

EXPLAINER

What Makes a Good Textbook Policy?



By supporting both teacher and student in the teaching and learning process, textbook can be a guidepost to growing educational attainments. Photo credit: ADB.

The right textbook policy and practice can help raise the quality of education and address learning gaps.

Introduction

Good textbook policy is a complex hybrid of different factors that contribute to the quality of education, linking good curriculum, teacher competencies, market practices in learning materials, and school level autonomy.

While digital learning materials are becoming indispensable in the modern era, policymakers need to support the development of high-quality and next-generation physical textbooks. They need to understand education not only in terms of curriculum and subject matter but also the dynamics and issues concerning textbook writing, financing, production, publishing, distribution, and use of textbooks and other materials in the classrooms. Textbook policies, whether or not they are published in an official document, should set out the criteria for high-quality textbooks within a high-quality education system—based on good theory, practice, and evidence of the kind of teaching and learning that policymakers wish to promote.

This piece is adapted from Textbook Policies in Asia: Development, Publishing, Printing, Distribution, and Future Implications.

A good textbook policy addresses system improvement.

The process of developing a textbook policy is valuable in itself. It can help align what are often described as the “quality” components of education—that is, the curriculum, textbooks, and assessment systems—in a golden triangle that lies at the heart of what takes place in the classroom and the learning of students.

In spite of recent technological advances, the importance of textbooks has not diminished. A textbook (or learning and teaching materials) policy can help with difficult decisions about how to invest in new technology to support teaching and learning while retaining and upgrading traditional textbooks and learning materials. A continuously updated textbook policy can facilitate allocation of budgets to physical textbooks and digital materials; ensure coherence between curriculum, classroom processes, and learning objectives; and bring innovations to the teaching and learning process. A well-prepared textbook policy will help to strike the balance between physical and digital materials and gear the textbooks to support improvements in student learning.

A good textbook policy provides framework to support good pedagogy.

A textbook is only as good as its contents. Research shows that a significant factor in improving learning outcomes, especially in primary and lower-secondary schools, is a focus on structured pedagogy, in which textbooks play a major role. Most Asian countries that have performed well in international education assessments in the past 20 years have made changes to their textbook policies during this period. While it is not possible to separate cause from effect, there is a clear correlation between textbook policy, classroom pedagogy, and educational outcomes. It is not surprising that some of the highest-achieving educational systems—such as Finland, Shanghai, and Singapore—have not only set the highest standards for their teaching cadres, but also have some of the most widely admired textbooks.

A good textbook policy promotes government-private publishing sector partnership.

In many countries, ownership of textbook development, publishing, and sometimes printing are tightly controlled by the government. This holds true particularly in textbook development and writing. Textbooks are also often directly linked to tests and assessments. Textbook policies that have evolved in educationally high-achieving Asian nations have sought to break the link between textbooks and exams by introducing multiple-textbook systems. Such policies depend on a thriving publishing sector. In most high-performing Asian education systems, commercial publishers play an important role, even though that role may be tightly regulated as in the case of People's Republic of China and Viet Nam's emerging textbook policies.

High-quality government textbook publishing is generally located within countries with a successful commercial publishing sector, in a mixed economy format, such as in Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore. Private sector knowledge and skills impact on government textbook publishing capacity. In such countries, the textbooks retained for development by government tend to be those with high-priority social content and/or early grade mother tongue and math, in which government wishes to follow a particular philosophy and pedagogy principles.

The transition from government to devolved and private textbook publishing is never smooth. It depends on open engagement between the government and publishers and requires long-term commitment.

A good textbook policy ensures that digital resources meet the necessary criteria for learning.

It is erroneous to consider that digital solutions by themselves will address long-standing, systemic problems in the quality of education and learning. It is also a fallacy that substituting the textbook with digital materials will save money for education policymakers or solve distribution challenges. Digital resources do not automatically transform teaching and learning unless they are backed by high-quality content linked to learning objectives and there is a wider strategy for such learning transformation, which in turn depends on system change involving tens of thousands of teachers and education officials.

Investment in digital resources tends to reinforce (or amplify) the existing dynamics. The impact of technology can only be as effective as the pedagogy it serves.

A good textbook policy recognizes the role of experienced teachers.

It is critical to include experienced teachers in the writing, evaluation, and selection of textbooks, especially for primary schools, where good pedagogy, together with good textbooks, plays a large part in learning outcomes for students. The process of selecting suitable teachers is vital. All high-achieving education systems ensure that teachers' voices are included at critical moments in the textbook policy chain. Teachers should be more than notionally represented in this chain, to ensure that content, language, and pedagogy are appropriate and that the tools placed in teachers' hands are fit for purpose.

Resource

Smart, A. and Jagannathan, S. 2018. *Textbook Policies in Asia: Development, Publishing, Printing, Distribution, and Future Implications*. Asian Development Bank.



Shanti Jagannathan

Principal Education Specialist, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department, Asian Development Bank

Shanti works on ADB education sector policies and strategies and provides technical advice and support to ADB's lending and non-lending education operations. She leads some of the knowledge initiatives, regional technical assistance programs, and policy research studies in the education sector. Shanti has also helped to establish the annual ADB International Skills Development Forum series. Prior to ADB, Shanti worked with the European Union on development cooperation in South Asia, and with an economic research think tank in India.

Follow Shanti Jagannathan on



Andy Smart

Independent Education and Publishing Consultant

Andy Smart is an independent education and publishing consultant. He is a board member of International Association for Research on Textbooks and Education Media (IARTEM) and a co-convenor of Networking to Integrate SDG Target 4.7 and Social and Emotional Learning into Educational Materials (NISSEM). He recently co-edited NISSEM Global Briefs: Educating for the social, the emotional and the sustainable.



Asian Development Bank (ADB)

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