

SELECTING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS: BRIEF 1 – QUALITY

How Teachers Judge the Quality of Instructional Materials

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With the adoption of new learning standards, states and districts have had to rewrite curriculum and adopt new instructional materials. States have had little to guide them in adopting new instructional materials or in determining what other states are using or how effective the materials are. Recent research has shown that the quality of instructional materials can make a big difference in student learning. New resources, such as EdReports (<http://www.edreports.org>) launched in 2015, supply third-party ratings and reviews of textbooks, to help states and districts make decisions about the quality of textbooks. Using an educator-designed tool that measures alignment, usability, and other quality criteria, these ratings and reviews help districts and educators to make informed purchasing and instructional decisions in support of positive student outcomes.

Textbooks are not the only source of instructional materials that teachers routinely use in their classrooms. In the focus groups conducted for this brief — in which teachers in six cities talked about how they obtain, judge the quality of, and select instructional materials — all teachers made it clear that they use materials that they have sourced themselves to supplement the required text materials. A separate brief in this series, *Teachers' Perceptions and Practices Related to the Adoption of Instructional Materials*, documents teachers' descriptions of their reasons for and sources of their supplementation choices.

The fact that all teachers in the focus groups reported that they are using supplemental materials raises the question of how they judge the quality of the materials that they select. This brief describes the criteria that teachers indicated that they apply when judging the quality of instructional materials.

Background

With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, WestEd is studying how teachers make decisions about which instructional materials to use in their classrooms. WestEd's work is designed to support a portfolio of Hewlett-funded grantees working to improve the quality and consistency of instructional materials in classrooms across the United States. In 2016, WestEd researchers conducted focus groups with teachers in six cities to develop a baseline understanding of how they obtain, judge the quality of, and select instructional materials. Specifically, WestEd researchers explored three areas of interest: (1) teachers' judgments of what constitutes quality materials, (2) why and how teachers choose to supplement the adopted materials, and (3) teachers' descriptions of processes for adopting instructional materials in their districts and schools. This brief focuses on the first area of interest: how teachers judge the quality of instructional materials. All three briefs are available online at <http://WestEd.org/bookstore>.

Teachers' Role in Judging Quality During the Adoption Process

As part of the screening process for focus groups in the metro areas of Boston, Denver, New Orleans, Raleigh, Seattle, and Tampa, the research team selected teachers who had participated in a formal materials adoption process in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, or both in the past five years. Teachers' participation in the process varied, but all were engaged in reviewing and offering recommendations to their districts on what materials to adopt. (For additional information about district-level materials adoption processes, see another brief in this series: *Teachers' Perceptions and Practices Related to the Adoption of Instructional Materials*.)

In most of the focus groups, teachers indicated that when they began the process of vetting instructional materials, they typically did not have a formally defined rubric or set of criteria for selecting materials. Instead, criteria emerged as they engaged with the materials, thought about what they did or did not like about the materials, and discussed the materials with colleagues. According to focus-group participants, the vetting process could be as simple as teachers being given a few hours to review the materials in the school library and then voting on their preferences, or could be a yearlong effort involving multiple committees reviewing the materials.

I was on the committee for choosing which textbook would be adopted. I was to review the books, list pros/cons for each book, give my input and suggestion[s].

— Teacher, Tampa Area

The head of the math department came to all of us with a bag with Go Math, Big Ideas Math, CMP II, and Singapore Math, and said, "Try this in your classroom. . . .

Tell me what you think." We had a meeting all together. We eliminated one of them and there were three that we still liked. We did another unit. We eliminated another one. Then, there were two that we still liked. Then, [the department head] had a parent committee. . . . She showed them both books and she walked them through some things and asked which one was more appealing to their student, which one was more comprehensive — all things like this. So, after doing that, she came back with the ideas from the parents. . . . Then both [the publishers] came to talk to us about [the materials]. . . . We asked questions and we tried problems. . . . Then, we said what we wanted and made the decision.

— Teacher, Boston Area

Despite the lack of a formal set of criteria for judging quality in most districts, teachers agreed that one essential criterion is that the materials must align to state standards. Some teachers indicated that they would talk to colleagues in other districts whom they knew to be using a particular text or series, and would ask how their colleagues liked the materials and try to ascertain whether the materials were aligned to standards. More typically, teachers reported that they would review materials, alone or in teams, for alignment. Once teachers determined that materials were aligned, they began to apply other criteria, such as accuracy, visual appeal, ease of use, potential for student engagement, and support for needed differentiation.

This one particular textbook that we really liked because it had all the things that we talked about — the standard[s] alignments, the real-world applicability — it was easy to use. There were lots of ways to get into critical thinking and differentiate both ends of the spectrum. We're like, "This thing is

great.” And it wasn’t as flashy; it didn’t have the traditional big hardbound textbook with all the pictures of the college professors on the front.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

Very aligned to specifically what the children are expected to be able to do, according to the standards, would be, like, my number one. And is it relevant . . . [and] real applicable, like, real-world . . . and having them learn by doing? And then teacher- and kid-friendliness. Like, is it easy for the teacher to just go in there and use it? . . . Is it easy for the kids to use and understand?

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

When districts or schools adopt new materials, teachers need time to learn how to use them. In particular, teachers may need extra time if changes in instruction are needed in order to focus on the standards that are addressed in the materials. Some of the teachers in the focus groups said that their districts provided extensive support to help them understand how to use newly adopted materials. Other teachers said that the materials “just showed up,” with no explanation or support, and that they never used those materials. Most teachers indicated that they worked with other teachers to figure out how to use new materials. Several teachers complained that their districts or schools change curriculum materials too frequently.

We jump on one bandwagon every time it comes through, and we never save anything good from the last bandwagon.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

The Role of Teachers’ Professional Judgment in Selecting Supplemental Materials

Most teachers in the focus groups reported that they have considerable autonomy to supplement the district- or school-adopted instructional materials with additional materials that they select. They also have leeway to determine whether the supplemental materials that they select are aligned with standards and with the goals of their classroom, grade level, and school. Teachers described the importance of developing their own professional judgment to select supplemental materials.

When asked whether they had a formal set of criteria that they used when selecting supplemental materials, most teachers responded that classroom needs drove their search but that they did not have a formal set of criteria that they applied. Instead, teachers sought materials that would address their students’ learning needs, and many considerations affected their decisions about potential new materials. Many teachers said that they knew from experience what to look for in supplemental materials and that they knew the indicators of which materials should be eliminated from consideration for their classroom.

Most teachers indicated that they are allowed to use their professional judgment in selecting supplemental materials and crafting lessons to meet the needs of their students. Many teachers voiced strong support for the notion that teaching is an art and that their job is to use their knowledge and experience in finding the right materials and the right ways to use those materials.

One of the things that makes it hard is, I think, is that teaching really is an art rather than a science. There are many different ways to get at something and to express it, and to get to a successful end. I think having goals, having knowledge and experience,

listening, having judgment, and getting feedback from the kids are all a part of it. Then learning how to engage and getting them enthused, that takes a certain amount of skill and talent.

— Teacher, Seattle Area

Many teachers talked about their difficulties as new teachers trying to decide whether instructional materials were the right ones for their students. They noted that having enough knowledge to vet new materials required experience. Most teachers said that they had received no guidance, or limited guidance, from their districts or schools about criteria to use for selecting supplemental instructional materials. Teachers also reported that they had not participated in professional development designed to help them develop criteria for selecting supplementary instructional materials. For most teachers, the guidance that they had received was from other teachers who shared the experiences that they had accumulated throughout their careers.

I think that through our teacher education we kind of picked up on those notes, you know, like that there are certain things that are good resources and things that aren't, but nobody explicitly sat us down and said "This is how you look for resources and how you tell whether it's reliable or not." I think that that's just something that you pick up.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

When I went through my master's program, it was assumed that either I would be taking from the textbook or I would be writing my own lessons. There was none of this, "You'll probably beg, borrow, and steal too." No one ever said that out loud.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

Criteria for Selecting Instructional Materials

The following sections describe the four primary categories of criteria that teachers said they use when selecting instructional materials: accuracy and visual appeal, alignment to standards and depth of knowledge, ease of use and support, and engagement and ability to meet student needs (Figure 1).

Accuracy and visual appeal

Focus-group teachers indicated that if they find errors of any kind — such as grammatical errors, spelling errors, inaccurate information, or wrong answer sheets to problems — in instructional materials, they quickly eliminate those materials from consideration. Many of the focus-group teachers said that they had rejected school- or district-supplied materials because they had found errors in those materials.

I know it might seem silly, but spacing and the coloring in the book don't give enough room for the kids to show their work.

— Teacher, Boston Area

We get a lot [of errors] — the first year in math is a nightmare. . . . I don't know how it happens, but the answers are wrong.

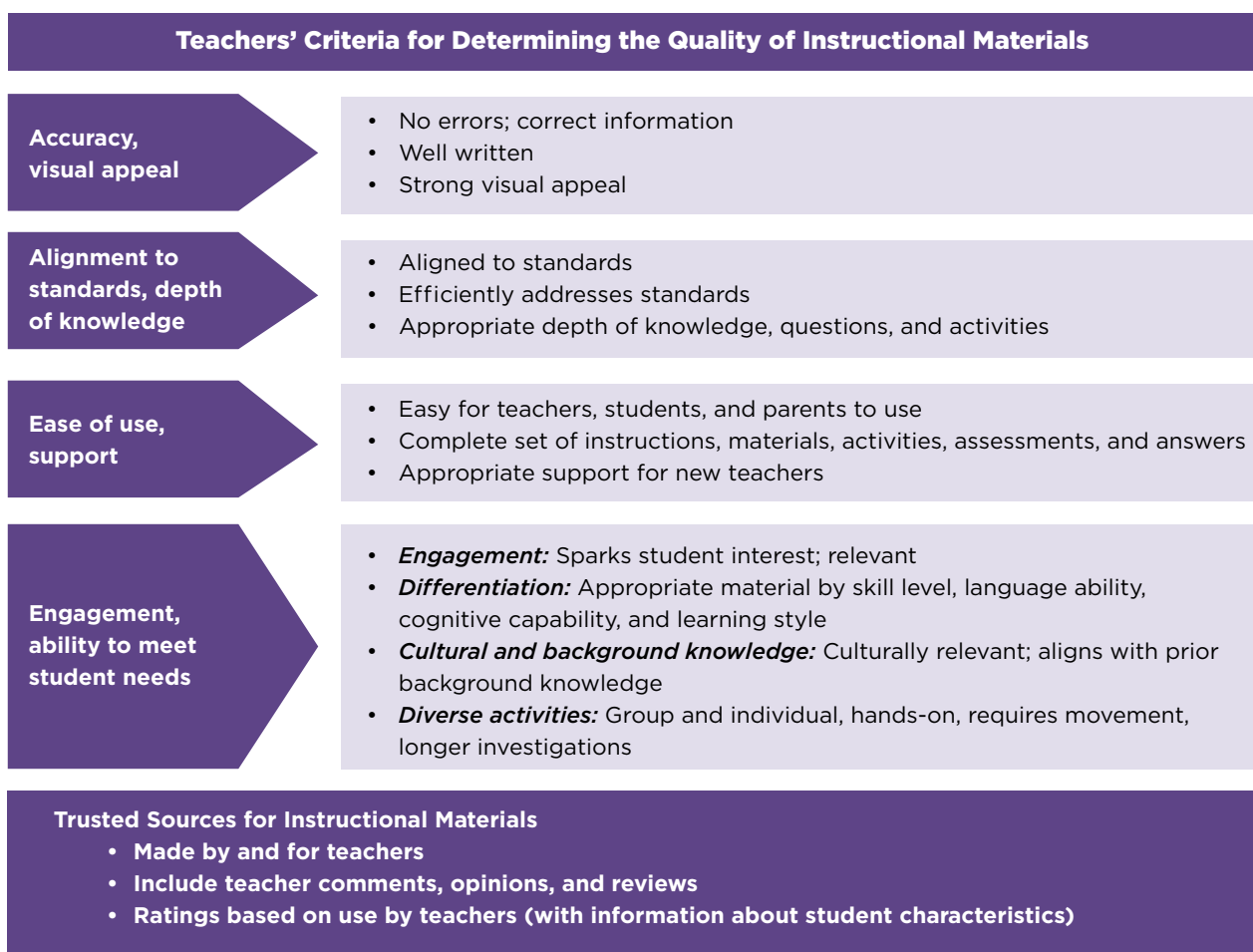
— Teacher, Tampa Area

We've seen spelling errors, grammatical errors. At one point there was something the district told us we had to [use], and it referred to Africa as a country.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

Focus-group teachers said that, in addition to containing incorrect information and other errors, some materials are poorly written and/or not visually appealing. Several teachers cited visual appeal as an important attribute for engaging students.

Figure 1. Teachers' Criteria for Determining the Quality of Instructional Materials



As far as the look, it has to be clean and not messy. A lot of our kids have ADD or ADHD, and they look at it and they're like, "This just looks awful." It just looks like so much to do, and immediately, as soon as they open the page of the workbook or the book, they're overwhelmed.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

Alignment to standards and depth of knowledge

Most focus-group teachers expressed that the one thing that they need to be able to show their principal or coach is that the materials that they use

are aligned to standards. Teachers indicated that they typically use their own judgment to determine whether materials are aligned.

I'm given a lot of autonomy to choose my own materials. All they really care about is the standards and [whether I am] going to cover all the standards.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

It will be addressing a certain standard, but when you start doing the lesson, you're like, "This does not even meet the standard."

— Teacher, Tampa Area

These teachers are not simply trying to eliminate non-aligned materials; they reported needing to consider how a lesson or set of lessons affects their ability to teach all of the other required standards over the course of a year.

There are tons of things that I want to do, but I know that I have to teach this test at the end of the year, so I cannot spend 5 to 10 days on surface area, as much as I'd love to. . . . I don't have all that time. . . . If it's going to take up that much time, does it go across multiple standards? Because if it's just one standard . . . [I] can't do it. But if it's going to teach four or five standards over a two-week period, okay.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

Another consideration that teachers described is the depth of knowledge or rigor embodied in the materials. Teachers reported that materials that lack the required depth are not useful to them in the classroom.

The problem solving is not rigorous enough. . . . So we have to pull a lot for problem solving from other resources, online things. And our assistant principal actually found us two or three good performance assessments for each unit, that are more rigorous.

— Teacher, Denver Area

There's not enough reading being done. . . . I mean, we hand kids these graphic novels, these dumbed-down versions of classics, and we're not having them really go deep and learn. It's more "What color was the main character's shirt?" as opposed to literature analysis and some actual reading.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

Teachers said that, when considering depth of knowledge, they look at the activities and tasks

associated with the materials that they use. They also analyze the types of questions in the texts and what those questions require of the students. According to focus-group teachers, better materials have activities and questions that help to convey the depth of knowledge that the teachers want to address with their students, regardless of the students' level of proficiency in the subject.

If there are any bubbles, it's gone. It's not going to help them. If there is matching, it's not going to help them. If it's fill-in-the-blank, it's not going to help them. So that's kind of a process of elimination. When it's open-ended, when it's like, "How did [the] character change? What happened here? What might have happened if . . . ?" So I'm looking for more of the hypothetical. More of the situational questions. More of the subjective questioning. And things that are kicking them into those higher levels of analysis and evaluating what they're reading, as opposed to just spitting back facts.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

And critical-thinking skills — am I still going to have to spend a lot of time to do that piece? And even, not just for your higher-level kids but [for] your lower-level, your mid-level kids. We've got to challenge them with your level 3s and 4s depth of knowledge-type questions, your critical-thinking questions.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

I look for depth of knowledge questions, especially in reading. . . . When I'm looking on Pinterest or any of those things, there's certain [ones] where you evaluate, describe, compare, analyze. Anything with those words — that pulls my attention.

— Teacher, Denver Area

Teachers indicated that they often have a goal in mind for how they want students to be interacting or participating in dialogue. They try to find materials that will help create the classroom learning environment that they want to achieve, and ask whether the materials will help their students think more critically about a topic, whether the materials will spark dialogue and discussion, and whether the materials will foster creative, collaborative problem solving.

[Desmos.com] is big on grapples, creating situations where there's not necessarily a fully resolvable answer, but you have to engage in mathematical reasoning, really do problem solving, and really build, which goes to creating a compelling reason for why you would [use those materials].

— Teacher, Boston Area

We wanted to engage their thinking so that they have something to say at the end of it. If they have nothing to say — they just did it and got it done — then when you ask for discussion there is nothing to be had, because there is nothing worthy of discussion. Picking the pieces, whether it's a math word problem or it's reading, it has to have something they're going to come back and have either questions or have a comment about.

— Teacher, Seattle Area

Ease of use and support

The focus-group teachers indicated that they try to avoid instructional materials that are not easy to use, whether for teachers, students, and/or parents to use. Teachers said they aim to select instructional materials that have everything that they need for a lesson and that minimize the burden on teachers. Materials require too much time and energy if, for example, the materials are incomplete, and the teacher needs to hunt for the missing

pieces or figure out the answers to problems, or if parents cannot understand them, causing teachers to spend more time explaining.

A lot of times you do spend a lot of your time trying to search for the [additional] materials that [a given set of materials] recommends. And that is . . . it's just very time-consuming.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

Parents don't like [it if] it's not online. If the kids are at home, they can't access it.

— Teacher, Boston Area

According to focus-group teachers, instructional materials are easy to use if everything is clear for them and for students, if all activities are listed, if supporting materials for all activities are included, if accurate answers are provided, and if the level of effort needed to use the materials is doable.

I think something that makes it appealing is, is it child-friendly and also teacher-friendly? . . . It's stuff that we either already have or it's all there in whatever we're purchasing. If it's a game, it's all there. If it's some type of activity, a learning activity, the stuff is all there, whether we're purchasing from a store or we're purchasing it online. It's like, "you need to get this book to read and talk about this, how to solve this problem" — it's all together.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

Will it engage the students, and do I have the time and energy to pull it off? Yes, those two go together, because things to engage the students most [are usually] the biggest eaters of time.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

It has to be convenient. The one thing about [our textbook] that's convenient is the way that it's set up in the teacher guidelines. You

see exactly what needs to be learned. The objective is very clear. . . . [It has] a clear layout and it's not too wordy. . . . I don't need you to tell me exactly what to say. I need you to give me the activities. I need you to give me supplemental activities or even just ideas for how I can scaffold.

— Teacher, New Orleans Area

Focus-group participants noted that new teachers often struggle with trying to anticipate what students will find easy to use. Teachers said that it often takes several years for teachers to build up a repertoire of lessons and activities that they know will work with certain types of learners. Newer teachers need a lot of support from colleagues and coaches to select materials and learn the best ways to use those materials.

Since I'm still pretty new, it's hard for me to gauge what is going to be readable and what's not. I can't look at a text and tell you the reading level.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

I want [students] to engage in the conversation. You don't just do that, right? That takes years of experience and expertise to really create the questions and the type of lessons to get [students] to go there.

— Teacher, New Orleans Area

Engagement and ability to meet student needs

In the focus groups, teachers described knowing their students, how the students learn and what they can do, and how they have previously responded to materials and activities. The teachers use that knowledge to determine whether new materials will engage their students.

Many teachers commented that part of the reason that they supplement school- or district-adopted

materials is in order to engage their students in a way that the adopted materials are not able to. Some teachers talked about materials being boring for both students and teachers. As one teacher noted, “If I am bored, they are bored.”

I used it the first year. And after about the third or fourth lesson — watching my kids be just so bored. It's so repetitive and it's so busy. I can't bring myself to do it. I know it's not in their best interest.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

It's just flat. They're not engaged with it. It's just facts thrown at them, so I don't think I've picked it up in two years. Everything I've done has been supplemented.

— Teacher, Boston Area

Focus-group teachers described student engagement as essential. They said that they need to find ways to hook the students on the materials and tasks, and then to help the students go deeper into the standards, skills, and activities, and that they want students to see that the materials are relevant to the students' lives.

Is this something that's going to hook them and hold their interest? If it's not, even if it teaches the standards, it's not worth implementing.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

For me, a lot of it is the demographic of my class, as I listen to what they tell me: What are they interested in, what are the things that are coming up for them, what are topics that would be of interest?

— Teacher, Seattle Area

Teachers said that if they think a set of materials will engage their students, they also need to determine whether the materials allow for the types and

levels of differentiation that their students need, align with students' cultural and background knowledge, and have a diverse set of activities.

Meeting student needs: Differentiation

Focus-group teachers noted that, because every class is different, materials and activities that work for one class may not work for another. Within and across classes, most teachers have a mix of students who vary by skill levels, language abilities, cognitive capabilities, and learning styles.

You can teach the same concept five times a day and the classes would go five different directions, based on the kids that are in front of you. So, if the text or whatever you're using only allows it to go one way, then that's only one successful class, because the other ones wanted to learn it a different way.

— Teacher, Boston Area

One year something works, and then the next year you go, "Oh my gosh, this is not going to work with these kids." So we are constantly having to reinvent.

— Teacher, Seattle Area

Teachers said that they often use supplemental materials for individual students who need something different, or for groups of students who are ahead or behind. Sometimes teachers remember what worked for a similar student in a prior class; at other times they must search for new solutions to help a particular student. Even when searching for materials for the whole class, teachers said they are mindful of their need to offer something for each different type of student.

Every once in a while we'll say OK, and we'll flip through [the adopted ELA materials]. And we're like, "This has one good text in it that

half of our students can use." But we need to find something else for the other half of our students, because they don't need this right now.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

I want to have really complex questions. I want to have middle-of-the road questions. And I want to have basic questions.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

Meeting student needs: Cultural and background knowledge

Teachers explained that part of engaging students is understanding the students' background knowledge and cultures. Teachers indicated that they would reject materials that assumed background knowledge that their students do not have, if the materials did not provide enough support to help students obtain that knowledge.

We check for bias in pictures and in stories. We look at the stories and story lines and see if [they're] at all biased. Then we also have to look at languages, if it comes in more than just Spanish and English.

— Teacher, Seattle Area

Your books need to address the multicultural makeup of our city.

— Teacher, New Orleans Area

Meeting student needs: Diverse activities

Another way that teachers said they engage students is by offering a wide range of activities that allow the students to work with materials in a variety of ways. Teachers said they actively look for instructional materials that help them address different learning styles (such as kinetic learners) and that promote students' working together as well as independently.

[Materials] should have . . . an attention getter and . . . a quick activity that [students] can do together. And then some kind of movement — the movement activity maybe first — and then something they can do together. And then some independent, so you know that Joey and Suzie got it.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

I'm looking for stuff that's hands-on, that can have color to it. I'm looking to address the tactile learners. We have auditory learners, and by having them work together and talking about it, it really helps us more.

— Teacher, Tampa Area

Whom Do Teachers Trust for Judging Instructional Materials?

I just feel like you just trust the people you're working with. And you don't have time, you don't have time to look at everything, so you rely upon the hive mind.

— Teacher, Boston Area

One of the topics explored in this study was the role of third-party rating sites in informing teacher judgments about the quality of instructional materials. However, the teachers who participated in the focus groups were not aware of third-party rating sites such as EdReports, and thus did not use them. Whom *do* teachers trust for advice, according to the focus-group participants? First, they trust their own experience as a teacher:

Sometimes I'm like, "Well, I've done this for six years in fourth grade, and my kids get it, and this is what helps them." . . . I feel like that's a research base too, which I think sometimes gets overlooked.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

Second, teachers trust their colleagues, with whom they interact throughout the year. They know and understand their colleagues' approaches to teaching and have formed opinions about them. They often share students.

I think it's interesting how powerful just the trust in your colleagues is in this situation because, literally, with this book, we were only going to do it with sixth grade, and then I just told everyone I liked it. And now, all of a sudden, seventh and eighth grade [were] just like, "Alright, we'll do it too, then."

— Teacher, Boston Area

Focus-group teachers indicated that when teachers develop instructional materials together, they end up creating a professional learning community that develops materials, tries out the materials, critiques the result, and then tweaks the materials for future use. Teachers spoke highly of this process — when it works — but also acknowledged that it is a time-consuming process.

We started in May that year, and we stayed after school once a week for hours and we mapped out what we want to do for reading. And we wrote a lot of our own projects and things we found, texts that we liked. And we did a lot of writing our own things, and then we would both teach it and come back together and, say, we would make adjustments for the next year. We've been doing that ever since Common Core has come in. And I think that's the way a quality product is developed. Sometimes you just have to write your own stuff. . . . Sometimes you just have to create it from scratch.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

In addition to relying on colleagues in their schools, teachers also indicated that they trust materials that are put together by other teachers

in other districts (and in other states), especially if the materials are accompanied by comments, opinions, and reviews by teachers.

I use [Teachers Pay Teachers] and I think what's so good about that . . . is that it's made actually by teachers. Not just someone who is making an activity in a cubicle somewhere.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

What draws me to it is not only that it's made by teachers, but we have, they give us, that evidence and that reflection [on] when and how they've used it. When they've used it. How it's worked. And then you can see everyone's [opinions] who has chosen to partake in it. All their comments. All their adjustments. All their questions.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

A lot of us talk to our friends who are teachers in other districts — what are you using, . . . what are the pros, what are the cons?

— Teacher, Boston Area

Focus-group teachers did not seem to trust materials that had not been made or vetted by other teachers. They conveyed a belief that the most effective materials are developed and reviewed by teachers who have been able to try the materials and who can offer nuanced and informed opinions.

I think a lot of things that are created are by people who have gone to college and they sit around board rooms and they create things and they've never actually taught. And I think that's unbelievable. It has to come from teachers. It has to come from teachers.

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

I mean, if the consumer reviews were from experts in the field and we've done studies and it proves this, that wouldn't mean as

much to me as if a colleague says, "I've used this and it works."

— Teacher, Boston Area

Summary

According to researchers' analyses of the focus-group teachers' responses, teachers apply a complex set of criteria when considering new instructional materials for their classrooms. Teachers described using criteria that fall into four main categories: (1) accuracy and visual appeal, (2) alignment to standards and depth of knowledge, (3) ease of use and support, and (4) engagement and ability to meet student needs. Teachers described the primary sources of these criteria as tacit knowledge derived from classroom experience. Few teachers articulated or explicitly laid out their criteria for selecting instructional materials. Fewer described the existence of a formalized process in their schools for teachers to use in selecting instructional materials. For the most part, teachers indicated that criteria emerge as teachers seek materials, or during their dialogues with one another about materials that they are considering.

Although focus-group facilitators did not probe teachers' knowledge of the Common Core or of their particular states' standards, the teachers indicated a familiarity with the new standards. They discussed instructional shifts, such as a focus on small-group work, and the importance of students being able to demonstrate discipline-specific conceptual and procedural fluency. For example, focus-group teachers described needs for materials that do not elicit easy answers and that require students to use critical thinking skills and practice fundamentals. Additionally, all teachers in the focus groups described needing students to succeed on summative (end-of-year) assessments, indicating that standards alignment is a critical part of their quality criteria for evaluating instructional materials.

Focus-group participants indicated that teachers trust instructional materials that have been developed and vetted by other teachers; they prefer materials that have been reviewed by other teachers who have used the materials in classrooms; and they prefer to have some information about the student population(s) with whom the materials were used.

Lastly, teachers indicated that they had received little formal training on how to develop quality criteria for selecting instructional materials, and that their schools or districts generally had not provided professional development on how to select materials. Teachers indicated that experience in their classrooms and conversations with colleagues had been their main sources for gaining knowledge about judging the quality of instructional materials.

Discussion

According to focus-group participants, teachers have a set of criteria — albeit tacit criteria — for assessing the quality of instructional materials for

use in their classrooms, and they will not utilize materials that do not pass muster. The focus-group teachers conveyed that materials must be accurate and appealing, easy to use, engaging, and aligned to the standards. These teachers did not indicate any awareness of resources such as EdReports that could help them to examine the criteria that they use to judge the quality of instructional materials.

Districts and schools might consider promoting professional learning communities for the purpose of developing and making transparent the criteria that teachers use to assess the quality of instructional materials. Such learning communities might also encourage sharing of resources and provide needed support for new teachers.

Similarly, curriculum providers may need to communicate more clearly about how teachers were involved in the development and refinement of instructional materials, and about how the materials meet teachers' quality concerns. This information, as well as ratings by teachers who have used the materials, could be presented in trainings that are co-developed by curriculum providers, districts, and schools.

Appendix 1: Sample and Methods

The data for this project were collected through group interviews with teachers in varied metropolitan areas across the country. A total of 14 focus groups were held in six metro locations: Boston, Denver, New Orleans, Raleigh, Seattle, and Tampa. In each of these locations, the project team hired a local firm to recruit participants. In addition, the project team used Craigslist advertisements to recruit teachers for two focus groups, in the Raleigh and Tampa metro areas. Prospective participants were screened using a short survey, to ensure that they were currently credentialed teachers working in public schools and that they had participated in either an English language arts (ELA) or a mathematics materials adoption process within five years of the focus group. The project team also required prospective participants to respond to a short-answer questionnaire regarding quality of materials. This process yielded a total of 65 ELA and/or mathematics teachers, from elementary schools (62%) and middle schools (38%). A total of 31 districts were represented, with an average total enrollment of 85,608 per district, and an average non-White student population of 56 percent across the districts.

About three quarters of participants (48) had been involved in materials adoption activities within the prior two years; the rest of the participants (17) had been involved in adoption activities within five years of the focus groups. In both the Seattle and Denver metro areas, the number of participants who had experience in the adoption of ELA materials was roughly equivalent to the number of participants who had experience in the adoption of mathematics materials. In the other four locations, slightly more participants had experience in the adoption of ELA materials than mathematics materials. In most locations, participants were about as likely to have been involved in both ELA and mathematics materials adoptions as they were to have participated in

the adoption of materials in only one subject. In the Boston area, most participants had been involved in only one subject's adoption process.

The focus-group interviews were intended to collect information about how teachers make judgments about the quality of instructional materials. Another interest of the study was to learn about why and how teachers sought additional instructional materials to supplement those adopted by their schools and districts. And a third interest was to collect information about school and district processes for adopting new instructional materials under the Common Core State Standards or other new standards, as well as information about teachers' roles in those processes.

Focus groups were facilitated by WestEd senior research staff and were limited to a maximum of eight participants per focus group. Questions were open-ended and structured by a protocol. However, the facilitator was also able to follow the participants' interests. Participants were regularly asked to support their statements by describing the materials adoption committees in which they had participated and by describing experiences in their classrooms.

The focus-group responses were transcribed, and the transcripts were coded in a two-part process. First, teacher statements that would inform the three primary interests of the project (materials adoption processes, teachers' judgments about materials quality, and supplementing adopted materials) were identified. Coding was non-exclusive, in that any statement or set of statements by teachers could be coded multiple ways. Codes were applied broadly, including as much information as needed to provide context for each statement. The first round of coding produced collections of quotations from across research sites. These collections were then read closely as a set, in order to develop a more refined and emergent

coding scheme for each of the three areas. The collection of quotations was then recoded using these thematic codes.

The exploratory nature of these focus groups, as well as the open-ended protocol, prevents strict quantifying of the findings. However, the themes described in this brief, as well as their subthemes, represent topics that were discussed substantially, often across multiple focus groups and by various groups of teachers. This brief and the other two briefs in this series explain these themes and use quotations as examples of teachers' statements to illustrate the themes.

Nonetheless, the themes that are discussed in these briefs should be interpreted with caution, as these focus groups capture the views of only a small number of teachers, and the statements made by these teachers are not necessarily representative of the teachers' schools, districts, or states. In addition, not every teacher in the focus groups remarked on every discussed topic, so the statements in these briefs should not be interpreted as the consensus of any focus group, except in instances that are explicitly noted as representing views expressed by all teachers.

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Suggested citation: Bugler, D., Marple, S., Burr, E., Chen-Gardini, M., & Finkelstein, N. (2017). *How teachers judge the quality of instructional materials*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

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The development of this brief was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The contents of this brief do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder.

