

# More damage predicted for educational outcomes: the case against approving only one textbook

A recent proposal by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is to do away with the national catalogue of eight books per subject per grade, and to approve only one book, is predicted to damage further South Africa's already poor educational outcomes.

The draft National Policy for the Provisioning and Management of Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM) has two good aspects to it. The first is the excellent intention to achieve universal provision by providing each student with a textbook per subject per grade, i.e. to supply a Minimum School Bag. The second is to ensure that books are kept by schools for five years, to ensure that universal provision is attainable within the limits of the annual budget for LTSM. However, the proposal to remove all choice of books by schools from a national catalogue of eight approved titles and to have only a single approved textbook is a retrogressive step.

One size does not fit all. A single textbook will not meet the widely differing needs of the South African school population. Students aiming at university entrance need books that cover the subject comprehensively, teach higher order skills, and prepare them for university entrance. At the other end of the spectrum, struggling students in poorly resourced schools, learning through a medium of instruction that is not their home language, require a more basic coverage of content and significant language support. Students in additive bilingualism classrooms require a different language approach altogether. A book that meets the needs of the top 30% of students will be inappropriate for the remaining 70%; if it is aimed at the lower-performing 50%, it will not meet the needs of the higher-performing 50%, who will be disadvantaged. Indeed, a paper on American states which have a single approved textbook system, note that the system has resulted in a dumbing down of textbooks to the lowest common denominator.

Education can't afford this kind of misalignment and waste of resources. Multiple textbook choice provides something for each situation.

It's widely accepted that a multi-text environment is educationally richer, offering different points of view and different content, teaching students to discriminate between texts – something that is specified in the History syllabus. Professor Johan Wasserman made the point in a recent article that "... in a society like South Africa where deeply conflicting views about the past exist" it is essential to avoid a "bland agreed-upon official narrative instead." This is but one step away from censorship, and another step towards totalitarianism.

Unlike many other countries, South Africa's teaching corps is exceptionally diverse in its background, teaching ability, language ability, and content knowledge. A single book will not address all these differing needs.

Part of professional development for teachers is assessing material and choosing what is appropriate for their classes language level and ability. To remove from teachers the professional decision as to which "tools" to use is to diminish their professional capacity and to exclude an important area of skill and growth. In addition, attitude and commitment are essential features of teachers' performance in the classroom. It's well-known that a person's commitment to a chosen course of action is greater if they are involved in as much of the decision-making process as possible. Part of gaining teachers' psychological commitment to using LTSM, and using them well, is to give them the right to choose the tools of their trade. Professor Rob Siebörger also makes the point that, "The writing of textbooks ... is an important professional activity and it may well be argued that the more textbooks are written for an education system, the better the intellectual health of the system. It means that more teachers are involved, there is greater participation and wider stakeholding."

An education system in an open, free, fair, non-racist and democratic society must offer a diversity of materials to all learners. There is no rainbow with only one colour. A national catalogue with diversity of content, methodology and approach offers diversity and fosters innovation and creativity.

While there is a wealth of research linking improved educational outcomes with the supply and effective use of a basic level of LTSM or, preferably, a wide range and plentiful supply of LTSM, there is no research that indicates that having a limited national catalogue or supplying only one book per subject per grade per learner improves educational outcomes. The few countries which have implemented such a system have, first of all, homogenous pupil populations and teacher cohorts, rather than the extraordinarily diverse range of pupils and teachers that South Africa has. Secondly, where they have good educational outcomes, this is attributable to other factors such as teacher qualifications, commitment, and attitude, the quality of teaching, the time on task, a range of available digital supplementary materials, parental and community support.

Singapore is one of the few countries which uses a single-book approved book system. It also has high educational outcomes, but the reason for this is not the approved book system. Like many Asian countries, Singapore has Tiger Parents who push their children to excel, and who pay for extra classes and material. Singapore teachers are of a very high quality and are well paid, so the profession attracts top graduates. Singapore is also a tiny city state: lines of communication are short, monitoring and control are relatively easy to perform. The student population is relatively homogenous in terms of skills and language ability. Finally, students don't depend only on the textbook: there is a lot of advanced digital support which is more important than the textbook.

A competitive publishing environment drives quality up and prices down. A single option catalogue will create monopolies, which ultimately are not cost-effective. The book value chain consists of paper manufacturers, printers, publishers, booksellers, libraries, freelancers (editors, proof-readers, designers, artists, indexers, translators) and authors, for whom the book chain represents skills, income, and jobs. Although the book chain consists of academic, general, and educational publishers, educational publishers consist of 66% (R2.8 billion) of the total turnover of the industry (R4.2 billion – which, to put it in context, is merely 7% of Pick 'n Pay's turnover in 2012). Thus, any significant change to the educational publishing sector – particularly one which drastically reduces its 'biodiversity', such as limiting the national catalogue or moving to a single title per subject per grade per language, will eliminate many publishing businesses and will have a negative ripple effect through the rest of the ecosystem, limiting innovation, creativity, experimentation, risk, ideas, and debate. When the current limited catalogue of eight books per subject per grade was first introduced, it reduced the number of educational publishers from roughly 90 to 30. It is estimated that a move to a single-book approval system will reduce the number of educational publishers to 2-3. The damage to the publishing industry and allied industries in terms of jobs and skills lost will be incalculable. This means fewer publishers to compete, innovate, cross-subsidise unprofitable areas such as African literature, and experiment with the digital solutions needed for the future.

Among the first publishers to be eliminated will be the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs) and historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs), who will find the barriers to entry have been raised so high in terms of investment and risk, that they will not be able to participate.

It is also obvious that a single-book choice system is a winner-takes-all system, which increases the risk of corruption.

The main reason behind the proposal is the erroneous idea that it will save costs. The national funding norm stipulated by the DBE is that the ratio of personnel to non-personnel funding should reflect an 80:20 split (the comparable European figures were 77:23 for 2007), but the actual split in South Africa in 2013/14 was 86:14. In other words, we're overspending on staff: teachers and national and provincial education department staff. In the recent Basic Education Budget Vote Speech, it was announced that the education budget for 2014/15 would be R254 billion for 2014/15. A mere 2% (R5.097 billion) will be spent on workbooks, textbooks and stationery. The figure ought to be at least 8% to ensure that every school has a library, a science laboratory, textbooks, classroom sets of readers, language and maths games, software, and digital content, from Grades R to 12.

The Department is pulling on the wrong levers to manage its budget. Firstly, it is personnel costs which need to be reduced, so that there is more funding for capital expenditure on infrastructure (school buildings, desks, chairs)

and equipment (books, etc). Secondly, it erroneously assumes that approving only one textbook will reduce the cost of supplying textbooks. Longer printruns are indeed cheaper than short printruns – but only up to a point. A paper by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on the provision of LTSM points out that the cost savings plateau is at around printruns of 35,000 – 50,000 copies. Above this the cost benefit is marginal. “Only small population countries are likely to derive significant cost benefits from single monopoly textbook policies designed to reduce costs. Most countries have sufficient school enrolments to provide a choice of alternative competing textbooks at economic prices,” DFID says.

If cost-savings need to be achieved, there are other ways to do so which don't damage educational outcomes. My calculations are that the items in the Minimum School Bag listed by the Department (which, incidentally, does not include dictionaries and atlases, or material for Grade R) – textbooks and stationery would cost R15.997 billion if all items were replaced each year. If books and stationery items such as scissors, rulers, calculators are kept by schools for five years, the annual cost falls to R4.852 billion, which is within the Department's small budget of R5.097 billion. Retention of books is the single biggest cost-saving in an LTSM budget, and yields the greatest savings of all. Making books last five years saves 80% of the cost.

The next biggest cost-saving is VAT, which is 14% of the cost of books. Most countries have a zero VAT rate or a reduced rate on books.

The Department's practice of supplying state-published disposable workbooks in which children write currently costs 17% of the LTSM budget (R896.7 million in 2014/15). It would be half the cost to issue, say, maths textbooks (kept for five years) with disposable exercise books to write in. Saving: 8.5% of budget.

Requiring books to be published in black and white instead of colour would save roughly 3%.

Another significant area of cost-saving is having fewer subjects in the curriculum, which means fewer books and less stationery need to be supplied – and teaching time can focus in greater depth on fewer subjects.

Frequent changes of curriculum and accelerated implementation are also expensive. The shortfall of textbooks in provincial budget allocations that has been experienced in recent years is more a result of the frequent changes of curriculum and the accelerated pace of curriculum reform than the prices of textbooks. Where a new curriculum for two to four grades is implemented each year to reform the total curriculum over three years, it places considerable strain on provincial textbook budgets, since a new book has to be bought for each child in the grades implementing the new curriculum. From a budgetary point of view, an eight-year curriculum reform cycle would be more manageable and affordable. In addition, the logistics of managing a four-grade submission and provisioning are considerably more complex and onerous than the logistics of managing a two-grade submission and provisioning.

Finally, to dispel a popular myth: it is clear that digital textbooks will increasingly form an important resource in the classroom, but overall they will not necessarily be cheaper to the user – the costs simply move elsewhere in the eco-system. In the current pricing model, the publisher pays all costs and recovers them through the price paid by the user. In the digital pricing model, the publisher pays for development, writing and production costs, but the user pays the costs of hardware, software, and internet access.

Similarly, in Open Educational Resources (OERs), the creator or donor covers the costs of development, writing, and production, and the long-term sustainability of the material is dependent on the altruism of the creator. OERs are an important part of the resources, but, as the DFID paper points out, the principles of a system of provisioning are that it should be affordable, sustainable, and predictable.

Is the benefit of ostensible cost-savings through a single-choice approval system worth the cost of damage to educational outcomes? I think not.

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