

Overview

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No One to Blame

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Those who have carefully analyzed instructional materials—especially Kenneth Komoski and his associates at EPIE Institute, and staff members of the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois—conclude that the textbooks used in American schools could and should be better.

For example, noting that most reading programs neglect research on schema theory, metacognition, and learning strategies, and that workbooks are often confusing and poorly organized, Jean Osborn and her co-authors (p. 9) say that educators have reason to "be a little nervous" about basal readers.

Bonnie Armbruster (p. 18) and her co-authors have found that attempts to reduce readability levels in science, social studies, and other materials may actually make them *harder* to understand. Readability formulas encourage the use of short, vague words rather than longer, more precise ones and little snippet sentences without the connecting words needed to clarify relationships.

Who's to blame for these problems? Nobody, it seems. Outstanding teachers might like to write better books, but teachers don't write textbooks. Instead, well-known authorities "advise" teams of paid writers who are understandably more concerned about churning out a product that meets their employer's specifications than about inspiring student learning.

But publishers aren't villains either. Based on her experience in the textbook industry, Connie Muther (p. 4) attests that those who work for publishing houses are "knowledgeable and honest" people who are forced by circumstances to compromise in order to sell their products. Publishers invest huge sums of money in preparing new materials, and they naturally want them to be as good as possible. Like other businesses, though, they must attend to what customers will buy.

And why don't buyers select better books? One reason is that an adopted textbook must be used by many different teachers, so it cannot be too demanding or too unusual. And with the heterogeneity of American classrooms, books must not be too difficult for slow students. Knowing these facts of life, selection committees make the best choices they can.

If none of the players is in the wrong, it may be the game itself that is faulty. Ko-

moski (p. 31) is on the right track when he insists that textbooks are the way they are because administrators use them to ensure curriculum consistency and continuity. Having presided over a series of textbook adoptions, I know the feeling of security that comes from knowing all the teachers in one's jurisdiction are expected to use approved materials selected by a group of presumably well-qualified people. The concerns expressed by our authors, however, suggest that placing trust in books, rather than in teachers, is a mistake.

Ironically, as Komoski argues, the adoption process itself probably contributes to the poor quality of textbooks. Selecting books on a large scale—statewide, for example—almost ensures mediocrity because to win at that level, a book must come close enough to fulfilling so many different expectations that it cannot meet any of them well.

Textbooks might be better, then, if they were not employed as substitute curriculums—but that's not the whole explanation either. The inadequacies of instructional materials result from a combination of factors: the conditions under which they are developed and marketed, the constraints on those who design them, the qualifications of those who choose them, and the capabilities of those who are to use them. Any attempt to correct the situation must address all these factors.

We have sayings like "It's always darkest before the dawn" and "Every cloud has a silver lining" to remind us that the gloomiest of circumstances often contains a glimmer of hope. For example, the one-sided condemnation of American schools by the Commission on Excellence attracted the attention of politicians and the general public and has sparked numerous reform campaigns. Exposing weaknesses in textbooks may have a similar effect.

That can happen only if more teachers and principals know about the defects in current materials, pay less attention to relatively unimportant matters such as the attractiveness of illustrations, and begin to seek the features researchers say are critical to aiding learning. Because the problem is complex, other actions may also be necessary. The first step, though, is informing ourselves.

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