



Creating an image of people with disabilities in formal education. Analysis of the textbooks used in the chosen European countries

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Abstract

Creating an image of people with disabilities in formal education is an important element of educating young people into a full and unbiased understanding of the needs and reality of these people. Consequently, it is an element of creating a social climate around people with disabilities and influencing state policy in this area. Therefore, I find it extremely important to analyse and compare ideas worked out in different countries in order to correctly assess our own situation and find inspiring and applicable solutions. In the text, I focused on one component of the system of formal education, i.e. selected textbooks used in Poland and Sweden in which I highlighted their disability-related content. The starting point for the analysis was the definition of disability and explanation of the social identity theory which provided the framework for the research questions. The presented analysis and comparison of the chosen teaching material, fragmentary as it, might form the basis for further investigation in this area.

Key words: addressing disability, stereotypes, English textbooks, comparative education

1. INTRODUCTION

Formal education is a broad term that comprises different forms of institutionalized training based on a curricula with objectives defined by educational authorities. An inevitable part of formal education is textbooks whose content, derived from the curricula, mirrors values, norms and attitudes present and dominating in a given society. Thus, textbooks, often in an indirect way,

can perpetuate stereotypes and influence the social perception of chosen groups either by the way they are presented or by omitting them at all (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1990, p. 60-64; Chomczyńska-Rubacha, Pankowska, 2011, p. 19-20; Janowski, 1989, p. 66-82; Meighan, 1993, p. 75-76). The role of textbooks in shaping collective awareness, including the attitude towards people with disabilities, cannot be underestimated as they authorize given knowledge, draw attention to some phenomena and fail to sensitize us to others (Hardin, Preston, 2001, p. 45).

An analysis of numerous textbooks for various subjects and school levels carried out in Poland over the last few years has revealed that they do not represent social diversity and often perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices, also in relation to people with disabilities. The main objections given to textbooks concern misrepresentations of people with disabilities and, in the case of their appearance, showing them in the context of their disability, usually as people needing care and protection (Pawłęga, Chustecka, 2011, p. 138-144; Jonczy-Adamska 2011, p. 203-206).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework for this paper is based on two assumptions. Firstly, the guideline for the paper is the definition of disability provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) that states that “Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. (...) Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers” (World Health Organization, 2014). In this model of disability, rooted in bio-psycho-social paradigm, the society is perceived as the essential power in creating favourable conditions for people with disabilities. In such a model, it is particularly important to equip the younger generation with relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes towards people with disabilities. It is only in this way will they be able and willing to change their environment into a place where people with disabilities will meet social acceptance that will also result in creating relevant facilities for them. Thus, in the context of education, it is necessary to create the a positive image of people with disabilities, e.g. by removing all content that carry stereotypical views.

Another element of this framework is connected with the social identity theory based on the way people identify their social belonging in the process of creating social categorization. Within this theory, I have found the model of personalization or de-categorization particularly relevant in the analysis of the teaching material. In this model, it is crucial to perceive the representative of the

stereotyped groups as an individual, not just a member of a social category. In the case of disability, it means seeing not only disability-related features but the whole person, with their personal traits, interests, skills, integrated with the social group other than labelled “people with disabilities.” This model can be also used by taking the perspective of the representative of the group by empathizing with situation of the discriminated person (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2013, p. 66-67; Nelson, 2003, p. 315-316).

When preparing my research questions, I also relied on the tips for evaluating books that address disability and particularly the things that should be **avoided** when dealing with the topic:

- Cast people with disabilities as victims and evoke pity, sorrow or sentimentality toward them.
- Include characters with disabilities only in tokenistic ways, or as objects of curiosity, rather than as developed characters with distinct lives and personalities.
- Define characters’ personalities by their disabilities and portray them as sad, incomplete, bitter, or angry in disproportionate ways (rather than as distinctive individuals with the full human range of character traits).
- Characterize people with disabilities in stereotypically positive ways that compensate for their “deficiency,” such as having unusual emotional or physical characteristics, special spiritual or moral insights, superior intellectual abilities or wisdom, or unnaturally inspirational qualities.
- Represent the achievements or ordinary actions of people with disabilities as heroic.
- Never show people with disabilities as independent, but rather depict them as overly helpless and in need of excessive support and assistance from people without disabilities in order to lead a functional life.
- Portray people with disabilities as overly preoccupied with their conditions and consumed with the hope of recovery or cure.
- Represent people with disabilities or the disabilities themselves as shameful, unattractive, or something to be hidden.
- Utilize condescending or pejorative language (e.g., special, crazy, sick, slow, cripple, dumb, retarded, idiot).
- Only show people with disabilities in passive roles and never show them in active or leadership positions.
- Show people with disabilities only in “special” settings and programs, and never show them participating in activities considered typical for their age group.

- Dwell on what people with disabilities *can't* do rather than what they *can* do.
- Represent disabilities as deficiencies rather than differences.
- Present disabilities as problems only for the people who have them and not for the broader society (i.e. prejudice, discrimination, inequity, access).
- Depict adolescent and adult people with disabilities as asexual and without the same emotional or sexual needs and attachments as other people their age.
- Portray allies to people with disabilities as inspirations or “saints” for helping them, or as especially wonderful simply for simply being their friends (*Anti-Defamation League, 2005*).

Taking into account the WHO definition of a disability and the social identity theory, I focused my textbooks analysis on detecting whether the textbooks perpetuate the stereotypes and reinforce social categorization or counteract them by creating an appropriate image of a person with a disability. Thus, the main questions applied in investigating the contents of the textbooks were as follows:

- Are the people with disabilities present in the texts and visual material?
- Are they presented in a stereotypical way (as dependent, less happy, passive, helpless)?
- Do people with disabilities appear in ordinary life or mainly in the context of care?
- Do we know their interests, personality and skills?
- Are they presented as heroes, victims or other characters as well?
- Do the textbooks teach to react to discrimination?
- Do they allow students to face their own stereotypes?
- Are there different types of disability presented?
- How are they divided according to gender and who, in this respect is a caretaker?

For my analysis, I have chosen English textbooks used in Sweden and in Poland and belonging to the most popular series in both countries.. The choice was on one hand determined by their linguistic availability. On the other hand, it was equally as important that in case of Swedish textbooks, they were written mainly by Swedish authors who, either consciously or unconsciously, transmit the set of values rooted in the culture they come from. In case of textbooks used in Poland, they were written and consulted by both English and Polish authors. Last but not least, the choice of textbooks for English resulted from universality of teaching English in both Sweden and Poland.

The Swedish textbooks employed in the analysis belong to the series *What's up*, written by Jorgen Gustafsson, Eva Osterberg and Andy Cowle, published by Bonnier Utbildning AB (the

company has belonged to Sanoma Utbildning since 2011). The material is intended for the last three grades of the Swedish comprehensive school (students aged 13-16). Thus, this level is comparable with the Polish last two grades of junior secondary school and the first grade of senior secondary school. Bearing this in mind and relying on my own experience as an English teacher and consulting other in-service teachers, I chose a sample of relevant textbooks used in Polish schools. The bibliography listed below contains the details of the analysed teaching material. Applying the method of content analysis, I firstly identified the texts and images related to the main topic of the research which were next subjected to further analysis.

3. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE TEXTBOOKS

In the analysed books, I followed the presence of people with disabilities understood in its most common sense, as mental or physical impairment, but I also focused on less obvious examples such as dyslexia or excessive weight.

As for the first research question (Are the people with disabilities present in the texts and visual material?), it should be concluded that the common feature of both Swedish and Polish textbooks is absence of people with disabilities on the pages of the teaching materials. As David Sadker notices, “the most fundamental and oldest form of bias in instructional materials is the complete or relative exclusion of a group” (Sadker, n.d.).

Another characteristic of the teaching material from the two countries is the general message they carry concerning personal appearance and health. This message involves promoting the cult of body, sport, fitness, physical activity with a healthy, slim, beautifully dressed and cared for average teenagers without any disabilities and health problems. This way, textbooks authorize the image of society with their “typical”, “desirable” and “acceptable” individuals among whom people with disabilities hardly ever appear.

3.1. POLISH TEXTBOOKS

Out of the six analysed textbooks, disability is addressed in three of them: *My matura success. Pre-Intermediate. Students' Book*, *Egzamin gimnazjalny z języka angielskiego. Podręcznik i repetytorium z testami* and *New Exam Connections Pre-Intermediate 3. Workbook*. In the first of the books mentioned above, *My matura success ...*, there is a text titled *Hidden talents* devoted to famous people who had dyslexia and who sometimes had a hard time, especially at school. Nevertheless, they were intelligent and creative in different areas as the examples of Agatha Christie, Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Ludwig van Beethoven, John Lennon, Thomas Edison show. The comment accompanying the text reads: “Of course, that doesn't mean that everybody with dyslexia is a genius, but it

shows that sometimes people can be a lot more intelligent than they seem” (McKinlay et al., 2012, p. 29). Although students can find useful information in the text on dyslexia and its whole message is positive, it also presents people with disabilities as unnaturally gifted, thus far from an average person. In the same publication, we find a photograph of a woman in a wheelchair, dancing with a healthy male partner. Next to the picture a small text appears that states: (...) “I saw a video on YouTube. It showed a couple dancing. The woman was on a wheelchair but they were dancing beautifully and really enjoying themselves! I was amazed. It was totally inspiring!” (...) (McKinlay et al., 2012, p. 40). It is worth noticing that the word “but” in this context may be interpreted as the expression of a surprise or disbelief and thus carrying a discriminatory attitude. Later on, in the text entitled *A new life* we find a story of boy who was overweight, because got depressed after his parents’ divorce, but he started a diet and now “he feels much happier, fitter and is more energetic” (McKinlay et al., 2012, p. 125). Optimistic as it is, the story seems a bit simplistic. In another of the analyzed books, *Egzamin gimnazjalny z języka angielskiego. Podręcznik i repetytorium z testami*, there are only a few separate words related to disability. They are located in the chapter “Health” and represented by “wheelchair”, “deaf”, “overweight” and “disabled” (Fricker et al., 2008, p. 110-115, p. 195). The last book that does not contain any references to disability is *New Exam Connections. Pre-Intermediate 3. Workbook*. In the text entitled *Extraordinary people* there are three stories about people who lived with serious disabilities or illness: Stephen Wiltshire – an autistic child who had excellent talent (he drew incredibly accurate and realistic pictures’ of what he saw), Evelyn Glennie – the famous percussionist who was almost deaf and Ben Underwood – a person suffering from rare form of eye cancer who lived without eyes, but who learnt to do everything his peers were doing and who was 'extraordinary in every way’ (Garside, Spencer-Kępczyńska, 2011, p. 10).

Generally, out of the eleven people who lived with disabilities or illnesses distinguished in the textbooks, ten were somehow special and extraordinary: six famous people described in the text on dyslexia, one dancer, and three people depicted in the last text. Although the texts do challenge the stereotype of a person with disabilities as dependent, passive and helpless, the students hardly have any chance to see them in everyday context. Their image is unnaturally positive and heroic. Moreover, students cannot get acquainted with different types of disabilities or related discrimination, let alone ways of preventing unfair treatment.

3.2. SWEDISH TEXTBOOKS

References to people with disabilities can be found in four out of five of the analyzed textbooks: *What’s up. Textbook 8*, *What’s up. Workbook 8*, *What’s up. Textbook 9*, *What’s up. Workbook 9*. The first relevant text, from *What’s up. Textbook 8*, is entitled *The year I loved him best* and its narrator – Lisa is

the cognitively disabled boy's (Michael) sister. Michael is described as sensitive, gifted, loving person and the story is focused on the process of Lisa's transformation from being ashamed of her brother to accepting his disability and appreciating his artistic gift and being proud of him. An additional value of the text is its presentation, in a very realistic way, the unfriendly and cruel reactions of the outside world towards Michael's disability (McIntyre, 2006, p. 35-36). In another story, the narrator is a boy with Asperger syndrome and readers get to know the world he lives in from his perspective (Haddon, 2006, p. 37-39). The workbook accompanying the textbook contains references to the material described above. In the same textbook we also have images of people who have recovered from their illnesses and were extremely successful in sport. It is *Wilma Rudolph – The Black Pearl*, about a runner who, as a child, had to overcome serious illness and whose words are quoted in the text: "The most important thing is to be yourself and have confidence in yourself" (Gustafsson, Osterberg & Cowle, 2006a, p. 62). Another text, *Lance Armstrong – Mr Tour de France*, tells the story of a famous cyclist (Gustafsson, Osterberg & Cowle, 2006a, p. 63). In part nine of the same series, both in the textbook and workbook, there is a story of a successful pianist who was born blind and mentally handicapped. The text, titled *A Genius – in spite of all*, describes all the limitations and great talents of the pianist and bears the message of hope even if prospects are unpromising in the beginning (Gustafsson, Osterberg & Cowle, 2007a, p. 14-15; Gustafsson, Osterberg & Cowle, 2007b, p. 19-20).

In the Swedish series, there is one more text that has transformative potential and can be indirectly related to disability. The author of *Noughts and Crosses* presents a world consisting of first- and second class citizens. The story can illustrate all kinds of social exclusion, mechanisms of stereotyping, maintaining prejudices and discrimination, and it gives space for students to discuss and reflect on the nature of intolerance (Blackman, 2007, p. 44-46).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis was based on a sample of teaching materials used in Poland and Sweden and fragmentary as it is, it allowed me to draw some conclusions in response to the research questions:

- in the textbooks used in the two countries, images of people with disabilities appear only exceptionally; it can be said the textbooks both reflect and contribute to relative absence of such people in the society
- in the textbooks used in Poland, there is a visible overrepresentation of people with disabilities who are pictured as heroes. While such an image can indeed serve as a counterbalance to the functioning stereotypes as it emphasize activity, independence

and talents of people with disabilities, it refers to a limited number of people and cannot be used as an example to follow for the average person

- the authors of the Swedish textbooks introduce characters – people with disabilities – who are ordinary and more credible from the educational point of view, because teenagers can easily identify with them
- both in the textbooks used in Sweden and in Poland there is severe lack of images of people with disabilities presented in everyday situations, as individuals integrated in society and as a part of a given socio-cultural environment. Thus, readers cannot see such people going to school, travelling, shopping, working or dating. They are never portrayed as characters in love stories, sides of arguments or daily conversations. They usually shown as separate individuals living *next to*, not *in* the social milieu
- in the chosen textbooks, people with disabilities (cognitively disabled, blind and handicapped, suffering from Asperger syndrome) are also shown as gifted, sensitive, compassionate and caring people. In this way, students may learn to perceive handicapped people not only through the prism of their disability or as mere beneficiaries of somebody's help and mercy, but as ones who actively create reality, by using their strength and determination
- gendered analysis of the textbooks reveals some striking features presented both in the material from Poland and Sweden. In Polish textbooks nine out of eleven characters with disabilities are men or boys. Considering that, as I have mentioned above, they are presented as heroes who overcame difficulties, such an approach also suggests that successes have male background regardless of health status. In Swedish teaching materials, people with disabilities are also mainly boys or men and it is them who show determination, power and talents. On the other hand, the female characters, a grandmother, a mother or a sister, are indicated in the text in the context of taking care of a person with disability. This is well visible in the quoted story about a cognitively disabled boy. The father, although he obviously exists, is not mentioned individually, thus we may guess that he is present by the use of the expression “parents”, (“parents became worried”, “Heart-broken, they sent him to private institution”), but only the mother is individualized by what she says or does. It is mother who was afraid whether another child would be disabled too: “My mother held breath for a year, wondering if I would be like Michael”. She is also the one who seems responsible for a cognitively disabled son, which might be concluded from her daughter's utterances: “I decided to be patient for Mom's sake”, “I helped her fix up

the guest room for Michael”, “Mother gave me a letter he had written” (McIntyre, 2006, p. 35-36). Also, characters from the textbooks used in Poland are looked after either by a single mother or by a grandmother

- generally, the authors of the textbooks insufficiently develop the topics connected with reacting to discrimination or facing students’ own stereotypes. As for the last research question, as the presence of people with disabilities is so limited, it cannot be surprising there are only a few types of disability represented.

To sum up, referring to the social identity theory, the textbooks only partly contribute to de-categorization of people with disabilities, i.e. to their perception as the members of a common group or community. The authors of the teaching material put some efforts to present people with disability as successful, creative and independent people. However, with such underrepresentation of disability-related topics in the books, the students are unable to get to know various forms of disability, symptoms of discrimination or ways of combating it. What is more, as people with disabilities are usually shown as separate cases and not as integral part of a peer group, it can be difficult for young learners to imagine them as community members. Finally, students are also rarely required to face the perspective of a person with a disability and such an approach would definitely contribute to better understanding the specificity of disability.

I hope that presented analysis, focused on a little excerpt of educational material, will be inspirational both for further research in this area and for the authors of the textbooks.

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