Navigating the Text Selection Gauntlet: Exploring Factors That Influence English Teachers’ Choices

Naomi Watkins and Jonathan Ostenson

This article details the results of a survey project that seeks to understand the factors that influence teachers’ decisions about instructional texts in the English classroom. The survey, delivered to 339 teachers in a western state where the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been adopted, asked teachers to identify influential factors in these decisions, to discuss challenges they face in selecting texts, and to speculate about the possible influence of the CCSS on these decisions. The results indicate that teachers attempt to make careful decisions about texts, weighing curricular factors as well as student needs and interests. However, teachers make these decisions in complicated contexts where resources are tight and practices such as whole-class novel study make these decisions difficult to make well. These results suggest that teacher educators evaluate traditional practices such as the whole-class novel to improve educational practice in English classrooms.

Introduction

Teachers make many decisions on a daily basis, both in their planning and in their interactions with students: considering which objectives to focus on, which activities to use in helping their students learn, how to respond to their comments or challenges in class and out. These decisions matter to us as teacher educators, as both of us work at the university level teaching and supervising preservice teachers; we are also both former secondary English teachers. Thus, we are invested in the preparation of future teachers and the form that instruction takes in English classes. While we seek to prepare teacher candidates to be strong, professional teachers, we are also interested in the way decisions like these are currently made and how they might be improved.

In particular, a significant set of decisions made by teachers in English language arts classrooms involves the texts used for classroom instruction and
out-of-class, independent reading. Decisions about texts can have far-reaching consequences for skill development and even for secondary students’ attitudes toward reading. These decisions have taken on new consequence given the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2010). These new standards direct teachers to use a variety of increasingly complex texts within and across grade levels. The CCSS assesses text complexity using quantitative and qualitative dimensions in addition to considerations of readers and tasks. An entire appendix of the CCSS is devoted to explaining these components of text complexity, providing a rationale for why more complex texts are needed in classrooms, and including highly criticized lists of texts (Moss, 2013) that are deemed appropriately complex using the CCSS guidelines (see Appendix A of CCSS).

In the April 2013 issue of this journal, the editors suggested, in light of changing circumstances such as the adoption of the CCSS, that English teacher educators ought to give careful consideration to “how we instruct our students to think about the texts they plan to teach” in their future classrooms (Rush & Scherff, 2013, p. 211). To better instruct the future English teachers with whom we work, English teacher educators need to understand how teachers make decisions about which texts to use in the classroom; by determining which factors play a role (and the degree to which each factor plays a role) in these decisions, we can better prepare students for the realities and challenges they will face in making these decisions.

There is no shortage of criteria and guidelines designed to help teachers make sound decisions about children’s literature and instructional texts (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2015; Graves, Juel, Galda, & Dewitz, 2010; Rush, Ash, Saunders, Holschuh, & Ford, 2011), including help with “matching” texts to students in the elementary grades (McGill-Franzen, 2009). But a worthy question to consider is, given the constraints placed on teachers in current education settings, are these ideals being implemented in practice? Some insight into teacher practices in text selection can come from surveys of the texts that English language arts teachers assign in classrooms (Applebee, 1989; Squire & Applebee, 1968; Stallworth, 1997; Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006; Stotsky, 2010). These surveys have shown that not much has changed in nearly 100 years: most titles teachers choose are written by white males from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. While the most recent studies suggest that there is an evolving attitude toward “classic literature” evidenced by newer teachers embracing more varied titles (such as multicultural texts), the traditional canon still holds sway (Hale & Crowe, 2001). Research, however, has shown that motivation and engagement are key factors in
helping students adopt literate behaviors (Alexander & Fox, 2011; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), causing some to question the assigning of canonical texts (which dominate the CCSS exemplar lists for secondary grades) that may not be as interesting or relevant to teenagers (Gallagher, 2009; Gallo, 2001; Monseau & Salvner, 2000).

Teachers may not always put into practice the principles advocated by researchers and academics. While we know which factors researchers and policymakers suggest that teachers use to select texts, and we know which texts they are using, little research exists on how teachers actually make these important text decisions (Doubek & Cooper, 2007). Do they use the suggested factors for selecting text? Are there other factors that influence their text selection decisions? And how do teachers foresee the increasingly important Common Core standards (with their accompanying exemplar text lists) influencing how they select texts?

In the research reported here, we sought to understand the factors that influence teachers’ decision-making regarding texts, their attitudes toward these decisions, and if recommendations on how to select texts figure into these decisions. A greater understanding of the realities of the text-selection process can help us prepare current and future English teachers to better meet the challenges of selecting texts, especially in a climate where text selection is under increased scrutiny.

The Context for This Study

Much of the literature on text selection focuses on the suggested factors that teachers should use when selecting text. In reviewing the literature, we first discuss the factors that teachers have been directed to use when selecting text and then examine the research that has identified which factors do, in actuality, influence teachers’ text-selection decisions.

Factors That Teachers Have Been Directed to Consider in Text Selection

Work on text selection has focused on providing tools and criteria for teachers to use when selecting texts for use with students in their classrooms. These tools and criteria are largely based on examining factors that make text difficult while taking into consideration students’ needs and abilities. The goal of these guidelines is to help teachers understand which factors make text more difficult or complex, enabling them to select texts that are appropriate for their students. Making this match between reader and text is not an easy task, as the breadth of the literature suggests. We have broken
the review here into quantitative and qualitative considerations, in line with categories used by the CCSS.

**Factors Assessed Quantitatively**

Some text factors, such as word and sentence length and cohesiveness, may best be evaluated using quantitative methods such as readability formulas. Readability formulas “focus on the characteristics of the words themselves and their appearance in sentences and paragraphs” (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 21), rather than textual meaning or content. Computer software typically measures these factors. While some readability formulas, such as the tool developed by Fry (2002), provide a simple readability score of a text, other formulas, such as Lexile, are used to measure both texts and readers. The idea with this latter assessment is for teachers to determine students’ reading levels using the software and then select texts that match student ability levels. Many programs compile databases of “leveled text,” where an individual can type a text title into the database and receive immediate information on its level or examine a compiled list of texts (e.g., Guided Reading). Given its ease of use, this method is an extremely popular way of selecting text.

However, critics of quantitative text measurements voice concern over reducing texts to mere numerical values and ignoring other factors that influence text difficulty, such as content and genre. They note that readability formulas do not provide precise grade-level estimates, with some off by one-half to one whole grade level, and they are not necessarily sensitive enough for early-stage readers and texts (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Mesmer, 2008).

Additionally, the science of quantitative text measurement has turned into a moneymaking enterprise for publishers and developers. Accelerated Reader, a popular reading incentive program, uses a formula similar to Lexile, the *ATOS Readability Formula for Books*, which is free to use. The ATOS does not require the entire text of a book for the assessment (it requires at least 5 samples of 150 words and an estimate of the entire book’s word count), which is problematic given that a text may not be the same level throughout. And while the ATOS is freely available, making it more accessible for users, Renaissance Learning, the company that owns Accelerated Reader, requires users to purchase their tests that are aligned to specific books, which, in turn, limits students’ book choices (Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008).

On the other hand, the Lexile measurement does measure texts in their entirety, but only does so for a fee (see Lexile website: https://www.lexile.com/tools/lexile-analyzer/using-the-professional-analyzer/), which could also burden financially strapped teachers, schools, or districts. Additionally,
“all major publishers of school and trade texts for the educational market provide Lexiles on their materials. . . . Further, numerous states require information on the LS [Lexile] for purchase of materials with state funds” (Heibert, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, these quantitative measures are widely used because they are often already embedded within reading programs that school districts purchase.

Factors Assessed Qualitatively

Rubrics and checklists have been developed to aid teachers in evaluating texts and readers qualitatively (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CSSI], 2012; Chall, Bissex, Conard, & Harris-Sharples, 1996; Fisher et al., 2012; Galda et al., 2013; Graves et al., 2010). These tools frequently assess factors such as density, complexity, purpose, genre, organization, text features and graphics, vocabulary, and content. Teachers evaluate these factors with a given text, generally using a sliding scale or a yes/no checklist. For example, Graves and Graves (2003) suggest that teachers consider 10 factors that influence text difficulty—six factors that are inherent in the text itself (vocabulary, sentence structure, length, elaboration, coherence and unity, and text structure) and four factors that involve the reader and the text (familiarity of content and background knowledge required, audience appropriateness, quality and verve of writing, and interestingness). They suggest that these factors be used “to consider carefully, to ponder . . . to decide whether or not a particular text ought to be used with a particular group of students” (p. 301). The CCSS documents provide a rubric that assesses similar features (CCSSI, 2010). These suggestions, as with those from Graves and Graves (2005), take into consideration the readers and tasks involved with the text, recognizing that a “perfect” text can vary greatly depending on the background knowledge, motivations, and cognitive abilities of students (Fisher et al., 2012). Teachers are also directed to collect interest inventories from students to help in selecting texts, assuming that if teachers know the interests of students, texts that include these interests should be used (Flynt & Cooter, 2004).

As with any qualitative measurement, rubrics, checklists, and inventories do not provide a sure answer as to the “level” of a text but assume that teachers have a level of knowledge about texts and students that helps inform decisions. One of the greatest challenges to these tools is that they can demand a significant amount of time; results can also vary greatly among users. These qualitative tools are often used in tandem with quantitative text measurements—after a teacher determines that a text is in the range of students’ reading levels, the teacher then more closely examines the text qualitatively to make a good match with readers. Many reading instruction
frameworks and programs, such as Reading Recovery (Peterson, 1988) and Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), use leveled text based on both quantitative and qualitative measures, using both types of tools to make informed decisions.

Factors That Teachers Report as Influencing Their Text Decisions

Research has examined the factors teachers report affecting their text decisions. Teachers’ knowledge and familiarity of text, as well as their personal taste, heavily influence the texts they choose (Applebee, 1993; Friese, Alvermann, Parkes, & Rezak, 2008; Jipson & Paley, 1991). Teachers report selecting texts based on instructional goals or alignment to curriculum; policy and institutional constraints also play a role (Applebee, 1993; Friese et. al. 2008). A text’s accessibility and availability greatly influences what teachers choose. Additionally, teachers consider the text’s appeal to students and its literary merit (Applebee, 1993).

Teachers also largely consider the potential community reaction to texts. Stallworth et al. (2006) explored teachers’ reasons for including or excluding texts, specifically multicultural and young adult literature. Even if teachers expressed interest in including multicultural literature in their classrooms, they did not do so because they feared problems (real or imagined) with community discontent over the literature’s content. Additionally, Wollman-Bonilla (1998) found that preservice teachers rejected texts for classroom use for one of three reasons: texts contained content that could frighten or corrupt, texts failed to uphold accepted societal values, or they called attention to issues such as racism or social problems.

More recently, Friese et al. (2008) initiated a discussion about the process involved in text selection decisions through a case study of four pairs of preservice and inservice English language arts teachers. They identified factors such as teacher knowledge of texts, access to texts, and institutional constraints influencing text-selection decisions. Importantly, they also noted that participant comments revealed high-stakes testing strongly influenced these decisions.

While these studies provide a background for understanding some of the factors influencing the text selection process, they uncover just a glimpse about institutional constraints, including limitations of resources, the level of teacher autonomy, and the pervasive influence of testing. In the post–No Child Left Behind world, and especially with the recent widespread adoption
of the Common Core State Standards, it is important to revisit teachers’ text-
selection processes. The goal of the study we describe here was to examine
teachers’ decisions in light of the evolving climate in which they work so as
to better identify challenges that our future English teacher students will
face as they move into the classroom. Having identified the realities of the
world in which today’s teachers operate, we can better prepare our preservice
teachers to make good decisions about texts in the classroom.

**Methods**

The instrument used in this study was an online survey deployed with
Qualtrics software that featured a combination of multiple-choice items,
rank-order and sliding-scale responses, and open-ended response items.
Participants were asked to identify factors that influence their decisions and to
discuss the challenges they face in selecting texts. Other survey items asked
participants to consider how the adoption of the CCSS might influence these
decisions and asked how much autonomy they had to make their own deci-
sions about texts. In addition, participants were asked about factors specific
to a text that influence their decisions (e.g., length, genre, quality, ease of
access) and about outside sources that they might consult in making deci-
sions. Survey items were based on prior research that examined these factors,
but we also sought to expand previous research by asking teachers about the
levels at which these decisions are made, how they felt about these decisions,
and the level of relative influence these factors had on their decisions.

A final group of survey items solicited demographic information about
participants, including how long they had been teaching, the population
of their school, their level of education, and other similar characteristics.
These items were designed to gather descriptive data about our participants.

While the survey items designed for this study had not been used
before, the survey was piloted with teachers outside the state from which
final participants were selected. Their responses were analyzed and, where
appropriate, adjustments in wording or ordering of questions were made to
help with clarity of the survey and validity of responses.

Public school English language arts teachers (grades 7–12) in a Moun-
tain West state where the Common Core standards have been formally
adopted were invited via email to participate in the survey; a total of 1,377
invitations were sent. (A small number of these teachers were known to one
of the researchers given his work with local area teachers as part of his as-
ignment to supervise student teachers. Their responses, however, were in
Email addresses for these teachers were culled from faculty listings on public middle and high school websites. Reminder emails were sent after two weeks to those who had not completed the survey. A random drawing for three $20 gift cards was offered as an incentive for completing the survey. The survey was available for 30 days, after which it was closed and incomplete surveys were discarded. A total of 339 teachers completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 25 percent.

Responses to the survey were divided into two categories for analysis: quantitative responses and open-ended responses. Participant responses to the multiple-choice items were gathered within the Qualtrics software, which automatically generated statistics on the frequency of each response to the item; the minimum, maximum, and mean values of specific responses; and the variance and standard deviation of responses to each item. Because the purpose of our study was largely descriptive, no additional statistical tests were run on the collected data. The open-ended responses were analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers began first by reading through the responses and looking for identifiable patterns or themes that emerged from those (for instance, the frequent mentions of financial issues facing teachers when selecting texts led us to identify that as a theme). With a set of themes identified, then, these responses were reread and coded using these themes to help the researchers identify the primary themes that emerged from participants’ responses.

Participants

Of the 339 public school English teachers who completed the survey, 81% were female and 19% male. One-fourth (24%) reported having fewer than 5 years of teaching experience and one-fourth (26%) reported having between 6 and 10 years; 15% of respondents indicated more than 25 years of experience. The majority of these teachers work in schools with a student population between 500 and 1,500 students (68%) and in suburban settings (65%), while 24% teach in rural schools and 12% in urban settings.

An overwhelming majority of the teachers (88%) received an undergraduate degree in English; 10% of respondents reported holding a master’s in English or literature and 42% a master’s degree in another field. Twenty-eight percent reported holding a reading endorsement with 8% reporting that they were currently enrolled in classes toward an endorsement; more than half (65%) did not hold an endorsement. When asked whether they...
received training in how to select text, 47% replied that they recalled receiving explicit training in this area as part of their teacher training at the university or college level. Of these teachers, the majority (91%) reported that this training was at least somewhat helpful to their practice. (See Table 1 for a summary of the characteristics of participants.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of Teaching Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–5 years</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10 years</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–15 years</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–20 years</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–25 years</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Population</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fewer than 500 students</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–1,000 students</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,001–1,500 students</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,501–2,000 students</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,001–2,500 students</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,500+ students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Setting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rural</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urban</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree(s) Held</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undergrad in English</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undergrad in other</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s in English</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s in other</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Endorsement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>currently pursuing one</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no endorsement</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

In this section, we first report teachers’ perceived levels of autonomy regarding text selection and the levels at which they feel most text decisions are made. Although teachers reported high levels of autonomy, they also reported that these decisions are made in contexts that often place constraints on this freedom, particularly at local and state levels. To explore the dimensions of their autonomy in context, we next discuss the factors that teachers report affecting their decisions (which, at times, limited their freedom to choose books), followed by a discussion of the challenges teachers face when making these decisions. Lastly, we share the results of teachers’ thoughts regarding the potential impact of the Common Core.

Level of Decision-Making and Autonomy

Teachers were asked to indicate how much autonomy they felt in decisions about texts and then asked about the level at which these decisions were made. A solid majority of teachers reported feeling “complete autonomy” or “a lot of autonomy” (see Table 2); nearly half indicated that decisions were made at the department or grade level, with the district level being the next most common response (see Table 3).

When asked about the texts they have and use in their classrooms, 80% of teachers reported having a literature anthology. Of those with antholo-

| Table 2. Teachers’ Perceived Level of Autonomy in Decision Making |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Level of Autonomy | Number of Responses | Percentage of Total |
| Complete Autonomy | 44 | 13% |
| A Lot of Autonomy | 168 | 50% |
| Some Autonomy | 88 | 26% |
| Little Autonomy | 31 | 9% |
| No Autonomy | 8 | 2% |

| Table 3. Teachers’ Reporting on the Level of Decision Making |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Level at Which Decisions about Texts Are Made | Number of Responses | Percentage of Total |
| National | 4 | 1% |
| State | 8 | 2% |
| District | 108 | 32% |
| Department/Grade Level | 160 | 47% |
| Self or Classroom | 59 | 17% |
gies, only 7% reported using their anthology frequently (every day or almost every day); 52% acknowledged using the anthology at least once a week. All teachers with a classroom anthology reported that, on average, one-third of their instructional texts came from the anthology. The majority of teachers responding in this survey, then, use texts other than the school or district-provided textbook; when they do use an anthology, our results suggest that teachers still feel a great deal of freedom when selecting texts from that anthology for classroom study.

To shed light on the role other people might play in these decisions, we asked respondents to rank order potential stakeholders and how much influence these groups may have on these decisions (see Table 4). Most respondents indicated department or grade-level personnel as being most influential (defined as ranking them first or second in their list). District stakeholders were the next most influential group, followed by state institutions; national institutions and community members tied as the least influential.

Teachers were asked in an open-ended question how satisfied they were with the level of decision-making regarding text selection. Those teachers who reported being satisfied felt that despite some constraints, they still had autonomy, noting that while there was often a district-approved list of texts from which they had to choose, they still had choice within this list and were happy with the listed texts. As one teacher commented, “The final decision about what we read in my classroom is up to me.” Other satisfied respondents mentioned how they saw safety in district-approved lists or the group decision-making process, discussing how either their department or the school district conferred on which texts to include on the approved list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>1 (6%)</th>
<th>2 (3%)</th>
<th>3 (6%)</th>
<th>4 (10%)</th>
<th>5 (23%)</th>
<th>6 (53%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Departments pr Personnel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department/Grade-Level Personnel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents or Community Members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Teachers’ Ordering of Stakeholders’ Influence
They explained that if a parent complained about a district-approved text, they could receive support from the district to continue using it. Interestingly, teachers seemed to feel more autonomy over shorter texts in the classroom than they did over whole-class novels. They felt more pressure to select the “right” novel for everyone to read and felt that they had more wiggle-room when selecting shorter texts since they did not need to be on district-approved lists.

Those teachers who were dissatisfied with the level of decision-making most often cited the frustration of this district approval process, complaining that it takes a great deal of time to get a text approved at the district level. These teachers also noted that they felt limited by the district-approved list, explaining that they felt pressure to teach canonical literature or were restricted by the set of texts available in the school. They noted that even if the text was district-approved, it might still not be physically available to teach at their school, thus limiting their choices further.

Factors Influencing Text Selection Decisions

The next set of results deals with factors that influence teachers’ decisions about the texts they choose to use. When we asked teachers to report these factors, we had them consider how the factors inherent in the texts and instructional contexts as well as outside stakeholders (such as district personnel or parents) or other sources might influence the decisions they make about texts.

**Instructional Context and Text Features**

Teachers were given a list of potential factors that could influence their decisions about which texts to use in the classroom. These factors were largely centered on instructional context and quantitative and qualitative features inherent to texts, as indicated by the research in the field. Teachers were asked to indicate all factors that had an influence on their decisions, so they could select more than one factor. Table 5 shows a complete list of the results from these survey questions. The three most frequently selected factors included purpose for using a text, its applicability to the curriculum, and the readability of the text. The quality of the writing and ease of access to the text were other frequently indicated factors.

So that we could better understand the relative influence of the factors, teachers were then presented with a list of the factors they had selected and asked to indicate how much influence each factor had in their decision-making process. These results (see Table 6) show that the vast majority of
Table 5. Factors That Influence Decisions about Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor (sorted by most frequently chosen)</th>
<th># of teachers indicating this factor influences decisions about texts</th>
<th>% of total indicating this factor influences decisions about texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose for Using the Text</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability to the Curriculum</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readability Level</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Writing</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Access</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Significance</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Community Values</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required by District/Curriculum</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation from Someone Else</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion in Anthology</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright Issues</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Amount of Influence of Individual Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor (sorted by greatest level of influence)</th>
<th>Percentage of Teachers Reporting This Level of Influence (due to rounding, values may not add to 100)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose for Using the Text</td>
<td>Significant Influence 74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability to Curriculum</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Writing</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required by District/Curriculum</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readability Level</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Access</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Significance</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion in Anthology</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright Issues</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Community Values</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation from Someone Else</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
teachers who indicated that the purpose for using a text was a significant factor in their decision-making felt this factor had either “a lot of influence” or “significant influence” in the decision-making process. The next two most important influences were the text’s applicability to the curriculum and the quality of its writing, respectively. While only 52% of respondents indicated that a text required by the district or curriculum was an influential factor in making decisions about a text, 83% of those listing this as a factor indicated it had either significant or a lot of influence on those decisions. Similarly, while only 10% of respondents selected copyright issues as a factor they considered, 46% of those same respondents indicated that these issues had either “a lot of” or “significant” influence on their decision-making.

Additional Factors

In an open-ended prompt, teachers were asked to identify additional factors that were not listed in these survey items. Many commented on considering potential student engagement with a text (Will students like it? Is it relevant to their lives?). Some teachers also stated that the text needed to be of interest to them, too. As one respondent stated, “I HAVE to like something before I ever share it with students.”

Many teachers spoke to a “grade-level tradition,” meaning that specific texts are taught in specific grade levels at their schools or districts. Some accepted that such an organization needed to exist so that students were not repeatedly reading the same texts from grade level to grade level. However, others expressed frustration with this tradition, explaining that they were not able to teach certain texts because “they were another grade level’s text,” even when they believed that the text would be a good match for their current students.

This mention of grade-level tradition also appeared in reference to required-reading lists either at an Advanced Placement level or from a district-approved reading list. Teachers often selected texts from these lists because the list represents what they are “supposed” to teach, because this is what other teachers are teaching, and/or because the lists provide some safety in regard to parent objections.

Teachers also consider texts that connect to the content that students are learning about in their other classes. For example, teachers commented that they might select texts about the Holocaust when their students are learning about this historical event in their history classes. They also select texts related to essential questions or around a common theme that they have self-selected.
Teachers were asked to indicate external sources (some of a professional nature) that they looked to for recommendations or advice in their search for classroom texts. Only a small number of respondents indicated using no outside sources at all (see Table 7). Of those who did use external sources, an overwhelming number of them indicated that they used recommendations from other teachers. Many teachers also indicated relying on librarians, department chairs, professional journals, and professional websites.

### Challenges Faced When Selecting Text

We used an open-ended question to ask teachers to comment on the challenges they face when trying to balance these factors and make decisions about texts. Participants listed many challenges that they face and our analysis of their responses yielded a number of themes.

Not surprisingly, many teachers noted budget constraints as most influencing what they used in the classroom. Many teachers mentioned personally purchasing most of the texts that they use, and they discussed how money in turn influenced text availability. One respondent stated, “Sometimes money is a factor. For many years, the English department had zero dollars for books and other materials. When we do have money, we have to go through...
a rigorous process of justifying the titles we intend to purchase—the books should be heavily used and serve multiple teachers.”

The theme of budget constraints was echoed in comments about an English department book repository or a “Book Room.” Many teachers explained how their text choices were constrained by the whole-class text sets that were available in the repository. Some respondents were satisfied with the text sets their departments owned, while others mentioned that many of these texts were outdated or were not interesting or engaging to them nor their students. However, many voiced sentiments similar to this teacher: “It’s better to have some books that I don’t particularly like rather than no books.”

Another theme that emerged was the challenge of finding appropriate texts. Teachers stated that it is challenging to find texts that not only appeal to students’ interests but that also align with their needs, reading levels, and backgrounds—and at the same time manage to be sufficiently challenging and complex. One teacher commented, “In all of my classes, I have ELLs, 504s, and IEP-accommodated students, and intentional non-learners along with my average and gifted students. It’s a little bit challenging to find a text from which everyone can take personal meaning and feel like they are being stretched.” Another stated, “In a class of 35, there will be 35 different personalities, levels of reading interest and comprehension, and reading habits. It’s hard—probably impossible—to pick a book that EVERYONE connects with, understands, appreciates, and learns from.” Comments like these were most often made in regards to selecting whole-class novels rather than shorter texts used as supplements.

Additionally, teachers remarked that finding texts that contain “appropriate” content, especially when teaching in a more conservative community, is challenging. Many remarked that they had difficulty finding texts that were interesting to students as well as non-controversial to parents. Several respondents cited specific texts that they were not able to teach due to parental concerns: “It’s difficult to choose age-appropriate texts since the community is so conservative yet the students I see in class have already been exposed to serious topics and issues.” Another respondent stated, “Not all teachers, parents, and community members agree on what is ‘appropriate.’”

Time was the last challenge offered by respondents. They commented that it took vast amounts of time to identify and locate texts, to read what is available, and to make sure that the texts meet all needs (both curriculum needs and students’ needs). As one respondent noted, “[I] consider myself a competent judge of appropriate materials, but it takes a long time to gather recommendations, obtain them, and read them.” Another frequent pattern from the responses concerned the limited amount of time available in class
to read and teach texts, especially from teachers who had limited funds and only had access to class sets of books.

Common Core Influences

In the last part of the survey, teachers were asked to share their feelings about the upcoming implementation of the CCSS and what impact (if any) they thought that these standards, the exemplar lists included in the standards, and the pending assessments might have on their test-selection decisions. In the state in which the survey was conducted, the State Office of Education has taken significant steps to provide resources for districts to implement the CCSS; individual districts have had freedom in establishing a timetable for adopting the standards. Most districts have at least begun this process, with many having presented professional development initiatives on the Common Core since the summer of 2011.

This push to implement the standards is reflected in teachers’ familiarity with the exemplar text lists presented in the appendices of the CCSS documents: 88% of respondents reported that they had looked at the exemplar list. Another item asked teachers to report how much weight (or how much consideration) they expected to give the exemplar text lists when making decisions about texts. Most reported that they would be giving these titles at least some weight (60% of respondents), with 25% of teachers reporting that they expected to give a lot of weight to these lists; only 16% claimed they would give little or no consideration to the lists.

The survey also asked teachers, based on the grade levels they reported teaching, to look at the exemplar text lists (reproduced from the CCSS documents) and to respond to two survey items asking them to consider how likely they would be to replace texts that they currently use with texts specifically from these lists. The responses to these items are given in Tables 8 and 9.

In these results, many teachers express the likelihood of using one or more of the texts listed in the exemplar lists in their instruction in the future. Even though some of the texts on the exemplar list may already be in use in teachers’ classrooms, the results shown in Table 8 indicate that 51% of teachers acknowledge a willingness to replace up to half of the texts they currently use with those listed in the exemplar lists. Teachers’ comments on open-ended survey items about the influence of these lists shed further light on their attitudes. Some teachers worried that even though they recognized that this list offered only examples of types of texts that should be taught, they would nevertheless be “forced” to teach them by their school or district. Concerns also came from how teachers perceive the increased
emphasis in the CCSS on nonfiction texts, which may compel many teachers to incorporate more of these kinds of texts as supplements or replacements for literary texts currently in use. This response from one respondent is typical of these comments:

Before the Common Core adoption, I would have said that I have complete autonomy in selecting my texts. [The Common Core] has forced me to exchange some of the literature that I find useful for more nonfiction. I think too much responsibility for teaching these nonfiction texts has been thrust on ELA teachers, and that change came from far away from the classroom—too far, I think.

It is important to note here, however, that the CCSS documents explicitly state that English language arts teachers are not to be the only teachers (or even the primary teachers) working nonfiction texts into their curriculum.
(see CCSS Introduction, p. 5). However, until that message is spread and understood more broadly among district leaders and teachers, concerns like the one above are likely to influence English language arts teachers’ decision-making.

**Discussion**

Overall, we found that when we asked teachers to identify the influences that shape their decisions about selecting texts, they indicated that they attempt to use the suggestions present in the research literature reviewed earlier. They consider their curricular goals, the needs of their students, and the readability of potential texts as they make these decisions. However, it is critical to note that currently, teachers make these decisions within challenging contexts, and it is these challenges that teachers frequently referenced as proving the most difficult to navigate as they tried to use the suggestions provided in the research literature.

As those with a special interest in helping improve teaching and teachers (both those currently in the classroom, but especially those soon to enter the profession), the implications of these challenges are important for us to consider. We cannot simply present our English teacher candidates with the principles that “should” guide their decision-making without helping them understand the nature of the challenges they will face and how to potentially navigate those challenges. We cannot simply present our English teacher candidates with the principles that “should” guide their decision-making without helping them understand the nature of the challenges they will face and how to potentially navigate those challenges. To do so, we treat in this section the issue of autonomy as we interpret it from teacher responses as well as the two dominant concerns teachers expressed in the decision-making process: matching students to appropriate texts and dealing with mandates such as the CCSS.

**Teachers’ Sense of Autonomy**

The majority of teachers responding to the survey noted that they felt a lot of autonomy in selecting texts for their classrooms. However, a close look at their responses about the challenges they face and the factors that influence their decision-making suggests that this feeling of autonomy is more nuanced than we might initially infer.

This freedom exists, based on our analysis of teachers’ responses, within the context of limited budgets and issues of community and grade-
level concerns about selections. This autonomy is not limitless but, rather, is constrained by practical considerations that teachers readily acknowledged in our survey but seemed to be willing to work within. Perhaps, we suggest, teachers report feeling autonomy because, compared to having a dictated set of texts from which they must work, these teachers feel that they have latitude (within the practical concerns mentioned) to choose the texts they see as best. In fact, these findings imply that finding the best match between student and text would not be as frustrating for teachers if they had greater latitude in choosing which texts they used in class.

For teacher educators, this suggests that we must be honest and explicit with our students about the challenges they are likely to face when in their own classrooms. For instance, if as future teachers our students are unlikely to be able to choose any text they want to teach, it is perhaps unwise for us to allow them to do so when completing assignments in our methods classes. We are better serving our students if we acquaint them with the limits within which they will make choices about texts. In addition, we must be attuned in our instruction to such reform efforts as the CCSS, given that these efforts are likely to shift the nature of some of these challenges, altering the real and perceived autonomy of teachers. Students who leave our programs clearly aware of the challenges they will face and equipped with some strategies for dealing with those challenges (as we discuss later in this section) will hopefully be less frustrated and more effective in the choices they make.

The Challenge of Matching Students with the “Right” Text
The results of this survey show that teachers want to make effective decisions about the texts they use in class, as demonstrated by the importance they place on such factors as curricular fit, readability, and the quality of the texts they use. In their written comments, teachers returned frequently to the idea that they wanted to select the “best” text to match their readers’ abilities, interests, and needs; their comments further suggest that this decision is most problematic when they are looking for a single book that will be used in whole-class study.

In choosing a book for whole-class study, budget limitations frustrated teachers, many of whom expressed a desire to choose newer or more relevant titles for students but lamented the lack of funds to do so. Teachers are often forced to choose the “lesser of the evils” from the texts that are already available to them—either based on the titles on a district-approved list or from those texts that are physically in English department closets or on classroom shelves. These lists, while they understandably address community concerns
about the content of instructional materials, do restrict teachers’ autonomy and their ability to find the best match between text and student. Applebee (1993) noted that “departmental lists provide larger schools a measure of continuity and consistency in what is taught” (p. 79), but the price of this consistency might be teacher frustration and limited real autonomy. And while teachers reported having knowledge of text selection resources, these constraints limit access to and the ability to choose which resources to use. It may be due to these limitations that teachers reported relying most frequently on fellow teachers as outside resources: Their peers are a readily available and free and relatively safe source of recommendations about texts. As Friese et al. (2008) noted, “the absence of any of these elements may result in text selections that do not fully meet the needs of readers” (p. 93). Their lack of ability to meet students’ needs clearly frustrated the teachers in our study.

These frustrations are understandable, given the slim odds that a single book will meet the needs of all the students in a typical secondary English language arts classroom. How, though, do we as teacher educators best prepare our future teachers for the reality of selecting texts for the classroom as portrayed in this study? A first step might be to examine how we (perhaps unconsciously) propagate the notion that a single novel chosen for whole-class study can meet all students’ needs rather than acknowledging the reality of the near impossibility of this. We should consider, instead, equipping our teacher candidates with the strategies they will need to differentiate the study of literature to meet their future students’ needs.

To that end, we advocate for approaches to teaching literature that better meet secondary students’ needs and address the realities the future teachers we work with will face in selecting texts. For instance, we can share with our teacher candidates approaches such as literature circles or book clubs that have secondary students reading and discussing literature in small groups with different books assigned to or chosen by each group (Daniels, 2001; O’Donnell-Allen, 2006). Choosing a book suited to the needs of a smaller group of 5–6 students is a more realistic endeavor, and these approaches also allow for more student choice in the process of choosing a book to read in the group.

Similarly, we can encourage the teacher candidates in our methods courses to approach the teacher-directed study of literature using shorter texts such as short stories and poetry and essays as described, for example, by Campbell (2007). Campbell found that using shorter texts allowed her to incorporate a wider variety of texts (from classics to more contemporary and multicultural selections), thus better addressing more of her students’ needs, both in terms of interest and ability. In addition, she noted that the
length of these texts allowed for more efficient in-class reading and more effective strategy instruction; this approach also resulted in students reading quantitatively more than they typically did when faced with longer, more intimidating novels. We should note that not every shorter text is going to appeal to every reader in a class, but we suspect that the briefer time spent with shorter texts will ameliorate negative reactions when compared to the weeks of class time typically spent with book-length works.

The amount of concern shown by teachers in this survey about matching a whole class of readers to the “right” text could also be indicative of challenges they face in teaching a whole-class text. While there are potential benefits to having the entire class focus on a single text, not least of which may be the community building that comes from the shared experience, these benefits might be lost if the books are taught in uninviting ways (Gallagher, 2009). Rather than expecting the book and its contents to engage all of the readers in our classrooms, we should assume that onus as teachers and craft learning activities and assessments that are more engaging for students and that, consequently, motivate them to engage meaningfully with the selected text.

Understanding how to craft such instruction is, we acknowledge, likely a shared goal of all teacher education programs. One approach that we would recommend is making the texts we choose part of an inquiry unit framed around an essential question that relates the content of these texts to students’ lives and concerns. When Burke (2010) has described his successes in framing instruction this way, he considered “what questions [the text] asked and which ones related most to students’ experience” (p. 77). Wilhelm (2007) has likewise suggested that making inquiry the center of our instructional approach makes content “matter to students by generating a real purpose for content and students’ personal connections to that curricular material” (p. 8). Both authors, building on a foundation laid earlier by the widely respected work done by Wiggins and McTighe (1998), document numerous examples of how such an approach has not only successfully engaged students in rigorous learning but also increased their motivation. Sacks (2015) details her many years of experience in teaching the whole novel and argues against the “chopping up” of these longer texts and over-analyzing these segments in ways that end up fragmenting the experience and dampening student interest in the books.

In light of the challenges many teachers (including those in our survey) report with teaching the whole-class text, some have advocated for moving completely away from the tradition of teaching whole-class texts (Atwell, 1998; Fisher & Ivey, 2007; Miller, 2009, 2012). These scholars suggest
that independent, student-driven reading choices can provide them with more authentic reading experiences, can help better address their needs and interests, and can encourage students to take ownership of the choices that independent, mature readers make. These approaches have merit and certainly deserve our attention, but they are not necessarily a fit with the realities in which the teachers in our survey work under, given their concern about whole-class texts. We should acknowledge to the future teachers in our methods classes that the single text for a whole class is a reality they will face in their classrooms, and embracing effective pedagogical approaches to the whole-class text is critical to helping our students be successful in this context. At the same time, we should encourage them to recognize the benefits of providing choice and independence in reading instruction wherever possible.

This discussion of different approaches must still acknowledge the limitations teachers face in terms of budgets. How do we prepare our future teachers for this reality, one that we do not see being resolved anytime soon? We can suggest to students that money spent on anthologies might be better spent on other texts—novels or shorter pieces—that are tailored to the needs of the young readers in their classrooms. If students in our methods classes have a field experience, they could interview practicing teachers about how purchasing decisions are made in their school or district; reflecting on these processes and how they might influence them in favor of their future students would be a useful exercise for our English education students. In addition, we can share with our students the methods that other teachers have found to help alleviate limited funds, including relying more on school and public libraries for books, writing grants or seeking donors to help supplement funds, and looking in places where books are offered inexpensively (such as garage sales, thrift stores, or used book stores). Brick-and-mortar bookstores (and even online sellers such as Amazon.com) often have bargain sales on books. Above all, we should be instilling in our students the sense that rather than allow some of these limitations to be excuses for inaction, we should instead be creative in looking for ways to address the limitations that teachers encounter when selecting texts.

The Role of the Common Core

It is difficult to say at this point what influence the Common Core assessments are going to have on the texts that teachers bring into the classroom since, as of this writing, final assessments for the standards are still in draft form. Perhaps once they have been finalized, teachers will feel more pressure to
comply with the standards and may pay closer attention to resources such as the exemplar lists included in the CCSS documents. Regardless of the eventual role of the Common Core standards and assessments, teachers have always been (and likely always will be) accountable to some set of standards and their accompanying assessments, and those expectations clearly exert influence on decisions about texts (Friese et al., 2008). Teachers responding to this survey, for instance, cited instructional purpose and curricular suitability as the most significant factors in selecting the texts they used.

So how might the arrival of the CCSS influence the decisions teachers make about texts? The CCSS documents are clear in admonishing teachers that a wide variety of texts exists that can meet the demands of the standards and that the exemplar lists are provided only to demonstrate progressive levels of complexity and should not serve as a prescribed reading list (CCSSI, Appendix B, p. 2). However, as some teachers in this study expressed, these lists might be seen as “required reading” lists, a view that sparked concern among our participants (and is a concern that we share). These text exemplars are also potentially attractive because most of them are free and in the public domain, thus easily addressing pressing concerns about budgets and copyright issues (Moss, 2015). The results of this survey indicate clearly that teachers are familiar with the standards and exemplar texts lists. In addition, a majority of teachers indicated that they expect to use texts from the exemplar lists in place of texts that they currently use. We do not know, however, if teachers have already been using texts on the exemplar lists or if these exemplar texts appear on district-approved lists. Since teachers did not indicate a reason for making these changes, we can only speculate that they would do so as a result of increasing pressure to meet the demands of the standards.

Other factors might drive teachers to pay more attention to texts from these lists, though. Their presence on an exemplar list might suggest a connection with assessments, so teachers might see these texts as more appropriate vehicles for teaching the Common Core. And since teachers in this survey expressed concerns about the time involved in making text selection decisions, having a ready list of exemplar titles may be convenient enough to encourage greater reliance on the exemplar lists. In addition, if their colleagues embrace the idea that these texts represent a mandate for text selection, teachers (especially new or less experienced teachers) may feel increased pressure to choose from these lists, given that so many of the respondents in this survey indicated that they rely heavily on recommendations from their peers in making these decisions.
A reliance on the texts from these exemplar lists could prove problematic, though, given that many of the texts on the exemplar lists may not be as appealing as young adult titles of the past few decades; they are almost certainly less personally accessible to students, as they deal with characters and situations far removed from students’ experiences. If teachers incorporate more of the exemplar texts in their instruction, especially if they replace more contemporary and appealing texts with exemplar list texts, this would run counter to research on teens’ motivation for reading: engaged readers tend to have better reading comprehension; interesting texts engage readers for longer periods of time; readers learn more from interesting texts (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000); and students’ personal connections to a text’s content are of critical importance to their engagement (Alexander & Fox, 2011). If teachers rely more on these exemplar lists, secondary students may find the reading they do in school to be less concretely connected to their own experiences and concerns—they may, as Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found, become detached from and uninterested in this “schoolish” notion of literacy. While we do not deny that Odysseus’s trials in *The Odyssey* touch on universal themes, his experiences are not likely to connect as easily or as meaningfully to teens as those of the young man in Paul Fleischman’s *Whirligig*, which details a similar journey in a modern context with a modern teenage protagonist. Exposing students to more texts like Fleischman’s could increase their motivation for reading as well as help establish a meaningful connection to literacy behaviors. The Common Core even expressly advises teachers, as they make decisions about texts, to consider readers’ interest in the content, background knowledge, and motivation (CCSSI, Appendix A, pp. 7–8). However, this suggestion opposes those who feel that the English curriculum should expose students to a canon of literature to preserve and promote cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1988). And the authors of the Common Core documents themselves may not be entirely committed to this stance of recognizing the reader’s needs given the relatively little attention paid in the appendix to reader concerns compared to quantitative and even qualitative measures of texts. This contradiction concerns us as it seems to send a conflicted message and complicates the implementation of the standards for current and future teachers.

This discussion suggests some concrete actions we can take in English teaching methods courses. First, we should increase teacher candidates’ awareness about the wide range of available texts. With the boom of young adult literature in the last two decades, there are hundreds of potential titles we should increase teacher candidates’ awareness about the wide range of available texts.
for teachers to choose from. Future teachers who are English majors may be far more familiar with the canonical classics of British and American literature and could benefit from formal exposure to young adult literature as part of their coursework. Even so, it would be impossible to be familiar with all of these titles. Introducing our students to resources to help identify the best titles would be valuable, including reviews from sources such as Kirkus or Booklist, in *The ALAN Review* and *The Horn Book Magazine*, and on websites such as teenreads.com or voya.com. In addition, examining award lists and other “best of” lists from organizations such as the International Literacy Association and YALSA can yield specific ideas. Our preservice teachers need to understand that these resources exist and to consider how to use them as practicing teachers.

Our preparation programs should also dedicate time to helping students understand how to best make choices about text selection given the constraints imposed by standards, limited resources, student needs, and community concerns. Instructional time would be well spent in helping students see how they might take the best advantage of limited resources—by joining with other teachers in purchasing and sharing books, using the librarian and public library collections, and discouraging expenditures on expensive anthologies and expensive reading programs in favor of individual titles for classroom libraries or group reading.

We envision an activity, for instance, where teacher candidates are given a hypothetical classroom of students with a budget and asked to explain and defend how they would choose texts for that classroom. Or preservice teachers might be given a hypothetical list of books available in their future school bookroom and a hypothetical group of students and the curricular demands of the Common Core standards. They would then be asked to explain the text selections they would make in this proposed context.

As well, explicating the rationale behind the Common Core admonishments (or those of the currently dominant set of standards) is important so that these future teachers understand the expectations ahead of them. Engaging students in a critical reading of the CCSS documents (especially the appendices where much of the rationale is explained) would be critical to helping them understand the possible implications—positive and negative—of implementing these standards in the classroom. We should also share with these students what we know about making good matches with teen readers: understanding readability levels, making sense of qualitative...
mechanisms for evaluating texts, and recognizing the role that motivation plays in reading. In addition, we should critically read the standards and supporting documents as part of our teacher preparation courses to ensure that teacher candidates understand the true intent behind elements of the Common Core such as the exemplar lists and the proposed ratio of literary to nonfiction texts. Helping our students be clear about the intent of these elements will empower them to make good decisions for students in their future classrooms.

Future Research

The descriptive data gathered in this survey provide a broad view of the influences that play a role in these decisions. However, a case study examination of representative teachers would help shed deeper light on this decision-making process while also providing a richer context for understanding how the factors uncovered in this research influence those decisions. Although these results suggest which factors play a role, case studies would help us understand how they are playing a role. In addition, this approach might help us understand why teachers feel motivated to replace texts they currently use within the context of the Common Core standards. These changes could be looked at closely to see what impact the standards might have—positive and negative—on learning or students’ attitudes toward reading.

Future research might also look at teacher education programs in more detail and see what, specifically, is done as part of coursework to teach students about how to choose texts for classroom study. Once we understand better the current trends and approaches used in addressing this key decision-making process, we can better address any weaknesses in those approaches given the context of the challenges teachers face. This future research might also consider instructional interventions designed to give students practice and feedback in making these choices.

And perhaps most importantly, we would encourage future research that examines the traditions of grade-level canons and the whole-class novel. We recognize that reading is a developmental skill and that a single class of students may represent a wide variety of reading skill, interests, and needs. To assume that a single text can be found that will address the needs of every student in a large group is, to put it mildly, overly idealistic. In this context, we would be smart to ask what goals we have with the whole-class novel study and whether those are being achieved and at what cost; further, we could ask whether a different approach (such as using shorter texts for whole-class work and reserving novels for independent reading or literature circle set-
tings) might meet the same objectives while also allowing a diversity of texts to be used that will have a better chance of meeting students’ needs. Again, our unique positions as English teacher educators affords us access to both experienced teachers with insights into how text decisions affect students and classrooms, as well as to future teachers who could form an important force in bringing meaningful change into future classrooms. This gives us a unique responsibility to engage in this inquiry and explore alternatives to the whole-class novel that may not only address the teachers’ concerns expressed in this survey but also better meet the needs of today’s students.

**Conclusion**

Recent educational reforms such as the Common Core State Standards have cast new light on the important decisions teachers make about texts that are used in the classroom. These are issues that have long concerned teachers and teacher educators, as evidenced by the long-running debates about Lexile and reading levels, the literary canon versus young adult literature, and the role of content-area texts in English language arts classrooms. The results of our research here show that teachers are ultimately concerned with finding texts that are a good match for curricular goals and the students with whom they work. These decisions are made in increasingly challenging contexts where teachers come under increased scrutiny while trying to work within structures that may have outlived their usefulness. As teacher educators charged, in part, with ensuring that the best instruction is being made available to students, we have a responsibility to help understand these challenges and contribute to solutions that address them. We can do so by closely examining (and challenging where appropriate) current practices and by giving preservice teachers the tools to recognize the variety of texts that exist and exploring the best ways to use texts in the classroom.

**References**


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