

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

Author: Joanne Buckley and Karen Vetter

Title of Project: *Strategies to approach more complex text*

Year: 2013-2014

School/Grade: H.C. Crittenden Middle School/ 6th Grade Language Arts Skills

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

We teach the skills section of the sixth grade language arts curriculum at H.C. Crittenden Middle School. A main component of our curriculum is working with our students on reading comprehension skills. We work with approximately 190 students of varying reading and writing abilities (heterogeneously grouped). With the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), we found that we needed to reevaluate the way that we approached our teaching of reading skills to help our students meet the new standards.

Last year, we went into the school year knowing what the new sixth grade CCLS language arts standards were, but we had a lot to learn about what they would “look like” in our classrooms and how we could help students bridge the gap and adjust to the new standards that would require them to think more critically and introduce more complex text. Although there were few materials available to help us, including the fact that we did not have samples of what the Common Core aligned NYS ELA exam would look like, we were ready to face this challenge.

At the end of last year, we reflected on what we thought caused our students to struggle the most. With the new knowledge of how the new Common Core aligned ELA exam addressed the new standards, we began to draw conclusions:

- New vocabulary terms were used in the ELA state exam questions that our students were unfamiliar with i.e. “claim” and “evidence”
- Questions and choices were very wordy
- Our students struggled the most with understanding what the actual question asked as opposed to an overall understanding of the text
- Students were required to think much more critically about the text

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Action Plan:

This year, we researched: **What strategies could we implement to help our students understand and answer ELA Common Core aligned reading comprehension questions?**

We found several websites that were informative and helped direct our research. We looked at information about the key shifts in the ELA standards.

The Common Core State Initiative website¹ stated the following three shifts need to be made in the ELA curriculum:

1. *Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language*
2. *Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational*
3. *Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction*

Other websites², written for teachers by teachers, provided more approaches to teaching close reading strategies. These used graphics that we could share with our students to help “map” their thinking while reading. Meta cognition was new to our students, but we were able to guide them through their own thinking, and provide opportunities for reflection throughout the unit.³

We researched several sources available that had aligned their material with the Common Core ELA standards. We found one workbook that we felt provided quality instruction in specific reading skills that were directly aligned with the new ELA Common Core reading standards and that would address the more complex ways that skills are being assessed - vocabulary, critical thinking, and the dense verbiage of the questions and choices. For our purposes, we settled upon the **Curriculum Associates Ready New York CCLS Instruction English Language Arts** instruction workbook.

Our data was collected over the course of seven months and included:

- A pre-assessment reading comprehension multiple choice test
- Several formative assessments conducted after direct instruction of specific reading skills and practice - assessments were conducted every few weeks
- Students' self-reflections after each assessment
- Informal observations from working with individual and small groups of students

¹ "Key Shifts in English Language Arts | Common Core State ..." 2014. 28 May. 2014
<<http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/>>

² "Teaching the Core -- A Non-Freaked Out Approach to the ..." 2012. 3 Jun. 2014 <<http://www.teachingthecore.com/>>

³ Livingston, JA. "Metacognition: An Overview." 2009. <[\](http://gse.buffalo.edu/fas/shuell/cep564/metacog.htm)>

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Results:

As we approached our reading comprehension curriculum, we wanted to find a way to “bridge the gap” from old expectations to new standards. We wanted to address what we felt was most difficult for students: understanding the question. This proved to be a great challenge. We adopted the mantra, “Break it down, think it through” to help our students approach complex questions. While the students repeated the mantra, and attempted to utilize the strategy, we were left finding ways to assist our students in learning *how* to break down questions and select key words. We also worked on impulsivity as the new questions include many distracting choices.

At the end of each unit and each school year, we are left wondering *What can we do to improve our instruction? What worked for our students? and What can we do to better address their needs?* We have found that students’ self-reflections and informal discussions have become essential in helping to direct our teaching and helping us to meet the needs of our individual students.

We relied heavily on student feedback to help drive our instruction for reading comprehension and to determine how the students felt about the “break it down, think it through” strategy. After each reading assessment, students had to complete a self-reflection, re-looking at each question they answered incorrectly, write why they chose the answer they did, and then figure out what they then felt was the correct answer. At the end of each reflection, there were some general questions that asked students to think about what strategies they used and what they thought they needed to do to help improve their comprehension. This is not an easy task for sixth graders, especially at the beginning of the year, because they are being asked to think critically about their thinking. After the first two reflections, we found that many students were just going through the motions to complete the reflection assignment, but they weren’t really learning anything about themselves as readers from these reflections.

After reevaluating our reflections, we found a way for our students to assess the strategies they had used or had not used for the questions they had answered incorrectly. These reflections helped the students (and us) learn valuable lessons. It helped teachers and students determine which questions were challenging, even after using the strategies taught. It helped students evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. Moreover, students were able to identify questions that could have been answered correctly had they used the strategies taught.

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Furthermore, we have come to the realization that we need to continue to foster an environment of learning that focuses on student responsibility. We hope that our students will begin to utilize the strategies taught in our class not just because “it counts towards their grade”, but because it helps them to become more focused readers, more able to attack complex texts, and more ready to continue their journey as life-long readers.

When reflecting on their performance, we asked our students, “*Explain your thoughts on the Break it Down, Think It Through strategy. Be sure to include whether it is helping you or if you still have some confusion about how to use it.*”

Student responses include:

“Break it down means find the important words included in the question, to shorten the question and make it easier to understand. Also to bring out the most important part of the question. I have been using the break it down, think it through strategy and it has been helping me. I kind of just do it in my head and block out the words that shouldn't be included in the question. I really think it is paying off!!”

“Break it down, think it through basically means to break down the question and remove anything that you don't need. Think it through is to think of what you think the answer is before seeing the options. I feel that the strategy is a good strategy because it keeps me away from choosing an answer just because it's there.”

“Break it down, think it through isn't really my kind of strategy. It may help but I like process of elimination better. The one time I did break it down think it through I did good on the test. But it was long and annoying. I should start to use it.”

“Some strategies I know that I need to use in order to ensure I do my best is to mark up the question and use process of elimination because it would help me understand what I am trying to answer.”

“To break down a question, I cross out the options I know are incorrect. I would then underline key words to help me simplify the question more. Once this is done, I would then proceed and answer the question. I think it helps me thoroughly understand the question better.”

Implications:

After conducting this year's research, we can conclude that we've only begun to scratch the surface. Being equipped with the right tools (like the *Curriculum Associates* book) has been

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extremely beneficial. It includes the kind of complexity and variety to give students lots of opportunities to work with challenging texts and questions. With that tool present, the other aspects are in our hands as teachers. We need to continue to explore our pedagogical philosophy to be sure that we are fostering an environment that makes our students eager to succeed and participate not just because of the outcome of “the test”, but because it will make them better readers and better learners through the practice. Working with students new to middle school, they can become consumed by their number grades and how they “stack up” to the rest of the group.

From this experience, we have tried to emphasize individual *progress* more than looking at number grades. We noticed when we asked students to keep track of their quiz outcomes, they looked more carefully at how they performed in relation to their other assessments. We will continue to look into ways to further this self-awareness. One area we will focus on in the future is our reflection guide. We will continue to look into ways to force students to trace their thinking and draw conclusions about their reading habits. Moreover, we will look for ways to help students understand the progress and improvement as a reader is more important than a number grade.