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# Review

The Educational Review

## Discrimination in the discourse of Polish textbooks dedicated to civic education courses

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### Abstract

The study presents a critical analysis of visual materials contained in civic education textbooks with the purpose to identify traits of discrimination of individuals with a “skin colour” other than “white”. The undertaken quantitative and qualitative analyses allowed for drawing a conclusion that the depiction of persons in the researched visual material did in fact bear certain traits of discrimination. Moreover, it was concluded that what may be observed is compound discrimination. The studies presented in the article were conducted within a larger-scale project entitled *Gender in textbooks*.

**Keywords:** *discrimination, visual material, textbooks, civic education*

### Introduction

The approach to contemporary civic education is required to encompass the legal context. Regulations from the following legal acts should be emphasised: Annex to Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Council of Europe – Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, Convention on the Rights of the Child as of 20 November 1989, ratified by Poland in 1991. All of them highlight the significance of social diversity, promotion of intercultural dialogue and valuing of diversity and equality in the education for democratic citizenship and human rights. However, the discourse articulating key civic competences is of a consolidating character, legitimising a certain construct of citizenship and of predicative nature (De Cillia, Reisigl, Wodak 1999, Reisigl 2010), e.g., due to the sole fact of defining such com-

petences as key ones. It results from the coexistence of modern and post-modern perspectives in education (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence 2013, pp. 70–73).

The characterisation of civic education in Poland should take into consideration Poland's history. For many years, communism ruled out the possibility for diversity, multi-perspective, and, at the same time, caricatured the concept of uniformity and universality. System transformation, on the other hand, led to a quick change, resulting in a hybrid system, i.e. one working according to democratic principles, yet an undemocratic one (Czarnota, 2006, pp. 18–21). How significant is it for civic education? It should be noted that some of the indicators pointing to the favourable position of civic education adopt a very specific form in Poland. The aforementioned hybridity consists, among other things, in the fact that the presence of particular social organs in the school is of non-participatory nature (Kopińska, 2013, pp. 165–184). Excluding practices are present both at the legal level (lack of significant establishing competences), as well as within the application of law (excluding practising of school statute resolutions) and its observance.

In the International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) (Wiłkomirska 2014, p. 71) Polish fourteen-year-olds were highly ranked in the area of civic knowledge (ibidem, pp. 102–105). Simultaneously, on the basis of the same studies, a conclusion was drawn that Poland belonged to the group of countries where little emphasis is placed on the development of knowledge and shaping of positive attitudes towards others (Wiłkomirska, 2013, p. 93).

The aim of the undertaken studies consists in a critical analysis of visual material together with captions included in school textbooks used for civic education at the 4<sup>th</sup> educational stage (from the tenth year of school education) in relation to the representation of people of different “race”.

The textbooks are an essential part of formal civic education. It is required that a textbook provides content adjusted to the core curriculum (Regulation of MNE, 2012). Although the context for an analysis of school textbooks is always related to the currently applicable core curricula, the textbooks themselves also present a certain analytical value. By being regarded as texts of culture, they are carriers of the “world vision, values, norms, prohibitions and orders, but also cultural stereotypes and prejudice” (Chomczyńska-Rubacha, Pankowska 2011, p. 19), they reconstruct the social knowledge imposed through education. They allow for understanding of how specific competencies are evaluated and what results are expected from school students. For instance, if a sense of efficacy is understood “as a construct based on personal experience at the disposal of cognitive and motivational resources to solve everyday problems” (Chomczyńska – Rubacha, Rubacha, 2013, p. 108), the textbook discourse gives an insight into the area (a part of it) of

students' experiences characteristic of contemporary education. It is obvious that the sense of efficacy does not depend on what is in the textbooks, however, the textbook discourse emphasizes what is important, desirable, necessary at the time and place in society. Thanks to textbooks it is possible to identify conflicting matters with regard to the current requirements or declarations. Although they are not the most important element of school education, especially at higher education stages, they do provide an insight into the education system.

It should be emphasised that visual material constitutes an integral and compulsory component of every textbook that is approved for school use (Regulation of the MNE, 2012) And at the same time, it is a part of the discourse, and discourse is understood as "framework for making sense of things" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 95) and "resources for representation, knowledge about some aspect of reality, which can be drawn upon when the aspect of reality has to be represented" (ibidem). In T. van Leeuwen's opinion "Evidence for the existence of a given discourse comes from text, from what has been said or written – and/or expressed by means of other semiotic modes. (...) it comes from similarity between the things that are said or written in different texts about the same aspect of reality" (ibidem).

The problem of this study was formulated in the course of data collection and encoding, on the basis of an initial overview of the material in the framework of the project entitled *Gender in textbooks*. Moreover, the choice of the subject matter was dictated by the results of the previous research carried out before the modification of the general education core curriculum. Despite the declared tolerance and openness the said research revealed the presence of content promoting an intolerant attitude as well as failure to discuss migration (Chmielewska 2004, pp. 46–51, 53, Ryabinska, 2008, pp. 23–25).

## **Research Methodology**

The primary category applied in the presented studies is "skin colour". An interesting part of the research consisted in the identification of the traits of discrimination of individuals presented in the visual material used in textbooks. According to Reisiigl (2010, pp. 29–32), the concept of discrimination assumes the existence of at least several elements:

- social actors who, at least temporarily, have or assume the power to discriminate others and undertake discriminatory actions,
- particular persons or groups experiencing discrimination,

- discriminatory actions or processes,
- “a distinguishing feature” or element on which the discrimination may be based,
- an individual or a group in relation to whom or which one may be perceived as discriminated.

In the article the “distinguishing feature” upon which the presumed discrimination is based is the said “skin colour”, and the underlying reason for the discrimination is racism. The group in relation to which particular individuals represent a given “skin colour” is white men/women. Whereas the area for these actions is education or, more precisely, the visual elements contained in school textbooks. Thus, the assumed discrimination is of indirect and implicit nature (Makkonen, 2002). The selected analytical categories allowing for identifying discrimination with regard to “skin colour” were: the significance of a particular individual, social evaluation of persons’ activities, symbolic distancing, homogenization and negative cultural connotation. The choice of the above-listed categories was based on the strategies of visual representation of social actors identified by Theo van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 136–148). In order to assure precise analysis of the material, the said categories were subjected to operationalisation at the definitional level (Rubacha, 2008, p. 58). Due to the small number of values related to the variables “skin colour,” they were grouped. In consequence, for the purposes of a statistical analysis it was assumed that the variable would represent two values, which were also used in the analysis description. The above note is necessary, otherwise the value *other than “white”* could be perceived as discriminatory.

The indicated categories were complemented with: “age” and “sex”, allowing for the identification of traits of compound discrimination (Makkonen, 2002, p.11), thus taking into account such reasons as ageism and sexism.

On the basis of the above conceptual framework, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the frequency of the occurrence of persons belonging to particular “races” in the researched textbooks?
2. Does the presented visual material based on analytical categories allow for identification of traits of discrimination with regard to “skin colour”?
3. Do the categories of age and sex impose additional burden on persons discriminated due to “skin colour”?

In order to answer the question of the rate of occurrence, the percentage value of frequency of persons of different “skin colour” was calculated. Whereas for the purpose of answering the question of the possibility of identification of traits of

discrimination and compound discrimination with regard to the representation of persons of various “races” within the said categories, the Chi-square test was performed with the significance level of at least 0.05. At this point it should be added that all illustrations and photographs together with captions were subjected to critical evaluation, whereas the values of particular analytical categories in relation to the representation of individuals were defined on the basis of the conceptual framework provided by T. van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 136–148). The collection of data was performed with the use of a tool constructed for the purposes of the aforementioned project – *Gender in textbooks*, complemented with variables specific to the analysed material.

The research sample encompassed all the textbooks currently admitted for school use (by the Minister of National Education) dedicated to teaching of the subject of civic education (7) in upper-secondary schools, basic level (the list of the textbooks: [http://www.men.gov.pl/podreczniki/wykaz\\_dopuszczone\\_lista1.php](http://www.men.gov.pl/podreczniki/wykaz_dopuszczone_lista1.php), access: 2014–07–22). In order to avoid overrepresentation of “white” persons of Polish descent, analysis of the illustrations and photographs with captions was conducted in accordance with three main thematic areas/scopes: human rights, protection of rights and liberties, education and work in Poland and the European Union. The possibility to identify an exclusion strategy only makes sense if it concerns situations where the exclusion is related to persons that are normally present.

Altogether 283 photographs/illustrations (excluding satirical drawings) were subjected to analysis, depicting 388 persons and 60 groups (those persons that could not be counted or isolated).

## **Research Results**

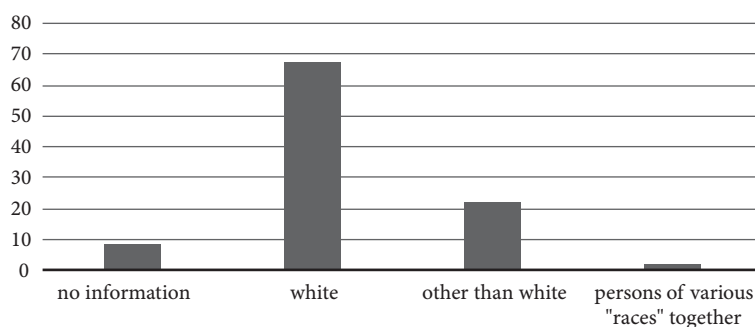
The collected data indicate the dominance (67.5%) of persons of “white” “race” (Figure 1).

Among the persons with the “skin colour” other than “white,” the dominant group comprises persons of the “black” “skin colour” (50%), then the persons of dark complexion (32%) and “yellow” “skin colour” (18%).

Further analyses involved statistical calculations carried out in isolation from those observations, where an identification of “skin colour” was infeasible. With regard to the “skin colour” variable, 8.5% of the cases were excluded.

An important category related to the discrimination of persons of a “skin colour” other than “white” was the significance of particular persons. It was shown

**Figure 1.** The frequency of occurrence of persons of various "skin colours"



that such individuals were more frequently depicted as anonymous real persons (over 75% of the cases), while the persons of white "skin colour" were more often presented as anonymous unreal persons (36%), but also to a similar extent as well-known persons (32%) and anonymous unreal persons (30%). Generally speaking, the manner of the representation of persons as real is not equivalent to their discrimination. However, it should be pointed out that anonymous unreal persons occurring in the visual material are male and female models shown as students, persons performing particular professions, family members, etc. Therefore, the discriminatory fact is that the persons of a "skin colour" other than "white" are not used as models to depict particular social roles. The comparison of relations of anonymous persons and well-known individuals in the case of persons differing in "skin colour" also exhibits the advantage of the "white race". This means that among the persons of a "skin colour" other than "white" there is a relatively lower representation of well-known persons.

Another significant difference was demonstrated with regard to the social evaluation of activity. It was observed that individuals with a "skin colour" other than "white" were more often used to depict activities characterised by poor social recognition. They were, e.g., prisoners, illegal workers, immigrants. What is also interesting is that at times such persons happen to be presented as holding a privileged position towards others, e.g., when distributing food, guarding prisoners; however, the role of the "subordinates" and "dependent" persons is always attributed to those assigned to the category of "others". In the analysed material a "black" guard never watches over "white" prisoners, as well as a "white" person is never dependent on "black" soldiers, even if he acts on behalf of the

UNO. A characteristic feature of the activity attributed to the representatives of a “skin colour” different from white also consists in exhibiting limited rights of such persons. Although it was observed that such individuals also appeared as representing an active role, the performed activity usually involved demonstrations, protests against various types of prejudice, dictatorships, etc. Even when a given photograph seems neutral, e.g., an image of Chinese bikers or pupils shown in a classroom, the provided caption points to their limited rights or low social position; e.g., “becoming orphans” and the need for the so-called distance adoption – with regard to the mentioned pupils.

The above-analysed category is combined with another one, namely the negative cultural connotation. On the basis of the conducted analysis the occurrence of discrimination with regard to “skin colour” was confirmed. The analysis of the visual material indicated that in the photographs depicting persons with a “skin colour” other than “white” one could more often find negative cultural predicates. They are mainly related to the activity performed by such persons, e.g., an image of child shooting from a machine gun, refugees crowded together on a ship.

The differences in the tendency level were found within the category of symbolic distancing of the presented persons. Namely, the figures of a “skin colour” other than “white” were more commonly depicted from a larger distance in relation to the viewer (47% and 35% respectively). These were, e.g., people reaching out to soldiers handing them portions of food, immigrants, or prisoners.

In those studies it was investigated whether the category of “skin colour” was overlapped with the categories of age and sex, thus resulting in “added burden”. In accordance with the definition “‘compound discrimination’ should be taken to refer to such a situation in which several grounds of discrimination add to each other in one particular instance: discrimination on the basis of one ground adds to discrimination based on another ground to create an added burden” (Makkonen 2002, p. 11).

In the analysis of sexes of the representatives of various races it was observed that both the “white” and other than “white” categories were dominated by the male sex (approx. 50%). However, slight differences were noted in the representation of women, which with regard to the “white race” amounted to about 30%, and for other than “white” almost 20%. These are statistically significant differences. Other statistically significant differences were also observed in the category of age. In both cases, adult persons constituted the dominant group (nearly 70%). Therefore, one may notice that the most commonly depicted figures are adult males, irrespective of representing the “white race” or other than “white”.



## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The form of representation of persons shown in the visual material of Polish social science textbooks for upper-secondary schools bears traits of discrimination. A “distinguishing feature” on which the discrimination is based is mainly concerned with the “skin colour” of the presented individuals. The strategy of exclusion was applied in relation to persons with a “skin colour” other than “white”. The obtained result is even more disturbing if one remembers that the analysis did not cover the entire textbooks, but rather placed the main focus on those thematic areas that involved the presence of representatives of various cultures, “races”, nationalities and ethnic groups. Moreover, it included compound discrimination. In consequence, visual representations of women, small children, teenagers and elderly with a “skin colour” other than “white” are relatively rare. Therefore, in the world visualised in the textbooks, the dominant group consists of “white” figures. This is also true for the areas related to education and work in Poland and the EU. The thus created representation of the world is false; however, due to the support of the authority of formal education it seems to be legitimate. Persons representing other “races” generally appear in chapters devoted to human rights and the protection of rights and liberties. Their depiction allows for identifying further discrimination strategies. Firstly, persons of a “skin colour” other than “white” are more often seen to be involved in activities which do not enjoy social recognition, and it is the type of activity that constitutes the main source of a negative cultural connotation. However, it needs to be emphasised that in the context presented in the textbooks, such individuals are not negatively evaluated. In the parts devoted to the violation of human rights, the material shows people whose rights are being violated or those that fight for their rights. Naturally, there is nothing odd about that. However, in the case that such representations are the only or the dominant ones, as a result the discourse will be perceived as operating with stereotypic images in which persons with a “skin colour” other than white are those of limited rights: illegal workers, immigrants, the orphaned, the dirty, people struggling to receive food. The depictions of figures holding significant social positions and performing socially valued activities are scarce and usually involve well-known persons. Their number is small, since among the people represented in the textbooks of a “skin colour” other than “white” the prevailing group consists of anonymous and real persons. The discrimination consists in the fact that the male and female models shown in the photographs as pupils, representatives of various professions, etc. are rarely persons of a “skin colour” other than “white”.

The presented conclusions fit in the European and Polish context of functioning of contemporary civic education. Thus, on the one hand the declarations concerning the shaping of attitudes supporting diversity and equality, tolerance, respect towards people of various nationalities, cultures, ethnic and religious groups are present. Based on a superficial analysis of the content of the civic education textbooks, the implementation of those declarations seems to be affirmed. However, a critical analysis of the visual material leads to a conclusion that the discourse of the textbooks applied in Polish civic education for the upper-secondary school level bears traits of discrimination and preserves stereotypes related to persons of different "skin colours". The results of the research are a contribution to critical pedagogy because they reveal another form of domination included in formal education, which officially promotes the valuing of diversity and equality.

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