

Reviewing Research When Choosing Materials

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Knowing what you need in a textbook is the first step in adopting one.

It was late in the year when the district asked me to conduct a workshop on how to analyze English textbooks. They had assessed their needs by examining test data and ranking opinions of what teachers, administrators, and parents wanted in a new program. When *writing* was identified as the most critical area, it was my task to show them how to select a K-8 English program with a strong writing strand.

The district was small, the textbook selection committee large, the needs assessment good. What went wrong?

The mistake was not clear until I began describing to the workshop participants the steps involved in the writing process. As I defined terms and reviewed research by Graves, Emig, and others, I saw my listeners' eyes cloud with despair. Although the committee found the research fascinating, they recognized the inaccuracy of their assessed needs: without reviewing any of the current research, they had defined *writing* as teaching how to write letters or stories. But since several months had already elapsed, they felt they had to continue their adoption process. They eventually selected the program most similar to the one they were already using.

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This mistake, repeated too often in districts throughout the nation, has forced publishers to continue to produce what looks like "the same program." Frustrated textbook authors and consultants seem resigned to the fact that current research results cannot be incorporated in depth since publishers must produce what sells. The unfamiliar won't sell. Clearly, we must understand what is possible and desirable in textbooks, not only for those responsible for selection, but for any person surveyed for suggestions and opinions in a needs assessment.

Sources of Research Information

What is needed is a review of the last five years of research on textbook adoption *before* assessing needs. This can be achieved through several sources:

- Professors of education frequently offer a research review course.
- Local, state, and regional education centers publish reviews and can recommend good consultants.
- State departments of education have consultants available in each subject area.
- National subject associations publish research reviews or curriculum guidelines.
- The *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (1982) offers well-documented research summaries of most subjects or topics.

Research reviews for this purpose should be limited to results. No one source should be transplanted into your local situation, but trends should be identified and practical ideas gleaned. Compare, condense, keep items as simple as possible, allow time for absorption, and plan time to discuss how the findings apply to individual situations.

If you invite a professor or consultant to direct an afternoon workshop, be sure this person provides a list of the latest-and-best research results (with references) to be circulated. It is wise to ask a second expert to ensure that the latest-and-best is agreed on.

The *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* is an excellent resource. Sponsored by the American Educational Research Association, it "presents a critical synthesis and interpretation of reported educational research" written by noted experts. If not available locally, it can be found in any college of education library.

Research reports and summaries published by national subject associations may be too lengthy for required reading, but direct application of these results is reflected in published guidelines, agendas, or standards. For example, NCTE's *Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs* (1979) is a three-page summary that defines terms and provides 19 characteristics of what to include in a good writing program. NCTM's *An Agenda for Action* (1980)

continues to influence school districts today. Use of these criteria often provokes sound thought on what should be found in a textbook program.

State departments of education guidelines are readily available. California's "Reading/Language Textbook Standards" (1984) identifies criteria that the state expects reading textbook programs to meet.

Research Has Changed

Today's average teacher was trained more than ten years ago and may not realize that educational research has

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changed—from a theoretical focus by authorities far removed from the classroom to practical teaching methods and thought processes of learners—and that research now has direct and exciting application for the classroom.

The trick to a stimulating review of research is to be brief, realistic, on target, and to provide direct practical applications followed by a lot of discussion. Remember, the goal for the whole staff is to produce a heightened awareness of the possibilities of something better; the goal for the adoption committee is to identify research trends that should be evident in current textbook programs.

Unfortunately, in their haste to examine new textbooks, many districts omit this important step. Not only is it critical to raising the quality of the textbook selected, it is critical to the success of day-to-day instruction in each and every class. □

References

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