

Reading Instruction in Kindergarten: Little to Gain and Much to Lose

In the United States there is a widespread belief that teaching children to read early — in kindergarten or even prekindergarten — will help them be better readers in the long-run. Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence that this is so. How then did this idea take hold so strongly?

The 1980s saw the beginnings of a shift in kindergarten education from play-based experiential approaches to more academic approaches, from hands-on exploration to worksheets and teacher-led instruction. The new approaches gained momentum like a snowball growing in volume and speed. They were given a mighty push by No Child Left Behind and another by Race to the Top's early childhood competitive grants, causing many to describe kindergarten as the new first grade.

Under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) the snowball has escalated into an avalanche which threatens to destroy appropriate and effective approaches to early education. The kindergarten standards, in use in over 40 states, place huge emphasis on print literacy and state bluntly that, by the end of kindergarten, children are to “read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.” Large amounts of time and money are being devoted to this goal, and its impact is felt strongly in many preschools as well.

Many children are not developmentally ready to read in kindergarten. In addition, the pressure of implementing the standards leads many kindergarten teachers to resort to inappropriate didactic methods combined with frequent testing. Teacher-led instruction in kindergartens has almost entirely replaced the active, play-based, experiential learning that we know children need from decades of research in cognitive and developmental psychology and neuroscience.^{1 2}

When children have educational experiences that are not geared to their developmental level or in tune with their learning needs and cultures, it can cause them great harm, including feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and confusion. A grandmother from Massachusetts told this story:

My 5-year-old grandson adored his play-based preschool, but it was a different story when he started an all-day, very academic, public kindergarten. From the first day he had mostly worksheets and table tasks, which he said were “hard.” On the fifth day of kindergarten he refused to go to school, locked himself in his bedroom, and hid under his bed!

Kindergarten and the Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards, the academic standards detailing what K-12 students should know in English language arts and mathematics, are provoking controversy across the educational and political spectrum. For kindergarten alone, there are more than 90 standards that young children are expected to meet. In this paper, we address the literacy standards for

kindergarten, specifically the one that pertains to reading: “Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.”

While other Common Core kindergarten literacy requirements begin with the words “With prompting and support...,” this one does not. There is a strong expectation that by the end of kindergarten children should be reading basic books on their own with purpose and understanding. We could find no research cited by the developers of the CCSS to support this reading standard for kindergarten. In fact, the current CCSS website, which attempts to address many of the criticisms of the standards and tries to make the hidden process of development more transparent, only cites “scholarly research” and states that all standards are “evidence- and research-based”.³

Researcher and educator Mercedes Schneider, author of *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who’s Who in the Implosion of American Education*⁴ and an upcoming book published by Teachers College Press, has documented the lightning-quick writing of the CCSS and has found no evidence that they are based on research.

If they [the writers of the CCSS] were interested in research they would have started with kindergarten and piloted the standards for a few years and then made adjustments based on their research — and built slowly from there. There is absolutely no evidence that developmental stages were considered. That is a major problem across the standards and especially for the youngest grades. Anyone who has a cursory knowledge of development knows that it is not linear and that children do not all develop at the same rate — there is a span.

In fact, of the people on the committees that wrote and reviewed the CCSS, not one of those individuals was a K-3rd grade teacher or an early childhood professional.^{5 6}

Preparing children to read has become the dominant activity in most kindergartens. A recent study by University of Virginia researchers found that already in 2006 kindergarten teachers spent as much time on literacy activities as on mathematics, science, social studies, music and art combined.⁷

Now, as the Common Core standards take hold across the country, literacy has taken over even more space in kindergarten classrooms, crowding out many high-quality learning experiences young children need. In a survey by Defending the Early Years (DEY) of about 200 early childhood teachers (preschool to grade three) across 38 states, 85% of the public school teachers reported that they are required to teach activities that are not developmentally appropriate for their students.⁸ A New York public school kindergarten teacher with more than 15 years of experience reported:

Kindergarten students are being forced to write words, sentences, and paragraphs before having a grasp of oral language... We are assessing them WEEKLY on how many sight words, letter sounds, and letter names they can identify. And we’re assessing the “neediest students” reading every other day.⁹

While the timetable for children's cognitive development has not changed significantly, society's expectations of what children should achieve in kindergarten have. A recent two-year study by the Gesell Institute in New Haven found that "children are still reaching important developmental milestones in much the same timeframe as they did when Dr. Arnold Gesell first published his data in 1925."¹⁰

Gesell used 19 measures to ascertain a child's development. Among them were asking children to look at and draw a circle, cross, square, triangle, divided rectangle, and more complex forms. A clear pattern emerged. He found an age span for each task, but also a clear pattern of when most children could accomplish the task. By age three most children could replicate the circle, but most could not copy the cross or square until age 4.5. They could draw the triangle by 5.5 but could not copy the diamond until after age 6. The Institute's recent study, given between 2008 and 2010 to about 1300 children across the country, found almost identical results.¹¹ The *Harvard Education Letter* described the findings under the heading: "Kids Haven't Changed; Kindergarten Has."¹²

- **Many children are not developmentally ready to read in kindergarten, yet the Common Core State Standards require them to do just that. This is leading to inappropriate classroom practices.**

The Evidence on Early Reading Instruction

To report on the question of early reading, Professor Sebastian Suggate summarized his own studies and those of others that shed light on the issue. Suggate is a professor of psychology from New Zealand who teaches at the Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences in Bonn, Germany. In 2007 Suggate began to study childhood reading, which became the topic of his doctoral thesis. His studies raise serious doubts about the effectiveness of early reading instruction. In his doctoral thesis Suggate concludes that there is no solid evidence showing long-term gains for children who are taught to read in kindergarten.¹³ In fact, by fourth grade and beyond, these children read at the same level as those who were taught to read in the first grade. Suggate has continued to study the question of why children should learn to read at five when those who learn at six or seven do just as well by age 11. He also considers what harm is done by focusing so much kindergarten time on reading instruction, leaving little time for other much-needed activities.¹⁴

Dr. Marcy Gudemi, executive director of the Gesell Institute, reports:

Dr. Arnold Gesell found that all children go on the same path of development; however, some go faster, some go slower, and all have spurts and set-backs along the way. The obvious example is the age that children learn to walk. Some children learn to walk as early as nine months, some as late as 15 months. But that is all normal and we all agree that the early walker is not a better walker than the later walker. A similar example is the age that children learn to read. Some children learn to read at age three or four years, others not until seven years or later. That range is quite normal. The most compelling part of the reading research is that by the end of third grade, early readers have no advantage

over later readers. Some later readers even go on to become the top in their class. Reading early is not an indicator of higher intelligence. In fact, children at the top of their class in kindergarten only have a 40 percent chance of being at the top of their class at the end of third grade.¹⁵

While it is true that some children in kindergarten and the early elementary grades do need specific kinds of extra support in learning to read, the kind of support needed and when it is given is highly individual. It is competent, skilled teachers who can best recognize whether a child needs specific support or is progressing more slowly and simply needs more time.

- **No research documents long-term gains from learning to read in kindergarten.**

Long-term Gains from Play-based Early Childhood Programs

A number of long-term studies point to greater gains for students in play-based programs as compared to their peers in academically-oriented preschools and kindergartens in which early reading instruction is generally a key component.

Findings from HighScope's Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study, for example, suggest long-term harm, especially in the social-emotional realm, from overly directive preschool instruction. In this study, begun in the late 1960s, 68 children from low-income homes were randomly assigned to one of three preschool classes. Two were play-based and experiential. The third was a scripted, direct-instruction approach. Interestingly, there were very similar short-term gains among the children in all three programs at the end of year one. But the children were followed until age 23. By that time, there were significant differences in social behavior.¹⁶

School records indicate that 47 percent of the children assigned to the direct instruction classroom needed special education for social difficulties versus only 6 percent from the play-oriented preschool classrooms. And by age 23, police records showed a higher rate of arrests for felony offenses among those who were previously in the instructional program (34 percent) compared to those in the play-based programs (9 percent).

Rebecca Marcon found negative effects of overly-directed preschool instruction on later school performance in a study of three different curricula, described as either "academically oriented" or "child-initiated."¹⁷ By third grade, her group of 343 students — 96% African American with 75% of the children qualifying for subsidized school lunch — displayed few differences in academic achievement programs. After six years of school, however, students who had been in the groups that were "more academically directed earned significantly lower grades compared to children who had attended child-initiated preschool classes. Children's later school success appears to have been enhanced by more active, child-initiated early learning experiences."¹⁸

A study with similar outcomes was done in Germany where play-based kindergartens were being transformed into early learning centers in the 1970s. The study compared 50 kindergarten classes using each of the two approaches. The children were followed through grade four, and those from the play-based programs excelled over the others on all 17 measures, including being more

advanced in reading and mathematics and being better adjusted socially and emotionally in school. As a result the German kindergartens again became play based.¹⁹

- **Research shows greater gains from play-based programs than from preschools and kindergartens with a more academic focus.**

How Young Children Learn

All aspects of the child — cognitive, social, emotional, and physical — are inextricably linked in learning. Through engaging in meaningful experiences in the real world, including in creative play and interactions with caring adults, children build skills and knowledge onto what they already know. Within the overall patterns of development, each child's trajectory is unique. Children develop at different rates and come from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds; they build new ideas onto their prior understanding and experiences. Thus, any child's learning in any given situation is distinct.

Children learn best when they are engaged in activities geared to their developmental levels, prior experiences and current needs. As they construct their ideas through play and hands-on activities that make sense to them, children's knowledge builds in a gradual progression that is solid and unshakable. They build a foundation of meaning that provides the basis for understanding concepts in language, literacy, math, science and the arts. In active learning, their capacities for language development, social and emotional awareness, problem solving, self-regulation, creativity, and original thinking develop, transforming them into effective learners.

- **Children learn through playful, hands-on experiences with materials, the natural world, and engaging, caring adults.**

How does experiential, play-based learning create the foundation for print literacy?

Our written language is a system of abstract symbols that represent the spoken word. Young children take years to build the foundation they need to be able to make sense of print. An important aspect of this process is being able to understand these abstract symbols.²⁰ Children learn that real things can be represented by symbols when they play and use hands-on materials. For example, a toddler might pretend that his wooden block is a phone to call daddy, a preschooler might turn her mud pie into a birthday cake, and a kindergartener might draw a picture of his family. Children engage in symbolic activities like these throughout the early years of childhood. Very slowly, especially in a print-rich environment and with the guidance of a skilled teacher, children begin to find meaningful ways to bring letter symbols into their play scenarios. This progression is gradual and very important; the great many ways that children use symbols in their play with materials builds the strong foundation for understanding the abstract symbols in our print system.

Being able to read well will also depend on the strength of a child's oral language development. Active, play-based experiences in the early years foster strong oral language in children. As children engage in active learning experiences and play, they are talking and listening all the

time. They attach words to their actions, talk with peers and teachers, learn new vocabulary and use more complex grammar. As they build, make paintings, and engage in imaginative play, they deepen their understanding of word meanings. As they listen to and create stories, hear rich language texts, sing songs, poems and chants, their foundation for reading grows strong.

Early education can also provide children with a wide range of life experiences that enrich their understanding of the world and help them comprehend the content of books. For children who have not experienced gardens or farms, forests or parks, supermarkets or a host of other public spaces, references to them in books can be puzzling. But teachers can help children plant seeds and tend them, name animals and care for them, visit parks and streams, and broaden their first-hand knowledge of the world around them. Through classroom activities, projects, and field trips, teachers strengthen children's background knowledge for making sense of print

- **Active, play-based experiences in language-rich environments help children develop their ideas about symbols, oral language and the printed word — all vital components of reading.**

Respecting Children’s Developmental Timeline

Many early learning experts, including those at Bank Street College of Education in New York, recommend a slow but solid start in preschool and kindergarten so that a foundation can be laid for a lifelong process of language development and reading. Bank Street's handbook²¹ for reading tutors describes most children in preschool, kindergarten, and even first grade, as “emergent readers,” and first and second graders as “early readers.”

According to Bank Street, the “emergent reader” understands that written language conveys messages, and the child often pretends to read and write. They begin to match spoken words with print and may know some letter names and some letter sound associations. They may recognize some words and letters in one environment but not in another. They can write some letters, usually those in their own names, and some words, but may still reverse letters. They mostly use upper case letters. This alone is in great contrast to the Common Core kindergarten standards which require that children know *all* the alphabet, both upper and lower case.

In first and second grade when the children become “early readers,” Bank Street describes them as being more attentive to print. They understand that books have exact and unchanging messages carried by print and pictures. They can identify most letters by name, and can use some letter/sound knowledge (i.e. the sound of the first letter) to help figure out words. They know the meaning of some punctuation (capitals and periods), but may not use them consistently in writing and reading. They can recognize, by sight, a small but growing store of words in different contexts.

Today we have hurried the reading process, and it is common to expect kindergartners to be early readers rather than emergent readers. We are setting unrealistic reading goals and frequently using inappropriate methods to accomplish and assess them. At DEY and the Alliance for Childhood, we hear increasing reports of kindergartens that use worksheets and drills, rely on

lengthy whole-group lessons, and require teachers to frequently pull children out of the classroom to administer assessments. The impact on students, families and educators is intensifying. A parent recently wrote:

My 5-year-old son started Common Core Kindergarten this year in California. Even though it's only been two months he is already far behind. His teacher asked, "What kind of preschool did he go to — it must have been a lot of play." Of course it was a lot of play! That's what I wanted for him! She warned me he would probably be getting some "area of concern" grades come November... [W]e are required to do ... [worksheets] four nights a week. It's the same boring thing over and over again. (Especially the reading homework)... I know he's not stupid but I'm being told in not so clear terms that he is. It's very disheartening.²²

The intense academic pressures described and documented in the Alliance for Childhood's 2009 report *Crisis in the Kindergarten*²³ have only intensified. Susan Sluyter, a veteran kindergarten and preschool teacher from Cambridge, Massachusetts describes it this way:

I have experienced, over the past few years, the same mandates that all teachers in the district have experienced. I have watched as my job requirements swung away from a focus on children, their individual learning styles, emotional needs, and their individual families, interests and strengths to a focus on testing, assessing and scoring young children, thereby ramping up the academic demands and pressures on them.²⁴

- **We are setting unrealistic reading goals and frequently using inappropriate methods to accomplish them.**

The Role of Teachers in Early Literacy

The teacher's role is crucial in helping children build a solid foundation in early literacy. The teacher sets up an environment that will engage children in a wide range of activities and establishes a warm and accepting relationship with each child.

Activity centers and experiences maximize their learning and ignite their interests and encourage deep engagement for extended periods of time. Such classrooms are typically filled with open-ended materials that spark investigation, imagination, and problem solving: wooden unit blocks, sand and water, play dough, objects from the natural world, and a wide range of building, collage and art supplies. With open-ended materials children can work on concepts at their own level as they develop and invent their own ideas.

Teachers carefully observe children in activities and play, identifying the concepts and skills each child is working on, asking questions, making suggestions, and providing follow-up activities to extend learning. Teachers use what they've learned from these observations to facilitate literacy development for each child. They are concerned with cognitive, physical, social, and emotional concepts and skills and artfully choose which to focus on with each child in a given moment. As they do so, they try to unite a child's interests and skills with the specific

goals they have for that child. In the early childhood setting, assessment through careful observations of children, their work, play, and social interactions provide authentic and broad-based documentation of student growth and progress. This lies in sharp contrast to computer-based or other standardized assessment tools.

In play-based kindergartens and preschools, there is true intentionality around literacy and language. Teachers employ many strategies to expose children to rich oral language and print — without bombarding or overwhelming the child. These may include telling stories, reading picture books and big books, singing songs and reciting poems, reading from posted charts (using pointers to read along), drawing and writing with invented and conventional spellings, taking dictation from children, and helping children write their own stories. In organic and meaningful ways, teachers often use print — labeling block structures, cubbies, and interest areas, writing recipes, transcribing the children’s stories, and making charts for attendance or classroom jobs. These broad experiences with oral and print language help children associate familiar objects and activities with print.

- **In play-based kindergartens and preschools, teachers intentionally design language and literacy experiences which help prepare children to become fluent readers.**

Inequality and Standards-Based Accountability

The focus on Common Core State Standards ignores the impact of poverty and the need to fund children’s education and health equitably. A massive amount of research conducted over the past several decades in the United States and in countries throughout the world consistently shows that families’ socioeconomic status is the most powerful correlate of student achievement.²⁵ Attention to the Common Core is a diversion from addressing the underlying issues of economic inequality that contribute to the achievement gap between low-and high-income students.²⁶

With the Common Core standards, all children are expected to achieve at the same level by the end of the kindergarten year. Yet, children in underserved communities do not receive the same educational resources as do children from wealthier communities. Residential segregation by income has increased during the last three decades across the United States and in 27 of the nation’s 30 largest major metropolitan areas.²⁷ Because a large percentage of funding for public schools comes from local property taxes, schools in low-income communities have fewer experienced teachers, more crowded classrooms, and fewer resources. The wealthiest highest-spending districts are now providing about twice as much funding per student as the lowest-spending districts, according to a federal advisory commission report, and this disparity helps to explain the growing achievement gap between lower and higher-income children.²⁸

Over the past decade of data-driven accountability and high-stakes testing, the inequalities in our education system have increased²⁹ and the child poverty rate has grown.³⁰ Linda Darling-Hammond writes:

Ignored by our current education policies are the facts that one in four American children lives below the poverty line and a growing number are homeless, without regular access to food or health care, and stressed by violence and drug abuse around them. Educators now spend a great deal of their time trying to help children and families in their care manage these issues, while they also seek to close skill gaps and promote learning.³¹

- **The adoption of the Common Core State Standards falsely implies that having children achieve these standards will overcome the impact of poverty on development and learning, and will create equal educational opportunity for all children.**

Strategies for Reversing this Trend

Most children are eager to meet high expectations, but their tools and skills as learners as well as their enthusiasm for learning suffer when the demands are inappropriate. High-stakes assessments are adding to their anxiety. They feel less in charge of, and invested in, the learning process — and their internal motivation is thwarted. They begin to feel that learning, and its deep satisfactions, do not belong to them. Many early childhood experts agree that the current pushdown of teaching of reading skills to 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds that used to be associated with older children is demoralizing young learners.

We see increased stress in children, teachers and families. We also see a weakening of the foundational capacities for learning that children should develop in the early years. We foresee lasting effects on children's health and wellbeing from both the increased stress to meet unrealistic goals, and the loss of skills and capacities that are no longer developed in kindergarten — and are increasingly lost from preschool classrooms as well.

We therefore call for the following actions and urge parents, educators, health professionals, and others to work with us to bring about the recommended changes in policy and practice:

1. Withdraw kindergarten standards from the Common Core so that they can be rethought along developmental lines.
2. Invest in high quality, long-term research to identify which approaches in preschool and kindergarten best help children become fluent readers by fourth grade and beyond, paying particular attention to children living in poverty.
3. Convene a task force of early childhood educators to recommend developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive guidelines for supporting young children's optimal learning from birth to age 8.
4. End the use of high-stakes testing with children up to third grade and the use of test scores for teacher evaluation and the closing of schools. Promote the use of assessments that are based on observations of children, their development and learning.

5. Ensure a high level of professionalism for all early childhood educators. Strive to reduce the income achievement gap by placing experienced teachers in low-income communities. Invest in high-quality teacher preparation and ongoing professional development.

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³ Common Core State Standards Initiative. 2014. *Frequently Asked Questions*. <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/frequently-asked-questions/>.

⁴ Schneider, Mercedes. 2014. *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

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¹⁰ Guddemi, Marcy, A. Sambrook, S. Wells, K. Fite, G. Selva and B. Randel. 2012. "Unrealistic Kindergarten Expectations: Findings from Gesell Institute's Revalidated Developmental Assessment Instrument." *Annual Conference for Early Childhood Research and Evaluation 1*. http://www.highscope.org/files/GuddemiM_Proceedings2012.pdf.

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¹⁶ Schweinhart, Larry J. and D. P. Weikart. 1997. "The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study through age 23." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 12. pp. 117-143.

¹⁷ Marcon, R.A. 2002. "Moving up the grades: Relationship between preschool model and later school success." *Early Childhood Research & Practice* 4(1). <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/marcon.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Darling-Hammond, Linda and J. Snyder. 1992. "Curriculum Studies and the Traditions of Inquiry: The Scientific Tradition." Edited by Philip W Jackson. *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*. MacMillan. pp. 41-78.

²⁰ Christie, James F. and Kathleen A. Roskos. 2006. "Standards, Science and the Role of Play in Early Literacy Education." Chap. 4 in *Play = Learning*, edited by Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta M. Golinkoff and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc. p. 62.

²¹ *Bank Street College of Education Emergent Readers and Writers*. (n.d.) <http://bankstreet.edu/literacy-guide/early-literacy-development/emergent-readers-and-writers/>.

²² Email from R.S., October 22, 2014.

²³ Miller, Ed, and Joan Almon. 2009. *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*. College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood. <http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/publications>.

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²⁹ Karp, Stan. 2013. "The coming Common Core meltdown." *The Washington Post*, January 23.

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About the Authors

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Geralyn Bywater McLaughlin has 25 years of experience in early childhood education and is the Director of Defending the Early Years. Geralyn is an advocate for playful learning and works to support other teachers in becoming activists on behalf of young children. She is a founding teacher (and current early childhood teacher) at the Mission Hill School — a teacher-led, democratic Boston Public School.

The Alliance for Childhood was founded in 1999 by educators and health professionals out of a deep concern for the decline in children's health and well-being. It promotes a healthy and creative childhood for all children through its Decade for Childhood: 2012-2022. Its projects focus on play-based experiential learning in preschools and kindergartens and restoring play throughout childhood. It collaborates with Alliance groups in Europe and Brazil and with many organizations in the U.S. www.allianceforchildhood.org

Defending the Early Years (DEY) was founded in 2012 to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. DEY is committed to promoting appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and supporting educators in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices. DEY is a non-profit project of the Survival Education Fund, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 educational organization. DEYproject.org

Kindergarten has become the New First Grade

Below examples from the CCSS literacy standards for kindergarten. The CCSS website states, “*Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards and retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in preceding grades.*” However, there is no evidence that mastering these standards in kindergarten rather than in first grade brings lasting gains. To achieve them usually calls for long hours of drill and worksheets — and reduces other vital areas of learning such as math, science, social studies, art, music and creative play.

Fluency

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.4: Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding

Print Concepts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.1.D: Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.

Phonics and Word Recognition

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.3.B: Associate the long and short sounds with common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.9: With prompting and support, identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.7: Participate in shared research and writing projects

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.K.4.B: Use the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (e.g., *-ed*, *-s*, *re-*, *un-*, *pre-*, *-ful*, *-less*) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word.

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