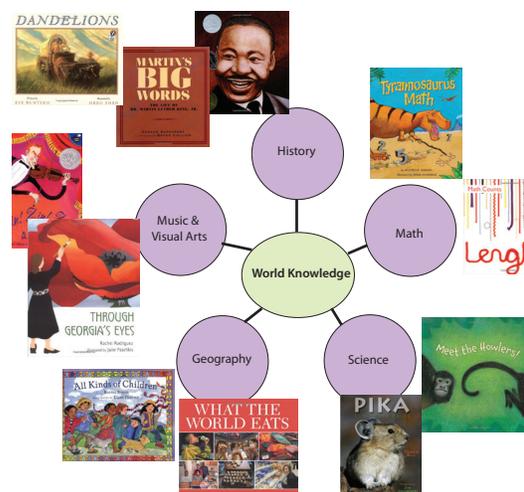
As these examples show, narratives continue to have a critical place in CCSS early childhood classrooms. But at the same time, there are many informational texts with compelling language, which lay a foundation for students' life-long engagement with texts as a source of knowledge and enjoyment.

What are good books to use with beginning readers?

Books for beginning readers should have a set of repeated, concrete words. Children, like adults, learn concrete words more readily than abstract words.

At the same time, English is an alphabetic language so phonetic regularity is essential. Words such as frog, bus, and cat illustrate the kinds of words which should be prominent in books for beginning readers—words which represent familiar, concrete objects and are phonetically regular. The BeginningReads program provides texts with phonetically regular, highly concrete words.

A second feature of good books for beginning readers is the repetition of highly concrete, phonetically regular words. When concrete words appear a single time in a text, children often use the picture to guess the word, which means they are not attending to the word's letters and associated sounds. Multiple repetitions of words in and across texts encourage beginning readers to attend to word features.

BeginningReads show how to support both alphabetic knowledge and meaningfulness in texts for beginning readers.

The BeginningReads program is available as free downloads at
http://www.textproject.org/students/beginningreads/

What texts should children be able to read at the end of kindergarten in the Common Core era? First-grade?

The answer to this question differs for kindergartners and 1st graders, as is evident in the Common Core State standards. Neither K nor grade one is included in the staircase of text complexity but the exemplar texts for K-1 which appear in the Standards and Appendix A give an indication of expectations for these levels.

For kindergarten, texts for independent reading are wordless picture books such as *Pancakes for Breakfast* or picture books with words in signs or on objects (e.g., trucks). Text complexity expectations, beginning at grades two-three, have been increased with no justifiable empirical foundation. But at kindergarten entry, an artificial standard has not been set which all young children must scale. Young children learn at different rates and also come into school with vastly different prior literacy experiences. Some kindergartners have had many prior school-like literacy experiences at home and are ready to move along the staircase of core vocabulary (see Figure 3). But, for the children whose primary literacy experiences occur in school, the Common Core has not placed an arbitrary level for them to achieve.

For first-grade, the prototypical texts for independent reading in the Common Core exemplars are *Hi! Fly Guy* (a story) and *Starfish* (an informational text). On the staircase of core vocabulary which appears in the figure above, *Hi! Fly Guy* and *Starfish* are on the fifth step of the staircase—facility with the 1,000 most frequent words and decoding skills with words of five or fewer letters. This level is a reasonable expectation for first graders and mirrors the expectation for end-of-first-grade reading in an assessment such as DIBELS.

Figure 3
Staircase of Core Vocabulary

Step

Step	
7	4,000 most frequent words* & words with ≤7 letters
6	3,000 most frequent words & words with ≤6 letters
5	1,000 most frequent words & words with ≤5 letters
4	500 most frequent words & words with ≤5 letters
3	300 most frequent words & words with ≤4 letters
2	100 most frequent words & words with ≤4 letters
1	50 most frequent words & words with ≤3 letters

* Includes simple word family members (e.g. *help, helping, helps, helped, helper*)

There is reason to be concerned, however, for the students whose literacy occurs primarily in school and who have not reached the end-of-grade one benchmark. In light of the upping of the ante in text levels in the grade two-three span, many first graders may be pushed to reach the *Hi! Fly Guy* level. For those students who don't reach this expectation (but could if given a little leeway in second grade), negative evaluations about their reading capacity may be prematurely made—with dire consequences.