Textbook Adoption in Christian Schools: A Model Aligned with Mission

By C. John Phillips (Part 1 of 2)

The subject of textbook adoption in Christian schools generates about as much enthusiasm as taking one's vitamins. Yet marketing gurus know presenting vitamins to kids as candy cartoon characters enhances the appeal. While rethinking current textbook adoption practices may not have the allurement of scarfing down Flintstone gummies, the attraction for educators is assurance in knowing the resources selected are those most closely aligned with the unique mission and learning objectives of the Christian school.

As the first in a two-part series, this article will raise awareness of the importance of textbooks and the adoption process in Christian schools. By introducing a research-based adoption model, the subjective nature of decision making is quantified into an objective reference point. In this way the scaled ratings of competing options may be evaluated alongside the cost differences to better inform the final decision.

Christian Perspective and Worldview

God imparts to parents the sacred trust of rearing their children. The Bible instructs parents to “teach” (Deuteronomy 6:7, ESV) and “train” (Proverbs 22:6) their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). The longstanding Judeo-Christian tradition, therefore, holds the education of children is the inherent right of parents. Very few, however, are able to educate their children to the academic standard required of modern society. Most parents delegate this stewardship to an educational institution. Logically it follows, then, the school assigns the student to a teacher, and the teacher presents the student with a textbook as part of the learning curricula. Thus teachers stand in the place of parents in the eyes of the student in many respects while textbooks serve as an authoritative source and tool for instruction. Surprisingly, though, the adoption research shows no standardized decision-making instrument exists to guide the textbook selection process in private schools.

Case Studies and Findings

The author conducted a number of textbook adoption case studies in ACSI-accredited schools. The purpose was to determine the current practice of administrators in adoption of textbooks for use in Christian schools. A cross-case inquiry of this nature requires some degree of uniformity across the research sites. ACSI academic and religious standards of the subject schools provided the basis for meaningful comparisons of multiple sites. The researcher intentionally selected schools of varied denominational perspectives to project the larger portrait of Christian education from the individual vignettes of the sample schools.

The research findings affirmed some previously known decision-making principles while yielding unexpected results also. As was anticipated, all administrators of the subject schools were concerned with horizontal alignment of textbook content with the school’s mission and learning objectives. Vertical or graded alignment was another leading concern. Again, all sought to ensure there were no “laps or gaps” (Phillips 2016, 115) in the curricula from one grade to the next. Unknown in the current research literature, however, was the practice among some administrators of conferring with peers regionally, nationally, and even abroad as to current trends in course curricula. In keeping with the symmetrical imagery, the term lateral alignment was coined to describe this peer-to-peer interaction. Lastly, the administrators could not emphasize enough their dependence on godly teachers to screen objectionable content. They accomplish this by omitting certain portions from the required reading or by qualifying the author’s perspective as not the school’s position. For students in the upper grades, some teachers use problematic material as an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills. They might, for example, ask students to identify the author’s fallacy from the Christian worldview perspective.

Multiple-Criteria Decisional Analysis

Selecting textbooks falls into a category of decision-making analytics known as multiple-criteria decisional analysis (MCDA). It can be illustrated by the currently popular reality TV phenomenon of house buying programs. Be it first-time home buyers, an upgrading or downsizing show, or folks seeking a vacation getaway, the pattern is always the same. The realtor establishes the buyers’ wish list (such as three bedrooms, two baths, a two-car garage, with a big back yard, located near work and school). The realtor then shows the buyers three house options that generally meet these requirements. While in real life it is doubtful buyers view only three houses, the reality lies in the fact that the options shown never fully match the buyers’ expectations. The buyers deliberate the pros and cons of each house option and oftentimes eliminate one to make the decision a binary choice upon which both can agree. The climactic moment comes as they announce their selection. Yet the
decision-making process remains very subjective. There is a way, however, to virtually eliminate subjectivity in decision making. Decisions involving multiple criteria and multiple options—such as buying a house, selecting textbooks, or even ordering lunch at a Mexican restaurant—are made in much the same way. The decision maker contemplates the need, ponders and deliberates over the choices, eliminates the least-favored options, and ultimately reaches a final decision.

Textbook adoption follows a similar pattern. Based upon the case study findings, Christian schools generally tackle textbook adoption by addressing one subject per year. Each subject area, therefore, is reviewed once every five or six years. As the adoption season approaches, the school principal typically directs the given subject area department head to acquire some textbook samples for review. As new samples filter in, the department head peruses them for grade-appropriate content, quality, and other factors including objectionable content. Once satisfied, the department head might ask certain teachers or, if applicable, an adoption committee to review them also. After deliberating the pros and cons of each option, the participants make their final recommendations to the principal or decision-making authority. As important as textbooks are to the learning curricula, and considering the unique concerns relevant to faith-based education, it seems there ought to be a better way of making these important decisions.

**The Decisional Ethic Model**

The adoption study led to the development of the research-based instrument for multiple criteria decision making as applied to textbook selection. The term research-based indicates the methodology was grounded in doctoral-level academic research. The study had a dual focus that asked (a) what factors Christian school administrators desire to see when reviewing potential textbooks and (b) how they make their selections from the various options. As to factors, a review of the literature in textbook adoption yielded several recurring themes or criteria. These criteria were submitted to the ACSI administrators, who agreed unanimously with the listing as an accurate and sufficient basis for reviewing textbooks. As to process, one adoption study in the literature review (Ho and Hsu 2011, 92–99) utilized a decision-making system known as Analytical Hierarchical Processing (AHP), a business analytics model. Most of the procedures employed in the current adoption instrument were adapted from AHP methodology (Saaty 1980).

**Ordering and Weighting the Criteria**

The administrator or principal considers the ten criteria drawn from the literature review: academic content, course objectives, faith integration, publisher, teacher helps, student helps, readability, quality, technology, and cost. The principal arranges these categories in order of importance bearing in mind the school mission, course objectives, and the subject area under consideration. The priorities for math, for example, might differ from those of language arts or history. These criteria are then weighted based upon the given hierarchy. (The instrument provides the weighting formula.) At this point the principal or administrator steps aside while the adoption committee and teacher/raters do their part.

**Preparing and Utilizing the Rating Worksheet**

An adoption coordinator and committee composed of subject-area teachers are appointed for this task. The committee develops a textbook rating worksheet based upon the administrator’s predefined criteria. Precise definitions for each of the ten criteria are formulated to assist the teacher/raters in scoring the textbook options. The teacher/raters follow the worksheet when rating the textbook options in view of the given content criteria. They use a simple 1–5 rating scale. The committee members are not apprised of the weighted values assigned to the content criteria. Acting independently of the administrator thus safeguards the integrity and reliability of the adoption event.

**Calculating the Final Ratings**

Once the teacher/raters’ task is completed, the adoption coordinator collects the worksheets and performs the instrument’s weighted averaging calculations. This formula is simply weight times rate over a given normalizing integer. This step converts the two sets of subjective qualities (the administrator’s weighting of priorities and the teacher/raters’ scoring of each textbook option) into objective numerical values. Once the textbook samples have been scaled, the instrument identifies which option is most closely aligned with the school’s mission and learning objectives. The subsequent article will elaborate on these steps including the cost-to-benefit ratio analysis.

**Keeping Schools Healthy**

Ensuring the alignment of textbooks with school mission is the main concern. The annual adoption event in schools also provides an opportunity for administrators and teachers to work together toward their common purpose. Enlisting the subject area expertise of teachers allows them to have a significant role in updating their teaching tools. Moreover, this shared leadership approach reduces task-work of administrators while providing leadership training opportunities and a sense of ownership among all participants.

Granted, implementing a decision-making procedure may be more involved than adding a vitamin regimen to one’s daily routine; yet even an otherwise healthy person should benefit from taking nutritional supplements. Likewise, selecting better teaching resources can only serve to enhance instruction and lead to better outcomes in the Christian school.

**References**


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