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Tracing Instructional Tensions in the Teaching of the English Language Arts

A Primer

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Across the grade levels, teachers of the English language arts face many similar professional challenges. These can include unpredictable student variability; novel and often jarringly imposed administrative regimens, curricular mandates, and standardized assessments; disheartening political critiques in the media and naïve expectations from parents; unrequited quests for useful instructional material and helpful professional development; and the internecine crossfire between specialist and administrative turfdoms. Chief among these difficulties is the challenge of choosing appropriate and effective instructional methods to achieve pedagogic and curricular goals. Unfortunately, guidance from educational scholarship on how best to frame and make sense of these challenges can often seem puzzling, contradictory, or counter-intuitive.

The often chaotic nature of classroom teaching is regularly described in the practitioner literature through such complexity metaphors as juggling (“keeping a lot of balls in the air”), smorgasbords (“having a lot on one’s plate”), or diplomacy (“negotiating the demands of numerous stake holders”). The metaphors employed in the scholarly literature, by contrast, are more likely to reduce this complexity to antagonistic dichotomies and vexing dilemmas, possibly enshrined in the image of counterweight scales, or in the framing of strawman arguments. To be fair, academics are quick to note the unsatisfactory simplicity of antagonistic binaries, but often address this through the expansion of their initial binaries with additional binaries: balance beams within balance beams (e.g., Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Madda, 2007), or the numerous directions from which one may fall from the bifurcating line of a tight rope (e.g., Boyd & Bailey, 2009).

In this chapter we ourselves use a binary instructional continuum—that between the direct training of skills and the less direct structuring of educative experience—as a central filament around which other threads will be entwined to represent the knotty challenge of effective English language arts instruction. With the guidance of this metaphor we shall interweave the opposition between instructional methods and curricular outcome; the tension inherent in addressing student variability within normative expectations; the challenge of applying valid assessment measures to educative purposes; the difficulty of designing a developmentally progressive curriculum across grade levels and content areas; the tension of redistributing teacher expertise and authority with specialist support; and, not least of all, the struggle between standardized educational programs and assessments on behalf of efficient administration of mandated policies, and responsible teacher autonomy warranted by reflective practice and professional development on behalf of educational effectiveness.

The Dichotomy of Trained Skills and Educative Experience

A long-standing instructional tension between skills training and experience-based pedagogy has manifested itself in school classrooms and educational theory alike in various ways since the early 19th-century. On the one hand, basic skills, identified through structuralist and behaviorist research, have been recommended as programmatic outcomes to be trained directly and discretely in piecemeal fashion (e.g., Thorndike, 1931; Watson, 1928), often requiring rote learning, lecture, or conditioned response, and typically for quick, targeted assessment. On the other hand, insights from functional and developmental psychology have inspired calls for learning through well-structured activities and environments (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Allen, 1976), preferably through carefully orchestrated experiences, purposeful inquiry, or independent discovery, typically for formative assessment. The tension between the didactic skills training and naturalistic experience-based development views of teaching and learning has been amply evident in the English language arts across decades. We will here consider it within three grade-level domains: (a) pre-elementary and early elementary classrooms, (b) upper elementary and...
middle school classrooms, (c) junior high and high school classrooms.

**Pre-elementary and Early Elementary Language Arts Classrooms** In grades K–3, the tension between language arts training and experience is most obvious in the area of reading instruction, and in particular in the debate between skill training in phonics decoding (Adams, 1990) and methodologies for fostering reading comprehension proficiency through experience-driven pedagogy (Goodman & Goodman, 2004). This tension positions letter-based or serial processing models of reading against meaning-based or holistic views of literacy—the notorious “reading wars,” a debate with an extensive history (Chall, 1967; Flippo, 1999). Theoretically, it has variously been framed as a debate between spelling vs. whole word recognition since the 19th century, the science of phonetics vs. principles of progressive education since the early 20th-century, and bottom-up/synthetic vs. top-down/analytic models of cognitive process since the late 20th-century. Yet, across the decades, the *instructional* implications have typically distilled to a recommendation for either efficient skill drilling or for literacy development through guided exploration within meaningful contexts.

Although there are numerous models that describe the reading process (see Ruddell & Unrau, 2004), a commonly employed way to articulate the reading debates is the so-called Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). In this view, \( R = D \times L \). (*Reading* is the product of *Decoding and Linguistic comprehension*). Letters are said to be decoded to a language sound stream, and the sound stream is comprehended just as spoken language would be. Decoding skill and linguistic comprehension must both be developed to allow a student to read well. Moreover, decoding needs to be trained to non-conscious automaticity (LeBerge & Samuels, 1974) so that the multiple processes of decoding do not swamp the limited capacity of a child’s working memory. If working memory is overloaded with sounding-out the print on a page, the theory goes, the reader will have insufficient cognitive capacity to make sense of the meaning, as well. Thus the developmental and instructional claim is often made that decoding must be mastered to fluency first so that comprehension can be allowed to occur subsequently. Limited to emergent and early reading, this view makes some intuitive sense.

However, whole language proponents (e.g., Goodman, 1994) have suggested just the opposite: that reading ability can be most effectively and individually developed through authentic reading experiences meant to support an understanding of the pragmatics of reading, and to develop the necessary motivation to drive linguistic development through ample encounters with text. This is deemed especially important for the development of syntactic and semantic processes central to language comprehension in reading. The development of decoding skills (in the form of graphophonemic processing or orthographic pattern recognition) is presumed to emerge naturally, just as phoneme perception does in speech, from meaningful encounters with text- and language-rich environments, with only minimal and focused phonics instruction provided as a particular student might require. It is posited that linguistic comprehension processes, such as syntactic and semantic processing, can bootstrap the development of decoding abilities.

It is important to distinguish two very different tensions at play in this phonics-whole language debate. The first is *developmental*, between either emphasizing decoding, in the belief that it will cause or facilitate the development of comprehension, or emphasizing comprehension, in the belief that it will cause or facilitate the development of decoding. The curricular implications of these two views are equally oppositional: either reading instruction in early elementary grades should be focused on decoding letters to sound, or should emphasize the making of meaning from texts.

But beneath this theoretical debate about reading development lies a different tension related to teacher practice, an *instructional* tension between drilling discrete skills in piece-meal, sequential fashion, or through student-centered experience-cued instruction. Decoding-first advocates generally recommend that decoding be taught through drilling phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency skills, arguing that meaningful content and activity distracts students from mastering the code for fluent, phoneme-based word recognition (Moats, 2007). In truth, experience-based instruction can also be quite systematic, if not didactic (e.g., Allen, 1976). But instructional approaches that attend to student meaning-making typically argue the intrinsic motivation of the student on behalf of content or objective realization is crucial for well integrated and readily employed ability development (e.g., Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988).

The recent national experiment in the United States with universally mandated decoding drilling (e.g., Reading First, Institute of Educational Sciences, 2008), has demonstrated that emphatic skills instruction is a dependable way to foster decoding of decodable texts for most students, but that focusing solely on decoding to the exclusion of linguistic comprehension development does not appear to produce superior readers as measured by reading comprehension measures. Decoding skills are clearly a necessary prerequisite for making sense of print, but they are not sufficient. Many students pick up decoding relatively easily, and this is the case regardless of such school risk factors as socio-economic status, verbal ability, or general intelligence measures (within the non-disabled range). Mandating 90 minutes of such skill drilling every day for all students for 3 to 4 years is not warranted given the results of Reading First. But some students, also regardless of risk factors, do require more structured instruction on the sound-letter code to facilitate their automatic word recognition. Programs, including reading remediation programs, that rule out the importance of explicit decoding instruction for students with poor phonological grain-size sensitivity or elemental acuity, are as worrisome as universally mandated phonics drills.

Thus, the debate between didactic vs. naturalistic instructional practice is one that too often demands a forced
and false choice. Arguments are rationalized on the basis of scientific-proof and/or curriculum goals, but actually seem more driven by ideological devotion to an underdemonstrated belief: that how a teacher teaches is as important a lesson for students as what a teacher teaches. This notion of a “hidden curriculum” goes back to the theoretical work of Horace Mann in the mid 19th-century on behalf of developing good citizens for the preservation of American democracy, and has been echoed by numerous educational theorists on both sides of the political spectrum ever since. Yet, to date, there is no empirical evidence that teaching students in a didactic fashion turns them into obedient fascists or that teaching them in a progressive fashion turns them into disruptive anarchists. Human development is not that simple. The belief that it should be seems an idée fixe of policy advocates obsessed with the grandeur of their own authority—precisely the Napoleonic impulse warned against by Mann!

Over the years, attempts to tap the best of both instructional views have given rise to interactive, integrated, balanced, situated, and transactional models of instruction. For instance, a balanced instruction view (Pressley, 2006) would employ focused skills training to get discrete skills up and running within the instructional context of a highly active learning environment rich with language and authentic opportunities to apply the skills. In other words, authentic instructional activities and environments designed to promote curricular content become the purpose and context within which to develop and practice the authentic application of trained skills. Research on notably effective classrooms seems to support the balanced instruction view (e.g., Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, & Morrow, 1998), although attempts to replicate such approaches in novel contexts have had only mixed success.

Although we have located our analysis so far in early reading instruction, similar tensions echo in early writing instruction. The balance among reading and writing in the early grade curriculum has favored reading and isolated skill development over the development of coherent written expression. Before the mid-20th century, early writing instruction was often little more than handwriting or grammar exercises. Starting in the 1960s, there was a recognition that students would learn to write only if they were encouraged in their oral expression and only if they had a meaningful purpose for writing (Darien Public Schools, 1971). An overemphasis on mechanical correctness in the early grades was discouraged, but nevertheless the time allotment for writing was scant: English language arts curriculum often consisted of literature selections paired with linguistic exercises, which were considered superior to traditional grammar instruction and which were the subject of experimental research (Martin, 1968). According to one curriculum guide from the era (Saporito, 1970), reading should receive 60–70 minutes of instruction time per day, spelling 15–20 minutes, handwriting 10–15 minutes, and English 30–35 minutes.

More recently, the writing curriculum has been sub-
merged into the basal, or core reading program, which is presumed to suffice as the entire early language arts curriculum. However, these programs offer very little on writing, and what they do offer arguably is not grounded in the research on effective writing instruction (Gleason & Isaacson, 2001). Even after decades of various types of school and curriculum reform efforts, writing instruction has been and continues to be subordinate to reading (Strickland et al., 2001).

To sum, in seeking guidance on the development of fundamental reading and writing abilities, early elementary language arts teachers must often confront strong scholarly stands, some of them concretized through policy mandates. These mandates often deny what classroom expertise and knowledge of effective instruction may suggest—that early reading and writing instruction requires positive and ample experience with a wide variety of developmentally appropriate and appealing text forms and practices to foster linguistic, cognitive, and creative skills.

**Upper Elementary and Middle School Classrooms**

Additional language arts instructional issues, some merely forestalled, become manifest in grades 4–8. In this subsection we will focus primarily on those related to linguistic comprehension as a necessary compliment to decoding for language arts competence. We are not suggesting by any means that attention to language comprehension should wait until Grade 4, but it is typically at the middle elementary grades that a marked difference in students’ linguistic ability correlates with literacy and scholastic success. We shall consider some reasons for this.

By Grade 4, the linguistic abilities of decoding-trained students demonstrate immense variability in part due to insufficient and well structured language experience in the context of schooling. Instead, language ability is carried forward only by informal linguistic experiences in schools, and with peers, family members, and the students’ preferred media forms (often action-packed television cartoons and youth-glamour variety shows). Yet, with often ill-developed academic language competencies all students are expected to meet the following challenges as they enter Grade 4:

- Students are expected to learn the content of the texts they read—in other words, they must now read for meaning and learning, tasks about which they may have had little previous instruction or structured experience;
- Such reading-to-learn requires making use of context, purpose, and prior knowledge, precisely the components and skills use that had been eliminated from instruction with decodable texts;
- The assigned texts from which students are expected to learn content are more challenging in terms of vocabulary, syntactic complexity, and semantic construction than most students’ oral language, or previous language experience;
- This challenging vocabulary and linguistic structure is increasingly married to subject-specific discourses and
text genres with which students may have little or no prior acquaintance;

- Students may lack the prior knowledge assumed of certain subject-specific discourses, particularly if this taken-for-granted “world knowledge” and “common sense” emanates from the purview of a middle-class living room;

- Increased use of new technologies in classrooms poses additional text genre and structure challenges requiring novel cognitive strategies, especially for the most at-risk students (Coiro & Dobler, 2007);

- The conceptual complexity of text content increases along assumptions of an average developmental trajectory, not necessarily the developmental trajectory of any particular student;

- Speed of oral recitation is no longer an indicator of good reading—indeed, learning to vary one’s reading speed depending on purpose, or when comprehension is troubled, is an important skill for upper grade reading.

Similar challenges face teachers and students regarding the development of writing abilities. In the upper elementary grades, the expectation that students will be able to write a research report appears. Having gained some familiarity with narrative structure throughout the primary grades, students are suddenly asked to write in an expository mode (Duke, 2000; Flood, Lapp, Farman, 1986). Also making an appearance in the upper grades is the statewide direct writing assessment, which has become prevalent, in part, as a way to promote writing in the curriculum (Calfee, 2000). However, direct writing assessments often have the unfortunate tendency to narrow the kinds of writing that teachers ask their students to do, and some have argued that students are encouraged to produce formulaic writing in response to prompts (Hillocks, 2002). For example, if the mode of writing demanded by a direct writing assessment is persuasion, the tendency is for teachers to neglect nearly all other forms of writing in order to prepare their students for the persuasive prompt they will encounter.

Here again, a tension emerges between the need for both basic and advanced skills, on the one hand, and authentic opportunities for their application on behalf of content learning, on the other. To foster the development of their professional expertise on this matter, teacher must confront a raft of questions that can only be effectively answered in context. For instance, when should vocabulary be taught through time-efficient rote memorization drills, training in morphemic analysis and context strategies, or through directed attention during meaningful reading with recourse to dictionaries, rich discussion, and ample opportunities for word use on behalf of world and concept knowledge development? When should syntax be parsed through grammatical sentence diagramming and prescriptive label and rule memorization, or through the kinds of experience that allow for the development of fluent syntactic pattern recognition? When should semantics be addressed through drilling in idioms and the avoidance of common errors of poor word choice, or through close examination, imitation, and rich discussion of how words interrelate in context and for purposes to indicate authorial intention and spark meaningful associations and responses in readers?

Further, should tone, style, and rhetoric be taught as technical attributes that require appropriate reader and authorial stances, or should they be taught as techniques for positioning readers and telling on authors and their narrators? Should subject-specific discourse and genre conventions be ignored as too abstract for pre-adolescent learners, or should students explicitly identify, discuss, and imitate these forms toward a comfortable familiarity with their semiotic conventions? Questions such as these almost always deserve the same general response: It depends! And although it depends on many factors, the needs of students, and the ability of teachers to identify and address them, are likely the paramount issue.

During the upper elementary years, increasing numbers of students begin to lag in their reading development, a phenomenon often referred to as the “fourth-grade slump” (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). This slump leaves them below grade-level as readers, leading to a widening achievement gap. For students in the middle and upper elementary grades, lower grade-level ability often means a K–3 reading level, where K–3 reading instruction and materials are presumed developmentally appropriate, including rudimentary decoding and fluency training. Thus, for teachers of such students, early elementary tensions in reading instruction continue to reverberate, compounded by the additional tension that the prior decoding curriculum have been ineffective. This leads to questions such as: was the student’s early reading instruction competent? Had the student not been developmentally ready to take advantage of it? Does the student suffer from a reading disability? Were there (and are there still) ancillary factors that put the student at risk for reading failure? Should direct decoding and fluency drilling continue to be the focus of the students’ reading instruction (as required in some state RTI models)? Will the student continue to (and does he/she even now) willingly participate in drilling for drilling’s sake? What of the trade-off between time devoted to remedial drilling and time lost to grade-level content instruction?

In addition to reading ability differences, there are differences specific to English language proficiency. English language learners are an obvious case. However, native-born English speakers can also demonstrate this difficulty, which manifests itself in grade-inadequate linguistic comprehension. These deficiencies correlate strongly with socio-economic status (SES), and may have their origin in the variable quality of early childhood language experience (Hart & Risley, 1999). Depending on the literacy and language proficiencies of a child’s parents, home-based language may offer little inking of the lexical, syntactic, or semantic demands of the academic discourses. Such initial disparities may be exacerbated over time through a combination of instructional neglect and an absence of well-structured in-school language experience.
Given the large number of immigrant ELL students (English language learners) who are also of poverty, it is important to clarify when a proficiency issue is merely a language issue (ELL-factor), and when it is also a language ability development issue (SES-factor). Many low-SES ELL students could prove at-risk even in their native countries for the same reasons low-SES native English speakers often are. Teaching English as a second language may be insufficient for these ELL students and probably unhelpful for linguistically limited native English speakers. On the other hand, there may be value in effective second language teaching methods for improving English language proficiency for native speakers. More research is needed in this domain, where, too, the tension between skill drilling and immersion exists.

Finally, there is the tension in specialist support for these and other struggling readers. Classroom teachers, reading specialists, special educators, speech therapists, and ELL specialists may all lay claim to overlapping subpopulations of students. Regular classroom teachers, intending no disrespect to such specialists, may intuitively worry that the discrete skills focus of most specialist intervention programs may hamper more than help many struggling students, and deny sufficient participation in the mainstream curriculum. But without adequate professional development or training in how to address the issue of linguistic competence, the mid-level teacher may be at a loss for adequate intervention.

Junior High and High School Classrooms It could be fairly suggested that all of the previously described tensions deepen in the secondary grades, as language arts instruction is restricted to a particular subject domain classroom, and meaningful incorporation of good language, literacy, and learning skills across the content areas becomes increasingly difficult to manage or even inspire among faculty. Additionally, the academic diversity of the students grows broader, with some students lacking strong decoding skills, others with variable language comprehension deficits, still others with prior knowledge and vocabulary deficiencies, and many with ancillary personal issues (poor study skills, uneven reading habits, personal idiosyncrasies and personality traits mismatched to the reigning policy mandates, and extra-scholastic demands).

Motivation, student identity, self-efficacy, and the willingness of students to buy-in to curricular objectives all move front-and-center as instructional factors with adolescents, even with at-level and advanced students. At the same time, the curriculum becomes ever more varied and tightly packed with requirements that can seem culturally and personally irrelevant for many students. For adolescents, the world at large tempts with greater distraction, and exerts more vibrant engagement and inspiration than ever before.

Secondary English language arts instruction varies, too, driven by a curriculum that spans a literary canon featuring epic and modernist poetry, 19th- and early 20th-century novels, and plays by Shakespeare, O’Neill, and even Aristophanes. Increasingly, these works are abetted with young adult novels, the writings of traditionally marginalized peoples, and popular culture texts. Reading instruction is typically limited to the identification and explication of tropes, allusions, and obscure grammatical idioms in works of literature, often by way of simplified New Criticism or Reader Response analyses. Sentence diagramming makes the occasional appearance. Writing instruction is sparse, but spans from creative writing workshops, to reader response journals, student journalism, instruction in basic business writing, research report writing, and the notorious five-paragraph essay.

In spite of a recent emphasis on writing assessment, the results of a new national study on the state of writing instruction in middle and high schools indicates that students are not writing very much. Analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data shows that, in 1998, 14% of 12th-grade students did not write anything at all, even in their English classes. Between 2002 and 2007, the amount and kinds of writing that students were asked to do decreased, perhaps because of the pressures of high-stakes testing that emphasizes reading more than writing. Writing in other content areas besides English also decreased during the 2002–2007 period (Applebee & Langer, 2009).

Literacy for learning, or content area reading, is largely regarded as an unloved intruder to the secondary curriculum. It rarely makes an emphatic impact, perhaps due to the perception by content instructors in other subjects that literacy instruction is solely a language arts issue, and that reading instruction is a matter for elementary teachers. Of course, content area teachers do employ subject-specific literacies and discourses often without being aware of it—and are often equally unaware that lack of sufficient familiarity with these discourses can be an impediment to student learning (Moje & Speyer, 2008). However, content area literacy methods can be rare even in secondary English language arts classrooms, perhaps because many favored content area literacy strategies seem better suited for informational texts than literary ones.

The need for remedial reading services has traditionally gone unaddressed for want of time and money, and when employed often acted as a segregating mechanism. The potential for change in the years ahead is uncertain. Too quick reliance on simple reading rate measures of fluency can easily misclassify struggling adolescent readers as needing decoding skills training, when many factors can impact reading rate in the secondary grades (Nichols, 2007). Traditionally, comprehension remediation instruction has focused on the instruction of cognitive strategies to improve students’ generic reading comprehension skills for learning content across the subject domains (Dole, Nokes, & Drits, 2009). But an over-emphasis on cognitive strategies as discretely trainable skills—often presented as all-purpose “silver bullet” solutions—succeeds only in disappointing otherwise effective teachers and struggling students alike.
Tensions Extended into Professional Development  Taking a developmental perspective, we note that as one moves across the grade levels, lower grade-level tensions are not displaced by, but are rather augmented and extended by, the tensions that grow more varied and pronounced in upper grade-level classrooms. It may be helpful, overall, for early grade teachers to consider the outcomes of their grade level instructional decisions on students’ upper-grade success, and it may be equally helpful for upper grade teachers to consider the genesis of the challenges they face with a better understanding of the issues confronted by early grade teachers. But the value of a bird’s-eye view and cross-grade generalizations must be weighed against being effectively within one’s classroom at a particular moment with particular students under particular conditions.

The complexity of literacy acquisition and instruction for students across grade and developmental levels is mirrored in newer models of professional learning for teachers, which also reflect the dichotomy of trained skills and educative experience. Language arts teacher education has typically followed a skills-training and informational transmission approach to instructional professional development. Do-as-I-say lectures, “sit and gets,” paint-by-number scripts, decontextualized instructor “modeling,” or one-day workshops predominate in teacher in-service environments, yet these approaches have long been known to produce little lasting change in teacher’s instructional practice, often leaving teachers frustrated as the promised generalized solutions fail to transfer to the specifics of their classrooms (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Consequently, coaching has become a prevalent practice in many schools that are striving to enact long-term instructional change. This kind of professional development brings together experience-based learning with the need for generalized skills. Cantrell, Burns, and Callaway (2008) explain, “[s]uccessful approaches to teacher education de-emphasize teacher-centered transmission models in favor of engaging teachers in collaborative construction of knowledge that enables them to analyze the complexities of curricula, pedagogy, and school cultures” (p. 3). Joyce and Showers (2002) note, “where transfer to a classroom is the object, the full array [of staff development components] is needed—theory, demonstration, practice, and peer coaching” (p. 77).

As has been outlined, effective instruction differs across grade levels and is moreover specific to teacher preparation, school location, curricular requirements, student population, and the individual needs of learners. Studies on the effectiveness of classroom supports for student learning—and literacy skills, specifically—have shown “positive effects for programs that are designed to improve the core of classroom practice” (Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008, p. 309). This approach to professional development is more firmly rooted in providing teachers with educative experience, while still accepting that many teachers may lack the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively negotiate instructional complexities.

Professional Tensions in Context: Standards, Assessments, and Mandates  The instructional oppositions confronting teachers of the English language arts are comprehensively evident in the NCTE/IRA Standards for Reading Professionals (National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association, 1998–2010). For instance, decoding skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency are explicitly identified in the standards for Pre-K and Elementary Classroom Teacher Candidates (2.2.3), as are language competency abilities such as vocabulary, comprehension, critical thinking, motivation, and writing. Drilling is not explicitly mentioned, but the emphasis on evidence-based practices, a now politically loaded term, suggests an openness to such methods. Standard 5, Literate Environment, is focused more on classroom management and use of space, than on contextualizing student constructions of meaning. But this is not ruled out. Similarly, the other standards cast a non-committal net over the previously reviewed tensions, offering no specific resolutions.

Standards, such as the NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts, should not be confused with standardization of the curriculum through state and federal mandates, which may work in opposition to teacher professionalization. Teacher knowledge and preparation is key to student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000), an insight that No Child Left Behind codified into law (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Wills & Sandholz, 2009). Educational policy has required standardized instructional programs because of the ease with which their application and efficacy can be inventoried through standardized high-stakes assessments. These political initiatives, although well-intentioned, cap the use of teachers’ professional expertise by circumscribing their autonomy as competent and adaptively effective professionals. When the aforementioned curricular and instructional tensions are imposed by administrative fiat, the result is a new tension, one between a forced fidelity that often fails, and a provoked disloyalty that potentially dispirits.

Conclusion  We have attempted to trace several tensions entwined throughout the teaching of the English language arts. The difficulties seem perennial and beyond simple, abstractly formulated solution. They are tied to the unpredictable contingencies of real classrooms with particular students in specific moments in time. Moreover, the central tension between skills and contexts that we have traced here requires a more sophisticated notion of both, one that differentiates between basic and high level skills and more and less educative experiences. Finally, a tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, although anathema to popular politics, is requisite in effective instruction for literacy development.

We would argue that attempts to standardize practice or professional development to preempt such uncertainty are unlikely to succeed. Other chapters in this section demonstrate in much greater detail the wealth of research and theory for effective practice in this regard.
References


