NCTE Guideline

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Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs

Approved by the NCTE Executive Committee
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Instructional materials are essential tools in the English language arts classroom. They allow students to interact with words, images, and ideas in ways that develop their abilities in multiple literacies such as reading, listening, viewing, thinking, speaking, writing, and technology. Because instructional materials are a primary resource for English language arts teachers, they must be selected wisely.

The cornerstone of consistent, pedagogically sound selection practices is a clear, written policy for the selection of materials in the English language arts program. Such a policy not only helps teachers to achieve program goals, but also helps schools protect the integrity of programs increasingly under pressure from censors, propagandists, and commercial interests.

Because selection policies should reflect local interests and issues and should be consistent with other locally developed policies and curriculum documents, NCTE provides no "boilerplate" to be used as a model by local schools. However, NCTE strongly recommends that English language arts teachers and school boards use the following guidelines to develop or review policies for inclusion of materials in English language arts programs.

Scope of the Policy for Selection of Instructional Materials

What do we mean by "instructional materials"? In the past, the answer might have been simply textbooks and workbooks. Today, however, the range has broadened considerably, including young adult and graphic novels, informational text, websites, and ever-changing technology. The focus of this document, then, is not on selection in the narrow sense of textbook adoption, but on curriculum and program planning that entails selection of a wide range of materials, both print and digital, that can be used in whole-class study, small-group work, and by individual students in extensive study.

As schools clarify the scope of the policy, they should consider not only purchased materials, but also materials that are provided online as well as those generated by the teacher and even the students (e.g., student writings discussed in class or small groups). Also, the scope of the policy should not unwittingly stifle spontaneity and creativity in teachers by requiring a formal selection process for all materials used for instructional purposes. Sometimes the most effective learning experiences are those that make use of unanticipated instructional materials: a letter to the editor, a blog or tweet, for instance, or a newly released video version of a literary work read by the class.

It is important, too, to distinguish between selection of materials and censorship of materials. (See NCTE's Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines [http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/censorshipprofguide] .) Selection of instructional materials is part of sound program planning. Needless to say, careful selection is a powerful buffer against challenges because it assures that the program planning process was thoughtful and not haphazard. NCTE has previously published many materials on responding to challenges, recommending that orderly procedures be followed when an objection to instructional materials is made.

Criteria

Each school should develop its own criteria for selecting materials for inclusion in English language arts programs, but virtually all criteria relate to two general requirements for selections: materials must (1) have a clear connection to established educational objectives and (2) address the needs of the students for whom they are intended.

Connection to Educational Objectives

Instructional materials in the English language arts program should align with the general philosophy of the school or district, the curriculum goals and objectives of the English language arts program, and the learning outcomes of the particular course or grade level. For instance, some materials may be included because they reflect the school's philosophy of encouraging critical thinking in relation to controversial situations and points of view. Or materials may be included because they meet the curriculum objective of presenting articulate voices from different eras or diverse cultures. Or they may be included to address specific learner outcomes, such as understanding how imagery can underscore theme. As an example, Khaled Hossein's *The Kite Runner* may serve all of these purposes while Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* may serve only some of them. However, because both of these high quality works have a clear connection to educational objectives of the school, both might be included in the English language arts program. Publishers and policymakers have found it easier than ever to compile national lists of "standards-aligned materials" because of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). While such lists may provide insight and guidance, decision-making about the selection of materials should still be shaped by local goals and objectives. Adoption of such lists may also hinder teacher-generated lessons and materials and rigid adherence to such lists limits the inclusion of timely materials that are often powerful teaching tools for any number of standards.

Policies should also reflect the understanding that an English language arts program is not one instructional resource, but many; not one curriculum objective, but several. Therefore, English language arts policies should seek to build a collection of instructional materials that as a whole create balance and emphasis in the curriculum. Clearly, no single textbook or set of instructional materials will meet the curricular goals of presenting various points of view, situations, and styles; addressing diverse ability levels; and representing the contributions of people of diverse religions, ages, races, ethnicity, abilities, and cultures. Nonetheless, the collection of materials in the English language arts program as a whole should address all of these concerns and should emphasize those which teachers, as informed professionals working within the district's philosophical framework, find particularly important.

Finally, materials must be selected with an eye toward coordinating instruction within and between grade levels, courses, and disciplines. For example, students who read or watch Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* in social studies, English, and health are getting too much of a good thing. So are the students who reported studying Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" every year in grades 7-10. By contrast, teachers of junior English cannot draw on students' shared literary background if teachers at earlier levels have used a potpourri of unarticulated works. This is not an argument for a fixed, lock-step curriculum but for a collegial sharing of goals and ideas for instructional materials as teachers engage in the process of selecting materials.

With the adoption and implementation of the CCSS, much emphasis has been placed on the need to use complex texts with students, leading to requirements for selection procedures to incorporate this dimension as an expectation of educational objectives. The concept of increasing text complexity over time is not new to English language arts teachers, while qualification of what is meant by "text complexity" in CCSS terms is new and must be considered. Appendix A of the CCSS attempts to clarify that text complexity should be determined by three "equally important components": quantitative measures (assessed by readability formulas measuring sentence length and word frequency to assign Lexile or grade levels); qualitative measures (assessed by adults measuring content, structures, knowledge demands, and clarity); and by reader and task considerations (assessed by teachers weighing knowledge of individual readers' motivation, experiences, background knowledge and considering the complexity of task(s) associated with a text (p. 4, 2010). Misinterpretations about determining text complexity are common, with publishers, state and local policy leaders focusing more heavily on the quantitative dimension and Lexile/Readability levels. Over-dependence on quantitative measures of text complexity is erroneous on behalf of publishers and policy leaders and perilous on behalf of students. Teacher expertise is clearly privileged within the CCSS criteria to make text complexity determinations using qualitative and reader/task considerations and requires the careful deliberation of those selecting materials.

Relevance to Student Needs

Materials should be examined for level of difficulty. They must be readable if they are to be truly accessible to students. Because readability formulas tend to be simplistic measures, such formulas should be used cautiously, if at all. Teachers' judgments about the difficulty of a work are more soundly based on complexity of plot, organization, abstractness of the language, familiarity of vocabulary, and clarity of syntax. Also, because the average classroom includes students reading at several levels of proficiency, materials judged as inappropriate for whole-class instruction might be suitable for small-group use or for independent reading by more capable readers.

Reading materials which draw upon students' backgrounds are desirable. Both comprehension and engagement are enhanced when students can activate relevant background knowledge as they read, connecting their personal experiences

with vicarious experiences. This does not deny the value of reading about the unfamiliar and even the fantastic. But the relevance of a work to students' daily lives or to the lives of their imaginations is worthy of consideration in the selection process.

"Age-appropriateness" alone is never sufficient reason to include particular materials in the English language arts program; nevertheless, materials should be suited to the maturity level of the students for whom they are intended. Evaluating "age-appropriateness" can be problematic, but legal decisions have provided some guidance in this area. Generally, when courts evaluate the age-appropriateness of material, they do not consider it in isolation. They weigh the value of the material as a whole, particularly its relevance to educational objectives, against the likelihood of a negative impact on the students for whom it is intended. That likelihood is lessened by the exposure the typical student has had to the controversial subject or manner of presentation. A negative impact is also less likely if the typical student of that age is sufficiently mature to view the subject or manner of presentation within the context of the overall purpose of the work. When these mitigating factors exist and the material serves a legitimate pedagogical purpose, courts consider the material age-appropriate. For instance, one court found the overall merit of a particular magazine article to outweigh the potentially negative impact of the author's repeated use of a profane expression (Keefe v. Geankos, 1969). The court noted that seniors in high school were "not devoid of all discrimination or resistance" and doubted that students of that age had been or could be protected from exposure to such expression.

Procedures for Selection of Instructional Materials

Good schools, recognizing the importance of support from parents and the community, operate within a framework for democratic decision making. Materials selection and challenged materials policies are important parts of that framework. Well-established procedures for selecting instructional material ensure public involvement and professional guidance. Therefore, it is essential that materials selection policies clearly describe the steps involved in the selection process and the personnel responsible for each step.

Responsibility for Selection

Selecting materials requires in-depth knowledge: not just of students' backgrounds and learning experiences, but also of their abilities and interests; not just of educational objectives, but of the best practices and range and quality of materials for meeting them; not just of the particular work being considered, but of its place within the medium, genre, epoch, etc., it represents. In short, responsible selection demands not only the experience and education needed to make sound choices but also the ability to defend the choices made.

This level of expertise can be found in the English language arts professional. Therefore, although administrators and school boards are often legally charged with the responsibility of selecting instructional materials, this responsibility should be delegated to English language arts professionals.

Selection Procedures

Selection procedures may vary in terms of the size of the group, nonteacher participants, and schedules, but certain elements are important. In general, selection is most appropriately done by the English language arts teachers who are closest to the students--that is, by teachers at the building level. The group's charge must be clearly specified and understood by all. The process should be part of the school's annual schedule, and adequate time must be set aside for the work at hand.

As part of its evaluation process, the selection group should discuss every work under consideration for inclusion, giving extended attention to materials that are likely to be assigned for whole-class use. However, good English language arts programs typically involve classroom libraries and extensive reading lists that individualize and expand student choices. Consequently, selection often makes use of published reviews of materials and opinions of informed peers, including district language arts coordinators, librarians, and leaders in professional associations.

All selections should be made on the basis of the materials' strengths in terms of the selection criteria. Once selections are made, the selection group should be encouraged to maintain a file of written rationales, if only in the form of meeting notes, which explain how selections meet the selection criteria.

The selection criteria should be made public in written form. The actual materials selected will become known in due time through course syllabi, booklists circulated to students and parents, and various assignments. But the list of materials can be

made available for comments by students, parents, and the public at any time, with the understanding that further informal selection and changes are sometimes made as teachers perceive numerous opportunities during the course of the year to better meet students' needs through other materials.

Opportunity for Informal Selection

Creative teachers take advantage of opportunities to use materials which do not lend themselves to the formal selection process e.g., current online newscasts, websites, videos, blogs, e-books, articles, student writing samples, or materials for short-term projects. Such supplemental materials may be selected by the appropriate instructor; but again they must meet the general selection criteria of educational relevance and ability to meet student needs.

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