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Negotiating the boundaries between mathematics and physics. The case of late 1950s French textbooks for middle schools.

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Summary: This paper examines physics and mathematics textbooks published in France at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s for children aged 11–15 years old. It argues that at this “middle school” level, textbooks contributed to shape cultural representations of both disciplines and their mutual boundaries through their contents and their material aspect. Further, this paper argues that far from presenting clearly delimited subjects, late 1950s textbooks offered possible connections between mathematics and physics. It highlights that such connections depended upon the type of schools the textbooks aimed at, at a time when educational organization still differentiated pupils of this age. It thus stresses how the audience and its projected aptitudes and needs, as well as the cultural teaching traditions of the teachers in charge, were inseparable from the diverse conceptions of mathematics and physics and their relationships promoted through textbooks of the time.

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