Text Complexity:
A New Way Forward
or Two Steps Back?

Sherry Sanden

Under the mandates of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a), complexity is perhaps the most critical yardstick with which to gauge the appropriateness of text for student readers. Specifically, reading anchor standard 10 requires that students “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (p. 10). Beginning in grade 1, students are expected to read literature and informational text of “appropriate complexity” (p. 11) until they exit grade 12 reading text at the high end of the text complexity band “independently and proficiently” (p. 40). Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2012) contend that the CCSS expectation to purposely move students through increasingly complex texts stands in contrast to efforts by teachers to avoid the use of books considered “too hard for their students” (p. 58).

Since the publication of the CCSS, much has been written in support of using more challenging materials. For example, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) explain that the CCSS make complex reading materials an essential part of the instructional equation; the text itself becomes a scaffold toward advanced reading ability. These authors make a case for “supportive struggle,” in which “students should be provided with opportunities to struggle and to learn about themselves as readers when they struggle, persevere, and eventually succeed” (p. 11). Fisher, Frey, and Lapp recount instructional episodes in which teachers support their students in understanding pieces of complex text with an underlying assumption that the students’ reading skills are advanced in this process of struggling through the analysis. In their examples, insightful teachers and their students successfully work through challenging pieces of text with the seemingly happy result that students are stronger readers for having survived this struggle. The question left unanswered is, what happened the next day? Or a month later? Or ten years down the road, when no one was forcing these readers to tackle challenging texts? What effect does an ongoing connection between reading and struggle have on individuals’ desires to ever pick up a book again?

Though it is beyond the purview of this article to fully review the research regarding potential results of ramping up text complexity on the success of student readers, a mention of some pertinent views will provide context for the current work. For example, Morgan, Wilcox, and Eldredge (2000) found that primary readers working with literacy materials above their grade levels demonstrated instructional gains, but benefits began to fall at increasing levels of difficulty. In addition, students provided with more difficult books were sometimes less inclined to read them. Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) explained that primary students experience difficulty with current levels of text on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) because of the uneven nature of readability systems; increased demands based on text leveling may have created further word identification challenges. In addition, Hiebert...
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**Quantitative dimensions of text complexity.** The terms quantitative dimensions and quantitative factors refer to those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult if not impossible for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, especially in long texts, and are thus today typically measured by computer software.

**Qualitative dimensions of text complexity.** In the Standards, qualitative dimensions and qualitative factors refer to those aspects of text complexity best measured or only measurable by an attentive human reader, such as levels of meaning or purpose; structure; language conventionality and clarity; and knowledge demands.

**Reader and task considerations.** While the prior two elements of the model focus on the inherent complexity of text, variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student. Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject.
teachers who are tuned in to the individual needs and characteristics of each of their student readers. As Rosenblatt (1938/1983) points out,

terms such as the reader . . . are somewhat misleading, though convenient, fictions. There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. (p. 25)

Rosenblatt (1985) adds, “The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader” (p. 36). In classrooms where teachers are experts at matching readers to texts, the three components of text complexity outlined in the CCSS might prompt a well-balanced approach. However, for less-skilled teachers, the CCSS provide little guidance in using reader factors to ensure that appropriate matches are made. If, as a result, teachers’ interpretations of text complexity rely on textual factors alone, students may well face a barrage of increasingly more difficult and disconnected texts that fail to take into account their individual needs as readers.

Bringing Readers to Reading . . . and Keeping Them There

While it may be impossible to know precisely which reader considerations are essential, research provides some insight into factors that readers bring with them to interact with texts. For example, the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) named numerous features that readers utilize in the act of reading, including “cognitive capabilities (attention, memory, critical analytic ability, inferencing, visualization); motivation (a purpose for reading, interest in the content, self-efficacy as a reader); knowledge (vocabulary and topic knowledge, linguistic and discourse knowledge, knowledge of comprehension strategies); and experiences” (pp. xiii–xiv). McRae and Guthrie (2009) discuss motivation specifically, naming teaching factors that foster students’ reading motivation, including relevance, choice, success, collaboration, and thematic units. These authors explain that the opposite factors, including non-relevance, excessive control, difficult lessons, frequent individual work, and disconnected units, negatively influence readers’ motivation. In combining these two sources of information, it is obvious that there are parallels between the needs of readers and the ways teachers might accommodate those needs in linking readers and texts that can promote students’ reading motivation. These studies also imply potential pitfalls in literacy instruction that might diminish reading motivation by way of questionable decisions about text-and-reader pairings.

In the following sections, I use students’ comments on their school experiences to explore ways that their literacy needs were overlooked in reading interactions. I rely on their perspectives to discover ways that this disregard influenced their motivation to pursue ongoing literacy experiences. Finally, I discuss possible implications of these results on the consideration of text complexity in prompting reading in school settings.

Study Context

Of the 82 preservice teachers participating in this study, approximately 80 percent are white, from middle-class homes, and attended schools in the same midwestern state in which they were currently enrolled as education majors. In the sections of the introductory literacy course my co-researcher and I taught, we explored theory and practice in elementary literacy education. Embedded in discussions about effective instructional strategies was a focus on motivation and its impact on literacy learning. We demonstrated through a variety of class activities the multiple opportunities teachers have to promote students’ engagement with literacy through authentic experiences and for actual purposes. Supporting rather than hindering their students’ love of reading was a challenge we posed to all of these future teachers.

Emphasis was also placed on teacher candidates’ first-hand experiences as students, in order to better understand the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975/2002, p. 61) that might be accessed in their instructional decision-making. In an assignment early in the semester, the preservice teachers were asked to recount literacy experiences from their own histories. They created digital timelines of eight literacy events and wrote accompanying reflections about how they viewed those events from their current perspectives as literate individuals.
their own histories. They created digital timelines of eight literacy events and wrote accompanying reflections about how they viewed those events from their current perspectives as literate individuals.

Utilizing NVivo qualitative coding software, the timeline events and reflection papers were subjected to open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) by the two co-researchers. In this process, event descriptions and reflections were read one by one and labeled for the literacy concepts and perspectives contained within them. As the coding continued, comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) allowed concepts holding similar properties to be grouped under the same codes, rounding out the dimensions of each code. To address the purpose for this article, which examines the influence of text use on students’ diminishing enthusiasm toward reading, data were originally grouped under one of the following codes: (1) deterred by activity or program or teacher, (2) developing dislike of literacy, (3) dislike of reading and writing, (4) loss of interest in reading, (5) perceptions of school-based literacy, or (6) required reading. After coding, the data were consolidated into a single category (Saldana, 2013) that demonstrated ways that the use of text in these students’ experiences acted as a deterrent to their reading motivation.

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### School Text Experiences

As we examined the study participants’ descriptions, it became apparent that there were three primary ways that the use of text in their student lives became a catalyst for a growing distaste for reading. In one pattern of responses, participants explained that teachers failed to provide for students any sense of agency in their reading choices. A second set of responses discussed teachers’ use of reading materials that were disconnected from the students, either in terms of interests or purposes. A third set of responses outlined texts as sources of struggle that generated feelings of failure with literacy activities. Across all of these cases, participants expressed increasingly antagonistic views toward reading that often lasted well beyond the literacy events themselves and sometimes even colored the preservice teachers’ current literacy lives.

**Limited Choices**

For some of the preservice teachers, merely having their reading choices limited was enough to discourage their interest in reading. Many reported that they actively pursued reading when they were in control, but when teachers began to demand involvement with reading materials over which students had no choice, students rebelled. Story after story demonstrated how students began school motivated and engaged as readers, only to have their interest in reading quashed by others’ mandates overpowering their literacy choices. This is exemplified by a quote from one participant: “I used to get frustrated when I had to read books for school and could not read what I wanted to read. This was the start of me not liking reading as much as when I was young.”

One preservice teacher explained that in the early elementary grades, when she was introduced to reading and writing, she “felt very interested and excited about both of these new literacy experiences.” She reported having many early opportunities to choose books based on her own personal interests. However, she stated:

> In fifth grade we were required to read Where the Red Fern Grows as a class. Although I did like being able to share my thoughts and feelings with my classmates, I did not enjoy being told when I had to read and how far I could read ahead. This is where I began to feel completely different towards reading. When I was constantly being told what to read and given restrictions on when to read it, I felt limited.

Another preservice teacher used her own experiences to acknowledge that “it is easy to steer children away from reading and writing, which is extremely heart breaking.” She went on to explain:

> When I was younger it was obvious that I really enjoyed reading. I would read every night with my mom before I went to bed. Once I got to be literate enough to read on my own I found books that I was interested in and loved independent reading. As I got older our choices were narrowed down as to what we could read. I gave up on reading during middle school and high school simply because I lost interest in what I was reading.
It is widely accepted that there is an increased likelihood that students will engage in reading when they are permitted to choose their own reading materials (e.g., Turner, 1995; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Participants in the current study clearly expressed their feelings of detachment from reading when denied the option of choosing their own books. This sense of powerlessness over their literacy choices appears to have created an antagonistic attitude toward all reading in these student readers.

**Disconnect between Student and Text**

Some participants reported a willingness to accept directives placed on them by teachers' text choices but explained that they often failed to connect with the books they were required to read. This disconnect often caused them to view reading as an irrelevant or undesirable part of their education experience. In one example, a preservice teacher described her intense interest as a young child in learning about real-life concepts, thoroughly enjoying the informational books supplied by her parents. However, she stated bluntly, "My love for books was destroyed in school. An under-appreciation of the literacies I enjoyed made me believe they were less valuable than the ones taught in school." She explained that "when I entered into school, my views on reading quickly changed. I could no longer spend time learning from my reference books; I had to read chapter books. To me, stories don’t usually have a purpose like reference books do. I was forced to read something I didn’t value.”

Another participant explained that in spite of her motivation to read, her interests were disregarded in pursuit of keeping her "leveled":

When I went to the library, I never checked out any book because none of the blue dot books seemed to interest me. My teacher and the librarian tried making me read several books, but I never wanted to. Our school library had many different Chicken Soup books and I really enjoyed them because I liked hearing how people got through problems that they were having. However, I was told if I wanted to read this book I would have to do it outside of school since it was not in my level. From then on I never enjoyed reading.

Yet another preservice teacher recounts the variation in her reading interest across her student years:

In my literary history timeline, I saw a range of reading enjoyment. I went from loving reading to disliking it and then back to appreciating it. I think part of the reason is that in my younger years (like preschool through early elementary school), I was able to choose the books I wanted to read. Then when I was in about fourth grade, I had to start reading books that my teacher assigned, told from points of views I could not connect with. It made it hard to enjoy books when everything seemed so foreign to me.

Students are more likely to engage in reading when allowed to read books of personal interest to them (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002; Morrow, 1992). Consistent with past findings (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Oldfather, 2002) demonstrating students' avoidance of reading activities that they don’t consider relevant, participants in this study reported that a lack of connection with or purpose for the materials they were required to read led them to give up on reading. Sometimes their loss of interest related only to the activity they were engaged in at the time, but in some cases, prolonged interactions with text from which they felt disconnected led to an overall and lasting dislike of reading.

**Text as a Source of Struggle**

A third source of distaste for reading occurred when students were forced into text experiences that left them feeling that reading was a source of struggle rather than of pleasure. One preservice teacher discussed her joyful view of reading as a young student, mentioning numerous books and literacy activities that exemplified her engagement with authentic reading; however, when reading became a source of struggle, her view of herself as a reader changed. She explained:

High school was a time in my life when my reading life came to a halt. Well, reading for enjoyment, that is. In high school we had to read a lot of Shakespeare which is very confusing and hard to understand. We also read a lot of classics such as *Moby Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*. These books could keep my attention for a while but most of the time they got long and boring and I couldn’t finish them.

Another participant explained that she “was very fond of reading as a child” and viewed herself as a “good reader.” However, she states,

My reading for enjoyment declined. I was expected to read difficult material from textbooks in middle school and high school and it was sometimes hard for me to focus. I was reading the words, but not comprehending the meaning. Reading was a major part of my childhood, but it slowly declined as I got older.
Yet another participant reported that her involvement with difficult materials and her obvious struggles compelled her to develop creative ways to avoid reading altogether:

Every month we received a new reading log where we were required to read at least 3 books a month. I hated reading because I was not a strong reader and I did not comprehend what I was reading. I remember locking myself in my room “pretending” that I was reading for my log. I must have fake read over 50 books that year.

Studies demonstrate the importance of students practicing with texts that they can read with high levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension (i.e., O’Connor et al., 2002; Kuhn et al., 2006). Specifically, motivation to read appears to be negatively affected by literacy tasks that are too challenging (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). Among these participants, experiences with texts that they perceived as too difficult appeared to create feelings of distaste, not just for the demanding piece of text but for reading in general.

**Implications of CCSS Text Complexity**

Allington (2006) points out that one of the challenges of literacy education is to match the increasing achievement of our student readers with an equally increasing number of students who choose to read. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), this is not the situation that currently exists; its report on national reading habits states that Americans are spending less and not more time reading for pleasure. It is clear from the responses of these study participants that the path to increased student reading involvement is not going to be paved with texts that fail to meet readers’ needs. However, the CCSS, which are being used to guide instruction in 46 states at this writing, place the primary focus of instructional text choices on text complexity rather than on connection to student readers. Is it possible to mesh these dual purposes of supporting students who embrace reading for pleasure and purpose with meeting the text criteria set forth in the CCSS documents? This complicated question has implications for multiple stakeholders in literacy education.

**Classroom Teachers**

For those on the front lines in supporting literacy learning under the mandates of CCSS, implications are immediate and significant. In the stories told by these participants, classroom teachers took the brunt of the blame for the use of reading materials that pushed students away from reading. Under CCSS, teachers may feel even more pressure to use texts that are guided by complexity requirements rather than by student needs. Yet, the call by CCSS for the use of complex texts does not inherently negate possibilities for time spent with reading materials that are more closely suited to students’ interests, purposes, and abilities. It will be incumbent upon classroom teachers to ensure that students are provided with many opportunities to read texts that support their growing motivation for reading, side by side or in conjunction with scaffolded instruction using CCSS-mandated text types. In spite of the lax attention in CCSS paid to reader needs, teachers will be called upon to ensure that their focus remains on readers and not on standards.

**Teacher Educators**

Those in the role of supporting the development of preservice teachers face the daunting task of addressing the sometimes complicated perceptions of literacy education that their students bring to their positions as future educators. While the preservice teachers in this study often reported their dismay over the role that school reading instruction played in their literacy development, studies show that without intervention, many will go on to use those same instructional practices with their own students (Boggs & Golden, 2009; Lortie, 1975/2002). This new generation of educators will begin their careers under the mandates of the CCSS, with a stronger focus on higher-level comprehension strategies and increasing expectations for text complexity (Calkins et al., 2012). It will be essential for teacher educators to demonstrate ways to address the sometimes conflicting objectives of meeting CCSS responsibilities while maintaining a commitment to their students’ needs to be motivated rather than discouraged by literacy tasks. Teacher education programs that provide opportunities for preservice teachers to examine their own literacy backgrounds and begin to form ideologies regarding literacy learning may prompt
these future teachers to maintain a focus on student literacy needs as they strive to meet CCSS mandates.

**Literacy Researchers**

Concern over the role of text in supporting or deterring readers’ academic and motivational literacy growth only continues to grow in the wake of the text complexity demands of CCSS. Participants in this study reported the failure of disconnected texts to spur their ongoing interest or success with reading activities, and past studies have found similar results (e.g., Guthrie & McRae, 2011). Others (e.g., Fisher et al., 2012) advocate the use of challenging materials that support students’ academic literacy growth. The challenge will be to find the appropriate balance that allows readers to advance their developing literacy skills and to promote their view of literacy as connected to their lives, abilities, and interests. As literacy activities begin to be guided more and more by CCSS requirements for texts of increasing complexity, many opportunities will exist to study the influence of these texts on students’ reading success and on their motivation to pursue ongoing reading activities.

**Conclusion**

The participants in this study grew up primarily under the umbrella of No Child Left Behind legislation, with its emphasis on the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (Calkins et al., 2012). Their students, the new generation of learners, will at least begin their education under the tenure of CCSS, with expectations for the use of increasingly complex texts to guide literacy learning. Much remains unanswered regarding whether text complexity will serve as a reliable source of literacy learning and whether complex texts can provide sufficient incentives for students to continue to pursue reading beyond the classroom walls. However, the stories shared by the participants in this study might be viewed as cautionary tales as we consider the long-lasting effects of failing to heed the needs of readers in the text selection process. Pushing increasingly complex texts on readers in the pursuit of reading advancement might well attain the goal of increasing reading ability, but will that outcome be achieved at the price of a decreased chance that students will use those skills in real reading tasks? The journey toward reading, at least for the foreseeable future, appears to be led by texts of the increasing complexity required by CCSS. Will it be a path toward lifelong reading for its student passengers, or will it take them down a bewildering road that cuts them off from the inspiration required to be lasting readers? The result remains to be seen.

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**Sherry Sanden** is an assistant professor of early childhood literacy in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. She can be reached at ssanden@ilstu.edu.

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