

The Achievement Ideology of *Reading Wonders*: A Critical Content Analysis of Success
and Failure in a Core Reading Program

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Abstract

In the early 1960's, researchers began to conduct content analyses of core reading programs/basal readers. Although these researchers often adopted a critical perspective, and examined the ideological underpinnings of the texts, they failed to make an explicit connection between ideologies and reader access to the text. The study described here is a critical content analysis of texts contained within the core reading program *Reading Wonders*. It addresses these research questions: What vision of success and failure is exemplified by selections in the fourth-grade *Reading Wonders* textbook? -and- To what extent are selections in this program accessible to readers? Mobilizing MacLeod's notion of *achievement ideology*, the study explores the contrast between the program's emphasis on individual success and the inaccessibility of the selections included in it. The analysis demonstrates that the achievement ideology is the foundation for most of the selections. It also shows that the complexity and unengaging quality of the basal reader interferes with the reader's ability to access the included texts. I argue the *Reading Wonders* textbook serves to convince readers that personal and professional success is the norm in contemporary society, while failing to allow them to construct more than a surface-level meaning of the included selections.

Key words: critical content analysis, critical literacy, curriculum research, reading engagement, reading programs

Core reading programs (otherwise termed reading textbooks or basal readers¹) play a prominent role in reading instruction in the United States and, as such, influence the reading experiences of the majority of students. As of 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, 73.3% of elementary teachers used a core reading program as the foundation for their teaching and more than a quarter of teachers rarely strayed from the instructions provided in the teacher's manual (Resnick, 2014). Reflective of this trend, Brenner and Hiebert (2010) quote the state of Maryland's guidelines for adoption of basal readers: 'Core reading programs are to be implemented with fidelity to directions and guidelines specified in the teachers' editions . . . (This) does not permit layering, i.e., substituting instructional elements or materials that are not part of the program' (p. 351).

The influence of these textbooks is not limited to the U.S. Historically, reading instruction in other countries such as Canada (Murphy, 1991; Norris, et al., 2008), Australia (Center, Freeman, & Robertson, 2001), Iran (Shorish, 1988), Germany (Neumann, 1989), India (Kumar, 1989), Mexico (Neumann & Cunningham, 1982), Finland (Hyona, et al., 1995), and China (Liu, 2010) has also been dominated by basals. Many of these countries have relied on textbooks published in the United States and Europe (Altbach & Kelly, 1988; Luke, 1991) or by multinational corporations (Lorimer & Keeney, 1989).²

Although sales of core programs in the U.S. have increased ('State of the K12 Market,' 2015), the number of major publishers—all of them now subsidiaries of multinational corporations—has decreased. By 2016, only two of these publishers remained: Pearson and McGraw-Hill (Dubay, 2016; 'Global Publishing Leaders,' 2016a, 2016b). McGraw-Hill publishes *Reading Wonders*, the basal reader that is the subject of

this paper. Having conducted a previous study of its predecessor series, *Open Court* (Author, 2012), I was familiar with the structure and content of products produced by this company and was interested in the most recent edition. Furthermore, *Reading Wonders* is the first major textbook specifically designed to address the U.S. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010), which have been adopted by 43 states and the District of Columbia; as a result, school districts across the United States are likely to purchase and implement this series.

The purpose of this paper is (a) to describe the vision of success and failure promoted by the *Reading Wonders* core reading program and (b) to evaluate the extent to which the selections in the program are accessible to readers. I argue here that this basal reader promotes a view of the world that aligns with the experience of dominant groups.³ In addition, because the textbook is relatively inaccessible—both complex and unengaging—it undermines middle-grade students' critical capacities. These characteristics limit the degree to which students understand and, thus, are inclined to challenge, this world view.

The literature review that follows addresses text ideologies and text accessibility. Then, I define *achievement ideology* (MacLeod, 2009), the theory used to frame my analysis; explain the design of this study; and present findings and implications.

Literature review

Included in the section on the ideologies of textbook production are the stances present in the texts, the potential influence of those stances, and the role of textbook publishers. The text accessibility section describes research about text complexity and reader engagement.

Ideology of textbook production

Text stances

Previous research demonstrates that children's literature in general (Forest, Garrison, & Kimmel, 2015; Taxel, 1981) and, specifically, textbooks used worldwide (Altbach & Kelly, 1988; Biraimah, 1988; Croghan & Croghan, 1980; Mehlinger, 1988; Neumann & Cunningham, 1982; Shorish, 1988) promote particular worldviews. Like basal readers from as far back as the nineteenth century (Billman, 1977; Bohning, 1986; deCharms & Moeller, 1962), current programs carry with them assumptions about epistemology, pedagogy, and the role of education in a capitalist society (Dutro, 2010; Imada, 2012). *Reading Wonders*, for example, is the product of a multinational corporation and, as noted by Lorimer and Keeney (1989), '(T)he multinational text, either explicitly or implicitly, imparts a certain ideology which reinforces the dominant spirit of the multinational business' (p. 171).

Despite evidence that texts promote specific ideologies, questions remain about the effect of these texts on the children who read them. First, I consider to what degree textbook ideologies can be said to influence student readers. Second, I delineate ways of determining whether readers are able to access the text selections in ways that allow them to both understand and challenge these potential influences.

Text influence

For at least half a century, theorists and practitioners have questioned the extent to which readers are influenced by the ideological content of texts. Some advocated for a reader response view in which the role of the individual reader is primary (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Rosenblatt, 1978). Others suggested that teachers play a major role in mediating

text content (Sipe, 1999; Spiegel, 1998). But as Shkedi (2009) noted, few teachers perceive bias or an overarching capitalist meta-narrative in textbooks. Still others argued that texts, in and of themselves, deeply affect student readers, either by reinforcing what they have known and experienced, or by instilling a view of the world that may be new to the reader (Hollindale, 1988; Taxel, 1981). These texts do so by cultivating beliefs, attitudes, and actions within the reader that last far after a book is returned to the shelf (Anyon, 1979; Taxel, 1981).

In a study like this one that focuses on text analysis, the perspective that texts themselves influence reader experience is more relevant than are reader/text or teacher/reader/text interactions. As such, the text-as-influence perspective serves as the foundation for this paper. The question remains, what does the process of a text's influence on its reader look like? Hollindale (1988) asserted that there exist three levels of ideological work occurring in textbook production and, therefore, text reading. The first, and most easily detected, are the explicit beliefs of a given author and how they are conveyed and recommended to the student reader. This work often occurs as the result of clearly didactic themes and morals.

The second level involves authors' unexamined assumptions, implicitly conveyed through the writing (Deng, 2011). Ideology may be expressed via the selection of heroes and villains, the ways in which conflict between them is portrayed, and how the author chooses to evoke the reader's emotional reactions to the text (Boutte, 2002). In addition, school texts assume greater authority than other texts and are typically *closed* rather than *open* (Kalmus, 2004). In other words, unlike open texts that invite the reader to actively participate in the construction of meaning, closed texts are designed to lead the reader to

an expected conclusion and, in doing so, positions these conclusions as objective and neutral (Wexler, 1982). As Bonilla-Silva (2015) noted, ‘when we tell stories, we tell them as if there were *only one way* of telling them, as the “of course” way of understanding what is happening in the world . . . (These stories) reinforce the status quo, serving particular interests without appearing to do so’ (p. 103).

Hollindale’s (1988) third level of ideological work emerges from his belief that ‘a large part of any book is written not by its author, but by the world its author lives in’ (p. 15). Whereas texts from other countries and cultures support more varied social worlds (e.g., Imada, 2012; Lu, 2014), texts from the U.S. and from multinational corporations typically feature a world characterized by individualism, by relations that are predominantly economic in nature, and by unflattering portraits of working class and poor citizens (Altbach & Kelly, 1988; Forest, et al., 2015; Imada, 2012). These texts solicit the support of readers from non-dominant groups by emphasizing the world that *is* rather than the one that *might be*. As a result, the student reader’s capacity for imagination, questioning, and critique is undermined (Luke, et al., 1989).

Textbook publishers

A subset of this ideological world is the multinational textbook publishing industry, including the McGraw-Hill Companies (now S & P Global) with business subsidiaries that extend throughout capitalist economies. At the time of *Reading Wonders*’ initial publication, this corporation was also the parent company of J.D. Power and Associates, a global marketing information services firm; CTB/McGraw-Hill, developer of the Terra Nova test and state summative assessments; and Standard and

Poor's, an intelligence gathering and credit rating company that also conducts school evaluations (Edelsky & Bomer, 2005).⁴

The chairman, president, and CEO of McGraw-Hill at the time, Harold McGraw III, was a member of the executive committee of the Business Round Table (BRT)—an organization comprised of CEOs of the most influential U.S. companies. Beginning in 1989, the group promoted an initiative designed to revolutionize public education: to remake it in the image of corporate America by emphasizing standards, performance accountability, and incentives (Augustine, 1997). This effort has continued to the present time in an effort to link business principles prioritizing individualism and economic relations with public education (Business Roundtable: Education and Workforce, 2017).⁵

Text accessibility

Given evidence for the claim that texts may influence the way readers think about and interact in the world, what factors support or inhibit their ability to effectively access the text and, therefore, to both understand and confront the ideologies presented there? For purposes of this paper, I define *accessibility* to include both text complexity and level of reader engagement. Texts with more complex language structures and higher vocabulary load may stymie the reader's efforts to grasp the content discussed. Unengaging texts—that is, those less relevant to the reader's interests and emotional connections, and less open to interpretation—fail to motivate readers to “keep at it” and, ultimately, to challenge ideological assumptions. I briefly review here these dual aspects of accessibility.

Measures of text complexity

The traditional way to assess text complexity is by using a readability formula. Most of these formulas measure, in one of several similar ways, a combination of sentence length and vocabulary difficulty. For example, in the Fry Readability Index (Fry, 2002), one counts the number of sentences and the number of syllables (proxy for hard words) in a 100-word segment of text and uses a graph to find the point at which the two axes intersect. That point is within an area of the graph assigned to a grade level. More recent quantitative formulas such as Coh-Metrix (Graesser, McNamara, & Kulakowich, 2011) are based on the work of Kintsch (1998). These formulas incorporate additional factors such as syntax, text cohesion, genre, and rhetorical structure.

In their seminal report, ‘Becoming a Nation of Readers,’ Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) described the limitations of quantitative readability formulas and recommended that they be supplemented with qualitative indicators. Researchers experimented with a variety of factors and, in 2013, authors associated with Text-Project, Inc. released a report dedicated to the topic (Pearson & Hiebert, 2013). Recommended qualitative indicators included levels of meaning (explicit versus implicit), as well as language conventionality and clarity.

Engagement with text

Reader engagement also plays an important role in text accessibility. One aspect of engagement is linked to text complexity/difficulty; there is evidence that readers who find success reading a given text are more willing to engage and stick with the texts they read (Treptoe, Burns, & McComas, 2007). On the other hand, some children fully engage with texts that, by any ‘objective’ measure, are too difficult for them and, on the other hand, some shun texts that seem well within their capabilities. These readers demonstrate

an affective connection—or lack of same— with these texts (Graesser & D’Mello, 2012). Authors of the CCSS (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010) downplayed the role of reader affect, insisting it undermines, rather than facilitates, understanding of text meaning (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012), but a reader’s personal interest in the content of the text has been shown to moderate text complexity (Fulmer, D’Mello, Strain, & Graesser, 2015). And, although most work in this area has focused on the distinct interests of individual readers, it appears that texts dealing with pertinent life issues (Pennell, 2014) and that are open to interpretation (Wexler, 1982) are engaging for most students.

This review has established the historical and contemporary basal reader context, demonstrating that (a) textbooks have, historically, demonstrated ideological perspectives that have the potential to influence readers, and (b) measures of text complexity and of the likelihood of reader engagement influence the accessibility of texts. Nevertheless, absent from included studies are detailed analyses of the ways in which a textbook’s ideological worldview and its limited accessibility conjoin to undermine readers’ understanding and their capacity for critique. When operating from a critical paradigm and when framed by MacLeod’s (2009) construct of *achievement ideology*, the analysis of *Reading Wonders* that follows fills this gap.

Theoretical framework

In the early 1980s, Macleod (2009) conducted a study of two groups of urban, working class adolescents and their ideas about school, work, and friendship. Employing Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), MacLeod argued that the odds of academic and economic success are weighted heavily in favor of those whose families have more academic and cultural capital.

Achievement ideology

MacLeod described a contrasting view which he termed the *achievement ideology*—that is, the ‘social perspective that sees American society as open and fair and full of opportunity’ (p. 3). He asserted that, within this ideology, ‘success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability’ (p. 3). In this view, biological and sociocultural factors such as class, race, gender, age, (dis)ability status, sexual orientation are irrelevant when answering the question of who succeeds and who does not, who is upwardly mobile and who remains behind. In fact, focusing on these factors may undermine an individual’s efforts to do well by offering an ‘excuse’ for failure. Success is, instead, attributable to particular work-related and personal traits and experiences; those who succeed are, for example, industrious, innovative, and skilled, as well as independent, confident, and responsible. Macleod suggested that school personnel tend to promote the achievement ideology because they believe it will motivate students to stay in school and succeed there.

When MacLeod returned to the area eight and then fifteen years later, he discovered that neither the Brothers, who accepted the achievement ideology, nor the Hallway Hangers who had rejected it, had managed to overcome the personal and economic challenges of their youth. It might be assumed that the United States is a more upwardly mobile society now than it was at that time. Carr and Wiemers (2016) demonstrated, however, that from 1981 to 2008, upward mobility declined for both genders and across all educational levels; Ferreira (2013) linked this stagnation to increases in economic inequality within the United States. Nearly 50% of U.S. young adults’ income can be predicted by their parents’ wealth and, while this rate is far lower

in more equitable European countries such as Denmark (15%), the United Kingdom, China, and particularly Peru (66%) have even lower rates of upward mobility than the U.S.

Achievement ideology and textbooks

With reference to textbooks, deCharms and Moeller (1962) noted that an emphasis on what they referred to as *achievement imagery*—that is, references in a text to McClelland’s (1955) concept of achievement motivation defined as an effort to achieve “success in competition with a standard of excellence” (p. 43)—rose between 1800 and 1900 and then declined between 1900 and 1950. This decline culminated in the first investigation of character portrayal in children’s books conducted by Larrick (1965). And yet, by the late 1970s, it was clear that an emphasis on individual success obtained as a result of intelligence, hard work, and conservative moral values drove textbook development (Anyon, 1979). This emphasis continues into the 21st century (Dutro, 2012; Imada, 2012).

To support and expand upon this earlier research, the purpose of the current study was to explore the ideology perpetuated by *Reading Wonders* and the extent to which the selections are accessible to readers. The research questions that drove the study were:

- What vision of success and failure is exemplified by selections in the fourth-grade *Reading Wonders* textbook?
- To what extent are selections in this program accessible to readers?

Method

McGraw-Hill produces *Reading Wonders* products for grades kindergarten through six (approximate ages five through twelve). Each level of the series consists of:

- A six-volume Teacher's Guide, one volume for each unit
- Two student readers—the *Literature Anthology* and the *Reading/Writing Workshop* text
- A range of supplementary materials, including workbooks, audio-tapes of text selections, and worksheets designed to meet a range of student needs

The fourth-grade level units are titled *Think It Through*; *Amazing Animals*; *That's the Spirit!*; *Fact or Fiction?*; *Figure It Out*; and *Past, Present, and Future*. Selections cover a variety of genres and range in length from two to twenty pages. Details for an exemplar unit are presented in Appendix A.

The general method employed for this study was content analysis, a research approach in which theory-based codes are used to analyze text content (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2016). Krippendorff (2004) noted that content analysis is typically motivated by either interesting/provocative texts or pre-designated research questions. My research was driven by a combination of these two factors; having studied *Open Court*, the previous edition of McGraw-Hill's basal reader (Author, 2012), I was interested in this new iteration, and also wanted to employ as codes the theoretical constructs relating to ideology and accessibility applied in the earlier study.

More specifically, this research is considered a critical content analysis. As Johnson, et al. (2016) note, 'Adding the word "critical" in front of content analysis signals a political stance by the researcher' (p. 15). The researcher enters the text analysis process with a perspective and applies that perspective to features *within* the text and writing styles and structures running *through* the text; in addition, s/he notes connections to the world *beyond* the text. The political stance I brought to the analysis

was one of questioning the ideology promoted by the text, as well as the accessibility of the selections included in it.

Instrument development, data collection, and analysis

I developed and employed a rating system designed to describe the ideologies present in the fourth-grade *Reading Wonders* text. In addition, I used several measures of text complexity and engagement to assess the accessibility of these selections.

Text ideologies

Having adopted MacLeod's (2009) achievement ideology as my theoretical frame, I began by listing variables related to this frame:

- Text and author (e.g., genre, race of author)
- Characters
 - Biological/sociocultural traits (e.g., age, social status)
 - Work-related traits (e.g., compliant vs, resistant, successful vs. unsuccessful)
 - Personal traits (e.g., active vs. passive, honest vs. deceitful)
 - Experiences (e.g., life obstacles)

In expanding this initial list, I drew heavily from several content analyses for a general overview of values analysis (Croghan & Croghan, 1980; Hyona, et al., 1995; McClelland, 1961) and adopted some value factors from a number of others (Beck, 1984; Bertram, 1984; Billman, 1977; Bohning, 1986; Busch, 1972; Jordan, 2005; Liu, 2010; May, Lantz, & Rohr, 1990; & Tyson-Bernstein, 1988). I focused here on what Taylor (2003) terms 'manifest content' (p. 303)—aspects of content that can be counted accurately, such as the number of female and male characters.

At this point, I assessed validity by carefully examining these items in response to the following questions (Colton & Covert, 2007): (a) face validity: Do the items listed ‘look like’ they reflect the constructs to be studied? and (b) content validity: Do the items cover the range of constructs necessary to provide comprehensive results? After this process, I developed a data collection instrument with the selected factors on one axis and ratings on the other. Some ratings were nominal (e.g., for genre, the choices were *fictional narrative*, *narrative non-fiction*, and *expository text*) and others ordinal (e.g., for supportive visuals, the choices were *mostly*, *some*, and *no*).

To collect data, I followed Huckin’s (1997) recommendation to first read uncritically, jotting down overall impressions. During and after the second reading of the student text, I recorded tally marks on the coding sheet. This work was done by hand rather than employing computer assistance because I agree with Braker-Walters (2014) that the hand-coding process encourages a critical read allowing for the connecting of apparently unrelated codes. After collecting data from several selections, I adjusted the instrument to reflect newly-evident elements, such as whether the character asked for or accepted help. Once the codes were solidified, I drafted a codebook with definitions and examples to avoid coding drift, revised the data collection instrument, and completed coding for all 80 selections included in the textbook (White & Marsh, 2006).⁶

I provide here two examples of the coding process, one for narrative and one for information text. “Tomas and his Sons” is a fable in which a father convinces his children to help him in the family’s vineyard by telling them that treasure is buried there. Coded character traits for the father included industrious, self-controlled, and innovative. The selection embraced the achievement ideology, as an ethic of hard work resulting in

success permeated the story. “Starting a Successful Business” provides information for children wanting to undertake this task. The article also promotes the achievement ideology in its efforts to convince children that starting a business at such a young age is a worthy use of their time.

I tested the reliability of the coding (Krippendorff, 2004) by recoding fifteen, randomly-selected selections (19%). The test-retest correlation was .86 which is generally considered to be within the acceptable range. Then I again revised the codebook to provide more specificity to the definitions and examples, hoping to further stabilize the coding.

Because some of the coded elements resembled ‘latent content’ (Taylor, 2003, p. 303)—that is, content for which interpretation is required—a second coder participated. This former graduate student coded an additional four selections (5%) to test the reproducibility of the coding (Krippendorff, 2004). The test-test correlation was .80. Based on some areas of disagreement, the code book (see Appendix B for final form) was again revised, and all selections in the student textbook (80 in number) were recoded to reflect this adjustment.

Text accessibility

For the purposes of this study, text accessibility has a dual definition. The first aspect is level of complexity. If a text is so difficult that a child cannot grasp basic information or follow the plot line, much less evaluate claims or character decisions, the text remains inaccessible. The second aspect is reader engagement. At times, readers are so committed to reading attractive texts that they succeed by sheer force of will (Fulmer, et al., 2015). Although engagement is largely dependent on personal interests and

preferences, some text characteristics tend to be more engaging to children than others (Hidi, 2001).

Text complexity. I employed the Fry readability formula to assess the texts. I selected this formula because (a) formulas such as the Fry that include sentence length and challenging words as factors have been shown to have respectably high correlations with first through fifth grade texts (Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, & Liben, 2011), (b) the Fry demonstrates predictive validity when compared with multiple choice tests, cloze measures, and oral reading accuracy (Fry, 1989), (c) it provides a grade-level score, and (d) it is easy to calculate by hand; this is crucial when dealing with many hard-copy texts because uploading those texts to conduct computer-based calculations would require considerable time, effort, and, in the case of some measures (e.g., Coh-Metrix), cost.⁷

Like other two-factor readability formulas, the Fry exhibits constraints as well as affordances (Pearson & Hiebert, 2013). The formula limits the measure of text complexity to sentence length and vocabulary load without considering other quantitative aspects (e.g., text coherence) and qualitative features (e.g., levels of meaning). As such, it provides a “ballpark” figure only. Because scores on five readability formulas varied, on average, over 1.5 years, even when outlying scores were removed (Larrick, 1954), I suggest that a text should not be assumed to be “too hard” unless it is at least two levels above a reader’s achievement level or unless it exhibits other complexity factors described below.

For this study, depending on the length of the selection, I evaluated two or three randomly-selected 100-word excerpts and took the average readability level of those excerpts. As an additional check, I tested a fourth excerpt from the longest selections; if,

when factored in to the average, the readability changed, I continued testing more excerpts until the readability figure stabilized. I also assessed two other factors which support or reduce the chance that fourth-graders could understand these texts at a deep level, thereby allowing them to critique the texts: supportive visuals and information density.

The extent to which visuals were supportive was measured by comparing the words and the pictures, graphs, etc. on each page; if the visual elaborated on the written text rather than conflicting with it or presenting new information, it was considered supportive (Unsworth & Chan, 2009). Information density was measured for information texts by counting the number of independent facts in a selection and dividing this figure by the number of sentences. I considered employing T-units (Hunt, 1965) to perform this analysis. The T-unit is, however, a measure of *grammatical* length and complexity rather than density of content. As a comparison, the sentence “But he knew his words were lost on the boys,” from the *Reading Wonders* story “Tomas and his Sons” referenced earlier, was assessed as containing one fact, but it has two T-units (the word *But* and the remainder of the sentence). The test-retest scores for this measure were above the 80% criterion.

Text engagement. Text accessibility is not, however, limited to text complexity. It also includes level of reader engagement. Although engagement may be primarily a matter of individual readers and their personal interests, I employed several measures to assess the degree to which *Reading Wonders* selections were likely to engage a range of children. The first is relevance to the daily lives of readers (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010; Pennell, 2014). To address this aspect, I assessed the degree to which narratives and

informational texts appeared age-appropriate—that is, on topics or about situations with which children of this age are likely to be familiar—and whether they included characters and experiences representative of the diversity of people in the community in which they live.⁸ The second is the extent to which characters are well-developed. The reader is more likely to engage with characters who think and behave like flesh-and-bone human beings rather than stock figures (Chadwick, 2012; Parsons, 2013). Texts of substantive length with characters who exhibited a range of character traits scored well on this measure; variety was measured by the percentage of the 30 traits included in the selection. The third is the presence or absence of developmental concerns of importance to this age group (Pennell, 2014). Researchers have suggested four major developmental concerns for these children: peer friendships; growing independence from family; fairness and honesty; and desire for competence⁹ (Berger, 2003; Lee, 2018; Wilson, 2006; Wood, 2007). The final factor is the sense of text ‘openness’ (Kalmus, 2004; Wexler, 1982)—that is, the extent to which readers are encouraged to question and challenge what they read. This construct was measured by the availability of multiple interpretations, whether the narrator assumes a critical view of events, and whether there exists any sense of controversy within narratives or presentation of information. I coded for each of these elements.

To return to the text exemplars coded earlier, the readability level of “Tomas and his Sons” was fourth grade. Visuals are supportive, including pictures of parents carrying grapes and their children relaxing, both plot-related. As is often true for narrative texts, the information density for this story is relatively low (1.08). Stories like this about family interactions seem to be appropriate for middle grade children. Although the story

includes characters of color, the length of the text precludes careful character development; in addition, while the plot alludes to a developmental concern for this age group—honesty—the parents benefit from shading the truth (Berger, 2003; Lee, 2018). Presentation of the theme—the value of hard work—is heavy-handed rather than open, with terms related to labor (e.g., hard-working, motivation, laziest) appearing in 36% of the sentences. “Starting a Successful Business” has a readability level of seventh grade. Although visuals—including pictures of each step in the business-building process—facilitate understanding, information density is high (1.57). It seems unlikely that many children of this age would consider developing a business plan, the text fails to deal with any of the pressing developmental concerns described by Berger (2003) and others, and does not appear open to multiple interpretations.

Findings

Major findings from this study demonstrate that most selections in the *Reading Wonders* basal reader support dominant beliefs about success and that, when applicable, most reflect the achievement ideology. In addition, these selections are, by and large, inaccessible to students—both in terms of level of complexity and in likelihood of reader engagement—and, as such, students may fail to grasp the ideology of these selections to the extent necessary to critique them.

The culture of success

When only surface-level features are considered, the *Reading Wonders* fourth-grade textbook exhibits considerable diversity. For example, as assessed by visuals present, 49% of main characters are people of color, whereas only 34% are White.¹⁰ Character gender is almost equally split, 20 males to 26 females. But when one looks more deeply,

the basal reader champions a coherent ideology. I will review these characteristics and then examine one selection in depth.

Character traits

In selections—both narrative texts and information texts that include characters—the textbook presents a clear portrait of the ideal character who conforms to a model perpetuated by dominant groups. Within selections in which the following traits (or their opposites) are evident, over 90% of characters defer gratification¹¹ and are industrious, independent, active, self-controlled, intelligent, innovative, responsible, and skilled.¹² At least 80% of characters are other-oriented and confident, accept moderate-to-high levels of risk, and gain status via achievement rather than ascription; relationships are contractual rather than affiliation-based: in other words, characters are connected with each other in an objective-oriented, rather than friendship-oriented manner. In contrast, some traits/values are strikingly absent. Issues of honesty and deceit are raised in only a third of selections (characters in these selections are split evenly between the two poles) and resistance to authority is witnessed in only two selections (5%).

The achievement ideology

The achievement ideology promotes the belief that hard work overcomes barriers to success (MacLeod, 2009). In the 40% of selections in which this ideology is applicable, 87% of the texts embrace it. *Reading Wonders* takes the achievement ideology one step further, however. In nearly 85% of the selections the main character actively seeks a conventional version of success—largely, access to money, recognition, and power—and s/he achieves success 96% of the time. Yet, the road to success is unclear and, therefore, the attainment of goals appears magical rather than planned and rational. For example,

adult readers would understand that 81% of main characters face serious obstacles, yet in only 19% of cases are these obstacles made evident to children (see example from Ben Franklin biography to follow). Similarly, although authors make some effort to note means-to-ends links, in only 12% of cases are these causal links presented in any detail. It is not my intent to argue that stories of success are, somehow, inappropriate for children, but these stories need to paint a varied, nuanced, and realistic picture of what success looks like.

The look of failure

In the two instances in which main characters fail, they differ markedly from those who succeed. In both instances, they ask for help from others and are self-indulgent; they are the only characters in the textbook as a whole who exhibit these traits. They are also self-absorbed and irresponsible. Main characters in both stories are presented as being from non-mainstream cultures: Anansi the Spider from Africa and a fisherman from Iran.

Anansi demands immediate gratification and is resistant to authority. The fisherman's low status is ascribed rather than achieved and he is presented as dependent, passive, and unskilled. Both stories "other" characters from non-Western cultures and both are cautionary tales; they implicitly support the achievement ideology by demonstrating that *lack* of success is related to a failure to exhibit traits associated with the dominant group.

"How Ben Franklin Stole Lightning" as an achievement ideology exemplar

A biography from *Reading Wonders*—"How Ben Franklin Stole Lightning"—exemplifies the achievement ideology. The story tells us that Ben was active, intelligent, innovative, skilled, and industrious. He was involved in a broad range of projects from cartooning to swimming. He helped write the Declaration of Independence, originated

home mail delivery, and managed a printing business. Ben is also portrayed as self-assured, independent, and responsible. He confidently flew a kite with a key attached to attract lightning, despite the danger this action entailed. He came up with most of his ideas on his own and enacted those ideas for the benefit of others. Some of Ben's inventions failed, but most proved successful, and he was honored by France for his work. Throughout his life, Ben faced many obstacles, foremost among these the time required to research and test all his areas of interest. The text, however, conveys the message that everything came easily to him by failing to portray the hard work required to be successful. It also overemphasizes his individual efforts and fails to acknowledge those who supported him. Like a host of other characters in this basal reader, Ben served as a perfect exemplar of the achievement ideology, proving that, given ability and ambition, he could do anything. The key message promoted by the text, however, is that Ben was not unique. Rather, anyone who exhibits similar traits and applies them rigorously in daily life can succeed. Poverty, class/race/ gender discrimination, and other mitigating factors are simply excuses for an unwillingness to embrace the effort required. And talk of such factors serves only to undermine an individual's chance for success by distracting that individual from the tenacity required to take the necessary steps along the path.

Text accessibility

Two related factors play a role in the concept of text accessibility as employed in this paper. The first is the level of complexity: features enhancing or undermining the reader's ability to construct meaning from text. If readers are unable to understand what they read, they will typically fail to recognize, much less challenge, the ideology

promoted by that text. The second is the level of engagement—how likely it is that the reader will feel connected to the text and, therefore, ready and willing to put in the effort required to overcome any text complexity challenges. I argue that *Reading Wonders* falls short on both counts. After each section, I analyze a text exemplar in detail.

Text complexity

To reiterate, I acknowledge legitimate concerns about readability formulas (Fry, 2002). Nevertheless, to have a general sense of difficulty, I began the evaluation of text complexity by testing each *Reading Wonders* selection using the Fry formula before moving on to other features of complexity.

Readability. The average readability of the fourth-grade selections was sixth grade instructional level.¹³ A child would need to be reading much better than the typical student at this grade level in order to grasp the content *with scaffolding by the teacher*; were it to be assigned as independent reading, only the strongest readers could manage the text. This figure is only an average. Readability scores ranged from second grade through college; 23% of selections tested at eighth grade or above, with 10% at the high school or college level.¹⁴ It is unsurprising that McGraw-Hill provides audio-tapes of the selections so children can listen as they read along as this practice supports comprehension (Wood, Moxley, Tighe, & Wagner, 2017). Even assuming a healthy skepticism about the readability measure, the likelihood that a child will make meaning from these selections is small.

Additional complexity markers. Not only are *Reading Wonders*' narratives and information texts rife with difficult words and long, complicated sentences, they exhibit other text complexity issues as well. Visuals, such as pictures and maps, if closely linked

to the text, facilitate understanding. On this variable, *Reading Wonders* was effective, with 89% of the selections including many visuals supporting the words on that page; that is, they reinforced the written language on the page rather than proving irrelevant to or even conflicting with it (Unsworth & Chan, 2009). Nevertheless, the level of information density—the number of facts per sentence—was very high. Within the information texts included in the *Reading Wonders* collection, 97% of selections had a ratio of facts to sentences of over 1:1, and, for 80%, the ratio was 1.5:1 or higher. The sheer volume of facts presented would prove an obstacle for all but the strongest readers and might also discourage a thoughtful approach to that information.

“Birth of American Democracy” as a high-complexity example. The article ‘Birth of American Democracy’ offers an example of the level of text complexity found in *Reading Wonders*. It describes the period of time from the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the addition of the Bill of Rights in 1791, referring briefly to current circumstances. Supports for understanding include a clear time sequence and supportive visuals, but the text is difficult in other ways. The Fry readability score for this selection is at the college level; multi-syllable words, rather than long sentences, accounted for most of the difficulty. Within the text’s three pages, the rate of facts to sentences was 1.5:1. An example is the sentence *After a long bloody war, the British surrendered in 1781, and a peace treaty was signed in 1783*. There are three facts within the sentence: (a) the length and nature of the war, (b) the British surrender, and (c) the peace treaty.

The complexity of this text encourages the reader to attend only to surface level meaning. As a result, the student is likely to miss the historical inaccuracy (in

parentheses) and the whitewashing of our nation's present lack of equality (in brackets) conveyed in this excerpt:

Our Constitution begins with the words, *We the People*. Back in 1791, however, the Constitution gave certain rights, such as voting, only to some people. This has changed over time. Today, our Constitution grants all citizens over the age of 18 the right to vote. (This is untrue for felons.) Politicians continually revisit this founding document to ensure that all people are treated equally in our democracy. [This, at its best, a simplistic view; many children who read this text live in poor communities defined by an unequal distribution of rights and resources.]

Not only does the *Reading Wonders* textbook strongly convey a vision of success based on individual effort, but most selections deter readers from understanding and questioning that ideology.

Text engagement

Readers who find a text interesting and relevant are often able to overcome text complexity in service of the knowledge and experience they seek, and to engage fully with that text. I considered four aspects of the text engagement construct: relevance to daily life, well-developed characters with whom the reader can connect, consideration of developmental concerns, and the extent to which the text allows for an open consideration of values present within it (Kalmus, 2004).

Text relevance. Low-income, urban school districts populated primarily by children of color frequently purchase and implement anthologies like *Reading Wonders* (Duncan-Owens, 2009); any consideration of relevance needs to account for this fact. Nearly 60% of main characters are people of color. And yet, a character of the reader's

skin color may share little else with that reader. As Edelsky and Bomer (2005) note, kids of color:

may see their faces in these packages, but they don't see their cultural perspectives . . . You can be sure that even if the story is about a kid who lives in a housing project, the spin of the story and the right answers to the questions won't reflect the world view of the streets and the projects (p. 12)

The time and place in which narratives and information texts are set is sometimes vague. But of those in which the setting is clear, just over half occur in contemporary times and less than a quarter in urban settings. Of greater import, of the 20 selections in which the main character is a person of color, only two are contemporary working-class figures.

In addition, less than half of texts are clearly age-appropriate. Others, for example Lincoln's Gettysburg address, present a series of abstract concepts, such as the dedication of a battlefield and the idea of 'dying in vain,' couched in unfamiliar diction. The Gross Domestic Product, a concept about which few adults can speak knowledgeably, is a topic of consideration in another information text. Relevance to readers' lives is at question here (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010; Pennell, 2014).

Well-developed, motivated characters. The brevity of *Reading Wonders* selections serves to undermine character development; 75% of selections are very short (three pages or less). The publisher may have felt that limiting text length would increase their suitability for close reading, a systematic analysis practice sanctioned by the CCSS (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). Nevertheless, this limitation undermines the reader's efforts to understand and relate to such a character and, as a result, sustain interest in the story. Most main characters are not clearly motivated—either by achievement or

affiliation; in fact, nearly one-quarter of the *Reading Wonders* characters exhibit little obvious motivation for what they say and do. It is challenging for readers to connect with characters if they know little about them and see no motivation for their behavior (Chadwick, 2012; Parson, 2013).

Developmental concerns. A third factor influencing text engagement is the presence—or absence—of developmental concerns (Pennell, 2014). Researchers have suggested four major issues of concern to nine-to-ten-year old children: developing and maintaining friendships with peers; negotiating independence from parents; interacting honestly and fairly; and pursuing competence (Berger, 2003; Lee, 2018; Wilson, 2016; Wood, 2007). Some *Reading Wonders* selections explore these concerns. For example, in the story “Delivering Justice,” a biography of the activist W.W. Law by Jim Haskins, the main character advocates competently for racial justice, with the effort to uncover systemic unfairness as his goal.

Selections such as this one are, however, the exception to the rule. Although 36% of characters pursue competence and 24% of the selections highlight issues of fairness and honesty, only 10% focus on peer friendships, and only 3% include child or adolescent characters who seek independence from their parents. What is more, 44% of selections address no key developmental concerns at all. A child may live in a world full of complex peer relations and questions about independence from the family members, but encounter *Reading Wonders*’ stories and articles from which these concerns are strangely absent.

Open or closed texts. Related to the developmental concern of challenging social norms is the question of to what extent an author positions the theme of a text as open for

discussion (Kalmus, 2004; Wexler, 1982). In *Reading Wonders* texts, this is not the case with 96% of selections offering a single point of view. Narrative texts generally flow along; events, and even conflicts, occur, but there rarely seems to be more than one side of the story. The narrator might be expected to assume the role of critic or, at least, propose an alternate view, but this occurs only 6% of the time. Within information texts, there is a decided lack of conceptual debate; the author's message is straightforward and unwavering. Whatever the genre, readers are led to the inexorable conclusion that things are as they appear to be and require no particular attention, much less concern.

“Birth of American Democracy” as a text (dis)engagement exemplar. A re-examination of ‘Birth of American Democracy’ leads to the conclusion that the text offers some foundation for reader engagement, but is probably insufficient to mitigate its overall complexity. On the positive side, the text foregrounds two developmental concerns. It highlights the so-called Founding Fathers’ commitment to justice, and briefly notes the disparities that existed between those who could vote—essentially white males—and those who could not. The text fails to mention the disenfranchisement of whites who did not own land or, in current times or that the same applies to felons today. It also implies that all U.S. citizens are now treated equally under the law. The text raises the controversial issue of equal representation, but fails to explore the issue in any depth. One also wonders whether fourth-graders will demonstrate even a fleeting interest in this topic. The third-person narrator produces a neutral, bordering on romantic, account of events. And, in reading the closing line, ‘Politicians continually revisit this founding document to ensure that all people are treated equally in our democracy,’ students are led

to the inevitable conclusion that government servants are constantly on the look-out for potential, as well as actual, inequity.

Text disengagement on a broader scale. The *Reading Wonders* Reading/Writing Workshop reader accounts for nearly half of the reading students do. Selections in this supplement appear to be intended primarily to introduce vocabulary from selections in the Literature Anthology in a context somewhat more supportive than the longer text students will ultimately read. With no named authors, these Workshop texts are clearly written ‘in-house’ by someone who has been given a task that is the professional equivalent of the elementary school assignment to incorporate as many spelling list words in one sentence as possible. The resulting texts are choppy and difficult to follow and, as noted earlier, characters are underdeveloped. These short texts exemplify all that is unfortunate with *Reading Wonders*. There is no room here to challenge dominant ideologies. Complexity levels for these texts—whether measured by readability or information density—are no lower than their Literature Anthology companion texts. And, the possibility for text engagement, as measured by relevance, character motivation, focus on developmental concerns, or text openness is, if anything, less than the anthology texts. In short, the Reading/Writing Workshop selections are less accessible than the texts they are intended to support.¹⁵

Conclusion

Reading materials, from Colonial times to the present, have embraced one ideology or another, ranging from religious devotion to the Protestant work ethic to, in Luke’s (1991) words, the ‘generic, middle class possible world’ (p. 166) of the 1950s. In the world promulgated in recent basal readers such as *Reading Wonders*, individuals working for

advancement and/or monetary gain serve as models for the children who experience this world, vicariously, if not actually.

A close analysis of the fourth-grade version of *Reading Wonders* produces a picture of this textbook that is both implicitly ideological and relatively inaccessible. Characters portrayed in these selections are, by and large, those who enter the achievement game directed toward individual goals and succeed, or those who refuse to play that game and fail. The vast majority of main characters display traits associated with the achievement ideology; they are, for example, industrious, innovative, willing to defer gratification, and confident in their ability to achieve without the help of others. Of even greater import, they are almost universally successful at what they do. And yet, obstacles to this success—and the means to overcoming them—are rarely evident to children.

We have long known that elementary students are capable of critical reading (Wolf, King, & Huck, 1968). If, however, readers are to question ideologies presented in texts, they must be able to access those texts. *Reading Wonders* selections are, however, largely inaccessible, both in terms of text complexity and reader engagement. Despite concerns about the accuracy of readability measures, an average reading level of sixth grade, with some texts written at high school level and beyond, is concerning. In addition, more than three-quarters of information text selections include at least one and a half times as many facts/concepts as sentences. Issues with relevance also exist; the world presented here is largely disconnected from the readers' experience; only two main characters in the textbook resemble the children who are most likely to read the stories they inhabit: contemporary working-class people of color. And less than half of the

selections are clearly age-appropriate. Other aspects of the selections interfere with student engagement. Few characters are fully-developed, nearly half of the selections fail to address even one of the major developmental concerns of children of this age, and nearly all selections lead the reader to a pre-defined, noncontroversial point of view. As a result, even as students read about winners, they themselves are positioned as poor readers, as losers.

In a world of great diversity and unceasing change, it is crucial for us to continue to analyze textbook content and use the knowledge from these analyses to provide for students opportunities to understand, reflect on, and challenge that world. One way to do this is by providing reading materials that consider a range of ideologies, feature a variety of characters, and examine challenges that naturally engage children—and are evident in our society— such as hypocrisy and injustice. What is more, these texts must be accessible to our students in ways that allow them to participate fully in the discussions with teachers and among peers.

Limitations and implications

The primary limitation of this study is that, due to lack of access to students, the research was conducted using texts only. It would have benefitted from including feedback from children who had read the texts; in this way, we might better understand the influence of these texts on readers. In addition, due to the volume of text involved, the study was informed by coding of the fourth-grade level texts only. Texts written for younger and older age groups, or by other publishers, may be dissimilar to this one. *Reading Wonders* is a scripted reading program, so it is likely that what we see in the student readers will be, in fact, the enacted curriculum. Nevertheless, the study would be enriched by a

systematic review of the Teacher's Guide; such a review might surface instructional features affecting ideological or accessibility factors.

Despite these limitations, I believe this study has implications for research and practice. Future research might address the limitations listed above. Investigating additional texts—other basal readers or other types of texts such as literature anthologies and Newbery Award winning novels—using the same theoretical frame or similar texts using an alternative frame could prove enlightening. How do the ideological variety, text difficulty, and level of engagement differ between alternative texts and basal readers? Conducting observations of instructional practice and interviews with those who engage with these texts in classrooms would allow us to better understand if or how teachers and students negotiate their way through them.

There are clear implications for practice. *Open Court* was arguably the most influential reading program in the decade following passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (Garan, 2005). Many states that have adopted the CCSS are looking for a reading series which explicitly addresses these standards and *Reading Wonders*, the successor to *Open Court*, has attracted the attention of, and been adopted by, districts within these states. As a result, the achievement ideology will be perpetuated in classrooms across the country and students will be reading short, inaccessible texts populated by relatively shallow characters unrepresentative of members of the communities in which students live. I would hope results of this study would play an important role in alerting potential adopters of the limitations of the *Reading Wonders* curriculum. If it is a required adoption, findings may support teachers as they challenge a

one-size-fits-all ideology and support students as they construct meaning from the textbook and critique the perspective it presents.

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Word count = 11,652 (appendices are not included because I assume they would be classified as Supplementary Online Materials)

Appendix A: *Reading Wonders* Fourth-Grade Reader, Unit 1—*Think It Through*

<i>Selection</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Pages/ Reading Level</i>	<i>Summary</i>
Princess & the Pizza	Fairy tale	5/6th	Girl tries to become a princess & succeeds
Tomas & His Sons	Fable	2.5/4th	Father tricks sons into helping in the vineyard
Dragon Problem	Fairy tale	2.5/6th	Young man scares dragon away
Experts	Realistic	5.5/5th	Boy must write essay about his career goal
Incorporated	fiction		
Speaking Out to Stop Bullying	Informa- tion	2/7th	Recommended actions to stop bullying
Talent Show	Realistic	2.5/4th	Girls plan their talent show acts
	fiction		
Earthquakes	Informa- tion	5.5/7th	Earthquakes: causes, predicting, measuring, examples
Tornado	Informa- tion	1/7th	Basic facts about tornados
World of Change	Informa- tion	2.5/7th	Earth's evolutionary and revolutionary changes
Crash Course	Graphic novelette	5/5th	Superhero demonstrates how science works
The Box-Zip Project	Fantasy	3/5th	Aliens come to Earth
The Big Race	Narrative nonfiction	2/5th	Boys learn about Earth's forces as they build a soap box car
Kids in Business	Informa- tion	3/6th	Examples of kid-run businesses
Starting a Successful Business	Informa- tion	1/7th	Tips for starting a business
Dollars & Sense	Informa- tion	2.5/7th	Examples of businesses that give back to the community

Appendix B: *Reading Wonders* Code Book

- Text and author
 - Length of text
 - Full text or excerpt?
 - Genre
 - Setting
 - Time period (historical, contemporary, or unclear)
 - Location (urban, rural, or unclear)
 - Race of author
 - Achievement ideology (embraced, questioned, or not applicable)
- Character factors
 - Biological/sociocultural traits
 - Age
 - Race
 - Gender
 - Social status
 - Stratified/equal
 - Achieved/ascribed
 - Work-related traits
 - Industrious/lazy
 - Defers gratification/hedonistic
 - Compliant/resistant
 - Competitive/collaborative
 - Successful/unsuccessful
 - Innovative/unoriginal
 - Skilled/unskilled
 - Personal traits
 - Independent/dependent
 - Active/passive
 - Reflective/unthinking
 - Self-absorbed/other-oriented
 - Self-controlled/self-indulgent
 - Confident/timid
 - Intelligent/ignorant
 - Honest/deceitful
 - High or moderate risk-taking/low risk-taking
 - Responsible/irresponsible
 - Planful/spontaneous
 - Emotional/detached
 - Optimistic/realistic/pessimistic
 - Diffuse relationships/contractual relationships
 - Asks for/accepts help?
 - Motivation (achievement, affiliation, power, none obvious)

- Experiences
 - Character faces major obstacles?
 - Would obstacles be evident to a child?
 - Means to success noted?
- Accessibility factors
 - Appropriate for age?
 - Supportive visuals?
 - Information density (number of facts in a selection divided by number of sentences)
 - Culture (U.S. dominant, U.S. non-dominant, or other)
 - Open to multiple interpretations?
 - Critical narrator?
 - Controversy highlighted?
 - Concerns for this age group present
 - Highlights hypocrisy?
 - Challenges social norms?
 - Prioritizes justice?
 - Recognizes desire for competence?

End Notes

¹ These three terms will be used interchangeably throughout this text.

² Many researchers studied the role of textbooks in the international context during the 1980s but there is a dearth of published research since that period.

³ For purposes of this study, I define *dominant groups* as those—particularly consisting largely of White, upper-class men—who hold the most power.

⁴ In 2013, after the publication of *Reading Wonders*, McGraw-Hill Education was sold to Apollo Global Management, a private equity firm with businesses ranging from Hostess Snacks and timeshares to insurance and television production, allowing the McGraw-Hill companies to focus on its more profitable financial businesses (Henry, 2012). Most Apollo subsidiaries are located in the Caymen Islands and Delaware, both of which are known as tax havens and prime locations for so-called shell companies. Apollo divested itself of CTB/McGraw in 2015 (Cavanaugh, 2015) and also changed McGraw-Hill Education's name to S & P Global Inc. in 2016 (S&P Global—Who We Are, 2016).

⁵ For a more detailed description of the role of textbook publishers in general, and McGraw-Hill in particular, see Jaeger (2012).

⁶ There were nine poems and two plays included in the texts, but they were excluded from the readability measure because they could not be assessed using the sentence-based formula; plays were included in other measures.

⁷ McGraw-Hill employs the Lexile formula to assess readability, but it, too, is more challenging to calculate. Comparing the *Reading Wonders* Lexile scores with my Fry calculations, 35% of the scores were identical, 36% were off by one grade level, 18% by two grade levels, and 13% by three or more levels. On average, the Fry calculations were about a third of a level higher than the Lexile calculations.

⁸ The target community for this core program was presumed to be urban. There is a clear link between urban communities and a preponderance of basal texts. The Reading First funding program, active at the time of this research, promoted the use of core reading programs (Dewitz, Jones, & Leahy (2009). Reading First grants were more likely to be granted to urban school districts and schools within them (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) that served children who were (a) poor (Fingertip, 2017; Response to the Reading First Advisory Committee, 2008), (b) non-White (Reading First State Profile: CA, 2017), and (c) low-achieving (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2017; Reading First Advisory Committee, 2008). All these aspects were true of the district in which this study took place.

⁹ It is important to distinguish *competence* (a feeling that one has what it takes to be successful) from *success* (the achievement of something desired).

¹⁰ The remaining 17% of main characters are animals.

¹¹ Failure to delay gratification is associated with very young and/or non-mainstream groups. Among the first ten empirically-based articles from the past ten years found in a search for *delay gratification* on the Summon database, eight were either preschoolers/kindergarteners or people exhibiting eating disorders, problematic Internet use, etc. The remaining two were school-age children.

¹² This is also true in the topics addressed in information text.

¹³ The texts ranged from third grade to college level: third grade = 1%, fourth grade = 8%, fifth through eighth grade = 62%, and high school/college = 11%.

¹⁴ *Reading Wonders* reported average Lexile score was 848 (between fifth grade and sixth grade) and the most challenging piece included was beyond twelfth grade level (Metametrics, 2017).

¹⁵ One might expect that the teacher's guide would support the instructor as s/he attempts to make the text more accessible. This assumption proved untrue in the one selection I examined, "Birth of a Democracy." In terms of text complexity, seven vocabulary words are introduced and, for those students who speak Spanish as a first language, cognates are offered. The teacher is urged to build prior knowledge by telling the students that, at the time of the American Revolution, Britain was a powerful empire: a fact largely irrelevant to the remaining information presented. Other than asking readers to imagine why it is important to be an active participant in a democracy, comprehension support is limited to literal questions, the answers to which can be found in and quoted from the text. Dutro (2010) provides a more complete analysis of the role Teacher's Guides play in instruction.