Textbook Adoption: Some Guidelines

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In the next few months, school districts across the Commonwealth will be faced with making choices about which textbooks are best for the students in their schools. Textbook adoption cycles force us to look closely at what is available and the money we have to spend. But more importantly, we need to look at the children we serve and decide whether the textbooks we choose meet their needs. This demands some measure of confidence in what a good reading curriculum looks like. As well, it demands that teachers are able to implement the curriculum selected.

In our capstone course for the Reading Master’s degree, graduate students from the University of Virginia who themselves are classroom teachers critically examined reading programs that might be considered for adoption in the upcoming textbook adoption cycle. They used everything they have learned about “best practices” in reading to judge the texts. They generated points of evaluation against which programs would be evaluated, found the material to be examined, and checked the literature supporting the program’s efficacy. Finally, the critiques were presented to the class. These graduate students acted, in other words, like a textbook selection committee. Here are the points they considered:

Does the program have an evaluation instrument or placement test and does the evaluation drive the instruction? Do programs help teachers look closely at children’s reading and writing behaviors using direct measures rather than using fill-in-the-bubble standardized tests for placement? If assessments are included, do they place children in the program? All too many programs use group administered tests which yield a score that “places” a student in a reading book he or she really cannot read too well. Some programs advise teachers to have all children in the class read from the same book. Neither of these approaches is optimum for individual achievement. Textbook companies have to provide teachers with ways to match children to leveled texts and then districts need to make sure that teachers have multiple levels of texts in their classrooms.

Can a teacher use this textbook to teach all components of the literacy diet: fluency, reading and comprehension, writing, and spelling (phonics)? Are there stories and poems provided for reading, phonics lessons, opportunities for writing, and comprehension strategies so that teachers can build a balanced literacy “diet” in their classrooms? Basal reading texts generally use a combination approach to teaching reading (they provide both stories and phonics lessons). Writing and comprehension activities, however, may or may not be in the forefront of the lessons. In addition, there are many new programs available which are not “basals” yet they are being purchased in lieu of the basic reading textbook. So the overriding question becomes whether teachers can use this material/textbook as a primary resource for teaching or whether it provides only one part of the literacy curriculum.

Is the phonics component appropriate (does it reflect what we know from research)? We have learned a lot in the past twenty years about how children learn letter-sound correspondences and how this learning supports reading. For

continued on page 2
example, if the textbook includes spelling or phonics lessons, the question to ask is whether the lessons are developmental in their scope and sequence (are short vowels taught before long vowels, for example?). We found in our reviews that few books presented phonics in the appropriate sequence. What this would mean for an adoption decision is that a basal or a program would have to be supplemented by a spelling series that did reflect developmental research. The best place to find a sequence for phonics and spelling instruction would be Words Their Way by Bear, Invernizzi, and Templeton.

Do the reading materials use some type of vocabulary control, especially for the beginning reader (1st grade)? Children at the early stages of learning to read need text that contains controlled vocabulary and they need lots of books for reading, rereading, and practice. One basal reading series we reviewed had only six or eight stories for first grade, and not one of the stories contained controlled vocabulary. We decided children in first grade in the school district that selected that basal were going to suffer unless their teacher knew enough to bring in alternative reading material. Once a child is a beginning reader, he or she needs to build fluency and an automatic sight vocabulary—things that are not easily done without some help from the text. Controlled vocabulary is a MUST for the beginning reader.

Above the beginning-to-read level, are children reading at their instructional reading levels? Once children become readers, they need to be reading at their instructional level. This means that they read 95 of 100 words accurately in any text given to them to read. We call this the “Five Finger Method” of determining instructional level—we ask the child to read 100 words aloud and count how many he or she mispronounces. Only when children are reading at instructional level can they be expected to gain power in their vocabulary growth and their reading comprehension. Prescribing that an entire class should read a given selection and that, if a child cannot read it, he or she can listen, is not teaching reading. The way to assure that children become readers is to put books and stories in their hands they CAN read. Instead of buying one text for each class, for example, schools could distribute the books so that each classroom has multiple copies of each book (for example, a third grade teacher could have 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade books in her classroom).

Are students exposed to different genres of reading materials? Does the textbook or program contain a variety of genres (fiction, nonfiction, plays, poetry) for reading? Several of the “reading programs” we reviewed had no text connected with them or very sparse passages. If these materials were purchased with teaching reading in mind, they would certainly have to be supplemented with multiple sets of titles children could read.

What about comprehension instruction? The goal and ultimate purpose of learning to read is comprehension. But children do not learn how to comprehend automatically nor do they learn it incidentally. Textbooks that help teachers by setting up pre-reading strategies to prime children’s prior knowledge or after-reading activities that help them understand what was read are the optimal choices. Some reading series we examined did a great job of helping teachers with comprehension instruction. Those are the kinds of reading series/textbooks that districts want to be searching for. If the reading text under consideration only provides questions after the reading, then there is literally no comprehension instruction being provided. Asking ten questions is not teaching comprehension.

If there is research support, is it valid? What we found about most materials on the market today is that there is precious little in the way of research to support one over another. Textbook companies that hire major reading researchers on their author teams do a better job of grounding the textbook and materials in best practices. But in reality, no program we examined had been shown to work better than another through any systematically designed study. 

continued on page 8
How expensive is the program? Cost is the overriding question that pervades all the theoretical questions. One hugely expensive program may have auxiliary materials but no controlled vocabulary books for beginners or no consistent spelling/phonics approach in its otherwise strong offering. One total phonics program may promise all children will learn to read but doesn't provide any books for that reading. In these cases, the district would have to supplement the “reading” program with other books! This adds to the expense of the selection.

In the end, a curriculum is not one textbook or set of materials. It is a mix of materials and activities that provide best ways to teach children how to read, spell, and write. Textbook adoption is simple if and only if teachers in our classrooms understand how children learn to read and what to use to help them. Such teachers can use the best aspects of any program to construct their curriculum. What we need to remember as we select textbooks is that the best textbook or teaching material is made even more powerful by teachers who have an understanding about learning to read. Even the best material cannot be expected to teach our children to read—teachers do that!

Dr. Abouzaid is the Director of the University’s state outreach in reading education, called McGuffey/TEMPO. Through TEMPO, professional development courses are set up in regional UVa Continuing Education Centers and in school districts across the state. In addition, courses are available on the web.