

**How do textbooks
improve the teaching of
knowledge-rich curricula
and improve education for all?**

**Rickard Vinde
Managing Director
Swedish Association
of Educational Publishers**

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Mister Chairman, Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

During my nine years as managing director of the Swedish Association of Educational Publishers I have visited schools where class sets of textbooks rotate between several classes. I have met pupils who are given complex and analytical tasks with no other material than the Internet can provide. I have received letters from desperate parents about the large piles of photocopies given to their children at school instead of textbooks.

The problem is that textbooks are not viewed as part of a school's knowledge infrastructure and that there is vast ignorance about the value that educational publishers can provide.

There is a significant supply of digital textbooks in Sweden. The issue, however, is not print or digital but whether pupils have access to textbooks at all.

Teachers and pupils are not deprived of up-to-date textbooks in every classroom, but it happens frequently enough to have a negative impact on the possibilities of individual pupils, on the capacity of entire schools and on Sweden as a knowledge-based society.

Attitudes to knowledge and the lack of textbooks

Ultimately the lack of textbooks is an outcome of the attitude to knowledge that prevailed in Sweden in the 1970s. Teaching and learning were no longer supposed to be based on defined and generally accepted knowledge but on information

established and developed through dialogue between teachers and pupils. This was intended to lead to an extreme individualisation of teaching.

Given this approach to knowledge, textbooks were seen as imposing limits. In a Government Bill in 1976 the Minister of Education stated that “textbooks seem to be limiting and conservative”. Textbooks should instead be understood “in its broadest sense, in other words as whatever teachers and pupils have agreed to use”. This is what is referred to as the extended concept of textbooks.

In an action programme in 1978, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities wrote that it was “possible and desirable” to replace textbooks by, for instance, “reference works, travel books and handbooks on hobbies”.

The Swedish National Agency for Education commented in a report in 2006 that the effect of textbooks is to impose educational constraints.

This attitude to textbooks resulted in a decline in the numbers of textbooks schools acquired for their pupils.

During the 2010s it was determined that Sweden was the country that had declined most in the PISA rankings and in 2011 extensive educational reforms were undertaken. The focus was on knowledge.

As a result of the reforms the extended concept of textbooks would have to be abolished. Even so, in the autumn of 2011 the National Agency’s general guidelines on Planning and implementing teaching, which were to enable implementation of the new reforms, contained no mention of textbooks.

The duty of the educational publishers

Almost all of those working for the educational publishers have been teachers, as I too have been. We know that professionally developed textbooks that closely align with the national curriculum support teachers and give pupils a shared core, thus improving the teaching of knowledge-rich curricula and education for all.

We were very frustrated by the fact that the educational publishers’ sales declined steadily and at least equally as much to see that teachers and pupils were not being given adequate teaching and learning conditions.

We saw it as our duty to act so that we could fulfil our mission in the educational system. We were encouraged by international research findings that showed that it is the best teachers who have the most positive attitudes to textbooks.

We have, to begin with, developed a Textbook map that shows to what extent primary school pupils receive new textbooks in the different municipalities. Our aim is to show that not all pupils are given a shared core of knowledge and that equity is wanting.

I believe we have forgotten that education is a public good. Good results in tests of knowledge for all pupils benefit the whole of society. This is not meant to say that the wealth of materials and media available to us should not be brought into the classroom or that teaching does not have to be adapted to the circumstances of different pupils.

The National Agency observed in an evaluation made in 2017 that one result of the greater clarity of the 2011 reforms was that teachers were more ready to base their teaching on the various course plans and the learning objectives they contained, and that this may have led to higher equity and quality.

Since 2011 primary schools have been acquiring more new textbooks per pupil. PISA has also published new results that may be interpreted as showing a positive reversal of the trend for Sweden. I view this as support for the international research on the importance of clear national syllabuses as well as textbooks.

Secondly, we have developed a Quality policy for print and digital textbooks that shows what educational publishers stand for.

And then, thirdly, we have produced a Textbook checklist, a tool that enables teachers to evaluate and select textbooks. This comprises seven headings, for instance Teachers' guide, Flexibility, Contents, as well as Accessibility, design and digital functionality. We want teachers to be knowledgeable, quality conscious and demanding and the Textbook checklist will encourage this. The Checklist has been inspired by work in Denmark, the UK and Hong Kong.

Digitalisation

Digitalisation has come quite a long way in Sweden. Many pupils have their own device in school. But there has been a shortage of content and the results have often been learning-by-surfing. We have maintained that teachers and pupils must have access to digital textbooks if knowledge outcomes are to improve.

Teachers can view a range of more than 2,000 different digital textbooks in various subjects in our Digital textbook portal. Many of these have enhancing features and new functionality.

Today 11 per cent of the sales of the companies that are members of my association consists of digital textbooks. Research has shown that it is not a question of print or digital but of both, blended learning. We can also see in Sweden that this is how work is being done in the classroom.

The implementation of a national digital strategy has just begun, and one area of focus is equity of access and usage and this includes digital textbooks. It is, however,

important for digitalisation to be guided by research on textbooks, knowledge and common sense.

A tighter textbook concept

To generate discussion we published an anthology in April, *The New Textbook Debate*, in which twelve authors write about textbooks in schools in the future. The authors include the chairpersons of the two teachers' unions, local politicians and members of the Swedish Riksdag.

The first article is by Tim Oates. The authors have different opinions on a number of issues but they are all in agreement about the significance of textbooks. One quote is "Textbooks are part of the central content of teaching".

This seems to be confirmed by the City of Stockholm's adoption recently of a Textbook policy. "Every pupil in the city's schools is to have good access to relevant analogue and digital textbooks and learning resources of a high standard". Schools are to "ensure that there is the appropriate access to high quality educational material".

This policy differentiates between textbooks and learning resources. The textbook concept is thus reserved for professionally developed textbooks. The extended textbook concept seems, therefore, to have been discarded.

The future

I believe that in Sweden it is today possible that textbooks will, once again, after many years, be able to make a more significant contribution to the teaching of knowledge-rich curricula and to improve education for all.

In the educational publishing houses there are teachers who are involved in continuous dialogue with the schools. The writers are most often themselves active teachers. The companies have many different development processes that guarantee quality. There are a number of different publishers and this offers teachers diversity. The development of textbooks should therefore take place in a free market.

Even so there should be more dialogue involving the educational publishers, researchers, the state and the educational system. We have developed a Quality policy and the Textbook checklist. We would welcome development of the dialogue.

We can also see that the Department of Education, the National Agency and the municipalities have to shoulder their responsibilities. The Department of Education should uphold the entitlement of pupils to textbooks. The municipalities should follow Stockholm's lead and introduce textbook policies. Textbooks should be included in the active quality assurance processes in every school.

We would also like to see more genuine research on textbooks.

Conclusion

In April this year a representative for Sweden's largest teachers' trade union wrote a polemical article in a local newspaper in the city of Borås asserting that teachers are not equipped for their tasks and become overworked. Among other things she wanted equal funding for textbooks for every pupil.

This teacher too seems to view textbooks as part of a school's infrastructure. She probably shares my belief that the lack of textbooks has undermined the professional status of teachers and contributed to the major shortage of teachers that is today the largest problem facing schools in Sweden.

In the next few years Swedish educational publishers will therefore continue their endeavours to ensure that teachers and pupils have access to textbooks.

Thank you.