CHAPTER 1

Super Core Values

Super Core is based on four ideas that are near and dear to my teaching heart. I call them the four values. It took me a while to come up with the term *values*. I deliberated over the word and considered a number of others, but none seemed quite right. "The four components" sounded too dry, "the four pillars" seemed too grandiose, and "the Four Tops" was already taken.

Actually, I settled on the term when I remembered a small epiphany I had a few years ago. In 2008, I was feeling more and more miserable in my role as a provider of staff development, and I was struggling to identify my future career options. Should I return to school for a doctoral degree, strike out on my own as a freelance consultant, or head off in an entirely different direction: jazz musician, cat care provider, stay-at-home freeloader? Ultimately, I rejected doctoral degree, freelancer, jazz musician, and cat care provider. My wife helped me rule out freeloader.

Knowing what I *didn't* want to do was of little help, so I decided to consult a career counselor. Meeting with her was an illuminating experience. She helped me see that many, if not most, of my personal decisions arose from my value system. For example, when I decided in 1988 to work with children rather than take a position as a research assistant in a biology lab, my decision was value based. I just couldn't bring myself to harm the lab animals, even when the research might lead to future medical gains that would benefit others.

Now that I'm aware of my decision-making process, I can see how I regularly make decisions based on my values. Because I value the freedom to follow my personal interests (more than climbing a career ladder), I haven't followed a sequential career track over the last 25 years. Because I value the natural world, I won't work for corporations or organizations that contribute to its destruction. Even my decision to leave staff development and return to public school teaching was a value-based one.

We all hold values. Sometimes we act on them, and sometimes we don't. Some people make the bulk of their decisions based on values. Others regularly put their values aside and make decisions based on a more pragmatic analysis of the situation. It's not a good versus bad thing, and one way is no more right or wrong than the other.

I believe that educational systems harbor values just like individuals do. Some values, however, are more discernible than others. Consider the Montessori system. Montessori values spring from the idea that learning is an active process that begins with the learner and extends outward into the world. Montessori educators value activities that promote student discovery, exploration of the environment, self-direction, independence, and concentration. These values permeate the Montessori system and are reflected in the way the classrooms are arranged, teachers are trained, and lessons are taught.

Another system, such as Waldorf, harbors a different set of values. The Waldorf system values the arts, developmental psychology, and the spiritual and social components of education. Thus, one teacher moves with a group of students through eight years of their education, guiding them through various stages of educational, developmental, and spiritual growth. Lessons are typically augmented with art, poetry, music, drama, and movement. Valued lessons are ones that create a classroom atmosphere that fills students with wonder, interest, and enthusiasm.

With the release of the National Reading Panel's report in 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000a), the rise of the Common Core State Standards, and the lessening of conflict among historically warring reading camps, higher education and research communities in the United States are coming to a greater consensus on what they value most in reading instruction. I don't believe, though, that these values have fully found their way into public school systems. Although a consensus on what should be valued in reading is closer than it was 20 years ago, many differences of opinion still exist.

When it comes to teachers and what they value, I can't claim to truly know more than a handful of individuals. I can, however, extrapolate to the general population. Concerning reading and communication skills, I'd bet that most teachers value fluency (up to a point), comprehension and the strategies that enable it, writing that is grammatically and mechanically correct, and critical thinking. Additionally, I believe teachers value a student's ability to pick up a book, read it, and enjoy it. More broadly speaking, teachers value the safety and well-being of their students. They want to see the kids in their classrooms experience academic, social, and personal success.

Although many in education hold broad "success for all" values, I wonder how many have well-defined content and instruction values. To explore this point, quickly answer the following questions, taking a few minutes to jot down the answers before reading further:

- What aspects of reading instruction do you value the most?
- What types of general instruction do you value the most?

- What components of a reading curriculum do you value the most?
- What reading content holds the most value to you?
- What assessments do you value?
- At the end of the year, what do you want your students to value when it comes to reading and writing?

If you had a hard time answering any of these questions quickly, I would argue that your teaching values are not firmly established in your mind. If you did come up with answers quickly, I'd say your educational values are front and center in your mind. I've been mulling over my values for a number of years now, and in the next section, I list them for you. They're important because they form the foundation of this book.

Teach what you value; value what you teach.

The Evolution of Super Core

Three years ago, when I left my educational consultant job and came back to elementary school teaching, I was brimming with excitement. I couldn't wait to put all of my knowledge into practice. I was a man on a mission, and that mission was to get all the students under my tutelage as close to grade-level reading as possible. How would I do it?

My plan went something like this: Design a reading program that provides students with a wide variety of books, structure the schedule so there's time for extended reading and writing practice, allow students to write about what they know and love while simultaneously teaching them grammar and spelling, and make use of the toolbox of reading and teaching strategies that I'd accumulated and tried to perfect over 19 years. As I prepared to introduce my plan, however, I realized that I'd made a crucial mistake. There can be only one grand design, one master plan, and my school already had one—Treasures, published by Macmillan/McGraw-Hill. My district called it our core reading program. I called it the basal.

When I first realized that I'd have to use a basal program, I was crushed! My heart was set on using all that I had learned to construct my own highly effective reading program. Using someone else's program struck me as uninteresting, uncreative, and downright dictatorial. My district, however, had made it clear that the basal program was the one that was to be used, and teachers were expected to use the program, in the jargon of the day, "with a high degree of fidelity." In other words, don't mess with the manual!

However, I had major qualms about the effectiveness of publisher-produced programs. During my years as a teacher-trainer, I'd read articles about and heard reading authorities speak to the shortcomings of basal programs (Allington, 2011; Brenner & Hiebert, 2010; Dewitz, Jones, & Leahy, 2009; Reutzel & Daines, 1987). As I traveled to local districts, reading teachers complained that their core programs didn't provide enough opportunities for struggling readers to master phonic patterns, read motivating books, or write authentic pieces of writing.

After returning to a district classroom and using a core reading program for one year, I became a complaining teacher, too. In my eyes, our basal program had numerous problems. For starters, the scope of phonics instruction was too broad and the sequence too haphazard. Few decoding skills were taught to mastery. Spelling was not integrated with real writing. There was a dearth of word work activities and an overreliance on worksheets and practice book pages. The end result was that the struggling students weren't mastering the basics of decoding.

Second, students had no choice in the story selection. If the story was mediocre or the majority of kids didn't like it, we went on with the story anyway. Also, struggling readers couldn't read the grade-level texts. I wondered what the students in other classrooms were reading, especially those who were homogeneously grouped in the "advanced group." If the teachers were following the core program, the advanced readers would have few, if any, opportunities to read authentic literature on an advanced level.

In addition, our basal series left little time for independent reading practice or extended and authentic writing activities. This really bothered me because I knew both were crucial if my students (or, rather, students in any classroom) were going to become successful readers and writers. For many reasons, I valued independent reading and extended time for writing, and it troubled me to leave them out of our reading program.

Finally, because I was trying to follow the dictates of the manual, my cooperating teacher and I were assigning dozens of worksheets and practice book pages. I disliked most of these pages, especially when I considered the neediest readers. Not only were the practice book pages divorced from real-world reading and writing, but they were also often above the instructional level of the struggling readers.

In the end, I had no faith that an unmodified core program was an effective way to teach students, especially those who struggle. What was I to do? In the words of special education visionary Marc Gold, it was time to try another way. Knowing I'd go crazy trying to teach reading with just a basal program, and realizing that my district wouldn't allow me, a new employee, to simply cast it aside, I set out to find a way to meld my educational values with the program already in place. I jotted

down the four things uppermost in my mind—my four core values, if you will—submitted them to the curriculum director, and petitioned him to allow me to create a third-grade reading program based on them.

Here's what I shared with my curriculum director:

1. Time for extended reading
2. Time for extended writing
3. Attention to the big ideas in reading and writing
4. Use of effective instructional practices and strategies

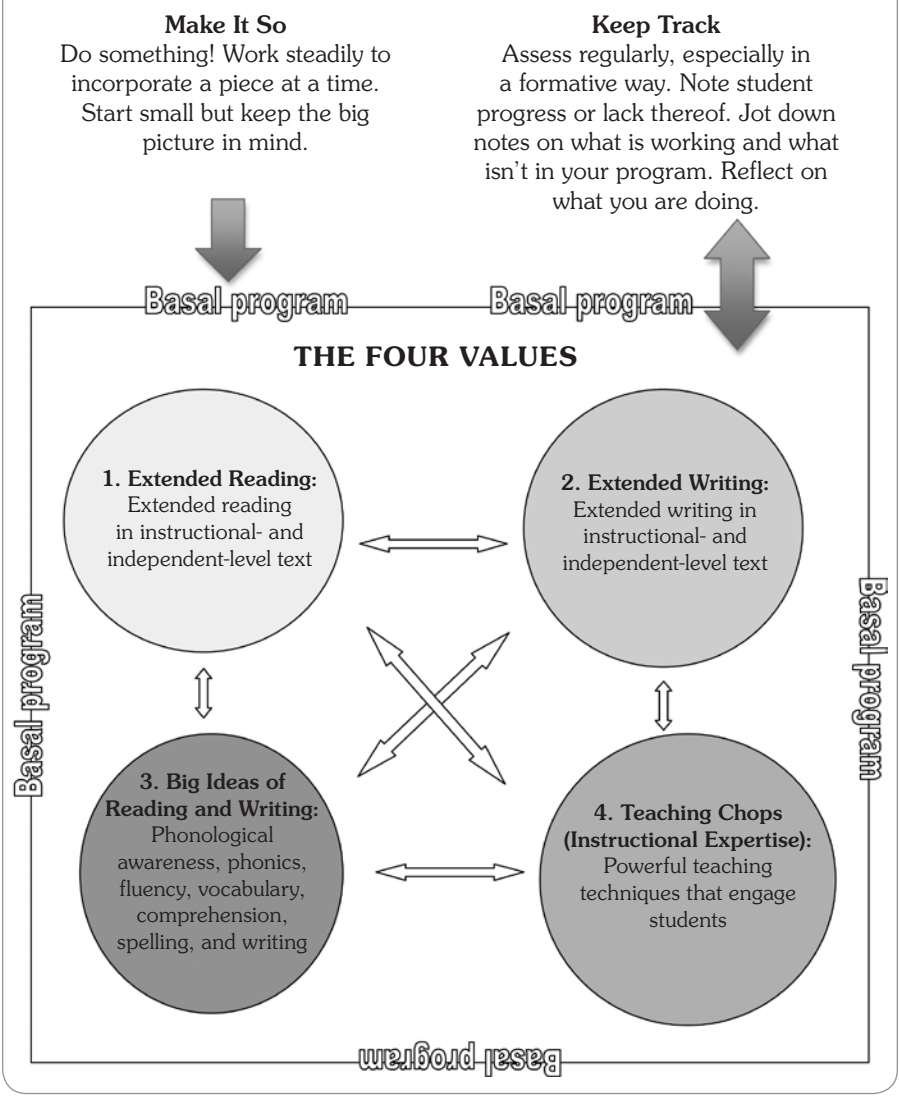
That list became my four values. In Figure 1.1 you'll see how the four values exist with a basal reading program. The core reading program, or basal, which is the foundation of this book, surrounds the values. For the purposes of this book, we'll never leave that core program behind. We will, however, insert a vital, beating heart into its body—namely, the four values. The arrows that connect the bubble of each value and crisscross in the center show that every value informs and works with the others. When you work on all four values at once, you create synergy, thus producing an effect that is much greater than the sum of the parts.

And what about the two columns at the top? These are the actions that enable you to build your supercharged program. The first step is to simply do something! First, create a schedule that works for you. Carve out blocks of time in which effective practices replace ineffective ones. Then, continue forward by implementing a few of the ideas laid out in this book. Finally, keep track of what you're doing and how the new ideas, strategies, and activities are working. Constant assessment and personal reflection form a critical feedback mechanism: Assess and reflect, take action based on your assessment and reflection, then assess and reflect some more.

The language of these values may sound familiar to you. After all, there's nothing new under the sun. If you're a student of reading instruction and an aficionado of teacher resource books, you'll see that many of my ideas come from the four blocks and balanced literacy models, readers' and writers' workshops, and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) gradual release of responsibility, and you'll know my values are constructed from the writings of instructional clinicians, researchers, and innovators such as Calkins, Allington, Moats, and Archer. What's new and different in Super Core is that my values are incorporated into the broad structure of a core reading program.

Now that we have an overview, let's look a little deeper into each of the values.

Figure 1.1. How to Create a Super Core Based on the Four Values



Value 1: Extended Reading

Children love to read. Given personal space and a book that they can independently read, most kids will settle into a story and read for at least 10–15 minutes. Older readers (and some young ones, too) can go longer. When instructed in an enthusiastic manner and with an effective program, kids who don't currently love reading will at least come to

appreciate it, and in time, they may even grow to love it. I've seen this happen in my own classroom and in the classrooms of master teachers who have permitted me to work with them.

How do children come to love reading? In a word: success. Success is the best motivator. When children experience success in reading, their confidence and enthusiasm grow. It's a cycle: Enthusiasm leads to more reading, which creates more success, which leads to even more reading.

Success is crucial for struggling readers. Without it, they're discouraged and demoralized by a persistently difficult activity. Think about your own response to a demanding task that's beyond your current ability level. If you've ever tried something and failed over and over again over a long period of time, you'll understand the sense of defeat and frustration experienced by struggling readers. So, it's critical that reading teachers structure their basal program so all students experience success in reading.

One way to begin this structuring is to create opportunities for students to read for extended periods of time on their independent and instructional levels. Reading is a skill that must be practiced for much more than five or 10 minutes a day. Allington (2001) proposed that students spend at least 90 minutes a day reading in school. That's in addition to any instructional time that takes place.

To engage students in reading for extended periods of time, you'll first need extended periods of time. I don't mean to be flippant here, merely lighthearted, because I know teachers never have enough time to accomplish all that is expected of them. I'll talk about time in more detail later. For now, let me just say that one of the basic premises of this book is that you must narrow the focus of what you teach and deep-six a healthy amount of ineffective worksheets and basal-based activities to create space to implement new and more effectives practices and activities. Simply put, it's time to put the tired metaphor of the heaping plate to rest. Teachers simply cannot continually add new items to their reading plate while simultaneously producing high degrees of student performance, especially with those students who struggle the most in reading and writing. Implementing the most effective reading practices, such as guided reading groups and thorough instruction in metacognitive reading strategies, demands getting rid of some core program content, activities, and worksheets.

In addition to time, you'll need a wide range of interesting books that are leveled appropriately for each student. For students to become fluent readers, they need exposure to a range of texts with high volumes of words in meaningful contexts (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Therefore, teachers must provide students with a multitude of

books. This seems readily apparent, yet I fear that teachers lose sight of this truth when they teach from basal manuals year after year.

This variety of books goes well beyond the leveled readers that some core reading programs provide. In addition to the anthology story, your basal program may supply a set of theme-related books with labels like "struggling," "on-level," and "enrichment." This can be the beginning of a book collection, but it is by no means adequate. An adequate variety of books is multiple book bins, each containing 30 books labeled with guided reading levels, Lexiles, or DRA levels. An adequate variety of books means classroom libraries stocked with multiple levels of different genres, such as nonfiction about animals, nonfiction history, adventure, fantasy, and poetry. An adequate variety of books is a communal book room stocked with hundreds, if not thousands, of books that a teacher can quickly borrow for use in his or her classroom.

Why are a variety of books on a variety of reading levels and extended blocks of time valuable classroom commodities? Over and over again, it's been found that when academic tasks are matched to students' instructional needs and ability levels, students are much more likely to remain engaged for periods of time and experience academic success (Gambrell, Marinak, Brooker, & McCrea-Andrews, 2011; Treptow, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978; Wyne & Stuck, 1979). In other words, when students read texts on their independent reading levels, they practice more, and when students practice more, they learn more. It's the Matthew effect: The rich get richer (Stanovich, 1986).

The two girls in Figure 1.2 are examples of students getting richer. They've chosen a book on their independent reading level and found a comfortable spot to read. While the teacher works with a guided reading group, these students are reading quietly by themselves. As they read, they encounter new vocabulary words, solve reading roadblocks, build their fluency skills, and learn facts about coral reefs, all without the teacher having to directly instruct them.

Ironically, providing time to read and providing a choice of books on a student's independent and instructional levels are two things that basal programs do poorly (Allington, 2011). Too much time gets eaten up with workbook pages, isolated skill drills, and activities like listening to a story on a CD. To add insult to injury, the difficulty level of the weekly anthology story is often well above some students' instructional levels, especially if the students are struggling or if the class is homogeneously grouped into a collection of below-grade-level readers. And basal anthologies don't give students choices. Choice is vital to reading engagement because choice builds enthusiasm and excitement. Just like adults, children want to have a say in what they read.

Figure 1.2. Independent Reading

Here's the good news: Even the most constrictive basal program can make room for extended reading. You'll find many thoughts on this in Chapter 6, which is devoted to the idea of extended reading and what you'll need to do to create it.

Value 2: Extended Writing

When it comes to writing, Super Core suggests carving out time for extended writing on independently chosen topics rather than sticking to a basal program's prescribed writing prompts, sentence completion worksheets, and writing projects.

Children love to write—but not about prompts pulled from a manual. Children love to write about the people they know and the things they're interested in. They experience flow in writing when they share information about their best friend, retell a funny story, or describe a favorite hobby or sport. It's all about communication. Kids want to tell teachers, their friends, and their classmates about their lives. When they write about objects, events, and people they know and love, children understand the purpose for writing, and they learn to love writing.

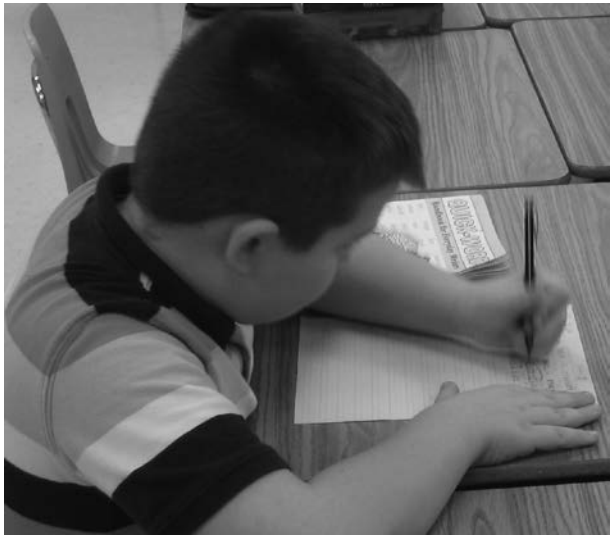
Writing plays an important part in a child's reading development. The flip side of reading and decoding, writing allows children to encode.

In other words, it gives them practice in matching individual letters, word families, and patterns to the sounds they hear in a word. Figure 1.3 shows a young writer busily encoding words. If you look closely, you'll notice that he's circling a word that he doesn't know how to spell. Rather than looking up the word immediately after he writes it, which would break the flow of his creative process, he spells the word as best as he can, circles it, and then goes back at a later time to check it in his student dictionary.

Writing does more than allow students to practice their spelling. When reading their writing quietly to themselves or out loud to a buddy, a small group, or the whole class, students practice their reading skills. Writing can be a wonderfully sneaky way to get kids to reread a piece of text three or even four times. Finally, when they write to give a summary of a story, predict what will happen next, compare two characters, or tell why they enjoyed a book, students have multiple opportunities to practice reading comprehension strategies, such as making connections, summarizing, predicting, and answering questions.

Recently, when four days' worth of April reading lessons were almost entirely canceled due to schedule changes (meetings, teacher training, school renovations, physicals, an assembly...you name it, we had it), my third-grade reading group had only 40 minutes to meet. What were

Figure 1.3. Independent Writing



we to do but write?! The students got out their composition books and Good Writers' Checklist (discussed in Chapter 6) and went at it, choosing topics of their choice. Highlights of the writing session included well-constructed paragraphs of 8–10 sentences. The four best paragraphs recounted a surprise birthday party and the big brother who almost ruined it, a salamander that may or may not have imprinted on the little boy who picked it up (to quote the boy, "Maybe the sally just liked the warmth of my hand"), an "I can't wait to go fishing with my dad" story, and a dramatic listing of all the reasons Mrs. Draksler is a little girl's favorite teacher. All of this wonderful writing came from students who, in October, struggled to write two sentences, rarely used proper punctuation or capitalization, and had no idea what a paragraph was.

Although authentic writing is valuable, an uninterrupted block of writing time of at least 30–40 minutes twice a week is equally valuable. To become a better writer, whether child or adult, one must practice, practice, practice. And practice takes time, time, time. In Chapter 5, we'll explore ways to find adequate time for writing. It should be noted that writing instruction encompasses handwriting and printing, spelling, grammar, reading, and speaking and listening. If you think of writing broadly—a way of teaching multiple components of reading simultaneously—carving out big blocks of time becomes more palatable to any teacher who must accomplish a lot in a short amount of time. Hmm, I guess that would be all of us!

I end the introduction of the first two values with a story from the classroom. Toward the end of her educational career, my mother left her coaching position and took command of a first-grade classroom. She taught in upstate New York, and the city school in which she taught stayed in session through most of the hot and humid month of June. On one especially muggy day, when the school year, patience, and sanity were all nearing their end, my mother promised the kids that the next day would be a fun day. "You can do anything you want," she said to her squirming students, "as long as it's related to something that we learned this year."

Before I finish the story, I must add that my mother was an exceptional teacher. After working for years as a team-teacher, mentor, and trainer and teaching both undergraduate- and graduate-level courses at the local college, her classroom teaching was a gifted blend of deep knowledge and practical application. On her list of educational values, extended time for reading and writing were at the top. If you were to walk in on her reading block on any given day, chances are you would see students curled up with a book or busily engaged in some type of writing activity.

In any case, my mother asked her first graders to go home that night and think about what they wanted to do tomorrow. The next day rolled around, again hot and humid, and the kids took their seats at their tables. "So," my mother asked, "what would you like to do today?" One little girl instantly raised her hand. "Tianna," my mother asked, "what would you like to do today?" Without missing a beat, Tianna replied, "Mrs. Weakland, can we read and write *all* day long?" Upon hearing this question, the other students erupted in cheers and applause. My mother still loves to tell this story.

Value 3: The Big Ideas of Reading and Writing

When I was an educational consultant charged with providing staff development to teachers in local school districts, I spent a great deal of time becoming knowledgeable about reading and instructional practice. I attended conferences, workshops, and presentations and put tens of thousands of miles on my car, all to bring back pertinent information to teachers in local school districts. Early on in my staff development gig, perhaps in 2003, I attended a wonderful presentation by Sharon Vaughn of the University of Texas at Austin. Her topic was the big ideas in reading, as handed down by the 2000 National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000a). Her clever graphic organizer was a reading quilt.

Vaughn's presentation was short, concise, and engaging, and I remember it to this day. She pictured each big idea as a panel of the quilt: phonemic awareness, phonics and the development of the alphabetic principle, fluency and its various subcomponents, vocabulary, and comprehension. A sixth quilt panel was devoted to spelling and writing. The quilt binding was instructional practice and student grouping.

In 20 minutes, she simply and elegantly presented the essence of reading instruction: the five big ideas of reading plus writing and spelling bound together with effective instructional practice. I believe her presentation encapsulated the basics of everything that a reading teacher needs to know. Table 1.1 summarizes and paraphrases how I remember that reading quilt.

Phonemic awareness, *phonics*, *fluency*, *vocabulary*, *comprehension*, *spelling*, *writing*—call me a total reading nerd, but I recite these terms like a mantra. As an elementary school reading specialist and classroom teacher, I press them into practice every day. Whether I'm teaching a kindergarten, third-grade, or fifth-grade lesson, I'm always asking myself, Which big idea am I focusing on? What aspect of the big idea am I working on? and How am I teaching it? To me, these big ideas are the foundational bedrock of reading theory.

Table 1.1. The Big Ideas of Reading and Writing Instruction

Big Idea	What Teachers Need to Teach Students
Phonemic awareness	• That spoken words consist of individual sounds (phonemes) • How words can be segmented (pulled apart) into sounds and how these sounds can be blended (put back together) and manipulated (added, deleted, and substituted) • How to use their phonemic awareness to blend sounds to read words and to segment sounds in words to spell them
Phonics	• The accurate and rapid identification of the letters of the alphabet • The alphabetic principle (an understanding that the sequence of sounds or phonemes in a spoken word is represented by letters in a written word) • Phonics elements (e.g., letter–sound correspondences, spelling patterns, syllables) • How to apply phonics elements while reading and writing
Fluency	• How to decode words (in isolation and in connected text) • How to automatically recognize words (accurately and quickly with little effort) • How to increase speed (or rate) of reading while maintaining accuracy • How to read in smooth and long phrases • How to read with proper inflection and expression (prosody)
Vocabulary	• Knowing the meanings of most words in a text so they can understand what they read • How to apply a variety of strategies to learn word meanings • How to make connections between words and concepts • How to accurately use new words in oral and written language
Comprehension	• How to read both narrative and expository texts • How to understand and remember what they read • How to relate their own knowledge and experiences to texts • How to use comprehension strategies to improve their comprehension • How to communicate with others about what they read
Spelling and writing	• How to segment words into sounds to spell them • How to remember and reproduce exact letter patterns (e.g., letter–sound correspondences, syllables, word parts) • Rapid and accurate letter formation • How to notice reliable spelling patterns and generalizations • How to write fluently • How to apply grammatical rules in writing • How to write for different purposes and audiences in various forms • How to critique and evaluate writing • How to communicate with others about what they know and experience

Although the big ideas bear simple labels, they are rich and nuanced in meaning. So, don't let the simple labels fool you. Each idea is like the center of a semantic web, intimately connected to other equally important ideas. When you discuss comprehension, for example, you also touch on fluency, background knowledge, motivation, metacognitive strategies, time to write, and time to read. Taberski (2010) builds a case for this extensive type of thinking. I find, however, that the big ideas as presented by the National Reading Panel are the easiest way to get acquainted with what is most foundational to reading. So, don't put the cart before the horse; I suggest you know and understand the basics before you dive deeply into each idea.

I also suggest that you should have on hand a PDF or free hard copy of the summarized National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000a). Sneak a peek at the summary when you're sitting in a staff development meeting, peruse it while you're waiting in line at the bank, or sit down with it for an hour over the weekend. If you're unfamiliar with the big ideas, the information in Super Core is only a start. But it's a good start! If you're already familiar with the big ideas but their emphasis in your classroom has faded over time, then Super Core is here to remind you of their importance.

Value 4: Teaching Chops (Instructional Expertise)

All teachers possess instructional techniques. Monitoring students as they practice, using proximity or graphic organizers, writing the lesson objectives on the board, using worksheets to practice skills, keeping a brisk pace of delivery, and speaking in funny dialects or with a stern tone of voice are all techniques for getting information across to students. But some are more effective than others.

When I see a teacher using effective teaching techniques regularly and effortlessly, I say that teacher has teaching chops. The term *chops*, like the word *gig*, is one that we musicians throw around regularly, as in "Eric was killer on the gig last night. That guy has some serious chops!" In the music world, *chops* refers to a musician's technique. Thus, a great guitarist fluently plays scales, arpeggios, and chords and masterfully combines these skills to create music with great soulfulness, beauty, or energy. In other words, the guitarist's chops are a means to an end: great music.

A great teacher has chops, too. He or she quickly analyzes a task and breaks it down into its most basic parts, then uses explicit instruction and modeling to introduce the skill or information. The teacher effortlessly hands out positive reinforcement, instantly assesses learning, and deeply engages the class with clever and effective instructional techniques. The teacher uses these teaching techniques as a means to an end:

student achievement and performance. When a teacher uses techniques masterfully, he or she has some serious chops.

Your method of instruction is every bit as important as the information you're attempting to impart. If information or content is a stack of cardboard boxes, your instruction is the big delivery truck that efficiently delivers those packages. Without instruction, content just sits in the warehouse gathering dust. Of course, some delivery trucks are more efficient than others. To become a master teacher, you'll need a truck that delivers the goods quickly, easily, and dependably.

Instructional technique is important because the way that you instruct is a huge factor in whether students attend and behave well in class, become more independent, and effectively organize, store, and use what you're trying to teach them (Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Cooley, 1981). Unlike school funding levels, poverty, and bad student attitudes, your instructional practice is one variable that's completely within your control, so make sure you choose the best instructional techniques.

My quest to become a more effective teacher began in my special education days when I was trained in a variety of teaching models, most notably Hunter's (1994) instructional theory into practice. I needed effective tools in my instructional toolbox because my students were always one step away from ripping up the floorboards and tearing down the walls. I still use many of the techniques I gathered during those early years.

Later, when I left the classroom and became a consultant, I learned other instructional techniques and models, including cooperative learning, Socratic questioning, and direct instruction. Now that I'm back in the classroom, and when I'm having a good day, I feel as if my teaching is better than ever. Why? Because I've mastered a handful of highly effective teaching strategies that I use regularly to engage students. The six techniques I love are time tested, relatively easy to perform, and highly effective. One thing they are not is new. I didn't invent the techniques or prove their efficacy. Researchers and educational innovators such as Marzano, Pickering, Archer, and Slavin did this for me.

Here's a final word before I list and unpack the techniques: *flow*. As an artist who loves to sit and practice the drums or guitar for hours at a time, I'm captivated by Csíkszentmihalyi's research on flow. Flow, which is somewhat analogous to engagement, is the mental state of a person who, when involved in an activity, is fully immersed in a feeling of focus, involvement, and success. When a person feels flow, he or she feels content and alive. Csíkszentmihalyi (1993) describes the feeling as "being carried away by a current, everything moving smoothly without effort" (p. xiii). What I love about teaching is that it's an opportunity to experience flow. Everyone in your classroom experiences flow when you

Figure 1.4. The Six Teaching Chops

Use the following instructional techniques and practices to supercharge your reading program:

1. Direct and explicit instruction
2. Social and cooperative learning
3. Whole-class physical response
4. Task analysis and mastery learning
5. Explicit modeling and practice
6. Formative assessment

teach a great lesson. Your teaching is strong, and your kids are engaged and happy. You and the students are engrossed and having fun, and the time just flies by. I believe that when you teach with effective instructional techniques as your foundation, you're much more likely to get into a state of flow.

In an educational world bursting with techniques and strategies, I've chosen to focus on six that are especially effective and engaging. Figure 1.4 provides my six teaching chops in a list, each of which I briefly explain next. In upcoming chapters, I explain in greater detail how each is used in reading and writing instruction.

Direct and Explicit Instruction. A staple of the instructivist camp, direct instruction is highly effective and time efficient (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Modeling and mastery learning is intimately connected to this instructional routine, as is explicit modeling and practice. Like social and cooperative learning and whole-class response, direct instruction is a way to more fully engage students in whatever information or skill you're trying to teach. It's often referred to as "I do, we do, you do."

Social and Cooperative Learning. This type of instruction is student centered, easy to do, and effective (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). I love to use think-pair-share, buddy reading, small-group brainstorming, and other types of social and cooperative learning groups. The three specific activities that I listed are only the tip of the iceberg, of course. It's possible to make cooperative learning the focus of your classroom or even school, and some people choose it as their number one value. I choose, however, to focus on a few simple techniques. I'll elaborate on each as they occur in later chapters.

Whole-Class Physical Response. If you frequently teach to the whole class, make all the students respond via some type of physical signal. This keeps the kids engaged and helps you monitor their understanding. Plus, it's fun! Options for ways to respond include response cards, vocabulary

cards, whiteboards, and body signals, such as thumbs-up/thumbs-down, fist of five, and head-shoulders-knees-toes.

Task Analysis and Mastery Learning. When teaching a complex task, such as writing a haiku or reading a poem, it's easy to overload struggling learners with too many unknowns. Therefore, you want to analyze the larger task and make sure you teach only one unknown aspect at a time. My wife, a fabulous music educator (and yes, I'm biased), swears by task analysis. She calls it the law of one unknown. Her mentor, Dawn Baker, formerly of Kent State University, called it making tea. Whatever the name, it's all about explicitly introducing one piece of information or one skill at a time. This increases the student's chance of mastering the information or skill (Rosenshine, 2012). The idea of mastery is critical to teaching and central to this book. Teachers and school systems must decide what content and skills are essential for students to master.

Explicit Modeling and Practice. Students learn more when you explicitly model everything that you expect them to do, make them practice everything you model, and motivate them as they practice it multiple times (Rosenshine, 2012).

Formative Assessment. Formative assessments are ongoing and frequent assessments that occur throughout the teaching and learning process. They're foundational to good teaching because they provide real information about students' knowledge, habits, and thinking. Formative assessments are fundamentally different from traditional end-of-the-week summative assessments (on story elements, spelling, grammar, etc.), which, by comparison, give teachers a score and confirm a student's self-impression as smart or not so smart but do little to help a teacher move the student toward mastery in critical areas of reading and writing.

Not only do formative assessments guide your future instruction, but they also validate your current instruction. When your assessments show that 85–90% of your students are at or above the critical reading benchmarks, then your instruction is working. Shine your halo and give yourself a pat on the back! If your classroom scores are below this level, your instruction has yet to take hold. As you know, because of reading difficulties, impaired cognitive functioning, lack of motivation, or a terrible home life, some students need a long time to fully master the meaning of dozens of vocabulary words, read passages of grade-level text fluently, or write well-constructed paragraphs. Therefore, it's best to collect data every two to four weeks on each student's progress toward the most important reading and writing benchmarks. Only formative assessments allow you to collect this kind of data.

Content and Instructional Mastery

If values 1 and 2 are the culmination of my years as a teacher of children, then values 3 and 4 are the culmination of my years as a teacher of teachers. During my 10 years as a trainer, I visited and observed many excellent teachers, all of whom demonstrated a combination of content and instructional mastery. Now that I'm back in the classroom as a Title I reading teacher, I strive to combine my valued big ideas and instructional techniques every time I teach, be it a 30-minute intervention session or a two-hour core reading class.

Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff (2011) found that the knowledge a masterful teacher imparts to students impacts them not only immediately but also over a lifetime. But what makes for a masterful teacher? It's difficult to pin down. More and more researchers, though, say that effective teachers are a combination of big ideas and teaching chops. I agree with David Chard (2011), dean of the School of Education at Southern Methodist University: "High-quality teachers must have two things: knowledge of content and effective instructional strategies" (para. 8). I value the big ideas because as a reading teacher, I feel it's important to understand the theories that are foundational to reading and writing. Mere knowledge, however, is not enough. You've got to be able to walk the walk. This is why I also value teaching chops. Skillful teachers are like doctors: Doctors use their knowledge to diagnose and cure health problems, and teachers use their knowledge to diagnose and cure learning problems.

Combining content knowledge and instructional pedagogy is where the rubber meets the road. When I'm working with "cute as a button" but "fidgety as a squirrel" kindergartners, some of whom are struggling to master the sounds of individual letters, I must thoroughly understand the alphabetic principle *and* have the chops to hold their attention and impart some information. This aspect of teaching—the art of blending knowledge and performance—is also what I love about performing music. My hope is that you'll see my passion for this blending and be moved to master content and instruction, too.

Not to go off the rails here, but I see the lack of teacher-clinicians as a big problem for the field of education. Many master teachers leave the field, migrating to administration, consulting, or private industry. They have knowledge and expertise, but they're no longer "doing" in the classroom. In other cases, expert teachers are in the classrooms but can't exercise their knowledge and skills because they're restrained and confined by scripted basal programs, controlling school boards, and/or untested educational models championed by administrators.

Finally, many public school systems aren't very good at creating effective classroom reading programs. Why? In some cases, it's because district administrators and university professors who consult with them have little K–12 classroom experience, and their demanding jobs prevent them from immersing themselves in classrooms for any meaningful length of time. This limits their pragmatic and practical knowledge and creates an excess of book knowledge (theory, policy, frameworks, etc.). Because they haven't lived where "the rubber meets the road," these folks don't truly understand how a particular model, assessment, or curriculum unfolds in the classroom. Thus, untested and unworkable models and programs are implemented and then abandoned when it becomes apparent that they don't work in the reality of the classroom. The cycle always begins again, though, because there's always something new to try, even if it's really not worth doing.

In other instances, teachers aren't very good at implementing an effective reading and writing program. These teachers are doing something, but it's not exemplary teaching. Some years ago, during a training session, I chatted over a break with a man who had been teaching reading for almost 17 years. I was shocked when he asked me to slowly restate the big ideas in reading. "Could you repeat those?" he asked. "I want to write them down. I really don't know reading very well." At another time, I observed a teacher using the Wilson Reading Program with a group of four struggling readers. When I talked briefly with the teacher after her lesson, she told me how happy she was to be using the Wilson materials. "Finally," she said, "after 30 years of teaching reading in special education, I feel like my teaching is effective!" As Charlie Brown would say, "Good grief!" I don't know if these comments were born of a breakdown in professional development, a lack of motivation to take the reins and teach themselves what they needed to know, or a combination of the two. Regardless, I was left wondering about teacher effectiveness.

The most effective reading teachers have mastered both content and instructional practice.

All of this leads me back to Waldorf and Montessori. I believe schools need to develop a philosophical foundation of educational values that's strong enough to exist over time. What could this foundation consist of? The big ideas in reading and writing, for starters, and the effective instructional strategies needed to teach them to children. Every reading teacher must have (or should be working toward) a deep understanding of what the big ideas are, how they work together as students move from emerging to established readers, and how to teach the big ideas by using effective and efficient instructional strategies.

How Do the Common Core State Standards Apply?

Unlike Waldorf and Montessori schools, many public schools never establish an essential baseline of content and instruction values that persists over time. Guided reading programs come and go. Heterogeneous groups in a full-inclusion program exist for a short time and then flip to homogeneous groups and pull-out programs. A basal series gives way to a readers' workshop model, only to return to a core reading program a few years later.

The implementation of competing assessments, curricula, and programs also inhibits the establishment of a philosophical baseline. Students are subjected to too many tests (e.g., DIBELS, DRA, 4Sight, Terra Nova, InView) and summative basal assessments, which suck up huge amounts of time but lead to little instructional change. State standards and core program content compete with essential reading program standards, many of which may be out of sync with a school's report card. Attempts are made to combine Response to Intervention with professional learning communities while, at the same time, essential learning and vision statements are created and rolled out via a collaborative teaching model and differentiated curriculum mapping. Huh? Trying to make sense of this educational gobbledygook is more difficult than developing a grand unified theory in physics!

These schools are like barnacle-ridden boats, slowed by the weight of ever-accumulating programs, curricula, and standards. Much is added, but little is ever scraped away. After years of no scraping, the poor little school boat is so encrusted that it can barely glide through the water. So, why bring the Common Core State Standards into the picture? Isn't the Common Core just another barnacle to cement onto the hull?

First of all, states expect to see district curricula based on standards. These standards are the focus of high-stakes tests. Although the worst of that era may be drawing to a close, accountability is important, and accountability tests will continue to be a part of our teaching lives in the foreseeable future. Second and more importantly, reading standards, when they aren't ridiculously broad or laden with minutia, provide a summary of the most important content and instruction. A few focused and well-stated standards provide the essentials of what to teach.

Constructed from past standards from multiple states and informed by the standards of other countries, the Common Core State Standards are designed to provide a strong, focused, and cumulative set of standards that every district in every state can use. Compared with the reading and writing standards of Pennsylvania (my state), I find the Common Core to be more lean and muscular.

When it comes to reading, the Common Core provides 10 reading standards for literature per grade level and 10 for informational texts. I love the idea of focusing on 10 essential standards and four foundational skills. Why? Teachers cannot thoroughly teach the dozens of standards found in state documents and core reading programs. Simply put, when everything is expected, nothing is essential. The word *essential* is by definition a limiting term.

To draw a musical analogy, an orchestral violinist strives to do a few things really well. His or her performance standards are to accurately play pitch, rhythm, tempo, and dynamics. Add general musicality to the list, and you come up with five music standards. These standards guide the violinist regardless of whether he or she is playing Bach, Brahms, or the Beatles. That's what makes them so powerful, so essential.

Thankfully, many of the Common Core State Standards, such as "ask and answer questions," "know and apply grade-level phonics," and "read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension," mirror what I already value. This means that when I teach, I'm not struggling to integrate competing standards. My core values are found in the Common Core language, and vice versa. When I use a comprehensive reading program *and* the ideas in this book, I know I'm teaching many of the Common Core State Standards. In each of the upcoming chapters, you'll see how the Common Core and the big ideas of reading and writing intertwine and overlap, and you'll come to a better understanding of how to focus on a few concepts to cover many standards.

Asking and Answering Questions

Once you accept the four values and agree to give them a try, questions will begin to form in your mind: How do I create opportunities for extended reading and teach more authentic writing? Which activities do I use to teach phonics in my spelling and writing block? Which instructional techniques do I focus on first? These questions and many others are answered and discussed in upcoming chapters.

In a general sense, though, you move the four values into a core reading program by carrying out the actions at the top of the four values graphic (see Figure 1.1), namely:

- Make it so by first creating time (i.e., get rid of basal "stuff") and then picking an idea presented in Super Core and doing it.
- Keep track of how it's working, mostly through formative assessments but also through anecdotal notes and the occasional summative or benchmark assessment.

Pretty simple, yes? Of course, it's easier to talk about a process than actually do it. But if you start small and make a commitment to taking action, you'll have a slightly more effective program in three months, a moderately more effective program in two years, and a much more effective program in three to four years.

However, if you want to go for the gusto, you can rocket to a very effective core reading program in two years. Don't fool yourself, though. Current wisdom says it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become a masterful musician, basketball player, or painter. Running a highly effective reading program is no different. It may not take 10,000 hours, but it will take considerable time and effort to get an extended reading and writing program up and running.

Getting the Go-Ahead

Regardless of whether you take action incrementally or in one giant leap, you'll first need to get the blessings of an administrator. It's important that your principal and/or curriculum director gives the go-ahead to make changes in your basal program. Basal programs are often treated like sacred cows. Some administrators enforce a program's fidelity with an iron fist, and others consider interpretation and modification to be big no-nos. If the latter is your district's position, work to convince your administrator to take a leap of faith, for basal programs are not and never will be the be-all and end-all. Core programs alone will never provide students with the extended, real-world reading and writing experiences that are necessary to accelerate their reading achievement.

This book provides you with the facts, activities, and action steps that you'll need to make a case for change. I suggest you start the change with a relaxed summer meeting between you and your principal. In the past, you've probably received informational articles and books from administrators, so perhaps you'll want to return the favor and give them a copy of this book prior to your meeting. Then, armed with knowledge and determination, go into that meeting, look your administrator in the eye, and say,

> Ms. Administrator, I'd like your permission to modify the core reading program. Why, you ask? Well, let me tell you! I want to make my reading program more engaging and effective. I want to see greater growth in my students' reading scores. I want to give my students books on their independent and instructional levels so they can read, read, read. I want to give them opportunities to write about what they know so they are motivated to write, write, write and spell, spell, spell. I want my students to leave the classroom with skills and strategies so fully learned that they'll automatically employ them in later grades. And, yes, I want my program to be more fun!

Press your administrator (politely, of course) until you hear her say, "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes! Please make it so. You have my permission!"

Reading Winners

The space race of the 1950s and 1960s was a contest between the United States and the U.S.S.R.: Who had the best rocket? Who would launch the first orbiting satellite? Which country would be the first to land a man on the moon? Although we are also engaged in rocket building—in this case, a reading rocket—our vehicle isn't part of a contest or competition. In our endeavor, there should be no losers, only winners. Reading winners are students who successfully rise to meet the benchmarks of decoding, fluent reading, and comprehension. And reading winners are students who successfully land in first or third or fifth grade with feelings of facility and confidence.

As you read through the upcoming chapters, I hope you'll see how the four values can transform your basal program into a supercharged reading rocket, one powerful enough to push all of your students into reading orbit. But don't just take my word for it. Tens of thousands of teachers, possibly many more, have embraced these types of values for decades. Talk to the teachers you most admire, and I bet you'll find that they've been working to incorporate these values into their reading and writing programs all along.