POLITICAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH EDUCATIONAL MEDIA:
A RECEPTION STUDY OF A NINTH GRADE CIVICS TEXTBOOK

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ABSTRACT. This study is a part of a cycle of research, which aims to estimate the role of school textbooks in political socialization by comparing textbook discourses and pupils’ discourses. Content analysis was used to find out relative frequencies of civic and political behaviors depicted in Estonian civics textbooks for Grade 4 and Grade 9. General ideology of the textbooks was examined qualitatively. Ninth-graders of two comprehensive schools wrote an essay on civic participation after they had gone through relevant parts of their civics textbook. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pupils whose essays represented different viewpoints. The study revealed that the textbooks emphasize political action (various forms of government) performed by state institutions; the principal civic behaviors are voting, and obeying laws and rules. The pupils’ discourse resembles the textbooks discourse in some respects: most of the ninth-graders accept the role of voter and obedient citizen. The pupils, however, lay more emphasis on some active civic behaviors (peaceful protest, charity, and environment protection) than their textbook does; moreover, they express more critical views on the society. The textbook serves as an additional source of political knowledge for most of the pupils; other agents of political socialization (primarily the media and the family) and immediate experiences play more important role in the formation of pupils’ political views and attitudes.

KEY WORDS: political communication, educational media, reception analysis, discourse, political socialization

Introduction

One of the common problems faced by new as well as established democracies all over the world is political apathy and low levels of participation among the young generation. Young people usually show little interest in social-political topics; also, casting a ballot is a more common among older people (see, e.g., Taru 1997). The ‘life-cycle effects’ theory (Conway 1991) suggests that people tend to become politically more aware and active when they grow older, at least, in the United States of America. In the case of disrupted democracies such as Estonia, the situation is, however, more critical: the prospects of an evolving civic nation and participatory democracy in those
societies are not very promising, when a large part of the young generation displays passivity and the lack of interest in any political matters.

The role of civic education curricula and textbooks is to prepare pupils for participation in a civic society. Civics textbooks should teach the principles of *critical citizenship* (Puolimatka 1995; Schwoch, White & Reilly 1992) and set models for active civic and political participation. This means that instead of a detailed coverage of particular topics such as ‘The State’, ‘The Law’, ‘The Government’, etc., the emphasis of civic education should be on teaching skills needed for intelligent choice-making, problem-solving, and critical thinking, reading and writing. Moreover, civic education should encourage pupils to stand up for their rights and engage in various forms of civic and political action (e.g., peaceful protest, writing a letter to the editor, joining a political party, etc.).

In this respect, the results of previous research on civics textbooks are not very favorable. The problem was studied intensively in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. The textbooks from these decades depicted citizens as passive, harmonious, and accepting (see Wade & Everett 1994: 308). For instance, in a study of four elementary social studies texts, Jean Anyon (1978) noted that the principal civic action discussed was voting, and that the texts promoted passive compliance and ‘safe’ political behaviors. Almost twenty years later, Rahima Wade and Susan Everett (1994) examined four third grade social studies textbooks. After comparing the findings with earlier studies they reported two encouraging differences: first, the textbooks depict civic participation as a variety of political and social acts, and second, pupils are encouraged to see themselves as active participants in their communities now, rather than just as adults in the future. Nevertheless, the textbooks tend to support the status quo in the society.

This study is a part of a wider *cycle of research* (Taxel 1989) which aims to estimate the role of school textbooks in political socialization, especially in promoting an active and critical citizenship. More concretely, the aim of the research is to explore and understand the dynamic interaction between teenagers and civic education textbooks in the process of learning. The study represents a form of reception analysis, that is, a comparative analysis of textbook discourses and pupils’ discourses (cf. Jensen 1991:
The analysis of textbook discourse comprises two methods. First, we used content analysis to find out the relative frequency of different civic and political activities depicted in a ninth grade civic education textbook, which is most widely used in Estonian as well as Russian schools in Estonia. A fourth grade civics textbook served as the material for comparison. In addition, I used qualitative text analysis to explore the general ideology of the textbooks. The pupils’ discourse consists of the essays by and interviews with a sample of the ninth-graders of an Estonian and a Russian school in Tartu: fifty-eight pupils (33 in the Estonian and 25 in the Russian school who made up 42% of the pupils in the selected classes) wrote an essay on civic participation after they had gone through the relevant parts of their civics textbook. We conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve pupils whose essays represented different viewpoints.

**Textbooks or law books?**

The content analysis revealed that the two civics textbooks resemble each other as well as the American textbooks from the 1960s and 1970s in a number of aspects. In terms of coverage, the priority is given to various forms of *government* performed by state institutions (see Figure 1). The principal civic activities are taking part in *elections* (mainly voting) in the ninth grade textbook, and *obeying laws and rules* in the fourth grade textbook. Both civic activities are passive and ‘safe’ in Anyon’s terms, similarly to *enjoying human rights*, which ranks the fourth and the third in the textbooks, respectively, and *patriotic acts* such as hoisting the national flag, which are fairly relevant in the fourth grade textbook. *Improving society* in general terms is somewhat ambivalent: in the ninth grade textbook this activity is political rather than civic (two thirds of the performers are state institutions or politicians); in the fourth grade textbook it is vice versa.

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1 The unit of measurement was one civic or political activity mentioned or described within a paragraph or its equivalent (a question, an exercise, a bulleted list, etc.). The analysis covered all verbal texts in the textbooks (including tables, diagrams, etc.). The number of units coded in the ninth grade and the fourth grade textbook was 706 and 100, respectively. The categories comprised the type of activity, the measure of importance (salience), contextual evaluation, and the type, age, ethnicity, and gender of the actor(s) performing the activity. Students of Tartu Teacher Training College participated as coders. The coefficient of inter-coder reliability was .79.

2 Some marginal activities (the relative frequency of which was less than 1.2 percent, and which did not occur elsewhere (in the other textbook or in the pupils’ essays) are not represented on the figure.
A positive finding to be reported is the representation of important civic activities such as expressing one’s point of view (e.g., writing a letter to the editor), lobbying (interest and pressure group activities), educating oneself as a citizen (learning about social problems, parties, etc.; critical reading of media), participating in civic society (nongovernmental organizations, popular movements), peaceful protest (demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, etc.), and environment protection in both textbooks. The ninth grade textbook contains some explicit positive evaluations of participating in civic society and lobbying; also, interest and pressure group activities are relatively salient (quite often in bold shrift, in captions, etc.) in that textbook. Active civic behaviors are, however, oddly underrepresented compared with some passive, obedient behaviors, and political-administrative activities.

The structure of the represented activities determines the prevailing type of actors: in both textbooks it is institutions (52% and 40% of all actors in the ninth grade and the fourth grade textbook, respectively). The rest of the actors are groups such as people, the electorate, etc. (19% and 28%, respectively), politicians (17% and 4%, respectively), and ordinary citizens (11% and 28%, respectively). The latter (actors such as ‘an individual’, ‘everyone’, ‘you’, etc. who presumably serve as main role models for pupils) are most frequently depicted just as passive, obedient subjects (29% and 44% of the ordinary citizens obey laws and rules or enjoy human rights in the ninth grade and the fourth grade textbook, respectively).

The age, ethnicity and gender of actors are in most of the cases not explicit. In the cases where age can be defined, most of the actors are children. An encouraging finding is that youngsters are fairly often depicted in active roles, e.g., educating oneself as a citizen (26% of the child actors in the textbooks), or expressing one’s point of view (22%). Obeying laws and rules is considered important, too (17% of the children).

The predominant role model set for the readers of these textbooks is, however, that of a passive citizen (or voter) obedient to the rule of laws and institutions. The textbooks seldom comment on the dominant social order and tend to support the status quo by simply describing it. The texts present few opportunities for critical reflection, for
gaining insight into social problems, or for the discussion of controversial issues. These findings harmonize with the opinion expressed by a number of Estonian civic education teachers in a pilot questionnaire survey in 1999 (Kalmus & Vihalemm 2000): the civics textbooks are too dogmatic, politicized or ideological (‘depicting the Estonian society in too rosy colors’) while problems and conflicts are missing from the textbooks.

**Obedient but critical citizens-to-be**

The pupils’ discourse\(^3\) resembles that of the textbooks in some respects (see Figure 1\(^4\)). Most of the ninth-graders accept the role of a voter and an obedient citizen promoted by the textbooks: taking part in elections was envisioned as a potential activity by 55% of the pupils and made up 16% of all activities mentioned in the essays; the corresponding figures for obeying laws and rules were 52% and 12%. It is quite encouraging that many pupils (41%) see themselves performing various acts of government in the future. Most of the statements regarding these activities are, however, in the form of conditional clauses (‘If I was the President / a member of parliament / an important person…’); some pupils add that it is probably never possible (‘If I worked, for instance, in the parliament, though I know that I will not reach there, neither do I want it so much…’).

In pupils’ discourse, some active civic behaviors are more frequent than in the textbooks: peaceful protest is seen as a potential civic activity by 31% of the pupils (making up 7% of the activities); charity and environmental protection occur in 29% and 21% of the essays, respectively. A positive sign is that quite many pupils will probably engage in some essential civic activities by expressing one’s point of view (19% of the pupils) or participating in civic society (12%).

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\(^3\) The essay topic was ‘How can I as a citizen-to-be participate in the life of society?’ I used principles of grounded theory (Strauss 1987) for the analysis of essays and interviews: initial categories of civic participation, social criticism, etc. emerged from the very language of pupils. During the next phases of coding, I classified the original concepts into broader categories, many of which were overlapping with the categories of political and civic activities used in the content analysis of textbooks. This enabled a comparison of the textbook discourse and the pupils’ discourse.

\(^4\) Figure 1 displays the distribution of 243 activities coded in the essays. A number of pupils considered acquiring education and economic activities as forms of participation in the life of society. The principles of grounded theory demand that these emergent categories were taken into account irrespective of the fact that such activities were not included in the operational definition of political and civic activities in the content analysis of textbooks. Some marginal activities in the pupils’ discourse (the relative frequency of which was less than one percent, and which did not make up a separate category in the content analysis) are not represented on the figure.
Another interesting finding is the considerable social criticism in the pupils’ discourse: most of the pupils (55% in the Estonian and 60% in the Russian school) expressed critical views on the society without being asked to do so. Estonian and Russian pupils share some points of criticism: unemployment, low salaries of the common people, and inequality and social injustice. Estonians are also concerned about poverty, homelessness and beggars, high taxes, environmental problems, and the large salaries of politicians. Russian-speaking pupils emphasize ethnic problems, inconveniences with visas and closed frontiers, and low social benefits. Most of these problems are never mentioned in the civics textbooks.

A modest role of textbooks

Interviews with pupils revealed that the civic education textbook plays some role in informing the readers about possibilities for civic participation: most of the pupils (11 out of 12) mentioned the textbook as a source of that kind of knowledge. Not one of the pupils, however, named the textbook as the primary source of information: in most of the cases the textbook was brought up as the second, the third, or the fourth source after the media, the school (civics lessons), or the parents. In fact, most of the pupils mentioned the civics textbook only in response to the interviewer’s question ‘Have you read about civic participation in any textbook?’

The role of the textbook in forming the pupils’ ideas and attitudes is more modest: only two pupils out of twelve declared that they had obtained some ideas expressed in the essay from the civics textbook. Sources mentioned more often were personal thoughts and experiences (5 pupils), the media (3), and the grandparents or parents (3). The importance of personal experiences and participation reveals itself in a striking difference between Estonian and Russian pupils: in the essays, 45% of Estonians vs. a mere 12% of Russians (the Chi-square value being significant at $a < .01$ level) stated their readiness to take part in a peaceful protest. The difference can be explained by the fact that a couple of days prior to writing these essays many Estonian pupils actually participated in a protest against a governmental plan to stop running a number of passenger trains and to raise the prices of bus tickets. Russian pupils had written their essays before those events took place.
We can conclude that for most of the pupils, the civics textbook serves as an additional source of political knowledge. In the construction of pupils’ political views and values, other agents of political socialization (primarily the media and the family) and immediate experience play a more important role. This, however, does not imply that textbooks should neither contain more examples of active civic participation, nor offer more possibilities for critical thinking.

References:


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Figure 1. Relative frequencies of political and civic activities in the textbooks and the pupils’ essays