A Qualitative Study of Elementary Educators’ Perception of Increasing Text Complexity in Instruction

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, some students have been entering colleges and careers without the appropriate reading ability to successfully do the work expected of them. Lexile scores are a scientifically-based measurement of texts and reading ability, which includes numeric measures of word frequency and sentence length. Over the last few decades, Lexile scores of texts have decreased in grades 2-12 classrooms and in response the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has required increased text complexity starting in grades 2 and extending into grade 12 (Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (2001). The increase in text complexity is of concern to teachers, especially in the elementary grades and more specifically with struggling readers (ACT, 2006). Therefore, more must be known about teachers’ perceptions about text-complexity and the instructional choices made when implementing the CCSS and the teachers’ choices in determining what complex texts should be taught. The theory which was used to guide this study was Fullan’s Change Theory, specifically the individual’s response to change. Fullan’s Change theory was used to explore how individual’s respond to change, especially when change is external. The theory supported the research when looking at individual educators and when implementing the CCSS, how that relates to the increase in text complexity. The following research questions were explored: What are teachers’ experiences in relation to text complexity and how do teachers make sense of text complexity as a multi-dimensional construct?; What are the teachers’ perceptions about the change of text complexity relative to their role as teachers as it relates to classroom instruction and its impact on student learning?; and What are the teachers’ perceptions about the challenges faced by the increase in text complexity? Through interviews with six elementary school teachers, several major findings were discovered. The teachers in the district had a level of acceptance of the change in text complexity, but had little background knowledge
about why the change occurred and had little cohesive professional development in determining best instructional practices to meet the needs of the students. The teachers shared their tension with understanding that it was important for students to be reading grade level texts, however, had concerns that struggling students would be further left behind with the implementation of the new complexity.

*Key words:* text complexity, elementary teachers, organizational change
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Within the United States, there are students graduating from high school and entering careers or college with significant gaps in their reading abilities. One reason for this dilemma, according to Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (2001) has been the steady decline in the complexity of reading materials used during primary and secondary education. Hayes et al. (2001) reported that the “Eighth grade reading materials of today are no more difficult than the 5th grade texts of 1945” (p. 1). The researchers emphasized a clear connection between schoolbook simplification and a decline in the SATs. As far back as 1967, it was argued that textbooks were becoming less rigorous, but these warnings were largely ignored (Hayes et al., 2001). Yet, while schoolbooks used in K-12 instruction have experienced a decline in complexity since the 1940s, the difficulty in college textbooks, as measured by Lexile (L) scores have been on an incline (CCSS for Language Arts, Appendix A). Lexile scores are a scientifically-based measurement of texts and reading ability, which includes numeric measures of word frequency and sentence length. Although the way in which Lexile is measured has not changed, the Lexile band in the current Common Core State Standards has shifted for an increase in the Lexile scores at each grade level beginning in grade 2 (Williamson, 2006). A Lexile band refers to the range of Lexile measurement at each grade level. By the end of each grade level, there is an identified lower Lexile measurement and a higher Lexile measurement indicating that all students in the grade level need to reach in order to attain reading proficiency. Up until the adjustment of the Lexile scores in the CCSS in 2011, there was a dichotomy in the expected level of textbook readability in college than what was expected in secondary high school (Williamson, 2006). Research supports the notion that students who performed better in college are better able to answer
questions associated with complex texts while students who struggled are challenged by complex
texts (ACT, 2006).

**Text Complexity and College and Career Readiness**

Text complexity - the capacity in which texts challenge students with new language, new
knowledge, and new modes of thoughts (Adams, 2009) - has been in decline in the United States
over the last fifty years. Text complexity has been defined by the CCSS (2010) as having
multiple dimensions: qualitative, quantitative, and the relationship between the reader and task.
Hayes et al (1996) found an even more drastic decline in average sentence length and vocabulary
levels in reading textbooks for many grade levels than previously found in earlier studies. In
2006, Williamson found a 350L gap between the difficulty level at the end of high school and
college texts. This is a gap similar to 1.5 standard deviations and more than the Lexile difference
found between grades 4 and 8 as found in texts of the National Assessment of Educational
Progress (NAEP). Williamson also stated that in 2006, The Alliance for Excellent Education,
found that 42 percent of freshmen at community colleges and 20 percent of freshmen at four-
year institutions enroll in a least one remedial course. Some studies have indicated that a high
school diploma does not necessarily mean that a graduate is prepared to enter college or into the
workplace (Alliance Excellent Education, 2006).

**Common Core State Standards**

In 2011, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts was adopted by
45 states, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. The Common Core
State Standards clearly addresses the need for increased text complexity in the classrooms. In
fact, the last of the ten College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards states that students are to
“read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently”
Realizing the growth of students’ achievement had been stagnant in comparison with other industrialized nations, the need was evident that a more cohesive set of academic standards were necessary (CCSS, 2011).

Given that there has been a steady decline of reading Lexile levels leading up to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2011 and the Common Core State Standards now demand more complex texts to be read in schools across the US, this sweeping change should have a significant impact on student achievement. However, while the curriculum policy has been created and adopted by the majority of the states, implementing the new standards will not be accomplished without challenges. Educators are anxious about the change. Educators have already exhibited concern over the increased text complexity and the implication within the classroom (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013). Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) asserted the increase in the text complexity may prove troublesome for some educators especially those already challenged with increasing reading skills in students’ reading levels under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy. Therefore, more must be known about teachers’ perceptions about text-complexity and the instructional choices made when implementing the CCSS and their choices in determining what complex texts should be taught. When the CCSS were being developed, critical research emerged which compelled the authors to increase text complexity bands from grades 2-12. The CCSS advocates for a “staircase” of increasing text complexity beginning in grade 2.

**Perceptions of Elementary Teachers**

Interviewing elementary teachers who are currently implementing the CCSS provided an opportunity to understand the role of teachers’ perceptions in facilitating literacy instruction which would best enable students to meet the goals of college and career readiness. Qualitative
methods were used to determine teachers’ perceptions and the relationship to instructional practices. The shift in Lexile bands begins in grade 2 with a continuous increase in the Lexile scores expected each school year. With the shift in Lexile bands, students graduating from high school will have been instructed using texts with Lexile bands that are equivalent to what is needed to successfully enter college or a career.

The topic. The CCSS has determined that for students to be “on track” for college and career, the expectation of text complexity must be raised (Common Core Standards and Text Complexity, retrieved May 14). The Lexile Framework for Reading is the measurement chosen by the CCSS to determine text complexity. It is stated that the Lexile is unique in that it measures not only text complexity, but other reader ability on the same scale (Common Core Standards and Text Complexity, retrieved May 14). Fisher, Frye, and Lapp (2012) argue that text complexity goes beyond the skills of the reader but must also include readability of the text, considerateness of the text, and an analysis of the text. Readability can be described in several ways. It can be thought of as the quality and clarity of the text or as the balance between the reader’s skills and the text. The considerateness of the text is a part of the readability and includes a number of characteristics such as text structure, coherence, unity, and audience appropriateness (Fisher et al., 2012). When considering text complexity, many nuances of reading must be considered which goes beyond the level of difficulty of vocabulary and the decoding of a text. For example, texts such as Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck have a Lexile measurement of 630 which in the CCSS would put the book into the grade 2-3 grade level band. This would mean that the book has the simpler vocabulary and is more easily decodable by younger readers; however, the nuances and ideas within the book would be too challenging for young readers. Thereby it is incumbent to explore text complexity using the different dimensions
of the text and how teachers perceive these dimensions when choosing texts for classroom instruction.

**Definition of terms.** Close reading is a comprehension strategy that is explicitly taught in which students delve deeply into complex text and require greater attention and thought about the meaning of the text.

- College and career readiness is a goal of the CCSS in which students leaving K-12 education will have the necessary skills and abilities to be prepared either for college or the workforce.
- Differentiation is an educational strategy in which a more complex skill or concept is made accessible to students of all ability levels.
- Lexile (L) measurements is a measurement of texts as well as reading ability; include the variables of word frequency and sentence length and is expressed as numeric measures (Williamson, 2008).
- Qualitative measures are measurements of complexity of texts using dimensions such as structure, language conventionality and clarity, knowledge demands, and levels of meaning (literary texts) or purpose (informational text).
- Quantitative measures are measurement of complexity of texts using information such as number of words, frequency of words, and sentence lengths.
- Scaffolding is the support provided to students who are reading below the necessary grade level band to increase their ability level.
- Text Complexity is text having multiple dimensions: qualitative, quantitative, and the relationship between the reader and task (CCSS, 2011).
**Research problem.** In 2008, Williamson explored the theory that students were graduating from high school without the necessary reading skills to successfully enter college or the workforce. Williamson (2008) stated that “if there is a gap between the readability of high school texts and the readability of texts encountered in various postsecondary endeavors, then previously successful students could still appear to be unprepared after high school simply because their reading skills are insufficient for postsecondary texts” (p. 604). In response to this argument, CCSS were developed and then adopted by 45 states, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. The intent of CCSS was to create a common framework of educational standards which would inform the instruction of educators across the nation. In an era of transient students, high-stakes testing, and the globalization of education it was important to provide educational guidelines to support core instruction throughout the country ([http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards)).

Within the CCSS, there are standards to provide rigorous instruction to ensure the college and career readiness of all students. The CCSS for English Language Arts have a framework of 10 essential anchor standards. The 10th anchor standard states, “Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 10). The CCSS set the goal that all students will be able to “comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school” (2010, Appendix A, p. 2). Appendix A (2010) of the CCSS provides a summary of research to support the use of complex text in the primary and secondary education. Of particular note are the findings that the ability to read complex and challenging texts can impact the amount of reading a person will do in general life and not just in an academic setting. Gallagher (2010) espouses the concern for reading in general in which she writes of the fear that the schools in the United States are not only causing students to become
increasingly deficient readers but that they may also becoming generally disinclined to read. There is a concern that students will gain information from text-free or text-light sources which would include text messages, twitter posts, and videos. Appendix A (2010) states:

A turning away of 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 decline in the richness of text itself. This bodes ill for the ability of Americans to meet the demands placed upon them by citizenship in a democratic republic with the challenges of a highly competitive global marketplace of foods, services, and ideas (p. 4).

The renewed focus on text complexity has implications for both students and teachers. The trajectory of K-12 education is to ensure that students graduate with the necessary skills to be college and career ready. Each grade level builds upon each other to ensure grade by grade growth in students’ ability to read complex texts (CCSS, Appendix A, 2011); thus students who have been exposed to and instructed to read more complex texts throughout K-12 education will be more likely to have sufficient reading ability to succeed post K-12 education. Providing increased text complexity has different implications across the grade levels. In grades K through grade 1, in which there have been virtually no changes in the Lexile requirement, teachers are still expected to teach strong foundational skills in reading. However, in grade 2, the first shift in text complexity occurs and as the grade level increases, the current expectation continues to widen from what had previously been expected in grades 2 through 12 (CCSS, 2011).

Williamson, Fitzgerald, and Stenner (2013) propose that, “Attention should be given to the
impact of raising text complexity expectations at specific grade levels in relation to what is known about how learning to read develops over time” (p. 65).

This goal creates an impetus on teachers to rethink not only what type of texts students are given for instructional purposes but also to be mindful of the scaffolding needed to allow students of all abilities to access more complex texts. Williamson et al. (2013) state “Raising text complexity expectations throughout schooling therefore takes on critical significance in students’ academic growth” (p. 61). In light of the call for increasing text complexity into literacy instruction, educators have the task of choosing appropriate texts, understanding the need to stretch students’ reading ability simultaneously teachers must develop the understanding that the goal in using more complex texts is to eventually the decrease scaffolding of texts and increasing students’ understanding of complex texts as the students’ progress through their schooling (CCSS, Appendix A, 2011). This is referred to in the CCSS as the “Staircase of Text Complexity.” Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) have raised concerns that if educators simply introduce more complex texts without the appropriate strategies, a negative impact could occur both for the students and teachers. A concern exists that as the CCSS new Lexile bands are implemented in the elementary school without the appropriate preparatory materials and professional development and teacher attritions may increase (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013). This reinforces the need to understand teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about raising text complexity.

**Justification for the research problem.** The dimensions- qualitative, quantitative, and task-reader match- outlined by the CCSS (2011) create a need for choosing instructional material, which require a shift from simply looking at quantitative measures of text. Typically teachers choose books thought to be “just right” which means that the students could read a book independently with little instruction needed from the teachers. This would sometimes mean that
students would continually read books below their grade level, which lends itself to students entering the next grade level unprepared (Fisher et al., 2012). However, simply raising the text complexity is insufficient; typically, all students may need scaffolding and additional support to attain the newer, more rigorous reading levels (CCSS for Language Arts, Appendix A, 2011). In order to succeed in reading more complex texts, students cannot just be giving more challenging texts, but teachers must be adept at choosing texts and reading comprehension strategies (Fisher et al., 2012; Hollenbeck & Saternus, 2013). Often educators rely on measurement levels to determine the appropriateness of a text for a student. Educators must foster the use of more complex texts in instruction by providing explicit strategy instruction for text comprehension which will allow students to become more proficient readers (Hollenbeck & Saternus, 2013).

In order to best understand how successful the implementation of the new, more rigorous standard of reading levels is, one must consider the role and perceptions of the educators who are integral in providing the appropriate level of instruction in the classroom. Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) researched the role of teachers’ attitudes and beliefs in the change process. One of their conclusions stated “Awareness-raising of beliefs and their origins will therefore be important if we wish to change or get teachers to question beliefs” (p. 359).

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Despite the current emphasis on text complexity and the instruction needed to ensure that students are provided appropriate instruction, there have been few studies, which have addressed teachers’ perceptions and attitudes about increasing text complexity. Understanding the views and the beliefs of the educators lead to better understanding of the success of new implementation of text complexities. Studies are typically focused on what is meant about text complexity (Adams, 2010-11; Benjamin, 2011; Fisher et al., 2012; Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, & Liben 2012; Williamson et al., 2013); reading comprehension
strategies (Fisher et al., 2012; Hollenbeck & Saternus, 2013; Marzano, 2013); close reading (Fisher et al., 2012; Boyles, 2013); and explanations on the importance of increasing text complexity within the classroom (Hayes et al., 1996; Williamson, 2006; CCSS, Appendix A, 2010). Adams (2010-11) argues that, “the right perceptions of the teachers about readability and modification when using authentic texts would bring many advantages to the lessons and the students as well” (p. 94).

Currently there are few or no research articles that speak directly on how teachers make sense of the change and the impact of increased text complexity on teachers’ instructional practices or the implication of increasing text complexity on students in the classroom. This research study provided insight into the beliefs of the educators who are currently shifting their practices to include increasingly more challenging texts into their classrooms. The research is intended to fill the gap in the literature that explores the use of complex texts in the classroom.

**Relating the discussion to audience.** This qualitative study will be of interest to elementary educators who are currently impacted by the increase in the Lexile expectations. Educators must develop an understanding of why the shift in Lexile measurements was deemed to be essential. Administration must provide guidance to educators as they grapple with the increase in difficulty of texts and might also be interested in a study, which explores the perceptions of teachers. This study provides insight into what professional development may need to be offered and what types of guidance teachers might need to create successful lesson plans that allow for all students to attain success at the increased text complexity. Colleges which design programs for pre-service teachers may also find this study useful as it seeks to create methods classes on the instruction of reading which seeks to shape perceptions of future
educators. Finally, policy-makers may use this study to determine how to create future policy with the understanding of how educators react to and implement significant external changes.

Significance of the research problem

In order to be best prepared for college and career, students must be instructed in literacy activities of increased text complex reading (Boyles, 2013). Educators in grades 2 through 4 may need to shift their perceptions of what are appropriate reading materials for students. Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) assert that “the third-grade teachers who have dealt with the NCLB [No Child Left Behind] demand in failing schools (of which there are many nationwide) are being asked to raise their students’ reading levels dramatically” (p. 49) as demonstrated on state and national standardized tests. Factors that make a text complex include both qualitative and quantitative measures—this includes content, cohesion, and organization (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Often teachers in elementary grades rely heavily on the quantitative measures: “word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult if not impossible for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, especially in long texts, and are thus today typically measured by computer software” (CCSS, Appendix A, 2010, p. 4). How teachers’ perceive increasing text complexity in elementary classrooms highlight the need for better understanding by educators on what is meant by text complexity and the impact of increasing text complexity in the classroom.

Understanding the perceptions of educators is critical in order to understand the effectiveness of implementing the curriculum changes, which are necessitated by the adoption of the CCSS (Adams, 2009). Text complexity, which had been on a decline for decades (Hayes et al, 2011) now is on the forefront of curriculum change and must be understood by educators both in terms of how to choose appropriately complex texts and how to support the instruction of all students using more complex texts. Taylor, Raphael, and Au (2011) state, “Teachers need to be
thoughtful and adaptable in their teaching to meet the needs of all children, to provide them with excellent learning opportunities, and to help them meet the highest of standards” (p. 623). Gunning (2012) has highlighted the fact that teachers currently have a misunderstanding of what is meant by text complexity and that there is a concern that they will not be sure what qualifies as complex text. Finally, Gunning (2012) also found that teachers were concerned with how to develop students’ ability to comprehend complex texts.

The perceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of educators can have a profound effect on students’ reading ability and success in reading comprehension. When educators have a solid understanding of research-based strategies, including the choosing of appropriate texts of increasing complexity, it has been demonstrated to provide a greater difference than any program in developing reading comprehension (Duke & Block, 2012). The goal of reading instruction is to ensure students are best prepared for college and career and educators must take a critical role in choosing texts which will increase students’ understanding while still providing the necessary scaffolding and differentiation to ensure that all students can access the information (Williamson et al., 2013).

Research that helps to understand the perceptions held by elementary education teachers as they grapple with and support the increase in text complexity will assist in determining what further professional development may be needed to support educators as they provide high quality literacy instruction. Findings may be significant to the wider academic community as it may highlight how perceptions held by educators can help to inform high level instruction in reading. Although a curriculum mandate has been implemented, a teacher’s perception can either make the implementation a success or a failure. Thus, asking elementary educators about their perceptions concerning text complexity and the inclusion of more rigorous texts into their
classroom instruction, may assist in developing professional development that will directly impact teachers’ inclusion of more rigorous texts and the strategies needed to ensure that students are positively impacted by the curriculum change.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this basic qualitative interpretative study is to explore teachers’ perceptions about the federal mandate of the CCSS (2011) that students are to read complex literary and informational texts independently and how their perceptions may affect their motivation to make the change. The research questions have been informed by the research, the conceptual framework and the qualitative methodology of the study:

1. What are teachers’ experiences in relation to text complexity and how do teachers make sense of text complexity as a multi-dimensional construct?
2. What are the teachers’ perceptions about the change of text complexity relative to their role as teachers as it relates to classroom instruction and its impact on student learning?
3. What are the teachers’ perceptions about the challenges faced by the increase in text complexity?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study explored the perceptions’ of elementary teachers about text complexity and the impact of increased rigor in daily literacy instruction. The CCSS (2010) has been adopted by the majority of states in the union and explicitly asserts that students are expected to “grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries” (p. 10), yet it does not take into account the impact of these changes on educators, who may be viewing the challenge of increasing text complexity with both tension and trepidation (Heiber & Mesmer, 2013). The conceptual framework that guided the investigation
about the challenges faced by educators when increasing text complexity in their classroom is informed by Fullan’s change theory. Fullan (1985, 2007, 2008, 2009) has written extensively about change in educational and business systems. Using Fullan’s theory of change, the lens of the individual in the change process will be explored, as it is the teacher who may need to adjust his/her perceptions about text complexity. Given that teachers must change and adapt to the new curriculum standards, including increasing text complexity, the following conceptual framework will provide a lens to help in understanding how educators might respond to and perceive these challenges.

A discussion of the conceptual framework begins with a review of Fullan’s (1985, 2007, 2008, 2009) theory of change and what the individual teachers’ role is when an organization is changed by outside forces such as new curriculum initiatives. This section will focus specifically on understanding the individual’s role is in an organization when confronting change.

**Organizational change and the individual using Theory of Change.** Michael Fullan has been exploring theories of change in educational systems for decades. He states “Change is at once simple and complex, and therein lies its fascination” (1985, p. 391). A change in an organization can be either internal or external. The adoption of the CCSS, an external policy change, has impacted nearly every public school system in the country thereby affecting most educators across the United States. Fullan (2008) looks at all aspects of change when discussing his theories of change, “a way of understanding the world that identifies insights and ideas for effectively improving it” (p. 275). Fullan’s theory of change was used specifically to explore teachers’ perceptions of an external change.

In his theory of change, Fullan (1985) summarizes the changes at the individual level as a process in which the individual is expected to alter his/her way of thinking and doing, develop
new skills, and find new meaning and satisfaction. Changes brought about by reform need to take into account what needs to change in instructional practice and what it will take to bring these changes into classes. Fullan (2007) asserts that change of the psychological state of the teacher can impact the implementation of a curriculum change in the educational setting. Innovations are generally more successful in school communities in which teachers work collaboratively to examine “how well students are doing, relates it to how they are teaching, and then make improvements” (Fullan, 2007, p. 142). This provides an important context to the research under consideration. Understanding the perceptions of teachers will assist to understand how successful the change will likely be. Fullan (2007) contends that changing teaching styles or approaches are difficult but that changes in beliefs are even more difficult but essential, “In other words, changes in beliefs and understanding are the foundation of achieving lasting reform” (p. 37). Fullan’s theory of change expands the impetus in understanding the basic tenets of the individual when confronting a systemic, external innovation. He explains that the visibility of the innovation in terms of materials and resources is easiest to deal with but the beliefs of the teacher are more complex:

Changes in belief are even more difficult. They challenge the core values held by individuals regarding the purposes of education. Moreover, beliefs are often not explicit, discussed, or understood, but rather are buried at the level of unstated assumptions. And the development of new understandings is essential because it provides a set of criteria for overall planning and a screen for sifting valuable from not-so-valuable learning opportunities (p. 36).

Fullan (2006) asserted that all change is impacted by one simple word: motivation. Without the motivation, whether that is by an individual or a collective group, change will not be
successful, even if that change is a reform initiative. The key aspects of motivation include: moral purpose; capacity; resources; peer and leadership support; and identity (p. 8). All of these aspects are critical for understanding the perceptions of teachers when facing a major curriculum change such as increasing text complexity. First, moral purpose can be described globally as doing what is best for the students and student learning. If the premise of increasing text complexity is that students will be more successful in the future then it would make sense to change instructional practices to support this premise, but the other side of this issue is the tension teachers feel that increasing text complexity may actually be harmful to students’ learning (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013). Williamson et al. (2013) stated that “Providing higher level cognitive demand for word recognition and related meaning construction could potentially facilitate each students’ growth” (p. 66). Second, capacity is defined as “any strategy that increased the collective effectiveness of a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning” (Fullan, 2006, p. 9). The initiative of raising text complexity is an external forced change, but there still needs to be capacity building to ensure the successful implementation. By studying the perceptions of the teachers, it will perhaps provide insight on how to build capacity amongst the teachers to better provide instruction in challenging texts. Third, resources are often a concern for teachers when implementing a change. Resources can include instructional materials and professional development. Often teachers’ perceptions are impacted by the resources which are provided to support an external change. Fourth, peer and leadership support which would include both other educators as well as school and district administrators. As stated previously, successful innovations have been found more often in organizations in which there is strong support amongst staff (Fullan, 2007). This could also provide information on where teachers are on the change continuum and provide models for peer leadership to support the
innovation. Finally, teachers’ identity, their own belief system about student learning and expectations are critical to understand the success of an innovation change.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2009) contend that “In reality, few people really change unless, at some point, they see the need to do so” (p. 2). The problem becomes compounded when the change is brought about by policy or reform and not by personal choice. It is important to understand the individual’s role in educational change especially when it is a forced change but one that directly impacts student achievement such as an increase in text complexity. Fullan’s theory of change, specifically as it relates to the individual, will help to frame the study to examine the perceptions of teachers as they are implementing the new CCSS with a particular focus on the elementary teachers’ perception on what will motivate an effective change of text complexity and the impact of that in the classroom.

Positionality Statement

I have completed a qualitative research study therefore I was the primary instrument in the proposed study. I interviewed the participants and then documented, interpreted, analyzed and described my subject matter (Creswell, 2007). There is some concern that researcher bias may be an issue. Due to many conversations I have had with the colleagues in my own elementary school and as well as being present at professional development which has revolved around text complexity, I have developed some beliefs about teachers’ perceptions toward text complexity. The basic view of many of the educators in the district I work is that the new levels of complexity are unattainable to students. The teachers have continually stated that the students are already struggling and that it is not fair or appropriate to raise the level of text complexity. They claim that it is not developmentally sound practice to present students with text that are not at their reading level. I do not hold those beliefs. I believe that with the appropriate level of
instruction, scaffolding, exposure to complex texts, and changing teachers’ beliefs, the majority of students can reach grade-level reading levels. When I was in a traditional classroom setting, students came to me with varying reading levels, yet they were all instructed using grade-level materials. By the end of the year, most of my students had increased their reading abilities and became more proficient readers as demonstrated on teacher-made, district, and state testing. I believe that having high expectations of student capacity coupled with appropriate reading instruction allowing for exposure to more complex texts, that all students can reach grade level expectations. I challenge the beliefs of other educators who do not hold these standards. Understanding this bias and considering my evaluative role within the elementary school I work, it was decided that I would interview teachers in a neighboring town. While interviewing the participants, I phrased questions as neutrally as possible without infusing my own personal mindset and beliefs.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers’ perceptions about the federal mandate of the CCSS that students are to read complex literary and informational texts independently and how teacher perceptions affect their instructional strategies in the elementary classrooms to ensure students’ are able to read and comprehend complex texts. The literature, theoretical framework and qualitative method of the study informed the research questions.

Overview

In 2011, the majority of the states in the United States adopted the CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA). One of the most significant changes found within the CCSS was the increase in text complexity beginning in grade 2. The increase in text complexity came as a result of a decline in students’ reading ability as highlighted by how many students entering college need to take remedial reading classes (ACT, 2006). Anchor standard number 10 highlights the need for increasing text complexity and having students read more analytically and independently. As a result of the increase in text complexity, teachers’ professional practice is impacted by having teachers include more rigorous texts and providing lessons and instruction which will allow access of these texts for all students. Often public policy surrounding education is done without the input of the educators in the field and often if an individual does not consider the change to be appropriate he/she may not implement it effectively (Fullan, 1985). Teachers often have specific concerns about change, especially when the innovation is from an external source. As such, teachers’ perception about the change process is critical in understanding if the change will be effective.
Teachers’ perceptions were examined using Fullan’s theory of change. The change process was considered using Fullan’s (2007) extensive change theories that explore how change is impacted by the beliefs of the individual within the organization. Studying the perceptions of the teacher in relation to the use of complex text in elementary reading programs may be useful in determining the course of action policy-makers and school administrators responsible for professional development may need to make. A review of the literature revealed that in-depth research about text complexity in the 21st century classroom has not been conducted, especially since the CCSS was widely adopted. The articles that exist currently discuss text complexity and the potential instructional strategies which will need to be used to allow for students to access texts which are considered far more advanced than previously used.

**Scope and Organization**

This qualitative research investigation encompassed comprehensive themes beginning with an overall introduction followed by four key themes: (1) Critical Reading Research (2) Reading Comprehension; (3) Education Reform and Teacher Perceptions; (4) Teacher Preparation. Lastly a summary of how the literature contributed and assisted in justifying the significance of this research.

**Introduction**

The rise of text complexity is still in its infancy and few research studies have been done to test the effectiveness on student achievement of the increase in Lexile scores beginning in grade 2. There have been informational articles written about text complexity especially over the last several years since the adoption of the CCSS in English Language Arts (2011). The articles range from examinations about what is meant by text complexity, the implications for
implementation of increasing text complexity, the historical context on the decision to raise text
complexity, and the possible implications of using increasingly more challenging texts.

The dearth of research studies about the implementation of using increased text
complexity led to a review of articles which examines elementary students’ reading development
and the connection with using more challenging texts. This investigation pursued an examination
of the possible impacts to student achievement and how students’ reading develops in elementary
schools looking as specifically as possible to students in grades 2-4. The connection between
reading development, traditional methods of reading instruction, and the fourth grade reading
slump, which is typically found at around the time that students are beginning to read to learn,
are explored in connection with text complexity. To date, no research articles have been found to
demonstrate any connection between the increase in text complexity and its impact to reading
development in the elementary classrooms. However, by exploring the reading development and
some aspects of reading comprehension in the elementary classrooms, it might clearly identify
areas of concerns about increasing text complexity.

The study examined the perceptions of teachers when confronted with the educational
mandate to increase text complexity in the elementary school. A review of the literature found
no specific studies about perceptions about text complexity although there have been references
to teachers’ beliefs about text complexity found (Adams, 2012; Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). The
literature review was expanded to examine both educational reforms and its impact on the lived
experiences of teachers as well literature that examined teachers’ perceptions, such as, teachers’
response to change and how perceptions and attitudes about teaching are initially developed.
The impact of educators on the reading process was also reviewed. The literature helped to frame
the study of teachers’ perceptions of text complexity by providing a lens to understand the
impact of both educational reforms and teacher perceptions and how innovations are accepted into the classroom.

**Critical Reading Research**

Within this section, the background of the rationale to increase text complexity is explored as well as the background of teachers’ roles in reading development.

The ACT (2006) demonstrated that many students were exiting public education and entering college or the workforce without the requisite skills in reading to be successful. For many college freshman this resulted in having to take additional remedial reading courses in order to be able to successful make it through the degree program; for others it resulted in not being able to complete the program. The RAND (2002) group also noted that the importance of reading comprehension for several factors including an increased demand to comprehend more challenging texts in a global society. American students are underperforming when compared with students in other countries, and there are notable gaps in reading comprehension from students in different economic groups. With this information it is evident that reading comprehension and the effectiveness of instruction of reading is instrumental to students’ future success in college and careers. Because reading development is a process, it is essential to begin the shift of more rigorous texts in the elementary grades in order to ensure students’ achievement in reading more complex texts as they progress through the grade levels.

Teacher beliefs, perceptions and practices around reading comprehension typically are informed during pre-service learning and later built upon by professional development. Duke and Block (2012) make the claim that one of the key obstacles in adoption of best practices in literacy instruction is the “lack of expertise” among some educators to effectively teach the more complex reading skills. The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) cite that “research has shown
that child outcomes are related to the quality of the instruction they receive, which in turn reflects teacher preparation and ongoing teacher professional development” (p. 7).

Unfortunately it has been noted by the RAND group that a systematic, research base that should provide educators with the instructional understanding and practices does not exist (2002). Allington (2002) made the assertion that in order to improve the instruction of reading comprehension, it requires generalist, elementary teachers who are experts at knowing not only how to explicitly teach reading strategies, but who also allow students to use strategies independently while working with a text alone. Duke and Block (2012) also make the claim that the single most critical challenge to changing reading outcomes in students lie in the teachers themselves. They make the assertion that, “The challenge here is to prepare and – for those already in the field- develop far more teachers who are skilled at improving not only word-reading skills, but also vocabulary, conceptual and content knowledge, and comprehension in their students” (p. 67).

Reading comprehension in its simplest form is making meaning from the words on the page. In its more complex form, it is a multi-faceted activity that combines three elements: the reader, the text, and the activity. These three elements fall within the larger socio-cultural context that “shapes and is shaped by the reader and that interacts with each of the three elements” (RAND, p. 11, 2002). A reader must have cognitive capacities, motivation, and knowledge to assist in reading text. These components can be impacted by the texts being used as well as the activity being designed. The reader can change through the reading process by gaining more knowledge and cognitive capacities. Teachers can also impact the knowledge and capacities of the reader during the reading process both by providing adequate instruction about the text the reader is reading as well as by providing general effective comprehension instruction.
Likewise, motivation can impact reading comprehension. A reader can be highly motivated to make meaning from a challenging text or be unmotivated to continue to read or make meaning (RAND, 2002).

There are several key theorists and researchers in the field of reading and reading comprehension. Jeanne Chall (1983, 1995), a noted theorist in reading development, wrote extensively about the six stages of reading development. The stages are considered fluid with students entering them at approximate ages and grade levels, but with the understanding that students might move more quickly through the stages, while others may progress at a slower rate of speed. Chall also made specific note of the “fourth grade slump”, a developmental phenomenon that has been cited for decades in which a child who had been progressing developmentally in reading, starts to regress in reading achievement. This is a point of concern as it can contribute to increasing difficult in reading as students shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Modern day reading researchers include Nell Duke, Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, Timothy Shanahan, and Richard Allington. Over the last decade each of these researchers has contributed to the field of reading development. Duke, Frey, and Fisher have been instrumental in discussing text complexity writing books and articles about the increase rigor and possible educational choices teachers can make. Shanahan (2011) has refuted the theory of instructional reading levels, that came into vogue in 1946 after a study was conducted by Emmet Betts. He researches and writes about all aspects of literacy, including the area of instruction. Allington’s (2012) belief is in some contrast to the idea of text complexity and discusses ensuring that all students have books that they can read daily, not always fostering reading more complex texts and often the texts students are reading independently are below the reading level which is expected.
Teachers typically receive training on reading instruction through pre-service training which may be continued when they enter the field through professional development. RAND (2002) make the contention that “few teachers receive adequate pre-service preparation or ongoing professional development focused on reading comprehension” (p. xii). The National Reading Panel asserts “if teacher behaviors cannot be transformed by changes in the curriculum in pre-service programs, it is unlikely that teacher behaviors can be changed later” (p. 6). This suggests the importance of providing effective training in reading instruction during the pre-service years. This also provides a context on how teachers may resist when faced with an innovation in the classroom. The RAND report (2002) asserts that many pre-service teachers enter the teacher preparation programs with firmly held beliefs about the nature of knowledge and teaching. These beliefs have been formed when the teachers were learners and are not easily changed. A challenge to new educational innovations is that although pre-service teachers have strongly held beliefs, teachers in the field have even more entrenched beliefs about their instructional practices. “Many believe that practicing teachers, through their teaching experiences and classroom routines have developed established ways of thinking about and implementing instruction- ways that are often resistant of change” (p. 51). It is an often-held belief by practicing teachers that professional development in educational innovations hold little to no value.

**Reading Comprehension**

The next section explored literature related to components of reading comprehension and its impact on text complexity.

**Reading development.** In order to understand teachers’ perceptions and response to the mandate that requires students beginning in second grade, to be expected to read and critically
understand books of higher Lexile scores, it is critical to review some of the research. The following research currently informs the beliefs held by many educators’ current beliefs. The study of the development of reading acquisition first began in the 1930s at the onset of scientific research in education. This area of study continued to be examined throughout the decades, reaching what was termed an “unprecedented level of refinement” (Indrisano & Chall, 1995, p. 63) in the 1980s and 1990s. The developmental process of reading theory was first presented by William S. Gray in 1925 and continued to be refined until 1937 when a five stage theory of development emerged: 1. readiness; 2. learning to read; 3. rapid progress in fundamental attitudes, habits, and skills; 4. extension of experiences and increases in efficiency and 5. Refinement of attitudes, habits, and tastes (p. 65). In 1979, Chall first introduced Stages of Reading Development that continued to grow until 1996. Indrisano and Chall (1995) contend “These stages may be seen in the different texts that students are able to read at different levels of development, and in the developing language and cognitive abilities need to comprehend these increasingly more difficult texts” (p. 66). Chall (1983) identified 6 stages of reading development, which start at the Prereading stage (Stage 0: Birth to Age 6) through Stage 5 (Construction and Reconstruction: College, Age 18 and above). For the purpose of this qualitative study, the two stages, which are most relevant are Stage 2 and Stage 3. Stage 2 is the Confirmation, Fluency, Ungluing from Print: Grades 2-3, ages 7-8. Although the major focus of Stage 2 is on decoding and fluency, the success of students in Stage 2 can indicate further success or failure in reading. Indrisano and Chall (1995) refer to Stage 2 as a time in which children are learning to read and are becoming more adept at reading familiar texts. In Stage 3, grades 3-4, students move to the reading to learn stage and readers are often using texts, which
may have topics unfamiliar to them. Hiebert (2011) asserts, “Chall’s stages give a sense of the primary milestones that readers face in becoming proficient through the school years” (p. 9).

Duke and Block (2012) examined the National Research council’s seminal report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, which was published over fifteen years ago. At the time of publication, key recommendations were provided to deliver best instructional practices for students in grades K-3. Duke and Block (2012) discovered that two key recommendations have been widely neglected in public education: vocabulary and comprehension. Duke and Block (2012) contend that although a key recommendation is the call for direct explicit instruction to ensure comprehension and to ensure that readers have a better understanding of what is being read little instructional time is spent teaching the skill. Wigfield, Guthrie, Perencevich, Taboada, Klauda, Mcrae, and Barbosa (2008) discovered a strong relationship between student engagement and strong reading comprehension attainment. Wigfield et al., (2008) assert that “Highly engaged readers are very strategic, using such comprehensions strategies as questioning and summarizing to gain meaning from a text” (p. 443). Allington (2002) provides additional support for ensuring high student engagement to increase reading comprehension. When analyzing exemplary teachers, it was found that the teachers who provided more complex tasks, fewer worksheets, and more student choice had students who were more actively engaged and students attained higher levels of reading comprehension.

**Fourth grade slump.** A theme that continued to emerge during the review of literature was the phenomenon of the fourth grade slump in reading comprehension. As the proposed study is centered on teachers of grades 2-4, it was beneficial to have an understanding of what the slump is, why it occurs, and possible prevention of the slump. Chall (1983) explained that the
fourth grade slump typically occurred in students who had difficulties in the developmental stages 1 and 2. It was also cited that this is the time many schools introduced textbooks to students in other subjects which might have impacted reading development. In 2012, Duke and Block found that there was a “near stagnation” (p. 55) of reading achievement in fourth-grade students. A few significant factors appear to be the causes of the fourth grade slump. Indrisano & Chall, 1995, RAND, 2002, Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009, Suhr, Hernandez, Grimes & Warschauer, 2010, Gee, 2008 posit that low oral language development compounded with low-socio economic status have been highlighted as major contributors to the lack of reading development in grade 4 and beyond. Another component leading to the “fourth grade slump” is the lack of focus on vocabulary in reading instruction (Hirsch, Jr, 2003, Best, Floyd, & McNamara, 2003, Chall, 1983, Indrisano & Chall, 1995, Duke & Block, 2012, Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Gee (2008) asserted that “most fourth-graders can decode, but too many of them today cannot read to learn. They are unable to negotiate the ‘language of content’ that is more abstract, complex, and precise than everyday oral language” (p. 4). When considering the “fourth grade slump”, some theorize that increasing the text complexity will exacerbate the current decline in reading achievement. Hiebert (2011) challenged raising the Lexile measurements in the elementary grades citing that it may not aid in creating career and college readiness and may in fact serve as an impediment to reading achievement in grades 2-4.

**Leveled readers.** The CCSS measure of text complexity using the Lexile measurement bands at each grade level. When reviewing the literature, the theme of leveling texts emerged as a critical component in understanding how teachers choose materials and how the increased text complexity might change the way in which leveled readers are chosen for students. Several key researchers have expressed concerns over the way in which leveling has been used in schools
and the fact that the theory that often directly informs leveling practices is based upon a 1946 study by Emmet Betts which has been subjected to a number of critiques and revisions (Glasswell & Ford, 2010; Shanahan, 2011; Glasswell & Ford, 2011; Halladay, 2012). Shanahan (2011) has taken the position that the theory of instructional reading level has been based on a study from Betts in 1946, but that is a tenuous theory at best. Shanahan (2011) believes that relying on a theory, which is relatively unproven begets the guidance, support and scaffolding provided by the teacher. In 2010, Glasswell and Ford raised concerns that teachers who used level readers to group students can inhibit student learning rather than expand student growth as a reader. According to Glasswell and Ford (2010) this happens because students in what is considered to be a lower reading group spent more instructional time on skill instruction than reading of the text. Glasswell and Ford (2011) proposed a new way of looking at leveled readers allowing for wider and more flexible decisions made by teachers on reading levels. Through the interactions with teachers, Glasswell and Ford (2011) found that students, at times, were more motivated to read books that may not have been at their level and that often students who were in leveled, guided reading groups were often reading below grade level. Glasswell and Ford (2011) asserted “Our concerns about leveling grow not from the good idea at the heart of this practice but from the way the good idea has been interpreted and implemented” (p. 208). The view is expanded upon by Halladay (2012) who posits that, “Teachers should be careful not to assume that a challenging text will be emotionally frustrating for a student” (p. 61).

Other researchers maintain that choosing the correct level books that match the reader is the best way to achieve growth in reading (Allington, 2002; Stange, 2013). This does not preclude the use of varied texts, but both researchers are far more concerned with ensuring that students are reading at the instructional level when working with the teachers and have the
opportunity to read at the independent level when not working with the teachers. Stange (2013) asserts that “When addressing comprehension and teaching a particular strategy while children are reading the text, it may be more helpful to use the independent level to reduce the cognitive load so children can attend to the strategy as well as the meaning of the text” (p. 125).

**Text complexity.** Text complexity has been written about extensively since the adoption and implementation of the CCSS in 2011. In response to students graduating from high school without the necessary reading skills to be successful in college and the workplace, CCSS created a “Staircase of Text Complexity” which increased the reading bands as measured by Lexile measurement. In response, many articles have been written about text complexity. At such time few qualitative or quantitative studies have been conducted to determine the effect of the increased rigor in reading. Leading literacy experts have used prior research to determine what impact increasing Lexile measures may have in terms of instructional practices and the impact that may have on students’ reading ability. Williamson (n.d.) provides a “strategy for determining and aligning reading growth standards so that they are consistent with postsecondary performance expectations embodied in text materials that students may encounter in various postsecondary endeavors” (p. 6).

Most of the articles reviewed supported the notion that students need to be challenged by the texts they are reading especially in light of research demonstrating students are not graduating with sufficient reading skills (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013; Mesmer et al., 2012; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013). Williamson et al. (2013) argue “Raising text complexity expectations throughout schooling, therefore takes on critical significance for students’ academic growth” (p. 61). Fisher et al. (2012) reiterate that the concern with decreased reading rigor has been explored in prior decades
and extends this to say it is time to view text complexity in the multiple dimensions of qualitative, quantitative and perhaps most importantly the match between the reader, the task and the text.

**Diverse learners.** Articles, which challenge the CCSS mandated increase in text complexity, are often concerned with how this will affect diverse learners: students whom have identified learning disabilities or enter school without English as their first language (Halladay, n.d.; Mesmer et al., 2012; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013; Fillmore & Fillmore, n.d.). Hiebert and Mesmer (2013) explore some of the potential negative effects of raised text complexity on young readers. Some possible negative impacts could be a decrease in automaticity and fluency and there is a concern that the challenging texts could decrease motivation and engagement. Williamson et al. (2013) raise the concerns that the rise in text complexity could hinder some of the foundational skills necessary for successful future reading. They also contend “beginning readers in general tend to self-select texts that are too challenging to read independently” (p. 66) which can inhibit student reading progress. Halladay (2008) conducted an extensive study of second-graders who self-selected challenging texts. One of the findings from the study demonstrated that often students of all ability level self-selected difficult texts even when easier texts were available to select. Students tended to self-select texts, regardless of difficulty based upon their interest in the text or prior knowledge of the subject. Fillmore and Fillmore (n.d.) claim that the increase in text complexity could have considerable impact on English Language learners and language diverse learners, especially since language acquisition is not addressed in the CCSS.

**Instructional strategies.** Proponents of the rise in text complexity also examine instructional strategies that support students in advancing their reading levels. Many articles
discuss at length the strategy of scaffolding instruction (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013; Mesmer et al., 2012; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013; Shanahan, 2013). Despite the fact that the ultimate goal of the CCSS is to have students independently read grade-level text by the end of each grade, it is expected that educators take an active role in providing the instructional support to allow students to achieve the goal. This includes guiding students with more complex text and providing students with an array of reading experiences (Shanahan, 2013; Fisher et al., 2012). The instructional strategy of close reading is explored by many literacy leaders (Fisher et al., 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Boyles, 2013). Close reading is not a new strategy but has actually been around for decades, often used more frequently in high school and colleges. Fisher and Frey (2012) assert “The purpose is to build the habits of readers as they engage with the complex texts of the discipline and to build their stamina skills for being able to do so independently” (p. 8). Hiebert (2012) contends, “It should be noted that there are no clear paths for how this standard translates into classroom instruction” (p. 1) but she does provide seven steps teachers can take to help manage the new text complexity. The seven actions are to focus on the knowledge, create connections, activate students’ passion, develop vocabulary, increase the volume of reading, build up students’ stamina, and identify clear benchmarks throughout the year.

**Educational Reform and Teachers’ Perceptions**

Within this section an overview of major educational reform over the last couple of decades was explored, especially as it relates to teachers’ perceptions.

Since the *Nation at Risk* report in the 1983, the United States educational system has had reforms and policy changes to ensure students are provided with the best education possible. *Nation at Risk* (1983) made the claim that the educational system was not preparing graduates
effectively ensuring their success in a global economy. Although some claimed the school reforms were a scapegoat of sorts in order to take the blame off of decisions of political and business leaders, what emerged was the start of a thirty-year search for educational reform that propelled true change in the schools. According to that report the United States had lost its competitive edge creating threat to our economic growth and development (Fowler, 2009; Putney & Morris, 2011). Often the policies and reforms are created by external forces such as local, state, or federal governments, but have immense impact on classroom teachers. Sargent et al., (2010) asserted, “Teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, pedagogical knowledge, and skills all play a key role in how they address and respond to the mandates imposed on them and in how they strive for quality teaching and learning in the classroom setting” (p. 369).

From *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 eventually emerged the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which was signed into law in 2002. This provided the shift from the proposed national goals of the 80s and 90s which required all states who receive federal money for public education to develop and adopt state standards and assessments (Fowler, 2009; Shirley, 2009). Shirley (2009) asserts that teacher support of the NCLB is waning, but yet it is still in effect. Most recently the 46 states have adopted the CCSS for both ELA and mathematics. The new standards were designed for and intended to prepare all high school graduates to become college and career ready. Recent research has demonstrated that United States students are still slightly behind their peers in industrialized countries. A major emphasis in the CCSS (2010) is the increase in text complexity and the expectation that all students will be reading at grade by the end of each academic year. The adoption of the CCSS is what has precipitated the current changes in educational practice in reading texts. Teachers’ perceptions of the policy change can and will impact the successful implementation of the adopted Common Core State Standards.
Teachers’ perceptions related to the mandated shift in text complexity was researched so an understanding of teachers’ perceptions was reviewed in the literature. Several articles were examined to gain insight on teachers’ perceptions in relation to instructional practices and mandated reforms. Ready and Wright (2010) claimed that “Teacher perceptions have powerful implications for children’s educational experiences” (p. 336). The study referenced was concerned with teachers’ perceptions in regards to the cognitive ability of students from varying backgrounds. The conclusions reached in this study were similar to those found in Hughes and Kowk (2007) which articulated that teacher perceptions about the backgrounds of students and the impact of parents in the role of education impacted the teachers’ beliefs about achievement. Teachers who perceive that students are able to achieve, showed higher level of student engagement and achievement. Sweet, Guthrie, and Ng (1998) conducted a study, which specifically focused on teachers’ perceptions on students’ reading motivation. Sweet et al. (1998) found a strong relationship between teachers’ perceptions, motivation, and student achievement. It was demonstrated through both of the above studies “that students who were perceived to be more internally motivated (intrinsic) would receive higher grades than students depending more on heavily on external (extrinsic) supports” (219). Although only a few studies were examined specifically about perceptions, they support the findings of the RAND group (2002) and the NRP (2000), which discuss the importance of teacher perceptions in pre-service teaching programs. These findings also align with the component of explicit training in diversity and perceptions held about diversity in pre-service learning (IRA, 2007). Typically, as explored by Fullan (2011), teachers’ perceptions are critical in the success of reform initiatives.
Teacher Preparation

In the next section, teachers’ preparation in reading instruction is explored and how this may impact teacher perceptions.

This qualitative study viewed the perceptions of teachers on a federally mandated policy that mandated the change in instructional practice in relation to text complexity (CCSS, Appendix A, 2011). In order to gain understanding about teacher beliefs and how it impacts classroom practices and student achievement a few studies were examined. Fullan (1985) looked at the role of individuals when a school is going through a change process. Fullan (1985) claims “change at the individual level is a process whereby individuals alter their ways of thinking and doing (e.g., teaching in this case)” (p. 396). A couple of the articles were focused on reading instruction, while others examined the formation and impact of teachers’ perceptions.

An overall theme which emerged from the literature was the role of the teacher in effective reading instruction and the how educational reform is enacted. Sargent et al. (2010) posits that changes in policy have created a shift in instructional practices of reading. The claim is that even with the knowledge of effective- developmentally appropriate practices, the pressures of policy mandates, many educators and districts implemented as a result, for example using scripted curriculum which may or may not incorporate research-based practices has been detrimental. This supports the position held by Allington (2002) who claimed that exemplary teachers of reading instruction were exemplary because they did not allow policy to dictate their instructional practice, but rather adapted instructional practices to support the literacy development of the students. “The exemplary teachers seemed to realize that most commercial instructional packages provide no useful information on the direct and explicit teaching of skills
and strategies” (p. 4). Although taken from two vantage points, the sentiment is the same: the role of scripted instruction has created a discrepancy in the teaching of reading.

The RAND group (2002) asserted that to improve reading comprehension in schools, the role of the teacher must be at the forefront of the conversation. It was further contended through their research- “how innovations affected teaching practices across five elementary teachers’ classrooms revealed the varied responses that these teachers made as a function of their knowledge and beliefs” (p. 49). Similar to the conclusions made by Allington (2002), it was evidenced that the teachers who exhibit proficient and deep understanding of reading process and reading comprehension were more versed at implementing research-based instructional strategies. Duke and Block (2012) cite that a major barrier to effective reading instruction in the primary grades is the dearth of expertise on how to teach the more challenging reading skills such as reading comprehension. Sargent et al., (2010) assert “the research-based comprehension techniques used by effective teachers may be entirely novel to some teachers only using ‘teacher-proof’ literacy curriculums” (p. 369). The research sets a context on how the teaching of complex text may be challenged or supported by teachers currently in the field.

Teacher training can fall into pre-service education and professional development. The next section will focus on pre-service education. This will also take into account the beliefs teachers come into pre-service education. The literature on pre-service teacher education programs in reading, four to five year programs whose goal is to prepare individuals to enter the field of education, is relatively scant (RAND Group, 2002). The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (2007) both did extensive reviews of teacher education programs that were as a result of concerns over teacher preparation programs. Both organizations found a definite correlation between effective teacher preparation programs
and teacher-preparedness in the classroom of reading instruction. Several key components distinguished more effective teacher education programs: (1) content- varied research-based programs that focus on students learn to read; (2) faculty and teaching; (3) apprenticeships, filed experiences, and practica- work in places which are closely aligned with coursework and with excellent models and mentors; (4) diversity- produce teachers who know how to teach diverse learners; (5) candidate and program assessment- continually assess all candidates, faculty and curriculum; and (6) governance, resources, and vision- vision of quality (IRA, 2007). On the contrary, the National Reading Panel (2000) was not able to determine one effective method that produced more effective teachers of reading than any other method. NRP (2000) contends, “There were simply too many approaches in this small sample to allow conclusions about any one specific method” (pp. 5-13).

The RAND group (2002) claimed that one aspect of teacher training program that was known was that pre-service teachers often have firmly held beliefs or perceptions about the field of teaching and especially the teaching of reading. This finding was also noted by NRP (2000) in a review of effective pre-service programs. Both studies found that the beliefs often hindered pre-service educators because they came into teaching programs with beliefs that they had little to gain through the coursework offered to them. RAND group (2002) asserted that pre-service teachers’ beliefs were “acquired through their own experiences as learners and in school” (p. 50). The NRP (2000) acknowledged that a key role in designing effective teacher education programs is to create programs, which result in a change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs about reading instruction. They contend that “If teacher behaviors cannot be transformed by changes in curriculum in pre-service programs, it is unlikely that teacher behaviors can be changed later” (p. 5-6). Although the IRA (2007) does not discuss pre-service teachers generally, they do point out
an area of concern specifically with pre-service candidates’ beliefs held about diverse students. The claim is that effective teacher education programs take positive action around diverse students. Their assertion is, “Research has shown that such views on the part of the teachers are among the greatest impediments struggling readers face” (IRA, 2007, p. 14). Quality teacher education programs challenge the long-held beliefs held by candidates to produce teachers who are able to use research-based instructional strategies to best teach students to read.

In order to support teachers currently in the field with a new education reforms or innovations, professional development is often provided. Duke et al, (2012) assert that the reading achievement of students can be directly related to the preparedness of the educator. It was further argued “The challenge here is to prepare and –for those are already in the field-develop far more teachers who are skilled at improving not only word-reading skill, but also vocabulary, conceptual and content knowledge, and comprehension in their students” (p. 67). Sargent et al. made the case for strong professional development in research-based reading comprehension skills to help better incorporate complex texts into elementary classrooms. However, in the RAND report (2002) evidence was shown that professional development was often not effective in changing teachers’ practices. The reasons for this were often two-fold: (1) Teacher’s believe that their current instructional practices based upon years of experience were appropriate and (2) Often, professional-development was relatively brief with a presenter providing instructional strategies with no follow-up. RAND group (2002) argued, “For the most part, teachers report that they perceive professional development to be of little use or value” (p. 51). However, in order to ensure that teachers’ have the knowledge and effective instruction, teachers in the field must be provided with professional development on the CCSS and specifically on text complexity and its impact on students and instruction.
Summary

Most of the reading experts and scholars will readily agree that teachers’ perceptions and beliefs can impact student achievement and/or motivation in reading. In order to prepare students in the United States to compete for spots in colleges, careers, and contribute effectively in an ever-changing global society, students need to be exposed to and become proficient at reading grade level texts. Where this becomes an argument, however, is regarding the question, “At what grade level should text complexity be raised and what are the research-based practices allow all readers, especially diverse readers to become proficient at each grade level?” Some teachers and researchers are convinced that the use of complex texts with the appropriate level of scaffolding and appropriate instructional strategies will benefit all students, others maintain that students need to be taught using books which are more easily attainable and not in the text range of what is considered to be frustrating or challenging.
Chapter Three: Methods

Introduction

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore teachers’ perceptions about the federal mandate of the CCSS (2010), which states that students are to read complex literary and informational texts independently, and determine how perceptions of the educators may affect their instructional strategies in the elementary classrooms. The research reviewed demonstrated the need for further research in the field of text complexity from all dimensions, but understanding teacher perceptions can help to inform further research by allowing researchers to have an insight into the educators’ mindsets when confronted by an educational change challenging their perceptions and beliefs about the educational needs of students. Fullan’s change theory of the individual when faced with an external mandate will be used as the theoretical framework.

The research questions explored through this study were as follows:

1. What are teachers’ experiences in relation to text complexity and how do teachers make sense of text complexity as a multi-dimensional construct?

2. What are the teachers’ perceptions about the change of text complexity relative to their role as teachers as it relates to classroom instruction and its impact on student learning?

3. What are the teachers’ perceptions about the challenges faced by the increase in text complexity?

Research Design

As the researcher, I typically identify with the social constructivist paradigm or worldview, which readily fits into the type of research that I conducted. As a constructivist researcher, I sought to understand how educators make sense of the new implementation of text complexity in
the elementary classrooms. Creswell (2009) wrote “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 8). The research study sought to find an understanding of teachers’ perceptions as they implement a mandated change. I used open-ended questions in order to listen carefully to the participants. There was a focus as well on the context of the participants to best understand the “historical and cultural settings” in which they may derive their perceptions (Creswell, 2009). The goal of the research as identified by a constructivist goal was to rely upon the participants’ views. As both a reading specialist and an instructional leader, I have a strong background in the subject of reading and instruction, which may shape my interpretation of the research (Creswell, 2009). As stated by Creswell (2009) as I conducted the research I acknowledged how my personal interpretation, which comes from my educational experiences, to provide an unbiased interpretation of the research.

Creswell (2009) asserts “We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (p. 40). A general definition of qualitative research is “studies that investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 422). Creswell (2007) stated that there are several reasons to use a qualitative design for research. One of the reasons cited is to acquire a “complex, detailed understanding to the issue” (p. 40). The issue investigated is that of the teachers’ perceptions of the increased rigor in text complexity beginning in grade 2. This understanding can best be reached by talking directly to the participants involved in the mandated change. By interviewing educators who are currently expected to implement the educational change and by listening in an objective manner, the research can better understand concerns and response to the change process. The interviews allowed educators to be empowered
by having the venue to share their stories. Teachers, having an opportunity to voice their perceptions, was heard and provided the researcher further insight into how the change will be implemented, whether the implementation was successful, and possible next steps to further research.

**Research Tradition**

There are many approaches that can be used in designing a qualitative study. The preponderance of the data was drawn from semi-structured interviews, but other relevant artifacts was submitted by the some of participants. The tradition best suited for this research was a basic interpretive study (Merriam, 2002), where the lived experiences of the educators was explored and explained. Merriam, (2002) notes that an interpretive approach is appropriate when researchers want to understand how people interact with the worlds around them and how these interactions make sense to them.

By following the tradition of general inductive approach, the themes of teachers’ perspectives emerged through various interviews of educators currently in the field of teaching reading to elementary students. Thomas (2006) notes “Inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (p. 238). Through the coding of the interviews, themes were identified.

**Research Procedures**

**Participants.** The participants of this study were purposefully chosen. The participants were elementary educators from the southeastern region of Massachusetts. The participants teach in general and special education classrooms and are responsible for teaching reading in grades 2, 3, or 4. There were two major reasons for choosing the three grade levels identified. The CCSS
identify grade 2 as the first year in which an increasingly more challenging Lexile readability will be expected by the end of the school year. Teachers in grade 2 have the responsibility to ensure that students have a strong foundation in reading while also extending their comprehension through the use of more complex texts. Grade 3 students in the state of Massachusetts have their first encounter in state-mandated tests. Educators of grade 3 students have the responsibility of instructing students to read more complex text with independence.

Furthermore, Chall (1985) identified a phenomenon in children’s reading development, which has been termed the “fourth grade slump.” At this point students often begin to struggle in reading comprehension, especially with informational text. Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi (2010) state “an abrupt disparity in these variables between the primary (2nd-3rd) and intermediate (4th) grades, however, lacks a lack of sensitivity to children’s evolving literacy challenges” (p. 437). Most of the participants have been teaching the same grade level for at least four years. This provided insight into the change from the Massachusetts State Standards to the more rigorous CCSS. Day (2002) asserted:

Whilst more experienced teachers were critical of the erosion of opportunities to exercise their moral purposes and contribute as educators to the education of the whole students, younger teachers seemed to be more content to exercise their pedagogical skills within what was perceived by their older colleagues as the narrower range of discretionary decision-making which was a consequence of reforms (pp. 687-8).

The participants will be specific in grade level. The years in the classroom did vary from first year teachers to more seasoned teachers. Effort was made to ensure maximum variation sampling within the school to understand the phenomenon from
different perspectives such as age, race, or gender; however, there was a lack of diversity within the selected schools so the sampling may resemble a typical sampling (Creswell, 2012). To eliminate subjectivity, most of the participants will be unknown to me both professionally and personally. The researcher contacted an acquaintance that teaches at the selected elementary schools and used this contact to assist with the recruitment of elementary educators who were interested in being interviewed about the innovation of text complexity (Creswell, 2007).

**Recruitment and Access**

In order to recruit participants, I first contacted the Superintendent (Appendix D) of a small Southeastern Massachusetts school district. I provided the Superintendent with the appropriate information about the research study and gained permission to speak with the principals of the two elementary schools in the district. From there, I used purposeful sampling allowing me to “intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Once I received the names and contacts of potential participants, I emailed a recruitment letter (Appendix A) to the educators introducing myself, the tenets of the research study, and inviting them to take part in a semi-structured interview. The letter also asked for suggestions of other possible participants in the event that there were not enough respondents to the initial recruitment letter. Each participant chose the interview site where she or he was most comfortable to speak candidly about the innovation.

Six participants were interviewed. The number of participants allowed for the lived experiences and perceptions of the educators to emerge. All of the original participants took part in the entire research project.
Data Collection Method

The data collection method was informed by Creswell (2012) and included open-ended interviews. Participants were also invited to share other documents such as lesson plans and class library set-ups as they pertain to text complexity. Additionally, a reflective memo was maintained throughout the study.

Survey. Initial data such as gender, age range, grade level taught, and years teaching at current grade level will be obtained through a short survey (Appendix B) that was included with the recruitment letter. The information was used to help inform final participant selection.

Interviews. Once participants were selected each took part in one semi-structured, face-to-face interview that was approximately 60-90 minutes in length. During the first part of the interview the informed consent form was reviewed and I ensured the comfort of the participants. All of the interviews were conducted at a time and place that was convenient and comfortable for the participant. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and professionally transcribed directly after the interviews. Each interview was listened to and compared to raw transcripts in order to ensure accuracy.

King and Horrocks (2010) methods of qualitative interviewing guided the interview protocol. There are three critical components for the qualitative interview to be effective and elicit the right level of data: the interview should be flexible and open-ended; the focus of the interview should be on participants’ actual experience; and the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is important for the method (King & Horrocks, 2010). An interview guide and protocol (Appendix C) had been developed in order to have interviews, which elicited deep and meaningful responses. Butin (2010) argues that the purpose of the interview is to gain understanding of the experiences of the educator as well as their feelings and their intuitions.
about the topic under investigation. During the interview, I recorded non-verbal behaviors, such as gestures, posture, or any visible emotions, which provided further insight into the participant’s beliefs about the change in text complexity.

King and Horrocks (2010) state that participants are allowed to choose a comfortable location as that will lead to a more comfortable conversation. The initial part of the interview was used to develop a rapport with the interviewee. I introduced myself to the participants and reviewed key details relative to the questionnaire. Many of the participants completed the survey at the beginning of the interview. The first question asked was a general professional related question that allowed the participant to provide any other relevant information they wished to share. When conducting the interviews, it is recommended that the questions be flexible in nature (King and Horrocks, 2010). The questions were focused on the research questions, which allowed for the participant to go into unanticipated directions of data. This allowed for follow-up and probing questions to elicit more information about the topic of teacher perceptions and allowed for more meaningful understanding of the perceptions of teachers about the increase of text complexity in the elementary classroom. King and Horrocks (2010) also make a specific distinction between the use of probes defined as questions to elicit deeper meaning and prompts, which are used to clarify information given.

One participant was interviewed per day with one to two interviews being conducted per week. The interviews were approximately 60 to 90 minute in length. The time determined was flexible due to the length and depth of individual participant’s response and any probing questions, which arose as the interviews were conducted. The researcher ensured that responses and probing or prompting was non-judgmental and non-biased and did not lead the participant to respond in any particular direction.
Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants and the school district. All identifying characteristics such as name, age, schools, students’ names, and towns were removed from the transcripts. Participants and the school district were assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

*Reflective memos.* Recorded reflective memos were maintained to document the experiences. The journal served as a way of identifying additional questions or thoughts as they arose while interviewing the participants. The memos also included data that could not be captured in the interview such as physical environment, facial expressions, and gestures that may be pertinent to the study.

*Artifacts.* To provide further insight into the participant’s perceptions, additional artifacts were included such as texts being used in the classroom. Some documents were provided by the participants and were related to the topic of text complexity. Documents were reviewed and analyzed in relation to how they correspond with the research question. All documents were safely stored in a locked drawer. When using the information from the documents, the researchers carefully protected the confidentiality of the participants by removing any identifying characteristics in the text.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio-taped using Garage Band on my MacBook Air. Interviews were professionally transcribed using rev.com services. All audio-tapes were converted to an MP3 files. Prior to sending the MP3 files to be transcribed, the researcher listened to the participants’ responses to determine what specifically needed to be transcribed, looking for main details and ideas. Several respondents emerged as key informants (King and Horrocks, 2010) shedding more insight into the perceptions of teachers about text complexity. A specific
transcription was used, including the pauses and time of the participants and especially the intonations of the participants’ speech.

All audio-taped data were transferred to MP3 files and stored on a flash drive. The flash drive, journals, and other artifacts such as sample text selections which pertain to text complexity were labeled using codes and dates and were locked at all times when not actively being used for the research. Code names were devised using the initials of the participants and a list of the codes will be kept in a separate file to maintain anonymity of participants. I was the only one with access to the data. At the appropriate time after the research study is complete, all data will be destroyed.

Analysis of the data was guided by five underlying principles described by Thomas (2006). These strategies guided the analysis of the data collected during the research. The strategies are as follows (1) “analysis is guided by the evaluation objectives” (p. 239) and it is supported through many readings and interpretations of the raw data; (2) raw data is developed into categories and formed into a model or framework; (3) findings result in multiple interpretations; (4) different viewpoints based upon researchers may emerge; and (5) trustworthiness is similar to other qualitative research designs.

As this was a basic interpretive study, the method of analyzing the data followed the general inductive analysis. I used the steps outlined by Thomas (2006). The transcripts and other pertinent artifacts were read several times to find emerging themes. The basic interpretive study used a general inductive approach to analysis. A general inductive approach analysis is a generic approach to research and not clearly identified in any specific tradition of research (Thomas, 2006). Thomas highlights the following as key purposes of the development of the general inductive analysis approach:
1. to condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format;

2. to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure that these links are both transparent and defensible; and

3. to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in text data (p. 238).

As a result of following the steps outlined by Thomas (2006), I developed categories into a framework that summarized the data analyzed from the interviews into key themes that emerged about teacher perceptions relating to the increase in text complexity as a result of the CCSS (2010). As explained in Thomas (2006), there will be 5 steps to the coding process. First, a category label was determined. This was a one word or a short phrase, which had inherent meanings of the specific feature in the category. Next, the category description was determined which incorporated the key characteristics, the scope, and the limitations of the category. The third step was text or data associated with the category providing examples of the text illustrating meanings, associations, and perspectives. The fourth step linked the categories into relationships with other categories. The links were determined as categories emerged from the transcripts. The final step was to determine the type of model in which the category was embedded. The model, theory, or framework will emerge as the data is analyzed (Thomas, 2006).

Initially the plan was to use Atlas.ti computer-program to assist in the coding of the data. Atlas.ti was chosen based upon computer search of different programs. I chose to use Atlas.ti based upon information provided by Creswell (2012) who described the program as one that can be used for coding of data and also has the feature that allows for comparison of segmented information. I also made efforts to use dedoose.com, another computer-based program that helps
sort and categorize relevant details from the interviews. After initially using the computer programing, it become apparent that my style of research allowed for me to analyze hard copies of the interviews using the methods described below, underlining and providing notation. I read through each transcript without making any notations initially. After the first reading, I went back through each transcript several times until a narrative of the perceptions of the teachers’ voice was created. This was then categorized into several themes.

Saldaña (2009) made the claim that coding data in qualitative studies are cyclical in nature which necessitates that the use of different stages of coding. The first cycle of coding will use In Vivo Coding. In Vivo Coding is appropriate when the research seeks to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 74). Because I sought to understand the lived experience of educator’s as they implement the new policy of text complexity, using their words provided a better understanding of their behaviors. Saldaña (2009) explains that “In Vivo Codes can provide imagery, symbols, and metaphors for rich category, theme, and concept development” (p. 76).

Along with In Vivo Coding, the use of Initial Coding was used during the first cycle of coding. The purpose of using Initial Coding is to look at the transcripts for similarities and differences between the participants. Saldaña (2009) asserts that Initial Coding can be used in “range from the descriptive to the conceptual to the theoretical” (p. 88) based upon the observations.

Axial Coding was used during the second cycle of coding. Saldaña (2009) describes Axial Coding as a way of reassembling the data that was separated in the first cycle of coding. It relates the data in terms of categories and subcategories and allows the researcher to know the whys and hows of the data. Saldaña (2009) asserts “One of the ultimate goals during Axial Coding is to achieve saturation” (p. 161).
Trustworthiness

The proposed study focused on the semi-structured interview conducted with each participant. The participants were provided the opportunity to review all of the transcripts prior to the use of the data within the study. Thomas (2006) argues “Among the procedures they described, those most applicable to performing data analyses include conducting peer debriefings and stakeholder checks as part of establishing credibility and conducting a research audit (comparing the data with the research findings and interpretations) for dependability” (p. 243). The teachers were also asked to provide any additional thoughts about text-complexity after they had time to reflect upon the interviews.

Limitations

Because this study was based upon the perceptions of educators as it relates to the new requirements of the increase text complexity, transferability of the study is limited. The study is time-bound. Within a year or so of the study, perceptions may change, but it will not be a study of initial viewpoints. The small sample size may not be adequate in determining trends in teachers’ perceptions about text complexity.
Chapter Four: Report of Research Findings

The primary goal in doing this study was to understand how elementary school teachers’ perceptions about text complexity informed their teaching practices. Through a thorough analysis of the data using the steps outlined in Chapter 3, I discovered that the teachers all had some natural tensions surrounding the change in text complexity. As the themes emerged, I reflected upon them in relation to the three questions developed for the study:

(1) What are teachers’ experiences in relation to text complexity and how do teachers make sense of text complexity as a multi-dimensional construct?

(2) What are the teachers perceptions about the change of text complexity relative to their role as teachers as it relates to classroom instruction and its impact on student learning?

(3) What are the teachers’ perceptions about the challenges faces by the increase in text complexity?

The themes that emerged as most prevalent were:

(1) The teachers interviewed believed there is a lack of professional development.

(2) The teachers interviewed believed that there is a need to shift reading materials and instruction.

(3) The teachers interviewed appeared to accept the change.

(4) The teachers interviewed are experiencing tensions surrounding the change.

These themes helped to support and answer the research questions.
## Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name *</th>
<th>Years of Employment</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Current Grade Teaching</th>
<th>Other Grades Taught</th>
<th>Courses in Reading Instruction</th>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6, Sped 9-11</td>
<td>4-5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Molly</td>
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<td>Masters +</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>6+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Masters +</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>PreK, K, 1</td>
<td>6+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>16 +</td>
<td>CAGS (2)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1, 4, 5</td>
<td>6+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Demographics of the participants. * Denotes that the names have been changed.

All of the participants teach in the same school district in southeastern Massachusetts. The school district has two elementary schools; one of the schools is an early education school and the second school services students in upper elementary grades. With the exception of Ashley, all of the participants chose to be interviewed in their classrooms allowing them to point out materials and share their teaching space. Carla is a recent college graduate and is currently pursuing a Masters in reading. Although the least veteran teacher interviewed, Carla has been educated most specifically in teaching using the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). She stated that while in college, there was an emphasis in the rigor associated with the CCSS and the need to ensure students were prepared for college and career. Because of this she had a slightly different insight into the CCSS. Sarah, who is currently enrolled in a doctoral program, also held
several other positions within the district she currently works in and has experience working in other districts- this made her more aware of the some of the major shifts within the CCSS and the rationale behind the shifts.

The participants were each asked about their own personal early reading experiences in an effort to see if there was a connection between their own experiences and their views about the increase in text complexity. Most of the participants reported positive experiences in their early reading. Two of the participants made particular note of reading becoming more positive when choice was involved or when they found the genre that they enjoyed reading. Molly stated, “…I also can think of one book that was in high school which I read which was Salem’s Lot. It was Stephen King, and I just could not put that down, and it was scary to read but it was great!” Carla reported that she did not really enjoy reading when she was younger and that as an adult regretted that it took her so long to enjoy reading. “I think it is really unfortunate that I didn’t love reading when I was younger. I now realize that it’s because I never read fantasy that I didn’t like reading. That’s my genre.” In response to her earliest experiences, Carla tends to provide students with plenty of choice in independent reading that doesn’t necessarily correlate with grade level or complexity but personal preference.

Another background question asked of the participants was how they believed students learn to read best. This question was asked to again see if it uncovered any perceptions about students and text complexity. Most of the participants provided similar responses, which was that students needed exposure to reading and books at an early age and for students to be motivated to read. Sarah stated, “I believe students learn to read best by being motivated to read, which means they must be read to. Reading to kids is a big predictor of their wanting to read on their
own, so I think that helps.” Sarah goes on to say some instructional practices actually diminishes students’ enjoyment of reading. “I think there are appropriate times to do that stuff; I just think we can suck the joy right out of reading for kids when we do too much of you’ve read this now answer these questions.”

Of all of the participants only Donna was challenged by the question about what method is best for students’ ability to learn to read and this stems from her role at the school. Donna works as an inclusion special education teacher, but she is also responsible for teaching students who have specified learning disabilities including autism.

That’s a tough question because I work with the students that have a hard time.
I found the most success after getting through the students that have actually, some severe dyslexic issues most of the time they just need to read at their own level and read a lot at their own levels.

Donna exhibited the most tension when faced with the higher text complexity and often supported students’ learning by using texts that were not grade level rather than scaffolding more challenging texts.

A final background question asked during the interviews involved education or training of reading programs. Carla is currently enrolled in her Masters of education in reading. Sarah is a reading specialist. Pam stated that she had mostly general education classes but that she has received graduate credits in phonics and vocabulary. Donna has been completely trained in Wilson, a specialized reading program, which focuses on decoding and fluency. Ashley stated that she has had some introductory professional development in Wilson. Of all of the participants
only Molly had no specific training in teaching reading or reading programs although she self-identified as having six or more classes in reading instruction.

The three background questions provided a context in which the participants approached the new initiative of text complexity and how they created a learning environment to support student learning.

**Lack of Professional Development**

Generally when there is an educational change, there is a need to provide appropriate professional development to allow for the change to be most effective. With the adoption of the CCSS, many districts offered different levels of professional development; however, this was an area of concern stated by each of the participants. The participants revealed that the professional development provided was building-based and not district initiated and did not deal specifically with text complexity or any new strategies to ensure that students were benefiting from the increase in text complexity.

The teachers in grades 3 and 4 discussed having time to create new curriculum maps, but this was done primarily with little guidance from administration and was mostly done on the teachers’ own time. Molly stated, “…we had professional time to break it apart and kind of map it out, so during the mapping out time, we did look at text and trade books that would match with the units and we were allowed to order different things.” Ashley was integral in creating new units of study using CommonCore.org that were aligned to the new standards. When prompted about professional development about the rigor associated with the CCSS. Ashley stated
We have not really had instruction in...discussion of staff development on the increase in text complexity. But about 6 or 7 years, we were leveling our classrooms. So we did have some staff development, maybe a dialogue, about leveling books, putting our classrooms into leveled books, making selections, we have a book room that has leveled books.

Molly stated having received no notification about the change in the Lexile bands in grade 3, the grade she was teaching during the shift, until a special education colleague informed her the year prior that there was a shift in the text complexity band. She said she had not really paid any attention to the Common Core, but rather just relied on using Common Core units and books to meet the standards. Donna reiterated throughout the interview that she had no formal knowledge about the rise in text complexity and that she found out accidently at an IEP meeting, which proved to be an embarrassing experience for her. Even when I explained some of the rationale behind the text complexity staircase, Donna replied with, “No clue.” When prompted on what type of training was given since the implementation of Common Core, Donna replied, “I am going to guess that 80% of any training since we had since Common Core was implemented has been on data.” She went on to say that they received no training on how to unpack the standards, “We just unpacked the standards. We haven’t had time go back and say we’re missing a lot of stuff. We’re missing the whole idea of what these standards were.”

Pam, a teacher in the lower elementary school, reported that there was inconsistency with professional development and expectations based upon the school leadership. The leadership in the school had changed several times over the last few years. When asked directly if she received any professional development on the rise of text complexity, her response was an unequivocal
“No.” Sarah, who teaches at the same school, had previously been in a different role in the district, which provided her with considerable more insight about the changes expected in the Common Core that had significant rigor in text complexity. However, she confirmed the lack of professional development within the district.

Not much. There hasn’t been much. I think every building leader did, and still does their own thing, and when we have a full day PD, it is usually district wide curriculum stuff, and yeah, we have to match standards, but it is not talking specifically what those standards require. What does it look like, in the standards, so, not much.

The lack of professional development in Common Core standards as an entity and specifically about the rise in text complexity was abundantly obvious throughout the interviews. The lack of professional development in text complexity led to some concerns about what the levels meant and how it could be that a Fountas and Pinnel level could shift from one year to the next year. Donna expressed some of the strongest concern, “So I don’t understand how something could be a third grade reading one year and then all of a sudden be second grade reading. No one has been able to explain it to me.”

**Shift of Reading Materials**

Each of the participants reported a shift in instructional reading materials with the implementation of the CCSS. By and large, however, instructional strategies, including how students were guided to independent reading books, remained the same. Also of note, is that teachers were provided autonomy of choosing units and lessons with the emphasis being on
using CommonCore.org in the upper elementary school, yet the lower elementary school was still using the basal series called Reading Street.

Because of the autonomy provided to the teachers in grades 3 and 4, a lack of consistency and a concern about how certain skills and strategies being used encouraged the district to create a position of curriculum leader. Carla has been appointed to the role of 4th grade curriculum leader and described the role as a facilitator to ensure that the seven different fourth grade classes are teaching the same standards in all of the subjects. Carla stated, “So there are a lot of us. So they want to make sure we’re doing the same stuff at the same time, that we’re teaching the same standards especially in science and social studies.”

Three of the participants from the upper elementary school spoke about moving away from Reading Street basal that had been used primarily before the implementation of CCSS and into the use of more authentic texts. Overall the participants viewed the use of more authentic texts favorably although there was an acknowledgement that the increase in text complexity needed to be accompanied by increase in scaffolding student learning. Ashley stated:

I used to be able to use simplified text with my kids as part of their instruction and feel pretty good about it. One of the selections I used was Passage Ways. And it was controlled text. It has a variety of levels that students could progress. But what happens is they’re not exposed to text that they’ll see on tests, or in classroom instruction. So, I’ve given a lot of thought to what they should be using, and I want it to be authentic and less controlled because they’re exposed to a wider variety.
Ashley also provided a sample of a text she used in the past to instruct students and a sample of what she is currently using to support students’ learning. (Appendix E)

Carla discussed a shift in her reading instruction this year to support learning through the use of supplementing the grade level text with more accessible picture books to teach specific skills. When Carla gets to more challenging comprehension strategies such as questioning the meaning of the text, she finds an appropriate picture book and does think aloud strategies:

So it’s hard for them to question the text. So I do that. I do a lot of read-aloud with picture books sometimes to teach a skill. I just got this squishy brain and I hold up the brain when I’m sharing my thinking so they know I’m thinking and it’s not in the text. I like to do a lot of picture books. I feel like my kids love it first of all and it’s a short way to teach a skill before we get into a bigger book where the skill might not happen until chapter 13.

Molly, who has looped with her students, had more experience with the third grade curriculum and felt confident in using Reading Street. “…I want to go back to third grade when we were using Reading Street, which I was happy using that. It is a ‘basal reader’, but it did give you, it was very good stories and it did give you opportunities to differentiate.” Donna, who mostly taught substantially separate programs and supported students on IEPs in grade 3 inclusion classrooms, referred to the third grade literacy curriculum as “home-grown” and that she was most comfortable supporting her students with a mixture of their own reading levels (below grade level), Core 5, and Raz-Kids. Core 5 is a computer program that supports some of the basic elements of reading such as sight words, blends, word segmentation, and other phonetic components. Students work at their own level and progress as their skills become stronger. Raz-
Kids is also a computer program that focuses on student’s fluency and comprehension. Students’ reading texts increase as their skills increase. Unlike the other participants, Donna was most adamant at instructing students at their comfort level regardless of the grade level, “I make sure my children are reading at the level they need.” She did also state that in the inclusion rooms she provides exposure to the grade-level texts.

The two teachers from the lower elementary school both stated that they are still using the Reading Street basal series, but that it had been updated to support the new CCSS. Pam also stated that they are supplementing the series with Model Curriculum Units (MCU) that have been written and vetted by Massachusetts educators. Pam noted about Reading Street, “We’re not finding it to be based on our reading, based on the data over the past three years, our district, as well, as our school, primarily because we’re early childhood, finding that Reading Street is not bringing the children where they need to be.” This sentiment is what compelled the staff at the school to supplement Reading Street with other materials such as the MCUs and using other leveled readers such as Fountas and Pinnel leveled readers and Raz-Kids.

As with the teachers in the upper elementary school, the teachers in the lower grades are providing more support and scaffolding to students as they encounter more complex texts. Sarah spoke about using more complex texts as read-aloud to expose students to a variety of texts. She also stated that she has students spend more time talking about the texts by participating in “turn and talks” and having students “ping-pong” their ideas with each other. She cited that she is now using less teacher talk and allowing students to talk with each other more about the texts. Ashley and Carla have been using a strategy called “tagging it” in which students either used post-it notes or writing in margins to support students as they read the text. This strategy allows for
students to make deeper connections to the text and help support comprehension. All of the teachers talked about using guided reading groups with either the same grade level texts or with leveled readers (texts at different readability levels), which is a shift from prior years, when typically guided reading groups would be instructed using simplistic texts.

Overall, the participants supported the increase in text complexity through modifying or completely changing their curriculum to support the new standards. Although they did not drastically change their instructional practices, the participants expressed more awareness of the need to ensure that students had the exposure necessary to grade-level texts- that are more complex due to the shift in the Lexile grade-level bands. (Appendix F) This contributed to a greater level of differentiation.

Acceptance Of the Change

One interesting theme that emerged from most of the participants was an acceptance of the change of the rigor of the standards and the change of text complexity. Although the teachers were not provided any professional development in this area and were directed by the district to change their curriculum and literacy materials to support the standards, the participants, with the exception of Donna, appeared to take the change in stride. Donna exhibited the most stress about the change and that stemmed from a specific incident in which she was made aware of the text complexity shift during the middle of an IEP meeting:

So I got into a lot of trouble, was it two years ago when Fountas and Pinnell jumped up the grades. In an IEP meeting I said <i>indecipherable</i> is reading at a level M or N and that is at grade level.
I did not know that Fountas and Pinnell had bumped it up to a P. He came back and I got reamed. So I couldn’t understand how that jump could just be made.

This statement by Donna also demonstrated Donna’s lack of understanding between the CCSS Lexile band shift and Fountas and Pinnell. Donna’s reluctance to completely embrace the changes in the reading levels may be due to her lack of understanding about why there is the change. Donna also works with students with significant learning disabilities, which makes it challenging for her to support the more rigorous reading expectations.

**Tensions**

Even as the teachers in the study accepted that the changes which were implemented, there was still tensions surrounding the increase in text complexity. This was especially evident when teachers were asked about how the increase in text complexity impacted student learning especially struggling learners, and whether the rise in text complexity is developmentally appropriate. Tension was also expressed when teachers were asked about how text complexity impacted their instruction.

The least veteran teacher, Carla, received her Bachelors’ degree, as the CCSS were being designed and initially implemented. Because of this, as part of her education, she was provided with instruction about the CCSS. Carla went into teaching with a very positive outlook on the rigors of the CCSS and has had no experience teaching under the former Massachusetts Curriculum Framework. This is her second year teaching in the fourth grade and because of the demographic make-up of her current group of students; Carla is starting to question the
developmental-appropriateness of the text complexity. In terms of her instruction, she questions whether she is doing a disservice to her students. “…I feel sometimes like this inner struggle. I want to teach my kids where they are, but am I doing a disservice to them by not like showing them these higher texts that they are expected to read? But then if I’m always showing them the text that they’re expected to read then they might feel like they’re not successful…”

Ashley expressed similar sentiments when she reflected on her shift from using more controlled text to authentic, more complex texts. “But in doing that, I know that I’m giving up a comfort level for them too and forcing them to read things that…forcing is not the right word, but expecting them to read something that they might not be quite ready for it.” Ashley goes on to say that she is conflicted because she wants to use appropriate material so that students are prepared for state and district testing, but that can create anxiety in the students and in her. She also expressed concern that her instructional choices in reading texts were sometimes based upon a perceived “arbitrary number.” Ashley stated, “…it doesn’t seem like there’s a progression when you use materials that are, that say they’re at a 4.5 level but really you know just by the structure and the dialogue of the text that it’s not really a 4.5 level and there’s no way to really assess that.”

In order to balance the tension around instruction of higher-level text, Pam has designed a system of instruction in which she provides students with practice of reading skills at their own level. Each of her students also has a “browsing bucket” of books in which most of the books are ones accessible to the students independently in order to encourage students to read more fluently and practice reading strategies. She does allow each student to have at least one challenging book in his/her browsing bucket that the student enjoys. Pam states, “Their practice
comes from literature that’s on their level. The instruction comes from the things that are on their level. The exposure, from my perspective, comes from literature is on level or higher because they need that. I don’t believe I can build their knowledge base without being at least exposed to higher level text.”

While most of the participants discussed their challenges and tensions in providing the right instructional materials and instruction in relation to text complexity, each and every participant expressed strong concern about the impact of text complexity on the achievement and learning of struggling readers.

Pam spoke about the visible look of the text and how it can impact student learning, “The text, the size of the text, the size of the print impacts all of it, impacts the lower level and kids that are just about making it. The kids that are on level and above it does not matter what I hand them…. ” Pam spoke about the challenges of the increased text complexity especially with struggling learners. She stated that the increase in text complexity was impacting students in a “negative way.” Pam believed that students who come from homes where there is family support for reading that those students will be more inclined to be successful, but she went on to say, “But for children in most of our classrooms that have either a medical issue, emotional issue, special needs, a learning difference, or learning deficit somewhere, there is no real way for them to stay with the crowd so to speak. They have too much on their mind.”

Sarah expressed concern over struggling students learning being impacted by the increase in text complexity. Although Sarah felt that students needed to be exposed to grade level texts or even more challenging texts, she was conflicted about what the increased text complexity would do to students who struggle. “I think that if you are pretty bright kid, I think it is going to be
great for you, because it kind of feels like enrichment used to feel, and if you struggle, if you’re on an IEP, I have three ELL students, if you’re struggling with acquiring language to begin with, then it is difficult.” Sarah acknowledges that it is important to high expectations but worries about the affect on the students, “…if you’re struggling readers, for whatever reason they’re struggling, you’ve got to meet them where they are. You’ve got to look at the standard and say okay, that’s where we’re trying to go, but we’re going to take longer to get there, and that scares me a little…”

Carla compared the actual implementation of the standards as compared to what she learned in college, “…I liked the ideas of students being ready for college and sort of building up through the grade. But I also don’t -now that I’ve had some experience in the classroom, I don’t know if that’s necessarily always like developmentally appropriate though. It’s one thing to get them where they need to be but it’s like so hard for them. Is that really helping them? I don’t know.” Carla expressed concern over the more complex text being frustrating for students, especially struggling students as many of her current students are:

So that’s why, I guess, where I was saying before about that inner struggle I just, the kids are frustrated if they’re reading by themselves or they just don’t even get it. So I don’t know how engaged they are, I guess, in their learning if they’re just so frustrated or giving up and they can’t understand it.

Ashley spoke about the anxiety that surrounds text complexity and that the text complexity can create disconnect within the classroom setting. Ashley, who is a special education inclusion teacher, has shifted her instructional practices to expose her struggling students to richer, more authentic texts. Ashley stated her beliefs that some students are better
able to access the text on their own, but the students who are challenged by the text need far more support. This creates a learning environment in which some students are often being left on their own which can hinder motivation and understanding of the text. She spoke also of students feeling overwhelmed by the more complex texts:

…they just have to have the motivation when they see a text that’s longer because you associate more complex with longer too. They’ll look at it and feel overwhelmed and not want to attack it. It’s also small in print when it’s…everything about it looks more challenging.

Donna and Molly both expressed their ideas to the tension about the rise in text complexity as it impacts student learning in similar ways. They both held the beliefs that having high expectations for all students was important. However there was a concern that students who are struggling could not achieve the higher levels independently. Donna also added that it was critical for students to be supported more in the lower grades in developmentally appropriate ways. She does not feel those students should be pushed to read too soon, but rather supported in ways that do not make them want to give up too soon. Molly stated, “I think that it is good that kids are exposed to text that might be a little more challenging for them, but I don’t think they can do it independently, so there is a trade-off.”

Through email, the participants were able to review the transcribed interviews. As a follow-up to the interview, I asked each of participants if they had any additional thoughts or ideas as it pertained to text complexity. Two of the participants provided thoughtful follow-up responses. Carla, the recent college graduate, stated that through her professional experience and after reflecting about the interview that she has decided that it is both important to prepare
students for the rigors of higher education, but it is also critical to provide student instruction at their reading levels. She said a balanced approach to teaching text complexity must be attained. Ashley said that she reflected a lot about instructional practices and how to provide the support students needed to access more complex texts. Ashley wrote, “I have now spent my time researching techniques and materials to use with kids. I am more aware of what students are reading for free choice and encouraging them to choose more complex text and I am arranging student groupings based on data and skill based needs/standards.” The other four participants did not provide any further reflection.

During the interviews, the teachers showed me examples of texts they used and which ones they believed to be most appropriate for students’ to best learn to read. Although, all of the teachers acknowledged the importance of the increase of the text complexity, the use of reading materials in the class varied. Many of the teachers continued to use material that was leveled prior to the adoption of CCSS. Most of the teachers were reluctant to give up some of the instructional materials, fearing that the struggling students would fall too far behind if they only taught with grade-level texts.

By conducting a thorough data analysis on the research data collected, I found four overarching themes. The six teachers brought a unique perspective and experience to the interview sessions. The teachers all have seemingly accepted the shift in text complexity while not fully comprehending why the shift occurred. With the exception of Sarah, background knowledge on the adoption of CCSS was not provided to the teachers within this district. While the teachers have made shifts in the curriculum they are using, they have by and large not changed their instructional practices except to provide more support and scaffolding to the students as they are
exposed to the higher text level. Overwhelmingly, the participants felt tension over the need to increase the text complexity while still balancing the needs of struggling readers. There was a lack of connection between the knowledge base about the Lexile bands stated in the CCSS and the Fountas and Pinnell leveling system. These themes and the data that support them better help the researcher understand the perceptions of elementary school teachers as they make sense of the increase in text complexity.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

This research study was guided by three research questions. This general inductive study was designed to allow teachers’ voices to be heard, using their own words about the experience of increasing the text complexity in the elementary classrooms. By allowing teachers’ their own voices to describe the impact of increasing text complexity in the elementary grades they were able to add the views of an important stakeholder group to the conversation (Creswell, 2009). The data collected was analyzed to highlight the important findings about the increase in text complexity. The discussion that follows is based upon the foundations of my study in relation to the major findings, the theoretical framework, and the literature review.

Discussion of Major Findings

By listening to the voices and thoughts of the six participants of the research study a couple of major findings were discovered. One striking finding was that although there was a level of acceptance by the majority of participants in the study, this acceptance was countered with a more subtle sense of resistance that ultimately created an overall tension surrounding the change in text complexity. Resistance to change is often viewed in a negative way and one in which would impede the success of an organizational change. However, current researchers Dent and Goldberg (1999) propose that it is important to not just examine the resistance of individuals in the organization but also why the individual or individuals are resisting the change. By understanding the nature and reason for the resistance management is able to devise an effective planning strategy taking into account the beliefs of the individuals.

In the school district examined in this study, each of the individuals felt that to some degree the change in the text complexity could negatively impact the student learning and
achievement of at-risk students. Students who were deemed to be at risk due to either lack of early reading at home, a specified learning disability, or students who were classified as English Language learners. Although most of the teachers in this study were adapting their instructional resources and some strategies to best implement the change in text complexity, it still conflicted with their knowledge that for some students learning to read and reading to learn was complicated enough with the lower Lexile bands which had been previously in place. This led to some in-class instructional choices that did not correlate with the district’s overall direction to increase the level of text complexity within the school and the district’s desire to have all students reading at higher reading levels. So the resistance was more passive in nature. The teachers did as they were instructed to do in creating new units of study with books and resources that correlated to the new shift in Lexile bands, but maintained areas in their classroom in which students were reading below grade level material either independently or in guided reading groups.

When examining the research site and the participants, it was clear that any resistance or tension stemmed both from a long-standing belief that students should not be frustrated by the texts that they encounter as well as a lack of appropriate professional development about the role of text complexity in the classroom. The resistance as mentioned by Dent and Goldberg (1999) did not come from a place of negativity towards the change, but rather from a source of concern by the teachers. Because of this, the administration of the school district should prepare the teachers to understand both why the Lexile measurements were changed as well providing teachers with the necessary instructional strategies needed to best meet the needs of all of the students. Working along side the teachers to acknowledge their resistance and tension
surrounding the change, would allow for more effective implementation of the increase in text complexity and open dialogue amongst the staff about good educational practices.

The belief that students should not be frustrated by reading stems from a study by Betts in 1946 in which it was cautioned if students were pushed too hard they would become frustrated and then lose the motivation to continue to learn to read. Because this perception was pervasive, teachers in the study opted to augment the use of increasingly challenging texts with the use of what the teachers decided was a better fit for the students. In some instances this was done in small reading groups or in what the teachers refer to as browsing boxes. This passive resistance, although at this time is not obstructing the implementation of the change within this district, could prove to have a negative effect on students who are already at-risk in reading. The teachers may hold the belief that they are frustrating the students that could decrease motivation; however not finding instructional strategies that can scaffold understanding and comprehension of more challenging will ultimately harm the students more. As the students progress through school, the increase in text complexity will continue to grow and it is incumbent upon teachers to shift their mind set in order to meet the needs of all of students.

The participants in the study have received very little to no professional development about the increase in text complexity. Any knowledge that they had came from conversations with their colleagues or self-taught. The professional development the participants received since the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in the district was typically focused on the use of data and was inconsistent and building-based. This could lead towards a situation in which capacity is not being built surrounding the implementation of the standards and especially surrounding text complexity. Currently, the lack of consistency in the implementation of the
increase in text complexity is being demonstrated through the interviews. The teachers with the most knowledge and curiosity of the increase in text complexity, such as Ashley, were more diligent in shifting instructional practices and resources. Donna, on the other hand, will probably never truly conform to the district’s mandate of having all students read grade level or more challenging texts because fundamentally she does not believe in the shift and more so she has ambivalence surrounding the change due to her perceived shame when finding out about the rise in reading levels in an IEP meeting. Carla was in college during the adoption phase of the Common Core State Standards and thereby should have received the most training in both understanding the Standards as well as effective appropriate strategies to ensure that all learners could access the increased text complexity; however that was not the case. The knowledge Carla received from her four-year degree about the CCSS was more in line with theory and the increase in rigor throughout the standards. This has left her with the feeling that she is harming her students by developing lessons that require students reading more challenging text. Carla’s perceptions are shifting each year that she is teaching, but not by becoming more assured of the rise in text levels, but rather that perhaps the increased text complexity is too challenging for her students. Ultimately, this perception could end up limiting her students’ overall reading achievement as teachers’ perception of student achievement has been shown to have direct correlation with the achievement.

The participants need to have professional development in order to increase capacity in achieving the organizational change of text complexity. The professional development needs to focus on teacher expectations and student achievement, the rationale about the increase in text complexity, and then finally the appropriate instructional strategies needed to be implemented in the classroom to ensure student success. Without this professional development, it is probable
that whatever gains the district has made to increase text complexity will ultimately falter and perhaps eventually fail altogether.

Evident throughout the interviews was the tensions that the teachers felt about the change in text complexity. The teachers were quite clear that the rise in text complexity would help students of average or above average ability. The teachers cited that students who came from homes in which reading was a priority would have no issues with the rise in text complexity, however the teachers were concerned and conflicted with the impact of the higher reading levels on students who were considered at-risk. By and large, the teachers identified students who came to school with little to no support as being the ones who would be harmed by the increase in reading levels. The teachers’ perceptions were that the students identified at being at-risk would not be able to reach grade level reading benchmarks. Because teachers’ perceptions are integral to the success of students more must be done to understand the perceptions of the teachers and then to use the knowledge to create instructional structures necessary to ensure that all students learn.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that informed the study was Fullan’s theory of change. Fullan (2007) examines individuals, schools, and districts to determine how effective a change is or likely to be based upon how each responds to the change. In the context of this study, the individual teacher perceptions about the external change of increased text complexity are examined. By interviewing six teachers in grades 2, 3, and 4 from the same school district, I was able to examine whether the change was effective at this point in the implementation. Fullan (2007) makes the case that one of the most difficult aspect of teachers, or people in general to
change, are their beliefs, but that the change in belief is critical to achieve lasting reform. This was an interesting area when examining the transcripts of the six participants. Each of the participants demonstrated some internal conflict about the change in the reading level. Each of the teachers were collaborating with the district to update reading material, but on the other hand each teacher expressed to some degree the uneasiness that the higher reading level would provide students and stated that for some of their learners, especially those students who were already showing signs of struggling, tension was apparent regarding the change. Fullan (2007) stated that often beliefs are not explicitly expressed nor always understood, but are based upon “unstated assumptions.” One of the beliefs that was expressed by the teachers was the unstated assumption that the at-risk students would never be able to read newly leveled grade level texts independently and would continually need support. Therefore, although they were compliant about the external change, the participants own internal conflict could still interfere with student academic progress, at least those students who are struggling readers. This also resulted in some divergent instructional practices. Some of the participants would only expose students to grade level text in controlled, teacher-led situations which meant that some students were still not practicing independent reading with grade level texts written at a higher level. The participants would need to be able to challenge their own assumptions about the belief that some students will never be able to read at grade level, regardless of what Lexile measurement is used, in order for this change to have optimal success.

Motivation is a key factor in whether any change is successful. Fullan (2006) stated that motivation has five key factors: moral purpose; capacity; resources; peer and leadership support, and identity (p. 8). When facing a change in curriculum and teaching practices such as raising the Lexile measurements at each grade level, it is important to look at teachers and their perceptions
through each of key factors. Moral purpose is about doing what is best for students and student learning. The participants in this study were all concerned with doing what is best for students and their learning. Carla, the least senior teacher, expressed the tension she felt quite clearly when she questioned whether preparing fourth graders for career and college readiness was actually appropriate for the students in her classroom. She worried that she was not doing what was best for the students’ learning. Although she had courses in college that addressed the CCSS and supported the standards and the overarching goals of the CCSS, she still questioned if the change was really in the best interest of the students. The belief that the rise in Lexile measures may not be in the best interest of the students, especially those with significant learning disabilities was forcefully stated by Karen who acknowledged that high standards are appropriate but that some students would always struggle and be behind and need to be taught at their own reading levels.

Capacity building is another critical aspect of successful change as cited by Fullan (2006). Capacity surrounding the educational change would be built through effective professional development. In the district in which the participants worked, there was a smattering of professional development in regards to the educational change. The professional development was mostly school-based and not consistent throughout the district. The result of this could mean diminished capacity in the district after a number of years. The teachers, although by and large were acceptant of the change in instructional materials, they did not have the background information and research to effectively implement the change. This factor could also create diminished capacity. Along with capacity building, the appropriate resources are critical to the motivation of the participant in order to embrace the change. The district at the center of the research provided teachers with the materials they needed to be successful in providing reading
material reflective of the change in the text levels. The participants who taught in the lower elementary school were provided with updated version of the reading series they had already been using while the teachers in the upper elementary school was provided time to do curriculum mapping and purchase materials that would best support the change in text complexity. This allowed all of the teachers the resource to support and implement the changed text levels within the classrooms.

Fullan (2007) stated that successful innovations are found more often in organizations in which there is strong support amongst the staff. The participants who were interviewed showed some slight divergence in this area. Karen was the most vocal about the lack of support and the feeling of shame when she found out about the change in text complexity in an IEP meeting. She was also not as supportive about the need to have the change. Two of the participants were concerned that the school level support they received was inconsistent, as they had had several school leaders over the last few years during the implementation.

When viewing the perceptions of the participants with the lens of the Fullan’s theory of change participants have adapted to the change. For the most part, although with some tension, the teachers were making every effort to support the change and to ensure that students are able to be successful at reading texts that are more challenging. Many of the teachers defaulted instructional practices and the time-honored use of reading “just-right” books with the students in guided reading groups, regardless of the expected grade level. The conflict between the belief that at-risk students could not reach a level of reading proficiency at the higher Lexile measurement expected at each grade level could ultimately create a deeper divide in the ability level of students in the district.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

Several overarching themes emerged through the literature review: critical reading research/reading comprehension, education reform and teachers’ perceptions, and teacher preparation. Reading research and comprehension encompasses several different components such as reading development, the “fourth grade slump”, leveled readers, text complexity, diverse learners, and instructional strategies. Teacher preparation at both the pre-service level and through professional development was researched. Teachers’ perceptions were also reviewed as well as the role of educational reform in public education.

Several key themes emerged from the interviews. Of the six participants, very few spoke about the actual research-based development of reading. Karen mentioned that the instruction of reading needed to be focused in a different way in the lower grades. The second grade teachers were far more concerned with the development of reading. They cited the “learning to read” stage of reading which is one of the five stages of reading development Chall (1995) defined in her study of reading development. The teachers were concerned that the emphasis on increased text complexity would interfere with some of the basic skills underlying reading competencies such as decoding and fluency.

One of the aspects not touched upon by any of the participants was that of the “fourth grade slump”. Three of the teachers are currently fourth grade teachers. Although they expressed concerns about student achievement and the concern about the increase in text complexity it was not connected to the “fourth grade slump”, although this is of concern amongst researchers, most notably Chall (1976). This could be explained in several ways. The teachers may not have a historic perspective of the students in terms of how they had done in prior years and in subsequent years. Typically in Massachusetts, students in grade 4 score higher on the MCAS
(Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) which might minimize the theory of the “fourth grade slump”, although research indicates this is when students experience the greatest level of decline in reading achievement (Duke and Block, 2012). However, the teachers might want to consider the role of the fourth grade reading slump in conjunction with the rise in text complexity. Students need to have a solid reading foundation in grades K-3 in order to best meet the needs of the fourth grade students. Because students will be grappling with higher level text earlier, this could mean that the students could be better prepared for fourth grade, or it could mean that the lack of reading growth could be experienced earlier.

Of particular note, were the participant’s use of leveled reading texts and guided reading groups. This area of literature offers some disparity. Betts (1946) did a research study in which three terms were coined: frustrational, instructional, and independent level. The results of the study have held firm over nearly 60 years, although debunked by several leading literacy leaders (Glasswell & Ford, 2010; Shanahan, 2011; Glasswell & Ford, 2011; Halladay, 2012) who have stated that with the support and guidance, students of most abilities are able to access grade level text. What was discovered within this research study is that regardless of the beliefs of the teachers in terms of high expectations and the acknowledgement of providing students grade level texts, within guided reading groups, the teachers tended to default to texts which where deemed to be at the students “instructional” level and sometimes even their independent level. Some of the participants acknowledged being concerned about frustrating students with texts with increased vocabulary and smaller print. However, this was not consistent. Ashley, a special education teacher, reported shifting to using more authentic texts to instruct her students. She had shifted her belief system since the implementation of the higher standards and realized the pattern-based texts she was using were not supporting academic literacy growth in her students.
Another participant stated that she taught students in small groups with the theory of Zone of Proximal Development. Although some teachers demonstrated ease in stretching the students in guided reading groups, the findings of this study demonstrated that many educators hold firm to the belief that during guided reading times students need to be taught at the student’s comfort level. The perceptions of the participants in this study suggest that students should not be confronted with texts that are too complex except through teacher-led exposure. Teachers appear to be most comfortable exposing students to higher-level texts than to teach students strategies on how to navigate challenging texts. Halladay (2012) would caution these teachers and remind them to not allow their assumptions that challenging texts will be “emotionally frustrating for a student” (p. 61).

Participants in the study all showed concern over the diverse learners in their classrooms. Diverse learners range from students learning English as a second language, students with specified learning disabilities, and students of low socio-economic or oral-language deficient homes. Most of the participants mentioned students’ early experiences with literature and language as having the biggest impact on student learning. Nearly every participant mentioned that students who were naturally gifted or had homes in which literacy was encouraged would be fine under the current standards but students without those supports would be more challenged or probably not make significant gains. These concerns are found in the research. Williamson et al (2013) expressed concern that the rise in the Lexile increase per grade level would have a negative impact on acquiring basic literacy skills such as automaticity and fluency. There was also a concern that the rise in text complexity would hinder motivation and engagement. This was corroborated by some of the participants who stated that some of the students were frustrated with aspects of reading instruction such as the expectation of tests, small print, or more
words on a page. The concern of the participants as well as the research proposes the sentiment that the ability level of the student and the format of the text should be taken into account when teaching reading skills to students in grades 2 through 4.

Overall, the participants had not incorporated many new or innovative instructional strategies to help support student learning using more challenging texts. Carla and Ashley, who work collaboratively in a classroom, expressed more innovative strategies to support student learning such as “tagging” the texts and using picture books to explicitly teach comprehension strategies before using more complex texts. The rest of the participants did not change their instructional strategies, just the resources they were using. When these participants spoke about guided reading groups, they generally were not using complex texts with some of the students, but rather texts that were deemed to be a better fit for the learner. As stated in the literature review, one of the goals of the CCSS Staircase of Text Complexity is through scaffolding and differentiation; the majority of students are expected to read grade level material independently. Many of the teachers in this study were more at ease exposing students to grade level text in whole group, teacher-led lessons. They had not been provided professional development on some of the more innovative instructional strategies such as close reading, which has been demonstrated to increase students’ comprehension of more challenging texts.

The research is clear that teacher pre-service training and ongoing professional development is integral to the success of students in reading development. It has been cited by Duke and Block (2012) that a critical barrier to effective reading instruction in the primary grades is the scarcity of expertise on how to teach more challenging reading skills such as reading comprehension. The participants all have several classes in reading instruction. One of the participants is currently enrolled in a graduate program for reading and another participant
has her reading specialists license. The participants all felt confident that they were well instructed in the area of reading instruction. One of the participants stated that it had been many years since she had any formal instruction in reading. In terms of professional development, the participants had not received any consistent or recent offerings on text complexity and appropriate instructional practices. The participants perception of all students being able to access more complex texts might shift if they were provided with professional development on what Hiebert (2012) classifies as the seven actions all teachers can take to manage text complexity: focus on knowledge, create connections, activate students’ passion, develop vocabulary, increase the volume of reading, build up students’ stamina, and identify clear benchmarks.

Limitations

Because this study is based upon the perceptions of educators in relation to the new requirements of the increase in text complexity, transferability may be limited. The participants were all from the same school district in Southeastern Massachusetts. Their perceptions may not be reflective of all educators who are using the CCSS as the guide for their instruction, however many of the perceptions and beliefs which emerged were similar to beliefs I have heard from other educators in informal conversations and at professional development. Although it appears that the voices of the teachers appeared representative, I was not able to get the true representation that was desired. Initially, the study proposed having all veteran classroom teachers who had taught in the same grade level for at least five years. Instead, the volunteers who chose to participate had a sampling of special education teachers and regular education
A further limitation is that the study is time-bound. As the CCSS was initially implemented in 2011, current policy review may alter, once again, the expected level of text complexity.

Another limitation is that teacher perceptions about text complexity may shift after they become better educated about the increased text complexity and receive appropriate professional development. At this time, and at least in this district, professional development and teacher understanding about text complexity is limited. As time goes on, provided there is no significant change in the expectation of the increase in text complexity, more and more districts may invest in significant professional development about best practices in instructional strategy and text complexity.

Implications for Educational Practice

Scholarly Significance. The utmost goal I had for this study was to allow teachers a voice in the controversial implementation of the increase in text complexity starting in grade 2. The general inductive approach allowed me to listen to the voices of the teachers and then to draw conclusions based upon what they said. During the interview process, I had to remain unbiased and ask questions in a way in which I did not lead the participants to answer the questions based upon my biases.

Based upon the responses of the six participants, it became evident that although teachers may comply with the implementation and use increasingly more challenging texts in their
classrooms, without appropriate professional development, the change is only superficial. Teachers must be given the historical understanding of why the shift in text complexity was made. Understanding that the shift of text complexity was not just a random act, but rather based on decades of research as well as the decline in college and career readiness. By providing teachers with the rationale behind the increase in text complexity, the implementation of the change may be more effective.

Teachers also need stronger and consistent administrative support in professional development to learn what is meant by text complexity. All of the participants interviewed were unaware of the multi-dimension of text complexity. Many felt that the shifts were random and made up by “someone.” Because of this, there was perceived frustration by the teachers’ as they did not think they had control over choosing texts or even how the texts were placed in certain ranges of difficulty.

Finally, teachers in the field need more defined and consistent professional development on research-based best practices to support students as they encounter more complex texts. The participants in the study had a range of understanding on how to best support students when they encounter texts.

**Practitioner significance.** As an instructional leader at the elementary level, teachers’ perceptions about text complexity are an area of concern. Research indicates that teachers who perceive their students are able to achieve generally show a higher level of engagement and achievement (Sweet, Guthrie, and Ng, 1998). The fact that this study reveals that teachers are basically conflicted about the increased text complexity is an area of concern. The participants all have high expectations and have seemingly embraced the district’s mandate to change the
materials being used. However, behind closed doors, some of the participants directly taught small groups of students using material based upon the new Lexile bands that are below grade level. This will inform my conversations with teachers who I evaluate as well as encourage my district to look at the professional development provided to the teachers to see if there is a more support or guidance we can give to the teachers to support them as they work towards increasing the Lexile bands for the students.

**Future research.** I have concluded that there is still more research that needs to be conducted in this area, particularly as it relates to the impact of increased text complexity on student achievement, best-practices in supporting student learning, and the impact of teachers’ perceptions about text complexity on student learning.

Throughout the interviews, teachers expressed concern that the at-risk or struggling readers were negatively impacted by the rise in text complexity. This compelled many of the teachers to often use grade-level texts in teacher-led instruction without the student interacting with grade level texts independently. By not providing students with the opportunity to learn independently, it may result in students not making acceptable reading gains. Research that explores the impact of increased text complexity may advance teachers’ understanding of how best to support all readers with grade-level or more complex texts.

Many of the teachers interviewed did not change their instructional practices to best meet the needs of the students. The teachers typically relied on instructional practices they had been using for years. This may be due to a lack of research on best practices in teaching more complex texts. Research that explores the best practices for teaching complex texts and how it will influence student achievement is critical.
Finally, through the literature review, it has been cited that teachers’ attitudes and perceptions can have a profound effect on student achievement. Within this study, there was a tension between teachers’ belief in having high expectations for all students with the concern that struggling and diverse learners would never be able to access grade-level texts which are at a higher level than in previous years. Additional research on this topic could provide greater insight into the degree to which teacher perceptions can affect the success or lack thereof of students. This knowledge could inform professional development that is designed to have teachers become reflective about their perceptions and assumptions about student learning.

**Action plan.** The understanding gained from this research supports the beliefs that districts need to be more deliberate in providing professional development for staff. Teachers need to be made aware of why the changes in Lexile measurements were made. The data that explains the decline in the reading abilities of many Americans might have a strong impact on not only the acceptance of the change for students with a natural inclination for reading, but also for students who are at risk or struggling readers.

Professional development should be an on-going goal of all districts to ensure that appropriate high-level reading instruction using appropriate reading texts is happening in the classrooms. Professional development on appropriate instructional practices both in guided reading groups as well as in whole group instruction should be implemented. Teachers need to be provided with a solid understanding of scaffolding, differentiation, and interventions to guide all students into being able to read and comprehend grade level texts independently. Professional development should be ongoing to continually reinforce the need for high-level quality instruction in using more complex texts.
Conclusion

When I initially decided to look at teacher perceptions surrounding text complexities it stemmed from my frustration within my own district. When the implementation of the CCSS first occurred, I was pleased to see the increase rigor that was put into place for text complexity. I had been troubled for years at how often students were leaving elementary schools without the ability to decode and comprehend texts. When I first started leading in the elementary schools, a greater understanding of the role of guided reading in daily elementary school instruction was gained. I was concerned that students who were struggling readers were continuously given less complex texts and were never able to access grade level texts. Students were often directly instructed using below-grade level texts. As a former middle school teacher having students reading significantly below grade level often challenged me. It was not until I was able to see first-hand the way in which guided reading groups were conducted that I had a better understanding that some students were never exposed to or expected to make meaning of grade level text.

This study supported many of the my presumptions with the exception that the staff and participants of this district were attempting to comply with the increase in text complexity, willing to update their instructional materials, and expose students to the richer, more authentic texts. The change in this district could be more meaningful if the district supported the teachers with rich professional development on how to best understand the shift in text complexity. Within the district, the teachers had firm beliefs that some students were struggling and would never be able to make the gains necessary to meet the goal.
This research project was centered on understanding the perceptions of elementary school teachers about the increase in text complexity. While teachers experience the change uniquely, there are many similarities in both the acceptance of the change as well as the tensions felt when dealing with at-risk students. This can provide further understanding about what teachers are going through when faced with a challenging external change such as an increase in text complexity. Teachers’ perceptions of change can directly impact the success of any educational change. This study may help lead to a clearer understanding of the role of the teacher in implementing change and encourage schools and districts to provide appropriate professional development to assist the educators. While this may advance the voices of the teachers, there are many other avenues of research that can provide more depth of understanding of the teacher perceptions and the impact on student learning.
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Common Core Appendix A: Research underlying the Standards, including discussion of text Complexity: [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)


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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

July 8, 2014

Dear <<insert name>>:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about the change in text complexity as a result of the implementation of Common Core State Standards.

I am conducting the study for my dissertation at Northeastern University, Boston. This study will explore the perceptions and lived experiences of veteran teachers as they explore what the change means as they instruct students in grades 2-4.

I was given your name by the principal of your school with the permission of the superintendent of schools. I asked for names of teachers who may be willing to be interviewed. The interview will be conducted at a time and place of your convenience. In order for me to have some additional data, could you please fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return using the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

I will follow-up this letter with a phone call. If you determine you would rather not participate, please contact me at 508-274-1468.

Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in any study.

If you would like additional information about this study, please call me at the number listed above.

Thank for your consideration in participating in this study.
Appendix B

Confidential Questionnaire

I. Demographics

1. Years of employment:   ____ 1-4  ____ 5-10  ____ 11-15  ____ 16+ years

2. Level of education:   _____ Bachelor’s   ____ Bachelor’s + ____ Masters
   _____ Masters +   _____ CAGS   _____ Doctorate

3. Gender:   _____ Female   _____ Male

4. Current grade teaching:   _____ 2   _____ 3   _____ 4

5. Others grade taught:   ______________________________________________

6. Courses in reading instruction:   _____ 1-3   _____ 4-5   _____ 6+
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

Part 1: Warm-up (10 minutes)

- The purpose of this interview and study is to understand teachers’ perceptions as they implement the instruction of more complex texts.
- Participants are classroom teachers in grades 2, 3, and 4.
- The demographics of the town and each participant will be coded to ensure confidentiality.
- Introduction of myself to the participant.
- Review the consent form and participants will sign it.
- Review of the questionnaire.

Part 2: Questions

1. Please describe your role in school.

2. What are your earliest experiences in reading?

   Prompt: How did you learn to read?

3. How do you believe students learn to read best?

   Prompt: Have you been trained in any specialized reading program?
4. What are some of your current experiences using reading material which may be at a higher reading level than in the past?

5. In what ways do you support students as they encounter more complex text?

   Prompt: Are there any other strategies you use?

6. What are your thoughts about the increase in text complexity as your role as a teacher?

7. What are your thoughts about the increase in text complexity as it relates to your instruction?

   Prompt: When did you first learn about the increase in text complexity?

8. What are your thoughts about the role of increased text complexity as it impacts student learning?
Appendix D

Consent Letter to Superintendent

December 12, 2014

Superintendent of Schools
Southeastern MA

Re: Perceptions of Elementary Educators about the Changes in Text Complexity
   Cheryl Morin Greeson, Researcher

Dear Superintendent,

I am writing to obtain permission to contact educators in your district to participate in a research study about the change in text complexity as a result of the implementation of Common Core State Standards. I am conducting the study for my dissertation at Northeastern University, Boston. This study will explore the perceptions and lived experiences of veteran teachers as they explore what the change means as they instruct students in grades 2-4.

I would like to contact the principals at the elementary schools for the names of potential participants.

The participants will be interviewed in one semi-structured interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes after school hours and in a location of their choosing. Participants will sign a consent form and can withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will be able to review the transcripts of the interviews for accuracy prior to the end of the research study.

I can be reached at 508-274-1468 to discuss the study further.

Thank you for your time,

Cheryl Morin Greeson
Appendix E
Comparison of Texts

Poison frogs don’t get sick very often. Scientists think that the frogs’ poison destroys germs that would make them sick. Their poison is strong enough to kill germs.

Some poison frogs live as long as nine years. That’s a long time for a frog!

Some Indians who live in the rain forest use darts for hunting. They rub the dart tips against a poison frog’s skin. The frog’s poison gets on the darts. The poison on the darts kills the animals.

A frog’s poison can also kill a person if it gets through the person’s skin.

So, what if you’re in a rain forest and see a tiny, brightly colored frog? Don’t touch it! It could be a poison frog.

Excerpt from Passageways. This is a text that was used prior to the implementation of CCSS in grade 4.

Below is a text example currently being used by the fourth grade special education teacher. The second page also shows example of the text comprehension strategy referred to as “tagging.”
Once, in a house on Egypt Street, there lived a china rabbit named Edward Tulane. The rabbit was very pleased with himself, for he was owned by a girl named Abilene, who treated him with the utmost care and adored him completely.

And then, one day, he was lost.

***

A BOSTON GLOBE–HORN BOOK AWARD WINNER
A NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR
A CHRISTOPHER AWARD WINNER
***

“Perhaps no other current American children’s book writer has appeared on the scene so brightly as Kate DiCamillo. . . . The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane may well be her best.”
—The New York Times Book Review

“When Edward’s journey ends, the reader will be wishing this story could go on and on.” —Washington Post Book World

★ “Why should I care what happens to an arrogant, overdressed china rabbit? But I did care, desperately, and I think I can safely predict you will, too.” —Katherine Paterson, Publishers Weekly (signature boxed review)
Edward felt, again, the sharp pain in his chest. He thought of Abilene. He saw the path leading up to the house on Egypt Street. He saw the dusk descending and Abilene running toward him.

Yes, Abilene had loved him.

“So, Malone,” said the man. He cleared his throat. “You are lost. That is my guess. Lucy and I are lost, too.”

At the sound of her name, Lucy let out another yip.

“Perhaps,” said the man, “you would like to be lost with us. I have found it much more agreeable to be lost in the company of others. My name is Bull. Lucy, as you may have surmised, is my dog. Would you care to join us?”

Bull waited for a moment, staring at Edward; and then with his hands still firmly around Edward’s waist, the man reached one enormous finger up and touched Edward’s head from
### Appendix F

**Reading Levels**

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This conversion chart illustrates how Learning A-Z levels appropriately correlate to other reading levels.