

## What's Happening in Practice

Classroom observation data from 2016 showed that Tennessee teachers were struggling to select appropriately complex texts that were worthy of students' time and attention. Observers often saw the same books read aloud for the same purpose in grades K–3, even within the same building. During observations in the 2017–18 school year, texts were more often quantitatively complex (as measured by Lexile level), but observed texts still often lacked the qualitative complexity that make them worthy of a student's time and attention (e.g., structure, levels of meaning,

and knowledge demands). About half of observations included texts that were rated as worthy of student time and attention. In general, text selection was driven by surface-level topics, rather than by conceptual units of study. The Tennessee Department of Education's educator survey in spring 2017 also found that less than half of grades K–3 teachers reported selecting texts for an instructional unit based on a particular content or concept (e.g., social studies or science).

## Contrasting Practices

The examples below describe texts used in Tennessee teachers' classrooms in the 2017–18 school year. To select texts that are truly worthy of students' time and attention teachers must

attend to three aspects of text selection: quantitative complexity, qualitative complexity, and consideration of reader and task. The strong practice is drawn from the department's unit starters.

### WEAK PRACTICE

#### *Text Selected Based on Time in School Year*

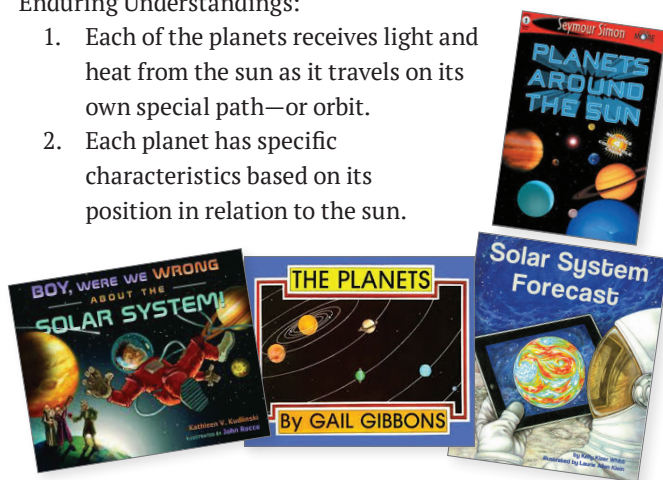


### STRONG PRACTICE

#### *Text Sets Selected to Build Conceptual Knowledge*

Enduring Understandings:

1. Each of the planets receives light and heat from the sun as it travels on its own special path—or orbit.
2. Each planet has specific characteristics based on its position in relation to the sun.



## Text Selection “Look Fors” for Coaches and Leaders

- Is the text part of a conceptual unit or text set?
- Is the Lexile appropriate for the students' grade level and the instructional strategy being used?
- Does the text have appropriate language conventions and structure?
- Does the text have appropriate knowledge demands and levels of meaning?
- Does the text help students build knowledge or engage in critical thinking?
- Are text(s) appropriately paired with an instructional strategy?

## What's Happening in Practice

Instruction should include question sequences and daily and end-of-unit tasks that integrate the standards and provide students with opportunities to demonstrate new understandings using evidence from the text. In observations from Tennessee classrooms in the fall 2016, many teachers asked questions that did not reference the texts. For example, following a read aloud in 2016, a teacher asked: “What does dodging mean? What does it mean to babble? Who usually babbles?” This past fall, teacher’s questions were generally tied to texts—a step in the right direction. For example, teachers asked questions like, “What happened at the beginning of this story?” and “What is

our book about?” Still, less than 10 percent of observed lessons included questions and tasks that integrated the standards or required students to use details from the text to demonstrate their understanding. Furthermore, while teachers provided opportunities for students to write, most writing tasks focused on students’ personal experiences and preferences instead of thinking deeply about enduring understandings related to texts. Students should engage in writing tasks that allow them to demonstrate critical thinking and text analysis skills and to practice writing for different purposes and in response to different types of texts.

## Contrasting Practices

The examples below show a question sequence observed in a grade 3 Tennessee classroom last fall, compared to an ideal question sequence for the same text, *Eggs* by Marilyn Singer. The

first question sequence represents isolated instruction targeting a single reading standard. The second sequence supports multiple reading standards and builds toward a conceptual understanding drawn from the grade 3 science standards.

**WEAK PRACTICE**

### Observed Question Sequence Focused on a Single Standard

- What is our book about?
- What else did it say [an egg] could be used as?
- Can you find the main idea?
- Where do we look for the main idea?
- Which one is the main idea in this paragraph?

**STRONG PRACTICE**

### Question Sequence that Integrates the Standards to Build Knowledge

- In the beginning of our book, the author said that eggs can be, “breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” Given what you know about how embryos survive in an egg, how can an egg provide “breakfast, lunch, and dinner?” Use specific vocabulary from our text.
- Why is the type, or texture, of the shell on an egg important? Give a specific example that explains your reasoning for the importance.
- Why do animals lay eggs that have different shapes? Give a specific example, and explain how the shape of that animal’s egg is important.
- Why does the egg’s color matter?
- According to our text, why do animals like fish and dragonflies lay thousands or even millions of eggs?
- Our text said: “Eggs have a long list of enemies...” Who are the enemies and how have animals and their eggs protected themselves from those enemies? Cite some specific ways based on our text. Use precise vocabulary we have learned in our unit.
- The caption here says: “The female red-legged partridge builds two nests and lays eggs in each. She incubates one clutch. The male incubates the other.” Using the information we just read and the illustrations on these pages, what does “incubate” mean? How does the male emperor penguin incubate his egg? Why is it important for birds to incubate their eggs?
- Why is it important for eggs to remain intact? Summarize some of the ways the eggs are designed to improve the chances of survival.
- How do animals’ reproductive behaviors and their eggs support their survival?

## “Look Fors” for Coaches and Leaders

- ☑ Do questions and tasks integrate multiple standards in service of building conceptual understanding?
- ☑ Do questions and tasks attend to specific vocabulary and structure, ideas, or details from the text?
- ☑ Do questions and tasks require students to use textual evidence to demonstrate their understandings or ideas?
- ☑ Are questions and tasks sequenced in a way that

deepens students’ understanding of the text, the author’s craft, or the concepts?

- ☑ Do questions and tasks elicit responses in age-appropriate interactive ways?
- ☑ Do questions address the varying needs of students?

## What's Happening in Practice

In observations of Tennessee early grades classrooms in fall 2017, over half of teachers targeted below grade-level skills that students already had mastered. Furthermore, very few foundational skills lessons included opportunities for students to practice their foundational literacy skills with authentic reading and writing experiences. Teachers tended to provide a lesson, but then stopped short of allowing students to actually practice applying what was taught. Specifically, just 14 percent

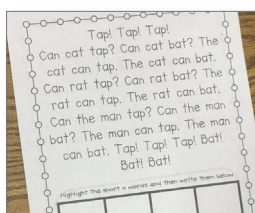
of observations in the fall and 20 percent in the winter included explicit foundational skills instruction with teacher modeling and student practice, and less than 10 percent of observed foundational skills lessons included opportunities for students to practice their skills with authentic reading and writing experiences. One encouraging finding, however, is that more foundational skills lessons were aligned to grade-level standards as compared to fall 2016.

## Contrasting Practices

The examples below describe foundational skills lessons focused on phonics included as part of the literacy block in first grade. The first example illustrates a teacher covering non-grade level

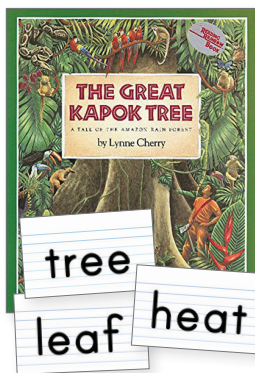
standards and solely using out-of-text teaching of foundational skills. The second example includes a foundational skills lesson that includes both in-text and out-of-text teaching.

### WEAK PRACTICE



This grade 1 assignment focuses on the short vowel sound, which is a Kindergarten skill. The year-end expectation in the Tennessee standards is that students know long vowel sounds. Reviewing a sequence of certain foundational skills from the prior year is appropriate, but there was evidence during the observation that students had already mastered this skill. Furthermore, a shared reading lesson following this lesson used a text with many short vowel sounds, but the questions and tasks focused entirely on sequencing events without any attention to an application of foundational skills.

### STRONG PRACTICE



*Teaching Literacy in Tennessee* provides an example of strong literacy practices in a first grade classroom in a unit on the importance of trees to animals and people. Following an interactive read aloud of *The Great Kapok Tree*, the teacher writes two words from the book on the board: "tree" and "heat." He asks his students what vowel sounds they hear in the words and invites his students to brainstorm other words with the long /e/ sound. The teacher adds the words to the board and points out the multiple spellings for the long /e/ sound. He explains that the words have different vowel teams for the same sound and models the process of finding the long /e/ spelling inside each word. He then directs the students to word cards on their tables, and the students work with each other to complete a word sort to determine which words had a long /e/ sound and then to sort the long /e/ words by spelling pattern. The teacher summarizes the lesson saying, "These two vowel patterns make the long 'e' sound. As we read *Trees Help*, let's be word detectives and look for these patterns in words."

## "Look Fors" for Coaches and Leaders

- ✓ Are foundational skills being taught systematically with a scope and sequence that is aligned to the grade-level standards?
- ✓ Are students practicing skills they are still working to develop (not those they have already mastered)?

- ✓ Is foundational skills instruction explicit, including both teacher modeling and student practice?
- ✓ Do students have opportunities to practice their newly acquired foundational skills with authentic reading and writing experiences?
- ✓ Do students connect acquisition of foundational skills to making meaning from text(s)?