



RESEARCH
REPORT

Smart Steps to Reading

Executive Summary

Introduction

Sundance’s *Smart Steps to Reading* is a comprehensive reading program—aligned to the Common Core State Standards and individual state reading and language arts standards—that integrates close reading instruction with foundational skills practice, language and vocabulary development, and writing, speaking, and listening activities to support students’ literacy growth.

Its goal is to develop strategic, independent readers with an integrated literacy program that meets the rigor of today’s standards and the needs of today’s diverse classrooms.

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate how *Smart Steps to Reading* links to research on effective English language arts instruction. To clearly identify how the program addresses the recommendations of the Common Core State Standards and state-specific Common Core standards, this document is organized in the following five areas of key criteria: (1) text selection, (2) close reading and comprehension, (3) foundational skills, (4) language and vocabulary development, and (5) writing, speaking, and listening.

The format of each key criterion includes the following sections:

Research Findings

This section references specific recommendations of the Common Core State Standards and cites recent research studies and summaries.

Research Implications

This section highlights specific features of the *Smart Steps to Reading* program that illustrate how the materials address the research recommendations.

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Foundational Research Basis for Smart Steps to Reading

The Role of Varied Leveled Texts

Research Findings

- ✓ “To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts.” (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 7)
- ✓ Coleman and Pimentel (2012), two lead authors of the Common Core State Standards, outline that reading comprehension materials “should assist teachers and students in staying focused on the primary goal of instruction in these early years: developing proficient and fluent readers able to learn independently from a wide variety of rich texts.” (p. 7)
- ✓ Students need to be reading authentic texts as opposed to anthologies, excerpts, or textbooks in order to truly think analytically about the text in an advanced way. (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 30)
- ✓ Fountas and Pinnell (2006a) point out that teachers need a large and varied collection of books to ensure students have access to both variety and quality.
- ✓ Studies confirm that classrooms with a large supply of books had: (1) students who read more frequently; and (2) more students reading books they could read successfully. (Allington, 2012)

- ✓ Classrooms must be literacy-rich environments, chock-full of engaging texts at varying levels of complexity. And students need sufficient time daily to read and write. Readers get better at reading by reading. (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007)

Informational Texts

- ✓ According to Coleman and Pimentel (2012), the time spent on literary texts and informational texts needs to be balanced at the elementary level.
- ✓ In her book published by the International Reading Association, Jennifer Altieri (2013) points out that to be college and career ready, students need more exposure to nonfiction texts. Teachers can help. “By introducing the youngest of students to tables, headings, tables of contents, and diagrams, we are demystifying many of the features they encounter in informational texts. Often students at higher grade levels struggle with content area material because they have limited experience with such texts. We can help our students be successful with informational texts by engaging them with such texts at a young age.”

- ✓ Neuman and Gambrel (2013) also highlight the importance of informational texts. These books “will have certain types of visual and design features like graphs, scale diagrams, and glossaries, all of which are intentionally linked to convey meaning to readers. These features, therefore, will need to be taught more deliberately if we are to make the most of these types of texts.”

Research Implications

The *Smart Steps to Reading* materials engage students with different text types at varying complexity levels.

- The Student Books (in print and digital formats) in this program offer a variety of authentic fiction and nonfiction texts. The literary genres include realistic fiction, fantasy, folktales, myths, and legends. The nonfiction text types include explanations, procedures, and reports.
- The Student Books contain age-appropriate stories and topics, ensuring that students find books that appeal to their interests.
- Each Student Book is carefully leveled and designated with a Guided Reading Level, enabling teachers to provide students with high-quality, complex texts that are appropriately challenging for them.
- The nonfiction titles provide classrooms with informational texts containing headings, photos and captions, diagrams, charts, glossaries, and other text features.
- The book-specific teacher guides for the informational texts guide teachers to discuss the specific text features with children, interpret the information they provide, and model how to use them to clarify the text and gain a deeper understanding it.

Focus on Close Reading and Comprehension

Research Findings

- ✓ According to the Common Core State Standards, as students develop their abilities to meet the standards, they show their ability to read independently, increase their content knowledge, understand and analyze what they read, and draw on evidence to explain their analysis. (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 7)
- ✓ “The CCSS assert that students must acquire the habits of reading independently and closely and undertake the attentive reading that is essential for deep understanding of text, which are essential to their future success. The term *close reading* also implies efforts on our part to help students pay close attention to the text and to provide evidence for their interpretations.” (Neuman & Gambrel, 2013)
- ✓ Coleman and Pimentel (2012) state that materials at the primary grades need to “design opportunities for careful reading of selected passages or texts and create a series of questions that demonstrate how close attention to those readings allows students to gather evidence and build knowledge.” They go on to say “close reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities.”
- ✓ In order for students to access challenging texts, Altieri (2013) points out that teachers need to “teach students effective strategies so that they can unlock information found in the texts.”
- ✓ Allington (2012) expresses that reading comprehension involves “active thinking.”
- ✓ Fountas and Pinnell (2006b) define literacy and comprehension by their interconnected nature. “*Literacy* comprises a network of in-the-head processes that enable the reader to pick up all kinds of information from the text and construct the author’s intended meaning. *Comprehending* is actively making meaning using this kind of in-the-head problem solving. All the complex operations of the brain before, during, and after reading a text—cognitive, linguistic, sensory-motor, emotional, artistic, and creative— are operating as readers process texts.” (p. 4)
- ✓ High-quality questions engage readers and produce deeper learning than lower level questions. (Keene, 2010; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001)
- ✓ Coleman and Pimentel (2012) identify key criteria of questions and tasks that meet the Common Core requirements, including: (1) “Questions and tasks cultivate students’ abilities to ask and answer questions based on the text.”; and (2) “Materials provide opportunities for students to build knowledge through close reading of specific texts.” (p. 7)

Research Implications

- Each book-specific teacher guide in *Smart Steps to Reading* provides teachers with a clear reading objective that is targeted throughout the lesson plan. Through these objectives, children are able to demonstrate their understanding of a text’s key details, its craft and structure, and their ability to integrate knowledge and ideas. They cover key reading skills and strategies, including:
 - ◆ asking and answering questions
 - ◆ retelling stories
 - ◆ describing characters, settings, and events of a story
 - ◆ defining the roles of authors and illustrators
 - ◆ recognizing points of view in a story
 - ◆ identifying the main topic of informational texts
 - ◆ describing the connections between pieces of information, and
 - ◆ understanding the connection between illustrations or photographs and the text.
- The Close Reading section of the teacher guide supplies scripted discussion questions that help children think critically to address the reading objective. Then, the Comprehension blackline master in the teacher guide focuses on the same objective, allowing children to demonstrate their comprehension of the text and their ability to meet the key objective.
- Students have opportunities to respond to all three levels of questioning: literal, inferential, and evaluative. Every book-specific teacher guide includes questions that prompt discussion and can be used while leading small groups or the whole class. The questions are labeled using the Bloom’s taxonomy to show what type of thinking the questions target. The higher-level questions encourage students to: (1) think more deeply; (2) become problem solvers; (3) integrate prior knowledge with newly learned information; and (4) become active participants in group discussions.
- A feature called “Think About It” at the end of each book provides a set of questions designed to guide students as they explore text and monitor their own understanding.
- The digital format of every title includes additional literal, inferential, and evaluative questions, with one question per double-page spread to promote close reading of the text.

Build Foundational Skills

Research Findings

- ✓ The Common Core reading standards for foundational skills “are directed toward fostering students’ understanding and working knowledge of concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions of the English writing system.” (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 15)
- ✓ Coleman and Pimentel (2012) point out that foundational skills are central to English language arts education in the primary grades. They explain, however, that the foundational skills “are not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are necessary and important components of an effective, comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines.”
- ✓ Altieri (2013) emphasizes that foundational skills can be integrated into instruction. “Literacy skills are not meant to be taught in a sequential and isolated manner. Because reading, writing, listening, and viewing are skills we use interchangeably as literate adults, we should not attempt to separate them for our younger learners. By keeping our eye on the big picture—the goal of developing literate adults and remembering how we use literacy in our day-to-day lives—we can help our students develop the full range of literacy skills they need to succeed in the world. While our instruction in primary grades should focus explicitly on foundational skills, it should be done in an environment where the simultaneous growth of other aspects of literacy are encouraged and valued.”
- ✓ Cunningham (2015) summarize the best practices for teaching foundational skills. She concludes, “activities designed to develop phonemic awareness should be done in the context of reading and writing so that children develop the other concepts necessary for successful beginning reading.” She goes on to say that research shows “phonics instruction should include a variety of activities, including letter-sound, spelling, and analogy instruction. As children encounter more big words in their reading, they should learn to use morphemes to unlock the pronunciation, spelling, and meaning of polysyllabic words.” (p. 173)
- ✓ Beck and Beck (2013) conclude that once children have begun learning letters, “decoding can be taught with the inclusion of phonemic awareness and that phonemic awareness can be taught by incorporating letters.” (p. 34)
- ✓ Becoming a fluent reader is important because it builds a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008)
- ✓ Allington (2012) notes that a key reason for some children not developing adequate fluency or rate of reading is simple: they have had limited reading practice in appropriately leveled materials.

Research Implications

- Each book-specific teacher guide in *Smart Steps to Reading* provides teachers with a clear foundational skill objective. The Practicing Skills page of the teacher guide gives explicit directions for a whole-class or small-group activity that targets this objective.
- Each concise activity teaches a phonological awareness or phonics skill that children need to foster their literacy. These foundational skills include:
 - ◆ demonstrating understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds through:
 - producing rhyming words
 - counting and segmenting syllables
 - isolating the individual sounds in one-syllable words
 - distinguishing long and short vowel sounds in spoken words
 - adding or substituting phonemes, and
 - blending or segmenting sounds.
 - ◆ knowing and applying grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words through:
 - demonstrating understanding of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences
 - reading high-frequency words by sight
 - decoding one-syllable or two-syllable words
 - using basic patterns to break words into syllables
 - decoding words with prefixes and suffixes
 - identifying words with inconsistent but common spelling-sound correspondences, and
 - reading irregularly spelled words.
- Each activity draws on clear examples from the student book, providing a meaningful context for teachers to use as they help children learn and apply the foundational skill.
- In addition, the Practicing Skills page includes a secondary skill activity that targets a key print concept, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, or language skill. These key print concepts, as identified in the Common Core State Standards and state-specific standards, include the following:
 - ◆ following words from left to right
 - ◆ understanding that words are separated by spaces in print,
 - ◆ recognizing upper- and lowercase letters, and
 - ◆ known the distinguishing features of a sentence.
- The Skills Practice blackline master in the teacher guide focuses on the same foundational skill objective, allowing children to practice the skill and demonstrate their ability to meet the objective.
- A feature called “Think About It” at the end of each book provides a set of questions designed to guide students as they explore text and monitor their own understanding, including a foundational skill or language question that relates directly to the text.
- The digital format of every title includes additional foundational skills and language questions, with one set of questions per double-page spread. The questions provide appropriate scaffolding to support children’s understanding.

Develop Language and Vocabulary

Research Findings

- ✓ The Common Core anchor standards for language require students to “demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking” and “demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.” (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 25)
- ✓ The Common Core standards recognize that grammar and usage development is an ongoing, nonlinear process for children and adults. They point out that “students must have a strong command of the grammar and usage of spoken and written standard English to succeed academically and professionally.” (NGA Center and CCSSO Appendix A, 2010, p. 29)
- ✓ Meier (2011) summarizes that research shows “mastery of written language conventions is essential for writing well.” (p. 4)
- ✓ A study by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (June 2012) confirms that students need to learn to write strong sentences in order to become strong writers. Starting in kindergarten, “students should develop an understanding of what sentences are and should learn the basic principles of capitalization and punctuation.” In the primary grades, “once students understand the concept of a sentence, they then need instruction in how to apply standard conventions for sentence writing, including punctuation and capitalization. Teachers should explicitly teach the conventions of written English.”
- ✓ The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserts that research shows “spelling instruction should be an important component of the reading and writing program since it directly affects reading ability.”
- ✓ Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman (2011) cite that building knowledge of vocabulary and language is one of the ten elements of effective reading comprehension instruction.
- ✓ The Common Core anchor standards for language require students to “determine or clarify the meaning of grade-appropriate words.” (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 25)
- ✓ Tier two words, called general academic words in the Common Core standards, are words that are encountered across disciplines. Enhancing understanding of these words is an effective means for improving students’ vocabulary. (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; NGA Center and CCSSO Appendix A, 2010)
- ✓ Vocabulary is critically linked to the development of reading skills and is integral to instructional designs. (Lane & Allen, 2010; McCardle, Chharbra, & Kapinus, 2008)
- ✓ In separate reviews, Allington and Kamil report that direct, explicit instruction and focusing on words in context are important. (Allington, 2012; Kamil, 2004)

Research Implications

- Each book-specific teacher guide in *Smart Steps to Reading* provides a clear language skill objective. The Practicing Skills page gives explicit directions for a whole-class or small-group activity that targets this objective.
- Each concise activity teaches a language skill that children need to foster their literacy. These language skills include:
 - ◆ demonstrating command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking through:
 - printing upper- and lowercase letters
 - using common and proper nouns
 - forming verb tenses
 - choosing between adjectives and adverbs
 - using prepositions, and
 - producing complete sentences.
 - ◆ Demonstrating command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing through:
 - capitalizing the first word in a sentence and proper nouns
 - recognizing end punctuation
 - using commas and apostrophes, and
 - spelling words phonetically.
- Each activity draws on clear examples from the student book, providing a meaningful context for learning and applying the language skill.
- In addition, the Practicing Skills page includes a secondary skill activity that targets a key foundational or language skill.
- The Skills Practice blackline master focuses on the same language skill objective, allowing children to practice the skill and demonstrate their ability to meet the objective.
- A feature called “Think About It” at the end of each book provides a set of questions designed to guide students as they explore the text and monitor their understanding, including a foundational skill or language question.
- The digital format of every title includes additional foundational skills and language questions, with one set of questions per double-page spread. The questions provide appropriate scaffolding to support children’s understanding.
- Each Close Reading section in the book-specific teacher guide includes a vocabulary acquisition question that enables students to figure out the meaning of a word as it is used in context. The question focuses on a specific vocabulary acquisition strategy in which tier two words are taught directly. These strategies include:
 - ◆ using sentence-level context as a clue to the word’s meaning
 - ◆ identifying root words and their inflectional forms
 - ◆ recognizing affixes, and
 - ◆ using the meanings of individual words to figure out the meaning of a compound word.
- In addition, the book’s content vocabulary is introduced as part of the pre-reading activities in the Before Reading section of each teacher guide. These content words are then reviewed as part of the post-reading activities in the After Reading section. Children apply their understanding of the words by using them in their own sentences.
- Vocabulary is also the focus of the Oral Language Development activity in the After Reading section of each teacher guide. As the research supports, teachers help children develop their vocabulary indirectly through participating in an oral discussion about the book and its photos with the teacher and their peers.
- In the digital format of each book, the foundational skills and language activity on each double-page spread frequently include questions that focus on the book’s vocabulary. These question focus on the words in context and give children scaffolded support as they determine or clarify the words’ meanings.

Foster Writing, Speaking, and Listening Skills

Research Findings

- ✓ The Common Core State Standards focus on students' abilities to use the texts they have read as the basis for their written responses. (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010)
- ✓ To become strong writers, students need "expert instruction, time to write, and meaningful opportunities for writing." (Caulkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 18)
- ✓ Coleman and Pimentel (2012) assert that the standards "call for writing both as a means of communicating thinking and answering questions and as a means of self-expression and exploration. Writing assignments should be varied and ask students to draw on their experience, on their imagination, and most frequently on the texts they encounter."
- ✓ The speaking and listening Common Core standards require students to "learn to work together, express and listen carefully to ideas, integrate information from oral, visual, quantitative, and media sources...and adapt speech to context and task." (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 8)
- ✓ Worthwhile discussions are necessary for students to achieve the high demands of the speaking and listening standards, which are integral to the reading and writing standards. (Caulkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, pp. 168–169)
- ✓ Learning happens through communicating with others. In addition to students working with the teacher, it is equally important that they also communicate with their peers. (Fisher & Frey, 2008)
- ✓ Working together to discuss a text can lead to improved reading comprehension among students. (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011)

Research Implications

The *Smart Steps to Reading* materials integrate writing, speaking, and listening skills practice with reading comprehension and language instruction.

- The Practicing Skills section of each book-specific teacher guide includes an explicit writing activity that involves a response to the student book or another meaningful activity that is closely related to the text.
- Each writing activity focuses on a key writing skill, such as writing opinion pieces, informative texts, or narratives; working collaboratively on a written work; providing feedback to peers; and revising writing based on others' comments. Children can share their written work with the class or small group as one way to build their speaking and listening skills.
- The Speaking and Listening section included in the After Reading activities of the teacher guide allows time for children to foster their communication skills. In this section, children work in pairs or small groups to respond to the Think About It questions on the inside back cover of the student book. These higher-order thinking questions lend themselves to discussions in which children carefully consider the text at hand, express their thoughts, and listen to the ideas of others.
- The comprehension questions on each double-page spread of the student book's digital format provide additional opportunities for children to practice their writing, speaking, and listening skills. They are able to write or type their answers to the questions, and they can then discuss their answers with a partner or small group.

The Role of Assessment

Assessment opportunities at the primary level “should guide teachers to provide scaffolding to students but also gradually remove those supports by including tasks that require students to demonstrate their independent capacity to read and write.” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 9)

Formal and informal assessment opportunities in the *Smart Steps to Reading* materials are designed to help teachers (1) monitor progress toward literacy goals, and (2) adjust instruction and text levels according to student progress.

The program provides blackline masters to assess comprehension. Each book-specific teacher guide includes a blackline master as a culminating activity. This worksheet asks students to demonstrate understanding of what is read and their ability to meet the lesson’s reading comprehension objective. For example, after reading a book, more proficient students may complete a graphic organizer to describe the characters, setting, and main plot events of a fiction story. Emergent readers may draw a picture as a response to a question about the story and write or dictate a word to explain their drawings. Teachers may use children’s work as an assessment of their reading comprehension level and assign other texts accordingly.

The other features of the program—including the Skills Practice blackline master, Close Reading questions, Think About It questions, and point-of-use questions in the book’s digital format—provide multiple opportunities throughout the reading process for teachers to monitor each student’s abilities and understanding.

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