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Predicting Teachers' Choice of Teaching and Learning Materials: A Survey Study with Swedish Teachers

Monica Reichenberg
University of Gothenburg
Sweden

Abstract

Few Swedish studies have investigated how teachers choose teaching and learning materials. In the context of choosing teaching and learning materials Sweden provides a particularly interesting case because the country undergone a transformation from high state regulation to a self-regulated market. Consequently, the overall aim of this article is to investigate how teachers choose teaching and learning materials. The following research questions were the focus: How do teachers choose teaching and learning materials? What predicts teachers' choice of teaching and learning materials? In the current study, 319 teachers filled out a questionnaire regarding their choice of teaching and learning materials. The descriptive statistics indicate that the content matters most to teachers when choosing teaching and learning materials. Readability is in the middle and commercials are at the bottom. The non-recursive structure of the model demonstrated that professional experience decreases teachers' preferences for

content. Talking to colleagues about teaching and learning materials increases teachers' preferences for adhering to collegial recommendations. Special educators are more concerned with content and readability than ordinary teachers. However, special educators are also less prone to be guided by past experiences when selecting teaching and learning materials.

Keywords: special education, teaching and learning materials, marketization, professional experience, collegiality

Marketization is a buzzword in teaching and learning materials in particular. Several scholars have argued that the marketization of teaching and learning materials implies that teachers unreflectively choose teaching and learning materials based upon the logic of the market because of too much work and too little time. Consequently, commercials and book fairs have an enormous influence (Apple, 1985; Apple, 2009). Furthermore, there is no official approval scheme for examining the textbooks.

In Sweden, marketization was not an issue until 1992. From 1938 to 1991, the Swedish state had an official approval scheme, regulated by law, for examining books before they could be used as textbooks in Swedish schools. The work was performed by an approval committee with the help of specially appointed reviewers. There were several aspects to be examined: 1) the price of the book; 2) that the content corresponded to the instructions in the national curriculum (the book had to cover the topics that were to be treated in the school subject); 3) that the textbooks were objective; 4) the language and the design. Accordingly, the state was driven by a different logic than the market and thus had a different agenda. When examining design, it was seen as important that the textbook had a good pedagogical design. The language should neither be too difficult nor too simple. They also examined how the content was arranged. The textbook should awaken the students' interest in the subject meaning that it was essential to examine not only text but also illustrations and maps. The overall motto was that the textbook should captivate and motivate the students (Långström, 1997; Johnson Harrie, 2009). Since 1992, there has been no official approval scheme of textbooks in Sweden. Wilkins (2011) has examined the textbook approval systems of various countries in relation to educational outcomes. In her study she used a typology developed by Repoussi and Tuitaux-Guillon (2010).

This typology distinguishes between five textbook approval systems Model A to Model E. Wilkins found that Australia, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy, Estonia and the Nordic countries belong to model A (no state approval). Sweden has transformed from Model B (state approval system with one book per subject) to model A (no state approval).

In Sweden this is a result of the great decentralization of the Swedish educational system in which the state delegated economic responsibility to the municipalities and instructional responsibility to the teaching profession. Since 1992, publishers began to operate in an intensely competitive textbook market. Consequently, the teachers were exposed to an excessive amount of teaching and learning materials (Långström, 1997). In many countries the parents are powerful actors when choosing textbooks (Wilkins, 2011). In this paper I will argue that Swedish teachers are important actors.

Few Swedish studies have investigated how teachers choose teaching and learning materials. At the same time, studies have demonstrated the importance of "good texts," i.e., texts with a high degree of readability and texts that awaken the students' interest (Lundberg & Reichenberg, 2009; Reichenberg, 2013). The question arises if active teachers are aware of these findings. Consequently, it is important to investigate how Swedish teachers choose teaching and learning materials.

The overall aim of this article is to investigate how teachers choose teaching and learning materials. The following research questions were on the focus:

1. How do teachers choose teaching and learning materials?
2. What predicts teachers' choice of teaching and learning materials?

Literature Review

Educationalists who research on teaching and learning materials stress the importance of these materials. Consequently, one would expect a great deal of interest in the question of how teachers choose teaching and learning materials in the first place. In contrast, I have found that educational research has neglected such an important issue. The phenomena have also been observed by Johnsen

(1999) and Skjelbred (2003). In the following, I will review contemporary resources on teaching and learning materials. I will briefly first present Swedish research and then I will come to international research.

Swedish studies have focused on two areas: (a) the readability of texts: Sandqvist (1995), Reichenberg (2000), Edling (2006), Lundberg and Reichenberg (2009), and Liberg (2010); and (b) the text content: Andolf (1972), Garefalakis (1994), Långström (1996), Ajagán-Lester (2000), Ammert (2010), and Kress and Selander (2012).

Global research has also focused on these two above-mentioned areas. Most of these studies were performed in the eighties and nineties. Here we can find Hvenekilde (1983, 1986), Chimombo (1989), Britton and Gülgöz, (1991), Bharucha (1992), Chiang-Soong and Yager (1993), Beck et al. (1991), Beck et al. (1995), Pretorius (1995), Mikk (1999), Vareberg and Askeland (2013), and Keith, Sloas, Mooney, and Norris (2014), all of whom have examined the readability of texts. Aamotsbakken et al. (2005), Aamotsbakken (2009), Hodkinsson (2007, 2014), and Wikman (2009) have focused the content. As can be seen, there has been much research on readability and content but more seldom researchers have investigated if readability or content matter for teacher choices of teaching and learning materials. One exception is Dargusch, Persaud, and Horsley (2011) who investigated teachers' and students' opinions about textbooks used. More specifically, they investigated Australian students' opinions of the quality of educational materials that were used for teaching and learning purposes in classrooms. Another exception is Sousa and Dionisios (2013) who interviewed native-speaking Portuguese teachers about their selection of textbooks in Portugal.

A third exception is Bueie (2002). She found that only 3% of the (Norwegian) schools in her study had constructed criteria for the choice of teaching and learning materials. Furthermore, the teachers in Bueie's study of learning materials were exposed to 44 different criteria. Ultimately, five criteria were ranked as relevant: (i) facts, (ii) linguistic quality, (iii) content, (iv) curricular standards, and (v) exercise. Approximately 70% of the teachers in Bueie's study say that they discuss with their colleagues when to choose textbooks. Other interesting studies are the following: Aamotsbakken and Skjelbred (2010) found that teachers had a strong conviction that the quality in textbooks was good and consequently they did not need to critically

examine them. Furthermore, Justvik (2012) interviewed teachers and students at 18 Norwegian schools about choices of teaching and learning materials. In accordance with Juhlin Svensson, Bueie and Justvik found that teachers did discuss evaluation copies of textbooks. Moreover, Justvik's study also identified the homepages of textbook publishers and habits as strong influences. The influence of habits has also been cited by Tønnesson (2002).

As can be seen from the review above, there is a neglected area of how teachers choose teaching and learning materials. What makes the Swedish case particularly interesting is that Swedish teachers have gained a considerable amount of autonomy when choosing teaching and learning materials. However, teachers have little to no education in how to evaluate and choose teaching and learning materials in teacher education; therefore, as educationalists we want to know what actually guides teachers when choosing teaching and learning materials.

Methodology

Participant Sample

A total of 319 teachers participated in the study. A large number of the teachers had a degree, and the mean number of working years was 17 (see Table 1). The teachers' age ranged between 26 and 63 years.

The sample was purposeful and thus non-random. The idea was to sample teachers from a vast range of teaching positions at primary schools, secondary schools, mainstream, and special schools. In Sweden primary schools, secondary schools and special schools are housed or located in the same building as mainstream school. On the one hand, the non-random sample makes generalizations to the population difficult. On the other hand, the sample reflects the broad range of the teaching occupation in contrast to studies that focus only on one educational stage or only on mainstream school teachers.

Procedure

Building on two previous exploratory studies, a questionnaire was developed (Reichenberg & Löfgren, 2013; Reichenberg, 2013). In these studies, teachers were asked how they chose textbooks. The answers were later used to construct survey. The purpose of the questionnaire was to cover issues ranging from reading instruction, math instruction, and special education to teaching and learning materials. To increase the response rate I visited each school and distributed the questionnaire personally to the teachers and also collected the questionnaires personally.

Data

Table 1 displays the number of observations, means, standard deviations, minimum/maximum, and percentages for dummy variables. The dependent variables are teachers' preferences for choices of teaching and learning materials. The three explanatory variables are framed within an educationalist perspective.

The average response rate on survey items was 92%. Accordingly, I will address how the issue of missing values was dealt with in the section on statistical procedures.

All dependent variables in Table 1 were measured on the same scale. I asked the teachers to rate teaching and learning materials on a scale ranging from 1-7. To differentiated between options I used the semantic terms "most importance" and "least important".

Table 1. Summary statistics

Variable	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Min**	**Max**
Independent variables:					
Special education	316	Yes = 16%	No = 84%		

Professional experience	310	16.729	9.893	1	42
Talk to colleagues	312	4.199	.8631	1	5
Dependent variables:					
Content	294	6.112	1.359	1	7
Easy to read	282	4.181	1.549	1	7
Cost	279	3.065	1.395	1	7
Collegial recommendations	285	4.961	1.304	1	7
Past experience	292	5.486	1.217	1	7
Fairs	278	2.669	1.329	1	7
Commercials	275	1.687	1.283	1	7

Dependent Variables: Choice of Teaching and Learning Materials

Costs. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon the cost of the material, rated on a 1-7 scale (Apple, 1985; 2009).

Commercials. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon the learning material (Apple, 1985; 2009).

Fairs. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon influence from fairs, rated on a 1-7 scale. Every year there is a big international fair in Gothenburg, called Bokmässan (Apple, 1985; 2009).

Collegial recommendation. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon whether or not the material had received recommendations from colleagues, rated on 1-7 scale (Juhlin Svensson, 2000, Bueie, 2002, Justvik, 2012).

Easy to read. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon if the material was easy to read for students, rated on 1-7 scale (Lundberg & Reichenberg, 2009, Vareberg & Askeland, 2013).

Previous experience. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon previous experience of the material, rated on 1-7 scale (Bueie, 2002).

Content. Teacher chooses teaching and learning materials depending upon the content of the material, rated on 1-7 scale (Aamotsbakken et al., 2005; Aamotsbakken, 2009; Hodkinsson 2007, 2014; and Wikman, 2009).

Explanatory Variables

Professional experience. Professional experience was a numeric variable measured as the number within the profession. Supposedly, the number years of experience in the job shapes teachers' judgment of what counts as good teaching and learning materials. My prediction is that the greater the professional experience, the more routine the judgment becomes (Guskey, 2002). That is, as one spends more years at the same school and at the same job, the less reflection is given to the task of choosing teaching and learning materials. Therefore, I predict a significant and negative impact of professional experience on the importance of content as a criterion for choosing textbooks.

Talking to colleagues. Talking to colleagues is a numeric variable measured on a 1-5 Likert scale. The participants were asked 'to what extent do you feel that you can talk to your colleagues about learning materials?' The responses were "Agree", "Partially Agree", "Neutral", "Partially disagree" "Disagree". The variable approximates teachers' school social capital, i.e., the resources of being able to ask someone for advice about teaching and learning materials (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Building on previous studies, I predicted that colleagues have a significant effect on the choice of teaching and learning materials. Moreover, I believe the more teachers talk to one another, the more teachers become receptive towards collegial recommendations. Furthermore, I predict that the more teachers talk to colleagues, the less teachers become interested in readability. That is because the collegial opinion overshadows readability.

Special education. Special education is a dummy variable. I asked teachers if they worked as special educators. I hypothesize that working with students with special

education needs significantly shapes teachers' preferences for choosing teaching and learning materials (Reichenberg & Löfgren, 2013). That is because working with students with special needs forces teachers to continually reflect upon the choice of learning materials. Special educators have to think about content in order to motivate the students to read texts. Without interesting content, students will not pick up the textbook. Furthermore, special educators also have to think about readability. If texts are too difficult, then the students will give up. Special educators are painfully aware of this fact (Lundberg, 2010). I think the fact that teachers practise special education is far more important than merely having a degree in special education. Training alone is not enough.

Statistical Procedure

Firstly, I wanted to fit a model capable of handling several dependent variables simultaneously. Secondly, I wanted to fit a model capable of handling correlated error terms. Consequently, the appropriate choice was a *non-recursive structural model* (Duncan et al., 1968). The non-recursive structural model can handle several dependent variables. Furthermore, the model can estimate a latent variable for the error term and allow error terms to co-vary. Consequently, in contrast to OLS regression, the model can estimate the error for individual variables. Therefore, the non-recursive structural model becomes more reliable than OLS regression. Thirdly, several of the variables were transformed prior to the analysis. Depending on the distributions, I used squared, logarithmic, and inverse transformations for content, past experience, and collegial recommendations. Moreover, I used the maximum likelihood to deal with missing values. Fourthly, all computations were done in STATA 13. The model was visualized using the SEM builder in STATA.

Results

I will first present descriptive statistics of how teachers rated criteria for choosing teaching and learning materials. After that, I will present a non-recursive structural model of the criteria for choosing teaching and learning materials.

How Teachers Choose Teaching and Learning Materials

I summarized the descriptive statistics in Table 2. The table presents the percentages of response on a 1-7 scale (7 max).

Table 2. Percentages of how teachers respond choosing teaching and learning materials.

Rank	Content	Easy to read	Cost	Collegial recom.	Past exp.	Fairs	Commercials
1	2,55	3,65	14,96	0,73	1,09	14,23	63,87
2	1,09	10,95	18,25	2,19	0,73	43,07	21,90
3	1,09	19,71	36,50	10,22	3,65	22,63	6,57
4	5,47	27,01	15,33	21,90	14,96	10,95	3,28
5	15,69	15,33	10,22	28,83	25,55	4,38	0,36
6	17,15	17,15	2,92	23,72	35,77	2,55	1,46
7	56,93	6,20	1,82	12,41	18,25	2,19	2,55

Note: within-variable percentages based upon responses, 7 highest and 1 lowest.

From Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of the teachers state that the content in the book is the most important factor. The second most important factor is past experiences, and the third most important is collegial recommendations. Easy-to-read texts are in the middle and had a perfect normal distribution among teachers.

The majority of the teachers do not base their choice of teaching and learning materials on commercials or fairs. Another less important aspect is the cost of the teaching and learning materials. Consequently, marketization, as indicated by fairs, commercials, and costs, does not influence the choice of teaching and learning materials to a large degree.

Given that teachers were surprisingly uninterested in costs, fairs, and commercials, I will not treat those variables further. Instead, I will analyse content, easy-to-read texts, collegial recommendations, and past experiences in the next section.

Predicting Teachers' Choice of Teaching and Learning Materials

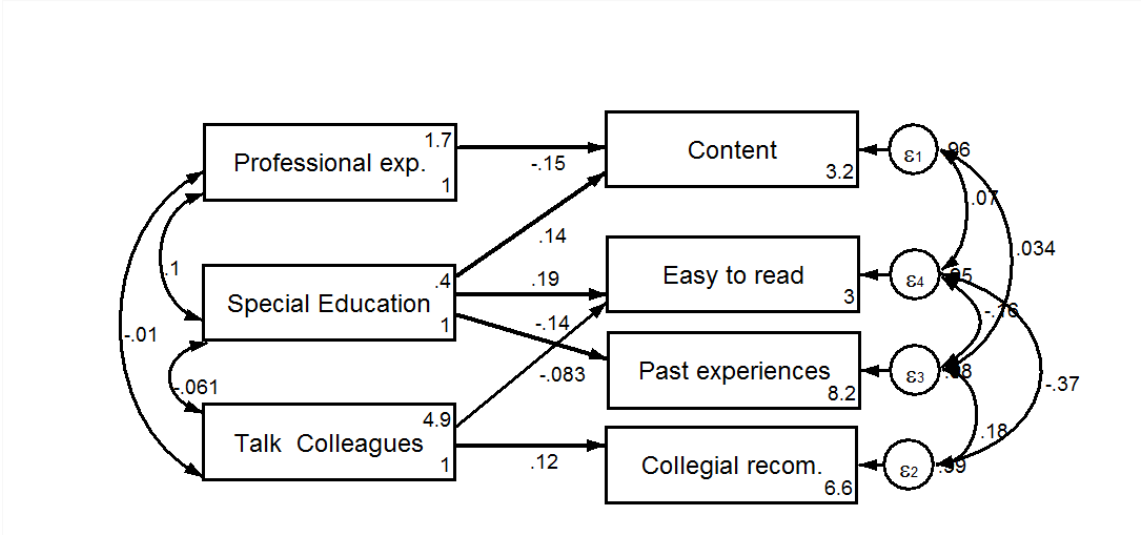
I present the results of the non-recursive structural model (Figure 1). The model takes into account the measurement error for each individual variable. In addition, the model takes into account dependence between (a) the error terms and (b) explanatory variables. Finally, the standard errors are robust to adjust for the possibility of unsuccessful variable transformations influencing the stand errors. Basically, robust stand errors are 10% more conservative than non-robust stand errors.

The coefficients can be interpreted as in OLS regression; however, the scale of model is not inherently meaningful. Consequently, one unit change in the original scale cannot be interpreted meaningfully in contrast to, e.g., test scores or marks. Therefore, I present the unstandardized coefficients in the table only. Instead, I will focus on standardized coefficients found in the diagram. Standardized coefficients can be interpreted as a one unit change in the explanatory variable, or the increase or decrease in the dependent variable with one standard deviation. As such, the interpretation becomes meaningful because the standard deviations are familiar from correlation and regression analysis.

Firstly, one unit change in professional experience decreases teachers' preferences for choosing teaching and learning materials based on the content significantly (p<.05), with .15 standard deviations. Secondly, special educators, when compared

to non-special educators, are significantly (*p*<.001) more probable of preferring to choose teaching and learning materials based on content, by .14 standard deviations. Thirdly, special educators, when compared to non-special educators, are significantly (*p*<.001) more probable of preferring to choose easy-to-read teaching and learning materials by .19 standard deviations. Fourthly, special educators, when compared to non-special educators, are significantly (*p*<.01) less probable of preferring to choose teaching and learning materials based on previous experiences by .14 standard deviations. Fifthly, one unit change in intensity of collegial discussion about teaching and learning materials increases the preference for choosing learning materials based on collegial recommendations significantly (*p*<.05) by .12 standard deviations. Sixthly, intensity of collegial discussion about teaching and learning materials did not significantly (*p*=n.s.) influence preferences for choosing easy-to-read teaching and learning materials.

Figure 1. Non-recursive structural model



The model supported most of the predictions about both the significance test and the direction of the coefficient. The small coefficients suggest that much unexplained

variance remains. However, the size can also be a matter of the instruments not being fine-tuned but rather derived from exploratory studies.

Being a special educator does matter for teachers' preferences for choosing teaching and learning materials. Special educators do think about the content and the readability. Note that teachers were not only asked about education in the questionnaire but also what subjects they were teaching. Consequently, the results can be interpreted as an effect of on-the-job learning. Special educators are faced daily with struggling readers with a history of failures, and many have developed low self-esteem and consequently do not want to read at all. Therefore, teaching and learning materials have to be both interesting and have a high degree of readability, i.e., an easy-to-read text (Lundberg & Reichenberg, 2009) to make these struggling students consider the idea of picking up the textbooks in the first place. A common belief among practitioners is that extensive experience as a teacher makes one a good teacher (Guskey, 2002). However, this belief is not in line with the results in this study. On the contrary, professional experience decreased teacher preferences for choosing teaching and learning materials based on content. Being at the same school and in the same job for too long is not necessarily a good thing. Teachers can start teaching by habit and make the choice of learning materials a routine practise with little to no reflection about the content (cf. Tønnesson, 2002; Aamotsbakken & Skjelbred, 2010).

Two expectations to the prediction ought to be noted. Firstly, talking to colleagues about learning materials did not influence the preference for choosing easy-to-read teaching and learning materials. However, the direction of the coefficient was correctly predicted, i.e., a negative slope. Secondly, the direction of the coefficient of

being a special educator on the preference for choosing learning materials based on past experiences was also falsely predicted. Being a special educator apparently inhibits t professional judgment.

Table 3. Non-recursive structural model

Structural	**Coef.**	**S.E.**
Content <-		
Professional experience	-.199*	(.086)
Special education	5.461***	(1.669)
Constant	41.742***	(1.554)
Collegial recommendations<-		
Talk to colleagues	.042*	(.020)
Constant	2.031***	(.086)
Easy to read <-		
Talk to colleagues	-.148	(.103)
Special education	.846***	(.240)
Constant	4.683***	(.449)
Past experience <-		
Special education	-.116**	(.044)
Constant	2.340***	(.018)

Mean (Professional experience)	16.728***	(.561)
Mean (Talk to colleagues)	(4.199)***	(.049)
Mean (Special education)	.139***	(.019)
var(Content)	168.368	(15.595)
var(Collegial recommendations)	.095	(.010)
var(Easy to read)	2.254	(.154)
var(Past experience)	.080	(.012)
var(Professional experience)	97.548	(7.489)
var(Talk to colleagues)	.743	(.083)
var(Special education)	.120	(.014)
cov(Content, Easy to read)	1.373	(1.230)
cov(Content, Past experience)	.124	(.295)
cov(Collegial recommendations, Easy to read)	-.170	(.030)
cov(Collegial recommendations, Past experience)	.016	(.010)
cov(Easy to read, Past experience)	-.066	(.030)
cov(Professional experience, Talk to colleagues)	-.088	(.435)
cov(Professional experience, Special education)	.343	(.211)
cov(Talk to colleagues, Special education)	-.018	(.019)

Note: Unstandardized coefficients; Robust stand errors; *Sig at .05;** Sig at .01; Sig at .001

Discussion

The overall aim of this article is to investigate how teachers choose teaching and learning materials. The following research questions were the focus:

1. How do teachers choose teaching and learning materials?
2. What predicts teachers' choice of teaching and learning materials?

One finding from this study is that the majority of teachers believe that the content is the most important factor when choosing teaching and learning materials. In other words, the teachers safeguard the old criteria from before 1992 (Långström, 1997). This is in line with research on professionalism, e.g., that professionals are a counterforce to the market (Friedson, 2001). The second most important factor is past experiences, and the third most important is collegial recommendations. The results are in line with Juhlin Svensson (2000) Bueie (2002), Justvik (2012), Reichenberg and Löfgren (2013), and Reichenberg (2013). Easy-to-read texts are in the middle and had a normal distribution among teachers. Of course, it is important to listen to collegial recommendations. On the one hand, teachers make active choices and do discuss how to improve teaching. On the other hand, teachers function as 'gatekeepers' for what books are selected for teaching. Collegial influence is a plausible explanation as to why teachers have a weak scientific legitimacy for their choice. Furthermore, collegial influence can also be a plausible explanation as to why teaching and learning materials used in schools do not follow curricular standards. Hence, collegial influence can be interpreted as both an enabling and constraining covariate. Ultimately, collegial influence is a matter of collegial trust as opposed to trusting in the abstract standards of the curriculum.

A second finding is that the majority of the teachers do not base their choice of teaching and learning materials on commercials or fairs. Another less important aspect is the cost of the teaching and learning materials. Consequently, marketization as indicated by book fairs, commercials, and costs does not influence the choice of textbooks to a large degree. Moreover, here the teachers do not

safeguard the old criteria from before 1992 (Långström, 1997; Johnson Harrie, 2009). This is in line with research on professionalism, e.g., that professionals are a counterforce to the market (Friedson, 2001). The results are not in line with Reichenberg and Löfgren (2013) or Reichenberg (2013).

A third finding is that the teachers' experience from the field, meaning the amount of years they have taught, does not have any significant role when selecting learning and teaching materials. On the contrary, this study indicates that the more experience from the field, the worse the teacher is at selecting teaching and learning materials based on content. This is really an interesting finding. An explanation may be that the power of habit is significant (cf. Tønnesson, 2002; Aamotsbakken & Skjelbred, 2010). A fourth finding in this study is that it has demonstrated the importance of advanced education, more specifically in special education. The teachers in the current study with an advanced education in special education were focused on easy-to-read texts and the content. This means that these teachers were aware of and had a preference to choose texts that would be accessible even to those students who were low achievers and those who were uninterested in reading books (Lundberg & Reichenberg, 2009).

A fifth finding in this study is that the more intensive discussions the teachers had with their colleagues, the more prone the teachers were to select teaching and learning materials based on recommendations from their colleagues. The results are in line with Juhlin Svensson (2000), Bueie (2002), Justvik (2012), Reichenberg, (2013), and Reichenberg and Löfgren (2013).

A sixth finding in this study is that those teachers with an advanced education–special education–were less probable to select learning materials based on past experiences. This was an unexpected finding. One plausible explanation is that special education teachers feel that they already have a set of criteria for selecting textbooks. Consequently, their judgment becomes less dependent on past experience and more dependent upon a set of standards.

A seventh finding, although not significant, was that I correctly predicted the direction of the coefficient of the effect of talking to colleagues on choosing easy-to-read teaching and learning materials.

Conclusions

One conclusion is the importance of advanced education, more specifically special education. A second conclusion is that teachers' networks are important when choosing teaching and learning materials. A third conclusion is that the amount of years influences the teachers' preferences negatively. This study underlines the need to focus on how to choose teaching and learning materials in teacher education. Consequently, resources need to be allocated to teacher education to help teachers to develop into effective literacy educators who can choose teaching and learning materials that have a high degree of readability and that can motivate struggling readers. There is also a need of education for practising teachers.

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Biographical note

Monica Reichenberg is a professor of general didactics at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her main research interest includes: reading comprehension, reading and writing practices, the readability of texts.

monica.reichenberg@ped.gu.se 046-031-7862451