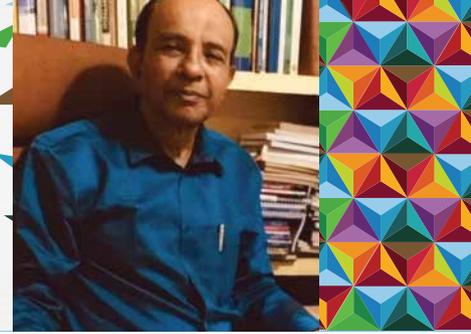


Taking Textbooks to Schools

Parthasarathi Misra



It was a hot summer afternoon of 2016 in the capital of an Indian State which had invited us to be associated with its textbook renewal exercise. We were working with the Faculty of the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) of the state and a few textbook writers drawn from two other organisations working in the field of education. Suddenly, the serene academic atmosphere of the place was marred by a slogan-shouting mob who had entered the SCERT building to gherao and submit a memorandum to the Director, SCERT alleging 'gross irregularities' in the process of textbook revision initiated by the Government. The demonstrators also raised slogans against outside forces interfering with the textbook revision exercise of the State. The SCERT colleagues working with us in our respective groups advised us not to venture out. I peeped through the window and was shocked to see that the majority of the demonstrators were in their early twenties!

A textbook narrative is a difficult terrain for the people involved in the process of conceptualising and contextualising a textbook as per the objectives of a curriculum specified by an educational authority. The curriculum, the syllabus and the textbook have an umbilical relationship in the domain of education and the people entrusted with the responsibility of designing and delivering good textbooks to learners try their level best to adhere to the guidelines incorporated in the policy documents. But in spite of their sincere efforts, textbook writers are often at crossroads, facing the wrath of a number of stakeholders keen on capitalising on the textbooks for their narrow partisan objectives. The present article, therefore, aims at demystifying textbooks by narrating and critiquing the actual process of converting the curriculum to texts, highlighting the manner in which decisions are made regarding choosing content and placing them systematically within the overall curricular arena. It also points out how a communication gap between the parties involved in the preparation, production and distribution of textbooks affects the whole exercise of making textbooks available to the students who are supposed to be the primary users of the textbooks.

Curriculum designers, textbook writers, illustrators, publishers, the educational administrators and policy makers have their specific priorities and perspectives which are often incompatible with one another and it is indeed a herculean task to accommodate conflicting priorities and perspectives in designing a particular textbook.

Demystifying textbooks

According to a tradition followed by people in many parts of India, the formal learning of a child called *vidyarambah* begins with the worshipping of a textbook. This ritual of introducing the child to a textbook makes the textbook synonymous with formal learning. For the child, it is an object of reverence, an artefact to be kept on a high pedestal, she should not treat the textbook at par with her toys, picture books and other household objects available to her. When she comes to school, a textbook is handed over to her as the symbol of her bondage, in order to prove her progress in the realm of learning she is forced to memorise and reproduce its content verbatim.

For her teacher too, teaching the textbook in the class is synonymous with the whole of education. The textbook haunts the poor teacher, as any deviation from the syllabus and the content of the textbook may invoke the wrath of the authorities and the disapproval of her learners and their parents. She surrenders to the textbook meekly, jettisoning the pedagogical practices she had learnt in her teacher education programmes.

However, the practice of using textbooks as complete curriculum goes against the recommendations of the Position Paper on Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training. Lamenting the excessive importance given to textbooks, the said policy document observes:

The present day classroom practices are, in almost all schools of the country, totally dominated by textbooks. As a result it has acquired an aura and a standard format. What is needed is not a single textbook, but a package of teaching-learning material that could be used to engage the child in active learning. The textbook thus becomes a part



of this package and not the only teaching learning material (NCERT, 2006: 37).

The role of textbooks and the politics of textbooks are debatable topics across the globe. Textbooks affect the students' autonomous learning adversely and stifle the creativity of the teachers. Pointing out the negative side effects of the textbooks, Koutselini (2012:33) observes, 'Replacement of curricula by textbooks means viewing the teaching process as delivery of a final product, ready-made in the content of the textbooks, which must be delivered by teachers and memorised by students.' Krishna Kumar (1986:1309) calls the textbook the symbol of 'the teacher's subservient status in the educational culture.'

It is, however, gratifying to note that in a recent circular issued on 18 January 2019, the Central Board of Secondary Education has clearly stated that schools, principals and teachers should go beyond 'using textbooks as a complete curriculum, or assessing children on the basis of questions given at the unit end exercises.'

Ownership of the textbooks in the Indian context

The institutional mechanism for textbook production in India started with the establishment of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in 1961. Subsequently, State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) were established in almost all the states on the model of NCERT. Though NCERT prepares textbooks for the whole country, the mechanism for textbook production for state schools varies from state to state. In some states, SCERTs, or the State Bureaus of Textbook Preparation and Publication, are entrusted with the task of the preparation of the textbooks while in some states the Boards of Secondary Education, Higher Secondary Education Councils or Elementary Education Councils are the nodal agency for the preparation of the school textbooks. Again, in some states more than one Government sponsored body is involved in the preparation of the textbooks and, consequently, a lot of academic and administrative animosity crops up among these academic bodies.

Criteria for selecting the content

Once a textbook committee is formed by the Government, the members of the committee meet for brain-storming sessions to arrive at a general consensus on the broad principles of selecting the content. The following points are generally taken into account in these brainstorming sessions, usually presided over by the Director of the SCERT or a distinguished expert working in the particular

domain, the following areas are discussed:

- a selecting the content which aligns with the aims of education and the Constitutional values
- b choosing grade and age appropriate content to be used in the textbook
- c balancing the regional, national and the global content
- d specifying the pedagogically suitable content
- e the question of avoiding the stereotypical presentation of class, case and gender in selecting the content
- f the difficulty level of the content.

In the case of language textbooks, theoretical perspectives of language teaching and their pedagogical implications are often hotly debated by the members while in the case of social science textbooks, the ideological perspectives of the members are debated and examined in the context of content selection.

For the elementary level of textbooks, one of the major concerns for the textbook writers should be the selection of child-centric age appropriate material for the textbooks, but an analysis of the content of the textbooks meant for elementary classes across the country indicates that adequate attention is not paid to the child's prior knowledge, age appropriate capability and the level of her conceptual development. While referring to the textbooks of a particular Indian State, Chomal (2016:64) points out that 'Selecting, pitching and presenting the information in a manner that would be age appropriate was *inadequately addressed* in the textbooks'. (Emphasis mine)

The selection of the content of a textbook has implications for the shape and the physical features of the book. The sequencing of the content, the organisation and the length of the chapters, graphs and tables, the text narrative, illustrations, pre reading, while reading and post reading activities and the end-of-chapter questions add to the overall readability of a textbook. Again, while designing a language textbook, the writers have to decide if it will be accompanied by a work book, and while designing a social science textbook, the writers have to decide the titles for supplementary or additional reading.

In order to make the content of a textbook pedagogically relevant for the teachers, textbook writers often advocate the preparation of a Teachers' Manual. Fearing that many teachers will not take the trouble of reading a separate Teacher's Manual, textbook designers often insert



a few Teacher's Pages between the chapters of the textbook. Besides the Teacher's Pages, brief notes for teachers are also incorporated at the bottom of a few pages as and when the textbook writers believe that the teachers need specific guidance while using the content of those pages.

The selection of the content of a textbook may seem to be an uneventful event, but the insiders involved in the process of textbook writing can vouch for the birth pangs in of a textbook. It is often noticed that members of the textbook committees have different perceptions and uneven level of experience. Conservative outlooks, rigid theoretical underpinnings, political perspectives, personal equations and institutional affiliations often create a lot of animosity in the selection of the content of a textbook.

How often should we change the content of a textbook? It is observed that some states initiate the process of textbook renewal without revising the curriculum or the syllabus. The guidelines given by the Karnataka State Education Policy (KSEP) in respect of the content of a textbook and the frequency of the revision of the textbooks are quite significant. The said policy document observes:

'It is important to stabilise the usage of textbooks and not keep changing the content for at least three years unless there are inaccuracies. It is to be recognised that often schools text books are the only access to reading material that students from poorer sections of society have. It is therefore important to take great care of the content of the text books, and ensure that it is not written only for examination purposes' (KSEP, 2016:54).

Hazards of textbook writing

One may wonder why Indian textbooks often get negative publicity in the media. Factual errors, inappropriate content, grammatical errors, inappropriate language use, faulty illustrations, pages published upside down, empty pages or

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Parthasarathi, a post-graduate from Nottingham University (UK) and a Ph.D. (Calcutta University), is a Visiting Faculty, Azim Premji University, Bangalore. Besides teaching a Curricular Material Development in Language course to the postgraduate students of the University, he is involved in designing and facilitating short term professional development courses of the School of Continuing Education and University Resource Centre of the University. He may be contacted at partha.misra@azimpremjifoundation.org or misrapartha2018@gmail.com

inordinate delay in the distribution of textbooks to schools cause a lot of embarrassment to the Government. The time constrain faced by the textbook writers is the most dangerous factor that makes the content of a textbook susceptible to inaccuracies. The members of the textbook committees in almost all the states of the country are not full time professional textbook writers. They are deputed to the SCERTs for attending textbook writing workshops for a few days and during these workshops they select the content and prepare the first draft which is finalised by the whole group and approved by the Chairman of the committee.

The illustrations are generally singlehandedly done by the artist of the concerned SCERT or an outside agency which is roped in only when the manuscript is ready. There is hardly any interface between the textbook writers and the illustrators. The writer's intention of having a picture for supporting the content and the illustrator's interpretation of the content should be aligned, but the lack of communication between the textbook writers and the designers or the illustrators often make the illustrations irrelevant, thematically as well as pedagogically.

The distribution of the textbooks is the nightmare of the education officers entrusted with the responsibility of sending the books to the different parts of the state. Inviting tenders for carrying the textbooks from the state capitals to the different parts of the state, the timely payment to the transporters, the storage of the textbooks at the district or the sub-divisional level and the statistical work related to the number of schools, the children and the textbooks affect the distribution of free textbooks to the state-run schools of the country. There are instances where transporters refuse to carry books to the districts for the non-payment of their dues for the work done by them in the previous year. Taking textbooks to schools is a difficult task indeed!