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Analysis of pictures in reading textbooks for 6-year-old children

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Introduction

"Teaching reading" normally implies all various methods of the process of teaching. This is obvious –perhaps too obvious. In the interpretation of teaching reading considered in this paper, it includes factors and processes different from those normally thought of in the acquisition of reading skills, and these factors and processes are usually obscured by focussing on the technical aspects of reading. This is not to discount the efforts that have been made to better understand what happens when one reads and how to use this knowledge in teaching. Many questions in this field are still open. As Cs. Czachesz (1998) summarises, two main trends of teaching reading have evolved. One is the method of synthesising, in which the teaching of individual letters and syllables comes first, and then their combinations lead the pupil to the ability to understand written words. The other method is the global approach, in which one skips the letter and syllable levels of teaching, and shows words together with small figures, so associating the concept and the written form in the child's mind. In Hungary, we have had serious debates about which method is more effective. It is not my aim in this paper to examine this question, but I need to indicate its importance. Good communication skills, including reading comprehension skills, are vital for understanding our social environment and finding our way about in it, so it is in the interest of society to have people who communicate well – this justifies the effort and debate on the teaching of reading.

However, children are engaged in other learning and socialisation processes, taking place in parallel to the processes of learning to read. One aspect of these processes is that children see and use figures found in textbooks. I suggest that since textbook pictures often reflect social interactions and socially valuable events, they deserve more attention.

Research

For teaching reading, various teaching materials are used, but one thing is always there: the textbook. Crawford (2000) described a detailed research framework for examining textbooks which includes the following levels: a) the context of influence, b) the context of text production and c) the context of practice. These levels represent the role of interest groups at political level, the authors, and the teachers etc. in the creation and application of textbooks. Crawford's example is, however, about history textbooks, so the main issue there is how textbooks re-create history and how they present it to the children. But a similar approach can be used with reading textbooks, in which case one might ask the following questions:

1. What texts and pictures do the reading textbooks use?
2. Are they related to real world events, characters, roles, conflicts, scenes etc.?
3. If so, how is the world re-created and presented to the children?

It is my hypothesis that the pictures used in reading textbook reflect certain values that may contribute to children's socialisation, and I want to examine in more detail what the pictures represent: what elements of the culture, what values, what behavioural patterns, what 'picture' of the world in general. As Bábosik (1999) says, there are two ways in

which we can show the world to children. One way is the 'harmony model' suggesting that the children should be protected from any impression which may be thought harmful to them - we should only present them with the pleasant side of reality. The other way is the 'conflict model' which says that children also need to know about the conflicts of our world. How do reading textbooks treat this educational problem?

The methodology for this research includes a special version of content analysis. Pictures from reading textbooks are analysed according to Bábosik's categories of 'constructive conduct'. Bábosik says the aim of education is to create a constructive conduct of life in the individual, meaning that after the educational impacts of parents and the teachers, children will participate in social progress and the development of the self. Constructive conduct includes a number of behavioural patterns or activities, as follows:

- Moral activities: work, protection of values, charity (helping others), discipline
- Self-development activities: learning (cultural activities), aesthetic activities, health protection.

In addition to these, two other aspects are examined. First, pictures showing classrooms or educational situations are analysed. Second, pictures representing a family are inspected. In both cases the focus will be on the activities and the relations between the people depicted.

For the analysis, the following books have been chosen. All except the first are Hungarian.

Book A: Букварь, Moscow, 1961 (Soviet Union)
Book B: Olvasókönyv [Reading Book], Budapest, 1963
Book C: Olvasni tanulok [I learn reading], Budapest, 1978
Book D: Ábécés olvasókönyv [ABC Reading Book], Budapest, 2000
Book E: Mesék az ABC-házból [Tales from the ABC house], Szeged, 1995
Book F: Betűfaló [Letter-eater], Celldömölk, 2001.

(Need to get a transliteration from Akos! --- Why? Leave as they are?)

The first three textbooks were published in the pre-1990 period, which was an era with a completely different social environment to that of the present. One would expect that analysis would reveal differences, that is, certain values or approaches to society might be depicted in different ways.

In the research, pictures that either represent social interactions or show individuals performing socially valuable actions are first identified, and these are then categorised according to Bábosik's system. Finally the number of pictures placed under the different group headings are counted.

Results[*]

In Book A, 44 pictures were found in which social interactions or activities described in Bábosik's list are shown. The majority represent moral activities. There are twelve pictures showing various scenes of work, seven showing people or children helping each other, five are about protecting values (trees in the park, benches in a classroom etc.) and four about discipline. As to the self-development activities, eleven pictures show learning

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*Some pictures illustrating this part of the paper can be seen at www.nexus.hu/cice

or other cultural activities (e.g. singing in a choir), six show aesthetic activities and two represent health protection. All in all in this book, work and learning take a determining role in the illustrations.

Book B includes 66 pictures that fulfil the requirements of the research. The vast majority represent moral values: fifteen show work, thirteen show protection of values, thirteen helping and ten represent discipline. The number of the pictures that can be classified as showing self-development activities is much lower - fifteen (learning and cultural activities = seven, aesthetic = four, health protection = four).

There is a drastic drop in the number of such pictures in book C. Although all categories are represented, the highest number was four, which belongs to the "charity activities". In Book C there are no pictures about health protection and only one shows discipline.

Book D contains even fewer pictures that can be analysed this way. Compared with Book B there are many more icon-like small pictures (although both books follow the "global" method of teaching reading), whilst a much smaller number of pictures show direct interactions of people. In Book E virtually none of the pictures do this - most are funny drawings of animals illustrating poems for children. Similarly in Book F, drawings and photographs of animals predominate: some pictures show children playing together (e.g. making a snowman), but they are comparatively few. However in Book F the relatively high number of photographs and drawings which show nature (flowers, trees, animals etc.) may contribute to taking the children closer to nature, that is, teaching and talking about it may lead to the children's better relations with it, so "protection of values" in the system above is implied.

The following statements can be made with regard to the second part of the research. Books A and B contain some typical classroom situations: a teacher or a pupil is at the blackboard, while the other pupils are looking at them and apparently listening. These figures represent fairly well the behavioural patterns expected from children in school. A drawing in book C also shows a teacher with her pupils, but the children are performing different activities (though it should be noted that the aim of this picture was to illustrate different activities like reading, sitting, drinking, building). What is overt in this picture is that the teacher is among her pupils even if not dealing with the children; a sense of 'togetherness' is implied. Book D also contains a picture of a classroom situation. A teacher is standing in front of a blackboard, talking about writing, but some of the pupils are not interested in the lesson. One is looking out of the window, while others are talking to each other. In Books A, B and C, pictures very similar to each other are placed at the beginning (page 3 or 5) of the book: a schoolyard can be seen where children are gathering to enter the school, apparently for the first time. While the pictures in Books A and B show children wearing uniforms and walking in a disciplined way, the picture in Book C shows them playing, running, or saying good-bye to their parents – a more natural setting than Books A and B.

Pictures of families are found in Books A, B, C and D. In Book A, four pictures show typical family events: a mother reads tales to her children, a grandmother reads from a book to her grandchildren – these two in a 'still life' style – parents having breakfast with their child, and a peaceful evening scene. All of these suggest a feeling of togetherness based on the common activities shown. Book A has also some pictures which instead of a 'still life' focus on activities in which people are interacting with each other (talking, helping each other etc.). Book C contains three pictures of families. In one the family

members sit around a table with a TV set in the background; in a second there is an artificially arranged setting, as if the picture was a keepsake. The third shows family members watching TV. Interestingly enough, the only family picture found in Book D is composed in a different way – family members are isolated and are dealing with completely different things, suggesting that they take no notice of each other. Book E contains one keepsake-style family picture, while Book F includes none of this kind.

Summary

The pictures in the reading textbooks for 6-year-old children examined reflect certain elements of real life and thus may contribute to the socialisation of the children who use them. The totality of the pictures in each book represents a virtual world which has its own values and behavioural patterns. Generally speaking, the older textbooks reflect a more coherent virtual world, while the newer ones have pictures with less focus on the conditions set up for the present research. Not only is the number of pictures showing constructive behavioural forms less but what the pictures themselves show is different in quality. Fewer real-life settings are shown and there are more icon-like, small, separated figures, usually without social interactions. The newer books seem to reflect the world in a more realistic way, but one might have reservations in some cases, e.g. with showing children a picture of a classroom where children are dealing with something different from what they are supposed to be doing.

The older books focus more on the values of constructive conduct, and this is probably related to the period of their publication, when a strong ideological influence determined the aims and methods of teaching. The upbringing of a 'socialist type of man' and a 'communist education' highlighted some values that are acceptable or even desirable independently from the only recognised and taught worldview of those days. One might ask then why these values are not so well represented in today's textbooks. To answer this question, further research is required. It is hypothesised that their role is not determining but they can certainly reinforce elements of children's socialisation – but more investigation would be needed to examine how, and to what extent, these pictures have an influence on children's thinking.

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