

A Comparative study of the Evaluation and Approval Techniques of School Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

In the recent past, in 2016, some publishers had complained that the quality of textbooks being approved by the Ministry of General Education in Zambia had been compromised, and the evaluation process was cited as one of the contributing factors. It became necessary that research be instituted in order to ascertain these claims. Research revealed that textbooks were a good supporting teaching and learning resource. Teachers and learners needed them on daily basis as they appeared to speed up the rate of learning. In many countries, textbooks are often evaluated and have to be approved before sending them to schools. The evaluation criteria used by different countries may vary; however, the common themes were found to be content, pedagogy, grammar, illustrations, crosscutting issues and exercises. The research took a qualitative approach. A sample of seven countries' evaluation criteria was selected through purposeful sampling. The criteria were accessed through study materials offered for capacity building for a Postgraduate Diploma in Curriculum Design (PGDCDD) offered by Tanzania Open University from 2013 to 2017. Other evaluation criteria were accessed through requests from curriculum departments of other countries. Some documents were accessed from internet. The research found that there was not much variation in the way different countries evaluated school textbooks. In some countries, books are evaluated by three or four independent evaluators, and a book has to score at least the minimum required percentage. In other countries, textbooks are piloted after an initial approval by evaluators. Though many textbooks may be approved, some countries only allowed a limited number for use in schools. In such countries, publishers compete greatly so as to be in the top three of four. In order to enhance the evaluation criteria of various countries, the study recommends that the process of evaluation should be made as open as possible, books should be piloted, and only a limited number of titles per subject per grade level should be approved for use in schools. This will induce competitiveness in writing, and consequently enhance the quality of textbooks.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background information

Some publishers and teachers in Zambia have complained over the quality some books that have been approved for use in schools. It was reported that evaluation of textbooks by the Ministry of General Education had been flawed. (Daily Nation of January 14, 2016).

Kenya was accused of favouring state publishing house and in Romania, educational officials are free to become authors, and this had led to concerns about conflicts of interest (Rainer, J et al, 2006). It appears different countries have challenges similar to those being experienced in Zambia.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Some publishers had complained that the quality of textbooks being approved by the Ministry of Education in Zambia had been compromised. It was not clear whether it was in one or all of the following aspects: grammar, content, illustrations, exercises, pedagogies, answers and font. Wrong textbooks may negatively affect the learning and teaching process and could lead to the failure of learners. Research therefore, needed to be undertaken so that the challenges could be addressed. To resolve such, it was thought that a comparative study of the evaluation and approval techniques of school textbooks by different countries could shed some light.

1.3 Research questions

- i) Are there flaws in the evaluation process of books in Zambia?
- ii) How are books evaluated in other countries?

1.4 Purpose of the study

The study was undertaken to influence curriculum departments from various countries, Zambia inclusive, to review their evaluation criteria, and possibly include some positives from this study in order to enrich their evaluation criteria.

1.5 Limitations of the study

It was not easy to access evaluation criteria of various countries as most of them exist as guidelines for local use.

2.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research took a qualitative approach. A sample of six countries' evaluation criteria was selected through purposeful sampling. These included Zambia and Namibia from Africa, and Germany, Vietnam, Philippines and Romania beyond Africa.

The researcher had undertaken a Post Graduate Diploma in Curriculum Design and Development (PGDCDD) in 2012/2013 from Tanzania Open University in conjunction with UNESCO. One of the courses studied included the analysis of various curriculum models used by different countries. The author also made efforts to consult curriculum departments from other countries through emails. Some countries cooperated and emailed their evaluation criteria.

The researcher also had an opportunity to discuss with some of the curriculum experts from other countries. The discussion bordered on some of the challenges they have been experiencing with regard to evaluation and approval of books.

In addition, the author accessed various documents from internet on how the approval of books is supposed to be done. These included articles from various journals.

3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Evaluation of books in Zambia

One of the research questions attempted to find out if there were flaws in the evaluation process of books in Zambia. To respond to this, the author examined the criterion for evaluation by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) and thereafter compared to those used by other countries.

The evaluation criteria themes for CDC were found to include content, language, cross cutting issues, exercises and testing as well as teaching methodologies. In addition, a book had to score a minimum of 85% for it to be approved for use in Zambian schools (CDC, 2013).

The evaluation team was composed of either three or four independent officers specialised in the subject area. In addition, another group of three officers, often referred to as the approval committee was also appointed to study the reports from the evaluators, and came up with one

consolidated report that also indicated whether the textbook was approved or not. The process sounds effective; however, there is need for further research on how the textbooks are handled from receiving department to the evaluators, to the handling of the reports to the publishers.

3.2 Evaluation of books in other nations

3.2.1 Namibia

In Namibia, the areas for evaluation include conformity to the syllabus, relevance to content, promotion of cross cutting issues, representation of inclusive education, language and editorial quality, design and easy to use of textbook, and teaching methodologies. Furthermore, the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) argued that too many titles on the market confuses teachers in choosing the right textbooks. The institute therefore, introduced competitiveness, and only a limited number of copies, about three per title were accepted (NIED, 2013).

3.2.2 Romania

In Romania, however, in addition to attaining the minimum 65% score, a book has to score at least 40% from each of the eight criteria used. It was also observed that their educational officials were free to become authors, and this had led to concerns about conflicts of interest (Rainer, J et al, 2006).

3.2.3 Philippines and Kenya

In Philippines, there have been complaints on inconsistencies in appraisal. Some books had non conditional approval even when they did not cover the entire curriculum. Kenya was accused of favouring state publishing house (Rainer, J et al, 2006).

3.2.4 Vietnam and Germany

In Vietnam and Germany, there were independent evaluation boards that evaluated educational materials. It was believed that boards were more accountable than internal committees that were usually the Ministries' extensions of curriculum departments. After books were evaluated and had been approved, they were piloted in selected schools (Gerald et al, 1997).

Gerald et al (1997) also argue that in many countries, several publishers produced textbooks and sought the Ministry's approval. The market or school often decided which books were

better. Such a scene allowed abandonment of monopoly by the Ministry and empowered the local teachers in the selection of textbooks of their choice.

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Formulas in solving problems

It is very important that school textbooks presented facts, theories and formulas as correct as possible. Consider the following Mathematical formula for instance:

Area of a circle: $A = \pi r^2$ and not $A = \pi r2$

Any distortion in the formula may severely affect the learners' intellectual potential.

O'Neil (1982) argues that school textbooks provide good supporting teaching and learning materials. Though teachers may have been trained, they need textbooks to guide them on what to teach.

Teachers and learners need textbooks on daily basis (Byrd, 2001). It is for this reason that facts need to be presented accordingly or else they may hinder the learners' development. In most schools, it is rare to find teachers with textbooks they used in universities and colleges. Allwright, R. (1981) argues that the most readily available educational materials found in schools are textbooks. These materials often serve as a blue print of what is to be taught over a period of time, following the school calendar. The topics and their sub-topics are usually arranged in a sequence in which they will be handled. Answers may be made available to all or some of the exercises; hence both the teachers and learners are able to assess themselves if they understood the materials.

4.2 Textbooks as training tools in community schools

In community schools where most of the teachers are not trained, textbooks often serve as a training tool. Lee (1997) says that textbooks can speed up the rate of learning. The work provided during school is often just a sample, but learners can find more interesting theories if they did further research in textbooks. According to Hussain and Mahmood (2002) in Mahmood, K. et al (2009), well written textbooks result in impressive expectations due to well expressed content and pedagogy, gradually ascending vocabulary and ambiguity free sentence structures.

4.3 Textbooks as reference points

It is also important to know that even if teachers were trained, some ideas may be lost through forgetfulness. According to Cunningsworth (1979), textbooks can serve as a reference point. In fact, teachers, especially for Mathematics refer to them almost on every lesson. The books do have examples and exercises for learners. According to O' Neil (1982), the use of a textbook can serve learners from the teacher's incompetence. After a lesson, learners can countercheck the facts from their textbooks. If facts do not agree, learners may object.

Proper use of textbooks help students gain a better understanding of key facts and skills (Tomlinson, B., 2010). They can also promote student thinking about certain experiences and skills. They should also encourage critical and creative thinking. They should have content and pedagogy that is clear and attractive.

4.4 Reasons for Evaluation of Textbooks

It is not all the books that we see on the market that have facts well presented facts. Some of them are not suitable either in grammar, illustrations, exercises or answers. A wrong choice of textbooks may negatively affect the learning and teaching process. Green, A. (1926) says the quality of a book can determine the success or failure of learners. Some books may have serious pedagogical flaws.

4.5 Comparisons of various evaluation criteria

4.5.1 Similarity in the evaluation process

The themes for evaluation in the different criteria examined were found to be similar. They all focussed at *grammar, content, illustrations, exercises, pedagogies, cross cutting issues, and answers*. The titles however, were not exactly the same. In Namibia, they have a theme 'inclusive education', but in Zambia, this is under inclusive education.

4.5.2 Differences in the evaluation process

The major differences that were found were not much to deal with the themes for evaluation, but how the books were linked to their procurement by government. Kindly refer to the following table.

Table 1: Major differences in Evaluation of Textbooks

Criteria	Zambia	Namibia
Textbooks allowed in school	Any book that scores 85% and above	Only books ranked 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd are allowed in schools
	Zambia	Romania
	Any book that scores 85% and above	2 things are considered: i) a book should score a minimum of 65% overall ii) on each theme, a book must score at least 40%
	Zambia	Vietnam and Germany
	Books are allowed in schools after being approved.	Textbooks are piloted after being approved

It was earlier pointed out that in Zambia, three to four evaluators are often used per book. For several factors, it was rare for the evaluators to score the same mark. As an example, the scores could be 90%, 75% and 45%. The wide differences suggest that some evaluators have varying abilities in the subject matter. Perhaps others lack concentration to details. The policy of the Curriculum Development Centre does not favour the involvement of curriculum specialists in writing books for publishers. However, some specialists were found to have been engaged by the publishers, and if such did not declare their interests during evaluation, they could have contributed to poor books being approved.

The National Academy of Sciences (1990) says a policy is one thing and practice is another. It is possible that some evaluators may not be following the laid down evaluating procedures with caution. Depending on the strength of the management, some critical issues could be overlooked and a book may pass with some serious errors. Each evaluator needs to be made accountable for their observations, and management need to ensure that only credible evaluators are maintained.

4.5.3 Limiting the number of Approved Books

Most of the books that are used in government schools are procured by government. It follows that any publisher whose books have been approved feels that the government shall purchase their books. In case the books are not bought, the publisher may be aggrieved. In a situation where several titles are approved, it is practically impossible for the government to be procuring from each publisher. The solution therefore, could be borrowing from the Namibian system where even though many titles could be approved, only a limited number could be allowed in schools. These would be the titles where governments fund could be spent on.

4.5.4 Involvement of Publishers and Society in Approval of Textbooks

If the number of titles of books to be procured by government is to be limited, it may be necessary that all stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process. A day such as a Thursday every week can be set for giving out evaluation reports. The reports are to be given out publicly, implying that any interested person could participate and give comments. One of the evaluators could read out the report and any person in participation could react to the report. The evaluator could play a facilitator's role, and the publishers and the general public would decide on the top best books. For this system to work effectively, publishers have to be given deadlines for submission of textbooks for evaluation. The dates for evaluation could also be advertised in the press for the public to be aware. Involvement of the public may reduce tension and criticism that often comes from publishers due to non procurement of their books by the government.

4.4.5 Piloting of Books

The period for evaluation of a book in Zambia is usually about two weeks. There is need to remember that evaluators are not editors. This implies that it is possible to approve a book based on a sample of chapters read, yet it may have some errors. Piloting a textbook means complete testing of every text, punctuation, grammar and texture of the book. Piloting usually takes a longer period such as three to six months; this enables the teachers to take note of other technicalities that curriculum experts could have overlooked. Teachers have the time to confirm the authenticity of even answers that are usually at the back of the textbook. Piloting allows so many 'eyes' to evaluate the book and definitely this could far improve the observation made by curriculum experts. In addition, the two weeks evaluation period by

curriculum experts may not clearly measure the quality of paper used. Piloting of books appear to consume more time, however, according to Wong (2011), it could result in high quality books that can stand the test of time.

4.4.6 Consideration of Minimum scores for each Theme

In writing, the distortion of even one illustration can spoil the whole book. One would argue that the mistake only contributed less than 2%. To some learners and teachers, they may depict it as a fact. In fact some of them think what ever has been printed in a textbook is bible truth. One error may override other tributes that have been covered well.

As pointed out earlier, evaluation criteria themes are weighted. For each of the themes, an evaluator awards a mark from 1 to 5 depending on performance, where 5 is the maximum score. After evaluation, a book can score up to 100%.

This is illustrated clearly in the following table:

Table 2: CDC Evaluation Criteria Weighting

	Weighting of different themes		Example
	Criteria themes	Weighting (%)	Marks a book got
1	Content	30%	30%
2	Methodology	20%	20%
3	Language	10%	10%
4	Cultural/Cross cutting issues	10%	10%
5	Activities	5%	5%
6	Exercises and Testing	5%	5%
7	Layout	5%	5%
8	Illustrations	5%	1%
9	Continuous Assessment	5%	5%
10	Need for Supplementary materials	5%	5%
	Total	100%	96%

From the table above, the textbook scored 96% and would be approved in Zambia, but in Romania it would have failed as on illustrations it failed to get 40% threshold.

Conclusion

In my conclusion, the Ministry's evaluation process was not really flawed as perceived by some publishers. Some processes such as the themes for evaluation were found to be similar to those from other lands. However, it could have some lacuna particularly in the handling of the evaluation reports. These could be minimised by borrowing from the models used by other countries such as those discussed from this research. The policy on liberalization of publishing books sounded good, but it has its own challenges. Every Jim and Jack wants to write a book, and this has proved a challenge in dealing with procurement matters.

Recommendations

The researchers would like to make the flowing recommendations:

I. Piloting of Approved Textbooks

Approved textbooks should be piloted before they are printed in large numbers. The feedback from teachers may also add value especially that they would be the end users of the materials.

II. Having Few Titles per Grade

Only a few titles per book, about three, should be authorised for use in schools. This ensures competitiveness in writing, and makes it easier for teachers to select the right titles.

III. Open Distribution of Evaluation Reports

The final approval report should be given out openly on a particular day in the presence of all publishers and the public. This reduces suspicions among publishers who argue that some publishers may have been favoured. The participation of society would equally contribute to making the final reports more credible.

IV. Scoring of Marks

In addition to looking at the aggregate scores, a book should be scoring a minimum of 50% from each theme on the different criteria themes. This is because a book could score 95%, making it pass, yet the remaining 5% could have serious flaws.

v. Handling of Evaluation reports

At CDC, books for evaluation are received by the faculty of Research and Evaluation and the same faculty does give out the reports. The faculty should therefore detach itself from the evaluation process. This activity should be dealt with by faculties specialised in the respective subjects.

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