

Cisco Magagula

The provision of teaching/learning materials in Swaziland high schools

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This study set out to establish whether there was any government policy regarding the provision of textbooks and stationery to high school learners in Swaziland; to determine whose responsibility it was to provide learners with these materials, and to assess the system used by high schools to give learners access to them. The study found that there was no government policy regulating the provision of textbooks and stationery to learners in high schools; that parents were solely responsible for providing such materials, and that most high schools used the book loan system (which has its advantages and disadvantages, and should be refined) to give learners access to the requisite materials.

Die voorsiening van handboeke/leermateriaal aan hoërskole in Swaziland

Die doel van hierdie studie is om vas te stel of daar enigsins 'n regeringsbeleid bestaan vir die voorsiening van handboeke en skryfbehoeftes aan hoërskoolleerlinge in Swaziland; om te bepaal wie verantwoordelik is vir die voorsiening van handboeke en skryfbehoeftes aan hoërskoolleerlinge in Swaziland en om te bepaal watter stelsel deur hoërskole gebruik word om leerlinge toegang tot handboeke en skryfbehoeftes te gee. Uit die studie is die volgende bevindings gemaak: daar bestaan geen regeringsbeleid ten opsigte van die regulering en voorsiening van handboeke en skryfbehoeftes aan leerlinge in hoërskole nie; ouers is ten volle verantwoordelik vir die voorsiening van handboeke en skryfbehoeftes aan leerlinge en die meeste hoërskole maak gebruik van die boekleenstelsel om leerlinge toegang tot handboeke en skryfbehoeftes te verleen. Die boekleenstelsel het voor- en nadele wat verder ondersoek en verfynd moet word.

Prof C M Magagula, University of Swaziland, Private Bag No 4, Kwaluseni M201, Swaziland; E-mail: ciscomag@uniswacc.uniswa.sz

Education is believed to be the great equaliser (Bowles & Gintis 1976).¹ Adequately funded, it can ensure fair competition and reduce the economic gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners. Indeed, adequate funding can ensure that teaching/learning materials for all school learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, are available at the beginning of the school year. However, in environments where learners have to procure their own materials, those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may not be able to do so on time. In this context, education fails to be the great equaliser and to ensure fair competition among advantaged and disadvantaged learners.

Empirical research has shown that the availability of teaching/learning materials, particularly textbooks and workbooks has a positive effect on student academic achievement. Indeed, they are the single most important and effective teaching/learning aid, especially when used in conjunction with teaching guides.² They constitute the main source of lesson content as well as strongly influencing how that content is taught (House & Taylor 2003) by providing detailed structures for classroom activity, thus simplifying many of the decisions involved in planning the teaching/learning process. Indeed, empirical research has shown that the impact of textbooks is greater when supplementary reading materials are available, and when teachers' guides describe what to teach, how to teach it, and how to assess students' learning (Farrell 1989). Furthermore, research has shown that children who have access to textbooks and other reading materials learn more than those who do not (Lockheed & Verspoor 1991), which is understandable since teachers rely heavily on these materials to teach them (Diedmueller 1996). It is thus critically important that all learners, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds, should have textbooks, stationery, and other learning materials at the beginning of the school year.

- 1 This paper forms a larger part of study on equity in the provision of educational resources in Swaziland high schools conducted by C M Magagula, B M Dlamini, T Mkhathswa, N Dlamini & A B Shongwe, and funded by the Educational Network of Eastern and Southern Africa (ERNESA).
- 2 Cf Fuller 1986; Heneveld & Craig 1996; House & Taylor 2003; Levin & Lockheed 1993; Reynolds *et al* 2003; Tamir 1995; Farrell 1989; Heyneman *et al* 1981; Heyneman & Loxley 1984; Verspoor 1989; Lockheed & Verspoor 1991; Lockheed & Levin 1993.

If education is the great equaliser between disadvantaged and advantaged learners; if learning materials such as textbooks, workbooks and stationery are critically important in the academic achievement of learners, and if, indeed, teachers rely heavily on textbooks when teaching learners, this article will investigate the situation obtaining in Swaziland, attempting to answer the following questions. Is there a government policy on the provision of teaching/learning materials for high school learners? Who is responsible for providing such materials to high school learners: government or parents? How soon can such learners access textbooks, workbooks, stationery and other materials at the beginning of the school year? What system(s) are used by high schools to ensure that learners can access materials at the beginning of the school year? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these system(s)?

1. Statement of the problem

All schools in Swaziland, irrespective of type and ownership, are under the control of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 1996 & 1999). They are expected to follow a broad-based school curriculum from the primary to the secondary and high school levels. At the end of grades five, ten and twelve all learners write national public examinations irrespective of differences among schools in terms of the provision, quality and availability of teaching/learning materials or equipment.

The assumption underlying the system of national public examinations is that the provision, quality and availability of teaching/learning materials and equipment will be equitable at all schools. It is assumed that learners will have equal opportunities to perform well in these examinations (Demeuse *et al* 2001). One of the purposes of such examinations is to select the proportion of learners who may proceed to the next level. The selection is based on the quality of pass earned in the examinations. Thus, learners who have passed in the distinction, merit, and first-class categories stand a better chance of proceeding to the next level than those who have passed in the second- and third-class categories. The rationale for using national public examinations to select learners for the next level is that there are fewer upper-level schools. Therefore, the examinations are critically important because they determine the fate of the learners.

No study has yet examined the issue of equity in the provision of teaching/learning materials to learners at Swaziland high schools.

2. Objectives

Given the lack of any previous study, the purpose of this investigation was to determine if there is any government policy regarding the provision of textbooks and stationery to high school learners in Swaziland; whether parents or government, or both, are responsible for providing learners with textbooks and stationery; what system(s) (if any) are used by schools to ensure that learners can access textbooks, workbooks and stationery at the beginning of the school year, and the advantages and disadvantages of such system(s).

3. Methodology

The research design of this study was descriptive. The target population comprised heads of high schools in Swaziland and two senior education officers from the Ministry of Education. At the time of the study, the total number of high schools countrywide was 114, so there were 114 head teachers, from whom a random sample of 100 was selected.

In addition, the researchers constructed a questionnaire and an interview schedule. (Both data-collecting instruments were piloted to a few heads of high schools who were not part of the group to be sampled). The researchers mailed the questionnaire to the randomly sampled 100 heads of high schools. Only 30 (30%) returned usable data — a relatively low return rate. The findings of this study should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Interview data from 15 heads of high schools and the two senior education officers supplemented the questionnaire data. In addition, a review and analysis of policy documents was undertaken to establish the existence or otherwise of government policy on the provision of teaching/learning materials for high schools. The quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), while the qualitative information was subjected to qualitative data analysis methods.

4. Findings

4.1 Government policy on the provision of textbooks

The first objective of this study was to determine if the Swaziland government had any policy on the provision of textbooks, workbooks, stationery and other teaching/learning materials to high school learners. Data from face-to-face interviews with the 15 heads of high schools and the two senior education officers indicated that there was no such government policy. However, at the primary school level it was government policy to provide textbooks to learners from grade one to grade seven, while parents paid for workbooks and stationery.

This information was corroborated by the review of the government of Swaziland's major policy documents, none of which referred to a policy statement on the provision of textbooks, workbooks, stationery or teaching/learning materials to high school learners.³

4.2 Responsibility for providing textbooks and stationery

The second objective of this study was to determine whether government or parents, or both, were responsible for providing textbooks and stationery to high schools. Data was sourced from the questionnaires returned by the 30 heads of high schools and from the interviews with the 15 heads of high schools and the two senior education officers.

The majority (83%) of the 30 heads of schools indicated that parents, rather than government, were responsible for providing such materials. This finding was corroborated by the interview data: all 15 heads of high schools and the two senior education officers concurred. This was also confirmed by the government policy documents⁴ and empirical research studies.⁵

Of the 30 heads of high schools who responded to the questionnaire, five (17%) indicated that both parents and government were responsible for providing textbooks and stationery to high school learners but they

3 Cf Economic Planning Office 1997; Government of Swaziland 1999; Ministry of Education 1996 & 1999; National Development Plan 1994.

4 Cf Economic Planning Office 1997; Government of Swaziland 1999; Ministry of Education 1996; Ministry of Education 1999; National Development Plan 1994.

5 Mehrotra *et al* 1996; Brickhill *et al* 1996; Mehrotra & Vandemoortele 1997.

could not substantiate the government responsibility. Not a single head indicated that government alone was responsible.

Data from the interviews with the 15 high school heads and from the government policy documents indicated that the government, through the Ministry of Education, paid teachers' salaries but only rarely provided furniture and laboratory equipment, for instance when a school had suffered a natural disaster or was being newly constructed.

This was confirmed by a high school head, who added:

This, however, depends on whether government has the money. Otherwise, it is the responsibility of the community to provide furniture and laboratory equipment (High School Head 10).

4.3 The book loan system

Not all parents, especially the less well-off, are able to purchase textbooks and stationery for their children, but all high school learners should have these at the beginning of the school year. The reality is that only some learners have them. Invariably, those who do not are disadvantaged in the teaching/learning process. Against this background, what system(s) do heads of high schools, in collaboration with school committees, put in place to ensure that all learners, even those from poor families, have textbooks and stationery at the beginning of the school year?

Analysis of the responses of the 30 heads of high schools to the questionnaire indicated that three-fifths of the heads had such system. The other two-fifths required learners to buy their textbooks and stationery directly from commercial bookshops in the towns.

The book loan system entailed high schools buying textbooks and stationery in bulk and then loaning them to learners. High schools operating such a system factored the cost of textbooks and stationery into their school fees, which learners paid in instalments through the school year. They used the book and stationery fee to purchase textbooks and stationery in bulk from commercial bookstores and then loaned them to the learners at the beginning of school year, distributing the cost over a period of four or five years.

The textbooks and stationery were issued to learners at the beginning of the school year after they had paid the first instalment of their

fees at registration. The textbooks remained the property of the school and were to be returned at the end of the school year in the same condition as they had received them. If, for some reason, learners lost textbooks or returned them in poor condition, the schools demanded that they replaced them or paid the full cost of new books. The expected life-cycle of a textbook was four or five years. Thus in schools operating the book loan system, all learners acquired textbooks and stationery at the beginning of the school year.

4.4 Advantages and disadvantages of the book loan system

The final objective of this study was to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the system(s) used by high schools to ensure that learners acquired textbooks, stationery and teaching/learning materials at the beginning of the school year. One of the interview questions asked the 15 heads of schools and the two senior education officers to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the book loan system. They pointed out that its advantages were that learners paid less for textbooks and stationery because the schools bought them in bulk from commercial bookstores, which gave schools 5% or 10% discounts to pass on to the learners. Also, the price of each textbook was spread over a period of four or five years and thus shared by four or five learners, thus further reducing the cost to learners. The textbook loan system also eliminated travelling costs to towns to buy textbooks and stationery, especially for rural learners.

Paying school fees in instalments was a great relief to parents. As soon as learners had registered and paid their book loan deposit, they received all their textbooks and stationery. This gave all learners equal access to such materials at the beginning of the school year irrespective of their socio-economic background.

Concerning the disadvantages of the book loan system, the 15 heads of high schools and the two senior education officers explained that it required capital (seed money) to purchase the textbooks and stationery in advance. Schools had difficulty raising such capital from financial institutions because they did not have collateral. Learners often failed to look after the textbooks, partly because they mistakenly believed that they were the property of the school. Instead of lasting for four or five

years, a textbook might last only two or three. Some learners even lost textbooks and failed to replace them.

Learners who dropped out of school failed to pay the balance of the school fees owing, including the book loan fee. Sometimes they failed to return the textbooks loaned to them. In such cases, the schools' textbook stocks declined. In order to offset this, some schools increased the book fee. Others forbade learners to take textbooks home during school vacations for fear they would soil them. Not all parents were able to pay the first instalment of the school fees at registration. They would pressurise principals to issue the textbooks and stationery anyway, promising to pay the book fee as soon as possible.

At times, commercial bookstores failed to supply schools with textbooks and stationery on time, especially when they were out of print. In such cases, pupils studied without textbooks for a long time, resulting in parents accusing heads of schools of poor planning or of misappropriating the book loan fee. Some schools did not have good store-rooms for keeping the textbooks and stationery. There were sometimes break-ins, with textbooks being stolen. In some instances, teachers failed to keep good records of textbooks loaned to the pupils. In view of these problems, some schools abandoned the book loan system. One principal explained:

We tried to use the textbook loan system, but had to discontinue it because most books got lost, resulting in heavy losses for the school. Pupils could not replace the lost books (Head Teacher 8).

4.5 Advantages and disadvantages of purchasing textbooks and stationery directly from bookstores

Of the 30 high schools that participated in this study, 12 (40%) did not operate the book loan system. This was corroborated by the interview data. Instead, these schools instructed learners and parents to purchase the required textbooks and stationery directly from commercial bookstores in nearby towns, providing them with a list. However, some schools that were situated far from towns made special arrangements with commercial bookstores to bring textbooks and stationery to sell on the school premises from designated rooms.

During the interview session, the 15 heads of high schools were asked to explain the advantages and disadvantages of this system. They explained that learners did not have to travel long distances to towns to purchase textbooks and stationery; the possibility of their purchasing the wrong textbooks and stationery was drastically reduced; principals experienced less pressure from parents who could not pay an initial book deposit fee, and schools did not have to track textbooks issued to learners as was the case under the book loan system.

On the other hand, the main disadvantage of this system was that the poorer learners were not able to purchase all the requisite materials at the beginning of the school year. Hence some learners attended classes without textbooks and stationery. Principals sometimes told learners to go home to fetch the book and stationery fee, and not to return until they had it. Some learners eventually dropped out of school when parents failed to raise the money. The two senior education officers concurred with the heads of high schools on this.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to determine whether there was any government policy regarding the provision of textbooks and stationery to high school learners in Swaziland; whether government or parents were responsible; the system(s) used by high schools to ensure that learners could access textbooks and stationery at the beginning of the school year, and the advantages and disadvantages of such system(s).

The study found that there was no government policy regulating the provision of textbooks and stationery to high school learners in Swaziland; that the provision of such materials was solely the responsibility of parents, and that most of the high schools used the book loan system, with parents paying a book/stationery fee in instalments. The book loan system had both advantages and disadvantages, as described in 4.4 above, as did the alternative system whereby books were purchased directly from commercial bookstores by parents (whether on the school premises or not).

6. Recommendation

If textbooks and stationery are as crucially important in the teaching/learning process as the literature suggests, then a nation-wide study is called for to assess the extent of the provision of textbooks and stationery, not only in high schools but throughout the education system. The book loan system is an attempt to ensure that all learners have access to textbooks and stationery at the beginning of the school year. Learners who fail to pay the book fee are sent home to fetch it and often drop out of school. In short, the book loan system is not perfect. However, it would work well if there were a guarantee that all learners would eventually pay the book fee.

Notwithstanding this, in view of the fact that the findings of the study were based on the responses of a small proportion of high school principals, the reader is cautioned about interpreting and inferring too much from them. The recommended nation-wide study should critically examine the following issues: government policy on the provision of textbooks and stationery; means of ensuring that the book/stationery fee is guaranteed, and the suspension of learners who fail to pay it.

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