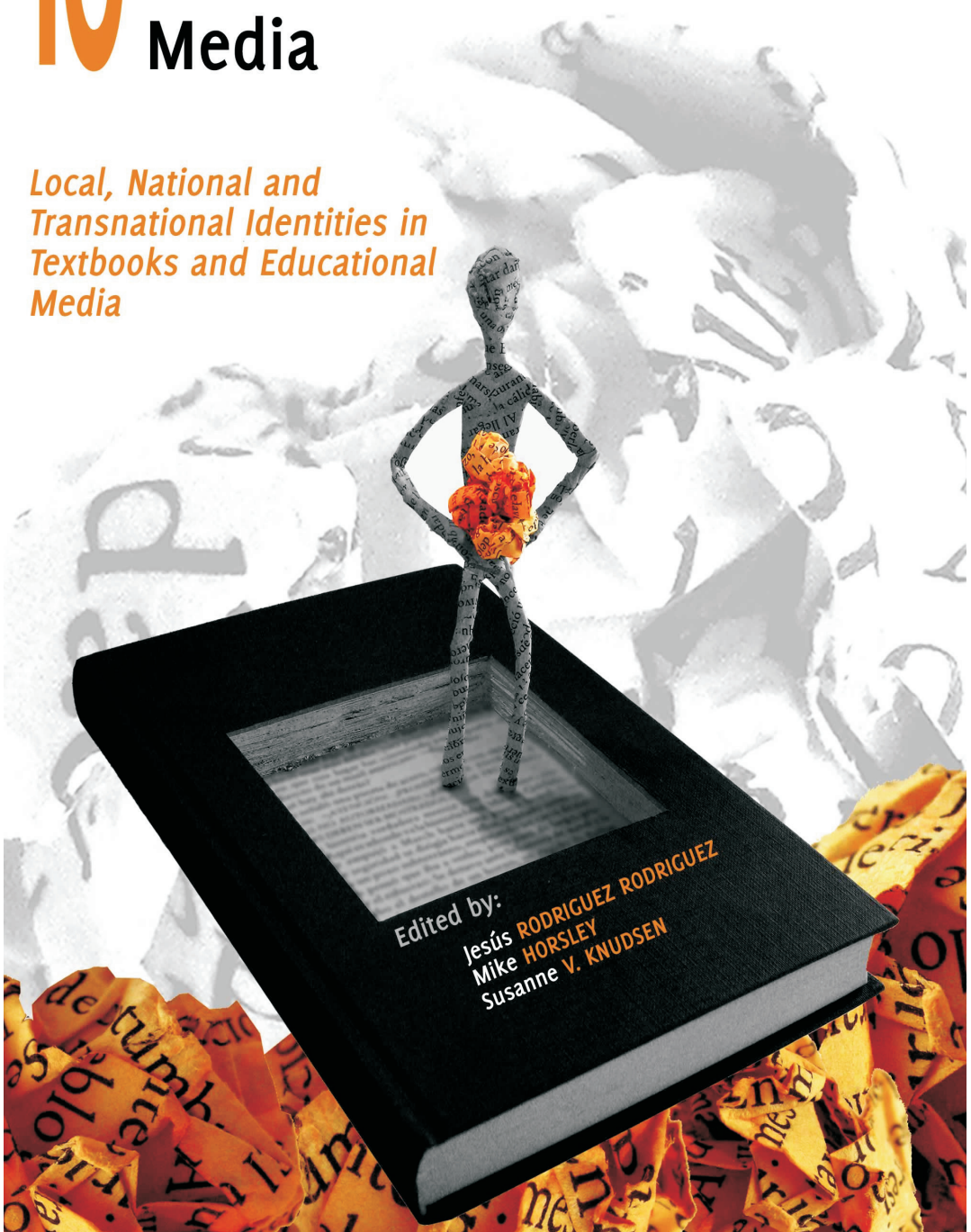


10th International Conference on Textbooks and Educational Media

*Local, National and
Transnational Identities in
Textbooks and Educational
Media*



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Local, National and Transnacional identities in Textbooks and Educational Media

Ten International Conference on Research on Textbooks and Educational Media

September 2009 Santiago de Compostela - Spain

This book presents cutting edge research and research methodologies from members of the International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media (IARTEM) <http://www.iartem.no>

Cover design: José María Mesias Lema

English and publishing editing: Wendy Ward, Australia

Editing and design: Jesús Rodríguez Rodríguez , Mike Horsley and Susanne V. Knudsen.

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ISBN: 978-84-8408-145-6

This research volume of the 10th conference of the International Association for Textbooks and Educational Media is dedicated to the memory and work of Professor Alain Choppin, France and Professor Peder Skyum Nielsen, Denmark.

Alain and Peder were great friends of IARTEM, highly accomplished researchers and writers and powerful voices for research on textbooks and educational media. They and their works will be remembered.

Between the market and the school: Textbook approval, selection and evaluation in Portugal

Joana de Sousa and Maria de Lourdes Dionísio

Introduction

Textbooks have always been complex materials in their different processes of production, selection, approval and use. In Portugal, studies have shown that textbooks are very often scientifically out of date, have conceptual errors and are pedagogically inadequate. However, at the same time, textbooks have been the most common resource in classrooms, representing, structuring and controlling school knowledge.

Until now, the selection of textbooks was delegated to each school and regulated by market forces. More recently, in order to improve the quality of textbooks, the Portuguese Ministry of Education initiated a new policy by implementing pedagogic evaluation.

As Portugal introduces this new system, the purpose of this paper is to outline the position of publishers concerning their criteria for approval, selection and evaluation of textbooks. To achieve this goal, discourse analysis has been used. Empirical data have been gathered from two sources: first, media texts published between 2005 and 2007; second, a questionnaire completed by Portuguese teachers in 2009. For the purposes of this paper, only the data available in media texts will be discussed here.

We will try to show that publishers strongly resist the Ministry's new approval process. They stand up for the product they sell, arguing that textbook quality can be judged by all teachers during the selection process. On the other side, teachers seem to agree with the lack of quality of a significant number of these books, and so agree with the need for reviewing their daily classroom resource.

Contextualising

In Portugal, there was no textbook evaluation policy until 2006, with State policies, until then, extremely liberal concerning textbooks. In addition, private enterprise was left in charge of the production and distribution of textbooks in schools. The marketing of textbooks was also uncontrolled, while the selection of titles to be used was the responsibility of the schools themselves and of the teachers.

In this free-market system, the only available data about the characteristics of textbooks came from academic studies. At the same time these studies were showing textbooks as the most common resource in everyday classrooms, they were also pointing out that Portuguese textbooks were frequently out of date, had conceptual

errors and were pedagogically inadequate (Dionísio 2000). With the growth of textbook production, teachers began to express more difficulties with the selection process, and the lack of proper criteria had as a consequence a more subjective evaluation (Bento 2000).

This situation, together with the knowledge about the positive impact of the investment in textbooks on learners' cognitive achievements, led to a more centralized policy for textbook development in the scope of the definition of the Portuguese National Goals for Education (UNESCO 2004, 17). This policy also has to be seen as a result of the challenges of the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs (European Commission 2008), because of stronger demands for increases in the quality of education.

Therefore, the Portuguese Ministry of Education initiated a series of actions aimed at improving the quality of education. Among them, Law 47/2006 identified the evaluation of textbooks as a means of improving their quality. By creating an effective instrument for quality control and textbook evaluation, the Portuguese Ministry of Education intends to increase the quality of education in a modern educational system.

This new law has some central issues, such as the systematic ongoing assessment of textbooks and the establishment of protocols with universities that will constitute teams to evaluate textbooks in areas of knowledge.

Research aims and methods

The purpose of this paper is to present the perspectives of textbook publishers concerning the approval, selection and evaluation processes. The selection of these publishers was made due to the fact that, since the beginning of the public discussion about the way textbooks were to be evaluated, they objected strongly to the new policy. The media was, by that time, a fertile arena for publishers to make public their views of the new policy.

For the analysis of the publishers' opinions, we used media texts published between 2005 and 2007, using discourse analysis techniques. The focus on publishers' discourse intends to establish by evidence – through the text analysis – what Fairclough says to be the construction of social relations and social reality:

[...] analytical properties of texts which are particularly connected to the interpersonal function of language and interpersonal meanings [...] and] aspects of text analysis which are particularly connected to ideational function and ideational meanings (Fairclough 1992, 137).

Publishers' point of view

The publishers' discourse was described according to aspects of text analysis combined with their interpretation because:

Description is not as separate from interpretation as it is often assumed to be. [...] one's analysis of the text is shaped and coloured by one's interpretation of its relationship to discourse processes and wider social processes (Fairclough 1992, 199).

This analysis has allowed us to arrange the publishers' arguments according to two main topics – Education and Market. However, more than half the arguments identified are limited to educational discourses and not to market discourses, as one could hypothesise. What makes this discourse particularly relevant is the fact that publishers – market agents with the purpose of selling textbooks – have a discourse more closely aligned to the educational field than the commercial. What we intend to explore is what this tells us, namely about the changing nature of the locus of production of the pedagogical discourse.

In these publishers statements it is clear that the way they choose to convince the public about the inadequacy of an evaluation system is to denounce, not only the business damage that this will constitute, but also the educational damage this process will bring, through statements such as:

- great damage to the quality of education
- also threatens the Portuguese publishers' survival, who won't have books to publish for 2 or 3 years. In this way, it 'opens the door' to the multinational companies or to a possible monopoly

These are examples of functional relationships between clauses. The first, through the adverb 'also', is an extension relationship of straight addition; 'in this way' is an elaboration relationship in which "one clause (or sentence) elaborates on the meaning of another by further specifying or describing it" (Fairclough 1992, 175).

The functional relationships between clauses have the advantage of showing the structure of the arguments. When the publisher goes on to state that the evaluation system is dangerous because of what the multinational companies represent, that threatening of the Portuguese publishers clearly compromises the quality of the education argument. So, beyond the quality of the education argument, there are, in fact, arguments from the discursive field of the commercial market.

According to the publishers' point of view, the educational "damage" will consist of an educational stagnation, as noted in the following comments:

- It will lead to an educational stagnation.
- The students' results will get worse.

Although the publishers' main goal is to make a profit, what makes these statements interesting is the fact that they defend textbooks within the field of pedagogy: for them, more important than the market good is the innovation element in the learning process, to which they as publishers contribute.

In the four examples above, we also note the use of verbal units such as: "threats", "opens", "will lead", "will get". All of these verbs, either in the present simple or in

the future simple, demonstrate future certainty. For publishers, knowledge about the future is not uncertain or just possible; on the contrary, they know “for sure” that it will be that way.

Publishers continue their refusal to support an evaluation system, arguing what they see as misunderstandings about the lack of evaluation:

- Do we know in Portugal or in any other developed country a better way to evaluate textbooks than teacher selection?
- The evaluation committee will replace teachers and schools in the adoption process.
- In countries like Finland and Norway, textbook selection is left to teachers.

The country development comparison here makes teachers’ skill a decisive argument to guarantee the quality of textbooks, arguing that the selection of texts by teachers is enough. Indeed, teachers’ qualifications are one of the arguments most preferred by publishers, a kind of a call for teacher solidarity. When publishers do this, they change the focus from evaluation to selection, even if the new policy states that teachers will continue to be free to choose and select textbooks.

It is also very curious that publishers gave, as examples, Finland and Norway. These two countries are internationally recognized as examples to follow in relation to educational policies and practices. What publishers are saying is that we should follow such countries’ policies to improve educational outcomes. However, what they really want to say is that the idea for an evaluation system of textbooks should be forgotten.

This call for solidarity with teachers, who at the same time were arguing with the Ministry of Education, is well expressed in the following statement: “I can’t accept publishers being despised in the evaluation process; and the way the Ministry of Education deals with publishers is the same that they use with teachers, being suspicious of them.”

The comparison between teachers and publishers may be understood on two levels: one in which teachers and publishers are agents and partners on equal terms; and a second being partners in the same circumstances, collaborating in disputes with the the Ministry of Education.

The purpose of these kinds of statements is to find allies: teachers. The way publishers construct themselves in this discourse is as partners, with the same goals for their social and educational roles and in the same ‘fight’ for the improvement of the quality on education. At the same time, because of their socio-economic power, publishers also ‘offer’ teachers their voice to speak on their behalf.

Publishers discourse has indeed some common aspects with strategic discourse from advertising, in which “producer, product, and consumer are brought together as co-participants in a life style, a community of consumption, which the advertisement constructs and simulates” (Fairclough 1992, 211).

As market agents, publishers know their clients very well. This explains why the majority of the arguments against the evaluation system focus on issues that they assume might have some meaning among teachers. For instance, the position of universities in the process:

- I don't know if I recognize qualification to the committee.
- I admit they are great teachers and researchers, but I doubt their competence for such a post.

Besides the importance of the epistemological modality of the argument: “I don't know”, what is really interesting is to notice how publishers assume a role and a function for recognizing a capacity, or a qualification, to researchers that are supposed to be involved in the evaluation committees. Publishers, market agents, promote themselves as pedagogic agents capables of recognizing skills to a professional team of educators. Of course, this doubt about the competence to evaluate textbooks on the part of university teachers echoes some of the criticism from school professionals that universities do not know the “schools' reality” very well.

In order to convince a wider audience, publishers' arguments also invoke ideology and democracy:

- In Europe there isn't any example to follow.
- It's not a rule in the European Union.
- It's a very similar scheme to the one used in dictatorship.

Arguing the evaluation system is an isolated action in Europe, publishers want us to believe the new policy for the textbook evaluation will return us to an educational policy from the dictatorship, with its “single, official – and strongly scrutinized – textbook”, and when teachers had no freedom of choice.

Such a word – dictatorship – has an ideological and political meaning that is still “an abstract concept frequently metaphorically understood as an enemy that should be fought” (Resende & Ramalho 2006, 88). In this way, our life experience allows us not only to identify this concept as injurious, but also to anticipate its causes and consequences.

This is how publishers project their particular vision, hiding certain aspects and constructing a reality that is being told. Through this ontological metaphor, the publishers' discourse dissimulates the inconvenience of the new evaluation system for the textbook market and the emphasis on certain characteristics, suggesting that inconvenience imposes negative meaning on the Education field and its policies (Resende & Ramalho 2006, 113).

As we have said before, the arguments from the discursive field of the market are very few and the discussion upon the new policy for textbooks is mainly a pedagogical and educational discussion. Even so, publishers cannot resist alerting us to the danger of possible bankruptcies, monopolies and multinational companies, even though some of the strongest voices against the evaluation come from publishing houses that virtually constitute a monopoly.

When asked about the excessive number of textbooks available on the market, publishers do not refer to the arguments until now:

- Primary school has only three areas of knowledge with basic theoretical content. In other words, the investment in publishing such textbooks is relatively low and easily re-exchanged, which explains the bigger supply.

Besides the meaning of the lexicalizations “investment”, “re-exchanged” and “supply” being perfectly related to the market, the school as an institution is, in this way, organized and defined in terms of production, distribution and consumption of commodities: “such expressions affect a metaphorical transfer of the vocabulary of commodities and markets into the educational order of discourse. [...]. It’s a commodified educational discourse.” (Fairclough 1992, 208).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it might be said that the publishers’ discourse about the evaluation of textbooks may represent an ongoing process of recontextualization, through which a certain organization (the school) and its discursive field is being colonized. This means that although publishers assume in their discourse to be the ‘voice’ of the teachers, their hidden intent is that their discourse might be appropriated by the school and its actors and become naturalized as their own voice.

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