Teachers' attitudes towards disability representation in textbooks: A comparative study in Italy, Brazil and USA

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Abstract

This paper examines primary teachers' attitudes towards the representation of disabilities and minorities within the school textbook. The study involved a sample of Italian, American and Brazilian teachers and utilized a questionnaire designed for the current research. Findings showed that most teachers assigned a substantial didactic role to the textbook, yet not an educational one. Teachers are generally aware of the lack of representation related to disability and minorities and showed a positive attitude towards the introduction of a more inclusive representation. Despite this they do not adapt learning materials to include disability and minorities. Findings revealed the importance of representation within the school textbook to assist teachers in the inclusion of social groups which are underrepresented in classroom discourse.

Keywords: Inclusion, Disability, Teachers, Representation.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the school textbook and its sociocultural aspects for the visibility of all the students

School textbooks and materials are a fundamental educational-didactic tool used by teachers for their students' learning: didactic materials are not mere vehicles of notions but should be considered a social construct (Crawford, 2004), a social tool (Stray, 2006) in which each student should recognize themselves (Human Science Research Council of South Africa, 2005).

The messages relating to cultural and social representation and the didactic content, therefore, play a central role in the process related to inclusion. As highlighted by Ligorio and Pontecorvo (2010), schools is to be viewed as a social context whereby learners should be given the opportunity to develop a positive identity by testing a possible and desired self. This view takes from Vygotsky's (1987) interpretation of educational

contexts as inclusive settings where learners feel welcomed and are active participants in the construction of their identity and knowledge.

School textbooks and learning materials contribute to reshaping learners' identity (Greenfield and Subrahmanion, 2003). The selection of imagery within the school textbook may translate into the exclusion of social groups in contrast with the tenets of inclusion (Anyon, 1979) and may thus favor the validation of dominant social representation.

Disabled people are an example of a social group which is often neglected or under-represented (Hodkinson, 2004). Reasons for these under-representations have been linked to the fact that disability is perceived as a medical condition (Davis, 2002) as well as to the type of discourse that revolves around it (Goodley, 2011): the cultural model that refers to non-ability (Mitchell and Snyder, 2006) has a strong impact on discourse revolving around disability (Garland-Thomson, 1997) and this in turn affects representation. Cultural artifacts (Vygotsky, 1987) such as the textbook can influence the cultural representations of teachers inasmuch as they help validate representative imagery. The representation of certain social groups over others can affect the attitudes and behaviors towards disability depending on the categories that are mostly represented.

Morvan (1988) has identified five types of social representation related to disability that can be interpreted in the light of metonymic thinking: a characteristic of the individual -be it real or not- is used to define their identity thus effectively canceling the complexity and multi-faceted nature of one's identity. The representation of disability may be conditioned by classifying principles, characterized by the refusal of differences, perceived as a condition of suffering and associated with a prosthetic device or to a condition of prolonged childhood.

These representations are conditioned by the sociocultural system we are immersed in. Disability Studies (Brisenden, 1989; Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991; Morris, 1991; Davis, 1995; Michalko, 2002, Finkelstein, 2004) use the term "ability" to highlight the criteria according to which societies evaluate the physical, cognitive, behavioral and social characteristics that contribute to the creation of a hierarchy within which the "not able" are unproductive and, therefore, not worthy of being a part of social imagery. Disability conceived as a social burden and as a tragic condition prevents the possibility of its representation as it is considered an example of failure and unhappiness which is ill-suited to the myth of perfection perpetrated by western societies.

Teachers' social and cultural representations

Teachers' attitudes are partly influenced by the knowledge of common sense which is built starting from categorizations shared by a given social group (Moscovici, 1984, Hewstone 1985) and brings to the objectification of social representations. These can, in turn, be conditioned by ideological systems that materialize in many cultural artifacts which have the function of conveying social values (Apple, 1992, 1993). There is no doubt that the school textbook is one of the most important cultural artifacts which, especially in the primary school, plays a fundamental role from both a didactic and pedagogical point of view. The textbook, in addition to proposing topics related to the different subjects inevitably proposes a specific social representation through its images and texts.

The Italian sociocultural studies on the school textbook in Italy

The debate on the socio-cultural aspects of the school textbook in the 1970s saw detractors criticizing the textbook: images and texts were considered banal in that they failed to represent an authentic social context by favoring commonplaces (Eco, 1972) and proposing cultural values which did not reveal a plurality of viewpoints (Gianini Belotti, 1973). The school textbook was viewed as a tool suitable for an authoritarian society (Cavallini et al. 1976). After forty years, not much has changed as pinpointed by Franci (2011): the school textbook is still considered as the official bearer of the truth.

To date, no studies on the representation of disability and minorities in the school textbook have been completed in Italy. Research on textbook analysis focused on gender representation and found that sexism is still widespread (Gallino, 1973; Biemmi, 2010) while confirming the lack of attention of the world of politics towards this issue.

The Brazilian sociocultural studies on the school textbook: disabilities and minorities

Brazilian studies on the school textbook have highlighted limits in the representation of social, regional, ethnic-racial, gender, sexual orientation groups; these limits have recently been challenged by Fundamentos par para uma educação inclusiva (Brasil, 2013). Braga Garcia et al. (2016) have analyzed Brazilian History textbooks and have found that they fail to recognize the social plurality students experience. Similarly, Gonzalez-Palomares et.al. (2015) have highlighted that the representation of disabled people in Physical Education textbooks is virtually non-existent and biased: people with physical disabilities are represented in high-performance competitive sport contexts.

American sociocultural studies on the school textbook: disabilities and minorities

The socio-cultural approach to the school textbook, developed in the 1930s has a solid tradition in the United States due to the country's multicultural and multiethnic context. Recent studies have found that most textbooks ignore or marginalize the social realms of African-Americans, women, as well as of people with disabilities and lower-income families: WASPs are still the predominant groups in terms of visibility within American textbooks (Deckman et. al, 2018).

Overall, American studies on the topic have focused on the representation of disability within school textbooks through the quantitative analysis of images and texts: disability is associated with a one-dimensional, static, inferior and stereotypical reality (Rosenau, 2000; Smith, 2006). Indeed, stories related to the culture of disability are almost absent (Rosenau, 2000) while the images in physical education books represent individuals who meet the criteria of ability and social prestige (Hardin and Hardin, 2004). Provenzo jr et al (2011) clarify that the content of textbooks reflects the values and beliefs as they are a part of a selective tradition, one that is situated in a specific time and culture.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The current study examined:
a. Italian, American, and Brazilian teachers' attitudes towards the didactic and educational value of the school textbook
b. Italian, American and Brazilian teachers' attitudes towards including the representation of disability in the school textbook
c. Possible differences within the different groups of teachers living and working in different countries

METHOD

The current study is the second part of a sequential mixed-methods research design (Creswell, 2013, 2014) focused on the analysis of teachers' attitudes towards the use of inclusive materials in the textbooks (Identifying Reference, 2019). An online questionnaire was used to collect data: the questionnaire was structured from data emerged in the previous qualitative phase. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts. In the first part, the participants were informed about the aims of the study, and their consent was obtained. The rest of the first part mainly required demographic information related to age, gender and level of education, year of experience, role, co-teaching experience. The second part of the questionnaire contained 48 statements addressing the representation of disability in the school textbook within the framework of a 6-point Likert scale to allow teachers to express their points of view. Average completion time was 15 min.

Schools in selected regions were approached for participation in the research project. They were asked to forward an email with information about the research project to all teachers in their school. Since there is no investigative tool relating to the representation of disability in textbooks, it was decided to take the Evripidou and Çavuşoğlu (2014) questionnaire as a starting point as it this tool had been developed on constructs similar to those emerged from the interviews although specifically inherent to LGBTQI social groups.

As for the study in the USA and Brazil, it was chosen to use the same questionnaire created in the Italian context in the light of the similar findings from the literature review of previous studies in all three countries.

The questionnaire was designed in Italian by the researchers. The final version was then translated into the local languages (i.e., English and Brazilian) and proofread by mother-tongue language translators.

Participants

Italian sample

The questionnaire was completed by 211 Italian teachers. The sample was composed by only 11 male participants (5.1%) and 206 females (94.9%); the majority of the participants had a degree (40.5% have the relevant teaching-qualification degree), while 61 had a High School Diploma only (28.1%). 21.6% (N=47) of the cohort was in the 20-35 age bracket, 55.7% (121) in the 36-50, 22.5% (49) in the 51 to 60 age group. As for their teaching experience, the majority of the participants have teaching experience between 6 and 15 years (44.6%; 22.5% 6-10 years and 22.1% 1-15 years); 44 respondents stated that they had 5 or fewer years of experience (20.2 %), while only 17 had between 16 to 20 years of teaching experience (7.8%). Moreover, participants with more than 20 years of teaching experience were 59 (27.1%). In addition to this, 126 participants (58%) indicated that they are working as classroom teachers, while 91 (42%) as a special need teacher. Most of the participants had several experiences of co-teaching (91.7%).

American sample

The target population in the USA was teachers in elementary schools (grades 1–5) working in the LA District - California. The questionnaire was sent via email to 10 schools in Los Angeles. Of the 300 teachers within these schools, a total of 64 responded to the survey. In total, 64 teachers responded to the questionnaire. Participants were distributed demographically as follows: 50 female participants (78.1%), 14 male (21.95), 57% of participants in the 20/35 age group (n=37), 32.8% in the 36/50 age group (n=21), 7.8% in the 51/60 age group (n=1), and 11% over 60 (n=5). They consisted of classroom teachers (n= 19, 30.2%), and special needs teachers (n= 44, 69.9%). Half of the professionals (48.4%) had been teaching from 1 to 5 years, 14.1% from 6 to 10 years, 15.6% from 1 to 15 years, 7.8%% from 16 to 20 years and 12.5% from more than 20 years. The majority of the respondents did not possess a specific degree (61%) or a specialization for teaching special needs students (68.7%). Vice versa, 65.6% of the participants had an experience of co-teaching, while 34.4% never experienced it.

Brazilian sample

The questionnaire was sent via email to 5 primary schools in Rio de Janeiro. Of the 300 teachers within these schools, a total of 87 responded to the survey. The majority of the participants were females (n= 76; 86.4%) and the most frequent range of teaching experience was 16-20 years (N=31; 35.6%). 28.7% (N=25) was in the 20-35 age bracket, 48.3% (42) in the 36-50, 20.7% (18) in the 51 to 60 age group. Most of them were classroom teachers (n = 69, 79.3%), whereas only 15 were special needs teachers (17.2%). 79 teachers (90.8%) had a degree (specifically, 42.5% have the relevant teaching-qualification degree), while 17 had a High School Diploma only (19.5%). Unlike the Italian and American samples, in this group there were more teachers who declared they have never had a co-teaching experience (n=49; 56.3%).

The demographics and teaching characteristics of the samples from the three countries are shown in Table 1.

The summary showed that the samples are quite similar by gender and age distribution. However, it should be noted that there are significant differences in the average number of years of service as a teacher and the type of professional experience (e.g. specialization for special needs, co-teaching experience) between the three countries.

RESULTS

On completion of the data collection, data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage and mean score calculations).

An exploratory analysis of the differences between the three groups was carried out. Specifically, separate one-way between-subjects ANOVAs/MANOVAs were conducted to compare the effect of the groups on teachers' attitudes in Italians, Americans, and Brazilian conditions. In the case of significant results, post-

hoc comparisons were conducted by means of Tukey post-hoc tests. The analyses have been performed using R software (ver. 3.2.3).

Moreover, it has to be noted that the items containing negations were reverse coded in order for higher mean scores to indicate positive attitudes. Therefore, in all items, a high mean score would stand for a positive attitude.

A summary of the results of the questionnaire items is presented in Table 2.

1. Assessment of the textbook value

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare teachers' perceived value of the textbook in the didactic (M=4.37, SD=1.17) and educational (M=4.23, SD=1.23) conditions (Item 1 e 2). A significant difference in the scores for the didactic value and the educational value conditions; [t(366)=3.49, p < 0.001] was found. These results suggested that - regardless of the educational context (i.e., group) - the primary school teachers assigned to the textbook a substantial didactic role, but not an educational one. In this regard, almost 30% of the sample had a negative attitude towards the educational value of the textbook used in their everyday classroom activities.

Furthermore, a one-way multivariate analysis of variance was performed to determine the effect of Group (Italy, USA, Brazil) on teachers' assessment of the didactic value and educational value of the textbook (see Figure 1). Results showed a statistically significant difference between the three groups on the combined dependent variables (didactic value and educational value), F(2, 364) = 6.591, p = 0.002. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.025, showed that there was a statistically significant difference in didactic value (F(2, 149) = 5.41, p = 0.005) and educational value (F(2, 147) = 5.89, p = 0.003) between the groups. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that there is a significant difference between the Brazilian group and the Italian in the perceived didactic and educational value of the textbook (didactic value: p= 0.006; educational value: p= 0.002). In addition, the Brazilian group's educational value was significantly different than the American (p=0.047).

2. Representations of disabilities and other social realities in the textbook

The use of a direct question (item 3, see Table 2) in the questionnaire seeking the teachers' attitudes towards the incorporation of disability-related images and texts in the classroom textbook revealed that their attitudes are generally positive (M=4.82, SD= 1.45; 83% of respondents), which showed that they would use such materials if given the opportunity. However, it has to be noted that results of a one way ANOVA [F(2, 263)= 9.21; p= 0.001], with group as between-subject variable, revealed significant differences between the American teachers' attitudes compared to the other two countries, as demonstrated by post-hoc comparisons [Italy-USA: p< 0.001; Brazil-USA: p= 0.002; see Figure 2]. Thus, even though American teachers' attitudes tended to be more positive (69% of the American respondents) than negative, they seem to believe less, compared to Italian and Brazilian teachers, to the pedagogical value of the representation of differences within textbooks.

In addition, teachers revealed that the lack or scarcity of images and texts representing disability may constitute a barrier to inclusion (Item 4: M= 4.25, DS=1.22; 28% totally agree with this statement, 19% agree and 25% quite agree, with a 28% of teachers who tend to respond negatively). Even though more than 75% of teachers believe that the reality of disability should be more represented in the school textbook (Item 5: M=5.09, DS=0.97; 79% of teachers totally agree and 13% agree), it seemed that they would feel more comfortable addressing disability-related topics if the inclusive materials were part of the textbook, without asking the teachers to provide them (Item 6: M= 2.05, DS= 1.42; 85% of respondents). In other words, these results suggested that teachers' positive attitudes are formed if such topics are already part of the textbook, they use in their everyday classroom activities. Results of a MANOVA with group as between-subject factor revealed no significant differences between the groups in these variables [F(6,725=2.41, p=0.09].

Furthermore, more than 67% of teachers responded that publishing houses do not include images and text related to physical disability (Item 7a; M=2.91, DS=1.48), while more than 81% of teachers believe that publishing houses do not include images and text related to intellectual disability (Item 7b; M=2.32,

DS=1.36). There were statistically significant differences between teachers' perceptions of the insertion of texts and images representing disability by the publishers. Specifically, teachers believe that there is a greater representation of physical disability within the school textbook than intellectual disability [$t(366)$=9.46, $p < 0.001$]. No significant differences among the three groups were observed [$F(4, 728)$ = 1.65, $p = 0.16$].

In addition, respondents judged that the representations contained in the textbook almost completely excludes other social realities such as different ethnic groups (Item 7c; M=3.24, DS=1.88, 49% of respondents), different religions (Item 7d; M=2.47, DS=1.82, 53% of respondents), Socio-economic disadvantaged communities (Item 7e; M=1.85, DS=1.64, 69% of respondents) and LGBT (Item 7f; M=0.76, DS=1.31, 88% of respondents).

We analyzed group differences in the perceived representations of these other social realities by means of a one-way multivariate analysis of variance. Results showed a statistically significant difference between the three groups [$F(8, 724)$ = 14.611, $p < 0.001$]. Tukey's post hoc tests revealed that American respondents considered different races and ethnicities, LGBT identities, and socio-economic disadvantages more represented in the textbook compared to the Italian ones ($P< 0.001$).

3. Pedagogical skills and attitudes towards the representation of disability and other social realities

We examined teachers' perception of their level of preparation in teaching using disability-related materials through three items: in item 8a we asked to judge their perceived level of preparation in managing a class using a textbook or instructional materials that include individuals with Physical Disability, while on item 8b and 8c Intellectual Disability and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), respectively. In general, the participants stated that they feel prepared to use books and materials representing physical disability (M=4.93, DS=1.17; 30% agree and 40% totally agree), intellectual disability (M=4.79, DS=1.25; 31% agree, 36% totally agree) and the autism spectrum disorder (M=4.60, DS=1.41; 27% agree and 34% totally agree). However, it has to be noted that there was a statistically significant difference in teachers' attitudes towards their level of perceived competence in managing educational materials representing disability according to the type of disability taken into consideration [$F(2, 1098)$=6.334 $p= 0.002$]. Specifically, post hoc Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) tests demonstrated that the ASD condition was significantly different from the Physical Disability condition ($p= 0.001$), highlighting a tendency for teachers to show more positive attitudes towards the representation of Physical Disability compared to ASD. The Intellectual disability condition was not significantly different from the other two, lying somewhere in the middle ($p>0.05$).

In addition, we analyzed group differences by means of a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (see Figure 3). There was a significant effect of the Group (Italy, USA, Brazil) on teachers' perceived level of competence at the $p<.05$ level for the three conditions [$F(2, 726)$ = 3.088, $p = 0.005$]. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.016, showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the level of competence with ASD-related materials ($F(2, 134)$ = 4.53, $p = 0.012$) between the groups. Specifically, American teachers declared a level of competence in teaching using ASD-related materials that is analogous to what they stated for Intellectual and Physical Disability. However, no significant differences were found using the Post hoc Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) tests probably due to the high number of factor levels and a relatively small sample size for the American group. As regards the attitude towards the perceived level of competence in teaching with materials representing other realities, it is important to notice the lack of agreement for LGBT identities (Item 9d; M=3.82, DS= 1.642). In this regard, teachers' answers are evenly distributed among the Likert scale (8% totally disagree, 11% disagree, 14% quite disagree, 19% quite agree, 21% agree and 26% totally agree). Indeed, there was a statistically significant difference in teachers' attitudes towards their competence depending on the type of social reality taken into consideration [$F(3, 1460)$=87.47 $p< 0.001$]. Specifically, teachers' perceived competence in the management of educational material representing LGBT identities within the textbook is significantly lower than the one for other ethnic groups (Item 9a), different religions (Item 9b), socio-economic disadvantaged communities (Item 9c) [for each comparison, Tukey's test, $p < 0.001$].

Taking into consideration the different groups, the MANOVA result indicated significant differences between the three countries [$F_{(8,716)}$=9.93 p< 0.001]. Particularly, post hoc comparisons highlighted that Italians teacher rated their level of competence with LGBT materials (M=3.82, DS=1.64) significantly lower compared to Americans (M=4.32, DS=1.46; p= 0.003) and Brazilians (M=4.69, DS=1.45; p< 0.001). Interestingly, Brazilians teachers considered themself more prepared - compared to what stated by Americans teachers - in dealing with materials representing low socio-cultural realities (Brazil: M=5.48, DS=0.88; USA: M=5.05, DS=1.08; p=0.027).

Discussion of findings

The results of the questionnaire revealed that teachers have more positive attitudes towards the didactic content of the school text compared to the attitudes towards its educational value. The teachers, therefore, are aware of the representative limit within the textbook confirmed by the scarcity or absence or of images and texts relating to disability and other situations at risk of exclusion (Biemmi, 2010; Hodkinson, 2004) and how much this impacts on educational aspects. Italian and American teachers seem more aware of the educational limit of the textbook.

The entire sample declares that the representation of physical disability during lessons would create fewer problems than the presence of images and texts related to intellectual disability; the reality of the autistic spectrum is considered, however, the most problematic to manage during teaching activities; from this emerges a very interesting fact: teachers have different attitudes depending on the severity and type of disability as it happens for attitudes towards the representation of disability and inclusion. With regard to the perception of preparation in the management of educational-didactic material representing disability, teachers reveal that they feel more prepared to lecture with materials representing physical disability compared to intellectual disability and the reality of the autism spectrum. (Campbell et.al., 2003; Koutrouba et al., 2006).

Consequently, teachers believe that disability should be better represented as a greater representation of disability could favor school inclusion (Davis, 1995; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Michalko, 2002; Titchkosky, 2011). The absence or lack of representation therefore constitutes an obstacle for teachers to the full participation of all students. Despite this, the teachers do not modify the materials to include the representation of disability in the textbooks, perhaps believing that it is the task of the publishing houses to propose images and texts representing the reality of the special needs as they should be more competent in choosing the images and texts.

Regarding the presence of images and texts within the textbook, physical disability, albeit underrepresented, is more present for teachers than intellectual disability and the reality of the autism spectrum. To support the hypothesis of the educational and representative limit of the textbook according to the teachers, the representation almost completely excludes the different ethnic groups, the different religions, the reality of the cultural disadvantage and the LGBTQ reality (references).

For teachers, the LGBT reality is considered the most complex to manage during lessons from a representative point of view: Italian teachers, compared to American teachers, feel less able to manage the representation of the LGBT reality (the laws on marriages of the same sex in Italy are much more recent).

The school textbook is thus profiled as a disabling agent (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009; Goodley, 2014) mirror of a social conformism that instead of stimulating teachers to a realistic and inclusive representation helps to hinder and validate the implicit and explicit acceptance of disability and its representation in teachers and pupils. The negative repercussions on the classroom speeches and the consequent marginalization of the culture of disability and other social realities impose an urgent reflection on the iconic and textual characteristics of the textbook and other educational-didactic materials in order to contrast invisibility of the "different differences" that have the right to recognize and be recognized in the representations of examples, backgrounds, experiences, experiences and stories.

Further studies

The limitations of the study concern the small size of the sample of American and Brazilian teachers compared to the Italian sample. The use of a structured questionnaire following the codes emerged from the interviews of Italian teachers represented a critical issue which was balanced by the homogeneity of the questionnaire results in all three contexts investigated. Further studies could contribute to a deeper knowledge on the topic of representation in textbooks and on teachers' attitudes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study can help stimulate reflection on the following aspects:
• Raise awareness among publishing houses and editors of school textbooks about inclusive representation.
• To encourage teachers to reflect on the importance of using texts and images representing disabilities in order to promote the construction and adaptation of educational and teaching materials
• Extend the debate on the ways of representing disabilities and other situations at risk of exclusion to reflect on the possibility of a "neutral" representation not burdened by prejudices and limiting perspectives
• Promote the possibility of inserting stories and images within the school textbook dealing with the theme of disability and other situations at risk of exclusion.
• Reflect on the limits of the adoption of a single school textbook not only from the didactic point of view but also from the point of view of representation.
• Activate training courses for teachers on construction of educational-didactic materials representing disability and other realities at risk of exclusion.

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