

TEXTBOOKS OF TORTURE

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One aspect of education today that virtually never is discussed is the nature of the textbooks with which our students are burdened. These textbooks are not a vehicle for providing a sound education. Instead, they are, increasingly, massive impediments to learning.

Contemporary textbooks are heavy, hardbound books, printed on heavy, glossy paper. In addition, they contain less and less substantive textual material because they have become overloaded with illustrations and supplementary study guides to the detriment of the essential content that they should be delivering. Furthermore, they are onerously heavy, too physically challenging to carry even for the beefiest of today's students.

Gone are the days when one could carry all one's books under one's arm resting on one's side, as boys did in my youth, or in the crook of one's elbow resting on one's abdomen, as girls did.

As a teacher, I had an advantage over my students, since I could—and did—cut apart these Brobdingnagian monstrosities, so that I never had to carry more than I absolutely needed on any given day. This is especially necessary for teachers, since the teacher's editions contain even more self-help material, presumably because those who compose textbooks believe that teachers need even more help than their students do to digest what little meat there is in these books.

As a member of a textbook selection committee, I once called a major textbook publisher to find out if it could provide its yearlong anthology in two smaller semester-long volumes. The representative told me that financial considerations made that impractical—code for 'less profitable.'

If these textbooks put off a voracious reader like me, one can only imagine what they do to contemporary students, who are resistant enough to reading already.

Such textbooks are a peculiarly American excess, not typical of what other countries use. According to Stevenson and Stigler, in *The Learning Gap: why our schools are failing and what we can learn from Japanese and Chinese education*:

Textbooks published in Japan . . . and China bear little physical resemblance to the typical American . . . textbooks. Asian textbooks are slim, inexpensively produced paperbacks. Separate volumes, seldom containing more than one hundred pages, cover [one] semester's work The . . . inside pages have few illustrations and are devoted primarily to text. (p. 139)

Liping Ma—in *Knowing and Teaching Elementary Mathematics*, her landmark study of the superiority of mathematics teaching in China as compared to the U.S.—observes that “the two textbooks [in China] for the two semesters of third grade mathematics . . . together . . . weigh only 6 ounces.” (p. 132) Yet these books cover at least as much mathematics content as our bulky tomes do. Supplementation is left largely to the teachers themselves, who—in China—demonstrated greater competence on tests of mathematics knowledge than their American counterparts do. It is striking that these Chinese teachers had no teacher training, no certification process, and many were only high school graduates without a college education.

Chinese teachers too are provided with teacher's manuals, but these are compact, and—according to Ma—“among the teaching materials . . . Chinese teachers take the teacher's manuals least seriously.” (p. 133)

The bulk and fluff of our textbooks are meant to pique student interest and to make the books more useful to students because—it is argued—the attractiveness of the books will entice the children into learning. This is the intention despite ample research evidence, going back at least 40 years, that exactly the opposite is the case.

As Bruno Bettelheim—in his too little read *On Learning to Read: the child's fascination with meaning*, co-authored with Karen Zelan—pointed out:

And . . . experimental evidence suggests that pictures retard or interfere with learning to read [He cites the work of Eleanor J. Gibson and S.J. Samuels.]

And yet, in the face of such evidence, primary reading texts remain full of pictures—presumably because . . . the pictures are the only attractive aspect of these readers, their texts being so obviously stupid as to be unbearable alone. (pp. 28-29)

Bettelheim's incisive comment is even more germane today than it was when he wrote it a quarter of a century ago.

It is about time that we took steps to address this problem. Let us free our students from the need to carry backpacks as big as they are.

Textbook reform would be a concrete, practicable, and meaningful step on the road to reforming our schools.