Textbooks and teachers’ guides: availability and use

Student learning improves with effective use of textbooks and teachers’ guides, therefore development, distribution, and procurement plans are critical.

Textbooks are critical inputs impacting student learning. Textbooks are more likely to improve student learning when they are based on a curriculum, when they employ a language that is easily understood and at an appropriate level for students and teachers, and when teachers adapt their pedagogy to achieve effective use. Issues that education planners must consider include: development and distribution of textbooks and teachers’ guides, public and private textbook development and procurement systems, and student access and use of textbooks.

Issues and Discussion:

Textbooks and learning outcomes: Over 50 years of research have shown that the availability of textbooks produces gains in student learning. Textbooks contribute to a text-rich environment, increasing knowledge sharing among students. Textbooks improve learning for the poorest students by increasing motivation, performance and opportunity to learn. Textbooks are responsible for changes in educational practices such as assigning homework and increasing classroom reading time. Textbooks not only save teachers’ planning time, but they also provide better learning experiences for students—including increasing active teaching and student-centred learning. Parents report that teachers become better planners, while students are able to do assignments more easily, read on their own, and explore new knowledge. Textbooks also help parents support their children’s learning at home. It is important to establish policies on the effective usage of textbooks, along with well-designed student and teacher support systems.

Teachers’ Guides (TGs): Teachers’ guides should support teachers in changing their practises in order to align with curricular reforms. Teachers’ guides may be linked to the use of particular textbooks, or they may be stand-alone resources for particular content areas or pedagogical issues. Effective teachers’ guides support teachers and student learning through the following essential components: 1) explicitly communicating conceptual goals with direct links to proposed activities; 2) providing knowledge and support to help understand and implement teaching plans; 3) reinforcing pedagogical content knowledge; 4) offering practices and understandings of relevant pedagogical activities; 5) presenting alternatives and freedom of choice; and 6) engaging teachers in ongoing reflection.
Quality Textbooks: Quality textbooks are a product of the curriculum development process and are aligned with high quality pedagogy. High quality textbooks are: grounded in learning theory and subject specific content theory to support highly effective pedagogic practices, clearly focused on key concepts and knowledge, and consistent with learning theory in progression and layout. They also offer varied application of concepts and principles, facilitate active and equitable participation of all learners, and guide learners to reflect on what they are learning. Quality textbooks also facilitate learning of measurable outcomes, and include multiple perspectives and differentiation in the paths to learning a given content. They are designed for age-appropriate conceptual levels, and take into account different linguistic environments, as well as the background and needs of learners. They must also be affordable, durable, and accessible.

Development of textbooks: In order for educators to focus on appropriate learning goals, curricular frameworks are essential to textbook development and procurement. In practice, however, textbooks may only partially reflect curricular frameworks, potentially due to the isolated world of textbook authors and editors, a lack of specificity in curricular frameworks, the high expense of revisions, and a tendency for textbook developers to rely on past practices and existing materials. Additionally, development can be stunted for multiple reasons, including separation of textbook developers from classroom practices, general resistance to change, time constraints, and lack of resources.

Textbook procurement systems: Textbook procurement options include state published monopolies, private sector monopolies, and limited and unlimited approved lists of textbooks. In general, it has been found that publishing monopolies tend to result in poor textbook quality—in terms of both physical specifications and the learning content—inertia in terms of changes to textbooks, and distribution issues. Attempts to resolve these issues have led to public-private-partnerships, which require several specific steps. First, national policies need to establish dialogue with all stakeholders. Procurement baseline studies establish the national state of textbooks and recommend how to reach textbook policy goals. Second, governments develop educational standards, while an independent authority evaluates textbook compliance with standards and criteria. This process needs to be transparent and fair, with equal opportunities for all publishers. Once the procurement process is complete, lists of the approved textbooks allow schools to meet students’ specific needs.

Distribution of Textbooks: Textbooks only improve learning if students use them; therefore, textbooks must arrive on time in all schools, be issued to students, be effectively managed by schools, and be conserved through policies establishing the conditions of use. Publishers are increasingly responsible for distribution of textbooks, under the public-private partnerships described previously. Regardless of the distribution system, any misuse or misallocation of resources results in fewer materials reaching their destination. With regular supervision, inspections, and auditing (see a sample internal audit), corruption decreases. The late release of funding can also contribute to the untimely delivery of materials.

Textbook access and storage: Recommended textbook-to-student ratios range from 1:1 to 1:3. However, it is commonly reported that textbooks are not used in classroom learning in developing countries. Factors impeding textbook-to-student ratios include the cost of textbooks and book loss over time. To minimize loss and maximize proper use of textbooks, school and classroom storage facilities must be secure, weatherproof, and clean – free from infestations of vermin, insects, and fungus. Simple materials management systems and guides to effective materials use need to be in place in schools and classrooms. Regular auditing ensures all materials are being maintained and replaced as needed. However, care should be taken to
ensure that teachers and schools are not penalized for normal wear and tear, so that schools are not afraid to allow student use of textbooks.

Inclusiveness Considerations:

Textbooks and teachers’ guides need to “encompass the diverse needs of all learners in a wide range of cultural contexts, economic conditions and educational settings.”(25, p.3)

Children with disabilities – Textbooks can accommodate the special needs of students through large font and Braille editions, as well as adapted versions at simpler levels of reading difficulty.

‘Low-achieving’ students - Textbooks are cost-effective in raising test scores for those considered academically strong.(6)(11)(22) However, for ‘low-achieving’ students, mother-tongue literacy skills must be developed and textbooks provided in their mother-tongue. When these conditions are met, students who have been designated 'low-achieving’ students’ may even outperform their academically strong counterparts.(11)(26)

Gender: Textbooks should equally portray males and females in ways to avoid negative gender stereotypes. Illustrations or text references favouring males leads to gender bias, promoting stereotypes within the culture and affecting the interest and aspiration of female learners.(7)(12)

Policy Examples:

- The United Republic of Tanzania Ministry of Education and Culture: Basic Education Master Plan (BEMP) [PDF]
- Ministry of Education Republic of Ghana: Textbook Development and Distribution Policy for Pre-Tertiary Education [PDF]
- Government of Pakistan: National Textbook and Learning Materials Policy and Plan of Action. [PDF]

References and sources


Section q/ Education/or Peace and Human Rights Division/or the Promotion of Quality Education, UNESCO.


Additional Resources:


Pingel, F. 2010. UNESCO guidebook on textbook research and textbook revision.


