

Chapter 1

Textbooks and Educational Opportunity

“Ability is nothing without opportunity.”

Napoleon I

Attending school dominates the lives of most children around the world. Much evidence indicates that their specific schooling experiences vary considerably from country to country. There is evidence that they even vary among schools and among classrooms in the same country. However, within this variety there are parts of the school setting so common as to be virtually universal. Textbooks are one such element. Perhaps only students and teachers themselves are a more ubiquitous element of schooling than textbooks. As such a central facet of schooling, understanding textbooks is essential to understanding the learning opportunities provided in educational systems around the world.

Textbooks help define school subjects as students experience them. They represent school disciplines to students. They translate a country’s curriculum policies into such representations. These representations are stories their authors and editors intend to be told in classrooms over the time that the books are used – often a full school year or grade. They are a fixed component providing an unchanging reference to the nature of these school subjects for teachers, students, and their parents.

Schooling is a dynamic activity and textbooks function within this dynamic structure of schooling. They are one in a series of resources that educational systems assemble to provide children opportunities to be exposed to and master knowledge and skills deemed important by their societies. These resources are organized purposively. Educational systems presumably are concerned with organizing such resources into optimal structures that create the best opportunities for children to learn.

Textbooks themselves are unchanging at a given point in schooling. However, they are flexible as tools used by school systems, schools, teachers and students. Teachers and students use them in varied ways. However, they are written to set down a particular vision of school subjects and reflect the intention of the authors. Thus, when they open their school texts, students and teachers access distinctive conceptions of what school subjects are. They look through a “glass” designed to reveal a particular vision. Teachers and students inevitably modify this vision as a result of using this tool in the classroom setting. However, some modifications are more likely than others, given the invariant nature of the text and the roles it plays in promoting pedagogical strategies. Hence, textbooks exert probabilistic influences on the educational opportunities that take place in the classrooms in which they are used.

Textbooks are artifacts. They are a part of schooling that many stakeholders have the chance to examine and understand (or misunderstand). In most classrooms they are the physical tools most intimately connected to teaching and learning. Textbooks are designed to translate the abstractions of curriculum policy into operations that teachers and students can carry out. They are intended as mediators between the intentions of the designers of curriculum policy and the teachers that provide instruction in classrooms. Their precise mediating role may vary according to the specifics of different nations, educational systems, schools and classrooms. Their great importance is constant.

They mediate between the intent of curricular policy and the instruction that occurs in classrooms. This suggests that textbooks have a strong impact on what occurs in classrooms. Textbooks’ substantial impact on teacher’s instructional decision-making has been extensively documented in studies in a number of countries.¹

Educational priorities are often central issues politically contested. Since textbooks embody such priorities, they acquire a relevance that is not only pedagogical but profoundly political as well. Textbooks define

school subjects not only for teachers and pupils, but for the public as well. They are thus closely scrutinized in the context of debates on directions in education. They are central features of the structure of schooling's educational opportunities. Consequently, and ultimately, they affect the life chances of students.

Textbooks are intimately related to classroom instruction. As such they are close to teachers, pupils and their families. As a result their content and structure are extremely important – and visible – in the politics of schooling. It is increasingly obvious that they serve important political purposes, helping to configure the environment in which schooling occurs.

In school systems across the world, textbooks' contents have been important promoters of specific visions of schooling. They are thus central characters in the politics of education. They have played part in national-level ideological upheavals such as the Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China,² and in intensive interest-group competition in the context of educational reforms in France,³ Taiwan⁴ and the Netherlands.⁵

In periods of perceived educational crisis, school systems and the educational opportunities they make available are under the critical scrutiny of key social actors. It is then that the content of textbooks is most likely to be the subject of political controversy. Certainly, this seems to be illustrated in the case of the United States. Textbooks – and the vision of school mathematics and science that they manifest – have become the center of attention as school districts attempt to change textbooks in the face of concerted public opposition.⁶ State textbook adoption agencies and independent monitoring groups find that the textbook market does not offer options that satisfy their conception of quality.⁷ School districts and states find it necessary to include disclaimers in school biology textbooks to defuse politically contentious issues between scientific and religious conceptions of how living organisms have acquired the morphological and physiological characteristics that distinguish them.⁸

According to the Book

Using TIMSS to investigate the translation of policy into
practice through the world of textbooks

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