Teachers' Increased Use of Informational Text: A Phenomenological Study of Five Primary Classrooms

Heather D. Young and Christian Z. Goering

In 2010, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) marked several changes in instruction including that students across the spectrum of K-12 education would experience an increase in informational text throughout their schooling,[1] topping out at 70% of the school day by 11th and 12th grades. Under this new set of standards adopted by the majority of the United States, 50% of the texts that elementary-age students encounter should be informational, a dramatic instructional shift in the early grades where learning-to-read has, for over a century, been primarily taught through works of literature.[2]

The call for more informational texts in the early grades is not a new notion. Educational research is replete with studies touting the importance of introducing children to this genre early.[3,4,5] Regardless of research findings, most Americans living today likely learned how to read through fictional texts, and those who are teaching in the early grades could well have decided to teach because they wanted to help students learn to read in the same ways that they learned to read—to find the joy of reading through stories and tales.[6,7] We—Heather and Chris—recognize that the impetus for the actual change of including more informational text in the early grades has likely been the implementation of the CCSS, a phenomenon that Chris has studied nationally and in a single state as part of a research team. This mandated inclusion of informational text is not merely asking teachers to change their approach or adopt a new tool or strategy; in some ways at least, it is asking them to rewire or rethink their entire literacy acquisition experience. If we are to believe that teachers teach how they were taught, following Lortie's (1975) concept of "apprenticeship of observation,"[8] shifts such as the move to informational text in early grades represent an unprecedented change for all involved in education, especially teacher education.

Literature Review

Literature was reviewed in the area of standards-based educational reforms to provide a context for the most recent standards-based movement in the United States, the CCSS. Additionally, research was reviewed regarding the historical use and scarcity of informational text in primary classrooms, as well as recent push back on the trend of increased use of informational text for young students.

Throughout the literature, the informational text (IT) genre may be discussed using many different terms, including expository, non-narrative, nonfiction, or informational. This genre also takes different formats such as books, newspapers, websites, recipes, articles, or brochures. In keeping with the current language of the CCSS, we've selected IT as our lone moniker for these varied texts.

Standards-Based Educational Reforms. For a pronounced portion of our nation's existence, control of education has been held at the local level with state and national policy makers taking a secondary role. The turning point in educational control came with the 1983 report, *A Nation at*

Risk. This report painted a bleak picture of the educational system in the United States and set in motion a series of reforms that have steadily picked up speed over the past 30 years.[9] *A Nation at Risk* made claims that allowed the federal and state governments to increase their control over local school districts. It was this trend that shaped the educational landscape as one in which standards-based reform appeared necessary.

The driving force behind standards-based reform postulates that improved teaching and subsequent learning will result from the creation of high quality standards that provide meaningful learning goals for students. A system of professional development, or support for teachers, would assist in building teachers' abilities to implement the uniform standards. Assessments would determine if the standards-based learning was taking place, and the accountability attached to these assessments would serve as the mechanism for motivating teachers to comply with the reforms.[10]

The early 1990s brought with it the passage of Goals 2000 and the Improving America's Schools Act. These two pieces of legislation established the requirement that schools implement uniform standards, establish assessments that would monitor student and school achievement, and hold schools accountable for progress toward these goals or standards.[11] No Child Left Behind expanded and further cemented the role of the federal government in education, yet standards and their creation were primarily left up to each state.[12] It was not until 2010 when, in order to compete for federal dollars under the Race to the Top program, states were motivated to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an act that altered the landscape of educational culture in this country.[13]

Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman state the CCSS represent the most sweeping reform in K-12 education this country has ever seen.[14] Since its adoption, this document has had an influential role in American schools. The adoption of CCSS was considered by most states in the US but with varying degrees of research support presented (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013).[15] This reform was met with a large amount of controversy in the education community largely due to the idea that these standards were adopted without the input of teachers, those who were responsible for the daily implementation and whose careers would be judged by the performance of their students based upon this implementation (Stone, 2012).[16,17]

Informational Text. Duke defines informational text (IT) as "text written with the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world and having particular text features to accomplish this purpose."[18] Instruction using IT is not a new concept. IT held prominence in elementary classrooms in the form of religious, patriotic, scientific, and historical selections shortly after the Revolutionary War.[19,20] Fictional texts became the instructional tool of choice at the end of the 19th century, and remained central in American classrooms until the early part of the twenty-first century when using IT once again gained momentum in educational research.[21,22,23] Most recently, increased attention is illuminating IT as an instructional tool in elementary classrooms. With the adoption of CCSS and the focus on high stakes testing, success in our school communities requires the ability to find and decipher facts in a critical way, and IT is the genre specifically used by educators to target these skills.[24,25]

Until recently, the use of IT in elementary schools began in third or fourth grade when students transitioned into more content-specific learning; IT was sparingly used prior to this benchmark.[26,27,28] The absence of IT in the early grades has been blamed for what Chall and Jacobs call the fourth grade slump,[29] which is the common description for the decline in reading achievement once students make the switch from primarily narrative to more informational reading.

Duke studied 20 first grade classrooms from 1996-1997, and discovered that on average only 3.6 minutes each day was spent on IT.[30] In addition, only six percent of elementary students' reading time was spent engaged with these text formats. Children who attend schools with a high percentage of free and reduced lunches were provided with even fewer IT resources (six percent) or experiences (1.4 minutes per day). Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi found similar results when they studied reading materials across 15 classrooms (five in each of the second, third, and fourth grades).[31] Classroom library inventories revealed the proportion of IT present in classrooms was highest in second grade and lowest in third grade with classroom libraries topping out at 25% IT across the study. Observations revealed less than one minute of each day's instructional time in grade two was spent engaged in IT, whereas the amount of instructional time devoted to IT in third and fourth grades was slightly higher with an average of 16 minutes per day.

Push Back on IT. Responding to the *Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy*,[32] former NCTE President Joanne Yatvin takes issue with the concept of a 50/50 split with informational text in early grades:

> Apparently, the authors deem such a shift in curriculum content necessary for students to reach the goal of college and career readiness. But are their expectations for classroom practice realistic? The fact that fiction now dominates the elementary curriculum is not the result of educators' decisions about what is best for children, but a reflection of children's developmental stages, their interests, and their limited experience in the fields of science, geography, history, and technology. It is one thing for a child to read *The Little Engine That Could* for the pleasure of the story and quite another for her to comprehend the inner workings of a locomotive (n.p.).[33]

Charging the authors of the CCSS with "contempt for teacher competence," Yatvin concludes that "Taken together, the standards and the criteria project an aura of arrogance and ignorance in their assumptions about how and why children learn."[34]

Further criticism is found in the research primarily when IT is taught in isolation.[35,36] One fear is that removing (or reducing the use of) literature from the early grades will limit the connections young students make with their world. "Story is the way we make sense of the world" and limiting the use of literature may impact this mode of knowing.[37] Gottschall argues that our brains tend to remember information more readily if we can connect it to a story.[38] For this reason, it is argued that IT should not be used in isolation but rather in tandem with literature to create literate students.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theory states that people learn not through passing a body of knowledge from one individual (teacher) to another (student) but through guided participation in socially constructed activities.[39,40] Learning is a collective activity that takes place in environments where social interaction is encouraged and valued. People learn through participation in activities and conversations with those who are more knowledgeable regarding a specific topic than oneself. We are particularly interested in the interplay between learners—both teachers and students—as they collectively take up a new phenomenon.

Additionally, for the teachers residing in one of 45 states where CCSS were adopted, the standards represent what Spillane (2006) refers to as a second-order change, an act implemented outside of a school district or system that directly impacts such a system.[41] Since change is reported as more difficult to obtain and maintain if a teacher has a significant number of years of experience (Sarason, 1996; Smith-Crispin & Gillespie, 2007),[42,43] how certain changes are implemented plays a role in understanding the broad picture of this change.[44,45] The larger factor in teacher change seems to be the teachers' states as learners and their levels of self-efficacy; *entrenched* (suspicious of change) and *withdrawn* (actively opposed to change) teachers compete against change and new ideas regardless of the outcome seen by others (Joyce, 1983).[46,47]

The Present Study

At the time of this study, 45 out of 50 US states had adopted CCSS. Though controversies were brewing regarding CCSS implementation around the country, the state and district represented in this study firmly supported these changes. The state set a rigorous timeline for implementation and it mandated the following: K-2 in 2011-2012; Grades 3-8 in 2012-2013; Grades 9-12 in 2013-2014; and full K-12 implementation by 2014-2015 in preparation for PARCC.

For this study, we embraced transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology, largely developed by Husserl, is a qualitative research methodology attempting to understand human experience.[48]This methodology is grounded in a central concept and study data are analyzed as the authors attempt to set aside all preconceived ideas (epoche) to see the phenomenon through an unbiased perspective, allowing the meaning of the identified phenomenon to emerge using the perspective of the study participants.[49] Moustakas is the primary source for transcendental phenomenology outside of Husserl's German writings. Moustakas' work first discusses Husserl's transcendental phenomenology constructs followed by discussion of elements that affect individual decision-making, a key component of transcendental phenomenology. The central phenomenon in this study was the participants' implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the resulting shift to more informational text in their primary classrooms. This study design was adopted in an effort to more deeply understand two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2):

1. How, if at all, has the implementation of CCSS changed these kindergarten, first, and second grade classroom teachers' instructional practices?
2. What experiences emerge regarding the use and incorporation of IT in the midst of this reform?

Place. Cardinal Elementary (pseudonym) was purposively chosen for this study due to the relationship already established with the teachers in the school. Phenomenology requires the researcher to create knowledge that "offers a portal of insight into the individual" and this could best be accomplished in an environment where rapport was already founded.[50] Previous studies pointing toward a paucity of IT foregrounded our interest in these specific grade levels. We also decided to look specifically at this grade range because they were in their second year of full implementation with CCSS whereas other elementary grades were just beginning this transition.

Cardinal Elementary is one of 17 elementary schools within a suburban district, the second largest district in a mid-south state with a total of nearly 19,000 students during the data collection year. The setting of Cardinal Elementary is not typical of other schools in the area in that only eight out of nearly 600 students did not receive any type of service (i.e. special education, ELL, gifted and talented, free or reduced lunch) from the district or state. Most students walked to school from nearby neighborhoods; 80% of the students identified as having Hispanic or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander background; 76% were classified as having Limited English Proficiency; 93% received free or reduced school lunches. However, Cardinal Elementary is more than the sum of its demographics. This school is situated in a close community. Visitors drive by the houses and apartment complexes where the children live to get to the school. It is common to see smiling parents walking their children into school and visiting with school personnel.

The school building is one of the oldest buildings in the district yet it is cheerful and warm on the inside. The halls are painted in muted colors and there are windows to each of the classrooms in the hallways. The classrooms, while not large, are adequately and comfortably furnished and it is clear the teachers make good use of the space they have been given. The school built an addition several years ago which houses a new library, computer lab, and classroom for a grant-funded family literacy program for the non-English speaking parents of the students.

Participants. The five teachers in the study were chosen to reflect the difference in years of experience. Specifically, we requested to study one experienced teacher (over 20 years of teaching) and one beginning teacher (under five years of teaching) in each of the grade levels, K-2; six teachers were approached but the beginning second grade teacher declined to participate. The difference between expert and novice teachers was particularly interesting in light of the phenomenon they were experiencing.[51,52,53]

The teachers' backgrounds varied ranging from strictly primary grade to post-secondary teaching experience, gaining teaching licensure from four different programs across the country. The two beginning teachers in the study recently graduated from a teacher education program at a local public research university. The beginning kindergarten teacher in the study completed her internship at Cardinal Elementary and was immediately hired. The beginning first grade teacher was in the middle of her first year in this grade level; her first three years of experience were in kindergarten, and she recently looped up to first grade with her students from the previous year. All three experienced teachers in the study spent the majority of their teaching careers at Cardinal Elementary; the experienced first grade teacher had been teaching first grade in the same classroom for 25 of her 28 years of experience. (See Table 1 for teacher demographic data.)

Table 1
Teacher Demographic Data

Teacher	Highest Degree Earned	Experience (years)	Grade levels taught	Current Grade level	Gender	Race	Students (n)
A	BS	23	K, 2nd	K	F	Caucasian	20
B	BS	3	K, 1st	K	F	Caucasian	20
C	BS+	28	1st, 2/3	1	F	Caucasian	25
D	MS+	4	K, 1st	1	F	Caucasian	25
E	MS	21	2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, college	2	F	Caucasian	21

Methods

We designed and conducted a phenomenological study with five elementary school teachers during the implementation of the CCSS, specifically focusing on the largest instructional shift at early grades, the move to IT.

Data Collection. Data collection occurred for three and a half months (14 weeks) between November 2012 and February 2013 and took three interrelated shapes. First, teacher-reported lesson plans were submitted weekly to Heather throughout the study by the five participants. These data were collected in an effort to understand what the teachers planned to do daily with their students. Grade level lesson planning was an expectation at this school. Second, each teacher was randomly observed three times for 120-180 minutes in an effort to understand the extent to which the CCSS were being implemented in their classrooms and as a by-product, how much IT was being used, either directly as an instructional tool or indirectly as it was made available for independent reading or research. Third, Heather conducted a 60-minute semi-structured interview with each participant in an effort to learn more about their implementation of CCSS, including their use of IT, as well as their overall approach to teaching. These interviews occurred after all classroom observations had been conducted.

Analysis. According to Moustakas, transcendental phenomenology focuses less on the interpretations of the researcher(s) and more on the lived experiences of the study participants.[54] The goal of a phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible in an attempt to let readers freshly perceive this idea, "as if for the first time."[55] The nearly four months spent at Cardinal Elementary along with the various data sources allowed us to experience the phenomenon of Common Core (RQ1), and specifically the shift toward IT, through the eyes of these teachers. Data in this study were analyzed inductively[56] through a process that began with a collaborative component of searching for significant statements or events.[57] To follow Lincoln and Guba, we initially used peer debriefing in order to assure the subsequent findings were grounded within the teachers' voices.[58] Following, Heather returned to the entirety of the data set and identified 386 significant statements (see Figure 1: Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Related Formulated Meanings).

Figure 1.: Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Related Formulated Meanings

Themes	Clusters of Meaning	Sample Significant Statements
Common Core Implementation	How We Want to Think about Common Core	"I have to be so focused on what they need" [CCSS] "made us think deeper into what kids need"
	Realities of Common Core	"Resources are tough…Looking for those harder questions…The expectations…knowing my expectations were here and that was great but now my expectations are up here."
Support	Support for Teachers and Students	"We ended up getting more books…a lot of informational text too" "It makes a big difference when [students] are getting information that is true…it builds their knowledge and schema for other things we are teaching" "The material isn't always available in kid friendly language so I am having to write articles myself…write it in kid friendly language and attach a picture to it with a caption."
Paradigm Shift	Shifting Literacy Paradigm	"We choose books that will be appropriate for what we are trying to teach." "The children seem to like the nonfiction a lot more than I thought because they are finding out this is really cool, now I am smarter."
	Kids and Informational Texts	"The students lean a bit more toward informational text because they enjoy reading the facts; they understand that is where the information comes from."
Focus on Informational Texts	Teaching Using Informational Texts	Our goal is that students know "how to read it and interpret it and pull facts from that and they really know how to use informational text." "There is something special about some of the words. They are darker or highlighted. What does that mean to me?"

		"[Teachers] focus on teaching students to utilize informational texts independently to support their thinking and writing"

Once finished with this initial analysis, we combined the significant statements into clusters of meaning. We read through each significant statement, independently grouped them into categories, and then compared our interpretations. This process allowed us to take 386 significant statements and reduce them into six clusters of meaning, each contributing to our understanding (see Figure 1.1) of the central phenomenon: *How We Want to Think about Common Core; Realities of Common Core; Shifting Literacy Paradigm; Kids and Informational Texts; Support for Teachers and Students;* and *Teaching Using Informational Texts.*

Determining themes is the final step in the phenomenological study data analysis process, the manner through which the final story is developed which will describe the interrelatedness of the categories and the essence of the shared experience, or phenomenon.[59] In this stage of the analysis we condensed the six clusters of meaning to four interrelated themes: (a) *Common Core Implementation,* (b) *Paradigm Shift,* (c) *Support,* and (d) *Focus on Informational Text*. The two clusters centering on the CCSS understandings were combined to form the theme *Common Core Implementation*. The clusters focusing on the reason teachers held for the shift in their teaching and understanding of literacy (*Shifting Literacy Paradigm* and *Kids and Informational Texts),* became *Paradigm Shift*. The final two themes held the same significant statements as their previous clusters but the names were shortened to better represent these themes.

These four themes emerged from the data in an order that allowed us to understand how CCSS affected these teachers, their thinking about literacy, and the subsequent changes in their classrooms. Considering the significant statements, the clusters of meaning, and the identified themes, we attempted to create a representation of the teachers' experiences during the study. The Essence of the Experience section below is organized based upon this order and understanding.

Essence of the Experience

Four different themes emerged, providing an understanding of what these five teachers experienced over the course of the study in relation to the studied phenomenological implementation and what it meant for the literacy practices in their classrooms. We recognize that the CCSS Implementation was an antecedent to the other three themes, and hypothesize that without this reform, the other events may not have happened in the manner recorded in this study. The following story is presented to answer both research questions simultaneously. All data sources were analyzed and interwoven in an attempt to present a clear understanding of how CCSS impacted the teaching practices in these five classrooms (RQ1) followed by the largest shift discovered, the increased use of IT in these primary classrooms (RQ2).

Common Core Implementation. At the time of this phenomenological study, kindergarten through second grade classrooms across this mid-south state were in the second year of full implementation of the CCSS. The shift to CCSS from the previous set of curriculum frameworks was done abruptly—nine months between the state mandate and the beginning of the following

school year—which left little to no time for the state's K-2 teachers to prepare. These ideas recurred in the data and combine to create the theme *Common Core Implementation*. We discovered through participant interviews that teachers held positive perceptions of CCSS because it offered them more of a "focus" on what to teach, allowed them to provide a "better education" for their students, and created opportunities for "deeper" teaching and learning experiences. The two beginning teachers thought because of CCSS they had "more time" to focus on the concepts their students truly needed. Additionally, the three experienced teachers initially discussed that it wasn't that difficult to implement because they saw it as a throwback. "The Common Core Units [are] a lot like when we did the thematic units in whole language…it goes back to whole language thematic approach and you teach across the curriculum."

Teachers opened up about the challenges they were facing. Lack of student resources and the unknown PARCC assessments were two notable sources of stress. Even though the studied teachers would not be responsible for high-stakes testing, they too felt the gravity of PARCC as the experienced first grade teacher communicated, "We have to do our part to get them ready. Even though they aren't testing for us I know there is pressure all the way down to kindergarten to get them ready."

When discussing the struggles, the experienced teachers contradicted the idea from their less experienced colleagues regarding time; they reported there "wasn't enough time" to teach all they needed. The experienced first grade teacher explained the time struggle in this way:

> [CCSS] has completely eliminated fluff. We have no time for anything except what Common Core asks us to teach. Because of it going deeper there is so much that needs to be done to make it deep. I am learning that. The first year we tried to implement, I think I was still hanging on to the past, trying to fit all that in. The second year was a little bit better because I got rid of some of that stuff we were doing to fill in. Now there is no time. In fact, all the stuff that I collected, we call it the fluff folder now. It's not bad things that I have in that folder; it's just that we have no time to do those things anymore. The shift has made us think deeper into what kids need before they move onto second grade. It is drastic in the way we were teaching before. It seemed more relaxed…now it isn't relaxed.

All of these ideas taken together create a picture of the standards' implementation in these five teachers' classrooms. While these teachers were attempting to put a positive spin on this change, they were also feeling quite a bit of pressure to implement these standards in the way they had been instructed to by their administration in a very brief span of time sans much preparation.

Support. With the abrupt implementation of CCSS these five teachers accepted that in order to correctly shift to these standards, they would need some support. This support was provided through extensive professional development sessions provided by the state's Department of Education, the area educational cooperative, the school district, and this school's Instructional Facilitator. During several classroom observations, the Instructional Facilitator modeled lessons regarding the use of IT and appropriate strategies to use when teaching this genre. The district also provided physical resources and book sets for each grade level to use when teaching the mandated *Common Core Curriculum Maps* units.

As teachers increased their use of the new standards they noticed that students would also need support for a successful change to be possible. During interviews, the teachers noted there was a need for increased emphasis on students' schema development prior to the introduction of a new topic or vocabulary. One kindergarten teacher mentioned that this was "something I do differently now. I build the background before I read a hard story." Heather observed several teachers using real pictures to introduce unfamiliar vocabulary prior to reading fictional and/or informational text. Teachers noticed that since they implemented these new ways of teaching, students were spending more time in their individual Zones of Proximal Development. As the beginning first grade teacher explained in her interview, students have an "optimal place where it's not too difficult but we are challenging them and pushing them beyond where their level of comfort is. I feel like I am constantly in that. I have a greater percentage of time in that optimal place, and I am pushing them further in a heavily supported, positive way."

Not only were these teachers offering more support for students in the area of background knowledge and modeling, they were offering specific encouragements as their students were working to achieve the complex tasks required from the standards. The studied teachers received considerable support for increasing the use of IT within their instruction, and Heather observed that teachers were also providing these supports for their students. Four of the teachers in this study explicitly supported students' understanding of ITs through the use of think-alouds during instruction, explicit questioning techniques, and by requiring students to explain their thinking in a deeper way. One example of a classroom exchange of this support is detailed below in an instructional conversation between the experienced first grade teacher and her students.

> T: Is this fiction or nonfiction? [Allows the students some think time.] Do you know what kinds of things are in these books? Fiction or nonfiction?
> S: nonfiction
> T: What is the difference between fiction and nonfiction? We have talked about fiction and nonfiction a lot. I want to know the difference between these types of writings.
> T: [Various students responded and the teacher then summarized.] Did you hear that? Fiction is not real but nonfiction is real. Nonfiction has interesting features and they give us information to learn.

The same first grade teacher followed this line of questioning in other observations, not only asking an initial question, but also probing for the students' understandings. When discussing realistic fiction, this teacher wanted her students to understand the difference in this genre and informational text. "We have to be careful not to think this is nonfiction. What is nonfiction?" Multiple students replied, "real and true." The teacher then continued, "We have to understand these are made up people even though the story sounds real."

Following some professional development, all but one studied teacher indicated they felt more comfortable and began to notice other aspects and outcomes of these new standards. In a way, they resigned themselves to the inevitability of this change yet started to notice things within their students that made this gargantuan task seem less prodigious.

Paradigm Shift. Both first grade teachers in particular noted a characteristic in their students that they discerned was overlooked during the realm of checklists of skills to teach followed by multiple-choice high-stakes tests; children are innately "curious" beings. The new set of standards brought with it a "greater depth" of teaching, and the tasks students were asked to complete allowed them to apply this inquisitiveness. In addition, the tools they were tasked to use fed "their natural curiosity and their innate desire to learn and want to know."

One tool that came to prominence with CCSS was the genre of IT. Four of the teachers in this study began using IT because they were required to with CCSS. The fifth teacher did not noticeably integrate IT into her classroom due to her idea that the students were "not ready for it." Subsequently, the four teachers integrating IT discovered that their students enjoyed using this genre and would often choose it outside of instruction for their own independent reading. The beginning first grade teacher communicated this revelation, saying, "students lean a bit more toward information text because they enjoy reading the facts…they understand that is where the information comes from." The verification of student interest led these four teachers to choose more and more IT for their instruction, as was noted in their observations and self-reported lesson plans (8/12 weeks for the beginning kindergarten teacher, 12/14 weeks for both first grade teachers, and 8/11 weeks for the second grade teacher contrasted with 1/10 weeks for the experienced kindergarten teacher). Four of the teachers in this study began selecting different types of ITs and even began collecting more of this genre for the classroom libraries so students would have access to high-quality IT that was appropriate for their reading levels, witnessed during several observations and across grade level lesson plans. This represented a new way of thinking regarding students and text from these teachers' perspectives. They gave themselves permission to shift their teaching paradigm. Even though these teachers had been told students would enjoy ITs prior to the CCSS implementation, they had yet to experience it. The experienced first grade teacher stated, "the children seem to like the nonfiction a lot more than I thought because they are finding out this is really cool; they feel like they are smarter." In order to change their belief system, these teachers had to experience IT in a manner that would cause them to see the impact it could have on their students.[60,61] When all of these pieces came together, the *Paradigm Shift* led to a *Focus on Informational Text*.

However, the experienced kindergarten teacher resisted this change. She pushed back against CCSS and shared negative perceptions regarding IT, differing from her four colleagues. When asked how her instruction was altered since the implementation of CCSS she replied, "I don't think I do any different… I just haven't got into it enough I think." When Heather asked her about her thoughts regarding the integration of IT into instruction she was hesitant. "[My students] really like fiction and fantasy books a lot. The nonfiction they aren't that interested in…I don't have a lot of big books in nonfiction which would help but other than that they just really like the stories." IT was not observed in use in her classroom even though she had access to the same professional development, resources, books, and materials as the other kindergarten teacher in the study. There was little evidence that students in her classroom had the opportunity to interact with this genre; only one out of ten weeks of self-reported lesson plans made reference to informational text and this was in the context of "asking and answering questions using key details in the text." In the context of the study, this teacher did not embrace the *Paradigm Shift*.

Focus on Informational Text. The result of the *Paradigm Shift* was a new way of teaching using a large percentage of ITs. According to classroom observations and lesson plans, these teachers were now using IT as a prominent tool for instruction in literacy, science, and social studies. Students were encouraged to choose this type of text for independent reading, although the experienced second grade teacher pointed out, "…that is what they really like and are choosing. It started out as a rule but it hasn't been a problem."

The four teachers embracing this shift not only taught students that IT was a genre that provides factual information, they utilized these texts evident in the various teaching methods observed in their classrooms and documented in their lesson plans. The beginning first grade teacher said her students were using informational text as they read and they were to "go back and look for that information in the text" to support their statements. The experienced first grade teacher mentioned the students' ability to utilize their informational resources. "We put an anchor chart up so they can refer to it when they read." She also wrote the standards on the white board in kid friendly terms. During one observation a student pointed to the standard "RI.1.5: I can find information in nonfiction books by looking at the captions." She then showed her teacher a picture in a Ranger Rick magazine and demonstrated her ability to glean the new information from the caption. The student's excitement at noticing this independently was evident during the exchange.

Four of the teachers taught students to look for text features and then utilize these to assist in the comprehension of their own reading. They read ITs during shared reading and read-alouds, pointing out text structures and features. In the interviews the teachers were all asked which text features were most important to teach with the students in their grade level. The beginning kindergarten teacher listed the table of contents, labels, captions, and bolded words. The beginning first grade teacher said that captions, bolded words, index, glossary, tables, graphs, and photographs were all a focus in first grade. The experienced first grade teacher echoed these features and said, "We did quite a bit of work at the front teaching how a nonfiction book is set up…about why it is so important." The second-grade teacher continued with the list and indicated that captions, pictures, and headings are very important. She was excited to point out that the time spent on text features paid off and that students were beginning to notice these features without prompting.

The IT features mentioned in the interviews were also seen as a focus in many of the classrooms during observations or throughout the lesson plans. Text features were not represented in the kindergarten lesson plans but an informal discussion about the glossary and bolded words was observed in the beginning kindergarten teacher's classroom. The discussion was prompted by a student question, "X was wondering what these were. This is a glossary. It tells us what all the dark words in the story mean." At that point the teacher did go back into the informational text and pointed to the bolded word "subjects." She went back to the glossary and found this word. "It means art, math, and reading. When you are older you will go to different classrooms for different subjects."

These four teachers also taught students to organize their thinking through the use of graphic organizers and anchor charts. No longer displays created and then forgotten, students were frequently encouraged to use these tools during their cooperative and independent work times.

During one classroom observation, the experienced first grade teacher and her students were creating a T-chart on IT features. One side was titled "feature" with the other side titled "purpose." The experienced teacher introduced the activity in the following way: "I have a T-chart here. We are going to start keeping track of features we find in nonfiction texts. One of the features we looked at today was a caption…a caption that goes with a photograph or an illustration. These are different but both have captions. What is the purpose of a caption?" A student answered, "to know more." Her teacher wrote this as the purpose and responded "Oh! I love it!" She continued this process with photographs, illustrations, and labels. The chart remained on the easel at the end of the discussion with the premise that the class would continue to add to this list.

Additionally, students used ITs as resources for research projects and as evidence to support their own writing. Teachers were observed creating student-friendly ITs on topics when a grade appropriate text couldn't be found. The focus on IT could be seen across all three grade levels at Cardinal Elementary. According to the teachers in this study, these changes to instruction largely came in response to this paradigm shift toward IT vis-à-vis the implementation of CCSS.

Discussion
Historically the use of IT for learning began around third or fourth grade when students made the switch from narrative to more informational reading.[62] With the increased pressure associated with standardized testing, the implementation of the CCSS in 45 out of 50 states, and the recognition that life outside school is increasingly information-driven, teachers are encouraged and mandated to use ITs with their students beginning in the earliest grades.[63,64,65,66] In the past, teachers demonstrated reluctance to include this genre of text in the early elementary grades for a number of reasons, including: their own reading preferences, the belief that students were not equipped to comprehend nor interested in this genre, and the belief that students should learn to read before being introduced to multiple types of text.[67,68,69] We look to the larger context of current education policy to understand IT as one result of the central phenomenon of the implementation of the CCSS.

Research vs. Policy. Our study sought to unpack and bring to light the "lived experiences" of five participants in a single school.[70] New to this policy-initiated shift toward IT due to the phenomenon of CCSS, four out of the five participants used IT on a regular basis in their instruction as evidenced through interviews, observations, and lesson plans. A reluctant Kindergarten teacher reported using IT two to three times a month while others shared that nearly 80% was IT in second grade. Though we didn't record this specifically, four of five teachers in the present study appeared to make increases from the teachers in Duke's[71] and Jeong et al.'s[72] studies (3.6 minutes each day, less than 6% of classroom materials; less than one minute per day, classroom libraries containing less than 25% IT) in their own classrooms. The participants in this study—in no way a replication of others—reported an apparent increase in time spent with ITs. IT in the lower grades cannot be fully discussed without a consideration of the education policy context in which it exists—chiefly that a policy mandate could shift teacher practice more immediately than researchers' findings and recommendations.

Given the nature of the current educational policy context,[73,74,75,76] one in which national level decisions have direct impact on individual classrooms, we further investigate recent changes

initiated by the CCSS. These standards represent—along with several interconnected educational reforms, like increased national standardized tests, teacher evaluations tied to test scores, and an increase in routes for alternative teaching—a crystallization of how education change is accomplished in our country, specifically representing a reform mindset that is done *to* rather than *with* teachers or researchers. If the results of our study are true in other places, this technique is effective in creating change, but it speaks to a larger disconnect between practitioner knowledge, education research, and education policy—a fact we find troubling.

The pressure to change to meet new standards, especially as those standards are in conversation with assessments and teacher specific accountability measures in the face of a paucity of evidence that such connections are legitimate,[77] is creating unprecedented change in teacher practice. This notion connects directly to the observed product of this study's central phenomenon, teachers incorporating IT in their classrooms to meet the 50% IT recommendation of CCSS. Our findings and the recommendations of several researchers, especially Nell Duke, dovetail nicely with the CCSS in the case of IT. Other aspects of CCSS do not, in fact, coalesce with empirical research or popular and/or politically convenient opinion. Whether or not these shifts will, in fact, accelerate student achievement in terms of IT remains to be studied further and we wonder if there could be unforeseen negative consequences to these sudden changes as well (e.g., experienced teachers leaving the profession, teacher shortages, negative impacts on students).

As it relates to our study directly, Duke and others have long recommended a balance of reading materials in the early grades. Despite an overwhelming amount of research suggesting IT increase, it appears as though these changes are now happening. The question we ask ourselves is "so what?" Research doesn't necessarily translate to policy or practice, but it appears if current accountability measures remain in place, policy will directly translate to practice, regardless of empiricism. In this study, innovations were well received by the teachers only after they observed their students engaged in the learning process and achieving classroom-based successes using these new tools. Regardless of our findings and the fact that they harmonize with research and policy in this instance, we deplore the fact that teachers weren't prominent members of this or any committee set out to write education standards. Goodman asserts that "professionals need to see our expertise, abilities and educational leadership to communicate […] to parents, teachers and the public and demand that governmental and policy groups act on the basis of the best knowledge."[78] Despite the temptation and apparent effectiveness of top-down policy changes, we urge all members of the education community to work collaboratively in careful view of empirical research in order to move forward, especially in ways that could impact the reading lives of young people.

Increases in the need for informational literacy, including those set forth in the CCSS, combine to move reading towards an increasingly analytical mode. For this shift to be realized, teachers will ultimately have to enact practices that include increased amounts of IT, considerably more than the previous studies indicate. Approaching IT not as an "object of inquiry, but an avenue for inquiry" will be key.[79] Since it has become necessary for students to understand how a text conveys and persuades readers of claims and points of view,[80] a paradigm shift in the way educators teach students to read and comprehend text is also needed. Young students are now asked to analyze multiple texts, note similarities and differences in the points of view presented,

and assess the validity behind people's ideas. They are asked to integrate information from several texts and use this information to explain relationships between ideas and author's craft.[81]

Implications and Conclusion

To effectively prepare teachers for top-down policy mandates, educator preparation programs must continue to strive to heavily embed empirical research into pedagogy coursework and allow pre-service educators to practice these strategies in real classrooms while also including coursework and practice related to education policy making and policy studies. Only then will teachers feel confident to deliver evidence-based teaching practices in their classrooms and advocate for those practices on a constant basis.[82]

Following Smagorinsky, Rhym, and Moore, the forces competing for the attention of pre-service and new-to-the-profession educators are myriad, complex, and contradictory.[83] When considering to what extent teachers can grow, take risks with lesson ideas, and learn to teach in a policy and accountability heavy context, we are concerned the individual and larger school systems in which teachers are being socialized hold potential for positive and negative outcomes in terms of teacher development.

We have no doubt that recent changes to learning and assessment policy impacting early grade classrooms (i.e., implementation of new standards, standardized testing as central metric of understanding learning, information-driven world) will directly impact the process of learning to read. Teachers who assist students through this complex and recursive process will need to provide additional instruction with IT as early as kindergarten and in some cases, will need to relearn aspects of their profession in order to implement IT with a higher frequency. This represents a significant challenge facing the profession. Experienced and new teachers in this study—with one exception—were willing to implement new teaching methods with IT in their classrooms. Data suggest they implemented an increased amount of IT due to educational policy changes rather than research recommendations for practice.

Appendix
Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Questions

1. General Demographic Information on Class
Male   Female
Caucasian   African Amer.   Hispanic   Marshallese   Other
Special Needs   ELL

2.   Tell me about your background and how you got into teaching. What is your educational background?

3.   How long have you been teaching and at what grade levels?

4.   What is your philosophy about teaching, specifically in the area of literacy? How do you think children learn?

5.   Talk to me about the Common Core Standards. Have they changed the ways in which you instruct? Have they caused you to rethink your teaching philosophy? If so, how? (Specifically in regard to literacy.)

6.   What is typically included in your literacy block?

7.   Did Common Core change the materials you use in your instruction? If so, how?

8.   How do you choose texts to use in your instruction?

9.   Talk to me about your preference on texts to use for instruction. How many narrative or fictional texts do you use? How many informational texts do you use?

10. How often do you think you use informational texts as your read aloud book? What about as your guided reading texts?

11. How do you think your students respond to nonfiction texts (as compared to fictional texts)?

12. How do you teach informational texts? What structures and features of informational text are important at this grade level? What strategies have you found useful when teaching these?

13. Do you teach informational texts differently than you teach fictional texts? If so, how?

14. How do you encourage students to read informational texts?

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Heather D. Young (hkindall@uark.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, AR.

Christian Z. Goering (cgoering@uark.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, AR.