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TEXT COMPLEXITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING THE RIGHT STAIRCASE

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──────────── **Abstract** ────────────

As more districts begin implementing the Common Core State Standards, text complexity is receiving a lot of discussion. It is important for educators to understand the numerous factors involved with text complexity and to have a wide range of strategies to support students with challenging text. This paper shares data from three elementary teachers that were impacted by the text complexity shift. Based on their understandings and interpretations of Common Core, teachers linked increasing the complexity of the text to using grade level text with all students, and changed their instruction significantly as a result. This shift in instruction led to an increase in whole class instruction with the same text, round robin reading, and less student engagement with reading.

With the release of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) last year, the topic of text complexity has entered the discourse of classroom teachers across the country. 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).

A concern associated with the standards is underprepared students entering college and careers. The authors of Appendix A of the CCSS assert that being able to read complex text independently and proficiently is necessary for high achievement in college and careers, as well as numerous life tasks. The document also includes the notion that moving away from complex texts is likely to lead to a "general impoverishment of knowledge, which, because knowledge is intimately linked with reading comprehension ability, will accelerate the decline in the ability to comprehend complex texts and the decline in the richness of text itself" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4). Some educational researchers support the idea that students who do not continue to climb the staircase of text complexity will face more challenges as an adult when asked to read in college or the workplace (Adams, 2010).

In the following sections, I will share data from a larger ethnographic study (Papola, 2012) that focused on how elementary teachers planned and implemented literacy instruction. The impact of CCSS on the teachers' literacy instruction was strong during the time of the study, with an emphasis on several shifts, including the shift to more complex text. Through the study, it became evident that the teachers equated "complex text" to grade level text for all students for a much larger portion of literacy instruction. This interpretation of text complexity became problematic, as teachers were sometimes uncertain of how to engage all students and help them achieve success with these texts. I will begin by sharing definitions of "text complexity", followed by an overview of the study. Next, I share findings related to how the teachers interpreted text complexity and implemented it within their classrooms. I will conclude with further discussion concerning the best way to support teachers with this shift in literacy instruction.

Defining Text Complexity

Defining text complexity is no simple task. The CCSS take a three-part approach to measuring complex text, which includes qualitative, quantitative, and reader/task factors (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Qualitative factors such as levels of meaning and knowledge demands, and quantitative factors of readability measures, are included as examples in the document. The reader/task considerations in the CCSS include factors such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences. While each of these is expanded upon in Appendix A of the CCSS, one could argue the quantitative factors are given more consideration, particularly because of the wording of Reading Anchor Standard 10 at each grade level. For instance, fourth grade students are expected to, "by the end of the year, read and comprehend literature [informational texts] in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range." (p.10). If a teacher focuses on the anchor standard, he or she may be more likely to define complex text as text that is at *or above* a student's grade level. This can be problematic in instruction if teachers are attempting to solve the text complexity issue by expecting students to read texts that are above their grade level when many teachers are still grappling with helping students succeed with text at their grade level (Pearson, in press).

Literacy scholars recognize the numerous factors involved in determining whether a text is "complex". Readability formulas often look at vocabulary and sentence structure to determine complexity, but other factors contribute greatly to how challenging a text is. For instance, the organization and general structure of the text is something to consider when determining complexity (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012). If a story is organized using a more predictable structure, such as chronological sequence, it might be easier for a reader to navigate than a text that skips around in time through the use of flashbacks. Additionally, the reader plays a large role in determining the complexity of text. According to Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012), "Text complexity is based, in part, on the skills of the reader" (p. 3). Factors including the reader's interest and background knowledge about the topic impact how challenging a text may be. Lack of certain life experiences or prior exposure to information about certain topics can make a text more or less challenging for different readers.

Another issue to consider regarding text complexity is when this "staircase" should actually begin and how quickly students should advance up the stairs. According to Hiebert (2012), it is unclear if the increase in text difficulty needs to

begin in the primary grade level texts, which is the recommendation of the CCSS. In fact, Hiebert asserts that the bigger problem with texts for beginning and early readers is that they are often too difficult. Other scholars caution teachers about increasing the level of text students are asked to read too quickly (Allington, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). There is concern that students will spend too much time reading text that is too challenging. Allington (2002) stressed that students need to spend a large part of their reading time engaged in successful reading, defined as "reading experiences in which students perform with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension" (p. 3). If students are unable to read with high accuracy and fluency, their comprehension will be significantly impacted. The notion that students need to apply strategies on "just difficult enough texts" is a widely supported idea in literacy (Allington, 2002; Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

When considering what text complexity should look like in the classroom, teachers should consider all of the factors that go into a text as well as their local knowledge about their students, including their motivation, prior experiences with the content, and readiness to encounter increasingly challenging passages. Few in the field of literacy would argue against a need for students to be exposed to a wide range of texts and levels of text, with varying support given by teachers as they encounter these texts. However, the problem occurs when a narrow understanding and interpretation of text complexity dominates how this instructional shift is implemented in the classroom.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In this study, ethnography was utilized to explore how elementary teachers implemented literacy instruction. This portion of the study focuses on how the CCSS text complexity shift was interpreted and put into practice. According to Foley (1990), "Ethnography is the craft of writing critical, reflective, empirical accounts of your personal fieldwork experiences" (p. xix). It involves the researcher attempting to think critically about the issue and context that is being studied. A theoretical lens of critical theory made the use of critical ethnography appropriate for this study as issues of power in schooling were explored, particularly through the implementation of new educational policies, and the impact those polices have on literacy instruction. Several existing studies have examined the impact policy has on instruction and on shaping teachers' beliefs (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Coburn, 2001; Palmer & Rangel, 2010).

In this study, the ways in which text complexity are framed by policymakers and by local administration significantly shape teachers' beliefs and instructional practices.

Setting and Participants

This study took place over the course of twelve weeks at an urban elementary school, Weldon Heights Elementary (pseudonym). Weldon Heights is a Title One school of less than 400 students enrolled between grades kindergarten and six, with half the students classified as English Language Learners and more than eighty percent of students qualifying for the Free or Reduced Lunch Program. The teachers in this study were in their first year of fully implementing the CCSS. Data from three teachers is shared in this paper. Two teachers—Ellen and Katelyn—were primary grade teachers and one—Andrea—taught upper elementary. The teachers ranged in experience from four years to twenty four years as classroom teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

I spent approximately sixty minutes each week observing the teachers in their classrooms during literacy instruction, taking field notes on what I observed. Each teacher also participated in a weekly debriefing interview, during which time the discussion focused on how they planned their literacy instruction and why they made the decisions they did when implementing instruction. As the study progressed, it became clear through the interviews with teachers as well as the observations that the CCSS were the largest influence on the teachers' instruction.

After transcribing the interviews myself, I analyzed data using line-by-line open coding (Charmaz, 2011; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), recording the main idea present in each line of the transcripts and field notes. With specific regard to the text complexity shift, common themes such as "grade level text", "whole class instruction", and "round robin reading", were prevalent in what the teachers spoke about and what I observed in their instruction. I then used these focused codes to code across teachers (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and look for commonalities shared by all the participants. For this article, I present data related to the teachers' interpretation of the text complexity shift in the CCSS.

"They have to read harder text!"

The school district that includes Weldon Heights Elementary was in their first year implementing the CCSS at the time of this study. All three teachers spoke about the professional development they received throughout the study, which consisted of a variety of district and site-based workshops and sessions. According to the teachers, they were encouraged to focus on the CCSS instructional shifts, with special attention to certain shifts. One of these was text complexity. Each one of the teachers, when discussing the need to use more complex text in their literacy instruction, spoke about this as a shift to using grade level text (or above grade level in certain cases) with all the students in the class. In the following sections, I present how this limited interpretation of text complexity impacted teachers' selection of "complex text", as well as the increase in whole class instruction, with a focus on a specific close reading model, as well as round robin reading.

Selecting "Complex" Text

As these three teachers at Weldon Heights began to discuss using complex text as part of CCSS, it became evident that they interpreted this to mean "grade level text". All three were observed using grade level text with all their students, and they reported using it more frequently than they had in any previous years. The teachers referenced this shift in text complexity when speaking about why they chose those texts. Katelyn, a primary teacher, stated, "I have to give them complex text at their grade level. Big, big part of Common Core". This statement shows her interpretation of "complex text" to mean "grade level text" based on her understanding of what was expected in implementing Common Core.

Rather than slowly supporting students on a gradual move up the staircase of text complexity, the teachers jumped from initially providing text at lower levels (usually students' instructional reading levels) straight to grade level text. The teachers reported that in previous years, they differentiated the levels of text used with students for the majority of their literacy instruction; however, this changed significantly after their interpretation that they should be using more complex text with their students in the wake of Common Core. Andrea, an upper elementary teacher, spoke about using grade level text with all of her students, despite also stating that half of her students came to her reading two years below grade level. According to Andrea, she used to differentiate the level of text she

used with students for most of her literacy instruction, while also exposing them to the grade level reading anthology. She spoke about her decision to begin using the grade level social studies textbook as the main material for reading instruction for all of her students for the remainder of the school year:

> Andrea: So...I went to [another teacher] and said what do you think about me using the [grade level] social studies text book with my lowest readers?...She was like, absolutely, they have to read grade level text....So I just started that this week...they're going to read grade level text for the rest of the year. They get all that differentiated stuff in their [reading] intervention groups. They have to be pushed.

Andrea used this decision to use the grade level social studies textbook as her basis for adhering to the CCSS shift to text complexity. She had never taken this approach for her literacy instruction in previous years, but based on her understandings of CCSS, she believed it was necessary this year. From a critical lens, Andrea's instructional beliefs were significantly shaped by the messages she interpreted regarding the CCSS, and her literacy instruction changed significantly based on these interpretations. Because of the shift in Common Core, Andrea believed that outside of the reading intervention time her students had for 45 minutes three times a week, all of her literacy instruction should be with challenging, *grade level* text, even with students whose instructional reading levels were two years below grade level.

Andrea was not the only teacher to interpret "complex" to mean "at grade level". In Ellen's primary grade classroom, I observed a combination of whole class and small group instruction, and she continued to use text at the students' instructional level for part of the day. She did say, however, that she needed to implement more grade level text instruction because of the text complexity shift. This shift guided her planning of a lesson I observed one morning:

> In one lesson in Ellen's classroom, the students were given copies of a text about Ruby Bridges. Ellen later stated she chose this book because of its complexity, knowing it was at least at the students' grade level. After briefly previewing the text, she asked students to follow along and point to the text as she read it aloud. After reading a page to the class, Ellen noticed some students off task and remarked that she knew some of them might think the text is boring and hard, but that they were doing this together so they could learn strategies to learn on their own when they get a

really hard book. She asked the students to echo read the next paragraph sentence by sentence with her. When the class struggled on a sentence, she had them repeat that sentence twice with echo reading. As Ellen and the class read more of the text, the students continued to struggle to decode words using echo reading, even when rereading the same sentence multiple times. Ellen decided to chorally read a section with the students, with little improvement. When calling on students to share what they took from the passage, several students were unable to respond and others repeated sentences verbatim from the text. Ellen concluded the lesson by reading another small section aloud to the students and telling them that was all they would read from that today.

In the debriefing interview immediately following the lesson, Ellen was visibly and vocally frustrated with how the lesson progressed. She made decisions to change her instructional approach on the spot, but none of the strategies led to the outcome she had hoped for. When I asked Ellen what she believed was the reason the lesson didn't go well for her students, she immediately stated that the text was too hard. She shared that she chose that text for the first time because it fit with her social studies unit, and it was more challenging. She believed she needed to increase the text complexity when she could because of the shift in CCSS.

> Ellen: [I'm] just trying to keep the shifts in mind ...and emphasis on text complexity. So I tried to keep that in mind when I was doing the Ruby Bridges book. I didn't want to throw out this text. Because I wanted to kind of teach them some strategies for accessing that. Text that is too hard. Because a lot of these kids are going to have texts that are too hard all the time now.

Ellen's frustration grew from her students' struggle with a text that was extremely challenging for the majority of them, text that she called "too hard". She said she was exposed to information about the text complexity shift during professional development about the CCSS, and was determined to incorporate this into her regular instruction. However, she was unsure of how to best scaffold and support her students in their confrontation with such a challenging piece. Ellen knew there were other texts she could use that contained the same content as this book, but selected this book because she interpreted the CCSS shift to mean she needed to use grade level text with her class. Her instructional approach

and choice of materials were shaped by her interpretation of the messages she received regarding the CCSS.

In each of the classrooms I visited at Weldon Heights, teachers were choosing grade level text for all of their students much more frequently than they had in previous years (according to them). They always connected their reason for doing so to the CCSS standards and shifts related to text complexity. In most cases, teachers weren't examining other factors related to the complexity or to their students, but rather focused only on providing all their students experiences with grade level text. There was not a gradual climb up a "staircase", but rather a leap to the top of the steps for each grade level. This shift resulted in two common instructional practices, which will be shared in the next section.

Whole Class Instruction

All of the teachers I visited at Weldon Heights reported an increase in whole class literacy instruction over the course of the study. This instruction was always spent utilizing grade level text, which teachers tied to the text complexity shift. At the beginning of the study, Katelyn shared that she used very little whole class instruction during literacy, but at the end was using it daily. She connected this to her increased use of complex, grade level text, stating that she knew many of her students couldn't read those texts independently. Therefore, it made more sense to her to read texts together as a whole class.

At Weldon Heights, these three teachers talked often and enthusiastically about having a lot of professional freedom in relation to their literacy instruction. For some, it was the first time in years they were allowed to choose the materials to use to teach literacy, as well as what instructional approaches to use—as long as they were focusing on the instructional shifts of the CCSS, according to the teachers. While the teachers welcomed this increase in autonomy, it left some uncertain on how to approach their instruction after years of having to follow mandates and scripts telling them how to teach. From a critical lens, unless teachers truly understand the power structures in schools, they might not perceive their freedom as constrained, even if they have limited decision- making (Leiter, 1981). The three teachers perceived themselves as having control over their instruction, but these interpretations of the CCSS in their classrooms show how they were still significantly shaped by others when choosing texts for their students.

Once the decisions were made to begin using grade level text with the whole class, teachers had the challenge of deciding how to approach instruction with these difficult passages. While the teachers may have been exposed to multiple strategies during professional development, the only one they talked about was a very specific model of "close reading". This, along with round robin style reading, were the two most common instructional approaches observed while teachers implemented complex text with their students.

"Close Reading" Method

One frequently used strategy for using complex text was the use of what the teachers called the "close reading model". The teachers spoke about professional development on the CCSS which included the implementation of lessons using a "close reading" strategy that teachers said was modeled in videos and shared at faculty meetings. According to the teachers, some of them were given lesson plans that asked them to distribute a specific "complex text" to their class. Students were tasked with first reading the text silently, followed by listening to the teacher read it aloud. Text dependent questions accompanied the lesson plans for teachers to use. When the three teachers at Weldon Heights implemented these lessons, they implemented the plans exactly as they were written. The intent, from the teachers' perspective, was to try out the complex text with their students, providing minimal support and limited time (if any at all) on pre-reading strategies.

In Andrea's upper grade classroom, the students were given a grade level text that Andrea received during a training at Weldon Heights. Andrea said she implemented the lesson in the exact manner that was suggested in the lesson plan.

> At the start of the lesson, Andrea passed out copies of an excerpt from a grade level novel and told her students they could all read the text. She said after they read it, she would read it to them. Several students groaned, but most began to read the passage. One student, after skimming the beginning of the story, remarked, "This is not interesting to me at all!" Andrea said they all needed to read it anyway. Two other students said it was too difficult. Andrea told the whole class that it was not too difficult because it was a grade level text. She told them she would give them seven minutes to read the two and a half page story. Many of the students began to read through the passage, while others shuffled

the papers, looked around the room at classmates, or sat in their chair waiting for the next activity. After ten minutes, Andrea asked if anyone needed more time. The majority of the class raised their hands, so they were given three more minutes. Andrea stopped the class at that point, while several students remarked they were not finished. She told them she was going to read the story aloud to them now. Over the next twelve minutes, the students listened to Andrea reread the story aloud to them, while some students followed along in their own text. After the read aloud, the students were given questions that accompanied the story. Andrea asked the students to look for evidence in the text to answer the first question. She called on a student to read the first paragraph aloud, which was the third reading of this part of the story. Students were then asked to highlight parts of that paragraph that answered the question about the main character. Two students responded with inferences that did not connect to the text, so Andrea redirected them to the passage. When a student provided the response Andrea was looking for, she wrote the response to the question on the board and told students to copy the answer on their papers.

In a debriefing interview two days later, Andrea expressed that she liked being given the texts with questions because she did not have to search for materials and texts on her own, and agreed with the focus on text dependent questions with these lessons. However, she expressed feeling like this lesson was long, and was unsure of the time spent rereading this text:

> Andrea: I think it's sometimes just a lot. The passage was long. They (Common Core) want you to do that whole thing in two days. I'm going on day three. It's a long time for them to sit there. I liked the passage itself and [the students] do because they've seen the movie [based on the book] and some have read the book already. This lesson I think went well…for those reasons. But had it been something more difficult, it might have…I mean, some of the kids after an hour were like, we're kind of bored with this.

Andrea felt that this close reading strategy, which she said was shared with her at a training session, was a way to approach complex texts but could be time consuming and "boring" to her students, especially if the text was less familiar.

She believed this lesson was somewhat successful because of the students' familiarity with the story previously, but was worried about using this strategy with "more difficult" material. The close reading model of reading it twice caused many students to vocalize their disinterest in the lesson. There was evidence that the students who were able to read the passage on their own grew bored when Andrea reread it. They were not attentive to the text and began to talk to other students. These same behaviors were seen by students who struggled reading this level of text during the first reading, when they were asked to read it independently. The reading of this text did not challenge students, or result in students using more complex strategies to tackle the text. Instead, they were disengaged, frustrated, or off task. Despite these behaviors and remarks from the students, Andrea expressed willingness to implement more of these lessons because this was the approach being shared in professional development, and therefore one that she interpreted she should use more often in the classroom. Her reliance on what she thought "they"–Common Core– wanted her to do outweighed other factors in making instructional decisions.

Other teachers tried this same "close reading model" for complex texts, with similar results. Because this framework was the only one teachers talked about being exposed to in professional development, this was used often in some classrooms. However, during this instructional framework, the only strategy dealing with how to help students navigate complex text was reading a passage multiple times. I did not observe discussion on looking at the text structure, how to handle difficult vocabulary, or other strategies related to text complexity. According to the teachers, this framework was emphasized at professional development, so teachers interpreted this as a main method they should use within their classroom.

Round Robin and Popcorn Reading

Another instructional approach that was used in many classrooms when using "complex text" was round robin or popcorn style reading. In round robin style reading, students are called on one after another to orally read a piece of a text to the class (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Its variation, "popcorn reading", (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009), is similar but involves students read in a random order, with the teacher, or at times the students, unexpectedly stopping to identify the next reader. Teachers expressed this was a way to engage their whole class in reading grade level text, despite observations of off task behavior, as well as

contradictory research that suggests round robin style reading is an ineffective instructional practice (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009; Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

I observed a whole class lesson in Katelyn's primary classroom where she was using round robin style reading for the very first time in order to have students access grade level text:

> Katelyn's students were all seated in their rows of desks and were asked to open to a story in their reading anthology. Beginning with the first student in the first desk, Katelyn asked each student to read one sentence aloud. When students struggled to decode the words, Katelyn used word-by-word echo reading, where she read a word and the student read it back until the sentence was finished. When this occurred, the students typically did not look at the book, but rather echoed the word from Katelyn without referring to the text. One student grew increasingly upset when he struggled to read his sentence, and put his head down in the middle of the oral reading. Three students were able to read their sentence aloud without assistance from Katelyn, but the rest relied on this echo reading style. When they weren't reading aloud, most students whispered to each other, played with pencils, and put their heads down. This round robin procedure continued for approximately fifteen minutes until the story concluded.

During our debriefing interview, I asked Katelyn to talk about her reasons for selecting this instructional approach with the reading passage:

> Katelyn: You noticed that the kids that could not read, they just... echo read with me. Ok. But I did not stop the flow of my lesson. I kept my lesson to the standard. Which is the reading standard [dealing with text complexity]. And the kids at grade level were able to read that text. There were only two of them who are actually reading at grade level. The rest can't...But [I kept] the expectation that they were going to read aloud to the rest of the class.

Katelyn used her interpretation of text complexity in Common Core to require all her students to read grade level text aloud to the class. She stated, "That is part of Common Core. Make sure they get the same text." This is actually not a part of the Common Core document, but was a big part of Katelyn's interpretation. She stated that she had to expose her students to text "they couldn't read" because she believed that was a significant part of Common

Core. Although she admitted only two of her students were able to decode the grade level text, she viewed CCSS as requiring all her students to read this level of text. She expressed that the standards were written by "people who know literacy", so expecting all the students to read "hard texts" was something she should do. Katelyn expressed plans to use this instructional approach in the future with her class so that they could all access complex text. To Katelyn, this lesson was a success because she did what she thought she was supposed to do–had all students in her class encounter and engage in complex, grade level text.

Andrea used the variation of round robin known as "popcorn style" reading, where students don't read in a set order, but rather jump around the room or around the group. Andrea was observed using popcorn style reading on five different occasions and was her main way of reading the social studies textbook that was the focus of her literacy instruction. During these lessons, students read a paragraph out loud, then called on someone else to read the next paragraph. When I observed these lessons, some students looked at their book while others looked around the room or lost their place if it was not their turn to read. Twice in one lesson, students had to be told where they were in the text when they were called on to read. During the debriefing interview, Andrea stated that the students were engaged because they were all working with the text and expressed excitement to "popcorn" read. She stated that she felt "like they're actually in the book when we popcorn read" and viewed it as a way to keep them focused on grade level text.

The CCSS text complexity shift held a strong presence in the classrooms at Weldon Heights. Teachers all reported an increase in their use of grade level text, as well as whole class instruction, as a result of their interpretation of this shift, which stemmed from information they reported receiving at professional development and their understandings of CCSS. With limited guidance on how to support students with such challenging text, teachers fell back on the main strategy shared with them, which focused mainly on rereading a passage, or began using strategies like round robin that are counter to what research shows is best practice in literacy.

Discussion

The three teachers in this study were caring, educated, and intelligent teachers who wanted the same thing–to help their students succeed in literacy. Each one of the teachers in this study, through implementing the CCSS, believed

they had to shift their instruction to include complex text, and each one did this. Their professional knowledge base was strong enough to know that most of their students could not successfully read and comprehend grade level text without support; therefore, none of the teachers simply assigned grade level books and sent the students on their way to read it without any guidance. However, they were left without being strongly supported with implementing such a shift in instruction, which led to practices that included less active student engagement and little connection to strategies students could utilize independently. A narrowed interpretation of text complexity received more attention at professional development, according to interviews with teachers and classroom practices that were observed, and a very specific framework of close reading was emphasized to teachers at Weldon Heights. This caused frustration in some cases, as was seen in the vignette describing Ellen's lesson with Ruby Bridges. In other cases, it led to troublesome literacy practices, like the strong use of round robin and popcorn style reading. This interpretation of text complexity has the potential to be widespread as more schools begin to implement the CCSS. Professional development needs to exist to support teachers in understanding the many factors that contribute to the complexity of a text, as well as how to help support students in navigating challenging texts.

Implications for Teachers and Administrators

For years, many teachers have been "deskilled" through the use of scripted programs, federal mandates, and local directives about their instruction (Apple, 1999; Shannon, 1987). While the teachers in this study perhaps had more decision-making power than many others in the field, they still were strongly shaped by the messages they claimed to receive at professional development regarding the CCSS. Whenever I asked the teachers where they obtained their information about CCSS, they *all* reported "from the district". "The district" meant different things to different teachers—district level professional development sessions or building level faculty meetings—but none of the teachers reported seeking information about CCSS from other sources, nor did they talk about a wide range of literature related to the concept of text complexity. This means that as more district administrators begin to implement professional development for teachers regarding CCSS, careful attention needs to be paid not just to the messages actually delivered, but to the ways in which classroom teachers interpret these messages and implement them into classroom practice. Follow up support

within teachers' classrooms can help bridge gaps in understandings, support teachers with instructional practices, and redirect misinterpretations.

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) remind us that "...students should be provided with opportunities to struggle and to learn about themselves as readers when they struggle, persevere, and eventually succeed" (p. 11). Additionally, students need to balance these times to struggle with opportunities to successfully read and comprehend texts independently (Allington, 2002). The skills and strategies teachers share with students to help them when they encounter challenging text should be reinforced and practiced with texts that students read at their instructional level. If we only allow them to struggle, but do not create opportunities to learn about themselves as readers through that struggle, we are not truly supporting our students and helping them to succeed. As more districts take on the task of implementing the CCSS standards in schools across the country, they should be mindful of the need for supportive professional development for teachers, particularly in how text complexity is defined and strategies that link whole class lessons with students' independent reading. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to play an active role in interpreting the shifts and standards of the Common Core, and engage in strong, collaborative work to make decisions on how these will look in their individual classrooms.

Reconsidering the "Staircase" of Complexity

When considering this "staircase of text complexity", we might need to envision a staircase that is unlike others. This staircase should allow students to begin on different steps, climbing as appropriate to their unique needs and levels. Not every student begins the school year on the same step, so the support they need while climbing should reflect that range in levels. This particular staircase needs to allow room for climbing up and, at times, even down, depending on the content and challenge of the text. After all, as adult readers, we sometimes seek less challenging texts if we have less background knowledge about certain topics. When we skip steps on a staircase, we often find ourselves exhausted when we reach the top, having benefited little, if at all, from the support that each individual step was created to offer us. The same is true when we ask students to skip steps on the text complexity staircase. Finally, there may be times when the staircase should resemble more of an escalator, with gradual and steady support offered to students while they ascend. By considering the needs of individual

students, we can create the right staircase, one that is most appropriate for each of our classrooms and learners.

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