

Introduction

Until very recently, one of the key elements in American education attracted scant attention. Textbooks are a central part of any educational system. They help to define the curriculum and can either significantly help or hinder the teacher. The “excellence movement” has directed its attention to textbooks in the past few years. American textbooks, according to the critics, are boring and designed for the lowest common denominator. They have been “dumbed down” so that content is diluted and “readability” is stressed. Textbooks have evolved over the past several decades into “products” often assembled by committees in response to external pressures rather than a coherent approach to education. Most important to many of the critics, textbooks do not provide the knowledge base necessary for American schools in a period of reform, renewal, and improvement.

It has been belatedly recognized that textbooks are a key part of any effort to reform America’s schools. And there are few parts of the educational system that would seem easier to fix. Textbooks are a relatively small part of any school budget—the average school district spent about \$4,000 per child in 1986, of which only \$34.17 was spent on instructional materials. Even doubling the average expenditure on textbooks would only marginally increase school expenditures—from 0.85 percent to 1.7 percent.¹ Even in an age of high technology, the “oldest technology” in education, the textbook, remains very important.

It is often difficult to assess blame in America’s decentralized educational structure. In the case of textbooks, critics have pointed in several directions. The publishers, they argue, have been only too willing to pander to fads, succumb to pressures from a variety of interest groups, and debase standards in their efforts to ensure a profit in an increasingly difficult marketplace. Many educators have stressed readability formulas rather than content in textbooks, and have contributed to the decline in both coherence and standards in textbooks. The centralized adoption

system, prevalent in almost half of the states, including such key states as Texas, California, and Florida, gives tremendous power to textbook boards, which must approve books for use statewide. These boards are frequently both overworked and undereducated. School administrators have rarely made a stand for high quality in textbooks. And the scholars in schools of education who are frequently involved in writing and evaluating textbooks have been seen as remiss for not sounding the alarm. In short, the complex system that creates, publishes, selects, and distributes textbooks for America's schools is in disarray. Virtually no one involved in the textbook enterprise has defended the status quo. And as Harriet Tyson-Bernstein points out, the situation is a "conspiracy of good intentions."² Textbook development is expensive, and publishers are naturally concerned with the bottom line of immediate profits in a highly competitive marketplace. In the past two decades, educators have been more concerned with ensuring that young people stayed in school during a period of declining budgets and seemingly intractable problems.

This is an opportune time for us to focus attention on textbooks. Change is taking place in tandem with the excellence movement. In California, Superintendent Bill Honig has been at the forefront of criticism, and he has also taken action by rejecting many of the textbooks offered for adoption in California schools. Honig and others have demanded books that will stimulate a desire for reading rather than simply imparting linguistic skills. When California — the largest single centralized textbook market in the United States — speaks, the publishers listen.

The textbook debate takes place in a broader social and educational context. In the 1960s and 1970s, politicians stressed the importance of access to schooling and the importance of equality of educational opportunity. Textbooks, not surprisingly, reflected this emphasis by lowering standards to ensure that they were understandable to an evermore diverse, and sometimes poorly prepared, student population. The pendulum has taken a swing, and the emphasis now is on higher academic standards, "cultural literacy" and the need for skills in a competitive world economy. The special interest groups that earlier were able to demand that textbooks include material on creationism, specific historical interpretations, and other sometimes rather odd topics have lost some of their power. Textbooks are now seen to be an important part of the excellence movement. We are in the midst of a significant change in the American approach to school textbooks.

It seems clear that textbook standards will improve, that more emphasis will be placed on content as opposed to method, and that publishers will pay more attention to quality. Yet, there are many voices and many demands in the highly complex textbook debate. The excellence ad-

vocates have a very strong voice and states like California play a key role. There are also countervailing forces, including special interest groups, the opinions of school boards and others throughout the country, and resistance to the expenditures required for the development of new textbooks. At the moment, the advocates of higher academic standards, coherence, and quality have the strongest position.

The story of America's textbook dilemma has yet to be fully told. Analysts and critics such as Harriet Tyson-Bernstein, Frances Fitzgerald, and Paul Gagnon have discussed key issues and analyzed specific elements of the highly complex nexus.³ Authors in this volume extend the story. This book looks at textbooks in historical perspective with a perceptive discussion by Michael Apple, who argues that there has been a link between political factors and state control over textbook decisions. He focuses on the South in his analysis. Sherry Keith and Kenneth Wong and Tom Loveless all add to this discussion from several different perspectives. They deal directly with the complex political equation of textbook selection. Two of the essays in this book focus on basal reading textbooks, a very important segment of the textbook business. In these essays Allan Luke and Patrick Shannon both grapple with issues of legitimacy, control, and the nature of reading texts. Many of the ideological and curricular debates are played out in the arena of reading texts. Bill Honig and Harriet Tyson-Bernstein and Arthur Woodward, from rather different perspectives, discuss the role of textbooks in the current educational reform movement.

Two insightful essays consider the textbook industry from the "inside." Naomi Silverman writes as a college textbook editor. She discusses how textbook publishers at the postsecondary level operate, and focuses on some of the constraints involved. Joel Spring, author of several widely used college textbooks in the field of education, writes about his experiences as an author and links the contemporary situation with the historical difficulties of textbook authors. This book concludes with several essays that deal with textbooks in a comparative and international framework—bringing a perspective that is seldom available.

Several authors consider the textbook industry itself, although a full-scale analysis of the economics, politics and culture of textbook publishing remains to be done. The unprecedented amalgamation of publishers that has occurred in the past decade will inevitably have an impact on American textbooks, although the scope and nature of that impact remains to be seen. Textbooks have always been seen by their publishers as a commodity, and commercial considerations have been of primary importance. Now, with textbooks published by multinational media con-

glomerates, it is likely that the bottom line will become even more crucial. As the structure of publishing changes, the nature of professional work in the industry will very likely undergo alteration as well. We know very little about the role of editors and others in textbook publishing. Naomi Silverman provides some insights from college publishing. We attempted without success to locate an editor to write about elementary and secondary school textbooks for this volume.

We know very little about many of the most important people involved in the development and publication of textbooks. The role of "experts" also needs analysis. How do curriculum specialists, reading scholars, and others exercise influence on textbook decisions? We know how the textbook adoption process works in states with centralized mechanisms—and the picture is not a pretty one. However, we have very little data on how textbook decisions are made in decentralized states and at the school district level. The list could go on. It is surprising that such an important part of the American educational enterprise has been so badly neglected by researchers.⁴

This volume presents a variety of perspectives on the topic. We have assembled an articulate group of educators, publishers, policymakers, and scholars to consider the textbook dilemma from a range of perspectives. We cannot hope to provide solutions to complex problems. However, we are convinced that textbooks deserve much more attention from educational policymakers and from the educational community than they have hitherto received. It is for this reason that we devote this book to a consideration of textbooks.

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NOTES

1. Harriet Tyson-Bernstein, *A Conspiracy of Good Intentions: America's Textbook Fiasco* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1988), p. 13.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid; Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979); Paul Gagnon, *Democracy's Untold Story: What World History Textbooks Neglected* (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1987).

4. For an overview of textbook issues, see Paul Goldstein, *Changing the American Schoolbook* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1978).