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Teachers' Professional Judgment in Contrast with Policy Mandates: Instructional Material Adoption and Students' Needs

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Abstract

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Keywords

Teacher Advocacy, Textbook Adoption, Literacy

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“The joy of reading good books and having rich conversations about them is what life-long learners do in real life,” (teacher-participant #102, Oregon).

Introduction

Many states have laws on the books that restrict the options schools can choose from when they select textbooks. In Oregon “Only basal instructional programs may be adopted by the State Board of Education” (ODE, 2017). Furthermore, some states, such as ours, require publishers to pay a fee in order to have their materials available for consideration (ODE, 2017). These laws effectively limit teacher voice in adoption decisions and funnel funds earmarked for curricular materials toward a few large publishing houses that profit enormously from them. It is no secret that textbook sales for public education are a big business. An estimated 19 billion dollars was spent in the United States on instructional materials for K-12 schools in 2010 (Kellogg School of

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Management, 2010). With 50 million children enrolled in K-12 public schools, 5.5 billion of those dollars were spent directly on “core instructional content” for those students (Fletcher, Schaffhauser, & Levin, 2012). The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has provided an additional opportunity for publishing houses to increase profits by marketing materials as CCSS aligned (whether or not publishers have made substantial revisions to achieve alignment). Allington (2012) cautions educators to adopt a “buyer beware” mindset, rather than blindly accepting publisher claims; however, restrictions on the adoption process that limit teacher voice can be an obstacle to having the flexibility to use instructional materials aligned in a meaningful way. Nationwide, schools and districts are expected to spend upwards of \$2.47 billion on materials in order to be aligned with these new standards (Works, 2012).

Despite the staggering costs of these materials, evidence of their effectiveness is limited. In reality, no research study supports the use of commercial reading programs as a means of improving reading achievement (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, Collins, & Scarcella, 2007). So why do states limit educators to selecting curricular materials from constrained lists of commercial reading programs and textbooks?

Textbook Adoptions

State textbook adoptions have been prevalent in the United States for at least 150 years. According to the Association of American Publishers, 20 states currently have textbook adoption legislation. In some states, a committee selects materials to be used statewide. Other states develop a list of instructional programs from which district committees choose. Most materials are then used for six years. According to Tulley (1985) who studied the textbook adoption policies of 22 states, the intents of a state adoption included 1) to provide uniformity of curriculum, 2) to ensure selection of the highest quality of textbooks, 3) to reduce costs, 4) to save time for district personnel, 5) to provide public participation, 6) to provide structure and order in the adoption process, 7) to ensure periodic review and updating of textbooks, 8) to control the marketing practices of the textbook adoption industry, and 9) to protect local school districts from textbook controversy (p. 295).

Follett (1985) found that adoption committees have little time to review potential textbooks, along with their ancillary materials, and that adoption committees tended to meet after the school day. Committee members, therefore, were under tremendous pressure to make quick decisions. Because of the lack of time that committee members could take reviewing materials, “sales are influenced more by adoption committee impressions than by facts” (Follett, p. 19). In an effort to maximize profits, publishers therefore, “produce textbooks that appeal to adoption committees” through catchy slogans and sound bites, which can minimize the time needed to work through the large amounts of materials while at the same time influence the appeal of one product over another. And while teachers often sit on district-level adoption committees, a 2002 National Education Association and Association of American Publishers survey reported that only 28% of teachers said they were responsible for choosing the textbooks they used in their classrooms (NEA, 2002).

Current Text Adoption Process in Oregon

During the decade following the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and spurred by Reading First requirements that funds be spent on “scientifically-based”

reading programs (USDOE, 2009), anthologies and core reading programs became increasingly prevalent. According to a 2011 market research report on textbook sales to schools, 84% of educators reported having a core/basal reading program. Oregon reflects this trend, where the choices of instructional materials teachers have are almost exclusively from core reading programs. State administrative rules require that classroom teachers make up a portion of the review committee to choose the materials to include on the approved list. However, only a narrow selection of materials qualify to make the initial review list--all materials from large publishing houses. True teacher voice in placing materials onto that list is usurped by the nature of the requirement to create a "list of basal instructional materials" (ODE, 2017).

The textbooks on the Oregon approved list vary depending on grade level, although they have similar structures and come from some of the same publishing companies. Most of the materials are similar to those offered in other states with structured lists of materials from which schools must choose.

The materials developed by publishing companies for English/Language Arts in grades 6 through 12 are literature anthologies with a selection of short stories, excerpts from longer texts, and poetry. Material adoption cycles run every seven years, which means that materials included on the list will be in place for the duration of that time. Table 1 shows the instructional materials from which schools can choose for high school literacy instruction.

Table 1 <i>Oregon: ELA/Literacy Grades 9-12</i> <i>Instructional Materials Contract Years: 2014-2020</i>	
Publisher	Title
Pearson Education Inc.	<i>Pearson Common Core Literature; Literature: An Introduction to Reading & Writing; Writing America: Language & Composition in Context</i>
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	<i>Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Collections Grades 9-12</i>
EMC Publishing, LLC	<i>EMC Publishing Mirrors & Windows Connecting with Literature Common Core State Standards, Edition Level IV, V, American Traditions, British Traditions</i>
The College Board/Springboard	<i>SpringBoard English Language Arts, Grade 9-11; SpringBoard English Language Arts, Senior English</i>
Holt McDougal	<i>Holt McDougal Literature Grades 9-12</i>

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Table 2 includes the instructional materials list for grades 6 through 8 literacy instruction, which mirrors the list adopted for high school instruction. The materials designed for each grade level band are targeted toward the reading level; otherwise, the collections include similar accompanying materials and resources.

Table 2 <i>Oregon: ELA/Literacy Grades 6-8 Instructional Materials Contract Years: 2014-2020</i>	
Publisher	Title
Pearson Education Inc.	<i>Pearson Common Core Literature</i>
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	<i>Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Collections Grades 6-8</i>
EMC Publishing, LLC	<i>EMC Publishing Mirrors & Windows Connecting with Literature Common Core State Standards, Edition Level I, II, III</i>
Edgenuity	<i>CCSS Grade 6; CCSS Grade 7; CCSS Grade 8</i>
The College Board/Springboard	<i>SpringBoard English Language Arts, Grade 6-8</i>
Scholastic Inc.	<i>Scholastic Common Core Code X, Course I, II, III</i>
Holt McDougal	<i>Holt McDougal Literature Grades 6-8</i>

In grades K-5, the main component is the core/basal reader with the accompanying teacher edition that includes a sequenced order of skills to guide instruction and suggestions for spiraling comprehension strategies. The core reading program also comes with ancillaries, including assessment packets, decodable readers, student workbooks, outreach materials for family engagement, vocabulary enrichment packets, etc. Table 3 includes the list of adopted instructional materials for ELA/Literacy K-5, 6. In Oregon, grade six is sometimes the final grade in elementary school and is taught and can be taught in a self-contained format. In other schools, grade six could be the first year of middle school. A school system would choose off either the K-5, 6 list for an elementary school structure or the Grade 6-8 list if goals are aligned for middle grades literacy instruction.

Table 3
Oregon: ELA/Literacy K-5, 6
Instructional Materials Contract Years: 2014-2020

Publisher	Title
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	<i>Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys Grades K-6</i>
Benchmark Education Company	<i>Benchmark Literacy Common Core K-6 Whole & Small Group with Resources, Oregon Edition</i>
McGraw-Hill Education	<i>Reading Wonders Grade K-6; Reading Wonderworks, Grade 1-6</i>
Pearson Education	<i>Scott Foresman Reading Street Common Core</i>
Cengage Learning	<i>Reach for Reading</i>

Back to the Classroom

With the proliferation of materials and money--and the limited choices for teachers--how do classroom teachers feel about whether the materials meet the needs of their students? If they could choose, what materials would classroom teachers want to use? This article describes the research a group of literacy educators conducted to find answers to these questions.

Teachers of Teachers of Literacy

Teachers of Teachers of Literacy (ToTL) is a group of teacher educators who came together to determine whether teachers in one state that chose textbooks from the Oregon state adopted list felt as to whether those texts met the needs of the students in their classrooms. Additionally, the ToTL researchers asked teachers what materials they wanted to use to support the needs of their students. ToTL is comprised of thirty-four literacy educators from fifteen teacher education programs in Oregon. This article focuses on one aspect of a larger sequential mixed methods research project. The goal of this part of the project was to determine how well the current adoption process was meeting the needs of K-12 teachers and also to understand what materials teachers want to have included on the approved state list.

ToTL Survey

Data collection began with a survey that was sent across the state to K-4 classroom and reading teachers, as well as grades 5-12 ELA teachers. 1,206 surveys produced complete data, which comprises 6.81 percent of the eligible teachers in the state. 60.3% of the respondents taught K-4; 39.6% taught 5-12. 82.6% of the school districts in Oregon were represented in the survey data. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to both comment and participate in a follow-up interview. 365 respondents provided additional commentary; thirty-four teachers agreed to participate in a follow-up interview.

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The survey questions were designed to capture both demographic data about participants, as well as information about the literacy practices and instructional materials used across Oregon. For the purposes of this article, only one survey question is included in order to focus on participants' responses to the current state instructional material selection law and teacher preference of which instructional materials should be included on the list:

Currently Oregon Instructional materials laws (ODE, 2017) state, "only basal instructional programs may be adopted by the State Board of Education." If you had a choice, which instructional materials should be included on the state instructional materials approved list? (Select all that apply.)

Respondents could select from the following:

- continue allowing only "basal instructional programs"*
- allow supplemental materials (digital and/or print)*
- allow intervention programs*
- allow Open Educational Resources (OER) (free digital texts)*
- allow new materials developed between review cycles*

What Teachers Want: Survey Data

In the analysis of the survey data, 7.2% of teachers wanted the state instructional materials law to remain as written and continue to only allow basal instructional programs. 71.5% of participants wanted supplemental materials to be included on the approved list, and 57.1% of teachers wanted intervention programs to be included on the list. 45.5 % of participants wanted Open Educational Resources included on the approved list, while 54.1% wanted inclusion of new materials that were developed between review cycles. It is

worth noting that in a test of associations, Open Educational Resources were preferred more strongly by high school teachers. The quantitative survey data showed that almost 93% of teachers wanted the state instructional material adoption law to change. ToTL researchers were interested to find out more about what teachers would do if the law allowed for more flexibility in material purchase and usage.

What Teachers Want: Survey Comments

The ToTL researchers analyzed survey comments by using qualitative methodology to find common themes from the responses (Bernard, 2000). Teachers' dissatisfaction with their current reading programs and structures, as well as the types of materials that teachers would like to see included on the state instructional materials approved list were common themes. Two perspectives were prevalent in the interview data: a) The teacher's view of their student's needs; and b) The teacher's view of what they needed to meet the needs of their students.

What students need: Authentic, engaging/high-interest books. Teachers across Oregon shared that their students needed authentic, engaging, high-interest books to read, choices in the materials that they read, and more access to nonfiction texts. The desire for students to have more authentic, engaging, high-interest books was stated in several ways. Many respondents noted the contrast between the design structure of core reading programs and what they felt their students needed for success. Teacher #116 stated:

“In my K classroom, my kids love information trade books (patterned text) and colorful fiction trade books (patterned text). Large anthology books are overwhelming for them to try to ‘read the words’.”

Some teachers responded with the specific needs of special populations of children in mind. Teacher #347 responded with consideration of emergent bilingual students and students receiving Special Education Services:

“There is a particular need for high-interest reading material for middle school students who are ELLs, or on IEPs.”

Other respondents tied the commercial reading programs directly to a decline in the reading of authentic texts. Teacher #291 wrote:

“Kids need to read real books. I amazed [sic] when kids come to me from schools that use basals, and they have never read an entire book before. That is outrageous.”

The response from Teacher #17 captured the conflict between where financial resources are placed:

“Students need the opportunity to read authentic text and to self-select. Instead of spending money on basals, we need to spend money on authentic literature and informational texts.”

What students need: Choice. Whereas some educators are convinced that children should repeat daily reading of the weekly story from core reading programs or practice reading using other forms of text that focus on specific letter sounds (decodable readers), others maintain that students read more frequently—and in turn have higher levels of reading achievement—when reading engaging text. Teachers in Oregon stated that they wanted to provide their students with the opportunity to choose the books that they read for a variety of reasons. Teacher #8 explained the connection between choice and reading improvement:

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"I believe that access to 'real world' texts and allowing students to self-select texts gives them both the responsibility and the motivation to read more, which inherently provides them with the opportunities to become better readers."

Teacher #224 wrote about the deep thinking that her students engaged in when they read books they chose: "When students are engaged in their reading and the books are high interest, they are more likely to think at a deeper level. They read, restate, analyze, discuss, debate, ask questions, reflect, infer, site evidence, summarize, interpret, and so much more. Most importantly, they see themselves as readers and they pick up books at home or the library. Choice of text is huge!"

In a connection between using meaningful texts versus the lack of actual time for reading embedded in many commercial reading programs, Teacher #136 wrote: "It has been my dream to be able to use materials to teach reading that are meaningful for the students AND to have them spend most of their time reading. It is so frustrating to have 'fidelity to the core' when it means so little reading and so many worksheets."

What students need: Access to nonfiction texts. Although commercial reading programs have moved toward the inclusion of more nonfiction texts since the adoption of the CCSS, teachers in Oregon voiced wanting more nonfiction texts for their students. Teacher #19 said, "Reading at third grade is still a struggle for most students. Getting students into non-fiction level appropriate materials is difficult. If lucky you can find one in a basal ... I need more high interest reading materials to insure student-motivated reading."

Regardless of whether teachers used a commercial reading program or had access to other materials, Oregon teachers voiced the need for more nonfiction resources. Teacher #151 commented, "There are insufficient nonfiction texts available for all students" while teacher #296 stated, "[Any] text that is approved should include more non-fiction that is interesting to students." With relevancy in mind, teacher #169 wrote, "Teachers in Oregon need more monetary support in providing current non-fiction texts to students as well as access to relevant digital media and resources."

According to the participating teachers in Oregon, the status quo of reading instruction based with a reliance on commercial reading programs is not meeting the needs of their students. In addition, teachers expressed what they *did* need in order to meet the needs of their students.

Additional Survey Comments: What Teachers Need

Alongside the theme of what students needed for solid reading instruction, teachers commented frequently about what they viewed themselves needing to meet the needs of their learners. Consistently, teachers responded with the desire for professional autonomy to choose materials as well as access to purchasing funds and resources.

What teachers need: Professionalism in autonomy and choices. Teachers across Oregon included comments about wanting to be able to make more professional choices about what materials they use in their classrooms. Being provided the opportunity to make professional choices was the more commonly shared comment. This concern is softly reflected in the comments teachers made about what students in their classrooms need to be successful readers (previous section); they are stated in a more forthright manner below.

Teacher #107 wrote, "I think we need to be able to select from a wide variety of materials. There are benefits to teaching from anthologies, novels, on-line sources, and periodicals. While I understand the control that is wanted, educators also need to be allowed to use their professional judgment to select materials."

Teachers consistently voiced their desire to use their professional judgment in accessing materials. Teacher #186 wrote, "I use a combination of core, leveled readers, trade books, and digital texts... To an equal degree and feel all are valuable. The most important thing is that an expert teacher responds appropriately to the individual needs of students." This was echoed by a comment from teacher #274: "We need to use what is best for kids and unfortunately that is a variety of things and each kid is different so we have to have a variety of items we're allowed to use" and again by teacher 260: "It feels as if our hands are tied and we can't do what is best for kids, rather we do what's easiest, cheapest, best for the district."

Some of the pleas for professionalism included frustration, as heard from teacher 254, "We are professionals, dedicated to improving our students' reading abilities. Let us be the professionals—do not dictate exact curriculum OR exact materials, but instead provide viable, quality options for us to choose from. Do NOT micromanage, which is what appears to be happening. Thank you!" or just asked, as did teacher 261: "If teachers are considered professionals then why are we not allowed to do what is best for our students?"

Teacher #140 summed it up this way, "I wish teachers had more freedom to use our professional skills to determine what materials and books would boost the levels of our individual students. I see the basal programs as a recipe for cheap cafeteria slop--easy to cook up in big batches but low quality. I am a master chef--let me cook gourmet!"

What teachers need: Access to funds and resources. Teachers across Oregon want more access to funds they could use to purchase needed materials, and they wanted to choose from a variety of resources to meet the variety of needs in their classrooms.

One tension that emerged from respondents was that they spent large amounts of time pulling materials together, and at times, still were unable to find access the materials needed to meet the needs of their students. Teacher 16 captured this conflict, "There are a lot of books in my classroom library, but unfortunately they are not in the language of instruction for early literacy ... I don't have any curriculum to follow and all of my whole group instruction is wholly created by myself. This requires HOURS upon HOURS of extra work outside of my regular hours in order to teach my students. If I didn't sacrifice my own time with my family in the evenings and on weekend, my students would not learn."

Teacher #76 wrote, "In a class with students ranging from on grade level to 3 years behind grade level in reading, it can be a challenge to constantly try to create my own reading program, essentially, by selecting texts that we can use as a class."

Teachers of Teachers of Literacy & Policy Change

Teachers of Teachers of Literacy came together around literacy issues in Oregon. Our group has statewide geographical representation, and as our group formed, the issue of instructional materials quickly came to the surface. In the early years of the millennium, many schools in Oregon received Reading First grants. As of June 2007, Reading First

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grants impacted over 6,000 schools in 1,700 school districts across the United States—ten percent of the public school population (USDOE, 2009). In Oregon, over 200 schools received these Reading First funds, which required schools to purchase and use core instructional materials. The instructional materials purchased by school districts were also used in the general school population: non-Reading First schools were impacted by Reading First purchases, leaving an imprint on the reading instruction children receive nationwide and the materials used by their teachers.

Implications for teacher educators and teacher education programs

As teacher educators, it is our responsibility to stay current on state policy decisions and to understand how the implementation of adopted policies affect teachers and students in classrooms. K-12 classroom teachers have limited time to participate in decision-making at the state level. Teacher educators can work as allies with teachers in the field to understand what materials they believe will best serve their students. In addition, teacher educators can build relationships with policymakers to share research from the larger field and the classroom teacher perspectives.

The Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards to which many teacher education programs adhere include expectations for teachers to evaluate curricular materials (InTASC #4) and integrate materials that will meet the needs of a variety of learners (InTASC #7). Coursework at the university level should include instruction on how to find classroom resources that meet the diverse needs of learners and align with state and national standards. Although new teachers have limited time to read current research, they should know where to find research on the topics that are important for the learning of their students. National organizations provide policy statements based on research in the broader field; teachers entering the profession should be aware of their professional organizations and where to find the research on topics of importance for their learners.

In addition, teacher education programs can encourage leadership in order for graduates to be agents of positive change. Graduates should understand the importance of working on district-level committees that make decisions about curriculum. In Oregon, we place strong importance on candidate use of culturally relevant materials. Taking that understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy into a curricular materials adoption committee allows for analysis of potential materials through a critical lens.

Allied Voices

ToTL has seen a generation of school children instructed using core reading materials alongside a stagnation of reaching achievement in the state. Additionally, ToTL has heard general frustrations from teachers about the materials they have access to in their classrooms. Coming together as a group has allowed us to focus on an important statewide issue, collect data to inform our work, and meet with policymakers at the state level to work toward policy change. Furthermore, it has allowed us to see trends in how the issue impacts teachers from varying contexts across the state, such as rural vs. urban and different demographic compositions. Allowing space for teachers to share their professional perspectives about the impact of legislation on the students they serve daily is vital. The survey and open-ended response items allowed for teachers to provide input that the ToTL group compiled and shared, providing an opportunity for teacher voices to come

together to show the complexity of considerations related to instructional materials. Teachers entering the profession can learn from this collaborative effort; a coordination of similar research at the national level could provide implications for national policy that impacts education.

Author's Note: Five authors contributed to this article: Maika J. Yeigh (Portland State University), Amanda Villagomez (Eastern Oregon University), Susan J. Lenski (Portland State University), Dot McElhone (Portland State University), & Mindy Legard Larsen (Linfield College). However, the larger research project was conducted by members of Teachers of Teachers of Literacy (ToTL), specifically the following people in addition to the authors: Melanie Landon-Hays (Western Oregon University), Marie LeJeune (Western Oregon University), Carol Lauritzen (Eastern Oregon University), Kim Ilsovay (University of Portland), & Dennis Davis (University of Texas).

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