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Critical Pedagogy

“All the kids we are most concerned about:”

Putting the At-Risk at Greater Risk by Teaching to the Common Core

BRIAN WHITE AND LINDSY MATTEONI

A Common Concern

In a presentation given before the New York State Department of Education, David Coleman (2011), perhaps the most visible and influential author of the Common Core State Standards (see, for example, White, 2015; Rabinowitz & Bancroft, 2014; Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm, 2014), indicates that the “crucial design principle” (p. 4) that informed the creation of the Standards was that they should prepare all students for the demands of college and career. According to Coleman, this principle is crucial because of what he calls a “terrifying truth” (p. 4): that so many high school graduates are in need of subsequent remediation in order to advance academically and to succeed in the work force. Coleman emphasizes the importance of closing this readiness gap, especially for “the kids we are most concerned about” (p. 4)—that is, he explains, for the students who, because of “systematic reasons” (p. 4), are trapped in scholastic and societal circumstances that hinder their preparation for academic and career success.

We share Coleman and his colleagues’ concern for students who are at-risk for various systematic reasons and we applaud the determination of the Common Core State Standards’ (CCSS) authors to see to it that all of our students, including the most vulnerable, “are getting the best possible education no matter where they live” (“CCSS Initiative Frequently Asked Questions,” 2010, p. 2). In addition, we hope that Grossman, Reyna & Shipton (2011) are correct when they argue that the Standards have “the potential to transform education in the United States by narrowing achievement gaps” (p.7). However, we also agree with Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm (2014) that, if the Standards are to “provide a real opportunity for progressive change in American education” (p. 2; see also pp.134, 183), we must focus not only on the

Standards themselves, but also on how teachers implement them on a day-to-day basis. In other words, we have to talk about pedagogy.

Clearly, the CCSS authors agree. Although they declare that “these standards establish what students need to learn but do not dictate how teachers should teach” (<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts/>), the authors have spent quite a bit of time promoting particular ways of teaching to the Standards and, consequently, denigrating other pedagogical approaches. Indeed, we would argue that the authors have certainly sought to influence, and perhaps even to dictate, how teachers should teach. For example, Coleman (2011) states that the purpose of his presentation before the New York Department of Education is to model his vision of “what instruction begins to look like with the core in mind” (p. 16) and to demonstrate what he believes “we must do” (p. 16) when teaching complex texts. Very unfortunately, as we (e.g., White, 2015) and many other teachers and scholars (e.g., Hodge & Banco, 2014; Rabinowitz & Bancroft, 2014; Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm, 2014; Stephens, 2016) have pointed out, many of the pedagogical strategies Coleman calls for have been discredited by careful research.

We find it even more unfortunate, then, that the authors of the CCSS have sought to expand their pedagogical influence by creating a nonprofit organization called Student Achievement Partners (<http://achievethecore.org/about-us>). Their website, which they have entitled *Achieve the Core*, provides access to “free, ready-to-use classroom resources designed to help educators understand and implement the Common Core” (<http://achievethecore.org/>). These resources include many sample lessons for frequently taught texts at every grade level; also included are detailed explanations

regarding what the CCSS authors believe to be both desirable and undesirable teaching strategies (e.g., how to introduce students to complex texts and how to craft discussion questions). As Stephens (2016) has pointed out, some highly influential organizations have promoted the use of these ready-to-use resources and pedagogical prescriptions, in spite of the fact that the pedagogical directives and sample lessons offered by the authors of the CCSS ignore the findings of decades' worth of reliable research on teaching and learning in general and in literary studies in particular.

In this paper, we will argue in particular that Coleman (2011) and his colleagues are insisting upon (if not dictating) particular approaches to the teaching of literature that are likely to be especially harmful to "all the kids we are most concerned about" (p. 4): the at-risk, those students who hail from historically oppressed racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We begin with a discussion of the nature of the much-discussed "achievement/opportunity gap"; then we explore the ways in which the CCSS authors' pedagogical prescriptions regarding text-complexity and text-dependency are likely to perpetuate and even widen the gaps in readiness and achievement the Standards were intended to bridge.

"Achievement Gaps," Text Complexity, and the At-Risk

Achievement vs. Opportunity

Achievement gaps may be defined as documented, educational performance disparities between student populations as measured by standardized tests. Some of those gaps between students of particular backgrounds tend to be both wide and persistent. For example, students who identify with historically oppressed populations are likely to score significantly lower on standardized tests of reading ability and other, similar academic achievement measures than students who identify with historically privileged populations (Braun, Wang, Jenkins & Weinbaum, 2006; "Do Race/Ethnicity," 2006; Maxwell, 2012; Xin, 2008).

Because so much research that uncovers and examines these disparities relies heavily on standardized test scores, it is important to understand that the format and content of standardized tests are biased in favor of test-takers habitually "exposed to a white, middle-class background" (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1992, p. 3). As Hanselman et al. (2014) have argued, these differences in standardized

test scores appear to be at least partly grounded in academic self-concept, stereotypes, standardized test biases, and a systemic lack of access to resources. Indeed, even beyond the genre and the substance of the exams themselves, the very structure and atmosphere of the standardized exam-taking experience has been proven to be inherently disadvantageous to African-American test-takers (see, for example, Petchauer, 2014) and to students from other, historically oppressed backgrounds, including children living in poverty (Chatterji, 2006; Leu, D.J., Forzani, E., Rhoads, C., Maykel, C., Kennedy, C., & Timbrell, N., 2014). Because of these racial, cultural, and socioeconomic influences, standardized examinations provide unreliable measures of at-risk students' knowledge and abilities; hence, they also provide unreliable indications of the nature and breadth of any academic gaps or disparities in achievement between populations. Thus, the so-called achievement gaps measured by standardized tests may be more appropriately referred to as opportunity gaps (<http://edglossary.org/opportunity-gap/>; Qaiglia, Fox & Corso, 2010).

The difference between gaps in *achievement* and gaps in *opportunity* is more than semantic. When Coleman and his colleagues speak of the achievement and readiness gaps between various populations, they are referring to patterned differences in standardized test scores without seeming to recognize the systematically differential opportunities that contribute so powerfully to those gaps. Thus, when they advocate the use of particular kinds of texts and teaching strategies in order to close the gaps, their goal is to raise students' standardized test scores, not to address the problem of inequitable opportunity. Such an approach is likely to perpetuate what all regard to be an undesirable cycle, as at-risk student populations consistently "underachieve" on the standardized tests that are supposed to register students' preparedness and determine their eligibility for advanced educational and career opportunities.

The cycle is especially likely to be perpetuated when teachers are encouraged—or, in some cases, required—to standardize their pedagogical approaches in a misguided attempt to achieve the CCSS. As Kliebard (1992) has argued, in the same way that hewing narrowly to industrial standards leads inevitably to standardized labor in the workplace, the drive to standardize educational outcomes leads inevitably to a push for standardized pedagogy in the classroom (see also White, 2011). In light of the fact that opportunity gaps

exist when children enter school and grow as students progress from kindergarten to twelfth grade, a one-size-fits-all approach to pedagogy is likely to maintain and exacerbate those gaps, especially for “all the kids we are most concerned about” (Coleman, 2011, p. 4). Unfortunately, the authors of the CCSS seem to be calling for the kind of pedagogical standardization that Kliebard (1992) warns of. As we shall demonstrate, many of their instructional recommendations are in direct opposition to English language arts teaching methods that have proven to help at-risk students make academic gains. We begin with their insistence that all students climb a “skewed staircase” (Coleman, 2011, p. 10) of increasingly complex texts, providing a “shared encounter of sufficiently difficult” (p. 14) material.

Determining Text Complexity and Sufficient Difficulty

The authors of the CCSS believe that classroom materials and teaching methods must facilitate student engagement with highly complex, grade-level texts for the vast majority of literacy instruction time (“CCSS in English Language Arts: Appendix A”). In defense of their call to increase reading passage difficulty in schools, Coleman and Pimentel (2012) state that instruction and reading materials have historically failed to prepare high school graduates for career and higher education literacy expectations. To remedy what the authors of the CCSS believe is a gap between the complexity of texts used in schools and the complexity of texts used in higher education and the workforce, they suggest using increasingly complex texts in K-12 classrooms. They also suggest that teachers, publishers, and curriculum developers use programs (such as ATOS, Degrees of Reading Power, and Flesch-Kincaid) to measure quantitative factors of text complexity, including word and sentence lengths, semantic and syntactic difficulty, and vocabulary (“Supplemental Information for Appendix A”).

Although we share the authors’ desire that all of our students learn to read increasingly complex texts, one problem with their recommendations regarding text-complexity measurements is that standardized measures of reading-passage difficulty are notoriously unreliable, in part because they do not take into account essential qualitative and individual reader factors. For example, as Biggers (2001) notes, many school districts and classroom teachers have come to rely on computerized programs like Accelerated Reader (which in

turn relies upon an automated version of Flesch-Kincaid) when trying to match the complexity of a particular text with an individual student’s reading ability. As Biggers (2001) points out, however, Accelerated Reader fails to take into account certain factors that reading researchers have identified as powerfully influential, including student motivation and interest; the kinds and amounts of direct instruction received; and the role of peer interaction and collaboration in helping individuals to extend their reading into what Vygotsky (1978) calls their zone of proximal development. Biggers (2001) concludes that programs like Accelerated Reader are especially harmful to at-risk students, perhaps especially in terms of their ongoing motivation as readers, because even a “low-ability student who is working very hard” (p. 73) cannot “achieve a point score equivalent to [that achieved by] his high-ability counterpart” (p. 73) who might not have to exert nearly as much effort.

We should note that, in their “Supplemental information for Appendix A,” the authors of the CCSS acknowledge that exclusively quantitative measures of text complexity are both limited and imperfect; therefore, they suggest that teachers apply additional, more qualitative measures based on their knowledge of each text’s structure and purpose on the one hand, and of each student’s needs and capacities on the other. Still, although the CCSS authors allow teachers to account for some qualitative measures and individual student abilities and characteristics when determining text complexity, the appropriate use of reader-task considerations is not described or, it seems to us, highly valued in CCSS documents. In fact, given our focus on at-risk students, we find the authors’ discussion of reader characteristics to be quite problematic, as when they argue that “harder texts may be appropriate for highly knowledgeable or skilled readers, who are often willing to put in the extra effort required to read harder texts that tell a story or contain complex information” (“Supplemental Information for Appendix A”). The implication that less-able readers are less able because of an unwillingness to “put in extra effort” is deeply troubling, in part because it blames the students for the shortcomings of those who decide what those students must read, why they must read it, how they must read it, and how they must demonstrate their understanding of and response to what they have read—as if the only gap we really need to attend to is what we might call an “effort gap.”

Perhaps a narrow focus on effort or willingness might make sense if all students came to us having had relatively

equal preparation and relatively equitable experiences in school and in society. However, research repeatedly highlights the patterned, systemic inequalities faced by many students, perhaps especially the at-risk, including inequalities that are not likely to be overcome by hard work alone. It simply isn't true that all students enter school with equal opportunities to succeed on standardized academic tasks and measures, or that they have equal opportunities to meet grade-level expectations so long as they work very hard ("Do Race/Ethnicity" 2006; Maxwell, 2012). The authors of the CCSS nevertheless claim that a systematic and standardized increase in text complexity will create equal opportunity for all students to meet the demands of post high school reading requirements (<http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/>). Such a claim ignores not only systemic inequities that affect wide swaths of the population, but also the profound effects of individual differences in reading experience, ability, interest, and response.

Consider, for instance, the widely acknowledged importance of giving students more choice and control, more decision-making power with regard to what they will read for school (see, for example, Kittle, 2013; Wilhelm, Smith, & Fransen, 2014). Consider also the ways in which at-risk students may excel in responding to literature when they have some choice in how to respond—that is, when they are allowed to demonstrate their literary understandings in ways that are not amenable to standardized testing (see, for example, Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995a; 1995b). As teachers we have seen what can happen when students who profess to hate reading fall in love with a "below-grade-level" book they have chosen, and how that book can lead to more (even to obsessive) reading. We have also seen the brilliance that emerges from many at-risk students when they are given the chance to respond to literature in non-standardized ways, such as drawing, singing, and acting (see, for example, Wilhelm, 2002). Such strategies, of course, resist what we see as the CCSS authors' insistence upon pedagogical sameness, but resistance is exactly what is called for when standardization perpetuates inequities.

Identifying CCSS Compliant, Complex Texts

Coleman & Pimentel (2012) emphasize the importance of a standardized, one-size-fits-all text complexity in a guide they produced for publishers and curriculum developers. According to this guide, all students, whatever their actual,

individual reading levels and capabilities, should spend the vast majority of their reading time engaging with texts that meet current grade-level complexity standards. We find this stricture particularly frustrating, both as teachers and as parents, for the following reasons. First, in order to comply with the CCSS authors' recommendations, teachers need an endless supply of reading materials that meet CCSS grade-level complexity standards. However, a reliable, text-complexity measure that accounts for qualitative factors, quantitative factors, and especially reader-task considerations does not exist, and the CCSS authors' descriptions of text complexity remain subjective, leaving teachers, publishers, and curriculum developers guessing whether the texts they choose meet the CCSS complexity requirements or not.

Second, as Hastings (2016) argues, the recommendation that all students, whatever their individual reading abilities, focus only on texts that have been approved for their grade level is likely to frustrate some, to bore others, and to perpetuate the inequities the CCSS authors are hoping to remedy. As parents, we have noted the frustrations of our own children when, for example, every trip to the school library is constrained by grade-level complexity measures, as when they are told, "You may choose any book from THIS section and from THIS section only—these are the books that have been approved for you"; or, "Sorry sweetie, but this book has a green dot and you're not supposed to be able to read the green ones yet—just wait 'til next year"; or "I know you love baseball, but that biography of Satchel Paige is for students a year younger than you are." Such strictures are far more likely to confuse and frustrate young readers (see, for example, Hastings, 2016) than they are to inspire a willingness to "put in the extra effort" required to read difficult material ("Supplemental Information for Appendix A").

Further Dismissal of Reader-Task Considerations

Not only do the authors of the CCSS encourage lock-step student engagement with uniformly complex texts as measured largely by machines, but they also discourage the use of text leveling. Leveling involves gauging individual students' reading levels and supplying texts that match or slightly exceed each individual's reading abilities (see, for example, Fisher & Frey, 2014; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Unlike measures of text complexity, which focus largely, if not exclusively, on the characteristics of the material to be read (e.g., sentence length, vocabulary, and so on), text leveling re-

quires a focus on both textual features and the characteristics of the individual reader (i.e., each student's reading ability, interests, funds of knowledge, and so on). Coleman (2011) argues against text leveling, claiming that students provided with leveled materials will never catch up to their peers who perform at and above grade-level:

I am saying in a clear voice, the core of instruction, core classroom time becomes the shared encounter of sufficiently difficult text. The proper role for leveled material can be an intensive support for students who then need additional support in addition to their confrontation of sufficiently complex work, but remember that time might also be used for them to have more time with that sufficiently complex work. (p. 13)

Instead of recommending the strategic use of less-complex materials in order to prepare students to encounter more complex material (see, for example, Crafton, 1982; Smith & Hillocks, 1988), Coleman (2011) argues that “the only thing we have seen that rapidly accelerates student performance towards reading more complex text is extensive practice repeatedly even with reading the same text” (p. 23). Unfortunately, Coleman's (2011) recommendation is in direct opposition to evidence that supports more generous use of leveled texts in classrooms (e.g., Brabham & Villaume, 2002), especially for less-able and at-risk students (Hastings, 2016). While the use of leveled texts can be beneficial to all students, research suggests that this particular instructional method is especially necessary for at-risk students.

Text Leveling in the Classroom

When leveled texts are used effectively, measurements of reading ability are repeated regularly, and teachers provide progressively more difficult texts as students' reading levels increase (Brabham & Villaume, 2002). Successful implementation of leveled texts relies heavily on Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development, which may be defined as the distance between an individual's current independent abilities and abilities that are attainable by that individual with the assistance of an instructor and/or knowledgeable peers (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). Ultimately, the goal of using leveled texts is to meet students at their current, independent reading abilities and provide scaffolding that allows them to enhance their reading fluency, comprehension, and response skills.

Although meeting students at their current abilities can facilitate student development of reading skills, Brabham & Villaume (2002) also caution against the pitfalls of implementing rigid text leveling strategies (strict adherence to measurement and advancement schedules) that ignore the needs of individuals and undermine instruction designed to help students develop their motivation and their skill as readers. Appropriate implementation of leveled texts requires teachers to account for various reader-task considerations and the fluctuating timeline of individual growth that are underrepresented in the CCSS authors' measures of text complexity. Appropriate use of text leveling requires teachers to recognize that text complexity is, first and foremost, a function of the experiences and needs of each student. We think that most educators would agree that a student's present academic ability rests in large measure upon that student's previously acquired background knowledge and skills. For example, multiplication is impossible for an individual who is only now learning to count; and that individual's inability to perform multiplication is not a reflection of his or her intelligence or potential for academic success. Rather, the individual's inability to perform multiplication reflects his or her background experience (or lack thereof) with numbers. Similarly, a high school student whose native dialect is not Standard English is likely to struggle if required to notice and describe Dickens's (2001) use of irony in *Hard Times*, and that struggle is no reliable indicator of lack of intelligence or reading ability. It becomes clear, then, that the authors of the Standards devalue what are arguably the most important factors of text complexity measures—reader-task considerations.

Whereas Coleman (2011) says that all students should spend the vast majority of their time engaging with texts that meet the CCSS grade-level complexity requirements, other professionals emphasize the benefits of using leveled texts by stating that students should rarely engage with materials that significantly exceed their current reading levels (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Hastings, 2016). Brabham and Villaume (2002) explain that “for effective reading instruction to occur, struggling readers must have opportunities to read comfortable texts rather than experience constant frustration with texts that are too difficult” (p. 438). While some educational professionals may argue that the use of leveled texts takes away from the educational opportunities of high achieving students by catering too much to underachieving students, text leveling can provide sufficiently challenging

texts that keep advanced students engaged in the learning process. Thus, text leveling can enhance the educational opportunities for all students engaging with literature.

Unfortunately, the CCSS authors' insistence that teachers almost exclusively use complex texts in the classroom dismisses the use of text leveling that could help to narrow the opportunity gap that continually confronts our at-risk students. As we shall now argue, however, once those uniformly complex texts have been chosen, opportunity gaps are likely to widen if teachers are forced to follow the pedagogical models presented by Coleman (2011) and his colleagues.

Pedagogical Strategies that Widen the Gaps

Repeated Reading

We share the CCSS authors' desire and determination that all of our students, including those we are most concerned about, should be able to engage in, understand, and respond to important, complex texts. We are therefore as concerned about the authors' instructional prescriptions as we are about their curricular resistance to text-leveling. For example, although Coleman (2011) mentions the importance of instructional scaffolding in order to help all students achieve grade-level proficiency in the reading of complex texts, he repeatedly emphasizes what for him is obviously a foundational instructional strategy: re-reading. Indeed, he claims that "the only thing we have seen that rapidly accelerates student performance towards reading more complex text is extensive practice repeatedly even with reading the same text" (p. 23). But is repeatedly reading a text that is beyond a student's present ability and experience really enough? Will repeated readings alone help students who struggle to identify a single, standardized theme to locate and explicate multiple themes? Will re-reading empower students who struggle to decipher archaic language in a complex short story to recognize, appreciate, and explain the author's use of ambiguity and irony? Well-prepared and highly-experienced readers may find re-reading an invaluable strategy for deepening engagement, comprehension, and appreciation, but at-risk students who are forced to read (and re-read) texts that are beyond their reach are likely to experience "constant frustration with texts that are too difficult" (Brabham & Villaume, 2002, p. 438). Thus, we worry that the CCSS authors' emphasis upon re-reading is likely to exacerbate opportunity gaps, as our more capable and more experienced readers continue to develop and to succeed, while our most vulnerable and least expe-

rienced readers are expected to try to pull themselves up to grade level by re-reading texts that have already proven to be beyond their present, individual capabilities and experiences.

Unprepared Plunging

Of course, as every teacher of literature knows, part of our job is to prepare our students to succeed as readers; thus, pre-reading preparation becomes especially important to our students' success when the text to be encountered is highly complex. However, both in their teaching demonstrations and in their sample lessons, the CCSS authors explicitly prohibit pre-reading preparation, arguing that students should simply "jump" (Coleman, 2011, p. 26) directly into complex texts and begin reading and re-reading. Similarly, in their lesson on Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," the authors insist that, instead of preparing students to encounter and navigate the complexities of the text, teachers should simply force all students to "plunge" (<http://achievethecore.org/page/35/the-gettysburg-address-by-abraham-lincoln>, pp. 3, 11) directly and immediately into it without any preparation whatsoever. Indeed, the instructional sequence for every middle- and high-school literature lesson on the website begins with students' silent, independent reading of the text. Interestingly, the CCSS authors conclude that a sudden, simultaneous plunge into a highly complex text "levels the playing field for all students" (see, for example, <http://achievethecore.org/page/35/the-gettysburg-address-by-abraham-lincoln>; <http://achievethecore.org/page/24/1984-by-george-orwell-with-mini-assessment>).

The assumption that no preparation ensures equal preparation becomes even more dangerous when we remember that the CCSS authors' solution to reading difficulties is not thoughtful, systematic preparation, but repeated reading. We can't imagine any other situation (in school, in athletics, in the workplace) in which this logic would hold. In calling for repeated reading of complex text without preparation, Coleman (2011) proposes exactly that, saying, "one of the greatest threats to a wide range of students being able to read sufficiently complex text with confidence is we keep them out of the game" (p. 13). Like Coleman, we want and intend all of our students to play; it is both our job and our desire to see to it that all of our students become able and avid readers of complex texts of all kinds. But we would argue that the greatest threat to the confidence of the widest range of young

readers is to force them into repeated readings of increasingly complex material without preparing them in any way. Readers, like athletes, may improve by facing increasingly difficult competition and challenges, but good coaches and good teachers know that if they don't prepare their kids for the difficult tasks ahead, then facing a series of increasingly powerful champions will bring only defeat and discouragement.

The Importance of Preparation

Although the CCSS document itself indicates that the authors have no desire to direct or constrain pedagogy, both in their public addresses (e.g., Coleman, 2011) and in their sample lessons (e.g. <http://achievethecore.org/page/35/the-gettysburg-address-by-abraham-lincoln>), the authors specifically prohibit pre-reading or frontloading preparation of any kind. As Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm (2014) point out, however, the CCSS authors have misunderstood and mischaracterized the nature, focus, and purpose of what literacy scholars mean when they speak of *frontloading*. Instead of referring to the sorts of prereading preparation advocated by literacy researchers such as Smagorinsky (2008), Smith (1993), and others (e.g., White, 1995, 2004; Kahn, Walter & Johannessen, 2009), Coleman (2011) suggests that frontloading means providing students with ready-made background knowledge, summarizing the text for students, and asking students to make predictions—in short, a caricature of the kinds of pre-reading activities that have proven to help students read with greater understanding, engagement, and enjoyment.

One reason why pre-reading activities are so important and effective is that they help students to build, retrieve, and activate relevant background knowledge. However, as the Achieve the Core website makes plain (see, for example, <http://achievethecore.org/page/24/1984-by-george-orwell-with-mini-assessment>), the authors of the CCSS deplore the building or application of background knowledge, especially at the pre-reading stage. The authors' antipathy toward background knowledge is especially unfortunate in light of their insistence on plunging students into complex texts, for as Smith (1991) points out, much research on reading and literacy has demonstrated that the availability and application of previously acquired background knowledge and experience

“is essential to constructing meaning” (Smith, 1991, p. 270) from complex literary texts (see also Crafton, 1982; Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm, 2014; White, 1995). Researchers and teachers have also demonstrated that carefully designed frontloading activities help students to retrieve and apply relevant background knowledge to difficult texts (see, for example, Smith, 1993; Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm, 2014; White, 1995). Perhaps most crucial for our purposes is the notion that, although our most at-risk students stand to gain the most from carefully designed pre-reading activities (Hamann, Schultz, Smith & White, 1991), they may also be “reluctant to apply what they know of the world to their reading of literature or may not know how to apply it” (Smith, 1991, p. 270).

Unless our goal is to increase such students' reluctance, it makes no sense to require them to jump (or to push them) into the depths of a complex text without preparation or instruction, without encouraging them to forge and allowing them to draw on the kinds of personal connections that keep our most able and experienced readers afloat. Although the CCSS were, ostensibly, created to narrow some of the most troubling achievement gaps in our society, teachers who choose or are required to follow the pedagogical advice of the CCSS authors with regard to an exclusive focus on complex texts and a prohibition of careful pre-reading preparation are actually far more likely to deepen, widen, and perpetuate the opportunity gaps in the literacy classroom. Let's help all of our students, especially the kids all of us are most concerned about, not only to survive, but also to thrive, even in the deep end. This will mean, in part, paying close attention to the needs and capabilities of our individual students instead of assuming a uniform, shared, grade-level capacity. It will also mean making liberal and strategic use of leveled texts to help all of our students, especially the at-risk, develop the background knowledge and reading skills they will need when confronted by more complex texts. Finally, it will require the use of pre-reading activities that will prepare all of our students to apply the wealth of their previously acquired experiences and understandings as they confront increasingly complex texts. By thus addressing the opportunity gap, we believe that we will be giving all the students we are most concerned about their best chance to achieve.

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