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Research on textbook use in the United States of America

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review published research literature on the curriculum role and use of textbooks and other materials in American schools. The contents of books, collected works, reports and journal articles were analysed, and summaries of the contents were then organised chronologically to present a commentary on this topic. The results showed that research indicating that teachers are dependent on textbooks has been accepted in educational circles since the beginning of the twentieth century, but the most recent research studies have challenged this assumption by finding that teachers do not use them with fidelity. Published in 1931, the earliest research study identified that whilst secondary school teachers depended on textbooks, the progressive education movement influenced elementary school teachers into using more diversified methods. A series of research studies published in the 1970s identified moderate to low use of materials produced by projects of the curriculum reform movement and, although these materials influenced the design of textbooks, textbooks continued to be the dominant resource used in schools. A large-scale research study published in 1977 supported evidence from earlier studies that teachers depended on textbooks and other materials, but also highlighted that they used relatively few of the materials available in the marketplace. In the late 1980s, case studies and ethnographic research on small numbers of teachers and students reported that they varied in their patterns of using materials.

Keywords: curriculum research; educational change; textbook content; textbook research; use studies