
What Every Textbook Evaluator Should Know

CONNIE MUTHER

A publisher's program should not be a district's program; districts must adapt instructional materials to meet their special requirements.

Who selects textbooks in your district? How is the selection made? Do decision makers know how to examine textbooks? Were they ever taught how?

Unfortunately, textbook selection is not always wisely determined. First, many methods for selection are outdated. Because today's textbook is designed to sell, traditional evaluation strategies and questions may no longer be effective (Muther, 1984).

Second, "the average teacher has never been trained to evaluate or to select materials for classroom use" (EPIE, 1976 p. 1). I informally surveyed some teacher training institutions and found that textbook evaluation courses, when taught, are often part of a "materials" course offered at the graduate level.¹ Several professors interviewed were totally unaware of the change in textbooks; they distributed outdated checklists and materials and required students to evaluate these materials and report back to the rest of the class. Rarely were students shown where—and why—textbooks are weak, how they differ, and specifically how to determine which program best matches an identified goal.

Third, many districts are not aware that there is a problem. After all, they've evaluated textbooks for years and have established policies and procedures. Many feel that there are more pressing issues to address.

Confusion surrounds textbook selection today. According to unpublished research by publishers, the primary determiners are pretty pictures, heaps of independent seatwork, and easy-to-use manuals. Yet personable sales people—those who tell jokes, bring doughnuts, and let committees out early—are also highly influential. Publishers who provide the best wine and cheese presentations, free consumable materials, or free "pilots" and accompanying giveaways win many selection decisions. Indeed, offering "the best deal" (usually a combination

Completed programs are rarely field-tested. Sample lessons are "tried out" on groups of students to see if directions are clear, lesson format is workable, or how teachers and students react to the materials while the program is being written so it can be changed before the printing film or plates are made. However, this means the *buyer* becomes the field test for many newly developed programs.

But buying a revised program is no guarantee of improvement. Since adoption states require recent copyrights, most publishers are forced into a three-year revision cycle. Unenforced and loosely interpreted copyright laws generally require a 10 percent change—which 10 percent is left to the discretion of the publisher. Modifications usually take a very minor form—a change in the covers, graphics, or labels could be 10 percent. The addition of a box of dittos or other supplementary components could be 10 percent.

But most important, a publisher must produce a product that "appeals" to the buyer. This means the textbook must be "attractive." Pictures must be "appealing." The instructional part of the program must not be too lengthy, or the program will appear difficult to teach. Ideally, the pupil page and the teacher's manual page should be turned at the same time.

For content subjects in the middle and high schools, "attractive" also means "coverage." Favorite topics must be included at appropriate grades along with skills or topics requested by Texas, California, Florida, and North Carolina (the four most influential adoption states) as well as several large cities (Chicago, New York, and Detroit, to name a few). Neglecting to "mention" some of their preferences could mean instant elimination.

Supplementary materials are in de-

mand. They must be numerous, provide easy-to-correct independent seatwork, and meet the needs of all types of students: learning or emotionally disabled; visual, hearing, or speech impaired; those who come from other cultures or speak other languages; and those who simply can't read. There must be options for the gifted and talented and letters offered in several languages to parents. Any program without these accompanying supplements, or suggestions labeled in the teacher's manual, may again be quickly eliminated.

Supplementary materials are created in some interesting ways. Sometimes workbooks from previous programs are stripped of cover, page numbers, and graphics and then reassembled and sold as support for the "new" program. Often workbooks, dittos, tests, and other supplementary items are written by outside editorial service organizations. Ironically, these same writers may be writing similar materials for competing publishers. Developed separately, many supplementary materials do not correlate with either content or instruction, but do allow for greater flexibility of materials—and greater sales potential.

The best source of income for publishers and sales reps is from consumable materials. Consumable items mean yearly replacement, which ensures repeat business for the life of the program—from five to ten years. The amount of return revenue depends on the subject and grade. For instance, percentage estimates of the initial purchase price returned every year vary—for elementary subjects, a low of 0 percent in science to a high of 35 percent in reading. Perhaps that explains why so many publishers publish spelling and phonics materials. In high school, it is much less, 0 to 10 percent, depending on whether they need a workbook or a lab manual.

Some publishers indirectly force purchase of all supplementary materials by offering closed computer management systems (no other publishers' materials may be entered into the system). Management systems provide prescriptions of additional activities students need determined by test results. Since no other materials may be indexed into the system, all prescriptions are for the one publisher. Thus all materials, many consumable, must be purchased from that publisher.

There's no secret about any of this. It's called good sales strategy and satisfies customer demand for extra material. Most publishers are open and honest about it—and will change if consumers change their demands. One sales agent who heard me relate the above information at a workshop recently admitted, "It's true. Many supplementary materials are written by low-paid writers and are not very good. But if we don't have them, we lose the adoption."

Publishing houses are staffed with knowledgeable, dedicated, and honest employees. Usually former educators, they entered publishing hoping to improve the quality of education by providing good textbooks. Often frustrated, they must constantly compromise between what sells and what's best. Unfortunately, the two are not synonymous and are frequently unrelated. All major companies have produced good programs that won't sell. Today publishers do not have the resources to produce a new product that may be superior educationally but has a high risk of failure. To produce an Edsel in today's market could be catastrophic.

The Textbook

Adoption states, special interest groups, and readability formulas have all contributed to produce textbooks "designed by a committee, written by a committee, and selected by a com-

mittee" to please all and offend none. Many textbooks have no clear point of view since there is no one author. American history has been revised (FitzGerald, 1979), and Darwin and his theory of evolution have been eliminated from one science text and minimized in others (Doyle, 1984, p. 11). Sentences have been shortened and vocabulary reduced to monosyllables that pass readability formulas but often obscure meaning (Armbruster, 1984). The result is too many textbooks with too many facts—and pages—unrelated to underlying concepts (Rowe, 1983)—many without in-depth challenge (Pauling, 1983), and American society presented as ideal or unrealistic.

For example, authors of reading and literature texts are asked to include stories that have no sexual overtones, no obscene words, no violence, no murder, and nothing downbeat. Authors must avoid all stories that concern death and all stereotypes in major or minor roles. Story characters should represent an even distribution of major populations (including the physically handicapped and elderly); they should uphold wholesome family values and may not eat junk food.

The possibility of finding good literature that meets all these requirements is very difficult and has resulted in the elimination of many classic works of literature. Many basal readers depict a world where girls do not play with dolls and women are airplane pilots, dump truck drivers, or construction workers. If a woman is black or Hispanic, she is probably a doctor or lawyer. Boys, on the other hand, rarely play baseball—at least without girls—and white men are not to be found at the office. Literature about evil witches, mysterious hunchbacks, and any minority person depicted as poor or naughty has been eliminated from most reading textbooks. Birthday parties are devoid of ice cream or cake

(California considers this junk food), while many adventures occur with Texas backdrops. (Texas, which dominates control of the market with its unique direct purchase of textbooks, prefers Texas settings.)

The goal of the above criteria should be applauded in most cases, but should your district eliminate a textbook if it violates one of these criteria? There isn't a simple answer. On the one hand, had not large adoption cities and states demanded change and refused to buy without it, these changes may not have occurred. On the other hand, selecting textbooks by this elimination process also eliminates programs that teach the subject best. Again, each district must return to its own definition of what a textbook is. If the textbook is primarily a manual of instruction, shouldn't selection be focused on finding out which program does that best? Then, if the selected book does portray a stereotype in one story, for example, couldn't this story be used as an example of what a stereotype is?

Webster's defines the textbook as a manual of instruction; as containing the "principles of a subject used as a basis for instruction." Most textbooks are designed by publishers to provide the base of instruction in a given subject. Generally, publishers expect teachers to judiciously select topics, units, or activities and support them with other resources. Unfortunately, many programs are not marketed this way. Why?

Today the textbook has become the total program. Research shows reli-

"Publishers who provide the best wine and cheese presentations, free consumable materials, or free 'pilots' and accompanying giveaways win many selection decisions."

ance on the textbook from 70 to 95 percent (EPIE, 1976, 1977; Shannon, 1982) of classroom time, depending on the subject and study, with students spending up to 70 percent (Durkin, 1983) of instructional time directly involved with workbooks, dittos, and other seatwork activities. One study in reading discovered that both teachers and administrators believed textbooks were based on scientific truth and that application of textbook materials would produce student learning (Shannon, 1982, 1983).

There is no such thing as a "perfect" textbook or textbook program. Each district must remold and adapt the selected publishers' product in order to meet its unique student and faculty needs. This may mean omitting chapters, adding multiple copies of trade books, or designing specialized units. Sections of tests might be rewritten to more closely match instruction, content, district goals, or state tests. Workbooks and dittos may be substituted with student projects and papers. Ultimately, the publisher's program should not be the district's program.

Conclusion

In any free market producers respond to consumer demands. If the majority of consumers continue to select textbooks by a process of elimination, then most publishers will continue to

Editor's Note: The first sentence under "Sources of Information" in Connie Muth's column in the February *Educational Leadership*, p. 86, should have read: "What is needed, before assessing needs, is a review of the last five years of research in the subject area of the books to be adopted."

include everything anyone wishes—without offending someone else. If school districts continue to believe there is no problem with textbook selection and do not provide both *time* and *training* for textbook evaluation, then selection committees will continue to focus evaluation on pretty pictures, favorite topics, amusing agents, and seducing sales presentations. If districts continue to select textbooks because of free materials, then publishers will continue to compete by providing bigger and better deals.

However, if customers first take the time to analyze what they want a textbook to accomplish, determine how the textbook should accomplish it, and select the textbook that best accomplishes this goal, then districts will not only obtain the best programs available today; they will also ensure a better textbook for tomorrow.□

¹In 1978 research, EPIE reported that less than 1 percent of teacher training institutions offered any training in textbook evaluation. Curious as to who those 1 percent are and what specific training is

provided, I have informally interviewed professors when visiting different states. Although no figures were kept, many teachers throughout the country have confirmed that this has been their experience.

References

- American Association of Publishers, One Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016.
- Armbruster, Bonnie B. "How Is a Turtle Like a Frog?" *American Educator* (Summer 1984): 14-17.
- Black, Hillel. *The American Textbook*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1967.
- Doyle, Denis. "The 'Unsacred' Texts." *American Educator* (Summer 1984): 8-13.
- Durkin, Dolores. "What Classroom Observations Reveal About Reading Comprehension Instruction." Technical Report No. 106. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, October 1978.
- Durkin, Dolores. "Is There a Match Between What Elementary Teachers Do and What Basal Reader Manuals Recommend?" Reading Education Report No. 44, Champaign, Ill. Center for the Study of Reading, October 1983.
- Educational Products Information Exchange (EPIE). "Research Findings: NSAIM, Two Years Later." *EPIEGRAM* (1976).
- Educational Products Information Ex-

change. "Report on a National Study of the Quality of Instructional Materials Most Used by Teachers and Learners." Technical Report No. 76. New York: EPIE Institute, 1977.

Fitzgerald, Frances. *America Revisited: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979.

Muth, Connie. "Textbook Selection." *Educational Leadership* 42 (November 1984): 82-85.

Noble, Kendrick. An address at the "Interstate Consortium on Instructional Materials, A National Conference for Educators, Policymakers, and Publishers," Tallahassee, Florida, March 19-20, 1984.

Pauling, Linus. "Throwing the Book at Elementary Chemistry." *The Science Teacher* (September 1983): 25-29.

Rowe, Mary Budd. "Science Education: A Framework for Decision-Makers." *Daedalus: Scientific Literacy*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Spring 1984): 123-142.

Shannon, Patrick. "Some Subjective Reasons for Teachers' Reliance on Commercial Reading Materials." *The Reading Teacher* (May 1982): 884-889.

Shannon, Patrick. "The Use of Commercial Reading Materials in American Elementary Schools." *Reading Research Quarterly* (Fall 1983): 68-85.

Another CTB area of expertise: Instructional Systems for Mathematics

New approaches to mathematics assessment and instruction designed to support different instructional models for Grades K-8+



The DMI Mathematics Systems (DMI/MS), published by CTB/McGraw-Hill, meet the needs being expressed by teachers and administrators for new approaches to the management of classroom mathematics instruction. DMI/MS can be successfully implemented and managed by teachers with little or no mathematics background because of the clarity and thoroughness of its objectives-based content structure, its flexible management system, and its support components.

The DMI Mathematics Systems will provide specific and understandable information about student achievement of mathematics skills and a means of monitoring and evaluating progress that will be useful to teachers, administrators, and outside constituencies concerned with student achievement in mathematics.

The DMI Mathematics Systems are easy to understand and flexible to use. They will help students learn mathematics and will help teachers teach it.

For additional information write or call Dept. AP, CTB/McGraw-Hill, 2500 Garden Road, Monterey, CA 93940—800/538-9547 (in California 800/682-9222).

INFORMATION AND SERVICES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS: ACHIEVEMENT AND APTITUDE TESTS, PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION, INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS, INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT MATERIALS, CUSTOMIZED TESTING, TESTS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

CTB/MCGRAW-HILL

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.