



'Making do': Teachers' coping strategies for dealing with textbook shortages in urban Zambia



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HIGHLIGHTS

- In Urban Zambia, student-textbook ratios rarely approach the government's mandated 2:1 ratio.
- Teachers valued textbooks as instructional aids that provided structure and content support.
- Teachers developed strategies to deal with persistent shortages—both positive and negative.
- Strategies with positive impacts on learning could be incorporated into teacher training.

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ABSTRACT

Textbooks are a critical component of quality education in developing countries. This article investigates textbook availability and teachers' coping strategies in the face of poor textbook access in Zambia. Driven by change theory, the study concludes that teachers' educational beliefs, teaching approaches and use of alternative materials together determine the strategies used to handle shortages. Teachers need more textbooks, but there is little indication that provision will improve in the near future. We therefore argue for the integration of some of the positive teacher-developed adaptations into teacher training programs, with the goal of improving outcomes in the near term.

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1. Introduction

Nearly 25 years have passed since the Jomtien Conference, where representatives of 155 countries and an equal number of nongovernmental organizations made a joint commitment to the goal of providing primary education to all children. While great improvements have been made in the area of primary enrollment as a result for the Education for All (EFA) movement—approximately half of the countries in the world will reach universal primary enrollment by 2015 (UNESCO, 2013)—educational quality remains a persistent problem in low-resource

contexts. Teachers in poor countries face innumerable barriers to providing quality instruction, including student-teacher ratios as high as 130 to 1 in first grade in Malawi (UNESCO, 2013), insufficient pre-service training (Akyaempong, Lussier, Pryor, & Westbrook, 2013), and, in many cases, severe shortages of textbooks and instructional materials (UNESCO, 2013). In contexts of increasing enrollment—in the absence of corresponding increases in funding—such pressures have only intensified. Our study focuses on this conflict between access and one factor of quality at the school level in Zambia, one of many sub-Saharan African countries that will fail to meet its EFA goals by 2015.

Providing equal opportunities for education has been one of the central themes of efforts to achieve Education for All in Zambia. In 2002, the government introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) and abolished school fees at all government schools across the nation (ZMoE, 2003). Since the inception of FPE, the student

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enrollment rates both of girls and boys have rapidly grown and UNESCO statistics (2012) show that the Net Primary Enrollment rate increased from 73% in 2002 to about 92% in 2011. The Gross Enrollment ratio jumped from 87% to 113% during the same period.

Despite such remarkable achievement in educational expansion, evidence shows that there has been little change in students' academic achievement, suggesting that the education provided is of poor quality (IOB, 2011). A post-fee-abolition government report on primary school student performance found that "learning achievement levels of pupils is [sic] still low across all levels and in all provinces" (Examination Council of Zambia, 2006, p. 84). It is in this context that the government of Zambia refocused on the issue of education quality and underlined the importance of the efforts of all stakeholders for the improvement of student learning outcomes. In recent years, the government developed a series of specific sub-sector priorities and objectives, including the revision of the official curriculum, the decentralization of educational materials procurement, and improvements in teacher training and deployment (ZMoE, 2007, p. 22).

Though the Zambian government has made a policy commitment to providing quality education, actually doing so has remained elusive. Part of this problem is a lack of clarity on what exactly constitutes quality education, which is by no means a problem unique to Zambia. Contemporary researchers use various approaches and factors to conceptualize and assess quality (Tawil, Akkari, & Macedo, 2011). In developing countries in particular, emphasis has been substantially placed on inputs—physical and human resources such as teaching and learning materials, facilities, and qualified teachers—as prerequisites for providing quality education (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel, & Ukpo, 2006; UNESCO, 2005). While textbooks and other input factors in and of themselves do not define quality, we argue that they generally contribute to it and are indicators that a country places a priority on education.

1.1. The importance of textbooks for teaching and learning in low-resource settings

In developing countries, textbooks serve a number of purposes in the provision of education. First, textbooks play a pivotal role in defining the curriculum. They delineate what should be taught and learned in a class and thereby bridge the gap between the objectives that schools are meant to achieve and schools' actual activities (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Mangwaya, Jeko, & Manyumwa, 2012). Second, textbooks convey the core content knowledge of subjects that students are meant to master (Budde, 1998; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991). The content knowledge encompassed by the textbook supplements the teacher's own knowledge and helps him or her to organize the appropriate instructional activities (Budde, 1998). Third, carefully-designed textbooks help teachers to teach more effectively, as they create compelling instructional platforms for teachers to motivate learners to learn more and faster (Boissiere, 2004; Chonjo, 1994; Heyneman, Farrell, & Sepulveda-Stuardo, 1981; Lewin & Stuart, 2003). Lastly, textbooks promote a more cooperative learning environment between teachers and students as well as among students, ultimately enhancing students' learning (Okobia, 2011).

Over the last several decades, a number of studies in sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated the potential impact of textbooks on students' academic achievement. Looking across 21 African countries participating in the SACMEQ and PASEC assessments, Fehrler, Michaelowa, and Wechtler (2009) find a positive association between textbooks and student scores. In Bondo district, Kenya, Yara and Otieno (2010) find that the student-textbook ratio is associated with mathematics performance among

secondary students. In Zimbabwe, Riddell and Nyagura (1991) multivariate analysis on a sample of 5293 students found that schools with more textbooks per student performed better on achievement tests than schools with higher student:text ratios. Heyneman and Jamison (1980), in their study in Uganda involving over 2000 students in 61 schools, found that textbook availability was associated with significantly higher English scores at the school level and with higher English and mathematics scores at the student level.

Evidence for textbooks is also strong in other regions of the world. In a quasi-experimental study in the Philippines, students in grades 1 and 2 who had access to textbooks in a ratio of one or two students per book performed one third of a standard deviation higher on examinations in three subjects than students who had only one text per ten students (Heyneman, Jamison, & Montenegro, 1984). Furthermore, the authors note that the positive effects of the textbooks were stronger on poor students. In Thailand, Lockheed, Vail, and Fuller (1986) used Second International Mathematics Study results to analyze the effect of textbooks. In a random sample of 4030 eighth-grade students, students whose teachers used textbooks in class scored higher on the SIMS—an equivalent gain to spending an extra 1.61 months in school. Textbooks were also found to have positive effects in Brazil (Harbison & Hanushek, 1992), Jamaica (Glewwe, Grosh, Jacoby, & Lockheed, 1995), the Philippines (Yamauchi & Liu, 2013), and Nicaragua (Jamison, Searle, Galda, & Heyneman, 1981). In addition, Fuller (1987) found that textbooks made a difference in 16 of 24 studies in his meta-analysis.

In the context of developing nations, many researchers have found that the availability of textbooks is one of the single most consistent and influential factors affecting students' learning, compared to other frequently measured factors such as facilities, class size, teacher training, and teacher salaries (Boissiere, 2004; Chonjo, 1994; Heyneman et al., 1981; Lewin & Stuart, 2003). The significance of textbook availability for student learning appears to be greater in these countries, as the quality of teacher preparation is generally low. When teachers are ill-prepared, they are more likely to need the assistance of well-designed textbooks in order to set the parameters of instruction as well as to impart the base of school knowledge (Altbach & Kelly, 1988; Beeby, 2001; Mangwaya et al., 2012; Read, 2011). Likewise, when there is a chronic lack of basic facilities in school, the provision of textbooks tends to ameliorate associated problems (Read, 2011).

Other studies, however, have found that the availability of textbooks alone does not necessarily ensure that students will reap the potential benefits (Somerset, 2011). Glewwe, Kremer, and Moulin (2009) found limited effects of reducing the student-textbook ratio in Kenya for grades 3 through 8. Researchers have argued that the availability and actual usage of textbooks together determine the extent that learners actually benefit from having textbooks in class (Chonjo, 1994; Maxwell, 1985; Mohammad & Kumari, 2007; Montagnes, 1999; Read, 2011). In this regard, Maxwell (1985) argued that it is the teacher's skills and practices that determine whether the textbooks are used as they are designed or unable to find more satisfactory ways even when textbooks are unsatisfactory. In Sierra Leone, Sabarwal, Evans, and Marshak (2013) found that additional textbook provision to schools did not improve student performance, likely because few of the new books actually made it into students' hands. In contexts where the provision of sufficient books is unpredictable from year to year, this conservative behavior by teachers and school administrators makes sense. Findings from the above studies suggest that in order to address the challenges surrounding textbooks, it is of significance not only to enable teachers and students to have access to sufficient textbooks, but also to help them to use the available textbooks in the most beneficial ways.

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