Working with a consortium of charter middle schools in Atlanta, one member of our team (Gwynne) was asked if *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1951) was an appropriate novel for fifth-grade students. Stunned, she replied, as politely as she could, that she did not think *Animal Farm* was an appropriate novel for fifth grade for a variety of reasons, including students’ lack of knowledge about the Bolshevik Revolution and the early Soviet Period. She then asked why they were considering *Animal Farm* for fifth graders. The middle school educators said they wanted all of their students to read great works of literature.

The schools in this consortium have student bodies in which 60% of the students are reading below grade level, 80% receive free and reduced lunch, and 100% are African American. The school has a “high academic press” (Lee & Smith, 1999), hoping to accelerate all students’ growth so they are accepted at and given scholarships to exclusive public and private high schools and later colleges. However, reading scores were not making the accelerated progress teachers had hoped. The teachers, most of whom had no formal coursework in literacy instruction, thought *Animal Farm* might be the key to accelerated literacy growth in fifth graders. The students were assigned *Animal Farm*; even with a great amount of teaching, the teacher acknowledged the students did not understand it. That semester students also read *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), a book Gwynne recommended and which she believed students would connect. This, at times light and at times somber, Newbery Honor Book, a tale of an African American family’s visit to the deep south during violent and turbulent times, brings up questions of racism, sibling and family relationships, and identity. The students read *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963*; they understood it because it mirrored their lives and echoed their humor (McNair, 2008; Tatum 2008a). The teachers wondered at how much students loved the book.

In our roles as middle- and high-school teacher educators, we see this tension between books that are seen as meaningful for their academic worth by teachers and policy makers and those that students find meaningful being played out in classrooms and schools across the country. School districts create book lists, filled with canonical texts (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006), but often the adolescents assigned to read them do not feel connected to them (Franzak, 2008). In spite of this, some argue that canonical texts are gatekeeping texts, essential for making sure all students have the cultural capital necessary to be successful in high-performing high schools and post-secondary institutions (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Those in favor of the traditional canon suggest that Young Adult (YA) and popular texts alone neither give students the background knowledge necessary for post-secondary studies (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, &
Mueller, 2002; Pike, 2003; Schoenbach et al., 1999), nor the rich text required for students to make deep connections with the text. Others suggest that YA and popular texts are anathema to literature and to literary study itself (Stotsky, 2010a).

Simultaneously, many have suggested students’ responses to texts are positioned by their racial, ethnic, social, cultural, linguistic, gender, and other identities (Clarke, 2006; Galda, & Beach, 2004; Tatum, 2008a, 2008b). However, arguments for texts that connect to students’ racial, ethnic, social, cultural, linguistic, and gendered identities (Brooks & Hampton, 2005; Dubb, 2007; McNair, 2008; Morrell, 2000; Tatum, 2008b; Tribunella, 2007) often clash with arguments for scaffolding students’ understanding of canonical texts (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Pike, 2003; Simon, 2008; Schoenbach et al., 1999). Some even go so far as to suggest canonical texts themselves are central to the ability to understand complex texts (Stotsky, 2010a).

Tatum (2008b) argues that students’ textual lineages consist of “texts that move them to feel differently about themselves, affect their views of themselves, or move them to some action in their current time and space” (p. 10). Tatum found that most students saw value in texts with characters within both their gender and ethnicity and, although students might branch out across one or the other, they rarely branched across both. The changing demographics of the United States suggest that in terms of identity, texts written by white males might fail to connect with many students on that basis alone. Nevertheless, a recent study of 142 Alabama high school English teachers demonstrated that even an expanded canon of 23, mostly 19th and 20th century texts, included only three works by women (Harper Lee, Emily Brontë, and Lorraine Hansberry) of which one, Hansberry, is an author of color (Stallworth et al., 2006).

In this article, we present two perspectives on text choices for English language arts courses in the upper grades. The first perspective is provided by the recently released Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts (Common Core State Standards, 2010); the second is the perspective provided by a report of a recent survey of English teachers regarding their text choices (Stotsky, 2010a). We then present our suggestions for policy and practice related to text choice and future research in this area.

THE RISE OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

In some cases (Morrell, 2000; Pike, 2003; Simon, 2008; Tatum, 2008b), the arguments for books that students can relate to and books that carry cultural capital are not seen as incompatible. Morrell, Tatum, and others suggest mediating the tension through a combination of canonical and meaningful texts. A synthesis of text types may be an answer, yet integrating canonical, YA, and popular texts requires teachers to be much more than just teachers of literature.

The tensions English language arts teachers feel—torn between being teachers of literature and teachers of literacy—have also been well documented. For example, Franzak (2008) demonstrated that readers who struggled in a high-performing high school were further marginalized by an English curriculum that focused on canonical texts and literary study, at the expense of literacy strategies. Likewise, in their study of a high school program to prepare students for collegiate reading and writing tasks, Moss and Bordelon (2007) suggested that opportunities were lost by pushing twelfth-grade students reading on the seventh-grade level into demanding text without
providing appropriate instructional scaffolding. Others have suggested the key to post-secondary success for middle and secondary literacy learners lies in tying literary theory to response-based literacy instruction (Eckert, 2008).

Enter the Common Core State Standards. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) coordinated the state-led Common Core State Standards (CCSS) effort that reflects a collaboration among “teachers, administrators, and experts, to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). These k-12 standards are aligned with the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCR) and delineate the knowledge and skills students should possess for a successful transition into entry-level employment, university, or workforce training programs. After the initial writing of standards, the NGA Center and CCSSO requested and received feedback from various organizations and groups like teacher organizations, university professors, educators, civil rights groups, and experts in language learners and students with disabilities in an effort to refine the language and wording of each standard.

All but two states, Texas and Alaska, took part in the development of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Materials provided by the Initiative advocate the creation of common standards to “provide a greater opportunity to share experiences and best practices within and across states that will improve our ability to best serve the needs of students” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). While the standards are not a curriculum—this point is emphasized throughout the website and in ancillary materials provided by the Initiative—they offer teachers a roadmap in terms of knowledge and skills students should have at a particular grade level, which will aid teachers in developing appropriately rigorous lesson plans and units of study.

SEARCHING FOR COMMON GROUND: WHAT THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS SAY ABOUT TEXT SELECTION

Although CCSS offer “Sample Performance Tasks” as exemplars of how teachers might approach the study of a particular piece of literature, these tasks are offered as models rather than mandates. One instance of this is found in the grades 9-10 Reading Standards, where a performance task suggests that students examine the purpose and point of view present in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” (1963) and consider the rhetorical devices present in the speech that forward these goals. Among a list of Key Takeaways from the English Language Arts/Reading Standards is a required “progressive development of reading comprehension” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) and the assignment of increasingly complex texts drawn from both contemporary and classical literature, and including a wide array of informational texts. Although the CCSS suggest certain categories of texts, such as classic myths and stories, primary documents, and classic works of literature, the Standards defer to school districts and states to determine which literature and readings are appropriate and/or required for local populations.

In terms of identifying appropriate texts for particular grade levels, the CCSS Initiative provides supporting materials and includes representative reading materials for English language arts, history/social studies, science, mathematics, and technical subjects and sample performance tasks. Reading materials are grade-banded (e.g., 4-5; 6-8; 9-10; 11-College and Career Readiness) and
broken out into categories for each content area. For English language arts, these are “stories, poetry, drama, informational texts;” for history/social studies, science, mathematics, and technical subjects there are exemplars of readings, both paper and digital, under the heading of “informational texts.” Grade-level determinations are made based on both quantitative and qualitative measurements, and additional support for approaching reading with English language learners and students with disabilities are readily available as resources/ancillary documents posted to the CCSS website.

After reading the recommended text resources and exemplar reading lists provided by the Common Core State Standards, several questions surface: To what degree do the Common Core State Standards rely on canonical texts as opposed to multicultural or more contemporary texts? What types of digital resources are highlighted? Do the readings help students “build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities, and broaden their perspective” as is suggested by the Key Takeaways document included in the Draft of the K-12 Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010)?

After exploring the reading lists and excerpts for each of the grade levels from 4-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-CCR, it is clear that the preponderance of texts suggested as exemplars are classic or canonical texts and are readily available in textbook anthologies commonly used in English language arts classrooms. For example, Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (reprint, 1997) is suggested as an exemplar for grades 4-5, Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (reprint, 2011) is suggested as an exemplar for grades 6-8, and Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales (reprint, 2008) is suggested as an exemplar for grades 11-12.

Although contemporary and multicultural texts are included for each of the grade-band levels, these texts are smaller in number and in some instances have become part of the literary canon. For example, for grades 4-5, Christopher Paul Curtis’ (1999) novel, Bud, Not Buddy is listed as an exemplar; for grades 6-8, Mildred Taylor’s (2004) novel Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry; for grades 9-10, Chinua Achebe’s (reprint, 1994) novel Things Fall Apart; and for grades 11-12, Zora Neale Hurston’s (reprint, 2006) novel Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Although digital literacy is a necessary tool for contemporary students, the CCSS resource lists include only a smattering of web-based readings for each grade level, and these are largely confined to informational texts. We provide two examples of such digital texts below.

- An online inventory and description of invasive plants, which is also available in pdf format (California Invasive Plant Council, 2010).
- An online map and table showing U. S. zones and suggested home insulation levels (U. S. Environmental Protection Agency/U. S. Department of Energy, 2010).

It is possible that because this is considered a “recommended” list, the writers chose only a few digital texts to stand as exemplar texts. Also, because websites are historically unstable and often produce dead links over time, the writers might have decided to leave the selection of digital texts up to individual schools and educators.

In regard to the question, “Do the Common Core State Standards readings help students ‘build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities, and broaden their perspective’ over time,” it is difficult to assess the absence of the passage of time and the use and critique of practicing teachers. Critiques and compliments are already available from the educational community about CCSS and the literary choices excerpted and highlighted in the CCSS Appendix documents. Stotsky (2010a)
expresses concern that the creation of CCSS is a step toward a nationalized curriculum and one that favors “non-analytical approaches” (p. 31) to the study of literature that will handicap students as they move toward college admission. Interestingly enough, she employs the work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who has written in support of CCSS (Hirsch, 2010/2011), to support the claim that the Core Standards will devolve into a “skills-driven” (Stotsky, 2010a, p. 32) approach, thus increasing the likelihood that secondary students will find themselves ill-prepared or capable of college-level work. Like Hirsch, Jr., many from the educational research community (Darling-Hammond, 2010/2011; Finn Jr. & Petrilli, 2010) are supportive of CCSS even though they are not always in accord on other educational issues. What this suggests is that the Common Core, and the increasingly challenging texts that are present in English language arts content area as well as in social studies, math, science, and technology studies, provides a workable set of standards to assist teachers, school districts, and states in developing curricula that become more complex while preparing students for entry into the workforce, university, or technical training centers after graduating from public schools.

RESISTING THE COMMON GROUND: THE CANONICAL BACKLASH

As noted, the Common Core Standards were not well received by some; the standards were criticized for not including enough traditional literary texts and for including a large number of non-fiction texts in the English curriculum. In 2010, one leading critic, Sandra Stotsky, published a report in the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers’ (ALSCW) publication, Forum, entitled, “Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey” (Stotsky, 2010a). Forum is described by the ALSCW as, “an imprint on literary advocacy and public policy, issued on an occasional basis and with the approval of the ALSCW Council” (ALSCW, n.d., para. 1). Although describing itself as non-political, the ALSCW is aligned with the National Association of Scholars (as is Stotsky), and considers its mission “to insist upon the literary nature of the teaching of literature” (ALSCW, n.d., Mission Goal 7).

Sandra Stotsky is the Endowed Chair in Teacher Quality at the University of Arkansas and was one of six educators featured in the New York Times commentary on the National Standards (Stotsky, 2009). She served on the state of Massachusetts’s Common Core validation committee, although she chose not to sign off on the final version, arguing:

In my judgment, Common Core’s standards for grades 6-12 do not reflect the core knowledge needed for authentic college-level work and do not frame the literary and cultural knowledge one would expect of graduates from an American high school. (Stotsky, 2010b, bullet point 1)

Even with this stated bias, her non-peer-reviewed study, meant to counter the Common Core Standards, has been given great credence by the press (e.g., Heitin, 2010; Leef, 2011; Johnson, 2011), teachers (e.g., English Companion Ning: http://englishcompanion.ning.com), and policymakers (e.g., The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy http://www.popecenter.org).

In her piece (funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, The University of Arkansas, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and sponsored by the ALSCW, the Concord Review, and the California Reading and Literature Project), Stotsky (2010a) purports to
be replicating earlier studies by Applebee (1989) and Squire and Applebee (1968). These two earlier studies, conducted by surveying high school department chairs or curriculum coordinators, sought to gather information on which texts were being read in which grades (9-12) in the United States.

However, in the introduction to the discussion of her survey of grade 9-11 classroom teachers, Stotsky condemns the quality of literature that high school students currently read. This condemnation is based on an internally conducted study of the most frequently taken tests in Accelerated Reader (AR) on the high school level (Stotsky, 2010a, p. 8). Using information indicating that of 1500 high school students (designated by Accelerated Reader to be in the top 10% of reading achievement), 332 took an AR test on *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), 325 on *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008), and 116 on *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, reprint 1988), Stotsky concludes that students *chose* Meyer’s works, but they were likely *assigned* Lee’s works (an assertion unsupported by her data). In general, the inclusion of AR data (which are not widely used in high schools) and its use to describe the reading habits of a nation of high school students is puzzling. However, when Stotsky reveals she is using the AR ATOS readability formula for calculating the difficulty for all books discussed in her piece, the connection seems clearer (p. 38). Although she acknowledges there are concerns with using readability formulas for evaluating the actual difficulty of literary works, she notes that she chose the formula because it adjusts difficulty based on the length of the text “adjusted upward for longer books and downward for shorter books” (p. 39). This choice is problematic, as book length is not necessarily a primary indicator for text difficulty. For example, ATOS equates the difficulty of *The Crucible* (Miller, reprint, 1976) with that of *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005). Additionally, the following texts are rated as below a high school reading level by ATOS: *The Crucible* (Miller, reprint 1976) (4.9), *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, reprint, 2002) (4.5), *Night* (Wiesel, reprint 2006) (4.8), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, reprint 1999) (7.3), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, reprint 2003) (5.0), *Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, reprint 2011) (6.7), *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1951) (7.3), and *Antigone* (Sophocles, reprint 2005) (5.3).

Many researchers might question the validity of the report from these two unsupported propositions alone (the number of AR tests taken reflects what students both choose and are assigned to read and that ATOS is a valid measure of difficulty for literary texts because it rates longer books as more difficult). However, as noted previously, the report has been widely read, and is becoming influential in discussions of both the Common Core Standards and secondary text selection. With these two conclusions and an American College Testing (ACT) recommendation that students read more challenging materials to be prepared for college level instruction, Stotsky (2010a) sets the stage for presenting her survey.

With two research questions: (a) What book-length works of fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction are assigned by teachers in grades 9-11 in standard or honors courses?, and (b) Which approach(es) do teachers use for the literature they assign and how much time do they allot to literary study? (that is not discussed in this piece), she surveyed (as best we can ascertain because the methodology is not clearly described and is only included in Appendices) 406 teachers via telephone, a web-based survey, or a mailed survey. Some portions of the survey are reproduced, but some details, such as the prompts used to elicit teachers’ pedagogical approaches, are missing. The number of teachers in the original sample is unclear; 1500 were contacted initially, then when the response rate was low, “we added additional teachers” to the database, although no specific number
is given (p. 38). Finally, an additional 1300 teachers were mailed surveys. How many teachers completed the survey via the various means is not reported, and there is no internal comparison among data collected in these different ways.

Regardless of methodological concerns, Stotsky (2010a) calls this “a representative sample” (p. 39) and goes on to draw the conclusion that only four commonly assigned books are on a high school reading level (according to ATOS): *Julius Caesar* (Shakespeare, reprint 2010), *The Odyssey* (Homer, reprint 2011), *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, reprint 2011), and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, reprint 2010). As a result, she states:

little is left of a coherent and progressive literature curriculum with respect to two of its major functions—to acquaint students with the literary and civic heritage of English-speaking people, and to develop an understanding and use of the language needed for college coursework. (p. 14)

Following this conclusion, she presents a data table, which she suggests demonstrates the differences in the assignment of quality literature from Applebee’s 1989 study to hers in 2009. Although she acknowledges:

For purposes of comparison, it is important to note that his study included all the different types of classes in grades 9-12…. not just standard and honors courses in grades 9-11…. Moreover, his unit of analysis was the school, not individual courses. Thus, his study picked up the maximum assignment of the titles on a school-wide basis, not a profile of what the average student likely reads…. (p.14)

She then asserts, “it is reasonable to conclude that significant changes have taken place” (p. 14). But is it? If we go deeply into Applebee’s (1989) study, we find he reported data by track. See Table 1.

We also find that if we use an apples-to-apples comparison of higher-level tracks, a comparison that includes information about how many texts in Applebee’s study were assigned in Grade 12 (which was not included, inexplicably) in Stotsky’s survey, we find the belief that significant changes have taken place unreasonable.

**Table 1.** Applebee’s (1989) Most Frequently Assigned Texts Reported by Track

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-level Track Text Choices</th>
<th>Percent of Schools Reporting this Text Choice</th>
<th>Lower-level Track Text Choices</th>
<th>Percent of Schools Reporting this Text Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romeo &amp; Juliet</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>Of Mice and Men</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>The Outsiders</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huckleberry Finn</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>The Pearl</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>The Pigman</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarlet Letter</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Gatsby</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord of the Flies</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>Call of the Wild</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Crucible</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>Diary of a Young Girl</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Certainly changes have taken place (including a great increase in teachers assigning *The Crucible*), and there has been a decline in the assignment of some texts. However, teachers do not seem to be fleeing Shakespeare and works that reflect the “literary and civic heritage of English-speaking people” at the rate Stotsky purports.

In reviewing text selection policies for middle and secondary schools, we are concerned by the assumptions that underlie Stotsky’s study (that literary reading is key to college success) and the conclusions drawn, often without supporting data, from a flawed piece of research (that to improve students’ college and career preparation, we must assign more canonical, literary text). Although ACT’s (2006) college readiness report suggests the clearest discriminator between students who are prepared for college-level work and those who are not is the ability to comprehend complex texts, there is no indication the texts are solely literary. Poor readers face difficult challenges in courses with heavy text demands (Simpson & Nist, 2000), but those courses often involve reading complex expository, discipline-based text and the synthesis of text information with class-based lecture and discussion. Recognizing this, the ACT (2006) calls on high schools to increase the level and amount of reading instruction in all high school courses, not just in English or remedial courses and they call on states to address text complexity in state standards. The Common Core, however, does promote the notion that reading must go beyond the English classroom and reading must comprise more than literature. We hope teachers, districts, and policy-makers do their own close reading of Stotsky’s report before using its findings in text-selection decisions.

**MEETING IN THE MIDDLE: MEDIATING STUDENTS’ NEEDS AND TEXT-SELECTION POLICY**

Educators in the United States are concerned about how to help struggling readers in middle and high school classrooms (Greenleaf et al., 2001). Crocco and Costigan (2007) found that, because of mandated testing and the resulting narrowing of curricular choices, teachers do not have room in the curriculum to be creative and to create relationships with their students. This narrowing

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### Table 2. A Comparison of Stotsky’s (2009) and Applebee’s (1989) Higher-level Track Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher-Level Track Text Choices</th>
<th>Percent of Schools Reporting this Text Choice in Applebee (1989)</th>
<th>Percent of Schools Reporting this Text Choice in Stotsky (2009)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romeo &amp; Juliet</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth*</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet**</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scarlet Letter</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Gatsby</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lord of the Flies</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Crucible</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 54% in grade 12 (Applebee, 1989)
** 45% in grade 12 (Applebee, 1989)
Meaningful and Significant Texts for Adolescent Readers

of curriculum means it is less likely teachers and students will have meaningful literacy experiences within the classroom. Curricula that focus on the canon do not necessarily enable students to engage and connect meaningfully with texts. Many students cannot read canonical texts with deep understanding because they find the texts boring or because teachers have not appropriately scaffolded reading to facilitate these connections (Tatum, 2008c).

Perhaps one thing educators can all agree on is that we want students to be active and effective readers, to be critical thinkers, and to learn both how to read a variety of texts and how to choose texts that will best suit their needs. Based on our discussion here, and on our understanding of the needs of students and the competing desires of policy makers, we have developed the following suggestions for teachers, department heads, curriculum coordinators, and others who are responsible for choosing texts and developing policies around choosing texts. In addition, we provide some suggestions for future research in the area of text selection.

Use Available Resources to Develop Policy Statements on Text Choices

We recommend teachers, curriculum directors, and administrators use resources that are available to them in regard to text choice. These resources might include the Common Core State Standards’ recommendations (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010), as well as those provided by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA, 1996). A policy that attends to students’ needs and interests and provides for increasing levels of text complexity and demand, as well as one that is coherent in terms of the community in which schools are located, has the opportunity to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Such a policy will ensure text choices can stand against banning or censorship attacks as well as voiced concerns about text and instructional rigor. In addition, it is our belief that the process of developing such a policy will assist in preventing self-censorship by teachers.

Put Students’ Needs at the Center

If we choose texts for students by focusing on what students need to be effective citizens of the world, we move away from imagining certain texts are required reading for all students. What we are advocating here is to begin with the student as the center of text choice, rather than beginning with the text at the center of the process of choosing texts.

Paying attention to students’ needs, and even students’ desires, means we should be developing collections of texts that are varied in genre and format. Fiction, non-fiction; classics and young adult literature; poetry and prose; digital and paper texts—all of these will suit some students’ needs and desires. No one category will provide what all students need. Thus, as we develop lists of texts for students, we must build in variety and invite a diversity that reflects the ever-burgeoning media available.

In addition, paying attention to students’ needs involves consideration of development of student skills. Thus, we may want to think of text choices using the metaphor of bridges or ladders (Lesesne, 2010). Both metaphors allow teachers and other knowledgeable parties to provide students with experiences with texts that build skills required for more difficult texts.

We suggest text choices begin with the collection of data on students’ backgrounds, cultural heritage, funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004), interests, and reading choices or motivation to read. Once collected, these data can be used by
school district personnel to make text choices that balance the needs and interests of students with other driving forces, such as standards, curriculum, culture, and community. A culturally responsive approach to text selection will give all students a sense of pride in their cultural backgrounds, a chance to learn through learning styles that will work for each student, and to instill in students the understanding that their culture is one of their strengths (Morgan, 2009).

Recognize the Complex Nature of Text Choices

A variety of means exist to determine text difficulty. Teachers in schools use methods ranging from simplistic sentence/syllable ratios to lists of grade-level ranges developed at some point in the history of a school. We like to advocate for a method for choosing texts that takes into consideration not only the word-level and sentence-level difficulty of a text, but also more qualitative considerations, such as students’ familiarity with the context and background of a text; complexity of ideas and concepts in a text; and sophistication or specialized knowledge required by a text.

The Common Core State Standards provides a roadmap for how stakeholders might approach text selection. Their recommended works include both challenging canonical texts as well as high-interest, culturally relevant and/or contemporary texts. However, we should not rely on any one list to support the learning needs of all adolescents. Instead, knowledgeable participants in text selection activities should consider students’ needs, text complexity, and available resources to develop text choices that are malleable, wide-ranging, and representative of the populations being served.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Our analysis of Stotsky’s (2010a) survey research indicates it is time for an Independent, nationwide survey of teachers’ text choices. We hope such a survey will be complemented by collection and analysis of additional corroborating data. Such data sources may include interviews with teachers and school district or state curriculum coordinators who can provide explanations of how text-choice decisions are made, observations of teaching techniques used with chosen texts, and documents created by schools, districts, and states in the process of text choice.

In addition, researchers should delve more deeply into the oft-repeated claim that reading literary classics is a necessary part of preparation for success in college. Much of the argument for the literary canon is based on this assumption, one for which we find little support in the literature. If college reading requires certain types of skills, how might those skills be best supported in high schools?

With the growing level of cultural and linguistic diversity in our country, we question the impetus to narrow curricular choices. One way to address concerns about high drop-out rates and to create more seamless transition to college and the workplace is to focus on student engagement by providing a wide array of text choices and to arrange those texts so increasing complexity is allied with increasing potential for academic growth. We are also concerned that, with the move toward standardization, many teachers will feel bound to use canonical books that may not reflect their students’ needs. We believe the field should remain vigilant against policies that make text choices less inclusive for today’s students.
REFERENCES


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