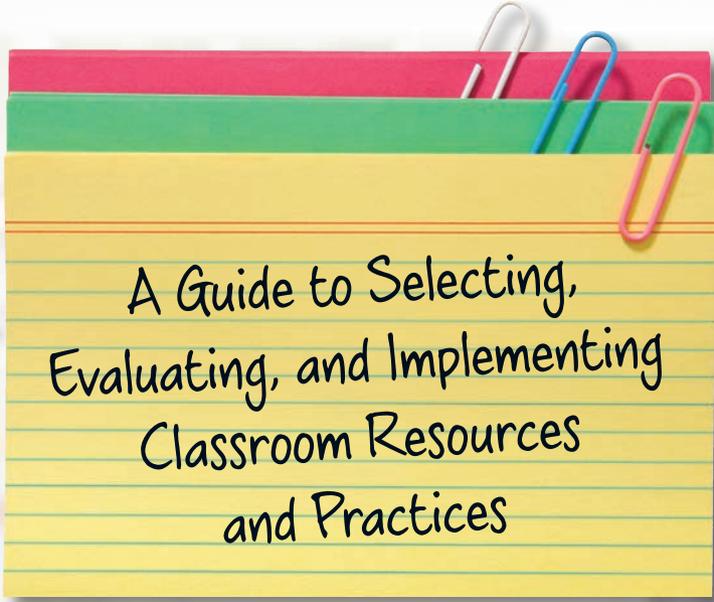




The **Right Tools**

The **Right Tools**



*A Guide to Selecting,
Evaluating, and Implementing
Classroom Resources
and Practices*

Towanda Harris

**HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH**

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit <http://heinemann.com/products/E10858.aspx>

Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2019 by Towanda Harris

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review, and with the exception of reproducible pages (identified by the *Right Tools* copyright line), which may be photocopied for classroom use only.

Heinemann authors have devoted their entire careers to developing the unique content in their work, and their written expression is protected by copyright law. We respectfully ask that you do not adapt, reuse, or copy anything on third-party (whether for-profit or not-for-profit) lesson-sharing websites.

—Heinemann Publishers

“Dedicated to Teachers” is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

Excerpt from “Improving the Instructional Core” by Richard F. Elmore. Copyright © 2008 by Richard F. Elmore. Unpublished manuscript, drafted March 2008, revised June 2008. Reprinted by permission of Richard F. Elmore.

Figure 3.6: Excerpt from *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching*, 2nd Edition by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. Copyright © 2014 by ASCD. Reprinted by permission of ASCD and conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

Excerpt from the Common Core State Standards. Copyright © 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress.
ISBN: 978-0-325-10858-2

Editor: Tobey Antao
Production: Vicki Kasabian
Cover and text designs: Monica Ann Crigler
Typesetter: Kim Arney
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
23 22 21 20 19 CGB 1 2 3 4 5

To my husband Aaron,
our friendship
means the world
to me.



Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction *xi*

1

What Are My Students' Strengths and Needs?

page 1

This chapter introduces tools to help you identify what you and your students need, so that you make your own “shopping list” of what to look for in the resources you consider.

- ▶ Student Progress Tracker 3
- ▶ Student Progress Descriptors 4
- ▶ Student Self-Reflection Checklist 15
- ▶ Goal Setting: Tracking Achievements 16

2

How Good Is It?

page 25

The tools in this chapter will help you consider the alignment of the resources with your goals for your students.

- ▶ Resource Inventory Checklist 29
- ▶ Unpacking the Standards 38

3

How Will I Use It?

page 45

This chapter discusses how to keep the focus on our students' strengths and needs when we try a new resource.

- ▶ Grouping Planner 54



Is It Working for My Students?

page 65

You've piloted a new resource. But is it helping your students? This chapter helps you assess how well the resource is working. It also offers guidance for keeping on track and meeting goals.



How Do I Collaborate to Learn Even More?

page 79

This chapter focuses on one of the most powerful resources available to you as a teacher: your colleagues.

- ▶ Meeting Guide 86



Appendixes

page 93

- A**
Student Progress Tracker 94
- B**
Student Progress Descriptors 96
- C**
Student Self-Reflection Checklist 98
- D**
Goal Setting: Tracking Achievements 104
- E**
Resource Inventory Checklist 105
- F**
Unpacking the Standards 106
- G**
Grouping Planner 107
- H**
Meeting Guide 108

References 109

Introduction

When I was eight years old, I rearranged my entire basement into a classroom so that I could be the teacher. I had a chalkboard, a teacher desk, plenty of carbon paper, flashcards, old workbooks, and anything else that I could find that looked like it might belong in a classroom. During family visits, I managed to get my cousins to play along as students, even if they called me *Ms. Davis* begrudgingly. In that room, with those tools, I was a teacher.

Perhaps this story sounds familiar to you. Many of us who are now educators once played games like these. And, in my first years as a teacher, I continued to collect a lot of *stuff*. I would keep everything I could fit in my room, year to year. I used the words *resource* and *stuff* interchangeably: I had been collecting without really evaluating what I was bringing into my classroom. At the time, I saw this as building a set of tools. But how helpful are those tools if we don't know what they can do, if they're of good quality, or if they'll work for the task at hand?

As I look back on those days now, I can see just how different this idea of teaching is from the teaching I've seen make a positive difference for children. Effective teaching comes from closely attending to student needs, being mindful of their strengths, and choosing and designing instruction that meets them where they are and moves them ahead. Early in my teaching career, I had the privilege of learning this lesson from mentors and colleagues. Later, in my work as a coach, and now on the district level, I can still see this pattern at work. Although resources have the potential to be a great help to us, having a room full of supplies doesn't make us teachers: helping our students learn and grow does.

Today, we often find ourselves facing a dizzying array of materials and resources, whether they be a box of dusty skills cards handed down

from a retiring teacher, a professional book passed on by a colleague, a unit plan saved from a previous year, a teacher's manual found in the back of a storage cabinet, a procedure recommended by a supervisor, a program required by a district, a book reviewed on a blog, a set of activities discussed on Twitter, a chart found on Pinterest, a unit downloaded from a website, or a strategy highlighted in a brochure or an email. But how do we know which of these will help the children in our classrooms? How do we find helpful new resources without squandering funding or instructional time?

Or maybe we find ourselves working with the same resources we've used for years, following their guidance, yet watching students hit the same predictable frustration points. How can we make adjustments to resources to maximize our support for our students? Or do we need new resources or approaches altogether?

Or maybe we are working with resources that, for whatever reason, have come to dictate what we do in the classroom, even if they aren't meeting our students' needs. How can we take a step back from the resources' suggested plans and timelines and, instead, use them strategically to best support our students? Or how can we bring in supplemental resources to help our students?

Resources are, of course, only a piece of our work, alongside our knowledge of best practices, our understanding of our students, and our ability to work with and learn from our own team of colleagues and mentors. Yet each of these pieces can have powerful effects. When we use a resource that's well matched to our students and their academic goals, we can make strong progress. But a resource that is not a good fit can do damage by wasting time, stalling student progress, disengaging students, frustrating struggling learners, or boring advanced learners.

This can feel like many options to weigh. But, in fact, the process becomes much simpler when we keep a tight focus on the most important factors in the classroom—our students' strengths and needs. When we invest some time in getting to know these variables, it becomes easier to decide which resources and approaches to try and to see a clear path ahead. The aim of this book is to provide tools to help you make this happen.

How Can This Book Help?

This book lays out a path for identifying what you are looking for in classroom resources, gives criteria for considering specific resources, offers ideas for how to put the chosen resource(s) to use strategically, and provides suggestions for assessing whether the resource(s) are working. Each of the chapters answers a guiding question.

Chapter 1: What Are My Students' Strengths and Needs?

Think about the difference between going grocery shopping when you have a list and running into the store without a plan when you're already hungry. You're more likely to come home with what you need—and only what you need—when you've planned in advance. This chapter introduces tools to help you to identify what you and your students need, so that you make your own “shopping list” of what to look for in the resources you consider.

Tools in this chapter:

- ▶ The **Student Progress Tracker** helps you to identify students' strengths and needs and to monitor their progress across the year.
- ▶ The **Student Progress Descriptors** can help you use your observations about students to identify their strengths and needs.
- ▶ The **Student Self-Reflection Checklist** and **Goal-Setting: Tracking Achievements** involve students in their own learning.

Chapter 2: How Good Is It?

Many resources can look impressive at first, but how well do they work for the students in your classroom? The tools in this chapter will help you to consider the skills the resources support, the options they offer you as a teacher, and the alignment of the resources with your goals for your students. Additionally, the chapter discusses what “research-based” really

means and includes questions to consider when examining research-based materials.

Tools in this chapter:

- ▶ The **Resource Inventory Checklist** enables us to compare resources in an apples-to-apples format.
- ▶ **Unpacking the Standards** helps us to identify the specific skills the standards require students to master.

Chapter 3: How Will I Use It?

Even if a resource comes with detailed instructions, it's still up to us—the educators who know our students best—to decide how to use it best for our students. This chapter discusses how to keep the focus on our students' strengths and needs when we try a new resource.

The tool in this chapter:

- ▶ The **Grouping Planner** connects the choices you make about instruction to how those choices will benefit your students.

Chapter 4: Is It Working for My Students?

You've piloted a new resource. But is it helping your students? This chapter discusses how to use checkpoint assessments and feedback to assess how the resource is working. It also offers guidance for keeping your class on track to meet their goals.

Chapter 5: How Do I Collaborate to Learn Even More?

No matter how well prepared we are for our work, collaboration can help us to support our students even better. This chapter focuses on one of the most powerful resources available to you as a teacher: your colleagues.

The tool in this chapter:

- ▶ The **Meeting Guide** provides a structure for drawing on your team's strengths and identifying actionable outcomes.

At the close of each chapter are guiding questions to start conversations with colleagues, instructional coaches, administrators, and other teachers as we consider what to look for in resources and approaches. These guiding questions help bring the focus back to students as we search for the right tools to meet their needs from year to year.

Full-size reproducibles of the eight tools found in the appendixes can be downloaded from *The Right Tools*' product page on Heinemann's website (click on Companion Resources): hein.pub/righttools

Chapter 2

How Good Is It?

I vividly remember walking into my classroom my first year in education. My heart was filled with the genuine desire to make a noticeable difference in the lives of the children that I encountered. Yet, to my surprise, my college education had not prepared me for my first few years as a teacher. In college, I remember creating lessons, organizing manipulative tools, and using sentence strips for just about anything. However, in my first year of teaching, I was given prepackaged activities, workbooks, and classroom libraries. My colleagues and I were expected to use these programs “with fidelity,” meaning that we were to follow them page by page. My bubble was burst, but I was determined to make lemonade out of lemons.

The first step was to look very carefully at the materials I’d been given. I soon found that I agreed with Arthur Gates, who helped to shape twenty-first-century reading instruction:

I have always believed that if one accepts the theory that the basal reading program must be used it should be adjusted to individual needs and that each child should be encouraged to move on into wider and more advanced material as rapidly as possible. [cited in Smith 1986, 224] (Dewitz and Wolskee 2012, 1)

With this same belief, I began studying each resource from cover to cover, disregarding elements that were not helpful, keeping those that did seem helpful, and frequently customizing components to fit the needs of my

students. I realized that the question I needed to ask about each component was not just “Is it good?” but “Is it good for my kids, at this point in time?”

In my work with teachers in a variety of schools over the years, I’ve noticed a pattern. When we don’t use resources, programs, and approaches strategically, when we simply follow the path that a tool lays out for us or we stick with the methods and materials we’ve used time and time again, we lose sight of what our students need. As a result, students’ achievement suffers, students’ motivation suffers, and our sense of professionalism suffers.

I’ve seen this disconnect between teaching practice and students’ needs in a range of schools. Here’s a snapshot of one example, from a recent classroom visit. The teacher and students were completing a book study. From the outside this busy class looked great: the teachers and students were actively engaged in the learning, in both whole-group and small-group activities. But then I took a closer look. Unfortunately, the activities that students were working on seemed disconnected from the intended focus skill (determining the meanings of unknown words and phrases). At one literacy center, children were doing round-robin reading with the teacher, who stopped the reading in seemingly random places to tell students the definitions of particular words. At another center, students were copying dictionary definitions for difficult words in their book. At a third center, focused on fluency, students were partner reading, alternating by page. At the fourth center, students were working on a worksheet, answering questions about events that occurred in the book. All the activities only required students to recall and regurgitate information from the book—the very lowest level of thinking defined in Webb’s Depth of Knowledge. All of these individual tools might have been useful if they had been used thoughtfully, at points when students needed the particular support they provided. However, when simply lumped together, they didn’t lead to growth for students. We can do better.

In this chapter, we are going to explore three questions that are essential to empowering us to determine if a resource has the potential

to be helpful to our students and, if so, to determine how to best use the resource:

- ▶ Does it meet a need that I'm not already adequately addressing with my students?
- ▶ Does it help my students meet the goals that have been set for them?
- ▶ Is there research that will tell me more about it?

Does It Meet a Need That I'm Not Already Adequately Addressing with My Students?

I remember when I first started teaching, my mentor said, “Teachers are the best thieves.” My eyes grew big! She laughed and explained. She said that teachers know what’s best for their kids and based on the availability of the resource, they know how to re-create, modify, adjust, and make it work for their students.



She was right, of course. Even while I was using the required program during my first year of teaching, I realized that there were best practices and strategies hidden within the pages of the materials. So like any professional educator, I began to pick and choose the strategies and routines that helped the students that I served to meet the goals I'd set for them. I carried those routines into math, science, social studies, and even health. It was great!

As educators, we're all familiar with this kind of judicious use of resources. But, as we collect resources that we trust, we need to be mindful of the overall effect of the resources we choose. It could be that our favorite resources tend to be teacher centered, giving students little time for independent practice. Or we might find that the resources we use year after year focus on introducing concepts, but that we have few supports for remediation or for mastery.

As time went on, I created a system for inventorying my trusted resources that helped me to determine the areas in which they were helping me and my students and to determine the areas in which I needed to



Roles support the “we do” stage of the lesson—they encourage students to work together and collaborate.

find additional resources (Figure 2.1). At the time, I used the required materials as my starting point, but I've found over the years that these questions are useful in considering whether any resource fills a need in my classroom.

The questions on my inventory fall into five categories, each of which is tied to a goal:

- **Stage: I want my students to be able to independently use what they learned.** To support this goal, I want to be sure that I have resources that address the stages of the gradual release of responsibility to students: “I do” (teacher driven), “we do” (cooperative work), and “you do” (independent work).

Resource Inventory Checklist																			
Resources	Stages			Skill(s) (needs you identified in Chapter 1)			Grouping				Expected Outcomes			Depth of Knowledge					
	I do	You do	We do				Whole Group	Small Group	One on One	Independent	Exposure	Remediation of Skills	Mastery (assessment)	Practice Opportunities	Level 1: Recall and Reproduction*	Level 2: Skills and Concepts**	Level 3: Strategic Thinking***	Level 4: Extended Thinking****	

(Copy or print additional pages as necessary)

* Recalling facts and simple procedures
** Deciding on an approach to solving a problem
*** Abstract thinking/Using planning and evidence to complete a task
**** Synthesizing information; transferring knowledge from one domain to another

See Appendix E for a larger copy of the Resource Inventory Checklist or download a printable version on the product page on Heinemann's website under Companion Resources (hein.pub/righttools).

Figure 2.1 Resource Inventory Checklist

- ▶ **Skill:** *I want my instruction to support students in the skills they need most.* To support this goal, I rely on the needs I identified in my review of student data on the Student Progress Tracker (see Chapter 1).
- ▶ **Grouping:** *I want to be sure I have opportunities to differentiate instruction.* To ensure that I'll have these opportunities, I identify the grouping configurations that each resource accommodates: whole group, small group, one-on-one, and independent work.
- ▶ **Expected Outcome:** *I want to be able to support my students wherever they are.* To do this, I need a range of resources to expose students to a skill, remediate, assess mastery, and provide opportunities for practice.
- ▶ **Depth of Knowledge:** *I want my students to be working toward greater levels of complexity in their work.* To move them ahead, I need to provide an appropriate level of challenge for where they are at the moment, and plan to progress them to levels of greater challenge.

The criteria on your list may look different depending on your goals for your students. The important thing is that we look carefully at what our approaches and materials are actually supporting.



Search Tools (How to Get a "Great Find")

This book is devoted to helping you decide which resources are best for your students. But how do we find potential resources in the first place?

At times, we may feel bombarded by options. During my own visits to educational conferences, for example, I've felt overwhelmed walking into the vendor gallery—so many educational resources, freebies, and demos occurring at one time. The vendors' goal was to make a sale, by any means necessary. For me, the challenge was trying to figure out the useful resources, before the last day of the conference. Needless to say, I ended up walking myself clear out of the door. Everything caught my eye, but it didn't mean that everything was good for my students. It's the same when we open our mailboxes or inboxes and are besieged by an onslaught of ads for materials—overwhelming and difficult to weed through. The expertise of the educators around us—in and beyond the school building—is a valuable tool when choosing the best for your students. Social media is a great way to reach educators around the world. Using platforms like Facebook groups, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, we can find resources that other educators have tried and recommended. From there, we can carefully consider whether the tools they use are also the best tools for our students right now.

Who Wrote This Resource?

A constant question to keep in mind as you review resources is "Who wrote this?" Whether teacher created or company created, it's worth researching the author(s) to get a better idea of their reputation in the field, their motivations for providing the resource, and even their core ideas about education and children.

Using this chart to inventory our current materials and approaches gives us a clear picture of the stages, skills, groupings, and outcomes that our approaches and materials support. For example, I may find that I have too many resources that are appropriate for whole-group and not enough that address small-group instruction. This tells me that I need to prioritize small-group instruction when I'm looking for new ideas and materials. On the other hand, if I find that one cell is packed with more notes than others, I might consider: Am I overemphasizing a particular stage, skill, grouping, outcome, or Depth of Knowledge level?

Does It Help My Students Meet the Goals That Have Been Set for Them?

During my first few years as a teacher, my classroom was built as the train was moving. I remembered waiting for payday to buy the cutest, most colorful, and most cost-efficient materials to stock my classroom. In addition, toward the end of the school year, teachers would sit furniture, materials, and resources in the hallways as a courtesy for newer teachers. It was exciting! Beggars can't be choosers, right? Well, I've learned that may be true for bookcases and bins, but we all need to be choosy when it comes to books and classroom resources.



Sometimes resources are chosen based on availability and price tag. As a result, the alignment of the resource can be an afterthought. But basing choices on what's easy to find and inexpensive can be costly in the long run if the resources we choose don't help our students meet the goals we have for them.

Alignment with What *Your* Students Need

At the end of the previous chapter, you identified:

- ▶ the skills and concepts for which your students need support most urgently
- ▶ the particular student need for which you will be seeking in new resources or approaches

Keep those notes and your tracker in front of you as you consider resources, and ask yourself, “Will this resource help my students with the needs I know they have? Will this resource work with their accommodations and interests?” If not, the resource is not what you're looking for—even if it is fun, recommended, or free.

Alignment with What *Children* Need Each Day

None of us became teachers to assign a flood of worksheets or to give daily practice tests, but many of us have found ourselves spending a great deal of precious time doing these kinds of activities. I have often seen the shift of a classroom from being student centered to being teacher centered because of the perceived need to cover content prior to the high-stakes testing window.

When we consider *what* a resource proposes to do for our children, we also need to consider *how* the resource proposes to do it. Students learn more than content at school—they also learn from the ways we teach and the ways they are required to participate in their learning. If we use a resource that requires students to spend all of their reading time at school filling in worksheets or watching videos, without any opportunities to immerse themselves in books, what are we teaching them about what it means to read? At a time when we face intense pressure to achieve higher scores and dramatic improvements, it may be tempting to adopt a resource that claims to promise results, even if it means turning our backs on practices that make school joyful, engaging, and meaningful for our students. “It’s just for a little while,” we might think, “just until the state test is over.” However, if we want students to make gains that outlast a single assessment and lead to a lifetime of learning, we can’t sacrifice the kind of instruction that we know children need.

Alignment with Standards

Although we all have our own goals for our students, most of us also have a set of standards that we are required to address. When we consider approaches and materials for our classrooms, we do not need to limit what we do in the classroom to what the standards prescribe. However, we can find innovative ideas and tools that will help us to address the standards. Often, there are essential skills that live within each standard. This allows teachers to broaden their criteria for resources that address standards by providing additional practice opportunities for key skills during instruction. Anchor charts, graphic organizers, and so on become

more useful because teachers are not limited to the wording of each standard and can differentiate where needed.

In the past, my district has learned the hard way that an “alignment” sticker on the cover of a resource does not mean that it adequately teaches required standards. We have seen companies quickly provide a “revised” version of a program to catch up with changes to our required standards. Because we were rushed to implement the new standards, we did not have a lot of time to validate or invalidate the companies’ claims. The easier choice was to roll with the new product. We found that the program’s formative assessments were not good indicators of students’ performance on our annual state assessment: the program wasn’t helping kids to meet the standards. In addition, it was challenging to clearly identify exactly where the gaps were within the program so that we could supplement lessons.

The following year, we realized that we couldn’t solely rely on one program to meet the standards. Our school began a deep dive into each



Reinforcing Key Standards Vocabulary Across the School Day

When you look at the standards with the lens of finding nouns and verb, you can also take one more step to help with standards alignment—looking for Tier 2 words to use across the school day, in all content areas.

In their influential *Bringing Words to Life*, Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) propose that there are three “tiers” of words: Tier 1 words are basic words that are in most children’s vocabularies. Tier 2 words are high-frequency words used by mature language users across several content areas. Examples of Tier 2 words include *explain, compare, infer, cite, demonstrate, conclude, organize, and observe*. Tier 3 words are not frequently used except in specific content areas or domains. Tier 3 words are central to building knowledge and conceptual understanding within the various academic domains and are integral to instruction of content, but each Tier 3 word is specific to a particular content area. Examples of Tier 3 words include *photosynthesis, protest, figurative language, cubic, algorithm, editorial, historical, and idiom*.

Although it is not important for students to know tier words, it is useful for teachers to be aware of these tiers so that they can increase students’ exposure to Tier 2 and Tier 3 words throughout the day. Allowing students to copy words and definitions in a workbook is not as useful as allowing students to use those same words in a cooperative group

setting with discussion starter cards. When we use key Tier 2 words in language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies, we reinforce key vocabulary across the school day. In addition, if students don't fully understand Tier 3 words, then they risk not grasping key concepts or content throughout each subject area.

In my school, we used Unpacking the Standards document (Figure 2.2) to identify activities and resources in the building to help teach that standard. By doing this, we were able to consider how technology, leveled libraries, science kits, artifacts, and much more aligned with our standards. One major bonus of using this formula was that we could easily align the assessments to the practice opportunities that students experienced. It was a win-win for the teachers and students.

content area's standards. Prior to each unit, we began to unpack the actual standards. This helped us to leave the planning table with the same understandings and expectations. We used a simple formula to get to the heart of each standard: verbs + nouns = standard.

The nouns were what students were expected to “know” and the verbs were what the students were expected to “do.” As you can see in Figure 2.2, teachers unpacked Common Core Reading Informational Standard 1 for fourth-grade students.

Unpacking the Standards	
Grade	4
Standard/Skill	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
Verbs	Nouns
Refer Explain Draw	Details Text Inferences
Students will be able to: What skills should students practice?	Refer to details and examples in a text
In order to: What higher-level skill does this support?	Explain what the text says explicitly when drawing inferences
Academic Vocabulary: What skill-/standard-specific words will students need to know?	Refer, details, examples, text, explaining, explicitly, drawing inferences
Suggested Activities	Helpful Resources/Materials

See Appendix F for a blank Unpacking the Standards form or download a printable version on the product page on Heinemann's website under Companion Resources (hein.pub/righttools).

Figure 2.2 An Example of Unpacking the Standards

Is There Research That Will Tell You More About It?

You may find that some resources, especially large-scale comprehensive programs (basal readers, for example) and established instructional approaches (such as the workshop model, guided reading, and balanced literacy), present themselves as research based. But what does that mean?

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences created the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) to provide educators, policy makers, and the public with a central and trusted source

of scientific evidence of what works in education. The WWC is committed to ensuring that its products and services meet user needs. The WWC uses randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and one of the distinguishing characteristics of an RCT is that study subjects are randomly assigned to one of two groups, which are differentiated by whether they receive the intervention. When you use the WWC to research a particular program, the site will offer an assessment of the program's efficacy, based on studies that meet its criteria for rigor. The WWC can also tell you the race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and language status of the students involved in the cited studies.

Although the WWC's assessments can help you spot resources that have not proven effective, they don't guarantee if a resource will or won't be effective in your classroom. The WWC assessments cannot tell you how well a particular tool will work for each of your own students or whether the tool will help you to meet the goals that have been set for your students. As the authors of *The Handbook of Reading Research* (Kamil et al. 2011) explain, when considering a program, "an emphasis on *what* works needs to be accompanied by an analysis of *why* and *how* various practices or curricula work for which students" (xviii).

Are "Research-Based" Programs Really Research Based?

In education, the terms *scientifically based research* and *research-based* are used interchangeably, and usually without the kind of proof that the WWC requires. These terms are meant to reassure school and district leaders, who are feeling the pressure of increased accountability around student achievement. Often, these leaders rely heavily on the reputation of the vendor and do not always have time to test programs to ensure that they're the best fit for the students they serve.

Educational researcher Peter Dewitz has studied the major basal/core reading programs and interviewed authors, publishers, and editors who worked on these programs to learn about how the programs are made. Dewitz argues that core reading programs are rarely faithful to the research they claim to be aligned with, that they omit valid

instructional ideas because the ideas don't align with what a publisher is selling, and that there are few trustworthy studies that prove the programs are effective. Because of this, he concludes, "the use of the label *research-based* conveys a certainty that does not exist" (Dewitz and Wolskee 2012, 11).

When a Research-Based Program Falls Short

So what happens when we use those research-based materials in our classes and the results aren't favorable? When someone says that the program works, but we find that it isn't working for our students?

When a district or school puts its faith in the program, not the teachers, the "compliance monster" begins to slowly rear its ugly head. In these cases, districts and schools equate fidelity with a false sense of effective instructional delivery, requiring teachers to read the teacher's manual page by page and never allowing teachers to determine how to differentiate instruction, but allowing the differentiation section in the manual to determine what that process looks like. As a result, I often heard teachers say, "Just tell me what you want me to say" or "What page do you want me to turn to?" Being told what to do seemed preferable to being perceived as dangerously out of compliance. The decision makers shifted from the classroom teacher to the front office building or even the district, moving the focus further away from the student.

When teachers are given research-based materials that address the masses but not the warm bodies that occupy the desks in their own classroom, their effectiveness is jeopardized. Even programs that are considered effective may not be so for every student in every situation. Harvard professor of educational leadership Richard F. Elmore puts it more directly: "The single biggest observational discipline we have to teach people in our networks is to look on top of the desk, rather than at the teacher in front of the room" (2008). The light bulb comes on when educators understand that *research-based* means that a program *can* work, but that we may need to adjust it to address the unique needs of each student on our roster. Students' behaviors determine how a resource can be maximized in the learning process.

So in a nutshell, a research-based label cannot be our sole determining factor in deciding what materials to use with our students. We must empower ourselves so that companies cannot present prepackaged materials with an alignment sticker affixed to the top and force our hand in adopting the resource.

Questions to Consider When Examining Research-Based Materials

The following questions can help us to consider whether a resource will be a good fit for our students.

- ▶ When was research conducted?
 - ◆ Education is ever evolving and so are resources. As an educator, it's important to know the era in which the resource was validated. Even though we may believe that they are tried and true, resources used during our childhood can be outdated. We need to ensure that our resources engage the new fast-paced highly stimulated learner.

- ▶ What were the demographics of the participants?
 - ◆ There is a myth out there that says that educational resources should follow a one-size-fits-all approach. If so, it would save us all a lot of time and money! Unfortunately, that is not the case and students need resources that can be easily adjusted to improve individual performance. Considering variables such as gender, race, and age can help us to predict whether something will be successful with the students we teach. For example, resources used in schools with a large English Language Learners population will look different than in a school with a large special education population. Of course, we can't capture our students' unique characteristics with these wide categories. As the National

Education Association (NEA) reminds us, there are a myriad of factors that affect students and their needs in the classroom. Keep the individuals in your room in mind as you consider resources.

- ▶ What was the instructional delivery method used to gather data for the study?
 - ◆ The instructional delivery method is the way in which teachers engage students during the lesson. This could be in whole group, in small group, or one on one. Knowing how the resource was used with participants will give us an idea of how we'll likely want to use the resource with our own students. And, if we're looking for help with whole-group instruction, for example, we'll keep that requirement in mind as we consider options.

Putting It into Practice

Determining whether a resource is “good” or not requires us to look at a variety of data, to scrutinize resources, to consider a host of factors, and to assess and track student progress. Let's take a moment now to remind ourselves of why we're doing this work.

During my time as an instructional coach, I had the opportunity to work with primary-grades teachers. I distinctly remember one kindergartner, Diega, a quiet girl who came to school speaking little English. Our baseline reading assessments ranked Diega at “high risk” for not achieving end-of-year goals. For two semesters, her teacher, Ms. Jones, worked with Diega four days a week for twenty minutes on targeted skills. Ms. Jones monitored Diega's progress weekly and used her findings to determine next steps in instruction. She drew from a variety of materials and approaches: alphabet arcs that helped with phonemic awareness and phonics, timed fluency passages, guiding comprehension questions during partner reading, teacher think-alouds with questioning that was mindful



of Depth of Knowledge levels, and scheduled formative assessments that were aligned with daily instruction.

Diega's performance and motivation began to shift, and each administration of the summative assessment showed improvement. By the end of the year, Diega had gained a whole year of progress. Her end-of-year assessment proclaimed her at "low risk" for not achieving end-of-year goals. More importantly, she was *reading* and was a more confident student. It was inspiring for both the student and the teacher!

Ms. Jones could simply have worked through a single program, or she might have stuck with lesson plans she'd used before and been comfortable with, but she knew that wasn't what Diega needed. Being consistent and intentional had a direct correlation to Diega's overall growth. Meeting a student's needs through careful consideration of the factors mentioned in this chapter can improve the most important part of our schools . . . our students.

Conversation Starters

Colleagues, instructional coaches, and administrators can be valuable resources for ideas and feedback as you consider what you'll look for in resources and approaches. A few questions might lead to helpful discussions:

- ⑥ What tools would you recommend for determining if a resource is helpful for students?
- ⑥ When determining the reliability of a resource, how do you suggest ensuring that it meets the needs of my students?
- ⑥ What educational search tools have been vetted by other teachers within my school?
- ⑥ What are some options for assessing the alignment of resources to provide meaningful skills or standards-driven learning opportunities?