On 20 November 2014 *The Times* published an article about educational publishing in Britain today. Under the heading, ‘Textbook case of sloppy work’, the standfirst reads: ‘Britain once led the world in educational publishing. Now we have to import titles’; and the second paragraph begins: ‘the UK now produces among the worst textbooks of any developed nation’. Could it be that those outstanding textbook writers of the last century have disappeared and left no heirs? If so, how has this happened?

**WHY TEXTBOOKS COUNT**

The article in *The Times* was prompted by a talk given the same day by the Schools Reform Minister, Nick Gibb, and by the publication of a paper entitled ‘Why textbooks count’ by Tim Oates, Director of Assessment Research and Development at Cambridge Assessment, also published on 20 November.

Nick Gibb’s message was that British textbooks ‘simply do not match up to the best in the world, resulting in poorly designed resources, damaging and undermining good teaching.’ He cited the example of a Maths textbook which had ‘incoherent presentations, little signposting of key concepts and an approach focused more on preparing for GCSE-type questions than understanding the subject’. He called this a ‘typical GCSE textbook’.

The title of Tim Oates paper, ‘Why textbooks count’, suggests that he thinks textbooks – high-quality textbooks – do matter, and this is indeed what he says: ‘In key jurisdictions, high-performing teachers are well-disposed [towards] and enthusiastic about textbooks.’ He gives the examples of Finland, where 95% of students use a textbook as a basis for instruction in their Maths lessons, and of Singapore, where the figure is 70%. In England, it is only 10%. If there is a correlation between students getting a sound education in a particular subject and the use of good textbooks, why is this figure so low in England?

**THE REASONS FOR THE ‘DECLINE’**

Firstly, for more than a decade, assessment levels were at the core of government policy on education, supposedly enabling teachers and parents to measure achievement and progress. Assessment and ‘accountability’ were the key to success, it seemed. It is not surprising that publishers responded with books which focused on levels, nor that teachers chose books that not only were endorsed by exam boards but were often written by Chief Examiners. Then, in July 2013, Michael Gove, as Education Secretary, announced that the levels were to be scrapped from September 2014 and not replaced. They had not achieved their purpose: they were not leading to what Tim Oates has called a ‘deep and secure understanding of key concepts, ideas and skills’. As any writer of textbooks for schools will tell you, there has for a considerable time been an unwholesome relationship between examination boards and publishers, which imposes its own restrictive controls on the style and content of textbooks. It has become standard practice for a textbook to boast on the cover that it provides all and only what is needed to prepare for a given GCSE or AS/A level. What this leads to, as Nick Gibb says, is that publishers ‘pander to the lowest common denominator in the scramble for market share’. Tim Oates also uses the language of business when identifying what has gone wrong: ‘Our analysis of the market in England suggests that there is chronic market failure. In KS4, teachers have been conditioned by performance tables into highly instrumental approaches to learning, oriented towards obtaining specific examination grades. This myopic focus has conditioned the market such that publishers efficiently are supplying the textbooks and materials which teachers are demanding.’
Secondly, educational writers work in a very different publishing environment from that of the ‘golden age’ of the 1980s and 90s. Quite simply, the terms and conditions of their contracts are not conducive to their producing their best work. They are asked, as a matter of routine, to sign away their copyright to the publisher, enabling the publisher to re-use all or parts of the material, ‘edited’ to suit new purposes, without referring back to the author; this works against the author’s sense of ownership of and commitment to the work. ‘Non-compete’ clauses are standard, so an author who has written, say, a textbook for KS3 History is not allowed to write, be a consultant on or edit a similar work so long as that textbook is in print, even though it might only be selling a few copies a year. Fees, even for major courses, are replacing royalties, resulting in a loss of income for authors. As an experienced author of Maths textbooks says, ‘In almost all cases it is more financially beneficial (in the long run) if I opt for royalties. However, in recent years royalties have not been on offer at all [...] I feel a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for the work, and, dare I say, dedication if I am receiving royalties.’ Authors who agree to work for fees find themselves fighting a losing battle to be paid adequately for their work. As another experienced author says, ‘I have been arguing with one publisher for an increase in the fee they offer for each book in a series (it’s my series – no one else writes in it) which is the same now as it was in 2006.’ According to a survey by the Authors’ Licensing & Collecting Society, there has been a drop in the typical income from writing of professional authors of 29% in real terms since 2005.

Thirdly, as Tim Oates points out, there is an anti-textbook ethos in teacher training establishments and educational research communities in England. The most obvious consequence is the ubiquitous ‘worksheet’, prepared by a teacher, not subject to peer or editorial evaluation, not part of a carefully planned learning sequence that informs the best textbooks. Ofsted, too, is open to the charge of discouraging the use of textbooks. In his article ‘Is Ofsted’s war on textbooks over?’ (Daily Telegraph, 23 Feb 2015), Alex Wynter quotes the history teacher and education researcher Robert Peal: ‘For years it was widely acknowledged within staffrooms that a teacher would be committing career suicide by teaching a lesson from a textbook during an Ofsted inspection.’

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Nick Gibb said that Tim Oates’s paper ‘should rightly send shockwaves through the education system and the publishing industry’. If, when he talks of ‘the education system’, he means the government department responsible for education, his words are welcome. It would be helpful if, after the shockwaves have been felt, there is a period of calm during which textbook writers can produce materials (in print and digital format) that enrich and expand a syllabus. If government ministers want high-quality textbooks, they need to understand that this process takes time, and they need to stop tinkering with the curriculum. They need to work with writers and publishers to create a climate in which the best educational writing can flourish. Leaving commercial interest to provide quick solutions, then complaining about declining quality, is not the answer. In August 2014, a survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers concluded that most schools were not ready for the new national curriculum, to be introduced the following month, and that more than eight out of ten respondents did not think teachers had been given enough time to implement it. Will whoever is in power after the general election undertake to introduce only those ‘reforms’, such as the reform of Ofsted, that have the backing of the majority of teachers, so that a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum, appropriately resourced, is a feature of all schools?

Exam boards should not endorse textbooks. Ofqual was clearly concerned by what it called the ‘linkage’ between exam boards and textbooks. In December 2013, their director of policy told the Publishers Association to ‘watch this space’ for announcements in the new year with regard to the endorsement process. However, in June 2014, we learned that although Ofqual had been considering an outright ban on the idea of ‘official’ textbooks, exam boards would be allowed to continue endorsing them. This will not lead to a healthy educational publishing environment.
Teacher training establishments need to re-examine their attitude towards textbooks. A good textbook is the product of rigorous research combined with a focus on the majority of students attaining ‘deep and secure understanding’ and a creative approach to imparting knowledge. It cannot meet the needs of every child in every classroom, but it can provide a sound basis on which a teacher can build. It is folly for teachers all over the country to be reinventing the wheel, producing their own ‘scope and sequence’ charts and their own unmoderated materials. There are signs that Ofsted is changing its attitude. A couple of years ago, Sir Michael Wilshaw, Head of Ofsted, spoke of ‘death by a thousand worksheets’. As Alex Wynter points out in his *Telegraph* article, it remains to be seen whether he can convince his inspectors to overcome their aversion to textbooks.

We need to be wary of comparisons with countries whose cultures and ‘typical classes’ are so different from our own. Just consider the following facts about Finland, given on the website of the Pearson Foundation:

- Finland’s society is relatively homogeneous. Out of a population of 5.3 million, only 3.8% are foreign-born, against an OECD average of 12.9%. Finland spends 5.9% of its gross domestic product on education, slightly above the OECD average of 5.2%.
- Finland recruits its teachers from the top 10% of graduates. From primary through upper secondary level, all teachers are required to have a Master’s degree.
- Finnish teachers spend 592 hours per year teaching in class, less than the OECD average of 703 hours. This allows more time for supporting students with learning difficulties.
- At least two out of five Finnish school students benefit from some type of special intervention during their secondary schooling.

Remember, too, that students in Finland do little or no homework. Is this a factor in their achieving better results?

And, finally, we need to take notice of the findings of the 2014 study by the European Parliament, ‘Contractual arrangements applicable to creators’: creators should be given a fair and continuing share in revenue, and contracts for writers and other copyright creators need to be fairer and ‘future-proofed’.

Given the right educational and publishing environment to work in, writers can provide teachers with the materials they need in order to give their students the deep and secure understanding of key concepts, ideas and skills that Tim Oates has characterised as the hallmark of a sound education.

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About Chris Barker

Chris Barker is the Chair of the Educational Writers Group. He worked for twelve years in educational publishing in the UK before becoming a full-time writer of English Language teaching materials. He has recently co-written two stages of an English as a Second Language course for Cambridge University Press.

About the SoA

The Society of Authors has been serving the interests of professional writers for more than a century. Today it has more than 9,000 Members and Associates writing in all areas of the profession (from novelists to doctors, textbook writers to ghost writers, broadcasters to academics, illustrators to translators).

About EWG

The Educational Writers Group is a subsidiary group of the SoA. It has 880 members, writing educational books for the UK, school and trade and English Language Textbooks. The Group, established in 1964, seeks to:

- Protect the interests of educational authors in all professional matters, especially contracts, rates of pay, digitalisation and copyright;
- Help its members keep abreast of developments in education, curriculum, TEFL, digital media and government policy;
- Lobby for adequate funding for books in schools, colleges and libraries, and for well-stocked public libraries and professionally-staffed libraries in all educational institutions;
- Encourage publishers in all media to respect the highest professional standards in educational writing, see our guidelines;
- Enable educational writers to meet together from time to time in congenial surroundings.

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