My Grade 2 Reader and my primary Song book

When I was a child, I eagerly anticipated the start of each new school year. The first week or two were magical. There were new teachers, new subjects, new routines, and, above all, new books.

In the first week of each new school year, we were issued our textbooks. These belonged to the school but a copy was entrusted to each student for a year. In Year 1 of primary, there was only one such book – a reader. Each year, the number of schoolbooks increased and by the time I was in high school, a dozen or so would be handed out to each student.

Receiving the books involved some trepidation. Each of us hoped that we would get copies that the previous custodian had taken good care of; that there would be no scribbled notes, stains or dog-ears. Of course, the school had a system in place designed to prevent such abuse: each copy contained a little slip where we would have to sign our name and enter it into the list of custodians. Still, being allocated a copy whose previous custodians included A-students or anyone you admired was a good omen.

Once the books had been handed out, we would schlep them home and spend the afternoon covering them neatly in protective paper.

And then the real fun could begin: reading the books. I loved that initial read of the Literature book with its stories and poems; the Geography book exploring far-away places; the History book enabling time travel; the Biology book explaining...
the natural world; Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Economics, Political Science, Religious Studies, Latin, English, French – I browsed all these textbooks with awe and read as much as I could. And with eager anticipation I looked forward to the point in the school year when we would study each lesson in detail and fully unravel the treasures they promised.

Throughout the school year, the books became our regular companions. We would carry them to and from school at least once or twice a week (some, like the Maths book, every day). And we would read them over and over again and use them to prepare for tests and exams.

At the end of the school year, the textbooks had to be returned to the school so that they could be passed on to the next student cohort. By then, the books had yielded all their secrets and new riches could be expected one grade up when school would return after the summer break.

When handing in the books, each copy was closely inspected by the teacher in charge and woe to the student who had not taken good care of their books; or, heaven forbid, lost their copy. Like most students, I was terrified that the inspection might find flaws for which I would be held responsible.

Sometimes, we were the last group of students to use a particular edition and, if that happened, we were allowed to keep them. Even today, I have those copies in my library.

The practices surrounding our textbooks taught us that books are precious and need to be treated with respect. They taught us that we are part of the great chain of human generations and that we are responsible for the legacy we leave to those who come after us. They taught us that books are guides and constant companions that help you grow and mature. And they gave me the gift of a lifelong love for reading and learning.

My experience with my schoolbooks was specific to a particular place and time. What lessons did your schoolbooks teach you? I don’t mean what their content was but what the practices surrounding their use taught you about books, life, and knowledge?