

What Lithuanian Pupils Learn about Disability: Analysis of Attitudes and Content of Textbooks

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Introduction

The representation of disability in textbooks is often a subject of research. The form and content of representation of disability in textbooks can refer to the latent subjects of educational curriculum. If, according to Schubert (1989), curriculum is conveying and interiorization of cultural values and relations of a society, representation of disability in textbooks shows not only what and how something is conveyed to students, but at the same time the meanings of disability introduced by the authors of textbooks in their turn shape behavioural models with the disabled. From this perspective, textbooks are treated as an aid of social and cultural reproduction and a definition of social diversity (McKinney, 2005). In other words, textbook content analysis can disclose a reproduced collective understanding of disability at school. Brantlinger (2004) points out, *“how textbook content is based on (and reinforces) the medical model of disability that posits deficiencies in classified children [...] text narratives conveyed that schools are neutral and “kids with disabilities” are the problem”*. Nansy’s (2001) research shows, that representation in textbooks mirrored representations of disability in the wider culture: *“They directed readers towards a negative view of disability through false dichotomies that universalize, totalize, make static and inferiorize [...] Despite the promise of a climate that values diversity, the hegemonic negativity of disability as a singular embodiment of Other was not resisted”*.

In this research school curriculum is evaluated from the perspective of integrated education of children with special educational needs (SEN). Changes in curriculum are happening in two directions. Firstly, in terms of concrete organizational activities, the school should be ready to admit children with different disorders and integrate them into mainstream classrooms. This means that it is necessary to be prepared to design modified and adapted programmes for these children, to realize principles of individualization and differentiation of the teaching/learning process. Secondly, changes are necessary not only in the technological, but also in the ideological, i.e. collective consciousness area. The concept of collective consciousness refers to people’s beliefs, attitudes, myths and stereotypes, which in one way or another influence concrete daily activities (Abric, 1994; Deschamps, Beauvois, 1996). The two forms of curriculum - one formal, documented, the other - informal, conceived, cultural, are investigated in this research.

The following questions have been posed: do school textbooks in Lithuania promote tolerance towards children with different disorders; do they teach them construing positive relations, co-operation, inclusion of students with special educational needs

into different forms of social participation at school? What are the means of integrating information about different children in textbooks; what information is given and what are the means of its representation; what kind of message about such children is sent to students? What is the real discourse – that of participation or of exclusion – formed by the textbooks? What is the intentional learning curriculum of children with special needs, i.e. how do the participants of curriculum – teachers and students – describe it?

The aim of this paper is to reveal how stereotyped representations of disability are manifested in school curriculum through the textbook content and the attitudes of participants of education. In carrying out the content analysis, texts and pictures of textbooks were analyzed. 27 Lithuanian language and literature textbooks and 9 Ethics textbooks for Years 1 to 10 were examined, in total 36 textbooks. The same content analysis of oral and written opinions of teachers and students was performed. Semi-open, oral, individual and group interviews among 70 teachers from two districts were conducted. Additionally, the same type of group interviews and discussions were conducted with 231 students from 45 schools.

Research Results

Text Content Analysis

Textbook content often contributes to the formation of negative stereotypes about disability by attributing negative features to children with special needs. Pessimistic social and educational roles of children with special needs are implied.

A very clear stereotype, which is found in the textbooks, is the negative stereotype of the person with a mental disorder. The behaviour of such a person is presented as inadequate, inappropriate to common norms; the strangeness of behaviour is emphasized, e.g., *what a stupid girl – when she cooks pancakes she mixes starch with butter.*

Another very frequent stereotype presented in the textbooks is a preconceived opinion about the lack of possibilities of people with mental disorders to take part in community life and education. For example, *only a stupid person could fall into a trap. She is blind from birth, so she doesn't know what yellow or green looks like. She doesn't know what colour is at all.*

The definition of disability in the textbooks is neutral and informative. However, in the texts this informational, cognitive definition is accompanied by an indirect feeling of misfortune, especially when acquired disabilities are discussed. For example, *In hospital he was diagnosed with an inflammation of the brain. It is possible to treat, but he will be mentally disabled for the rest of his life.* When inherent disabilities are discussed, the semantics is somewhat different, but the pessimistic mood remains, for example, *He was born such. He doesn't know why. And nobody knows.*

There are some texts, fewer than those described above, where the disabled person is recognised, as being disabled, and where support for the disabled is emphasized, where people are encouraged to care about disabled people, and to include disabled persons in different forms of social participation, for example, *Please behave with us, as friendly, as you do with others. Please include us in your life, too.*

There are quite a few texts where disability is presented as a difference, a peculiarity; where disabled people are labelled, stigmatised and ridiculed, for example *...but he stutters so terribly, ha- ha, – said the boy. – What could we do together?*

There are texts, where irresponsibility is almost consciously evoked. It means that we are not responsible for caring about disabled people. These texts indirectly indicate to the readers not to care about a disabled person, not to pay attention to his/her needs and opportunities, e.g., *she has a mental disorder, that is why her other sisters mistreated her and called her a fool.*

In some texts the feelings and experiences linked with disability are presented. There is an appeal to the reader's feelings with respect to a disabled person. The reader is invited to empathise with the disabled, for example, *I am not an empty place or a rare animal in the zoo. Why do so many people notice my body, but nobody sees ME?*

In other texts aspirations of disabled people to be active are presented. The message sent to the reader is, as follows: disabled people can and would like to make their contribution to society. For example, *The optimism came step by step, the wish to enjoy life, too; she again began to communicate with other people.*

Analysis of categories, according to the frequency in textbooks of different years, has shown that such semantic category of disability, as strange behaviour, as a consequence of a mental disability is the most frequently encountered category in the textbooks. It is found in textbooks of all years, but most often in the textbooks of Year 6. Inadequate (bad, ignorant) behaviour because of a mental disorder – this category takes 2nd–3rd place in our rating – is very often presented in the textbooks of Year 6 and 7. Making a fool of somebody, calling in anger somebody disabled – this category also takes 2nd–3rd place in our rating – this category is most frequently presented in the textbooks of Year 6. A mental disorder, as a cause of poor opportunities (4th place in the ratings scale) is more often found in Year 4 to Year 7. Decrease of the person's possibilities because of the disability (the 4th place in the ratings scale) is more often found from Year 5 to Year 7. It is obvious that the presentation of disability in the investigated textbooks is very negative; unconsciously pupils are ascribed to the category of disabled people because of the difference in their personality and behaviour and because of no prospects for their educational and social participation. It is important to mention that in Year 6 that negative stereotypes of disability are being instilled in the most intensive way.

There are only a few texts in the analyzed textbooks where positive attitudes towards disability are presented. Positive semantic categories, such as mutual help among disabled people; offering (trying) to stand in the shoes of a disabled person, aiming at compensating disability are presented only a few times during the 10 years of schooling.

The greatest differences in stereotypes are in those semantic categories where disability is described negatively. The most negative stereotypes are presented in the Lithuanian language textbooks. In these textbooks mental disability is identified, as a reason for weak social and educational opportunities. This semantic category is the one, which mostly distinguishes Lithuanian language and Ethics textbooks. In the Lithuanian language textbooks, the inadequate (bad, ignorant) behaviour because of mental disability, disability as punishment, decreasing expectations for activity of a disabled person and the inadequate attitude of a disabled person towards him/herself are mostly emphasized.

Mystical and mythological stereotypes of disability are more often presented in Lithuanian language textbooks than in Ethics textbooks. In the first group of textbooks, disabled people are presented in tales, in the other group information about famous disabled people is given. In both cases, it is not usual, traditional and normal situations that are described, but rather more exceptional, and a special context of disability is given.

The Ethics textbooks are more oriented towards positive stereotypes of disability than Lithuanian language textbooks. Inclusion of disabled people in activities at the initiative of non-disabled people, recognition of a disabled person as s/he is, rights of disabled people guaranteed by the law (are not at all presented in Lithuanian language textbooks), teaching that it is bad to ridicule a disabled person, mutual help among disabled people, offering (trying) to stand in the shoes of a disabled person (are not at all presented in the Lithuanian language textbooks), care about disabled people – these categories are emphasized in the Ethics textbooks.

However, negative stereotypes of disability are also not avoided in the Ethics textbooks. In these textbooks, even more than in the Lithuanian language, the descriptions of strange behaviour of mentally disabled people can be found. A similar frequency of such categories, as a decrease of a person's possibilities because of disability, disability as a stigma, a burden, making a fool of somebody, in anger calling somebody disabled, inadequate (bad, ignorant) behaviour because of the mental disorder, are presented in both Lithuanian language and Ethics textbooks.

Most often negative stereotypes of disability are presented in the textbooks of Lithuanian authors. A mental disorder is a reason for poor opportunities, strange behaviour as a consequence of a mental disorder, inadequate (bad, ignorant) behaviour because of a mental disorder, making a fool of somebody, in anger calling somebody disabled, reduced opportunities because of the person's disability, ridicule of disabled people, disability as a punishment, a decrease of expectations for

activities of a disabled person (mental disorders) – all these are the negative images of disability, which are clearly evident in the textbooks of Lithuanian authors.

Negative stereotypes of disability could also be found in the textbooks of foreign authors, but, of course, much fewer. There are much more positive images of disability in the texts of foreign authors, than in the texts of Lithuanian authors. As an example, we could give such semantic categories, which are characteristic for foreign authors: inclusion of disabled people in activities at the initiative of non-disabled people, offering (trying) to stand in the shoes of a disabled person, rights of disabled people guaranteed by the law.

In the texts of Lithuanian authors, disability is presented, as a reason for poor opportunities, making a fool of somebody, and in anger calling somebody disabled. In these texts disabled people are often described, as unhappy people who have very high aspirations to change the state of their disability, to no longer have a disability. In other words, the negative moment of disability, the description of disability, as evil is emphasized here. In the texts of foreign authors, more than in those of Lithuanian authors, an attempt at care for a disabled person is shown. The semantics of presentation of a disability in the texts of Lithuanian and foreign authors is essentially the same; only a slight tendency to give a more negative, strange image of a disabled person in the texts of Lithuanian authors can be mentioned.

Analysis of the content of pictures

A visually impaired person (a child or an adult) is most often presented in the pictures. They show such a person together with other people. People with other kinds of disabilities are very rarely presented. A visually impaired person together with other people is more often presented in the Lithuanian language textbooks, but not in Ethics textbooks. It is interesting to note that the textbooks of Lithuanian authors present an image of an active child with visual disorders together with other people, while a visually impaired adult is passive.

Thus, the pictures in the textbooks, contrary to the texts, form a positive image of a disabled person. Other semantic categories of pictures were rarely found. Pictures with disabled people in them are most often found in primary school textbooks and in those for Year 5 and Year 6.

Data of a semi-standard survey of teachers

Data of a semi-standard survey of teachers was processed by using the content analysis method. Lexical-semantic units were grouped into semantic categories. Semantic categories show the informal, hidden components of the curriculum. Teachers, more than other groups, emphasized that a child with special needs is an equal member of the class and school community: *He is the same, as other class members. Usually these children are not very different from the others.* These answers and tendencies point out that integrated education of children with special needs is understood, as a value and practical reality. On the other hand, as soon as

reality of integration is considered, a great scepticism, pessimism and tendencies of segregation are strongly evident. In the 2nd and 3rd place of the rating scale of categories we can find such categories, as “to teach children with special needs is a teacher’s obligation and the children themselves are a burden” (teachers said: *it is a big burden for a teacher and a minimum profit for the child*), “the segregation of children with special needs in the common activities of the class and school” (teachers said: *the best we can do in this case is to leave such a child in peace in upper high school*); “the aim is to remove and segregate a child with special needs from the class “(teachers said: *we should teach them in special classes. Such children should feel better among others like themselves. It is necessary to teach them in special schools*). *The learning programmes are suitable to their abilities; While designing a learning programme I am planning what the pupil would be able to learn with all pupils and also the variants of other tasks; I am adapting textbooks and curriculum to their possibilities* – such are the thoughts of teachers. These propositions belong to the category “learning programmes, as an educational resource for pupils with special educational needs”. This category emphasizes the idea that one of the most important elements of a curriculum is well designed learning programmes, appropriate to the educational needs of children. An emotional-relational aspect of educating children with special needs is very strongly expressed in the structure of teachers’ attitudes. Categories of curriculum “Emotional disposition for working with SEN pupils and giving time to this” and “Close co-operation with colleagues, specialists, institutions of pedagogical-psychological service” show that it is important to regulate emotions and relations if we are looking for a positive aspect of quality of education: *I understood that it would be necessary to give more attention to him, as a human being, and to more accurately observe his progress*. Competencies of regulating emotions and relations became one of the preconditions of quality of education. Pedagogical pessimism is expressed in the structure of teachers’ attitudes. Teachers do not believe in educational abilities of pupils, depreciate them, do not see any inner resources of the child: *the work is usually futile. They are not able to say anything. They absolutely can’t work independently. They are not even able to copy from a book*. Such tendencies are more evident in the responses of teachers from basic schools in the country.

Data of a semi-standard survey of pupils

As well as teachers, pupils were questioned with the aim of finding out about their images of disability, their experience in communicating with disabled people and SEN children, and projections of their behaviour. In this research the images of pupils were treated, as the reflection and result of their curriculum (in pupil’s consciousness). In essence, pupils’ images about disability and communication experience are very positive. Children told about their experiences of friendship with disabled people (*I made friends with my neighbour; I call him; we often go for walks; it is interesting and fun to be with him*). They are projecting helpful and good behaviour with them (*I will not leave my friend in need; they need our help, because*

their life is not the best). From conversations with pupils it is clear that teachers play a special role in this case. Pupils give them the functions of mediation. They need explanation and advice, they observe teachers' behaviour and create their own models of action (*Quite often nobody talks about this. The teachers and the pupils are afraid to talk*).

Discussion

Information about disabled people and SEN children conveyed to students at school is essentially negative. Textbook texts are often discriminating. They don't develop students' tolerance and understanding of disabled people and SEN children. The problem is more serious because the writings of Lithuanian authors are more negatively stereotyped towards disabled people and SEN children, than those of foreign authors. In other words, it is obvious that the authors of Lithuanian textbooks are not sufficiently aware, not only about the problems of discrimination of disabled people, but the hidden (indirect, latent) educational meanings of the given information. In Lithuania today there are no regulations of latent learning content. It seems that the authors of the textbooks understand only one, i.e. direct, open educational side of the text, while not enough attention is paid to the indirect essence of the text. Because of this, negative information about disabled people can be contained in the texts. In the textbooks disabled people are presented, as behaving in a strange way, looking different, they are being ridiculed and on the whole bad features are ascribed to them.

Tolerance could and probably should be taught, as a separate school subject in Lithuania today (for example, a program for development of tolerance), but it is also obvious that tolerance towards different people and respect for human beings could be developed consistently through the existing school curriculum. In the Lithuanian language and literature textbooks and the Ethics textbooks, the disabled person is seldom presented, as an active and equal member of society. It is noted that more often such a person is excluded from joint activities and ascribed some negative features. In the pictures, which also send a message about disabled people, almost all of them are presented with visual disorders. In our society many people have visual disorders; glasses are not an element of exception, but more a generality. People wearing glasses are presented in standard social situations. People with other disorders are very rarely presented in the pictures. Thus, the pictures do not perform an educational function of tolerance, social and educational participation of disabled people. Research results evidently show that the authors of the textbooks do not realise enough the hidden content of texts in the textbooks. Tolerance of other people in the process of textbook writing should be organized and purposeful, and only sometimes left to the authors' will.

The role of the teacher, as an educational mediator between the meaning (semantics) of disability and the student (the receiver of the meaning) is also very important. In this case it is not only the teachers' professional competence in teaching a subject that is important, their attitudes towards disability, i.e. how teachers themselves treat

disability, special needs, how they evaluate such a person's (disabled and SEN children's) perspectives for social and educational participation, which are also of great importance. It is evident that if the teacher has a negative image of disability, the same information is given to the students. Even more so, this information will have a stronger negative character. If a teacher has a positive image of disability and SEN children, the negative information of the textbooks could be oriented in a more positive way. In this case, pupils will have a positive understanding about disabled and SEN children and their participation. The research has shown that teachers' attitudes towards disabled people are different. They recognize the integration of disabled and SEN children into mainstream schools. On the other hand, teachers' negative, discriminating attitudes are also very evident. The work with SEN children is viewed as an obligation, a burden; there is a wish to separate such children from the others; teachers have quite a lot of arguments for separation. Nevertheless, teachers are looking for resources, which could facilitate the integrated education of SEN children, such as co-operation with other specialists, individualized curricula, attention and time for the child.

Students construct their own discourse of disability. It was interesting to discover that students' discourse of disability and SEN children is different from the quite negative discourse of the textbooks and teachers. Students are construing a positive discourse of disability: they actualized the positive experience of communication, friendship, joint leisure activities with disabled people and SEN children; they notice educational possibilities for such children. According to the research results, the inadequacy between mediators of the meanings of disability (the content of textbooks and teachers' consciousness) and receivers (the content of students' consciousness) could be explained this way: students have construed their own opinion, their own subjective discourse not on the basis of official materials of meanings (textbook content and teachers' explanations), but on the basis of their own individual experience. An educational problem is that most often students' positive experience is not stimulated by official materials (textbook content) and authority (teachers' opinion).

On the basis of the research results, the authors have recommended to the Ministry of Education and Science and to other responsible institutions to design methodological recommendations for the authors of textbooks. Recommendations should mention exactly how (with what frequency, what kind of disorders, in what situations) disabled people should be presented in textbooks. We also recommend to carry out research into different experiences of European countries; their experience should be evaluated, their textbooks analyzed, the opinion of experts of social integration should be sought. Such investigation would help to prepare detailed and clear methodological recommendations, not only for the authors of textbooks, but also for teachers. They should receive recommendations how to explain and discuss the texts with students. Such methodological recommendations would help in forming a positive discourse of disability at school. This in turn would contribute to a better realization of the principles of "school for everybody", and towards achieving real inclusion of SEN children at school.

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