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# Cracking the Code: Redefining Text Complexity, Complicating Reading Pedagogy, Creating Lifelong Readers and Learners

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Cracking the Code: Redefining Text Complexity, Complicating Reading Pedagogy, Creating Lifelong
Readers and Learners

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"American meritocracy is validated and sustained by the deep-rooted belief in equal opportunity. But can we really say that kids like those I taught have equal access to America's educational resources? Consider not only the economic and political barriers they face, but the fact, too, that judgments about their ability are made at a very young age, and those judgments, accurate or not, affect the curriculum they receive, their place in the school, the way they're defined institutionally."
— Mike Rose *Lives on The Boundary* pg. 128

*Introduction*

When I was 3, my dad and I spent our days sprawled out on the library floor. While he would press through massive nursing textbooks for his master's degree, I would often find myself grabbing everything and anything I could reach off the shelf. And in between the moments of my dad stopping his work to read to me, and me picking books that had the most words on the page because I wanted to "read like a grown up," my love for reading came into being. My want and willingness to read things far beyond my comprehension and maturity level not only made me a rather inquisitive and precocious toddler but set me on the path of good habits and practices of reading--an important step in to the world of true literacy.

But my experiences with literacy are not universal. Stepping into the realm of literacy is no easy feat for many students, especially certain populations of students affected by the achievement gap. Namely, African American, Latino, and students who live in the lower socio-economic scale. Understanding how fluency and efficiency with reading and writing comes into place did not resonate with me until I was taken out of my comfort zone, a place of education and socio-economic privilege, and was invited to observe how students on the opposite end of the privilege spectrum respond to texts and instruction in the literacy classroom.

My time spent on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota and in a summer bridge program writing classroom with middle school students from the very population most affected by the achievement gap introduced me to the disparities present in today's education system. Having witnessed classes full with bright and bubbling kindergartners, fluent in both

English and Lakota, shift over to become more reserved and reluctant readers and learners in middle and high school acquainted me with what the achievement gap might actually look like in the literacy-achievement classroom. Similarly, having middle school students, most if not all coming from unstable and unsupportive households, share their anxieties and past relationships with school made me critically aware of my own privilege. It became quite clear that none of these students shared the similar experience of waking up to the sound of NPR on the radio, with the daily newspaper and burnt pancakes waiting on the table, both to be devoured; not many of these students shared a similar level of exposure to words and texts.

The trouble of exposing children to the right vocabulary occurs long before they enter the classroom. In 2003, University of Kansas researchers Betty Hart's and Todd Risley's extrapolation of data indicated that children from "professional" families would hear roughly 30 million more words by age 3 than children from "welfare" families (Hart & Risley, 2003). Hart and Risley's findings establish the notion of literacy developing before students even enter the classroom, and further identifies the advantage of growing up in privilege. Understanding my automatic advantage and inherent privilege in the eyes of the education system did not transpire until I set foot in the classroom with children on the other end of the achievement scale.

Figuring my place as an advantaged future teacher of students, who, I know for certain, are not as enthralled by literature as I am, leads me to question the very standards that dictate student success and achievement. Specifically, Common Core's utilization of Standard 10, otherwise known as text complexity, and whether it has any impact on the ever-growing achievement gap that exists for many students of color and/or those students at-risk socioeconomically. Historically, we have not agreed on what U.S. students should learn at each grade level. These decisions have been left to individual schools and teachers. The result is a

system that, by and large, either asks too much or too little of most of its students, and leaves teachers ill equipped for the classroom. And what's more, the current standards put forth by the Common Core are a corporate, not pedagogical, model of instruction that puts profit in front of good practice.

These corporate education companies willingness to take credit for narrowing the gap, but apprehension towards a responsibility for widening it adds to the idea that the achievement gap primarily exists today because of fraught and impossible standards like the text complexity standard in the Common Core. These types of standards and attitudes towards education prevents teachers and students alike from reaching their true potential. Common Core's most current definition of text complexity increases the ease and efficiency of text selection for the teacher, but reduces the space for risk in students' experiences of texts. If educators wish to see a minimization in the achievement gap, specifically the literacy achievement gap, I suggest redefining the current model of text complexity. Those put forward and advocated for by the CCSS is actually a reductive way to include reading in a classroom that further exacerbates the achievement gap. To facilitate these suggested changes, educators and contributors of the Common Core should turn to the fundamentals of reading theory to gain a greater sense of how reading is a non-linear experience filled with risk and failure--and, through risk and failure, recovery and growth. Encouraging teachers to assume a supportive not domineering role in the reading classroom will foster confidence and liberation for students largely affected by the achievement gap.

It is not in my intention for this essay to completely discredit the Common Core in its entirety. I am in full support of objectives and target goals in order to measure students understanding. But what I am not in support of, and am positing in this essay, is the

incorporation of non-specific and restrictive standards that limit students' potential to succeed. Text complexity restricts students and teacher's opportunity to understand reading and literacy by advocating for a "staircase" of text complexity. Asking for reading to be understood and reciprocated as a methodical and organized structure that only admits success with a text as its favorable outcome prevents students from learning from risk and failure. In an October 2016 audio interview educator and academic literary critic E.D. Hirsch interpreted the concept of text complexity as a myth by stating that we cannot just view complexity "as an inherent characteristic of a text. It is the characteristic of a text AND the characteristic of the reader." (2016). Viewing text complexity as a concept where the teacher acknowledges their students background, upbringing, and culture promotes a greater understanding of how Standard 10 of the Common Core focuses on the materialistic benefits of education, and promotes bad habits of reading.

### *What is the achievement gap and what does it have to do with Text Complexity?*

Before I move into a detailed discussion of text complexity and Standard 10, I want first to define what I mean by the achievement gap within the context of literacy education and text complexity. The achievement gap measures the differences in learning between different gender, race, and ethnicity groups. Since the 2002 enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative and its demand for schools to be held accountable for all students' success through standardized testing and high school graduation, a sense of urgency has been placed on improving educational outcomes for underperforming students--namely, poor and disadvantaged children, students with learning disabilities, recent immigrants and English language learners, and in many communities of African Americans, Latina/os and other students of color (Miller,

1995). The achievement gap refers to the observable difference in educational measures like grade point average, standardized test scores, and dropout rates in both secondary and higher education.

Difference in student achievement has always existed, and even takes place in other parts of the world besides the United States. But what sets the U. S's relationship with the achievement gap apart from others is the numerous attempts of varying education reforms to close the gap. Since 1966, groups like the Education Equality Project (EEP), and Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) have made it their end-goal to close the gap in achievement through efforts like affirmative action, multicultural education, and accountability programs.

Reading research results completed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that efforts to support literacy were beneficial at the 4th grade level, but not among 8th and 12th graders (Biancarosa & Snow. 2006, pp. 7-8). Further studies conducted by the NAEP concluded that roughly two-thirds of 12th graders read and write below proficient level, and half of those students lack even the most basic literacy skills needed to succeed in school. Still, those figures measured remained the same with zero change between 1974 and 2005 (NALC 2007). To this day, the achievement gap remains, despite the continuous efforts of government legislation. The National Educational Association (2015) stresses that closing the gaps and raising the achievement outcomes will require more than just changes within school systems, curricula, instructional methods, and other aspects of educational practice are an important part of the solution, but they are not enough. Moreover, educators need to consider other pedagogies that better support strong literacy skills. One place to do that is by helping students develop skills with complex texts.

The issue of text complexity starts to mesh in with the achievement gap when data and statistics start highlighting issues of literacy rates of improvement with some populations of students but not all. CCSS claim they develop cultural sensitivity through selected and encouraged texts (Pearson et. al., 2007), but with a large majority of students still struggling to move from that "basic" and into "proficient" grade-level, it becomes clear that current education measures are not sufficient enough. Since the 1960's, numerous solutions from different categories of closing this gap have been tried. With the passage of the NCLBA, closing achievement gaps among these various student groups became a focus of federal education accountability, and schools and districts were required to disaggregate student test scores and other performance data by student characteristics to enable better comparisons between groups. This created both greater awareness of racial disparities and to rising concern about other kinds of achievement gaps. The attention led to more targeted interventions for different groups of students, but had not closed most achievement gaps to an appreciable degree a decade of the law passed.

In 2006, the ACT, a college readiness standardized test, published a study finding that only 51% of high school students achieved benchmark levels for successfully interacting with complex texts. As a response, the Common Core decided to rectify the situation by shifting their standards to include more complex texts across all grade levels. In order to help narrow the achievement gap and prepare students for college and the workplace, there is a national focus on expecting students to read and comprehend texts at increasing levels of complexity. The CCSS requires the reading of text in a "staircase of complexity" and asks students to read and comprehend literature at or above grade level by the end of the students' school year (National

Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010).

With the rise and consequential push of standardized testing, disparities in literacy has come to the forefront for solving the achievement gap. Although research has taught us much about what is needed to learn to read words off a page, it has provided much less knowledge about effective means of helping students learn to read to learn. While many teaching approaches exist, they are typically not evaluated using the same criteria, making comparisons across programs and large-scale evaluation difficult. Many instructional innovations are researcher-initiated and never get supported with the tools needed for sustained large-scale use. Furthermore, a dearth of information exists about novel approaches or adaptations of effective approaches designed specifically for use with groups of underperforming readers. As complicated and fraught it may be, text complexity is an example and a start of an approach that carries the potential to be effective in the k-12 classroom. (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003).

The National Education Association (2015) stresses that closing the gaps and raising the achievement outcomes will require more than just changes within school systems. Curricula, instructional methods, a deep understanding of the impact of critical consciousness in the classroom, and other aspects of educational practice are an important part of the solution. Educators need to consider different pedagogies and theories that better support strong literacy skills. One place to do that is by helping students to develop the skills to make meaning of their lives so they have the capacity to take on a challenging text. Their ability to make meaning can then be translated into making meaning of larger and more complicated texts. Instilling a sense of meaning and liberation in students largely oppressed can be the key factor in shrinking the achievement gap.

If we consider the ways the Common Core State Standards, Standard 10 in particular, can be seen as an oppressive force that contributes to the widening of the achievement gap, Paolo Freire, the Brazilian Educator and activist, asks me and other future educators to resist the given tripartite model of text complexity and adopt methods of teaching that approach literacy and complex texts with a heightened sense of critical consciousness. He reminds teachers to be wary of creating an authoritarian type of classroom in both the ways of methodology and text selection.

### *Defining Text Complexity*

As defined by the CCSS, text complexity refers to "the inherent difficulty of reading and comprehending a text combined with consideration of reader and task variables" (NGA/CCSSO, 2010b, p. 43). In short, text complexity is determined solely based off of one variable: a textual element that can be measured or analyzed. Text complexity expert and researcher Elfrieda Hiebert stresses that text complexity must be separately defined and not compared with the similar concept of text difficulty: "The difficulty of a text or text feature always implies a dependent or criterion variable: the actual or predicted performance of multiple readers on a task based on that text or feature" (Mesmer et. al. 2012). In other words, the overall concept of text complexity does not focus on the individual student's outcome with a challenging text. Rather, it narrows in on which aspects (i.e. sentence length/vocab) of the text at hand makes it difficult. The focus here is on the text and not the reader. Though it remains easy and common to lump text complexity and text difficulty into the same category, it is vital to recognize the difference. By considering the reader and her needs first, text difficulty allows for better and more thought out reader-text matches. Text complexity, with its focus on texts, pinpoints the characteristic of text that poses potential problems in reading.

Briefly, text complexity is broken down in the Common Core into 3 components: quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, and reader and task instruction. Quantitative analysis applies to any aspect of a text that can be systematically measured, components like sentence length, number of syllables, and word frequency. Qualitative analysis of text complexity requires an "informed sense of judgement on the difficulty of a text by considering a range of factors" (pg. 6, CCSS Appendix A). Factors include: purpose, levels of meaning, text structure, and conventionality of language. Finally, CCSS define reader and task, the last component, is a measure of specific tasks designed to elicit a response. It is worthwhile to delve into each of these components with more care.

Qualitative measures require that the following components must be addressed by teachers when selecting a challenging text: layout; purpose and meaning; text structure; language features; and knowledge demands. As an attempt to help teachers navigate the confusing world of text complexity, the Common Core developed an informational rubric so both literary and informational texts can be reviewed for moments of complexity. All of the above mentioned descriptors of qualitative analysis do not have to necessarily occur at the same level of complexity. For example, a text could have simple sentences and vocabulary but carry complex themes and ideas that are subtle and thus harder to comprehend. Qualitative measures rely heavily on the teacher's ability to make a fair judgement of a text.

Perhaps the most fraught component of the text complexity formula, at least from my perspective, is Quantitative analysis. Quantitative data in text complexity has been, and continues to be, the most influential and accessible component of determining a text's complexity. Between the 19th and 20th century, over 200 readability formulas were created.

These 200 readability formulas sparked researchers interest into not only understanding how difficult a book is to read, but rather, how difficult a book is to *comprehend*.

In reading theory speak, the difference between reading and comprehension is clear: reading requires only the uptake of words on the page; comprehension requires a real and personal understanding of what a text means--in all it's possible and multiple interpretations. But what quantitative data, as suggested by the Common Core, does not provide for students and teachers is the ability to identify where the complexity lies within a text so that appropriate teaching strategies can yield comprehension rather than reading. Text complexity within quantitative data lies beyond word and sentence levels. Quantitative data, or readability formulas, don't account for the match between reader and text, namely, engagement and conceptual knowledge (Heibert & Mesmer, 2013). The quantitative element of the text complexity formula relies heavily on readability scores--subject requiring its own section that I will turn to momentarily.

The third and last factor of the Common Core's definition of Standard 10 calls for the comparison between a text and a task. Reader and Task asks for its teachers to examine and gain insight to their students as individual readers before creating selecting a text. It requires the teacher to educate themselves on *where* the complexity lies in each individual text and be able to use a range of instructional approaches flexibly. The reader and task component of Standard 10 of the Common Core requires teachers to offer higher levels of independence with less of complex texts and more guided instruction with increasingly more challenging texts.

This tripartite model was created by the CCSS as a kind of map for teachers of all grades levels to rely on when determining the appropriate text for their students. Yet Standard 10 still remains bewildering to some teachers, as not all components are always concretely defined. In

"Upping the Ante of Text Complexity in the Common Core State Standards: Examining Its Potential Impact on Young Readers," Hiebert & Mesmer stress how the lack of definition as to appropriate text levels for different developmental levels has meant that teachers and students have not been focused on increasing capacity and sophistication in reading texts. The vague descriptions and imbalance in the level of guidance for the three features lead to poorer performance and assessment, potentially exacerbating the achievement gap or possibly indicating a gap where one might not be. Simply put, the model does not help teachers as it was intended to.

### *Discussion and development of reading formulas*

As mentioned in the previous section, the single biggest factor in determining text complexity is the quantitative analysis. And the single biggest contributor to quantitative data about texts is through the use of readability formulas, so much so that it is worthwhile to discuss them at greater length. Teacher and researcher Edward Fry determines readability as the "ease of reading comprehension due to the style of writing" (2002). The concept of readability was defined and studied around the beginning of the 20th century. Materials and instructional methods were thus created to help support the idea of readability, but served as unnecessary until the development of readability formulas in the early 1900's. In its simplest form, readability formulas have been used to assess written material by calculating the average number of words in a sentence, and then correlating this with the average number of sentences in each paragraph (Gray, 2012). These readability formulas make up the quantitative element of the CCSS tripartite model of text complexity.

Most development in readability research occurred between the 1920s and the early 1990s. The growth of attention to this research area was caused by the urge to emphasize quantification in developing a scientifically based curriculum. The earliest readability formulae

were produced between 1921 and 1934, including such examples as those from Thorndike (1921) and Vogel and Washburne (1928). At that time, primary attention was given to vocabulary as the basis for predicting readability, and emphasis was placed on Thorndike's *Teacher's Word Book* as the basis for measuring vocabulary difficulties (Klare, 1963).

Readability formulas continued to develop with McLaughlin's (1969) Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG). Chall and Dale (1995) revamped their 1948 formula, largely by updating its essential list of 3,000 easy words that had first been assembled 47 years earlier. More recently, a greater number of computerized formulas have been developed, such as the Lexile Framework (Lennon and Burdick, 2004) and ATOS (Milone, 2008). The Lexile Framework formula uses several variables, such as average sentence length and word frequency (Stenner et al, 2006). The ATOS readability formula was formed with the purpose of providing an "open" formula that would be available to the educational community free of charge and began with an extensive study of readability. It includes three variables: words per sentence, average difficulty level of words, and characters per word (Milone, 2009; Renaissance Institute, 2000). Over the years, teachers, librarians, and scholars developed a type of dependency on readability formulas to determine what seemed readable to their students.

***Current Readability Measures and Their Limits as Tools in Text Selection***

While researchers claimed that quantitative analysis is not the only factor in determining complexity, the expansion and growth of digitized readability systems heavily influenced the world's understanding of text complexity. School publishers, districts, and states became dependent on using those systems to determine the texts appropriate for each grade level. Quantitative data tells us the average sentence length is a number, but qualitative data tells us the

nature and intention of those sentences. Further, qualitative data cannot and will not exist without quantitative. Quantitative data alerts us to the need for qualitative attention to particular features of texts. The developed 200 readability formulas sparked researchers interest into not only understanding how difficult a book is to read, but rather, how difficult a book is to *comprehend*. By the late 20th century, researchers further tried to understand what it means to comprehend by fixating their approaches less on predicting the difficulty of a text, and instead focused on how a text affects readers' cognition.

Today, five readability formulas remain in general use: Lexile Framework for Reading, The Flesch Reading Ease Readability Formula, The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Readability Formula, The Dale-Chall Readability Formula, and Gunning Fog Index (or Fog) Readability Formula. All formulas, Lexile Frameworks in particular, are easily-accessible online. These five formulas have continued to make such an impact on today's classroom that publishers of instructional materials rely on them to determine their recommended curricula. For example, the Scholastic Corporation, a multinational publishing, education, and media company known for recommending and distributing books to teachers and parents, determines grade-level texts through Lexile measures.

With the five major readability formulas dominant in the industry and accessible to all educators, large education corporations are still pushing for the development of bigger and better equations. Most recently, Pearson Education, a large (arguably the largest) education publishing and assessment company, developed a new quantitative system of analysis to measure text complexity called Reading Maturity Metric (2012). The reasoning behind this development includes a noticeable decrease in students' ability to read independently: "Correspondingly the

standards also cite research showing a decrease in students' ability to read independently over many past years" (Landauer & Way, 2012).

Typically, readability measures have focused on two variables: word frequency to represent vocabulary difficulty and sentence length to represent complexity in organization. Lexile measures were considered the most reliable measures around the 20th century because of its ability to simultaneously measure frequency and sentence difficulty. However, more recent readability measures have ramped up their computational models and methods. In order to up the ante on all the previously developed readability measures, Pearson's RMM calls for the combination of linguistic analysis with word frequency and sentence length. With this integration of the linguistic component, simulating word and passage meaning has become swifter and more precise: "One variety based on modern computational linguistics, counts and analyzes a much wider range of potentially important linguistic components. Another new approach simulates the ways that words and passages acquire and use word and passage meaning. Pearson's Reading Maturity Metric combines the two" (Landauer & Way, 2012). The combining of the old approaches towards readability with Pearson's upgraded linguistic component gives RMM an edge; teachers are likely to put more faith and trust into RMM because of its supposed increase in predictive power of measurement.

While Reading Maturity Metric has the ability to increase the power of predictive measure and ease teachers' role of having to correct errors in writing, spelling and syntax prior to model application, RMM still does not guarantee a one hundred percent correlation with the appropriate grade to passage level. In their 2012 article "Improving Text Complexity Measurement through the Reading Maturity Metric," Landauer and Way review RMM's functionality and conclude that the standard deviations of grade levels predicted by both the

RMM and readability formulas were lower than the actual grade level standard deviations (2012). The primary obstacle for the RMM is a two-fold: First the linguistic feature of RMM has difficulty separating the differences between literary and informational texts, creating a similar, insufficiently analyzed result. Second, the overall score of RMM does not always reflect the rigor needed to prep students for college level texts. Landauer and Way suggest creators and producers of the Reading Maturity Metric consider which roles of texts are needed for readiness, rather than only its "reading difficulty".

Reasonably, educators make decisions about texts that appropriately meet their classroom's level of understanding. A general assumption exists that fourth grade materials are more challenging than third grade materials and so on, but how accurate a teacher is when trying to select a text that best meets their students' reading abilities gets complicated. For instance, trying to find a text for students who struggle to read creates limitations in selecting something "grade-level" appropriate. Having to go a grade-level below the recommended for those struggling students' disputes the reasoning and logic behind curriculum publishers and the publisher's use of one or more readability formulas for determining text difficulty (Begeny & Greene, 2013). Though the act of going below the recommended grade-level may allow the student's overall understanding of the text to increase, the issue of stifling and minimizing the student's reading progress still exists. In both situations, teachers are making instructional decisions primarily based on levels of displayed readability, yet cannot be assured that the represented levels will guarantee meaningful results.

### *Reading Theory vs Text Complexity: A Different Way to Think about Strong Reading*

Conventional reading formulae measures the average sentence length and word length to provide an "appropriate" grade level score. A grade level of reading material typically relies on one or more readability formulas to measure a text's difficulty depending on specific text characteristics. Briefly, readability formulas are good indicators of telling us what conspicuous parts of a text might be too much or too little for students' understanding. However, they obtain the adverse ability to prompt teachers towards selecting materials from curriculum publishers that rely on readability formulas to level reading materials. Consequently, students are assigned material that may be inappropriate for their level of ability--minimizing their reading progress.

The problem still remains that teachers are making instructional decisions based on purported levels of readability, not guaranteeing that these levels represent meaningful differences (Begeny & Greene, 199). The bewilderment educators face with determining the appropriate text and instruction from readability formulae calls a pressing question to the forefronts: where do we go from here? If readability measures are the most favorable form of determining a text's complexity, then what other options remain available for teachers to depend on? One resolution, the fundamental component of my research, is for reading theory and theorists to enter the conversation of text complexity.

The 200 developed readability formulas sparked researchers interest into not only understanding how difficult a book is to read, but rather, how difficult a book is to *comprehend*. In reading theory speak, the difference between reading and comprehension is clear: reading requires only the uptake of words on the page; comprehension requires a real and personal understanding of what a text means--in all its possible and multiple interpretations. Reading theory takes on a different approach when it comes to text complexity because it

handles it in a more qualitative manner. With a focus of what readers do with texts instead of what texts do to readers, reading theory serves as a holistic approach to understanding students' struggle when stomaching a difficult text instead of seeing students as independent variables in a large, complex literacy equation.

Popular and notable literary theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, and Frank Smith advocate for a more thoughtful approach towards reading through theory. In his 1978 text, *The Act of Reading,* Wolfgang Iser stresses the process of reading as a construction of meaning between both the reader and the text: "As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process rather than the product." (Iser, 18). For Iser, meaning is not an object to construct in a text but rather an action that occurs when the reader and the text work together. Moreover, Iser argues for meaning to come into play through the interpreter's own self-actualizations, experiences, and realizations. As Iser and other reading theorists argue, true, authentic reading happens when the teacher, the text, and the reader allow for different connections to readings: "Each actualization therefore represents a selective realization of the implied reader, whose own structure provides a frame of reference within which individual responses to a text can be communicated to others." (Iser, 37). What Iser demonstrates in his text is the power of reading theory possesses in regards to understanding what makes a text challenging for the reader, and why what the reader brings to the table matters in the text complexity formula.

Text complexity is informed by reading theory in the way it measures and comes to define how we *comprehend* a text. Reading theory has had its shifts and changes from Dole et al.'s traditional view of reading (1991) where novice readers acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that sequentially build toward comprehension ability to cognitively based

views of reading comprehension that emphasize the interactive nature of reading between text and reader, and the constructive nature of comprehension. Ultimately, reading theory when allowed to figure into the selection of texts for students and classrooms has the ability for the teacher to see *how* and *where* a student might slip up with a text--not to eliminate those areas of difficulty, but to create supportive pedagogies that allow the student to rebound from them. Such a relationship to text complexity suggests that readers grow when challenged with difficult texts. Understanding reading theory as part of the text complexity equation means being able to give students the literacy skills to succeed--skills like classifying, sequencing, compare and contrasting, determining cause-effect, summarizing, hypothesizing, and predicting, inferring, and concluding.

Aside from selecting texts from companies' dependent on readability formulas, educators also rely on readability formulas and measures to create assessments and instructional materials. Following the notion that different grade-level texts vary in text difficulty, teacher's decisions of assessments are similarly affected. Due to the uncertainty of predicting student reading abilities, readability formulas are not a sound choice for teachers to rely on solely in their creation of assignments. Because assignments, ones that are rooted in meaning and purpose, allow for students to produce a more consequential response. Theorist Louise Rosenblatt argues that, "[an] assumption of an aesthetic stance does not depend entirely on the cues offered by the text, but depends also on the reader's being prepared to act on them. The reader does not simply reflect the text." (Rosenblatt, 83) Assessments based off assigned texts in the classroom must ask for more than mere reflection. They rely on the teacher's knowledge and understanding of the class's ability and potential to comprehend what parts of a text might cause uncertainty.

Relying on quantitative systems of measurement for selecting texts in the classroom equally neglect the teacher's role and responsibility of taking students' cultural context into consideration. For example, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* scores a 5th grade reading level according to Lexile frameworks: suggesting that the text is uncomplicated and uses a conventional story structure with few abstract words. However, it is possible that children, say, of migrant worker families, families who are socio-economically at-risk, or, more pointedly, students identified at the losing end of the achievement gap, might bring insights to the novel that middle class or suburban counterparts would either skip over or ignore.

This is considered a major loss in the realm of literacy on account of limiting students to bring their own life experience into the classroom. In her 1938 text, *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt argues that even the newest readers must encounter literature that leaves room for personal experience: "He, too, must draw on his past experience with language as the raw materials out of which to shape the new experience symbolized on the page" (Rosenblatt, 25). Drawing on past experiences in the involvement of reading literature matters in how it allows for the reader to make greater meaning and comprehension of both the text at hand, and in their own lives.

In their 2014 article "Text Complexity," Goldman and Lee hope instructors of text complexity understand that the "importance of conceptualizing difficulties in reading comprehension in the intersections among features of texts, the demands of tasks, the recourses that readers bring, and the broader sociocultural contexts under which reading comprehension takes place" (4). The issue of socio-cultural context merged with the topic of text complexity within the literature classroom calls upon much more than just deciding on one archetypical theme. Instead, it is how one reacts differently to one theme and what criteria should be used to

determine the level of complexity within these themes. Looking at it from a cultural lens, children from different cultural communities can bring different repertoires for wrestling with different thematic complexities. It ultimately becomes the school and educators job, not the readability formulas, to recognize the diversity of their student population, and select texts that will both resonate with the students' cultural background, and pick texts with themes that encourage students to understand their own experiences in light of those themes--reading theory suggests that this is where true literacy resides.

*How is text complexity oppressive to teachers and students?*

While the main goal of the Common Core is to raise achievement levels in all students across each state, the suggestion of a narrow curriculum leaves little room for teachers to expand and explore different teaching methods. In a review of the writers and careers of the CCSS, Mercedes Schneider concludes that only 5 out of 15 writers for the ELA standards workgroup have actual *experience* in the classroom: "My findings indicate that NGA and CCSSO had a clear, intentional bent toward CCSS work group members with assessment experience, not with teaching experience, and certainly not with current classroom teaching experience." With Standard 10 being the direct result of a non-desirable achievement score (ACT, 2006), text complexity thus becomes a symbol of assessment. By reviewing its history and contributors, it is not difficult to see the Common Core as an oppressive force. Standard 10 is the direct result of a non-desirable achievement score (ACT, 2006), text complexity thus becomes a symbol of assessment--and to a certain extent--of oppression.

The role of the teacher is crucial in the understanding of text complexity and in the closing of the achievement gap. As Paolo Freire points out, the beginning point of a liberating

education lies in bringing both the student and the teacher together**:** "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (Freire, 72). The development of the ELA frameworks and Standard 10 of the Common Core neglects to reconcile the student and the teacher. The lack of contributing knowledge from persons with *real* classroom experience is the starting place to challenge both text complexity and the Common Core. If it is the ultimate goal of the Common Core to see achievement across all student populations, they must start by adding more teacher contributors to bridge the gap of experience and assessment.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire refutes the idea of the Common Core in his discussion of the banking concept of education. To Freire, the concept of a banking education is when the teacher embodies the role of the "depositor" and fills each student with information that ultimately serves little purpose or meaning. In the long run, this concept of banking education further "dehumanizes" the student and sets them further off the path of liberation. In order to resist putting their students further behind on the scale of achievement, educators "must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world." (Freire, 75). Following the notion that the CCSS hopes are for each student to "master" each recommended standard by the end of each grade level, it can be determined that they follow and encourage the banking method. The Common Core thus embodies the role of the oppressor over educators, which in turn, creates oppressive teachers. Teachers are held hostage by the Common Core to produce students that meet the standards. Failure to do so puts blame on both the teacher and the student. There is no space for risk and recovery for students learning to read and, thus, limits what Freire would call authentic thinking. Education initiatives like Standard 10 of the Common Core encourage teachers to

assume a dominating role in the classroom; it is only when both education initiative contributors and teachers of the Common Core recognize the dehumanizing power of the presented standards then steps towards teaching methods of consciousness and cognition instead of transferals of information be made.

In order for student achievement to exist across all populations, Paulo Freire tells us that educators must call for the Common Core to take authentic thinking into account. Throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire stresses the dangers of limiting students' ability to make their own claims and interpretations of information: "The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is a better 'fit' for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors created, and how little they question it" (Freire, 76). With a wide majority of Common Core contributors remaining outside the classroom, it can be determined that they gain some benefit knowing their jobs are secured by the consistent underperformance of students. Further, an advantage exists in encouraging teachers to comply with the banking method.

Freire suggests that only when teachers allow room for dialogue, conversation, and *true* communication to enter their classroom then students will be able to make their first strides towards achievement: "Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality,* does not take place in the ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination is students to teachers becomes impossible" (Freire, 77). Here, Freire argues that the Common Cores promotes isolated and oppressive ways of instructional methods. Moreover, he stresses that teachers should approach standards with open minds (and semi-closed mouths) so that students can apply meaning to their lives and educational careers through authentic thinking.

Freire further challenges a standard like text complexity and the Common Core as a whole by determining that the supposed purpose of both--to help students achieve--is false and disheartening. To Freire, no oppressor sets out to help the oppressed without reducing their lives to objects in order to better themselves. Following the notion that the Common Core and all of its contributors are the oppressors, it can be argued that text complexity is just a part a larger education initiative that is set on profit gains and a materialistic concept of existence: "Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more--always more--even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, *to be* is *to have* and to be the class of the "haves" (Freire, 34). With the majority of writers of the Common Core being workers for large testing companies (ACT, College Board, PARCC), their ultimate motives for advancing student achievement are called into question.

In *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* Louise Rosenblatt similarly stresses the oppressive impact of standards like the Common Core and the sincerity of treating reading as process; in order for it to truly work, we must handle it with love and care. Engaging a reader is no easy task, but what teachers tend to forget, as Rosenblatt reiterates, is to allow their students to be active participants in the creation of meaning in a text: "the reader's creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process." (Rosenblatt, 11). Systems of measurement like Lexile scores and Reading Maturity Metric (RMM) leave little to no room for students to with fail with a text and to later recover. Their motive to produce a numerical representation of difficulty with a text creates reluctant students and teachers. Readability formulas have only made the concept of text complexity easy for the outside onlooker. Rosenblatt discredits readability formulas and quantitative systems of analysis as a whole by

acknowledging literacy as a system that requires students as active participants and where literacy means to engage in the struggle to make real and relevant meaning.

The act of self-correction serves as the most convincing strategy for students' to adopt in their process of approaching a challenging text. As Louise Rosenblatt explains in a study of experienced reader's responses towards Robert Frost's "It Bids Pretty Fair," readers will not always follow a text in sequential order: "We have seen how the interpretation even of a brief quatrain did not proceed in a linear fashion, phrase by phrase, line by line, but consisted in subtle adjustment and readjustment of meaning and tone, an effort to achieve a unified and coherent synthesis. The text itself leads the reader toward this self-corrective process" (Rosenblatt, 11). Adjustment and readjustment are natural parts of the reading process that go unlooked by readability measure formulas. Here, Rosenblatt stresses that even those who have a wider and more long-term experience with literature struggle sometimes to find meaning within a text. Readability measures fixate on eliminating the self-corrective process by telling teachers certain texts, that could possibly carry the potential to reach a student on a different level, are too complex because something as simple as one unfamiliar word could set them off pace.

**A Different Kind of Complexity; A Different Kind of Classroom**

Today being a time of public and higher education associating with market competition, conformity, disempowerment and uncompromising modes of punishment, Freire's work, along with other notable reading theorists, resonates with educators and the world more than ever. If Freire were to enter today's classroom, it could be imagined that he would be despair over the lack of *teaching* humanization. To Freire, the heart of an education is one aimed at achieving humanization; the idea that teachers are also students and students are also teachers. Freire believed that in order for a liberatory education to take place the teacher-student contradiction

must be reconciled. He argues, "education must begin with the solution of the teacher- student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (Freire, 72). In order to reconcile that teacher-student contradiction, the issue of text complexity must be understood by both the teacher *and* student.

Returning to his humble roots in his writing, Paulo Freire revamps and revisits some of his past claims of teaching the "oppressed." His 1994 text, *Pedagogy of Hope,* offers a more thorough defense of progressive teaching in a postmodern world, and a clearer, more straightforward rejection of conservative neoliberalism. Conservative neoliberalism, according to Freire, can refer to the type of dominating pedagogies that limit both the students and the teacher's capability. Exemplars like instrumental instruction geared toward memorization, and high stakes testing contributes to Freire's past notion of all education being political. With text complexity falling under Freire's impression of being a product of conservative neoliberalism (Common Core as an entity), *Pedagogy of Hope* is a comment (again) on how pedagogy, even at its best, is not about its discipline in methods or techniques, nor should it involve coercion or political indoctrination. To Freire, what makes a successful education is one where students engage in practices that amount to a constant push for a more equal and just future, one where students can see their own world as well as to see beyond the world they know and are able to expand the range of possibilities for their own futures.

Understanding complexity in the classroom means the teacher is situating herself in a position of solidarity. For Freire, solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture" (Freire, 49). He argues that "true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another"" (Freire, 49). Acknowledging that Paulo Freire's interpretation of a

classroom being a space of pure political power, it becomes quite clear that he would incorporate reflection as his main component of practicing transformation in the classroom.

Tackling the concept of complexity in the reading classroom requires an embracing of humility: "Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go" (Freire, 36). Here, Freire calls attention to the importance of acknowledging and accepting all student's attempts to understand text. A classroom that is expected to meet the same standard of complexity cannot, as Freire reminds us, function on the assumption that all students struggle on the same concepts and parts of a text. Similarly, teachers should encourage cohesion between students; opening up a type of dialogue rooted in commiseration and support for one another.

Correspondingly, Louise Rosenblatt's concept of text complexity fosters humility and encourages literary work, regardless of theme or subject, to become a part of *everyone's* repertoire:

> "The capacity to participate in verbally complex texts is not widely fostered in our education system, and desirable habits of reflection, interpretation, and evaluation are not widespread. These are goals that should engender powerful reforms in language training and literary education. But none of these are attainable of good literary works of art are envisioned as the province of only a small, highly trained elite. Once the literary work is seen as part of the fabric of individual lives, the gap may be at least narrowed, without relinquishing recognition of standards of excellence" (Rosenblatt, 143).

Though it is acceptable to say that now, thanks to the development of Standard 10, verbally complex texts are incorporated in today's education system, the lack of desirable habits of reflection, interpretation and evaluation (pg.143) are still absent. Rosenblatt highlights that texts

in the classroom should be open and accessible to *all* students, not just those who sit on the higher end of the achievement scale. In order to achieve higher levels of comprehension with complex texts, Rosenblatt is arguing for a classroom that is open to multifaceted texts and instruction.

Although Freire and Rosenblatt missed the opportunity to be able to teach and develop lesson plans and instructional methodologies surrounding the concept of text complexity, contemporary teachers and researchers like Penny Kittle demonstrate a classroom based on a fuller, richer idea of text complexity--one redefined by Freire and Rosenblatt. In *Write Beside Them,* Kittle creates a support system and safety net for her students, building their confidence in writing and reading. To fulfil the idea that reading is not a linear experience and that reading assessment can be chaotic, Kittle emphasizes that teachers should "not [be] giving them the tools to tackle complex tasks if we make writing a paint-by-paint number process" (120). Her idea of writing as an impossible task if applied as a step-by-step process can be translated to the concept of the Common Core expecting students to read complex texts as a step-by-step process. Kittle demonstrates a Freire(an) type of concept of text complexity through embracing reading as something open and free. In Kittle's classroom, students are expected, arguably even encouraged, to take on a text in their own way.

*Lives on the Boundary* by American scholar and teacher Mike Rose demonstrates what true loss and gain in literacy looks like, especially in the face of marginalized students in America's school system. He offers me an excellent summary of what is really at stake in teaching students to read, to invite them into the world of genuine, remarkable literacy. Rose takes us into classrooms and communities to reveal what really lies behind the labels and test

scores; challenging educators and policymakers to rethink some assumptions made about certain populations of student's abilities:

> "To have any prayer of success, we'll need many conceptual blessings: A philosophy of language and literacy that affirms the diverse sources of linguistic competence and deepens our understanding of the ways class and culture blind us to the richness of those sources. A perspective on failure that lays open the logic of error. An orientation toward the interaction of poverty and ability that undercuts simple polarities, that enables us to see simultaneously the constraints poverty places on the play of mind and the actual mind at play within those constraints" (Rose, 238).

Here, Rose stresses the significance of being critically and culturally conscious in the classroom. Like Freire, Rose uses social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of society. Rose's classroom is thus a representation of a Freirean model of text complexity in how he is able to use and draw on his past experiences to have students develop a critical awareness of systems of privilege and oppression. Furthermore, once attaining a sense of critical consciousness, students then have the power to create resistance and action against an oppressive system like the Common Core and its standard of text complexity.

### *Conclusion*

Translating the CCSS standard of text complexity into classroom instruction becomes less clear without the guidance of literary theorists. Regardless of the number of complex texts modeled by the Common Core, exemplary methods of instruction remain an unexplained feature of Standard 10. Though the qualitative analysis and reader and task instruction components of the text complexity tripartite model are an attempt at creating ideal models of instruction, their vague guidelines and ambiguous rubrics leave teachers confused in the text selection and assessment creation process. The Common Core's construct of text complexity remains an

unresolved issue in the education reform system, but educator's selection of texts and assessment decisions in the classroom remain the main focus of creating stronger learners and readers.

As a future teacher, instilling confidence within my students facing challenging texts that will give them strong literacy skills is of the utmost importance. Author and contemporary psycholinguist, Frank Smith, equates being a "good reader" by reading a text with a purpose: "Readers always read *something,* they read for a *purpose,* and reading and its recollection always involve *feelings* as well as knowledge and experience" (Smith, 178). A text can only generate meaning if it evokes some connection in a reader, both emotional and intellectual. Smith is calling upon all teachers to evoke a sense of purpose in their students as readers, and calls upon the notion that better attention to a truer commitment could potentially level the playing field.

One of the reasons for the achievement gap exists is because the CCSS fails to aim the concept of text complexity at secondary levels of teaching. And thus, the quality of lesson plans and the complexity of texts can be marginally and poorly taught. Text complexity scholars, Hiebert and Van Sluys stress that Standard 10 will "neither help, nor hurt, those who come to school ready to read," but they could make literacy achievement a "greater challenge for the very students who most depend on America's public schools for their literacy instruction (148). I think there's value in getting kids to try to read challenging texts. But for me, the key here is that curriculum and texts need to be on topics that show kids how their own background knowledge can create a kind of self-generated scaffolding.  Some students will rise to the occasion of a challenging text, and others will fail. Actually, most of them will probably fail. But it's not just the job of the student to recognize their struggle with a challenging piece of writing—it's the teachers. The Common Core's inability to recognize the different sociocultural contexts of the students, and lack of guidance and support for teachers in their process of selecting a text that

will best serve their literacy abilities. In a not so distant past, I also thought the main purpose of education was to climb the economic ladder (and perhaps learn a few interesting things along the way). I now see education as a process of transformation that includes constant reflection and informed action.

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