

# Inquiry and Independence in the English Language Arts Classroom

## Meet Tonya Perry, University of Alabama at Birmingham

In this section of the book, you will be introduced to six teachers who work with middle school students in their English and/or reading classes every day. We will learn more about their teaching and how they integrate the CCSS into their instruction. Through their experiences, perhaps you will learn more about framing the CCSS in your context and find some useful ways to build on curriculum that already affects student learning. We will read how these teachers continue to make learning come alive for their students and, at the same time, face the challenges that often accompany integrating a new set of standards.

In my teaching journey that started more than twenty years ago, I have focused mainly in the middle grades. I have been taught powerful lessons by these young adolescents. One of the most powerful recurring lessons has been the importance of relevance in my teaching. This takes on so many different aspects: selection of text, choice, engagement, community building, differentiation, and connectedness. No matter the new challenge in education, the idea of relevance remains at the core of my teaching. This does not mean that students recycle information that they already know; the challenge is to connect the new learning to something that already exists—to scaffold that learning. I think the CCSS give us the opportunity to have conversations about relevance and connections with horizontal and vertical teaching with colleagues; otherwise, teaching will be disjointed and lack the “spiraled” design that is so important in the thinking behind the CCSS.



We do not have to choose between the CCSS and the students' need for relevance and connectedness, but I do think educators will have to think carefully and collaborate about what we want students to know and how we are instructing them to increase their learning. Although the standards call for increased informational reading, dialogue about how to do this and conversations about the personal reading and writing needs of students can coexist. The answer is there for us to discover in the context of our classrooms along with teachers in the content areas.

Three of the teachers from this volume and I spent much time together discussing the CCSS. Each is from a different school, bringing an even broader perspective about the infusion of the standards into the classroom. We have learned from each other just how beneficial it is to expand the professional community beyond the school walls through our dialogue as educators and our ties as Red Mountain Writing Project Fellows. My co-contributors Anne Gere and Rebecca Manery brought other teachers into the conversation and our circle of thinking expanded. Through conversations and NCTE Web seminars, all of these teachers and I have increased our knowledge about the CCSS exponentially. As a result, we share with you our thinking throughout the text before each pair of vignettes you will read.

All the teachers in this volume have generously invited us into their classrooms to experience teaching and learning moments that illustrate how the chaos of their classroom life is indeed deliberate, precise, and carefully designed. The teaching and learning practices described highlight the ways these teachers work to enact NCTE principles that affirm the value of the knowledge and experience students bring to school, the role of equity in literacy learning, and—always—the learning needs of students while attending to the CCSS. Each of the teaching and learning vignettes within each chapter is preceded by a brief description of the context in which the teacher and his or her students are working and is followed by an explanation of the teacher's journey to developing pathways to enact these practices because, as we all know, exemplary moments in teaching are the product of many years of studying classroom practice, discussing ideas with colleagues, and reflecting on teaching and learning. Charts following the vignettes highlight key teaching and learning practices and connect them with specific CCSS and with NCTE research-based principles; footnotes point toward research that supports the teaching described; and finally, in the "Frames That Build" sections, I offer exercises to help you think about how the teaching and learning practices highlighted in the vignettes can connect to your local teaching context.

The online component of this book offers additional classroom vignettes along with questions to prompt reflection and generate conversations among readers who want to deepen their understanding of their students and expand their professional knowledge of literacy theory and practice.

## Contextualizing

The way we design instruction with local context and the CCSS in mind determines the kind of learning that will emerge on the canvas of our classrooms. What we emphasize, what we say, and what we spend our time engaged in will emerge in what and how our students learn. So, we are deliberate, knowing that what happens on the first day and how it connects to the last day matters. We are precise, cognizant that the language of learning permeating our classrooms affects thinking.

It is our hope that these teaching and learning vignettes and the corresponding materials will serve as a reflection of the language of learning that already fills your classrooms, and that they will demonstrate a framework that allows thinking about not just *what* we do, but *why* we do it. We hope they will remind us that in the layers of local, state, and national values, the greatest intentionality comes from the classroom teacher who enters the complexity and emerges with a process that honors the learning in our classrooms. We invite you to step into these classrooms, reflect on them, and use their successes and challenges to further your own thinking about what bridges you can build between the CCSS and your own instruction.

During one group session about the CCSS, teachers and I discussed the benefits of facilitating middle schoolers' development as more independent thinkers. The College and Career Readiness guidelines in the CCSS call for students who demonstrate independence, and part of that process is decision-making about their own time, choosing references and support, and discerning key points and ideas (p. 7). In this next section, you will see two teachers, Kathleen and Rod, who guide their students through the inquiry process. Kathleen implements the reading and writing workshop, allowing students to plan their independent work for the day based on personal inquiry. Rod allows students to choose a social issue of importance to them and conduct independent inquiries about the issues they choose. This type of instruction helps students engage in their own learning process to develop important skills, such as researching, revising, and questioning their own choices and the larger world around them.

## Meet Kathleen Hayes-Parvin, Birney Middle School

Kathleen Hayes-Parvin is currently facing many challenges that result from the declining economy of the community where her school is located. The unemployment rate is over 18 percent, the school district had to cut \$20 million from its budget

As you read through the chapters in this volume, look for the following symbols to signal various themes and practices.



**Common  
Core State  
Standards**



**Collaboration**



**Connections**



**Integrated  
Teaching and  
Learning**



**Honoring  
Diversity**



**Connections**

Section III focuses exclusively on the building frame. There, you will find specific resources for building your instruction with the CCSS and for working with colleagues to observe patterns in the CCSS document compared to previous local and state standards.



last year, and the school is facing additional cuts this year. Children in the community are struggling: home foreclosures, unemployment, and fractured families have increased the transience of the student population. At this Title I school, approximately 45 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Many of them cannot afford basic school supplies, and Kathleen often goes to the Dollar Store to buy pencils and erasers for them. A number of school services have been outsourced, which limits the opportunities available to students. Late buses, for example, have been eliminated as a cost-cutting measure by the private company that now handles transportation, so many students cannot participate in after-school

activities or stay to get extra help from teachers.

The effects of family poverty and diminished school resources take their toll on students, as Kathleen learns from their writing and from conversations. She often reads accounts of families moving in with relatives or having to go to food banks. Not surprisingly, Kathleen finds that a number of her students are less school-congruent than those she taught several years ago, and this difference is exacerbated by the financial constraints faced by her school district. She used to teach on a block schedule and have classes of about twenty-six students, but this year the block schedule was eliminated, and class sizes were increased to thirty, so she is teaching 150 sixth graders every day. The school, formerly a middle school, has been transformed into a K–8 building because of dropping enrollments in the district, and a new pull-out program takes a number of the most talented students out of the regular classes that Kathleen teaches. Yet, Kathleen finds ways to meet the challenges of working in an under-resourced school. She is good at finding ways to compensate for the dwindling financial support, often calling on a network of friends and former teachers to help underwrite the cost of books and other classroom materials. She views families as allies in their children's education, giving them a variety of ways to become involved in her classroom. She takes advantage of community resources, incorporating the public library's Battle of Books into her curriculum and offering local businesses opportunities to support school projects. Kathleen's goal is for each of her students to be active learners who will become "real readers and real writers." By "real" Kathleen means emulating the practices of literacy professionals. These goals emerged from Kathleen's experience with the National Writing Project, where she began to see herself as a writer, and she wants her students to have the same opportunity. Her earlier background in special



#### **Collaboration**

Many of the teachers in this volume engage in extensive collaboration and are active in professional organizations such as the National Writing Project. For more ideas about how to work collaboratively with colleagues and your local community, see the resources in Section III of this text.

education strengthened her commitment to helping students develop their capacities for meaning-making in reading, and her collaboration with teaching partners in her school and teacher colleagues across the state has further strengthened her desire to help students become real readers and real writers.

### ***Integrating Reading and Writing: Kathleen's Classroom***

Kathleen's third-period class comes into a room filled with books. There are bookshelves pushed against every wall, low ones and high ones; recently she asked her students to help count all the books in the classroom, and they found 577. In addition to the desks where students sit, there is a comfortable sofa surrounded by cushions. On every metal surface there are magnetic letters and words arranged into poems. Several class mottos are displayed on the walls: "Read and write every day"; "Ten points a day = an A"; "If you're not making meaning, you're not reading"; and "If you don't come with what you need, I can't help you succeed." In one corner sits an expensive projector and a visual presenter. The visual presenter was donated by a local corporation, but it didn't come with a projector. Kathleen was able to buy the projector because one of her students won an essay contest in a local competition called Dough for Teachers, and the prize included a grant for Kathleen to use for classroom supplies.

As her third-period class enters the classroom, Kathleen greets each student by name and invites him or her to take a seat. As soon as everyone is settled, she begins talking about their writer's notebooks, praising them for writing every day. Then she mentions that she has been seeing some common problems in their writing. One of these is difficulty with the *their/there/they're* distinction, so she does a mini-lesson to explain how each one is used, urging students to watch for these in their reading at the same time that they work on using the correct word in their writing. She also encourages students to focus on readability as they are writing.

After the mini-lesson is over, Kathleen asks students to respond to "status of the class," where all students list what they have accomplished in their homework and what they will work on during class. A few students who have received praise for meeting homework writing goals ask if they can sit on the sofa or one of the cushions, and Kathleen agrees. Most students move comfortably into independent work. Some are doing revisions, others are composing in their writer's notebook, and still others are writing first drafts. Kathleen links student writing to reading, and since they just read a memoir, they are writing memoirs. A few students have difficulty getting started, and Kathleen asks them questions about what they plan to accomplish. One student needs to select a new book, and Kathleen leads him over to a bookshelf, reminding him, "Your last book was *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.



#### **Integrated Teaching and Learning**

Kathleen teaches the conventions of Standard Written English in the context of student writing, integrating writing and language instruction so that students can make connections between language use and writing situations.

## Common Core Standards That Intersect with These Practices

### Reading Standards for Literature, Grades 6–8

10. By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

### Writing Standards, Grades 6–8

1. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant audience.

<div style="text-align: center;">↓</div> <b>How Kathleen enacts the practice</b>	<div style="text-align: center;">← Teaching Practice →</div>	<b>How Rod enacts the practice</b> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Requires students to keep a list of books that they have read to share with one another.</li> <li>→ Encourages students to read books on their reading level to gain ideas for their own writing.</li> <li>→ Uses journal entries and reflections to encourage the students to think critically about their own writing.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">The teacher conducts mini-lessons about writing craft and conventions that students are expected to apply.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The teacher offers students choice of texts and topics, providing guidance while encouraging students to guide their own learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Encourages students to think about the audience for their persuasive writing.</li> <li>→ Uses real-world audiences to allow students to practice their persuasive writing through letter writing.</li> </ul>
<div style="text-align: center;">↓</div> <b>How Kathleen's students enact the practice</b>	<div style="text-align: center;">← Learning Practice →</div>	<b>How Rod's students enact the practice</b> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Students try out ideas, experiment with craft, and practice using conventions by writing in writer's notebooks.</li> <li>→ Students choose their own writing tasks and select their own books for independent reading with guidance and support from the teacher, who ensures students are being appropriately challenged.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">Students choose substantial texts within their reading level to discuss with classmates and the teacher.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Students learn about persuasive writing through engagement in multiple genres including critical reflection, journal entries, and letter writing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Students write for authentic purposes to real audiences about issues of concern to themselves and their communities.</li> <li>→ Students develop critical thinking as they investigate, discuss, and write about real-world issues.</li> </ul>

### NCTE Principles

Students have daily opportunities to read books of their own choice in school.  
 Students have daily opportunities to write on topics of their own choice in school.  
 Literate practices are embedded in complex social practices.

*See pages 102–103 for more on NCTE principles regarding reading instruction and pages 104–105 for more on NCTE principles regarding writing instruction.*