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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Textbooks and citizenship education

Maria Luísa Amaral Varela de Freitas
Universidade do Minho (Portugal)

Introduction

Childhood research that ignores schooling experiences amputates childhood in a very important dimension. (Preuss-Lausitz, 1995, p. 222)

The study presented here is part of a broader study, where teachers' and parents' points of views were investigated along with children's perspectives. Psychological and pedagogical studies listen to children. Children's perceptions, attitudes and mental images of varied world aspects or school perspectives have been the focus of many studies. Even in Portugal there is a strong field of research, mainly in science education, about children's intuitive ideas about the world (Nunes, 1993) and in social sciences (Oliveira, 1985).

In the 1990s, however, the way we listen to children changed, inasmuch as the conceptions of childhood changed. The main developments were more evident in the sociological field (Postman, 1995; Chrisholm, Büchner, Krüger and Bois-Reymond, 1995). On the other hand anthropological methods were adapted to study other social sciences, including educational studies with children. In Portugal, Raul Iturra is a point of reference in this kind of study (Iturra, 1996 and 1997). According to the postmodern paradigm, and to the concern for different points of view, different cultures would not be ignored in this distinct childhood approach which gives more attention to children's own perspectives. Researchers try to understand children's own culture and to know their opinions assuming that 'even small children are as credible and important to listen to as adults are' (Näsman, von Gerber and Hollmer, 1999, p. 127). Last but not least was the role of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, mainly the 12th and 13th articles.

However I have some doubts about the effective changes in school. Do we feel an effective and an authentic need to pay attention to the 'child's right to express an opinion, and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child' (Article 12, *Convention on the Rights of the Child* - Osler and Starkey, 1996, p. 176). Do we care about what children think in relation to the textbooks? They have the right to say things about them. In fact they are the most important users and they carry them, days and days of their life.

Textbook research has developed in Portugal over the last three decades, but the focus has been mainly to investigate what government and society have tried to disseminate through them. No one has tried to find out what they actually transmitted, or how the user saw the messages. Only a recent article of Pais (1999) reports an international study where questions about the teaching and learning of history included some questions put to students about the role of textbooks. The results of this showed that reading of textbooks was one of the most often used strategies in class but that it was also the one students ranked last in terms of their preferences and of accuracy. Some studies have tried to systematise the several kinds of ideal criteria that textbooks should reach, but they have been mainly theoretical studies, not experimental ones.

Several studies analysed elementary social studies textbooks and issues related to values, covering citizenship education (Radich, 1979; Valente, 1989), but not through students' ideas about it. Marques (1997) compared the values included in the official documents (the Comprehensive Law on the Education System, Law 46/1986) with the present syllabus, and concluded that textbooks do not pay as much attention to the official documents as they are supposed to.

The study

I did not have support from other studies, even from other countries, about students' opinions on their textbooks. On the other hand, research that listens to student voices were less usual than they are now. The purpose of this study was to understand how children look at their social studies textbooks, and the research questions were:

- What kind of textbook would they like to have?
- What do they like and dislike most in their textbooks and why?
- What do they think was more easy or more difficult and why?

The subjects were 144 children, from nine classes, first to fourth grade (two classes from each grade except the third grade), 76 boys and 68 girls. They were students from the classrooms of teachers co-operating with the University of Minho in the programme of primary teachers' education. The study was carried out during the 1997-98 academic year.

The students answered two open questions, related to a short story they had listened to, about their preferences for the next year's social studies textbooks. The content analyses of this set of answers showed that the influence of teachers was evident in some classrooms, but not in most of them. The answers were classified in three main categories: subject matter (163 answers), illustration (116 answers), and quizzes (15 answers). Many answers (200), mainly from second and third grade students, were difficult to classify. The subjects students chose most often were the human body, health care and local and Portuguese history. These answers could have been value-related. Marques (1997) stressed that basic values related to health care and national identity values were the most common in the textbooks he analysed, just as it seems happened in these answers. It was also evident that students did not like to do easy tasks; they preferred harder work. The most used adjectives showed that the students liked textbooks to be nice, colourful, funny, big, difficult, new, clean, with sound and important information.

I also asked them to list three pages they liked or disliked and two pages they felt to be easy or difficult, and the reasons for that choice. They enjoyed developing this activity, and it seemed that teachers gave them total autonomy to in this task. Some teachers read the answers and did not understand them: one of them said that some of the reasons given did not make sense to her. I worked hard trying to understand their answers, analysing the pages and the reasons they presented for their selections. The selections of the subject matter preferred were also evident, and the two main topics were the same as those found through the content analysis of the first two questions: the human body and local and Portuguese history.

However a significant number of pages selected by their like and dislike choice did not have a distinctive category. The 'things' represented in the pages were the reason for the selection. Apart from the easy-to-understand aesthetic reasons, there were reasons related

to behaviour, which allowed me to relate them to correct or incorrect behaviour, or with values. This helped me to classify most answers, such as: 'I do not do it' or 'My mother doesn't like it'. Sometimes the behaviour was not explicitly represented, but was seen as ones. The main values were basic items such as security, hygiene, and health care. The second set of values that motivated choices was related to environmental preservation. Values related to respect for others, specifically other cultures, also appeared.

Four main points arise from this study:

1. Students were sensitive to values education. They perceived more values than the textbooks' authors intended to include.
2. The negative examples brought more attention than the positive ones. They were selected many more times than the positive ones. This was not only those with explicit values, but also those with values only perceived by the student who selected the page. For example, one student selected a page with a woman sitting in an affected way, speaking on the phone, and wrote, 'I don't like the secretary. She seems to me very arrogant'.
3. Students did the task carefully, and presented personal justifications. It is not easy to interpret their opinions and researchers need time, patience and love trying to listen to their voices.
4. Textbooks could be a powerful vehicle for citizenship education.

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