Five Questions to Ask When Reviewing a Literacy Curriculum Resource

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Selecting a curriculum resource goes beyond book previews for administrators and curriculum leaders. This article offers a nuanced approach, prompting consideration of alignment with values, student engagement, classroom joy, inclusivity, and equity, urging educators to delve deeper into these complex decisions.

Educators deciding which literacy teaching resource to use (


***Image: Educators deciding which literacy teaching resource to use (DALL-E)***

Selecting a curriculum resource is not as simple as previewing a book.

As a building administrator and a former curriculum leadership instructor, these decisions are complex and multifaceted. I have learned that competing agendas can complicate these decisions. This is why I wanted to share this list as you review resources.

Consider each question to give you insight into various perspectives.

## **Question #1: What beliefs and values are aligned with this resource and its accompanying practices?**

How a literacy resource guides teachers' instruction tells you what the publisher values. And if those values are not aligned with what a school values for their readers and writers, it’s difficult to select the resources that will help teachers support students in reaching these goals.

For example, if there is little time for independent reading or conferring with students, the belief may be that empowering students as readers is not valued. Kids and teachers are expected to be dependent on the resource.

Another example: if a school values wanting students to “become critical and creative thinkers”, then a resource that relies on compliance and limited student engagement does not align with what the school community envisions for their kids.

## **Question #2: Will students know what they are learning and why it is important?**

Engagement and relevance have always been important. Since the pandemic, I think it has become paramount. Kids are more audacious about letting their teachers know, either through behaviors or words, when instruction isn’t working for them.

You can learn this by visiting a school currently using the literacy resource you are considering.

Pay attention to what the students are doing and saying. Ask them what they appreciate about the resource. Kids are usually honest about their learning experience.

Another way to begin discerning if students will find a curriculum relevant is to examine the essential questions and big ideas of the units. Do they go beyond topics? Are kids asked to think deeply about timeless concepts and themes, for example “innovation” or “change”?

## **Question #3: Would there be a sense of joy in the classroom?**

Joy - “the beauty, the aesthetics and the topics we're teaching children” as [Dr. Gholdy Muhammad defines it](https://readbyexample.substack.com/p/cultivating-genius?utm_source=url) - is not only an active experience that we might assume. It can also be deep, quiet engagement.

One of the best ways to assess students' sense of joy is to observe whether they notice you, a new person, entering the classroom. Students who stay engaged in what they are reading and writing despite interruptions is a good sign they are enjoying the experience.

Joy can show up in any curriculum, as long as it gives students and teachers space for it to flourish. This means it’s not jam-packed with only teacher-directed instruction and includes:

* Time for independent reading, including voice and choice in what students read
* Read aloud
* Writers workshop
* Public celebration, such as author’s chair

## **Question #4 - Does the curriculum bring students together or pull them apart?**

If the primary goal is a strong core curriculum, separating students from each other can backfire and create more inequities.This can include prioritizing small group instruction over authentic, whole group literacy experiences such as shared reading and writing.

A resource pulling kids apart can also happen beyond the general classroom. For example, if a student receives an intervention during book clubs, they miss out on the rich discussion and deep thinking of the more effective readers in the classroom. A high-quality curriculum resource will caution educators against this practice.

Related, are there opportunities for **student discussion** around what they are reading and/or writing? Are kids asked to work in **cooperative groups** during centers? The more a literacy curriculum integrates the different strands and builds classroom community, the better.

## **Question #5: Who does this work for and who does this not work for?**

This question comes from [Dr. Lauryn Mascareñaz](https://www.solutiontree.com/lauryn-mascarenaz.html).This might be the most important question. It’s about *equity*, ensuring that all kids have access to high quality instruction.

For example, during our review of programs we learned that one publisher designed lessons and units from the level of a high achieving student, and then built the rest of the program so students of all capabilities could access the content. This was not the norm in the industry; resources too often focus first on students who struggle, potentially lowering expectations for all kids.

How will a resource help teachers meet each student where they are at? No literacy curriculum program can support all students by itself. With that, consider using the following matrix to review new materials for acquisition. The questions are a starting point for and only one part of the work. What questions would you add to this list? Please add more as you consider the goals, shared beliefs, and values you have for your students and for literacy.

### **Matrix: Five Questions for Selecting a New Literacy Curriculum Program**

Directions: As a leadership team, use this tool to collect evidence to support the acquisition of a new literacy curriculum program. Add more questions based on your context.

|  | **Evidence #1** | **Evidence #2** | **Notes and Questions** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **What shared beliefs are aligned with the resource?** |  |  |  |
| **Will students know what they are learning and why it is important?** |  |  |  |
| **Would there be a sense of joy in the classroom?** |  |  |  |
| **Does the literacy curriculum bring students together or pull them apart?** |  |  |  |
| **Who does this work for and who does this not work for?** |  |  |  |

Template adapted from *Resist the Script! Five Critical Questions for Teachers to Adapt, Adopt, or Develop a Literacy Curriculum That Works For All Readers and Writers* by Matt Renwick