

# Understanding the Limpopo textbook saga

Between December 2011 and July 2012, the non-delivery of textbooks to schools in Limpopo provoked a storm of anger. *Linda Chisholm* investigates.



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*Stand and deliver – Books being packed for delivery at the Limpopo warehouse in 2012 once logistics company UTI had taken over.*

Investigation to ensure delivery of the now so-called Limpopo textbooks coincided with allegations of corruption, mismanagement and maladministration in the province and the media was full of images of workbooks – flagships of the national department – being shredded, dumped into rivers or fluttering in the wind outside warehouses. The dominant discourse represented the saga as one of chaos, corruption, incompetence and indifference. But investigative reporting did not extend to all aspects of the mystery. So the question arises: what happened in Limpopo that schools did not have textbooks on time in 2012?

Closer investigation reveals that a number of factors combined to create conditions in which conflicts within and between sections of the ruling party, national and provincial departments, state and civil society, publishers and third party agents simply exploded. Non-delivery of textbooks became the lightning rod of wider social, political and economic tensions. But what were the underlying issues?

## Immediate causes

The immediate cause of the problem was the cash flow crisis the Limpopo Department of Education found itself in, in 2011. This was precipitated by overpriced contracts and a high teacher salary budget that was a result of poor management of the system for allocating teachers to the available basket of posts.

With a looming budget shortfall of R2 billion, R1 billion of which was made up of so-called ‘excess teachers,’ Limpopo faced the prospect of being unable to pay its teachers. Since more than 90% of its budget was going to teacher salaries,

severe pressure was placed on what remained for infrastructure backlogs, maintenance and textbooks.

In June 2011, treasury stepped in to arrest overspending, and in December the province was placed under national administration. Vacant and excess posts were frozen. All contracts and financial operations were subjected to forensic scrutiny, and a R565 million contract with Edusolutions to purchase and deliver textbooks, was suspended. As a result, textbook orders had not been placed by the time the school year started in 2012.

More than 4 million textbooks were eventually purchased and delivered at greatly reduced cost, but not before two national administrators had come and gone, the second revealing the depth of corruption in the department, and creating some tensions within it as a result. By the time the third administrator had negotiated prices with publishers within acceptable limits, placed orders and found a new distributor, it was well into the school year. It was within this context that the public interest law centre, Section 27, took the national department to court to pressurise it into timeous delivery.

## Contextual dimensions

The Limpopo textbook saga occurred within a specific and sometimes linked economic, political and educational context. To this end there were five key features that impacted on its dramatic unfolding.

Economically, and first, the economic downturn in 2009, spurred by the global economic crisis, reduced gains made in the 2001-2008 period. Pressure mounted on the state to curb

financial losses incurred by poor provincial administrations. Meanwhile, a team from treasury began closer examination of the finances of the province in the light of the Auditor-General's 2010 and 2011 reports, in which Limpopo had received a 'disclaimer,' meaning there was no evidence of internal controls over record keeping and management, especially budget management. In such an environment, fraud and abuse of public resources are easily perpetrated.

Politically, and second, the crisis occurred in a province in which intraparty tensions in the run-up to a significant ruling party conference to be held later in the year at Mangaung, were running high. The emasculation of ANC Youth League leader, Julius Malema, by the ruling party, to limit his access to state resources by corrupt means, was in process, and a party disciplinary committee had taken steps to remove his ANC membership. It is possible that such steps provoked opportunistic efforts to block national initiatives to arrest corruption in the province.

Third, Limpopo was a province under national administration in terms of section 100(1)(b) of the constitution. The modus operandi was for provincial officials – several were facing fraud charges – to remain in place, executing the day-to-day tasks, while national officials, including a ministerial team and national administrator, provided oversight and direction. The limits of this approach were recognised in the July 2012 Metcalfe Report commissioned to verify delivery of books to schools.

Educationally, and fourth, implementation of a revised curriculum was planned for Grades 1-3 and Grade 10 in 2012. Curriculum revision required new textbooks, which were produced under pressure at great speed to meet the implementation deadline for those four grades, causing tensions with publishers.

These tensions were exacerbated by new initiatives and policies to improve the quality and bring down the price of textbooks. These included the production and distribution of free workbooks for grades 1-9 in maths, languages, natural science and technology and life skills and the distribution of free grades 10-12 maths and science textbooks prepared by Siyavula, in association with the Shuttleworth Foundation. In addition, the department had instituted a national catalogue providing eight approved titles per subject which excluded some publishers and a process of central procurement of textbooks at reduced rates. These initiatives and policies shook the market.

Finally, and fifth, the growth, influence and impact of the NGO, Equal Education, which had a strong legal base, was another important dimension of the social and educational landscape. With experience and strong networks in the Treatment Action Campaign, it spawned Section27, a legal pressure group, to take up the question of timely provision of textbooks in Limpopo schools. Its legalistic approach was important in highlighting the importance of access to and availability of textbooks in all schools, a position promoted nationally through the Teachers, Time and Texts campaign of government.

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### **Systemic issues**

Rational explanations often lay behind seemingly inexplicable phenomena. The strange case of workbooks found dumped in a river, for example, turned out to be simply irresponsible behaviour on the part of an individual employee. Under the guise of delivering workbooks to a school, a district employee had gone visiting a girlfriend, clocking up many miles. When the storm about non-delivery, provoked by Section27, broke in the media, he panicked and dumped the workbooks in a river, afraid of being found out.

But it was systemic issues that underlaid slow and inaccurate deliveries to schools. These concern both the financial questions discussed above and the actual textbook delivery modalities that came into being in the post-1994 period. To understand this, we need to distinguish between textbooks and workbooks, and how the distribution systems of the two differ.

Workbooks were introduced as a national project in part, to circumvent difficulties encountered in the multiple provincial arrangements to deliver textbooks. They were a direct response to the ongoing and troubling evidence of poor literacy and numeracy in primary schools. The idea was to develop colourful workbooks that children could write in and take home with them. They were to be an additional resource for schools, not displacing textbooks, but supplementing them, and they were to be delivered directly by the national department rather than through provincial arrangements.

By contrast, how textbooks are delivered to schools depends on whether they are section 21 or section 20 schools. Section 21 schools – mainly suburban schools – have the right to buy their own textbooks from their provincial allocations. Section 20 schools comprise the majority of schools in townships and rural areas. They do not have the right to buy their own textbooks; these are bought for them by the province and delivered either directly or through third parties.

Where third parties are used, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Mpumalanga use Edusolutions, while the Eastern Cape uses the East London Credit Bureau and/or a variety of SMMEs. Publishers have offered discounts to provinces and third parties buying and delivering textbooks, with these discounts usually being taken as profit or returned to provincial learning and teaching support material budgets.

The delivery of both textbooks and workbooks depends on accurate data: provincial data about the location of schools, and school data about the numbers of books needed for which subjects from which publishers and in which languages. When data is inaccurate, delivery is compromised. In this instance, neither was in good shape, pointing to systemic failures in the Limpopo Department of education.

### Moving forward

Measures were taken to address specific problems that arose from this debacle, including the implementation of a hotline for reporting incorrect deliveries; work with Statistics SA to improve reporting on school-level data; a management plan for timeous placement of orders, development of good working relationships with the Publishers' Association of South Africa and the appointment of a new distributor for Limpopo. These measures were undertaken within the overall framework of a stabilised budget and political changes in the province. Difficulties will remain, rooted in overall systemic issues, but attention now also needs to include the quality and use of textbooks and workbooks in schools.

#### The delivery process for CAPS-textbooks for 2013

UTi CL&D, a customer's information system called eWarehouse, worked with the Limpopo Department of Education under the Minister's Operations Team. It had three weeks in November 2012 to distribute textbooks to 4 055 schools, with a second phase of remedial action to address shortages as well as any other requests schools might have.

Publishers delivered textbooks to warehouses from 15 October where quantities were checked and errors remediated within seven days.

A high-tech system was adopted to track all facets of the delivery process.

Over 20 days, 72 trucks travelled 792 000 km per day; and four line-haul vehicles took freight to branch warehouses for further distribution daily. It was a 24-hour operation, with a total project staff of 771 people, who were provided with work and skills development for the duration of the project. Limpopo Department of Education staff were selected and trained as 'super trainers', who in turn trained the 88 Limpopo Department of Education pickers, manifesters and quality checkers. ■

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## Listening before telling: pairing indigenous knowledge with the school curriculum

A team of researchers set its sights on developing context-relevant teaching tools by using indigenous and local knowledge in the Cofimvaba district in the Eastern Cape. *Tebello Letsekha* relates the team's experiences.

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 resulted in a number of changes to the schooling system. Following these changes, school learners had to learn in the context of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RCNS) from Grades R to 9, which was published in 2002, and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) from Grades 10 to 12, published in 2003. The NCS was designed in such a way as to ensure flexibility, so it could be adapted to local conditions and needs at school level.

From its side, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) expected these curricula to be interpreted and implemented differently in diverse contexts. Yet, schools in so-called rural areas were still unable to take advantage of the opportunities created by the NCS owing to limited resources.

### Applying indigenous knowledge to teaching

This article reflects on the journey of researchers involved in a three-year study that aims to develop context-relevant teaching tools using indigenous and local knowledge in collaboration with local teachers and community members, in the Cofimvaba district in the Eastern Cape.

The study, now in its second year, is titled 'Promoting and learning from Cofimvaba community's indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) so as to benefit the school curriculum'. It focuses on promoting the direct participation of teachers in planning, researching and developing learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs) for use in the classroom.

To realise this aim, the project first pursued ways of identifying and making use of local and indigenous knowledge (IK) that would benefit the school curriculum, and then forged links between the school and the wider community.