2018

What Counts as Common Core Aligned? An Examination of a Reading Program's Agreement with the Common Core State Standards

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Abstract

Passage and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) created numerous difficulties for educational stakeholders. One such difficulty, determining the alignment of previously utilized curricula to the CCSS, forced many states, districts, and schools into purchasing "new" curricular resources marketed as "Common Core Aligned" without any available auditing process to validate the claims made by publishers. Since initial implementation of CCSS, measures for determining alignment have been developed. This study examined the alignment of a widely used reading program, *Adventures Common Core* (pseudonym), to the Common Core State Standards using a modified version of the Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products (EQuIP) Rubric for Lessons and Units: ELA/Literacy. The following research questions guided this study: (1) To what extent does the *Adventures Common Core* reading program effectively address all components of literacy as defined by the Common Core State Standards? (2) To what extent does the *Adventures Common Core* reading program accurately assess student literacy in alignment with the Common Core State Standards? Findings, which are significant for future research, show that even intentionally aligned curricula can fall short of addressing standards to the depth and rigor intended.

Keywords: curriculum alignment, ELA curriculum, Common Core State Standards, assessment

Passage and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) created numerous difficulties for educational stakeholders. One such difficulty, determining the alignment of previously utilized curricula to the CCSS, forced many states, districts, and schools into purchasing "new" curricular resources marketed as "Common Core Aligned" without any available auditing process to validate the claims made by publishers.

Since initial implementation of CCSS, measures for determining alignment have been developed. This study examined the alignment of a widely-used reading program, *Adventures* Common Core (pseudonym), to the Common Core State Standards using a modified version of the Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products (EQuIP) Rubric for Lessons and Units: ELA/Literacy (Achieve, 2014). The following research questions guided this study: (1) To what extent does the *Adventures* Common Core reading program effectively address all components of literacy as defined by the Common Core State Standards? (2) To what extent does the *Adventures* Common Core reading program

accurately assess student literacy in alignment with the Common Core State Standards?

Standards in US Education

The call for standards-based reform in the United States was enacted in federal law with the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (1994) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001). According to Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson (2010), "Standards are the foundation upon which almost everything else rests—or should rest. They should guide state assessments and accountability systems; inform teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development; and give shape to curricula" (p. 1).

The reauthorization of ESEA required that "states set challenging and rigorous content standards for all students and develop assessments, aligned with the standards, to measure student progress" (Shepard, Hannaway, & Baker, 2009, p. 4). Title VI of ESEA described key principles for comprehensive educational improvement, such as, "high standards for all students" and "teachers better trained to teach high standards" (ESEA, 1994). In order to set and implement high standards, according to ESEA, there must be a clear definition of what all students need to know and be able to do.

With the aim of showing school progress and raising student achievement, NCLB required that the states create a set of standards, proficiency levels, and assessments for students' academic achievement (Wallender, 2014). However, the definition of a standard varied from state to state. Ultimately, each state created different standards and accountability systems for determining proficiency. This variation in standards and achievement levels created a challenge in comparing the ability levels of students across the United States because there was no means to compare what one student in one state could do, to what a student in another state could do. The variation in rigor among state standards and discrepancies in grade level proficiency created wide gaps in student academic achievement across the nation (Bandeira de Mello, Bohrnstedt, Blankenship, & Sherman, 2015; Jones, 2012: MacDougall, 2017).

The Common Core State Standards

After the realization of the academic achievement gap due to discrepancies in standards, the National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Council Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) began the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSb, 2015). Beginning in November 2007, these groups collaborated with teachers, school administrators, and content experts in order to create a set of "consistent, real-world learning goals" (CCSSa, 2015). In order to achieve this, the creators used the best state standards currently implemented, experience of professionals in the field, and feedback from the public (CCSSb, 2015).

The creation of these standards sought to eliminate the variation among state standards and provide teachers with clear and specific, measurable benchmarks (CCSSa, 2015). While rigorous, the coherent organization of the CCSS helps teachers create clear and specific learning objectives that adequately prepare students for the next grade level as well as success in life (CCSSa, 2015). The adoption across states proposed to guarantee that no matter the location of students' living, they receive the instruction necessary to achieve (CCSSb, 2015).

Key Shifts in the ELA CCSS

Due to substantial variance in standards from state to state, there was no clear consensus for what skills students needed to have mastered at the end of each school year before the implementation of the CCSS. In 2011, forty-two states adopted the CCSS, standards that required students to develop substantial literacy skills. Common Core State Standards provide three major shifts in ELA: complex texts, textual evidence, and interaction with informational texts.

Complex texts. According to "Key Shifts in English Language Arts" (2015), the first shift is for students to have regular practice with complex texts as well as academic vocabulary. The standards required educators to push their students' reading skills to the next level by emphasizing the use of challenging texts which contain rich vocabulary in order give them opportunities to usurp the higher-level thinking skills that are deemed necessary for a

continuation of education (Brown & Kappes, 2012). The Common Core State Standards Initiative clarified this shift by stating, "Closely related to text complexity and inextricably connected to reading comprehension is a focus on academic vocabulary: words that appear in a variety of content areas (such as ignite and commit)" (Key Shifts, 2012, para. 3). Students must comprehend a wide variety of general academic vocabulary words across the curriculum in order to meet the demands put into place by the standards.

Textual evidence. The next shift implemented in schools due to the CCSS requires students to provide evidence from the texts they read. Alberti (2013) examined the shifts and stated, "The Common Core State Standards emphasize using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information" (para. 9). Students must provide proof from both literary and informational texts in order to meet CCSS requirements (Key Shifts, 2012). Due to implementation of the CCSS, teachers are required to prompt their students with questions that oblige them to analyze texts and search for deeper meanings within the texts.

Interaction with informational texts. The third change in English language arts instruction brought on by the Common Core State Standards is the movement towards building knowledge through content-rich information (Key Shifts, 2012). Students should be able to gain knowledge and practice interpreting informational texts daily, and students need opportunities to read, write, speak and listen throughout each day across the curriculum to develop the necessary skills to succeed in every subject area. Literacy instruction is no longer exclusive to ELA, because under the CCSS, students must receive literacy instruction in all the subject areas.

Curricular Materials

While the Common Core State Standards are a set of standards created with the intention of aligning the quality of education across the United States, the standards do not establish the curricular requirement per se, but they do establish base-guidelines within the content areas. Thus, with the adoption of national standards without a national curriculum for guidance, many states, school districts, and other educational institutions scrambled after CCSS implementation to find readily available CCSS-aligned curriculum in English language arts and the content areas. Funding issues and the need for frequently updated digital materials caused many states to shift from state to local authority for curricular materials adoptions. Local districts, in possession of previous materials and deluged with educational publishers' new offerings, faced an unprecedented need to review materials across all grade levels and content areas (Gewertz, 2015; MacDougall, 2017).

The depth and breadth of instructional content and processes in English language arts in the elementary grades is particularly challenging, and often stakeholders turn to basal reading programs. Most basal reading programs include a grade-leveled series of student and teacher-edition textbooks with short, weekly stories, individual leveled books for learners, workbooks, activities, and assessments. These programs tend to be the comprehensive in components and offer literacy educators a highly structured, sometimes scripted, linear program of study.

Significance of Curriculum Alignment to Standards

Most recently, the implementation of the Common Core State Standards has become an important and complicated topic in the world of education. By the end of 2015, more than forty states adopted the CCSS. As schools adopt these standards, the need for alignment between the standards and the curriculum is crucial. Drake (2012) defined alignment as, "The standards, content, assessment, and instructional strategies are coherent and make a complementary fit" (p. 30). The CCSS include a heavier emphasis on higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and analysis. Educators must ensure that the curriculum adequately addresses these new, more sophisticated areas of skill and mastery. Educators use different methods for aligning curriculum to the standards, especially the increasingly common method of curriculum mapping. Curriculum mapping includes recording and analyzing a combination of the content,

assessment, and accompanying skills taught over a span of time (Drake, 2012; MacDougall, 2017).

Challenges of Curriculum Alignment to Standards

While schools may implore tactics like curriculum mapping in an attempt to align the curriculum to the standards, research has proven that successful alignment is a problem (e.g., Evans, 2015; Jefferson & Anderson, 2017). Numerous instructional materials, especially textbooks, advertise alignment to the CCSS. This has become a common issue, as the materials present multiple discrepancies in alignment. Studies have shown that many companies, in an attempt to meet the new demands after adoption of the Common Core, made minor adjustments to existing products and relabeled them as Common Core Aligned. Although some companies actually have developed materials that adhere to alignment, the hefty price tag they carry make them unobtainable to many school districts (Carroll, 2015).

The lack of teacher support and guidance from administrators in developing and implementing standards-aligned curriculum has complicated the adoption of these standards. Research has shown that less than half of all teachers implementing common core standards report they are receiving sufficient support; however, those who feel supported are far more likely be enthusiastic about the standards (Carroll, 2015; Glatthorn, Jailall, & Jailall, 2016). Massell and Perrault (2014) pointed out that, despite the misconception that alignment simply involves matching the curriculum to the standards; the process is actually much more daunting and involved. Without proper support from leaders and administrators, aligning curriculum to the standards can/has become a seemingly impossible task for teachers and puts the success of both students and teachers at risk.

ELA Curriculum Alignment to CCSS

According to "Understanding the Skills in the Common Core State Standards" (2012), the standards address vast academic skill sets while also bringing in, "technical elements or applications—such as work-based communications and job-seeking skills" (p. 2). The purpose of incorporating these higher-order thinking skills is to ensure that students successfully apply learning outside of the academic environment. These skills include communication, teamwork/collaboration, problem solving, reasoning, research, time-management, and technology skills, as well as the ability to use data and apply core content in various situations. When aligning the ELA curriculum to meet the new demands outlined in the CCSS, educators must ensure that they address this new, more advanced skill set because, "all of these skills, grounded in rigorous academic content, will help students build skills for success in high school and beyond" (p. 8). The standards merely identify these skill sets, but it is the responsibility of educators (with guidance from administrators) to implement them. Using their pedagogical and instructional intelligence, the educational team must develop a curriculum that provides students with the tools needed to master the content and skills.

Basal programs. Many researchers discuss the incorporation of basal programs for ELA instruction into the CCSS aligned curriculum (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2015; Konrad, Keesey, Ressa, Alexeeff, Chan, & Peters, 2014; Sulzer, 2014). Sulzer found the basal readers that support the CCSS focus on the students' ability to extract and interpret meaning from a text. Educators have the task of creating readers who approach a text selection as detectives who are to interpret and examine the sample as closely as possible. Sulzer also notes that the reading skills outlined in the CCSS and subsequently addressed in basal programs are, "envisioned as objective, neutral and eternal—and importantly, conducive to measurement" (p. 1). When educators must follow and implement reading programs that are objective and, as a result, must be measurable, the creative aspect of reading and reading interpretation disappears from the classroom. Instead, this type of instruction uses formative data collection techniques, measures student development on standards considered as priority, and adapts lessons based on perceived interventions. Through these basal programs, educators adapt reading instruction to a new, non-traditional format promoted by the Common Core State Standards.

Assessment

Teachers use assessment in classrooms to evaluate student learning and inform future instructional decisions. Assessment is an ongoing process that includes various methods of measuring for student learning such as: formative, summative, formal, and informal assessments. Formative assessment occurs before and throughout instruction, while summative assessment takes place after a lesson or unit. Formal assessments are intentional and designed to gather data, while informal assessments occur sporadically as opportunities present themselves within the classroom. The goal of assessment is for educators to measure whether or not students have achieved mastery of learning objectives.

Significance of Assessment Alignment to Standards

In addition to aligning the curriculum to standards, alignment between the standards and the assessments used to evaluate student learning is also an important aspect for student success. According to Webb (1997), "a formal alignment process employed by a district or state is one indication that these systems are assuming responsibility for assuring that students are learning what is expressed as important knowledge in standards, frameworks, or other statements of expectations" (p. 2). As the district and state take responsibility for students' learning, they are taking responsibility for the knowledge delivered and the mediums through which this knowledge travels to the students. Those in power within the education system are heavily concerned with educators teaching what is important to the education system. Drake (2012) argued, "standardization is a way of determining such accountability" (p. xiv). As teachers are accountable for teaching the content of the standards mandated by the government, then their students demonstrate mastery of the content taught through their performance on the standardized tests issued by the education system.

Challenges of Assessment Alignment to Standards

The alignment of standards and assessment is more complex than the inclusion of the same topics and content. Though educators teach the topics included in both the standards and assessments, the details within the topics can vary considerably, and the method for teaching and measuring the topic can be uniquely specific. While this may not seem significant, experts on alignment in the educational system believe, "the system becomes functional only when students are tested on information they have been taught, in a fashion similar to how the information was presented and learned" (La Marca, Redfield, & Winter, 2000, p. 3). When the Common Core State Standards became the mandated content and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment became the required measurement of those standards, a curriculum was needed to link the standards and the assessment in a similar format in order to make students successful.

ELA Assessment Alignment to the CCSS

Within the ELA section of the PARCC assessment, three main skills are evaluated: a literacy analysis task, a narrative task, and a research simulation task. On the overall PARCC assessment, forty-five percent of the test is focused on language and writing (Sarles, 2013). Students are expected to be able to read a text, analyze it, and then use textual evidence to prove their analysis (Wilcox, Jeffrey, & Gardner-Bixler, 2015). The assessment of students is no longer focused on knowing facts, but on using skills and showing the ability to utilize tools and strategies to find facts and analyze them.

Research Approach

The approach used for this study was action research. Teacher action researchers validate their personal theories about student learning and achievement through practice in the classroom. Educational practitioners "must be engaged in curriculum research and have control over the

process and results of such inquiry" (McKernan, 2006, p. 28). Practitioners ask research questions and implement changes in their classrooms, seeking to improve the culture of learning within their classrooms. Teachers are uniquely positioned to examine curriculum used in the classroom. Action research calls for more than collecting data and analyzing results. Rather, action research encourages researchers to implement changes based on the analysis of the information.

Statement of Problem

Elementary school teachers are faced with the challenge of ensuring that the state-adopted standards – in this case the CCSS – are effectively taught to students. ELA programs adopted by schools and districts claim to provide materials and methods of instruction that match the standards, and teachers generally trust the claims of publishers. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the alignment of the curriculum and assessments of the *Adventures* ELA program to the Common Core State Standards. The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. To what extent does the *Adventures* Common Core program effectively address all components of literacy as defined by the Common Core State Standards?
2. To what extent does the *Adventures* Common Core program accurately assess student literacy in alignment with the Common Core State Standards?

Data Collection

For this study, the researchers chose and analyzed four lessons from the *Adventures* Common Core Grades 1-4 program, one lesson from each grade level. The *Adventures* Common Core reading program is comprised of four components: foundational skills, reading literature and informational text, writing, and language. The curricular materials for each grade level include the teacher's edition of the basal reader, a basal reader

with short weekly selections for each student, student assessment booklets, and ancillary materials such as leveled readers and student workbooks. Chosen by the researchers as exemplars, this study focused on data collected from Lesson 8 in Grade 1 (G1L8), Lesson 14 in Grade 2 (G2L14), Lesson 17 in Grade 3 (G3L17), and Lesson 6 in Grade 4 (G4L6).

Data Analysis

To investigate the extent of alignment of the Grades 1-4 *Adventures* lessons and assessments to the standards, the researchers used the *Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products* (EQuIP) *Rubric for Lessons and Units: ELA/Literacy* (Achieve, 2014). The EQuIP rubric is an inquiry-based tool used for measuring alignment of an individual unit or lesson to the targeted Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As utilization of the EQuIP rubric relies on both subjective and objective measures, the researchers spent considerable time analyzing the examples provided in the instructions. All the researchers had prior experience with the *Adventures* reading program in classrooms, which expanded their knowledge of these curriculum materials beyond the printed page.

The rubric is categorized into four dimensions: Alignment to the Depth of the CCSS, Key Shifts in the CCSS, Instructional Supports, and Assessment. Before the researchers used the rubric for evaluation, they performed a cursory review of the materials for familiarization of all aspects. The first application of the EQuIP rubric evaluated the *Adventures* curricular resources for Dimension I through the "lens" of the criterion for each subcategory. Evidence supporting alignment or lack of alignment was recorded. The evaluation of Dimensions II-IV was conducted using the same process. After each researcher completed an evaluation of his/her grade level *Adventures* materials, the criteria and ratings were combined for a comprehensive analysis within and across grade levels. Analysis of common trends in data across grade levels identified strengths and weaknesses within and across the *Adventures* grade level reading programs.

According to the EQuIP rubric scale, the criteria within each dimension are evaluated and given a

rating of 0-3. The Rating Scale for Dimensions I, II, III, IV is

3: Meets most to all the criteria in the dimension

2: Meets many of the criteria in the dimension

1: Meets some of the criteria in the dimension

0: Does not meet the criteria in the dimension

For this study, the researchers quantified each of the rating descriptors, such as,

3: Meets 100% of the criteria in the dimension

2: Meets 70-90% of the criteria in the dimension

1: Meets 1-69% of the criteria in the dimension

0: Meets 0% of the criteria in the dimension

Findings

Alignment to the Depth of the CCSS

As Table 1 shows, the first dimension of the rubric, Alignment to the Depth of the CCSS, received an overall rating of 2.3 of 3.0 . The highest rating across grade levels (3 of 3) was for Criterion A: Targets Grade-level CCSS. For all Grades 1-4 lessons, a list of grade-level Common Core State Standards was provided for instructional content and practices.

The criterion with the lowest rating (1.8 of 3) in this dimension was Criterion C: Grade-level Texts. The researchers leveled all reading selections and determined that the *Adventures* weekly-leveled readers, provided for small group instruction for students who are homogeneously grouped by reading level, were too advanced for each of the assigned grade-levels. In other words, the texts that *Adventures* reported to be on grade-level were actually all above grade-level.

Table 1

Depth of Alignment

Criterion	Rating of Criterion by Grade Level				
The lesson aligns with the letter and spirit of the CCSS:	G1L8	G2L14	G3L17	G4L6	Mean
A. Grade-level CCSS: Targets a set of grade-level CCSS ELA/Literacy standards	3	3	3	3	**3.0**
B. Purpose for Instruction: Includes a clear and explicit purpose for instruction	2	2	2	2	**2.0**
C. Grade-level Texts: Selects sufficient grade-level text(s) that are of sufficient quality and scope for the stated purpose	2	2	1	2	**1.8**
D. Integration: Integrate all aspects of literacy so that students synthesize advancing literacy skills	3	2	3	2	**2.5**
E. Multidisciplinary Texts: Build students' content knowledge and their understanding of reading and writing through multidisciplinary texts	2	3	1	3	**2.3**
Overall Rating: Alignment to Depth of CCSS	2.4	2.4	2.0	2.4	**2.3**

Table 2

Key Shifts

Criterion	Rating of Criterion by Grade Level				
The lesson addresses key shifts in the CCSS:	G1L8	G2L14	G3L17	G4L6	Mean
A. Reading Text Closely: Makes reading text(s) closely, examining textual evidence, and discerning deep meaning a central focus	3	2	3	2	**2.5**
B. Text-Based Evidence: Facilitates rich text-based discussions and writing through specific, thought-provoking questions	2	2	2	2	**2.0**
C. Academic Vocabulary: Focuses on explicitly building students' academic vocabulary	3	2	2	3	**2.5**
D. Balance of Texts: Focus instruction equally on literary and informational texts in CCSS	2	2	3	3	**2.5**
E. Balance of Writing: Include prominent and varied writing opportunities for students that balance communicating, thinking and answering questions with self-expression and exploration	1	1	3	1	**1.5**
F. Increasing Text Complexity: Include a progression of comp. texts	1	1	2	2	**1.5**
Overall Rating: Key Shifts in CCSS	2.0	1.7	2.5	2.2	**2.1**

For example, determination of the Lexile and DRA2 levels of Grade 3 weekly-leveled texts, designed for use during small group instruction, revealed that the Grade 3, Lesson 17 (mid-year) weekly-leveled texts are

- Struggling weekly-leveled text: Lexile 710 (Grade 3 range = 415-760), DRA2 Level 28
- On-level weekly-leveled text: Lexile 850 (Grade 3 range = 415-760), DRA2 Level 38
- Advanced weekly-leveled text: Lexile 910 (Grade 3 range = 415-760), DRA2 Level 40

The Instructional Reading Level expectation for Grade 3 Mid-Year students is DRA2 Level 28, yet that is the level of the text provided for the below-level struggling reader, with the on-level and advanced readers expected to read text for Lesson 17 (mid-year) beyond the Spring Instructional Reading Level expectation of Levels 30-34.

Key Shifts in the CCSS

The second dimension of the rubric, Key Shifts in the CCSS, received an overall rating of 2.1 of 3.0 (see Table 2).. The highest ratings across grade levels (2.5 of 3) was for Criterion A: Reading Texts Closely, Criterion C: Academic Vocabulary and Criterion D: Balance of Texts. G1L8 and G3L17 scored a 3 of 3 for reading texts closely as these grade-level lessons showed high emphasis on textual evidence and developing deep meaning of text. G1L8 and G4L6 earned a 3 of 3 for academic vocabulary because *Adventures* discussed the vocabulary words daily and incorporated them into small group instruction. While more applicable across the year, the criterion that addressed exposure to a balance of texts received 3 of 3 in Grades 3 and 4 as the texts included several types and multiple genres (e.g., Grade 3: anchor text was a fictional play, the read-alouds were informational texts, and the leveled readers were fantasy and realistic fiction).

Two criteria that received the lowest rating (1.5 of 3) in the Key Shifts dimension of the EQuIP rubric were Criterion E: Balance of Writing and Criterion F: Increasing Text Complexity. Particular weakness was evident within the Balance of Writing criterion, as evidenced by a rating of 1 of 3 in Grades 1, 2, and 4. The rating reflected a dearth of time provided over the lesson for writing instruction and student writing. Additionally, the writing that did take place is not at the level expected by the Common Core State Standards.

Within the Increasing Text Complexity criterion, Grades 1 and 2 received a rating of 1 of 3, primarily due to the difficulty of the weekly-leveled texts without adequate scaffolding. While the levels of texts progressed and became more complex, the sequence was dependent on availability of text and the ability of the student to comprehend above level text with little support.

Instructional Supports

The third dimension, Instructional Supports, received an overall rating of 1.8 of 3 (see Table 3). Despite the overall rating, two criteria were rated 3 of 3 in Grades 1, 2, 3, and 4. Criterion K: Technology received the highest rating at every grade evaluated, as each grade has a digital component, web support, and a daily media literacy component. For Criterion E: Rich Texts, all grade levels reported 3 of 3 for providing overall rating, two criteria were rated 3 of 3 in Grades 1, 2, 3, and 4. Criterion K: Technology received the highest rating at every grade evaluated, as each grade has a digital component, web support, and a daily media literacy component. For Criterion E: Rich Texts, all grade levels reported 3 of 3 for providing challenging sections of text as resources for student struggle and dialogue. The lowest rated criterion was Criterion J: Accountability, as

Table 3

Instructional Supports

Criterion	Rating of Criterion by Grade Level				
The lesson is responsive to varied student learning needs:	G1L8	G2L14	G3L17	G4L6	Mean
A. Student Interest: Cultivates student interest and engagement in literacy	2	1	1	2	**1.5**
B. Ease of Use: Addresses instructional expectations and is easy to understand and use for teachers	2	2	2	2	**2.0**
C. Grade-level Texts: Provides all students with extensive opportunities to engage with grade-level texts	2	2	3	1	**2.0**
D. Targeted Instruction: Integrates targeted instruction in all areas of foundational reading/writing skills	3	2	3	2	**2.5**
E. Rich Texts: Focuses on rich texts that present the greatest challenge through discussion questions	3	3	3	3	**3.0**
F. Enrichment: Provides enrichment for students above grade level	1	1	1	2	**1.3**
G. Progression of Learning: A prog. of learning where concepts, knowledge, and skills deepen	1	1	2	2	**1.5**
H. Scaffolding: Gradually remove supports	2	1	3	2	**2.0**
I. Authentic Learning: Provide authentic learning, appl. of literacy skills and/or student-directed inquiry	2	0	1	2	**1.3**
J. Accountability: Indicate how students are accountable for independent engaged reading	0	0	0	0	**0.0**
K. Technology: Use technology and media to deepen learning	3	3	3	3	**3.0**
Overall Rating of Instructional Supports	1.9	1.5	2.0	1.9	**1.8**

researchers for Grades 1-4 rated this criterion 0 of 3. Simply stated, there was no accountability for students' independent reading in any grade level curriculum analyzed. Criterion I: Authentic Learning and Enrichment each received a 1.3 of 3 rating across grade levels. In grades 2 and 3, opportunities for students to engage in authentic learning were not provided. In grades 1, 2, and 3, the lessons analyzed did not provide occasions for enrichment in reading or writing.

Assessment

The fourth dimension, Assessment, received an overall rating of 1.6 of 3 for the assessments ability to measure the students' independent mastery of the targeted CCSS within each lesson (see Table 4). The highest rating across grade levels was Criterion A: Evidence of Knowledge was rated 2.3 of 3 across grade levels, with observable evidence students can independently demonstrate targeted grade level literacy standards present in Grades 1 and 2, rated 3 of 3.

The researchers rated Criterion C: Rubrics as 1.3 of 3 as the inclusion of aligned rubrics with sufficient guidance for interpreting student performance were not present within the curriculum. The weakest criterion at every grade level was Criterion B: Unbiased Assessment rated 1 of 3 in every grade.

The methods used for lesson assessment, often multiple-choice, gave little room for differences in interpretation or attention to students' variance.

Discussion of the Results
Evidence from the researchers' evaluations of the four dimensions of the EQuIP rubric raise a number of points of interest regarding strengths and weaknesses of published curriculum.

Alignment of the Depth of the CCSS

Each of the lessons analyzed targeted ELA/Literacy Common Core State Standards deemed grade level. At the beginning of each lesson, every CCSS addressed for the lesson was listed. The CCSS were also listed at the onset of the daily lesson and day-by-day on the weekly planner for each of the lessons analyzed. Standards were provided for each specific activity. There were no discrepancies for targeting the CCSS standards causing this to be the strength of the Alignment to the Depth of the CCSS pillar.

The text difficulty identified in this study confirms what Jones (2012) found that text difficulty forces teachers to rush through content without making true connections and helping them develop higher-order skills. This results in students who are

Table 4

Assessment

Criterion	Rating of Criterion by Grade Level				
The lesson regularly assesses whether students are achieving standards-based skills:	G1L8	G2L14	G3L17	G4L6	Mean
A. Evidence of Knowledge: Elicits direct, observable evidence of the degree to which a student can independently demonstrate targeted grade level literacy CCSS	3	3	1	2	**2.3**
B. Unbiased Assessment: Assesses student proficiency using unbiased methods	1	1	1	1	**1.0**
C. Rubrics: Includes aligned rubrics that provide sufficient guidance for interpreting student performance	2	1	1	1	**1.3**
D. Varied Modes: Use varied modes of assessment	2	1	2	2	**1.8**
Overall Rating of Assessment	2.0	1.5	1.3	1.5	**1.6**

not able to independently read these texts and accurately comprehend them without scaffolding and prompting. The weakness of the Alignment to the Depth of the CCSS pillar occurred in the appropriate grade-level text criterion. All texts, both anchor texts and weekly-leveled readers, provided for the *Adventures* reading curriculum were too advanced for the grade level. The reading levels *Adventures* declared to be grade level, were not actually grade level. The weekly-leveled readers were not accurately categorized either. This was evident when evaluating the weekly-leveled reader's Lexile rating. For example, for G3L17, the struggling reader's weekly-leveled reader was evaluated as the end of third grade level. The on-level weekly-leveled reader evaluated the text as mid-fourth grade level. The advanced weekly-leveled readers received an upper fourth grade rating for Lexile. The DRA evaluations for these weekly-leveled reader texts proved the same evidence that the texts were all too difficult for the level claimed. The anchor test required extreme scaffolding throughout instruction. Excessive prompting must also be included with these lessons. Students would not be able to independently read this text and accurately comprehend it without scaffolding and prompting.

Key Shifts of the CCSS

Aligning to the key shifts of the CCSS was the focus of academic vocabulary, because *Adventures* discussed the vocabulary words daily and incorporated them in small group instruction, though not in grades two and three, as the students were given an opportunity to apply their vocabulary knowledge on one of the five days allotted for the lesson.

The inclusion of progressive leveled texts was a weakness, as the texts did not advance in complexity as skill was acquired. The researchers found that for every lesson that was analyzed, the weekly-leveled readers were inaccurately leveled. The texts provided by *Adventures* were much more difficult than the level claimed. For example, G4L6 was taught in the middle of fourth grade. The weekly-leveled reader for English Language Learners was labeled as having a DRA level of 40, which students were not expected to reach until the end of fourth

grade. The leveled reader for students on level was listed as having a DRA level of 44, which was also too advanced for the middle of fourth grade. Due to the inaccurately leveled texts for small group instruction, *Adventures* did not scaffold instruction for the students to support them as they advanced to an independent level of reading.

Another weak point in *Adventures*' alignment to the key shifts of the CCSS was writing. The writing portion of *Adventures* was lacking for several reasons. Each lesson only focused on one type of writing, such as persuasive, informative, or narrative, which gave students little freedom to explore other outlets of writing. The curriculum also failed to include a portion for free choice writing, so their ability to self-express was lacking. G3L17 included a writing process, which was broken down by each day of the lesson. However, the other lessons included an arbitrary writing prompt, which lasted a day or two. G3L17 also required students to use explanations from the text, but there was no text-based writing found in any of the other lessons. The fact that only one of four lessons met the writing criteria outlined by the CCSS proved that writing is one of *Adventures*' greatest weaknesses.

Instructional Support

Researchers found strengths in the inclusion of technology and media to deepen learning. Overall, *Adventures* provided web support known as "Go Digital". The "Go Digital" resource included materials to further student learning and differentiate instruction. For students, "Go Digital" included vocabulary concept cards, grammar practice, grammar videos, audio eBooks, student eBooks, and interactive writing tools with opportunities for peer collaborations. The "Go Digital" tool also provided teacher resources such as interactive focus walls, teacher one-stop, interactive whiteboard lessons, literacy and language guide, and an online assessment system. While *Adventures* included many technology resources, the lesson only called for students to independently use technology on one day of the lesson. Overall, technology was considered a strength for instructional supports as it provided many tools for teachers to utilize.

For the criterion "Ease of Use," researchers found that while *Adventures* included detailed and thorough teacher support, it was confusing to follow. Researchers also found that since such a large amount of material was included, the quality of material was subpar. This combined with the attempt to teach a large amount of CCSS led to the researchers finding inadequacies in ease of use.

The criterion titled "Accountability," the lessons did not include student chosen independent reading within the time allotted for any portion of instruction or independent work. The lessons briefly mentioned that students should choose an independent reading selection on their own time and record this in a reading journal. The lessons did not extend instruction to include student-chosen reading and did not explicitly explain how students should be held accountable for independent reading. This does not correlate with the nature of CCSS, which calls for each student to independently read and be held accountable for their reading.

The final area of weakness within instructional tools was for the criterion "Authentic Learning." Some lessons included authentic engagement of literacy skills, such as the writing of a thank you note to demonstrate writing skills in G1L8 and the writing of a newspaper article in G4L6. However, overall the lessons required little application of skills to meet real-life goals. In addition, *Adventures* provided ample discussion questions for the instructor to pose to the classroom and gave expected student answers for teachers. However, the researchers found that there was a lack of student-directed inquiry and independent discovery across all lessons. This also led to weaknesses across the program, as student-directed inquiry is a crucial component of the CCSS and of building independence in readers.

Assessment

The final category of the EQuIP rubric addresses how well the assessments were aligned to the CCSS. The *Adventures* Common Core (2014) program received an overall rating of 1.3 of 3. Of the four sections in the rubric, this was the lowest scoring. The first criterion, and arguably the most important component, evaluated the curriculum's ability to directly observe evidence proving students'

knowledge and ability of a given CCSS. The data in this criterion did not follow a pattern and is very inconsistent which gives educators difficulty when they are ready to assess their students on a specific CCSS. Data from G1L8 and G2L14 revealed that the assessments provided in the curriculum do explicitly test a student's ability for the target standard of that specific lesson. However, data from G3L1 and G3L17 revealed that while there are informal formative assessments provided daily, the summative assessments do not even evaluate the students' ability to perform the target skill of that lesson.

The biggest assessment weaknesses of the *Adventures* program are that the assessments are biased, and the provided rubrics are insufficient. Across all lessons evaluated, the primarily multiple-choice assessments favor the average student. To an ELL student, even if the test is read aloud, the words still might not make sense, or the context might not be appropriately understood. The assessments also appear to be on level, which hinders a lower level student from even being able to read tests and therefore does not authentically measure that student's ability. The other fault is that the curriculum does not provide sufficient rubrics. Again, across all lessons studied, the rubrics provided to interpret student performance on the daily informal formative assessments do no provide specific guidelines for distinguishing a student's ability.

When introducing this study and the significance of assessment, it was noted that the goals of assessment are to "[assure] that students are learning what is expressed as important knowledge…" (Webb, 1997) and to keep educators accountable to teaching that knowledge. After analyzing the assessments provided by the *Adventures* Common Core 2014 reading program, it is clear that this program is not effectively assessing the CCSS. Therefore, how can educators be assured that students are learning what was deemed important? In addition, if the assessments do not effectively measure the CCSS, then educators are not accountable for mandated student learning. Ultimately, in using this curriculum and the assessments provided, educators are receiving inaccurate information about how students are performing on the CCSS skills.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the time allotted for the research study. Each researcher was only able to analyze one lesson from a year-long ELA program. The *Adventures* program includes six units with five lessons per grade level, which were not entirely evaluated in this study. Chosen as exemplars, the lessons chosen by the researchers were lessons they had previously taught, and thus knew well. However, the results of this study cannot speak for the entire *Adventures* guided reading program in terms of its alignment to the CCSS.

Implications

Researchers found that some of *Adventures'* greatest weaknesses included an absence of appropriate grade level text, inconsistencies in the quality and depth of writing instruction, a lack of student-directed inquiry, minimal authentic engagement in terms of instructional support, and ineffective, biased assessments. Based on the researchers' findings, educators who utilize the *Adventures* reading program must include various supplementary materials and instruction in order to ensure that they provide a comprehensive and effective ELA curriculum for students. *Adventures* failed to provide sufficient and appropriate grade-level texts. To compensate, teachers may utilize different texts that more effectively teach the targeted standard of each lesson. Teachers must analyze the level of the text and consider the students' grade level and the targeted objective. One of the greatest deficiencies researchers found were within the leveled readers for small group guided reading. If provided leveled readers are inadequate or inappropriate for the intended student groups, teachers must choose different texts in order to ensure that students receive appropriate, meaningful instruction.

The lack of accountability for students' independent reading led researchers to suggest teachers include a program that supports, encourages, and monitors student-chosen, independent reading. Implementation of programs such as sustained silent reading or a home reading log would allow teachers to monitor student reading as well as encourage and foster a love of reading in the spirit of the CCSS. After instruction of how to choose a "just right" text for students, teachers should also utilize small group time to allow students to choose their own text and engage with that text. Due to the inconsistencies in writing instruction and activities, educators should incorporate their own weekly writing instruction to provide students with a more comprehensive and consistent writing program throughout the year. In order to create a stronger alignment to the CCSS, writing instruction should occur on a daily basis and should develop and grow over the span of the week-long lesson as well as over the entire unit. To supplement the inconsistency of authenticity in the Journeys program, teachers should create authentic learning experiences within their classrooms. Requiring students to accomplish real-life tasks on a regular basis would help educators achieve a greater scope of the CCSS. This coincides with the need for unbiased, authentic assessments.

For teachers, it is important to know if an educational program will help them teach to the depth and rigor of the standards. Understanding that programs such as *Adventures* are not a curriculum, but a program that operates within the curriculum is important. Using a rubric such as EQuIP is a starting point when analyzing programs because it allows the teacher to review the program in depth. Determining which program is the best fit can save teachers and schools time and effort when trying to supplement for these weaknesses.

Teachers need to take on the role of an action researcher because they should be aware of the programs used in their classroom and know when changes are needed. From the results of our study, it is apparent that teachers need to supplement supplied basal reading programs with additional resources to better meet the needs of their students. Teachers may need to choose their own readers, provide additional writing opportunities, and create additional assessments that will better align with the CCSS.

Conclusion

Lack of alignment jeopardizes the successful acquisition of grade-level knowledge and skill, both of which are necessary for appropriate progression in learning. Moving forward, educators must take

accountability for the classroom, both the environment and substance. Educators ask questions and seek answers through teacher action research to implement changes in their classrooms. Teacher action research allows the practitioner to take ownership in instruction rather than trusting a produced reading program. As teachers know their students best, teacher action research is an effective approach to ensure that students receive the education necessary to achieve rigorous learning standards.

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