The Common Core State Standards & Text Complexity:

What Librarians Need To Know….And Do

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Many librarians describe queries from students, parents, and teachers ask for texts that match students' ATOS grade-level or Lexile designations. Students have been assigned a level (e.g., 3.5 ATOS grade-level or 550 Lexile) and have been told to get texts that match their level. There is some wiggle room—that is, students can read texts within a certain range--but the assumption is that the level that students have been assigned from an assessment can be used to pick texts at just the right levels. The match of texts to students' designated reading levels will ensure, according to this perspective, that students can read texts proficiently. In some locales, librarians have been asked to organize texts in their school libraries according to one or more of these readability systems.

During this sorting process, librarians have often wondered about the ways in which texts are sorted. Why, for example, on the ATOS measure used in the Accelerated Reader program (Milone, 2009) is *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger* Boy (Pilkey, 2003) assigned a fifth grade level but *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) a low fourth grade level? Why are both *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) and the *Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1996) on a list for fourth-graders when the former deals with issues appropriate for ten or eleven years and the latter is a picturebook appropriate for second or third graders?

If librarians are in states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards (Common Core; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) since the spring of 2010 (and most states have as well as the District of Columbia), librarians may well feel even more pressure to provide

information on the readability levels of texts to teachers, students, and parents. The Common Core is the first standards document to identify a separate standard for text complexity. Previous standards documents from states and also national organizations failed to recognize this critical aspect of reading development. In retrospect, a failure of previous standards documents to attend to this aspect of reading development is surprising. As students move through school, their capacity to read increasingly more complex text needs to expand. It may seem surprising to observers that this critical facet has fallen below the radar screen in past standards documents. This paper is not the place to delve into history and reasons for this shortcoming of previous documents. The inclusion of a standard devoted to increasing students' capacity with complex text is a big step forward in the current Common Core document.

As often happens, however, when a new direction is taken as it has been in the Common Core, many questions remain about the hows and whats of text complexity. The Common Core writers offered recommendations on text complexity that could result in increased attention to readability levels. There are three features of the Common Core that could result in increased attention to the readability levels of texts.

First, while quantitative measurement was only one side of a triad for establishing text complexity, it was the only form of measurement that was presented explicitly. Two other sides of the triad were identified: qualitative features of texts (e.g., levels of meaning, knowledge demands) and the match between texts and readers and tasks. However, analytic schemes for these two types of assessment were not described in depth and the less than a handful of illustrations of these schemes used texts for grades 7-10 only. For the quantitative leg, however, guidance was highly prescriptive. Specific Lexile levels were identified within Appendix A of

the Common Core and, subsequently, levels for additional readability schemes (e.g., ATOS, DRP) have been provided (Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, & Liben, 2012).

Another feature of the Common Core promises to increase attention to readability levels: the acceleration of text levels. Claiming that text levels have decreased in difficulty from grades K-12 over the past 50 years, the Common Core writers created a staircase of text complexity whichbegins with accelerated text levels at the second-third grade band and ends with high school graduates reading texts with levels equivalent to those of college and careers. The level of acceleration is apparent in Table 1 where formerly recommended and accelerated Lexile levels appear. Several assumptions underlying this staircase approach are problematic, particularly the lack of evidence that texts at the primary grades have been dumbed down (Hiebert, 2012).

A third potential aspect of the Common Core which could influence librarians is the second appendix (B) where a list of texts identified as exemplary for different grade bands is provided. Some publishers and educators are treating these texts as a curriculum. In such contexts, librarians may be asked to purchase and/or feature the texts which were identified as exemplars. When librarians attempt to correlate these texts with the Lexile or ATOS text assignments, they may find themselves in a quandary. Consider the grade level designations of the texts that were identified as exemplars in Table 2. The texts are within the range that the developers of the Lexile Framework (MetaMetrics, 2000) have identified as acceptable for variation in a grade—approximately 50 Lexiles. In relation to the ranges given in Table 1, all of these texts fall solidly into the grade two-three band. In Appendix B, however, half of the texts were offered as exemplars for the grade two-three band. Three of the other texts are on the exemplar list for grades 4-5 and two for grades 6-8. The writers of the Common Core did not

test the Lexile levels of the texts they offered in Appendix B with the ranges that they specified in Appendix A. But even with this information, what are librarians to do? Should *Roll of Thunder* (Taylor, 1976) and Adams's (2004) *Letters on Thomas Jefferson* be placed in the section for second to third graders? Librarians who are familiar with these two texts know that they are highly complex in content and also text structure.

Readability systems such as Lexiles and ATOS as well as a new generation of systems such as SourceRater (Sheehan, Kostin, & Napolitano, 2012) and the Reading Maturity Metrix (Landauer, Kireyev, & Panaccione, 2011) can be expected to be part of the educational landscape in the future, just as they have been over the past almost 90 years (Lively & Pressey, 1923). The first part of this article provides information for librarians to responding to queries regarding texts leveled by various readability systems. The second part of the paper is a call to action on the part of librarians. Librarians are leaders in the digital-global age where information is the critical commodity. I propose a means by which librarians can lead students and teachers in supporting the true goals of the Common Core—ensuring that students learn from and use the wealth of textual information of the digital-global age as citizens, community members, consumers, and producers.

The Common Core State Standards and Readability Systems

As mentioned in the last paragraph, readability formulas have a long history in American reading instruction. In the mid-1980s, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) summarized research that showed the tenuous hold of readability formulas in revising and generating texts, not simply selecting texts for instruction (Davison & Kantor, 1982). After that, large states (especially California and Texas) which had previously mandated particular levels on readability

formulas for their state-wide textbook adoptions began to use readability formulas much more cautiously. In the ensuing years, readability formulas have been used extensively in science and social studies textbook programs but not in the design of English/Language Arts textbooks.

At the same time as Anderson et al. (1985) were questioning premises of readability formulas, projects were initiated where readability formulas were calculated on digitized versions of texts (Koslin, Zeno, & Koslin, 1987; Milone, 2009; Smith, Stenner, Horabin, & Smith, 1989). The basis for these digital readability formulas is fundamentally the same as those for the first generation of formulas (e.g., Dale & Chall, 1948; Spache, 1953)—a measure of syntactic complexity (usually average sentence length) and a measure of semantic complexity (usually the average of word frequency or the portion of rare words). With earlier readability formulas that required manual calculation of sentence length and vocabulary, users had a sense of the vocabulary that made a text challenging or the nature of syntactic structures of texts. When texts are digitized and a text level assigned digitally, users no longer have to examine the text closely.

A second way in which the digitized readability formulas differ from the earlier formulas is the manner in which the complexity of vocabulary is computed. With large digital databases, developers of readability formulas began to use the relative frequency of words as a measure of vocabulary complexity, rather than an identification of the percentage of words in texts that are not grade-specific vocabulary lists. The complexity of the vocabulary in a text is established by computing an algorithm for the average frequency of the words in a text (with a word's frequency established relative to all of the

words in the database). The vast discrepancies in the frequencies of words in written English—90% of the total words in texts in the Common Core exemplars is explained by 4,000 words and simple derivatives (e.g., *help, helped, helping, helps, helper)* (Hiebert, 2012). The other 10% of the words come from a group of approximately 280,000 or more words. The differences in word frequency averages for texts are small. For example, the word frequency averages for *The Gettysburg Address* (Lincoln, 1863)--an exemplar text for grades 9-10--and *Henry and Mudge* (Rylant, 1996)--an exemplar text for grades 2-3--are the same: 3.6. With only small differences in the word frequency average, the role of syntax looms large (Deane, Sheehan, Sabatini, Futagi, & Kostin, 2006). *Gettysburg Address,* with a Lexile of 1230, has an average sentence length of 22.08 words, while *Henry and Mudge*, with a Lexile of 460, has an average sentence length of 7.89 words. The word frequency averages, however, are similar.

This feature of readability formulas is specific to the use of the average word frequency. The effects of two other features of texts—and the failure of readability to recognize these features—have been known as influences on the readabilities of texts for decades (e.g., Finn, 1978). First, when rare words are repeated—as they often are in informational texts where precise vocabulary (e.g., *photosynthesis*, *refraction*) is used—the level of a text is frequently overestimated. Second, when texts contain large amounts of dialogue as is often the case with narrative texts, texts levels are frequently underestimated since people typically speak in short sentences. These two patterns explain why *Roll of Thunder* (Taylor, 1976)—a text with substantial amounts of dialogue—and *Where do polar bears* (Thomson, 2010)—a text aimed at very young children but with rare words such as *blubber* and *tundra*—have a similar Lexile level.

In all likelihood, readability systems will continue to play a role on American reading education. Librarians can provide substantial leadership in the interpretation of recommended levels for texts to teachers, students, parents, and also administrators. For example, they can explain why an informational text with a higher level may be more appropriate than a narrative text with a lower level for students. With such guidance, librarians can help temper strict adherence to narrow applications of readability formulas.

But there is a proactive role for librarians as well--where they support intensive and extensive involvement with high-quality texts on the part of students, especially informational texts.

A Call To Action For Teacher Librarians

The Common Core affords a substantial opportunity for librarians to provide leadership in school literacy programs. The essence of the Common Core is an increase in students' bodies of knowledge and text is recognized as the central source for this knowledge. As information specialists in schools, librarians are the ones who can guide students in identifying texts that provide knowledge and that engage them to read extensively and intensively.

What is needed in schools, districts, and states is an intentional campaign to engage students in the acquisition of funds of information. In the remainder of this article, I describe what I refer to as the Funds of Information Initiative (FII). This initiative builds on work on funds of knowledge conducted by Luis Moll and his colleagues (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Within Moll's perspective, a fund of knowledge consisted of a body of skills and knowledge around an area such as gardening, repairing cars and bicycles, carpentry, or herbal remedies that was maintained in households and communities of Mexican-Americans and their relatives and neighbors in Mexico.

A fund of information, as defined in this context, captures the idea of expertise in Moll's work. It is also socially situated in that students' areas of expertise are recognized within a classroom and school community and students share their information with others in the community. The fund of information, relative to a fund of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), however, is less about craft knowledge than it is about knowledge gained from texts. A single individual could develop numerous funds of information and several individuals might share an interest in a similar fund of information. The common thread is that information is recognized as something that can be gained and that can be shared. Students become aware that Julian knows a substantial amount about plants and can identify the best place in a classroom to place boxes of seedlings. Madeline is recognized as an expert on books about women inventors and can be the one counted on to recommend just the right one to an interested classroom.

In the FII, students read widely but they also read deeply in particular topics. They read narrative and informational texts. Even in the primary grades, they have at least some autonomy in selecting from several choices—an action that can go far to ensuring students' long-term engagement in reading (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). The critical feature of the initiative is that students come to see themselves as experts on topics. For many students, especially for those who depend on schools for their academic experiences, such bodies or funds of information occur as a result of intentional and strategic design on the part of school faculty. Librarians—the information specialists within a school community—are the ones who provide the guidance to teachers and students (as well as their families) in identifying texts that will invite students' curiosity and extend their knowledge.

Fundamentally a FII effort involves three components: the identification of core bodies of information and books that support these bodies of information, a set of guidelines for students in

reading and responding to these books (including when this reading occurs), and a means of recording students' accomplishments (and hopefully a recognition/celebration system as well). I will sketch out these elements with a set of topics and texts that I developed and which appears in Table 3. I caution, however, that the contents of Table 3 pale in comparison to the design that results from collaboration among teachers and librarians in schools. Hopefully, the limitations and faults of my list will not dampen the creative energies and vast knowledge about texts and students held by a team of teachers and librarians.

Identification of topics and books

There are many sources for establishing the content including standards documents of national organizations as well as those of efforts such as Hirsch's (1988) Core Knowledge curriculum. The aim was to have a broad representation of content with attention to topics with extensive collections (e.g., history where there are numerous autobiographies and biographies) and topics that are not on the beaten path such as mathematics and music. Topics that are often popular among children—fashion and sports—were included but the aim was to move to topics where funds of information can be applied in numerous domains. In recognition that there are many ways of inviting students into more extensive reading, a number of selections from popular literature are included (e.g., Wild Soccer Bunch, Vet Volunteers). Series featuring the same characters can be one means of involving reticent readers into more extended reading. With a focus only on a single grade level in Table 3, the nature of change of topics over the course of school years is not recognized but such changes would be expected to be extensive.

With topics in hand, book selection came next. Underlying the selection of books intended for students who are chronologically in Grade 3 in Table 3 are three principles. First, a range of genres is included. Since different genres of texts provide different kinds of information,

both narrative and expository texts were of interest. But the focus went deeper than a simple "genre distribution" as promoted by the Common Core. Within a text type, the nature of information can vary considerably. Fables and trickster tales both fall into the category of tales but they differ considerably in the information that they convey about human behavior. For example, *The Treasure* (Shulevitz, 1978) as a fable, presents a moral that instantiates long-held wisdom. In a trickster tale such as *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1985), an underdog outwits a powerful character. An informational text that enumerates the characteristics of an animal (e.g., *Pikas: Life in the rocks* (Bill, 2010)) varies considerably from a biography (*e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Bray, 1995)). Within a topic, a fundamental aim was to give students as much variation of text types as possible. In this manner, students are able to gain information from numerous perspectives.

A second aim was to include at least a handful of titles from popular literature. The recent report, *What kids are reading* (Renaissance, 2012), indicates that popular literature looms large in students' choices. The aim of the FII is to move students beyond a diet of only popular fiction but this aim does not mean that students should be discouraged from reading popular fiction. For some students, series such as *The Wild Soccer Bunch* or *Vet Volunteers* may involve students in reading extensively. As they develop automaticity and engagement in reading, students can be guided in reading more broadly.

The final aim of book selection was to ensure that texts should be accessible to the majority of students within a designated grade span. Lexiles were obtained for all of the texts in Table 3. Two of the texts were considerably more difficult than the others—Maze's *I want to be a fashion designer* and Ball's *Amazing X-Rays.* The Lexiles of these two texts as well as the others were viewed through the lenses of the information on strengths and weaknesses of

readability formulas that was reviewed earlier. The "hard" vocabulary that accounted for the high Lexiles of these two texts reflect the condundrum that was described earlier—rare vocabulary is repeated in informational texts. In that students with an interest in fashion or in animals are acquiring a background vocabulary, these texts were deemed to be appropriate for inclusion.

With these guidelines in mind, the search for books began. Numerous sources were consulted including several classic sources of high-quality literature (Lipson, 2000; Silvey, 2004; Trelease, 2006). Since these sources are slim on recommendations regarding informational texts, lists of award-winning books from professional organizations in science (National Science Teachers Association) and social studies (National Council for the Social Studies) were consulted. Finally, I used amazon to identify texts on specific topics, especially popular literature series that supported particular themes (e.g., *Wild Soccer Bunch* for sports).

Texts from programs that are sold to schools as instructional programs are not included in the list. Many of these texts, however, are of high quality and resemble closely informational texts that are offered as trade books. For example, *What if rain boots were made of paper?* (Beals & Pearson, 2005), which is part of the Seeds of Science/Roots of Reading program, is as inventive, engaging, well-written, and well-illustrated as texts labeled as trade (e.g., Gibbons, 1991; Simon, 1995). A school librarian might choose to include some of the texts from instructional programs that have been purchased by a school or district but not extensively implemented.

I also gathered information on the text difficulty to ensure that the texts weren't too far afield. But I was aware in choosing texts that (a) a vocabulary around a topic can be built up as

students read and (b) some students have additional perseverance in attending to unfamiliar vocabulary when the texts are of their choosing.

Selecting and recording. The fundamental guidelines are that students read a text from each category and then select a category in which they read extensively. This self-chosen category does not need to be from this list but, probably in the first iteration of this program, there will be need to be some stipulations on what counts and what doesn't.

The element of choice is critical. Even the opportunity to make choices from among two or three texts or tasks can increase students' engagement (Guthrie et al., 2012). Practices often associated with sustained silent reading have been criticized in that students' time is spent poorly in independent reading. At one point or another in life, of course, students will be making their own choices about reading (and the most frequent choice appears to be *not* to read). But learning to make appropriate choices, which challenge and extend readers' backgrounds does not occur serendipitously. Students need to guidance in developing the skill of book selection. For students who have been taken to the library and bookstores by parents, the foundation for this skill has been developed. Students who have not had such experiences depend on their teachers and librarians for teaching them how to select texts.

But there does need to be some form of keeping records of what has been learned. A record might take the form of a notebook where students record what they have read, write a brief summary of what they intend to remember from the text (even in the form of a mind or semantic map), and to write their recommendation of the text (even the ubiquitous thumbs up, thumbs down). Over time, more extensive systems could be developed such as systems that re reminiscent of the preference systems (one to five stars) which are popular in social media systems.

Recognizing and celebrating accomplishments. Supporting students in acquiring information with texts goes much beyond the counting of words that lead students to certificates and badges. Badges for reading from all of the topics offered for a grade level might be a first step. The aim, however, should be to extend the venues in which students can share their information. The ideas that follow sketch out possible directions but are not intended to be comprehensive by any means.

A first level might be for students to keep journals and notebooks on their funds of knowledge. These notebooks might be shared in "information talks" in either classroom or library settings. The information talk could take the same form as a book talk but with students sharing information gained from reading (and references to the sources of their information).

A second level of sharing involves a community beyond the individual classroom. If a librarian is leading the initiative, bulletin boards in the library might be the context in which students create collages or graphic representations of their areas of expertise. Posters might be created which are posted in the library or on the walls of a school's hallways.

A third level takes the information to an even wider scale—the community which includes families and those in the school's neighborhood. For example, a school magazine could be created in which students write articles about their areas of expertise. This magazine could be virtual, rather than a paper product.

There are numerous other possibilities, some of which involve broader communities such as sharing with the school or classrooms in other parts of the country or even world through the Internet. There are reputable organizations that provide connections across classrooms in the Internet.

When funds of information rather than simply words read become the goal of extended reading, librarians and teachers look for ways in which students can share what they have learned in authentic contexts. External recognitions such as badges and certificates may be part of the system. But librarians and teachers should keep the goal in mind: Students are developing areas of expertise that form the foundation of lifelong pursuits. When this goal is recognized, librarians and teachers identify ways in which students' expertise can be recognized.

Conclusion

Readability formulas undoubtedly will continue to play a role in American education. In all likelihood there will be additional aspects of text that can be described quantitatively in the next generation of readability formulas such as coherence and the nature of academic language. Quantitative systems can contribute to our understandings of what makes a text complex. As with any data analysis, however, human beings need to interpret the results. Data need to be viewed from lenses such as the purpose of reading, the type of text, and the nature of readers and their backgrounds. Librarians are critical in misinterpretation of quantitative evidence on tax complexity. With the recognition of how text characteristics differ as a function of genre, librarians can work with teachers and reading specialists in identifying texts that will support the underlying goal of the Common Core—to grow students' capacity in learning from text.

Librarians serve as critical resources for teachers and parents in understanding appropriate uses of readability formulas. But librarians have an even more critical role. They are essential in supporting students in learning about the immense resources of information and in navigating those resources. American students will only be successful in the digital-global world if they are guided in learning from text. It is our nation's librarians who have the knowledge about the available text and media resources. American students and their teachers

depend on librarians to uncover and navigate the world of information available in texts and media.

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Table 1.

Original and Recalibrated Lexile Ranges for CCSS/ELA Grade Bands

Text Complexity Grade Band	Original Lexile Ranges	Recalibrated Lexile Ranges
K-1	N/A	N/A
2-3	450-725	450-790
4-5	645-845	770-980
6-8	860-1010	955-1155
9-10	960-1115	1080-1305
11-CCR	1070-1220	1215-1355

Table 2.

Common Core State Standards Exemplar Texts: Lexiles 660 to 720

Title	Grade Span Assignment	Genre	Lexile	Mean Sentence Length	Mean Word Frequency
Good Pet, Bad Pet	4 to 5	Expository	660	8.6	3.28
Art around the world	2 to 3	Expository	680	9.1	3.35
The one-eyed giant	2 to 3	Narrative	680	9.8	3.47
The black stallion	4 to 5	Narrative	690	10.2	3.53
The Stories Julian Tells	2 to 3	Narrative	700	11.9	3.79
Where do Polar Bears	2 to 3	Expository	700	10.4	3.53
Discovering Mars	4 to 5	Expository	700	9.9	3.46
Letters on Thomas Jefferson.txt	6 to 8	Expository	700	11.9	3.79
Bat loves the night	2 to 3	Expository	720	10.2	3.45
Roll of Thunder.txt	6 to 8	Narrative	720	11.7	3.71

Table 3.

Sample Categories with Book Suggestions for Funds of Information Initiative:

Grades 3-4

Stories about heroes		Joan of Arc (Diane Stanley) Martin Luther King, Jr. (Rosemary L. Bray) Seven Brave Women (Betsy Hearne) She's wearing a dead bird on her head! (Kathryn Lasky)
Music		I like music (Leah Komaiko) The Philharmonic gets dressed (Karla Kuskin) Moses goes to a concert (Isaac Millman)
Tales: New & Old		The Huckabuck Family & and how they raised popcorn in Nebraska and quit and came back (Carl Sandburg) The people could fly: American black folktales (Virginia Hamilton) Rapunzel (Paul O. Zelinsky)
Math		Grandfather's Tang's Story (Ann Tompert) A very improbable story: A math adventure (Edward Einhorn) Math Curse (Jon Scieszka)
Animals in the Wild		Manatee Blues (*Vet Volunteers* series) (Laurie Halse Anderson) Animals and the Seasons (Susanne Riha) Amazing X-Rays: Wild Animals (Jacquelin A. Ball)
History & Geography		Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Eleanor Coerr) The Scrambled States of America (Laurie Keller) Shaka: King of the Zulus (Diane Stanley)
How Peopl e Live	Fas-hion	I want to be a fashion designer (Stephan Maze) My wonderful world of Fashion: A book for drawing, creating, and dreaming (Nina Chakarabarti) Frankly, Frannie: Fashion Frenzy (AJ Stine)
	Sports	The world's greatest soccer players (Matt Doeden) The Wild Soccer Bunch: Kevin the Star Striker (Joachim Masannek) A Beautiful Game: The World's Greatest Players and How Soccer Changed Their Lives (Tom Watt)