

All textbooks deserve attention

The Limpopo saga has led many to lose sight of the larger curriculum picture.

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Pupils need proper resources for a good education. (Oupa Nkosi, MG)

In many ways, 2012 has been the year of the school textbook. That the media, non-governmental organisations and the government should be worrying about this aspect of our schooling system is a good thing. The stature of the textbook seems to have completely recovered from the battering received from the more extreme Curriculum 2005 proponents a decade ago.

But in the fight for better textbook access there are realities we sometimes lose sight of. The first is that textbook provisioning for our children will soon no longer be a question of new titles needed for the introduction of new curriculum policies. We have been through an intense and extended period of curriculum change.

Between 1998 and 2014 there will have been only three years in which no new curriculum rules were being introduced in one or more grades. The introduction of the latest changes — formally, the curriculum and assessment policy statement — will have been completed by 2015 and this

should usher in a new era of curriculum stability.

This recent history explains why so much attention has been devoted to textbooks for the new curriculum. Moreover, it is an issue that lends itself to drama: publication deadlines are tight, contracts are large and the distribution challenges considerable.

Textbooks wearing out

But what has suffered in this process is attention to the more mundane issue of topping up existing titles in schools as textbooks wear out. The rule of thumb used among policymakers, a somewhat arbitrary one, is that on average a textbook can be used by three pupils in three successive years. As curriculum stability becomes the norm, this more mundane matter of textbook replacement should take centre stage.

Even in 2012 the replacement of existing titles should arguably have been as large a concern as the delivery of new textbooks. Four grades needed new books in 2012 because of the introduction of the curriculum and assessment policy statement: grades one to three and 10. The remaining eight grades required topping up at a rate of about one in every three books. That is about the equivalent of replacing all textbooks in two to three grades of the system.

One wonders what happened to this topping-up process when so much of the public attention was on new-curriculum textbooks. Did topping up receive enough money and managerial attention under the circumstances? There is a broader point to be made here. Paying a lot of attention to one aspect of the schooling system, although often necessary to raise awareness, can have the unintended consequence of negligence in other areas. It is a bit like the difficulty of herding cats.

Not paying sufficient attention to the replacement of textbooks at schools over many years is a part of the explanation behind the poor textbook-to-pupil ratios found in the few surveys that have monitored this important statistic. Data from the 2007 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality programme, a regional testing and data collection system, suggests there were only about 52 textbooks per 100 pupils in grade six mathematics in South Africa, against 77 in Botswana and 100 in Swaziland.

Rewards

A second point worth reminding ourselves of is that schools are better at looking after their books if they are rewarded for doing so. The existing school-funding norms provide a good basis for ensuring that such rewards exist. According to the norms, even if procurement and delivery of textbooks is organised centrally, schools must have a say in how their school allocation is spent. If they order fewer books because they are able to make their books last longer than three years, then the school should be able to use the savings for other educational inputs.

The same norms say that schools that are able to display sufficient management capacity should not be forced to remain in a central procurement system. If the system does not serve

their interests, they should be able to opt out, receive the money instead and buy books themselves.

A valid concern raised by the education departments is that schools may abuse their freedoms and not buy enough books for effective teaching. The question is whether one should tackle this risk through less freedom for school principals as opposed to better monitoring of the desired result, namely that every pupil should have sufficient access to the texts he or she needs.

Whatever policy approach one takes, better monitoring in this area is needed. With effective monitoring it becomes more difficult for irresponsible schools to skimp on textbooks. Without this monitoring, books could end up sitting in a school storeroom even in the presence of good centralised deliveries.

Parents and their organisations have an important role to play in this regard, not only in helping schools and their children to look after their books, but also in terms of decisions about how best to balance centralised controls against letting schools decide.

Finally, the bureaucracy will never be as good at predicting what next year's textbooks needs are as schools themselves. The 2012 textbooks saga, which has been about a very specific part of the entire textbook delivery system, has in some ways created the impression that the ideal is a state that has real-time data on enrolments by grade, language of instruction and, for grades 10 to 12, subjects and is able to deliver textbooks accordingly. No developing country has succeeded in establishing such an information system and it would almost certainly not be worth the cost. Even if it was possible, enrolments are fluid and delivering resources to schools must always involve some prediction of what will happen next.

School principals are infinitely better than a central system at predicting next year's needs on the basis of what the current stock of books in the school is and the likely enrolment changes from one year to the next. This applies not just to textbooks, but also to the new national workbooks. Even where the capacity of principals is weak, evidence from other countries suggests it is easier to develop the required capacity at the school than to run everything centrally.

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