

Getting Close to Close Reading: Teachers Making Instructional Shifts in Early Literacy

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ABSTRACT: Based on the emphasis from the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards, K-2 teachers are expected to provide students with close reading experiences with increasingly complex text. Because close reading as an instructional routine is in its infancy for early grades, we conducted a collective case study to uncover how teachers perceived implementing close reading in K-2. The overarching research question was: How do K-2 teachers perceive making instructional shifts with close reading? Participants included twelve K-2 teachers enrolled in a graduate course. Four data sources comprised: (a) teacher-generated analogies; (b) online reflections; (c) teacher-generated lesson plans; and (d) focus group transcripts. Data was coded for themes that reflected how participants were making instructional shifts with close reading. Three themes emerged: (a) choosing appropriate texts for close reading; (b) modeling close reading; and (c) scaffolding close reading. While participants reported applying strategies for close reading with students as young as kindergarten, they perceived many challenges. Understanding how teachers are implementing close reading in K-2 classrooms and the challenges they face provides valuable input for ongoing research and teacher professional development

Key words: Close reading, K-12, Instructional Shifts, Reading strategies



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The concept and practice of close reading has gained attention as a result of many states adopting the *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGACBP] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a). In the United States, the CCSS currently determine what counts as knowledge and what should be taught and measured (Gehsmann, 2011). With regard to the area of reading, “Research links the close reading of complex text—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced—to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC], 2011, p. 7). Although this assertion draws from research on grades three through eleven, based on the new emphasis from the English Language Arts (ELA) CCSS, K-2 teachers are also expected to provide students with close reading experiences with increasingly complex text. See Appendix A for a list of standards that address close reading and text complexity for K-2.

PARCC (2011) defines close reading as an analytic process that “stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately” (p. 7). For teachers in the early grades, implementing close reading with their students can be a daunting task. Fisher and Frey (2014) attempt to demystify close reading for practitioners by framing it as an instructional practice that “makes complex texts accessible using repeated reading, cognitive scaffolding, and discussion” (p. 35). This definition may be more appropriate to the K-2 instructional context.

Students who must focus on decoding and fluency of grade-level texts often find comprehension of more complex texts very challenging. Teachers often ask *right there* or *in your head* questions to help these students feel successful. However, a close reading of a text moves beyond parroting or personal connections and into higher levels of cognitive demand. Students in second and fourth grades are pushed to read and comprehend third and fifth grade texts, respectively, with instructional support. As

teachers begin to implement this aspect of the ELA CCSS, some are encountering difficulties in making the instructional shifts that are required to be successful (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012) as well as debating the appropriateness of requiring students to read beyond their apparent instructional levels. Given the early adoption phase of the reading standards and the perceived challenges teachers are encountering, the purpose of this study was to explore how K-2 teachers perceived making instructional shifts with close reading.

Perspectives from the Literature

Unprecedented in its rigor and high expectations for United States education, the CCSS provided a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century:

Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010a, para. 6)

Central to the CCSS vision was a student’s capacity to engage in the act of close reading while navigating textual complexity. Historically, close reading had been used at the secondary (Adler, 1982) and postsecondary levels (Richards, 1929), but had not been a common practice in the early grades. Fisher and Frey (2012) suggested that close reading is an instructional routine where students conduct in-depth examination of a text, especially through the practice of multiple readings. They further elaborated that close reading supports focus on deep structures of a text, which may include “the way the text is organized, the precision of its vocabulary to advance concepts, and its key details, arguments, and inferential meanings” (p. 179).

In a recent article, Mesmer, Cunningham, and Hiebert (2012) introduced a theoretical framework

that produced a unified treatment of the complexities of early grade text. As part of their explanation, they drew a distinction between text complexity and text difficulty. Text complexity implies independent variables, such as text elements that can be analyzed or manipulated; text difficulty, on the other hand, suggests “the actual or predicted performance of multiple readers on a task based on that text or features” (p. 236). They claimed that it is the understanding of text complexity that will promote (a) essential knowledge about the interaction among text, reader, and task, and (b) the alignment of specific text characteristics with reading instruction, which is pivotal in the early grades.

Text complexity and close reading applications for the primary grades are not without critics. Specifically, Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) raised concerns about the text complexity staircase in an attempt to thwart unintended consequences for readers in the primary grades. NGACBP and CCSSO describe the text complexity staircase as “grade-by-grade specifications for increasing text complexity in successive years of schooling” (2010b, p. 4). Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) took issue with CCSS writers’ claim that all text levels have declined over the years. They made a compelling argument that text levels in middle and high school were the ones that have decreased over time; not texts in primary grades. Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) believed that using the same brushstroke for K-12 readers has the potential to be developmentally disruptive for primary students. Likewise, Williamson, Fitzgerald, and Stenner (2013) provided a caveat concerning how teachers interpret the application of text complexity in early reading. Creating reading challenges that are too high for students may in fact lead to frustration, diminished motivation, and potentially a stalling of reading development.

As teachers begin to implement this aspect of the ELA CCSS, some are encountering difficulties in making the instructional shifts that are required to be successful, as well as debating the appropriateness of requiring students to read beyond their apparent instructional levels.

In the midst of re-setting reading demands through the CCSS, many K-2 teachers were struggling to understand text complexity and close reading as it applied to their instruction and to their students’ reading engagement and development. Specifically, they had concerns about their lack of experience in teaching informational text because narrative had been the staple for beginning reading (Duke, 2000; Ness, 2011). Since there was a lack of empirical

studies on how the new standards affected K-2 reading, our research team designed a study to explore how K-2 teachers were making instructional shifts with close reading.

Research Methods

We conducted an exploratory collective case study (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Exploratory studies inductively investigate a phenomenon because the area of research is new to the field (Yin, 2009). Collective case studies explore numerous cases in order to build a stronger understanding of the phenomenon by comparing and contrasting experiences across participants (Barone, 2011; Stake, 2000). The collective case consisted of twelve teachers bound by participation in a graduate level reading course (Yin, 2009). The research question was: How do K-2 teachers perceive making instructional shifts with close reading? Guiding questions for the study included: (a) What close reading strategies did K-2 teachers report using in their classrooms?; (b) How did K-2 teachers perceive their development with close reading strategies?; (c) What challenges did they perceive as they applied close reading strategies?

Participants

Participants included twelve K-2 teachers who were participating in a graduate course as part of a master’s degree program in reading. All participants were female with their teaching experience ranging

from one to twelve years. The breakdown of participants' ethnic categories was Black/African American ($n = 2$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 1$), and White/Caucasian ($n = 9$). Participants taught in four public school districts in the southeastern United States. The graduate course was designed to engage students in dominant literacy theories (Tracey & Morrow, 2012), text complexity and close reading (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012), as well as the CCSS for K-5 Reading. Additionally, the participants were expected to create practical lesson applications for their K-2 classes that aligned with the CCSS.

Data Sources and Procedures

The four data sources included: (a) teacher-generated analogies from an exploratory exercise that attempted to capture changes in participants' views of their close reading instructional strategies and experiences; (b) teacher-generated reflections that were captured on an online forum within the course Moodle; (c) teacher-generated lesson plans on text complexity and close reading applications; and (d) transcripts from a teacher focus group session. See Table 1 (Appendix B) for the data collection schedule.

Teacher-generated analogies. Bailey (2003) indicated that using analogies is a powerful technique in explanation and, combined with a visual illustration or demonstration, can stimulate significant new learning, or transform previous knowledge. Analogies act in a special way by addressing complexity or novelty via engaging in a comparison with common sense knowledge or experience. This often calls for an imaginative, intuitive leap on the part of the learner. Thus, an analogy exercise has the potential to mediate a metacognitive transfer for newly developed insights for text complexity and close reading (Dreistadt, 1969). We based our procedure loosely on the model of Synectics (Gordon, 1961); the term comes from the Greek "syn" and "ektos" and refers to the fusion of diverse ideas (Nolan, 2003). In his application of Synectics, Gordon (1961) used three forms: direct analogy, personal analogy, and compressed conflict.

As an exploratory teaching and research measure, we asked teachers to use one aspect of Synectics—

creating a personal analogy. In this case, they created an analogy about their understanding of close reading based on a visual stimulus. At the beginning of the course, teachers were asked to peruse an archive of pictures located in VoiceThread, choosing the one that they could relate to in terms of their current capacity to apply close reading strategies in their classes. They reflected on how the picture visually represented or reminded them of their current experiences; this reflection was captured orally or in writing within VoiceThread as a companion to the targeted picture. The teachers conducted the same process at the end of the course. We anticipated that the subsequent comparison with a previous analogy might provide evidence of deeper interpretation and meaning within the context of the development of their close reading strategies, perhaps uncovering the journey towards a better conceptual understanding of close reading. See Figure 1 (Appendix C) for sample pre and post teacher analogies.

Teacher online reflections. Particular emphasis was placed on teachers' perceptions about the relationship between specific course activities and their development to conduct close reading exercises in their classes. McAuliffe, DiFranceisco, and Reed (2007) advocated for ongoing data collection throughout a study due to memory-related errors that can occur in retrospective interviews. Teachers answered researcher-created, open-ended questions and provided peer responses in weekly online forums throughout the semester within the course Moodle. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their individual perceptions, successes, and challenges (Hoepfl, 1997). Sample reflection prompts included: What strategies did you find worked for close reading with struggling readers? How can you apply information about assessing text complexity in your instruction?

Teacher-generated lesson plans on text complexity and close reading. The teachers were required to design, implement, and video record a two-part ELA lesson based on the CCSS. A key feature of the lesson was for teachers to capture two examples of students answering text-dependent questions during a close reading session. See Table 2 for this assignment, which we called the Common

Core Connections Project (CCCP). The data included specific examples from teacher lessons in which they demonstrated their practice of text-dependent questioning with their students.

Table 2

Common Core Connections Project (CCCP)

Design and Implement an ELA CCSS Lesson

- Select a theory of reading (one that you do not currently use) that will support your lesson plan. (Feel free to use more than one theory if needed.)
 - Choose two complex, nonfiction content-rich reading selections and determine the sequence based on increasing text complexity.
 - Determine levels of scaffolding needed (based on pre-assessment or knowledge of students) in order to differentiate the close reading experience.
 - Construct text-dependent questions that include higher level questions.
 - Classify Common Core State Standards used in the two-part lesson.
 - Create an appropriate culminating activity integrating at least one other ELA CCSS, such as writing or speaking, utilizing a new literacies tool.
 - Use our class wiki as the design space for your lesson.
 - Present and video record your lesson in a classroom.
 - Show 2 segments of your video that showcase your implementation of text-based questioning (2-3 minutes) and levels of scaffolding (2-3 minutes).
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Teacher focus group session. Each researcher facilitated a 50-minute focus group of six

participants at the end of the course. We chose this particular group size based on Patton's (2001) assertion that six is a good number to allow interaction between participants. The session was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Semi-structured interview questions (Patton, 2001) included: (a) What training—professional development, readings, university coursework—best helped you implement the CCSS for close reading?; (b) What training was not helpful? Why was it not helpful?; (c) If you were to lead professional development on close reading, what would you tell other teachers about teaching students to close read informational texts?; (d) How could your schools better support you in teaching the CCSS for close reading?

Data Analysis

The researchers approached the four data sources inductively and holistically (Yin, 2009) with a focus on how participants were making instructional shifts with close reading. Each was color-coded according to the three guiding questions. We used an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) by highlighting key phrases that answered the three guiding questions about close reading and wrote key word summaries of the answers in the margins. Researchers frequently met face-to-face to compare the coding process of the phrases. All shared key phrases and key words were copied to a master list (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The codes were then counted: 101 for guiding question one regarding applying close reading, 51 for guiding question two about teacher development, and 51 for guiding question three about challenges encountered. We then consolidated the list to reduce redundancy and repetition. There were then 80 key words for guiding question one, 37 key words for guiding question two, and 40 key words for guiding question three. We conducted a second round using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to organize the codes into “descriptive, multi-dimensional categories” and then emerging themes (Hoepfl, 1997, para. 39). We found seven emerging themes for guiding question one (i.e., learning text complexity, choosing texts, choosing short passages, not pre-teaching the text, modeling, scaffolding, and discussing text-dependent questions with evidence);

two for guiding question two (i.e., the crescent moon to half-moon analogy and positive perception); and three for guiding question three (i.e., perceived disconnect in theoretical assumptions, time management, and need for ongoing training).

A third round of consolidation was completed to define and refine themes and ensure that themes were mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, we consolidated “choosing short passages” and “learn text complexity” with “choosing texts,” and “crescent moon to half-moon” with “need ongoing training.” A final round of consolidation was completed across the three guiding questions for a holistic description of the case. See Table 3 for themes with a sampling of codes.

Table 3
Themes with a Sampling of Codes

Themes	Sample Codes
Choosing appropriate texts for close reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn text complexity • applying the knowledge of text complexity to the lesson plan • teach homophones • teach text features
Modeling close reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will be applying the teaching modeling lessons described on page 87 (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012) • text features • model graphic organizers • reading skills
Scaffolding close reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by asking questions • utilize student leaders • manipulatives which included a magnifying glass and strips • mark text with pencils and highlighters

Findings

The data was analyzed for themes that reflected how participants were making instructional shifts with close reading. Three themes emerged: (a) choosing appropriate texts for close reading; (b) modeling close reading; and (c) scaffolding close reading. Table

4 (Appendix D) displays exemplary quotes for each theme. The support for each theme is divided into three parts (i.e., application, development and challenges) based on the three guiding questions: (a) What strategies did teachers report for applying close reading instruction in their classrooms?; (b) How did teachers perceive their development of close reading instruction?; and (c) What challenges did they perceive as they applied close reading?

Choosing Appropriate Texts for Close Reading: “Quality over Quantity”

Appropriate text choice by the teachers was the first theme in the teaching of close reading. Teachers found that quality trumped quantity as they practiced close reading with their students.

Application. Data revealed intentionality when choosing texts for close reading, including the consideration of passage length in relation to instructional tasks and the matching of students’ backgrounds and interests. The most frequent code for *application of close reading in the classroom* was in relation to the length of passage, *choosing short, worthy passages*. After reading Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012), a participant responded in an online reflection: “I began to search through *Reading A-Z* passages to select a few ‘short, worthy passages’ to use rather than an entire book.” She continued, “These shorter passages could be read multiple times in one reading group and provide a deeper level of understanding.” Three participants explicitly stated that choosing shorter passages made close reading realistic for K-2 students.

With complex texts, participants stated that a shared past experience, such as a field trip topic or a read-aloud book, made a good choice for a close reading passage so that students could access the text. Past field trip topics offered consistent background knowledge across the class. Past read-alouds contextualized the passage so that students knew what had happened before and after the passage. Students were initially resistant when asked to reread a text. Over time, however, participants saw progress: “I am beginning to see a difference, as I am no longer hearing ‘we already read this story!’” Multiple reads were part of close reading instruction

so that students could first focus on the decoding and comprehension of the text before following with an analysis of the author's craft.

Development. The CCSS Appendix A clearly states that quantitative, qualitative, and reader and task considerations, should be taken into account when choosing a text. However, we found that participants were more familiar with Lexile scores than any other measurement at the beginning of the study. After the CCCP lesson, students showed growth in assessing text complexity by utilizing published Lexile scores, other online quantitative measurement tools, and qualitative rubrics. At the same time, many desired more practice with the reader and task considerations. In the analogy exercise, four participants directly mentioned their growth in analyzing complex texts.

One participant selected the image of a craftsman transporting baskets to market to create her analogy about close reading. In her initial interpretation, she felt as if she had too much weight on her shoulders concerning the CCSS. By the end of the course, she said the following:

Although my knowledge of the Common Core English Language Arts Standards has increased, as well as my understanding of text complexity, I still feel as if I have the weight of the world on my shoulders. Reflecting on the baskets in the image, I feel like they also reflect the uniqueness of each text available for teachers to use in their classrooms. I have learned how important it is to carefully analyze each text, just like one would look carefully at a basket.

Relating to the picture of a lone meerkat standing to the side of the pack, another participant felt behind the learning curve with the CCSS, but after practice, she decided that she would use close reading with

her first grade students in the future because of what she learned about choosing appropriate texts. She stated, "I know now that I should only read parts of the book." Through repeated practice, the participants discovered practical strategies that helped them focus on quality of text over quantity.

Challenges. Participants appeared to understand the reasoning behind the shift to more informational texts after reading CCSS ELA Supporting Research and Glossary (NGABP & CCSSO, 2010b), but did not have the resources to find complex informational texts that would be not only accessible to their students for a close read, but would also reflect their students' cultures. After searching for a text for the CCCP lesson plan, several participants agreed with the statement, "Diverse books are hard to find." Teachers reported that they were not aware of free, online resources for complex grade-level informational texts and that their current libraries were inadequate.

Modeling Close Reading: "Lay the Foundation"

The second theme related to teachers modeling close reading of informational text. Teachers found the expectations for third grade vertically aligned with this practice, when stakes are higher in assessments.

Application. Our data revealed that participants applied close reading instruction by modeling metacognitive strategies and reading skills through teacher think-alouds. Participants reported modeling close reading in both mini-lessons and read-alouds. For a mini-lesson example, one participant said, "I begin the week by explicitly teaching a strategy, such as self-correcting. As the week progresses, I gradually release responsibility to my students." Other participants chose to model close reading during read-alouds. For example, one participant reflected, "I realize the importance of utilizing complex texts during read-aloud activities

Providing teachers the time and intellectual space to create close reading practices that are both challenging and developmentally appropriate, is key to the successful implementation of the

in order to model how to closely monitor comprehension while reading to make meaning of texts.” During the online reflections, one participant noted, “It can be difficult to relate the ideas to young students; however, as with most complex academic skills, we can lay the foundation with students as young as kindergarten.” Most participants believed that they could model close reading with students as young as kindergarten.

Development. Our study found that participants valued “creating a positive environment” around literacy so that students were motivated to read and enjoyed reading. At the beginning of the study, participants perceived that students would not be able to maintain engagement during teacher modeling of close reading. In the online reflections, a participant wrote: “I found I was much more concerned about keeping things moving to keep their attention, and I caught myself at first not giving enough time to let them struggle with the text or model my thinking.” A second participant replied, “I too have struggled with keeping my lessons short enough to keep my kids’ attention but also thorough enough to model my think-alouds and give my kids the opportunity to work with complex texts.” Participants perceived a conflict between making instruction either engaging or rigorous.

One participant seemed to resolve the perceived conflict when she discovered that students found the challenge of close reading exciting: “It is evident to me that text can be extremely interesting if we spend the time to look beyond the basic text and focus on the hidden meaning.” Students in her class enjoyed the challenge of close reading the complex book. After teaching the CCCP lesson, a participant stated, “I now realize that digging deeper into two pages of a complex text can promote high level thinking and hold students’ engagement.” As participants continued to hone their ability to choose appropriate texts, they found that students were interested in hearing the teacher model metacognitive strategies. After practice, participants demonstrated a changed attitude about teacher think-alouds during reading of complex informational texts.

Challenges. Participants faced two challenges in relation to modeling close reading:

finding time to reinforce basic skills and evaluating the developmental appropriateness of close reading for K-2.

The participants felt torn between preparing students to think critically and preparing students to read fluently. One participant lamented:

Common Core is creating a Matthew Effect within my own classroom. I’m teaching new concepts at such an accelerated rate with little depth in order to hit all of the standards. For my average readers, I am able to reinforce these standards in small groups. Although these low readers are immersed in great instruction that targets their needs, they are continuing to get further and further behind the Common Core expectations.

This participant clearly believed that the time it took to close read took time away from skill instruction. Another participant similarly stated, “To delve into a complex text, a lesson usually lasts at least 30 minutes, which allows less time to meet with differentiated reading groups. Students often ‘slip through the cracks’ when not meeting with a guided reading group often.”

Additionally, participants found close reading challenging for kindergarten to second grade because of students’ developmental levels. In the analogy exercise conducted at the end of the study, two of the twelve participants still did not think that modeling close reading during read-alouds was developmentally appropriate for kindergarten and first grade students. For example, one teacher felt strongly about this issue when she said: “I think the theory applied to close readings of complex texts is not developmentally appropriate for younger grades.” Another teacher found monitoring student progress difficult to do. She explained, “Getting five year-olds to be aware of their own thinking is challenging, and it is difficult to monitor because it is not always observable.” Others viewed close reading similarly but added that challenge was good: “While I think it is appropriate to challenge our students, even necessary, sometimes I think the tasks that we are asking our children to do may be too challenging for them to do developmentally.” This same teacher recognized the challenge for her students to answer

questions that “require going beyond the text and using prior knowledge.” Of particular concern to the teachers was the apparent strain on the English language learner, who in addition to struggling to answer questions beyond the text, “face a multitude of challenges within the classroom setting.” At the end of the study, teachers continued to wrestle with whether close reading was developmentally appropriate for K-2.

Scaffolding Close Reading: “Find That Happy Medium”

The third theme in the teaching of close reading was for teachers to provide scaffolding in order for students to be successful. Interestingly, teachers thought that too much scaffolding was counterproductive.

Application. Our study revealed that with scaffolding, young students were able to closely read a text and discuss the meaning using evidence from the text. One participant noted in response to her CCCP lesson plan, “I have begun to experiment with what close reading means for emergent readers, and have found that they are capable of much.” The participants experimented with different grouping patterns and found that scaffolding close reading was most effective in small, homogeneous groups. To look deeply at the text, our study found that teachers had students reread the text in small groups. Over time, participants saw growth in that students became comfortable with rereading the same text. During close reading, students would mark important ideas with post-it notes, pencils, and highlighters.

Our data revealed that many K-2 students needed scaffolding to answer questions using text evidence. One participant wrote on the teacher online reflection, “My students often struggle to support their answers with textual evidence. Most answers are based on emotions and feelings.” She continued, “Rarely is it their first instinct to respond with textual evidence, and when they are pointed to the text, they usually refer to pictures rather than words.” Our study demonstrated that participants discovered many scaffolding techniques for text dependent questions, including: (a) sentence stems on posters

and bookmarks, (b) highlight strips for text on the overhead projector, and (c) fun devices (e.g., a wand, a magnifying glass, oversized toy finger) to point to the evidence in small groups. The sentence stems poster and bookmarks were titled *Show Me the Evidence* and students used magnifying glasses to detect the evidence in the text. With this scaffolding process, class discussions about text slowly shifted from a focus on personal connections to a focus on the author’s purpose. One participant shared her differentiated close reading strategies for scaffolding:

The language [sentence] stems geared towards text evidence was a strategy that my struggling readers used on a daily basis to participate in close reading discussions. My struggling readers will brainstorm, look up at the language stems board, and then try to provide a response to the question. I felt like physically having a hand lens to discover text evidence was helpful by reminding my struggling readers about the purpose of their reading.

Another participant shared that strategies she used, such as peer teaching and student leaders, helped her high-level students internalize the process of close reading. These heterogeneous group opportunities appeared to give the higher readers a chance to ask thought-provoking questions and explain their thinking.

In addition, we found that participants were still struggling with allowing time for students to grapple. One participant stated, “I’m still learning how to find that happy medium of using scaffolding after the student has had a sincere opportunity to interact with the text.” The participant noted that the easier the passage, the less scaffolding she provided; the more challenging the text, the amount of scaffolding increased. One participant said that often she would not correct students if they provided a connection or prediction rather than response grounded in the text because she did not want to discourage students and she did not have time in the schedule to keep pushing students on the same questions. She stated, “I would often not correct students if they provided a connection or prediction rather than the efferent [fact-based] response because I wanted to finish the lesson in time.” This pattern held true for

kindergarten and first grade teachers more so than second grade teachers, although all teachers expressed dissatisfaction.

Development. Data revealed that participants quickly developed scaffolding to help students identify text evidence and answer *right there* questions. After the CCCP lesson, a participant stated, “Through this process, I found my strength has been in equipping my students with strategies to find evidence in the text to support their answers.” However, participants identified asking higher-level questions to dig deeper into the text as a weakness. Participants stated that while students were able to answer *right there* and *think and search* text-dependent questions after much scaffolding, students did not achieve the desired success with *author and me* questions. All participants agreed with the speaker in the focus group who stated, “I would like some more experience crafting those [higher-level] questions.” We observed in the videotaped CCCP lessons that creating text-dependent questions with high cognitive demand was challenging. We often found that higher-level thinking happened beyond the text. Our data showed that students in one first grade class were not able to answer the question, “What are the possible author’s biases?” but were able to answer the question “Was the author’s purpose to entertain, to inform, or to persuade?” with teacher prompting to determine facts and opinions.

The participant who chose the image of the lumber with rings stated, “I feel pressure to truly understand how to go deeper with my students.” She wanted to teach more than a “superficial knowledge” to her students. At the end of the semester, she said, “My first graders now are beginning to naturally finish their answers with ‘and I know that because it says it here’ and point to the sentence in the text that they are gathering their information from.” This statement is an example of how a participant achieved *right there* answers, but fell short of developing higher-level thinking in order to dig deeper into the text.

Overall, our study found that participants perceived growth in their efficacy to teach close reading and in their students’ ability to answer *right there* text-

dependent questions. However, in the analogies, 11 out of 12 participants said that they had much more room for growth. One participant chose the image of a crescent moon to illustrate her perception of development with close reading. At the beginning of the semester, she said, “I feel like I am in the dark with only a little light from the crescent moon to guide me. As I learn more about the standards, the moon will hopefully grow brighter until it is full.” At the end of the semester, she acknowledged progress but had fallen short of her goal when she said, “I think there is still a lot to learn. I would say my moon had evolved into a half moon. I see a little more light to guide the way, but half of the pieces still are not there.”

Challenges. Our study revealed that participants found close reading challenging to teach because it was a new practice and as such, they desired more professional development. One participant wrote in her analogy, “I still feel that Common Core is more than just a learning curve. It’s a completely new way of approaching teaching and thinking about learning.” Another participant shared, “Teaching my students how to read a text closely and search for meaning has been new to me.” The participants had to shift their instruction as students had to shift their reading practices.

Not surprisingly, the data demonstrated that participants were frustrated with the “work in progress” status of implementation of the ELA CCSS. They perceived they had not received sufficient professional development to understand how to conduct close reading with their students. A participant described this perception in her analogy exercise: “I feel that although I’m listening, open to change and participating in multiple professional development sessions, I am still ‘teaching in the dark.’” Through the online reflections, a teacher explained, “I realized the importance of learning about texts, structure, vocabulary, and demands of each discipline. More time needs to be dedicated during PLTs [professional learning teams] about how to integrate . . . literacy skills daily in the classroom.” She wanted more training on how to integrate the new skills from the CCSS into her literacy instruction.

While participants desired more professional development, they qualified the statement with *effective* professional development. Many of the participants in the focus groups expressed frustration with past ineffectiveness in professional development sessions. One participant stated, “I feel like our professional development just targets the things that I don’t feel like are very important and don’t relate to close reading.” Another participant added, “I do not feel that all teachers know how and what to teach as well as I do or the essentials of the Common Core due to lack of effective training.” Participants explained that they found both instructional demonstration and practice with feedback sessions helpful.

Discussion and Limitations

Our findings indicated that teachers: (a) were able to apply strategies for close reading instruction with students as young as kindergarten, (b) perceived they were making variable progress in their own development with close reading, and (c) faced many challenges as they made shifts in their instruction to implement a close reading process. Our discussion focuses on the relationship of the findings to two significant theoretical issues in literacy instruction.

First, although participants were able to apply close reading instruction in the K-2 classroom, we found that Hiebert and Mesmer’s (2013) caveat related to developmental appropriateness of close reading and the related issue of text complexity rang true. Specifically, participants questioned the appropriateness of close reading for K-2 struggling readers, which called in to play some of the concerns set forth by Hiebert and Mesmer (2013). We know that early reading development in K-2 entails three phases: phonological awareness, code breaking, and the development of automaticity with text processing (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996). Considering these phases in the design of reading instruction, and specifically close reading activities, is essential. If students do not progress through these phases appropriately (i.e., by either encountering text that is too demanding or not demanding enough) the consequences tend to be severe. For example, students who are not able to achieve basic reading abilities by third grade often experience poor

performance in later grades, school dropout, and even increased crime rates (Hernandez, 2012). It is important for students to acquire “a just-right challenge level of material for optimal reading growth” (Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013, p. 66) at the early stages of reading in order to be set up for later reading success.

Second, a tension between the time-honored practice of prior knowledge activation, making personal connections with texts, and the newly emphasized implementation of text-based questions and answers, exists around the practice of close reading. Our study found that some participants had a misunderstanding relative to whether teachers should ever ask personally connecting questions. As teachers enrolled in a graduate reading program, our participants were familiar with transactional reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), in which readers may respond on a continuum from an efferent stance to an aesthetic stance, depending on the readers’ goals. Emphasis on aesthetic responses to reading, especially for emerging readers, is one way to engage them, encouraging a positive, emotional connection to the reading process. Our participants thought that an over-emphasis on informational text and text-dependent questioning within the CCSS was displacing the aesthetic approach to reading. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) reconcile the historical view of close reading with what we know about reader response theory by saying that for close reading instruction in today’s classroom, the reader, text, and context must be taken into account. In this regard, there should be a balance among these three factors when designing close reading instruction to take into account the individual reader’s needs and interests.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The most obvious limitation was that the participants were part of a graded course. Since participants were performing for a grade, their responses could be skewed for a favorable evaluation from the instructor. Although there was no direct evidence that participants were intentionally masking their points of view, results should be viewed within the stated context. Another limitation was the lack of direct observation of participants’ teaching within their classrooms.

Although the teachers videotaped one lesson and shared it within the context of the class, we did not observe the teachers in their natural state within their classrooms. Direct observations would provide a rich source of data relative to how teachers were implementing close reading, including spontaneously made instructional decisions.

Conclusion

This study provides initial insights in how elementary teachers are making instructional shifts with the practice of close reading related to the ELA CCSS. Although the standards have been adopted for several years now, implementation is a work in progress for schools and teachers alike. Hearing where teachers say they need support in development of instructional materials, teaching methods, and specifically close reading strategies, provides valuable input for ongoing teacher professional development relative to the ELA CCSS.

Understanding the shifts in the ELA CCSS requires knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings as well as intentional practice in implementing appropriate strategies. Providing teachers the time and intellectual space to create close reading practices that are both challenging and developmentally appropriate, is key to the successful implementation of the standards. Close reading as an instructional routine is in its infancy for early grade teachers. Future research needs to be conducted to more fully account for the complexities and nuances that are involved for young readers as they establish new relationships with texts that go beyond aesthetic reader responses. Mesmer, Cunningham, and Hiebert's (2012) vision of a theoretical model of text complexity for the early grades and proposed research agenda hold great promise as the field embarks on a new era in reading instruction. Ideally, "teaching in the dark" is not a holding pattern for teachers, but rather the first step into a necessary disequilibrium that will propel them to get closer to productive close reading with their students.

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Appendix A
K-2 CCSS ELA Standards that Address Close Reading and Text Complexity



Anchor Standard	Kindergarten Standards	1 st Grade Standards	2 nd Grade Standards
1	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.1</u> and <u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.2</u></p> <p>With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1</u> and <u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.1</u></p> <p>Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.1</u> and <u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.1</u></p> <p>Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.</p>
3	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.3</u></p> <p>With prompting and support, describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.3</u></p> <p>Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.3</u></p> <p>Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text.</p>
7	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.7</u></p> <p>With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear (e.g., what person, place, thing, or idea in the text an illustration depicts).</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.7</u></p> <p>Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.7</u></p> <p>Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.</p>
8	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.8</u></p> <p>With prompting and support, identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.8</u></p> <p>Identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.8</u></p> <p>Describe how reasons support specific points the author makes in a text.</p>
10	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.10</u> and <u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.10</u></p> <p>Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.10</u> and <u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.10</u></p> <p>With prompting and support, read informational texts, prose and poetry of appropriate complexity for grade 1.</p>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.10</u> and <u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.10</u></p> <p>By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including history/social studies, science, technical texts stories and poetry, in the grades 2-3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.</p>

Appendix B

Table 1
Data Collection Schedule

Type of Data	Schedule	Rationale	Guiding Questions
Teacher-generated analogies	At the beginning and end of the semester	To capture teacher's perceived growth over time	How did K-2 teachers perceive their development with close reading strategies?
Online reflections	Weekly throughout the semester	To capture participant perceptions throughout the process of learning, planning, implementing, reflecting, and revising the instructional practice of close reading.	What close reading strategies did K-2 teachers report using in their classrooms? How did K-2 teachers perceive their development with close reading strategies? What challenges did they perceive as they applied close reading strategies?
Teacher-generated lesson plans	The last month of the semester	To capture how teachers implemented close reading instruction.	What close reading strategies did K-2 teachers report using in their classrooms?
Focus group semi-structured interview	At the end of the semester.	To determine capacity and barriers to possible implementation of close reading instruction. To evaluate the impact of professional development.	How did K-2 teachers perceive their development with close reading strategies? What challenges did they perceive as they applied close reading strategies?

Appendix C

Picture	Pre (beginning of semester)	Post (end of semester)
 <p data-bbox="268 321 464 492">4 Meerkats standing in a group with 1 to the side and 1 farther ahead</p>	<p data-bbox="495 321 1073 524">This visual reminds me of the Common Core because I feel like some people have understanding of what they are teaching; however, I feel as if I am all alone. I feel like I am by self and learning the ELA standards with the students.</p>	<p data-bbox="1094 321 1961 670">I feel like I have a better understand of what I am teaching; however, I still feel like I have a lot to learn. I still feel as if I am learning the materials with students. I do feel like I have a better understanding of close reading and I have some understanding of the standards I should hold for my students. In the future I will use close reading because I do feel that it is very doable and effective for students, but I also know that I will limit the questions. Holding students on the carpet for longer than 25 to 30 minutes isn't helpful or effective for them. I know now that I should only read parts of the book and if necessary read the book on the next day.</p>
 <p data-bbox="268 706 432 841">Stack of lumber with tree rings visible</p>	<p data-bbox="495 706 1073 1409">One of the main things I've learned from the ELA Common Core Standards is that our standards should "spiral". That's immediately what I thought of when I saw this picture. With these new standards it's our job to ensure that what we are teaching our students will be the foundation, the building blocks for the next grade level and the next so that they develop deep understandings instead of broad, shallow ones. I appreciate the vertical focus of the standards, but I feel pressure to truly understand how to go deeper with my students when standards are seemingly basic (in first grade, at least). I don't want to just expose them to information and move on when all they have gained is a superficial knowledge of it. I want to see what text complexity, for instance, can offer to a lower-grades teacher looking to really</p>	<p data-bbox="1094 706 1961 979">I feel somewhat more prepared to use complex texts with my first grade students now than I did when I wrote my previous comment. In some ways I think the theory of complex text read alouds is not developmentally appropriate for younger grades. In my experience a whole group close reading ends up losing most of my students' attention and is "over their heads" in terms of syntax and craft questions. A close reading like this one can last 30 minutes alone and is just too much.</p>



		deepen students understanding of literacy concepts.	
	Rocket taking off	I have learned some things from the Common core so I have taken off, but I've not reached my destination yet. I had training in close reading through DPI. We were "mock" students and were led through a lesson on close reading. I then gave the same training to the staff at my school, but I have never implemented it with a class of students. So like the rocket, I have not reached my destination.	I now feel like I have a better understanding of text complexity, text dependent questions and close reading. The two part lesson we had to do helped me understand the challenge of teaching the Common Core. Therefore, I may be further along the rocket's trajectory, but have still not reached my destination.
	Crescent moon	Crescent moon. When I think about the ELA Common Core Standards, this image stood out in my mind the most. I am not very familiar with these standards and have not had much experience with them in a classroom. Since I just student taught last semester, I was still using the NC Standard Course of Study. This was the focus of much of my undergraduate learning. Because I am not teaching now, I have not had much training or practice implementing these standards. Like this picture, I feel as if I am in the dark, with only a little light from the crescent moon to guide me. This light comes from Common Core specialists, school personnel, and fellow educators. As I learn more about the standards and their components, the moon will hopefully grow brighter until it is full and bright enough for me to see my destination.	Half moon. Although I have learned a lot through this class and through my time in grad school, I still feel somewhat in the dark about the common core. The reason I think I still feel this way is because I am not yet teaching. Once I get in the classroom and am able to put these standards into practice, I may feel more comfortable with them. I think there is still a lot to learn about the common core. I would say my moon had evolved into a half moon. I see a little more light to guide the way, but half of the pieces still are not there.

Figure 1. Sample analogies from participants about learning and teaching with the ELA CCSS

Appendix D

Table 4

Themes with Exemplary Quotes for the Overarching Research Question and the Three Guiding Questions

Theme	Overarching	Application	Development	Challenges
Choosing appropriate texts for close reading: “Quality over quantity”	“I have found it better to work with a small amount of text rather than longer texts, quality over quantity.”	“I began to search through <i>Reading A-Z</i> passages to select a few ‘short, worthy passages’ to use rather than an entire book.”	“I have learned how important it is to carefully analyze [quantitatively and qualitatively] each text.”	“Diverse books are hard to find.”
Modeling close reading: “Lay the foundation”	“It can be difficult to relate the ideas to young students; however, as with most complex academic skills, we can lay the foundation with students as young as kindergarten.”	“I realize the importance of utilizing complex texts during read-aloud activities in order to model how to closely monitor comprehension while reading to make meaning of texts.”	“I now realize that digging deeper into two pages of a complex text can promote high level thinking and hold students’ engagement.”	“While I think it is appropriate to challenge our students, even necessary, sometimes I think the tasks that we are asking our children to do may be too challenging for them to do developmentally.”
Scaffolding close reading: “Find that happy medium”	“I’m still learning how to find that happy medium of using scaffolding after the student has had a sincere opportunity to interact with the text.”	“When I ask students to answer questions about a text, I give them sentence starters to help them begin verbalizing their ideas. For example, ‘This book reminds me of. . .’”	“Through this process, I found my strength has been in equipping my students with strategies to find evidence in the text to support their answers.”	“I still feel that Common Core is more than just a learning curve. It’s a completely new way of approaching teaching and thinking about learning.”