Textbooks as mediators in the intellectual project of history education

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Preface

The research on which this book is based was undertaken for a doctoral thesis at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, between 2008 and 2011. The primary aim was to design a tool for the analysis of content and its presentation in high school history textbooks. This focus arises from a gap in the literature on theoretical considerations of textbook research. A secondary aim was to show how such a tool could be put to use. To this end, a particular chapter on the history of race and racism was compared across 10 different history textbooks. These 10 books were selected because all of them were officially approved for the South African school curriculum; in other words, at the time of the study, these were the books available to teachers in state schools.

While in more developed countries textbooks are likely to be one of many tools teachers have at their disposal, in the South African context they have a significant role to play, because many teachers have no access to any other media or sources of subject knowledge[1]. But even if teachers were not to use them at all, they can still be studied as examples of "history in the present". They record the attitude of the ruling generation both towards the knowledge deemed important to pass down, as well as towards the next generation.

This is another way of saying that textbooks, and especially history textbooks, represent a sample of a body of knowledge which can be understood to pass on a certain sociocultural inheritance. This inheritance is encoded in a text-based reality (that) the textbooks represent. The encoding happens through language and images, as they record the education system's position towards knowledge in a moment of time. This position is partly captured in the curriculum.

Post-1994 curricula devised for the South African school system have had an overtly transformative agenda. Apartheid-era curricula promoted the values of the country's rulers: 'white', patriarchal, capitalist, Eurocentric and authoritarian. Not surprisingly, history as a subject became one of the main foci in the educational transformation project, since it is widely accepted that shaping the future relies to some extent on controlling how the past is presented. The

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[1] This is strengthened by the 2009 speech of South African Minister of Basic Education, Angelina Motshekga, stating that the textbook is the most effective tool in curriculum delivery because it is the most effective tool to ensure consistency, coverage, appropriate pacing and better quality instruction.

study aimed to investigate how the transformation project was faring. To do this, the approach of the study is that of finding ways of uncovering the strategy of the text constructors.

Overall, for the design of a tool for history textbook analysis a bounded case study was used. The case was defined by the topic of 'impact of 19th century race theories leading to genocide' (shortened from the curriculum, Department of Education 2003, 26) as represented in the 10 textbooks and their respective teacher guides. The methods can be described as a hybrid of hermeneutic analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, question (pedagogic) analysis, critical analysis, and semiotic analysis. Such experimentation with a hybrid method can be justified, given that the process of analysis was itself an object of study.

A major conclusion of the study is that textbooks have many choices in how to address the intellectual project of history education. Even when they operate within the same curricular framework, they respond to it in remarkably different ways. Arguably, the study's main claim to originality lies in its identification of general principles for analysing historical-educational texts and the ensuing design of a model based on these principles. The tool helps to *identify* and *name* different features of educational media (for history) that may be important and helpful in all contexts. How these features are then *evaluated* in particular texts is a different matter. Other researchers may come to different results and conclusions, depending on their subjective positionings.

The model could be used by other researchers of history textbooks and perhaps also with other, related subject textbooks (such as social science or civics for example). The tool could also be adapted to analysing other educational media for history and social science, such as websites, museums, documentary films and so on. It could also be adapted to analysing classroom interaction. A further contribution of the study is a set of key recommendations to history textbook developers and evaluators. Others who may find the study of interest are postgraduate students doing textbook research on social science related subjects, history teachers and teacher educators, and social justice/human rights workers.

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

AS	Assessment Standard
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid (term used in genetics)
DoE	South African National Department of Education (Renamed the SA Dept of Basic Education in 2010)
FET	Further Education and Training (grades 10-12)
FHAO	Facing History and Ourselves
GEI	Georg Eckert Institute
GIS	Geographic Information System
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IARTEM	International Association for Research in Textbooks and Educational Media
INPRA	International Press Agencies
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LB	Learner Book
LO	Learning Outcome
NRF	National Research Foundation
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
SA	South Africa(n)
SS	Schutzstaffel (German – *protection squadron*)
T-4	Code name for Nazi euthanasia programme
TG	Teacher Guide
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
USA	United States of America

Introduction

As a work of emergent scholarship, this study firstly aimed to devise a *theory-based methodology for textbook research.* Concurrently, its second aim was to *put this methodology to the test* by analysing one topic in ten history textbooks – and their teacher guides – designed for senior high school learners and teachers in South Africa. The topic is that of race theories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The history textbooks were those approved for use in South African government schools at the time of the study (2008-2011).

The study's first aim stems from the claim by various scholars that textbook research is under-theorised. For example, Weinbrenner, who can be considered a pioneering theorist of textbook research, wrote in 1992 that "although awash with humanitarian questions, assessments, judgements, evaluations and recommendations [textbook research] has not been sufficiently theorised. There is no 'theory of the textbook' upon which to construct solid methodologies of textbook inquiry" (Weinbrenner in Nicholls 2005, 24). The first aim of this study was therefore to contribute to the development of a methodology for textbooks analysis. The main research question related to this first aim is thus: How can an interdisciplinary[2] approach to textual analysis be used to construct a model for text analysis? In this construction process the type of analysis to be done remained open. It explored hermeneutic, discourse, visual, question (pedagogic), critical and semiotic analyses. By constructing such a model, it is hoped that it can be applied in new and different ways in future research. For example, it could be applied and adjusted according to textbooks in other subjects, or even to other types of educational media such as websites, films, museum exhibits, etc.

The second aim of the study was motivated by Lässig and Pohl's (2009, 125) claim that "although we still know little about the ways in which the contents of textbooks are processed and learned, as a medium they undoubtedly influence many people during a phase of the life-cycle which often helps to shape their ideas for the rest of their lives". And by influencing young people individually, they also shape national culture in powerful ways (see *The Economist* October 2012, 1). Therefore it is not only important to examine textbooks, but also to look at how the very topic that has tainted South Africa's past – that of race and

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[2] Textbook research is by nature interdisciplinary and this will be explored more thoroughly in chapter 1.

racism – is portrayed in these books. This was the second aim of the study: to investigate how the sampled texts address the topic that has had such a major role to play in South Africa's history – and continues to do so today. The second research question is thus: How can the constructed model of text analysis be demonstrated 'in action' to analyse one theme in a series of 10 grade 11 history textbooks?

This second aim of the study explains why the focus is on textbooks. They represent the sanctioned version of history deemed suitable and desirable to pass on to the next generation. It is widely accepted that the degree to which a government keeps control of the textbooks used in classrooms is a good, if imprecise, guide to its commitment to ideological control (*The Economist* October 2012, 2). It is the nature and degree of this ideological control through textual mediation that the study wishes to bring to light through the analysis of the texts. Textbooks may not be the only influencing factors in a classroom and naturally teachers play a major role in how they are used or not. Nevertheless, textbooks are historical records in their own right. One can analyse representations in textbooks as a formal exercise without focussing on their use in classrooms. Bezemer and Kress (2008, 171), in their research comparing textbooks and educational media from different eras, show how it is possible to provide *a means* for describing and understanding what is being used. This is because texts can be considered "potentials of a quite specific kind that in their specificity allow an unlimited (in number) yet constrained (in semantic scope) number of readings" (ibid). In a way, this is what this study aimed to do. It wanted to examine textbooks as historical records and to provide a means for uncovering the different potentials of semantic meaning-making from them. As such, the study was a historical project, in that one day it will, and may already have become, a historical resource in itself.

It should be made clear from the outset that the phrase "intellectual project" in the title of this book does not imply an exclusively cognitive orientation to the project, but includes the affective domain. The term is thus used to include the analysis of empathy and values in history education. One such value is the integrity of the discipline itself, which is part of a broader education project. Education is concerned with the whole person. Or as Oakshott (1971) reminds us, the aim of schooling is for the child to "encounter his [sic] moral and intellectual inheritance" and so to become more human. For this to take place rationality is important: without rational reflection as a cognitive tool, empathy

is reduced to feelings. In history such reflection is central to the discipline, which may be thought of as "an organised metacognitive tradition in that it insists on its practitioners reflecting on what they say" and why they say things (Lee, 2011, 66). The "intellectual project" is the task of the school, or, as Lee (2011, 67) asserts: "History education must make a difference to students' intellectual behaviour or it is nothing", whereby "intellectual" does not imply anything elitist "unless we imagine that learning to think is elitist" (Lee, 2011:70). In fact, Lee combines the intellectual domain with the ethical domain of the human mind by explaining that "teaching for historical literacy means taking seriously students' cognitive and rational ethics" (ibid, p. 67). Therefore the "intellectual project" includes heart and mind; intellect and morality all at the same time.

The theoretical orientation underpinning the main research questions

Every study needs to demarcate its boundaries based on some core theoretical choices. Perhaps the best way to introduce the theoretical orientation of this study is to refer to Applebaum's (2009) extrapolation of the meaning of "ideology". She identifies four different positions: ideology can be understood 1) as "empty slur" – a convenient way of attributing to a belief system a host of failings; 2) as derogatory towards true knowledge – rationality is detached from and is prior to ideology; 3) as descriptive – involving the way the real is constructed through our reliance on language; and 4) as a particular type of criticality – a response to unjust relations. Without delving into the details of each, suffice it to say that the theoretical positioning of this study is most closely aligned with the third option: that ideology describes a state of beliefs. These beliefs are tied up with language because a particular language puts a boundary around what is possible to think and therefore to believe. Because language is neither outside of, nor a reflection of reality, "but that which organises reality so that subjects can render it intelligible, there is no way out of ideology" (Applebaum 2009, 390).

This alignment with the third understanding of ideology as inescapably bound up with language speaks of the theoretical choices throughout this study. The main orientation is that of Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978, 1986) with its emphasis on signs and symbols as tools in the communicative act of conceptual development. From such a sociocultural perspective,

> human mental processes are not independently "constructed" by children (as constructivists would say), nor do they "unfold" as a result of children's maturation (as nativists would hold), nor are they inculcated into children by adults (as behaviourists would hold). Rather than that, the development of mental processes are mediated by adults in the context of social interaction with children. Thus, Vygotsky and his followers consider mediation in the context of social interactions to be the major determinant of children's development. (Karpov 2005, 10-11).

Two key interrelated ideas are emphasised through the use of this theoretical lens: firstly, signs and symbols mediate learning in *social settings*. This social setting is expressed largely through language, implying that "thought development is determined by language […] The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastery of the social means of thought, that is language" (Vygotsky 1986, 94). Secondly, learning of scientific concepts, or the development of *higher order thinking*, is the aim of school learning. Each of these points is discussed briefly here. In chapter 1 these ideas are explored in more depth.

Followers of Vygotskian sociocultural theory promote an understanding of the social psychology of learning in which socially encoded signs and tools are seen as the essence of mediated action (Wertsch 1985; Minick 1987). Such socially encoded signs are described by Bernstein as "culturally determined positioning devices" (1981, 327). Sociocultural theorists claim that language forms (in textbooks for example) are produced by social actors in social contexts (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006:13). From this perspective, a pedagogic text like a textbook presents a semiotic resource for learning (Selander, 2007:13). Such texts represent a simulated or manufactured environment but their essential function is a social one: they act as 'go-betweens,' or as mediating tools between subjects (creators of textbooks) and objects (recipients/ users of textbooks)[3].

Language plays a central role here. Vygotsky's argument is that it is through language that we create our world. Underlying this argument is the assumption that there is no automatic or linear correspondence between the world and the word. Or, as Munslow (2012, 110) would put it: "it is the indiscriminate use of supposedly discriminatory language that defines an epistemological definition of meaning. Once we define language the world becomes its and our reality". This

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[3] This relationship is a dynamic one and does not imply that readers are passive. This dynamic relationship between producers and consumers of texts will be explored in more detail in chapter 2.

applies to photographs and other iconic representations as well. For example, Keilbach (2009, 54) shows how through the frequent reproduction of photographs in a given subject matter – she analyses Holocaust photographs – they are transformed into symbolic images that can be removed from their specific context and in this way come to signify abstract concepts such as "evil". In other words, photographs – as a form of language – define reality. They do not correspond to it.

Added to these social and discursive functions is the fact that textbooks are tools in the intellectual project. In other words, they are meant to teach scientific concepts or higher order mental functions at high school. Such functions are those that have to do with abstracting and logical reasoning. They do not automatically develop from lower or baser functions such as memorisation. Importantly, the development of higher mental functions is a social process: there is a close link between the use of signs and symbols in social settings and the development of cognition in children or adolescents. In other words, higher mental processes are created through activity; they are an objectivation of action that takes place in social settings through mediation. In this way textbooks act as the social agents or mediators of higher psychological tools[4]. These tools are a kind of symbolic agent that causes a change in the relationships between different human mental functions (Kozulin 1990, 264). The higher mental function does not develop as a direct continuation of the corresponding elementary function. It constitutes a new type of psychological formation (p. 112) that is related to the mediation. The point is that without mediation there is no "natural" progression from lower psychological functions to higher ones.

Based on these two key theoretical principles, namely that signs and symbols mediate learning in social settings, and that the development of higher order thinking is the aim of school learning, the guiding questions of the study can be summed up as follows: What happens to the intellectual project of history education through textbooks? How do the textbooks function or serve as mediators in this project? If they can contribute to the conceptual development of their users, then they can, in fact, contribute to "higher psychological functions" as Vygotsky would put it. If the textbooks fail to serve the intellectual project, the question then is, what *do* they mediate?

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[4] Teachers also have an important mediating role, but this study only focuses on the texts.