

The old Textbook Catalogue and its implications for Education and Industry

There is general agreement in education circles that textbooks play a critical role in the delivery of education. UNESCO further points out that in situations where for different reasons, teachers are not able to teach effectively or are underprepared for this task, textbooks become even more critical as a guide into the curriculum, for both the teacher and the learner. They can become a critical tool for students that are not in ideal learning environments, including lack of access to teachers, fellow students, and other help. The pandemic period that we have just gone through illustrated this. Huge efforts were made by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and industry and other role players to make sure that at least learners had books and learning could continue. It is for this reason that the public and education authorities and critics are quite unforgiving when textbooks are found wanting with regards to their adherence to the curriculum, norms and values, as we have seen in the media occasionally. Many initiatives have been taken at a global, i.e. UNESCO, as well as local DBE, to ensure that books do not carry elements of prejudice and discrimination.

Beyond the technical delivery of the curriculum, textbooks also transmit values and norms and can entrench social values and norms as provided for and beyond the curriculum, especially in communities that are in social transition like South Africa. Textbooks are subjected to rigorous selection processes to ensure that they do not only cover the curriculum, but they also promote the social values that we hold dear as a society and we would like to inculcate in young people, as tomorrow's leaders. Teachers play a critical role in the symbiotic relationship with the textbooks in the delivery of the curriculum and attainment of better learning outcomes. A diverse catalogue that includes a healthy variety of materials, provides teachers with a range of materials that are suitable for different learning requirements.

One can conclude that an ideal education setup is one where competent teachers are supported by good textbooks to improve learning outcomes. Although there are many sources of textbooks today, including workbooks and textbooks that are produced by the Department of Education, corporate sponsored books and Open Education Resources (OERs), the majority of the textbooks used in our education system, especially the core materials that drive the curriculum, are delivered by a dedicated commercial publishing sector.

The provisioning of textbooks has not been without challenges, including the elusive attainment of universal coverage. This has led to situations where Chapter 9 institutions like the Human Rights Commission, Section 27 and Equal Education, have had to take the DBE to court to ensure that this critical right is realized. In an attempt to manage the attainment of universal

coverage sustainably, the department argued that it was working on a progressive realization of this goal. The courts insisted on an immediate realization, arguing that there is no redress for a learner who goes without a textbook. This further confirmed the critical role that textbooks play in the delivering of education to learners and the prejudice that they can suffer if they do not have textbooks. Yet there are requisite conditions under which textbooks make a positive contribution. These include having a diverse range of good, properly screened textbooks that are fully aligned with the curriculum; textbooks that are available in good quantities, ideally where each learner has a textbook for every subject or no more than 3 learners sharing a book, and this book is available to them when they are before the teacher in class; when they do their group activities and when they are studying on their own. To achieve this, a viable publishing industry with professionals that are available to work on these textbooks when they are needed, is a necessity. These books need to be kept updated and compliant with the changing curriculum, norms and values. It also means budget provisioning that allows the updating and the replacement of these titles with new and relevant materials. Variables like physical quality, regular updating and replenishment, the range of textbooks used in the system and others impact procurement cost and eventually textbook coverage. Education authorities are constantly juggling and balancing these variables to make sure that learners and teachers have enough quality textbooks for their learning. In South Africa we have had a strong education publishing sector that can meet the textbook needs of education and an education system that has enjoyed increasing levels of saturation and has sustained the industry. The DBE indicated earlier this year that many provinces had gone beyond 96% coverage with textbooks from the current catalogue. This is after more than a decade of procurement and replenishment. There have been challenges in areas like reading and mathematics as shown in the PIRLS and TIMSS but generally education results have been improving year on year while the provisioning of textbooks has been getting closer and closer to universal coverage. However, the current catalogue is very old and should have been replaced long ago.

Save for FET literature, which was renewed in 2016, the current catalogue is more than 12 years old. Ideally the catalogue should be renewed every 5 years, depending on how stable the curriculum is, to ensure that the books are revised regularly, are in line with the curriculum and promote the values that should be delivered with the curriculum. For a very long time, the DBE has been trying to renew the catalogue but has not been able to do so. Though there has not been a whole scale change to the curriculum, there have been mild but cumulatively significant changes and very rapid socio-economic and political changes that have accelerated the datedness of the current catalogue. For example, illustrations and examples that were used when the textbooks were developed more than a decade ago and made sense to learners, would not have the same impact today, especially considering the rate at which technology is accelerating change and the rights of minority communities that are being enshrined in our law and social interaction. There are also critical changes to teaching approaches, that need to be aided by appropriate textbooks. As learning tools, textbooks and teacher's guides must accommodate and complement the changes to teaching approaches, for example the use of

phonics in acquiring decoding skills. Publishers are professionals who can work with education authorities to make sure that learners and teachers have access to textbooks that are in tune with the pulse of education. The non-renewal of the catalogue has implications for both education and the book sector in general, and the education publishing sector in particular.

Relevance to the education curriculum, social reality, and norms

Relevance does not need much emphasis. A tool that is recognized as a central driver of the curriculum and is often the guide for the teacher and the learner into the curriculum, needs to remain aligned and needs to track changes in such a curriculum. To begin with our world is changing so rapidly and impacts what needs to be taught in schools, including the subjects offered. For example, there are new subjects that have come out of the growing relevance of the maritime economy, the ever-growing role of robotics and coding, the growing use of artificial intelligence (AI), and others. These subjects may be running without the necessary support of textbooks. Even where the curriculum has remained unchanged, over time there is change in emphasis and approach, including social norms, developments and examples that need to be cited. Sometimes these are technology driven sweeping changes to our world view like the 4IR, Artificial intelligence, and social phenomena like Covid 19 and LGBTQIA phenomena, that need to be infused in the text of any curriculum and need to be reflected in the applicable textbooks. While good teachers can mediate the gap between the textbook and the reality that learners live, over time the gap just widens to the point where the teacher has to spend more time updating the textbook. This can detract from the teaching process. Some of the teaching tools and examples that come up over time and are not taken on by the textbook are crucial to learners and may be at odds with the textbook's approach. For example, the role of AI, its utility and role in society was hardly a topic 12 years ago but it is mainstream today. A Natural science, Life orientation or Economic studies book that does not cite COVID 19, is hard to imagine, but this is the case without an updated catalogue. Textbooks that do not cover such a fundamental development cannot be viewed as relating to learners' reality. A child who starts Grade 1 now is most likely to use a book that contains nothing that happened in their lifetime, yet the last decade was momentous in many ways. Updating and renewing textbooks opens access for students and teachers to new materials that cover a different and more relevant reality for them. Both the DBE and the industry agree that regular catalogue renewal is critical to the effectiveness of textbooks and their use in education.

Loss of critical skills for learning materials development

The quality of textbooks that support an education system is determined by a few critical factors. One is the quality of the curriculum statement itself and how clearly it is articulated through the call for submissions of textbooks. It is this articulation that guides materials developers. It is also dependent on the availability of dedicated professionals who write and develop the materials. These includes writers, illustrators, designers, editors and trainers who work in an iterative process to make sure that these materials can be used by teachers and learners effectively. These professionals need to be available when they are needed. The majority of them earn their livelihood from this, as dedicated employees in publishing houses or as freelance service providers. When there has been no meaningful activity in the work field like we have seen in the last 12 years, these professionals seek alternative work and some of them may be lost to the sector. Companies have also been forced to scale down by laying off some of these dedicated professionals, as they cannot afford to keep them, especially with no firm prospect of a new catalogue on the horizon. Companies will battle to recruit and train new people when there is a call for a new catalogue in the future. They will also battle to find freelance professionals who can assist, especially considering the frenetic pace at which the implementation often happens.

Dedicated textbook companies may also be decimated

Education publishers, booksellers and distributors are often dedicated to developing and distributing textbooks. When there is no work and can no longer downsize any more, they may fold. Large international companies operate in different markets and can rely on other markets when some are dormant. Local and often smaller entities who play a crucial role in socio-economic transformation and cultural diversity, are taking a huge strain and many of them will be lost if there is no work coming their way. The closure of two major booksellers this year, including one that had been operating for more than a century is attributable to many factors, including what is happening in the academic sector, but part of their strain also came from dwindling activity in the schools textbook sector. The sector is bleeding jobs at a time when the country cannot afford to.

The new catalogue

For a while after 5 years, the non-renewal of the catalogue was justifiable and understandable. Indeed, the catalogue has to have a reasonable lifespan to make sure that the learning environment can be saturated with learning materials, through retention and replenishment, especially in situations where the curriculum is relatively stable. This is particularly beneficial in situations where procured books are of a reasonable and durable quality and there are retention systems. Indeed, teachers can mediate the few cases where textbook accuracy and

relevance is eroded by time. It is all part of a sustainable book procurement and utilisation management system. This catalogue stretch has resulted in perhaps the highest provisioning levels of textbook and learner support materials that we have seen since 1994. However, 12 years is too long by any consideration and as indicated earlier has negative implications for education and the whole book and education value chain.

Initially the DBE indicated that they had budgetary constraints with screening, including paying screeners. This was an easy problem to solve as participating publishers are charged a fee per submission to cover this cost. Publishers were willing to pay what was required to make this possible. The second explanation for the delay was determining whether the new catalogue process has to cater for a wholesale change of the curriculum or for a mild revision. This determination certainly informs the call for submission and the expectation on the materials that have to be submitted. However, whether there has been a change in the curriculum or there will just be mild changes, cumulatively and over time, there have been many changes in the curriculum and in the social context, to suggest that continuing with such an old catalogue is not viable. The latest and more fundamental is budget constraints. There has been a circular from Treasury to departments to cut down on spending as tax collections are expected to be lower than normal in an economy that is facing several challenges. In situations like this, budget allocation and prioritization become major concerns.

The DBE, like many other government departments, may be facing a fiscal challenge. The question then becomes a matter of budget and priority and where books as education tools sit in the priority matrix. It is convenient to believe and accept that textbooks are catered for because many provinces are reaching universal coverage. It is also quite an investment to move from a near universal coverage situation to a zero-based procurement with all the curriculum and catalogue development costs. However, it is also quite shortsighted to underestimate the impact of a dated catalogue on education and the implications of a widening gap between the curriculum and social norms and values on one side and the content in the textbooks. It is important to consider that if submissions for the first 3 grades, as is usually the approach, is not made for another year, by the time the last grades are implemented, the catalogue will be 15 or more years old. It is also quite worrying that due to lack of clarity on the planning, the industry and all that are critical for the process have no idea if and when there will be a call for a new catalogue. This makes them quite unprepared to respond effectively and promptly to the call. There will have to be major discussions and negotiations between the responsible authorities in the DBE and the industry on when it would be feasible to deliver the materials. The notice time is critical in this regard. In the past, both the DBE and the industry have acknowledged that better LTSM could be delivered with longer lead times. It is imperative that role players come together and work out a plan to alleviate a possible educational crisis.

The voice of publishers is often tainted by their concern for their business interest in the matter, together with many other players on the supplier side. On the DBE's side, textbooks and the near saturation situation, may provide a quick but unsustainable fix to the fiscal constraint. Yet the ramifications of a dated catalogue of textbooks for education are quite far-reaching and need to be the concern of all in society, including education professionals, national planning and other government departments. These departments and entities need to discuss and reach a common understanding of what is at stake and come up with a national plan that can assist the DBE and other role players ensure that the process of updating the catalogue begins without further delay. The DBE and the industry should continue discussing this matter in the LTSM forum and try to come up with indicative dates of when the call for submissions can be expected from the DBE. Such indicative dates will allow everyone involved enough time to prepare. Preparations would include securing authors, editors, typesetters, trainers and other professionals with the requisite skill set. This is going to be particularly difficult because after so many years, many of them may not be available. New players will need the necessary training while old players may need refresher training. Getting prepared to respond to a submission call is particularly challenging for small players. Bigger players with more resources find it easier to secure professionals quickly. The DBE has often indicated that they would like to see the transformation process in the industry continuing at a faster pace. One of the ways to do so is to make sure that small players are placed in a position where they can participate and compete more easily. Even a simple indication of how long the current catalogue is going to stay in place will help the sector plan better.

Beyond the traditional catalogue of print materials, there is need to explore appropriate formats and technology to ensure that universal coverage is reached in a much shorter time than in the past, including the licensing of digital materials to schools and learners that have the necessary technology. The inclusion of reading scheme materials may help resolve our schools' reading crisis.

There is also the need to look at how to resolve some of the problems that have eluded the sector in the past, for example catering for small enrolment subjects that are not viable under standard publishing and procurement arrangements. These subjects need to be catered for as part of the submission arrangements and requirements.

In the past there have been attempts mid-stream by provinces like KZN to come up with optimized book formats and materials to make sure that the allocated funds cover more learners. The reason why such efforts did not work was that they were late considerations that could not be built into national planning and procurement, to tap into bigger economies of scale. This is the time that should be used to explore all these options to ensure that not only is a catalogue of LTSM delivered as soon as possible but it is also an optimal catalogue that ensures the delivery of more quality materials to more learners as soon as possible.

Conclusion

It is very encouraging that in the last engagement with the DBE, including senior officials in curriculum and LTSM, the concerns raised here and the need to resolve the new catalogue issue were acknowledged. It is also very heartening that the role of publishers in the delivery of an appropriate catalogue was acknowledged with a commitment to share plans and requirements, as soon as possible. The recognition of publishers as partners and stakeholders in the process is critical because it enables publishers to plan accordingly and deliver LTSM that can meet the needs of education effectively and on time. As an industry, we look forward to further collaboration with the DBE and getting new and relevant textbooks in the hands of learners and teachers expeditiously.

Thank you.

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