

The Idea of “Inequality” in Alternative Textbooks for Primary School

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Abstract: The formation of primary school children involves a multitude of aspects that are based (by examples and by counterexamples) not only on the activities carried out in the classroom, but also on the concrete materials used or referred to in the educational instructive approach. In this context, this paper proposes an analysis of the texts presented in the alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian / Romanian Language and Literature, used in Romania, in primary school. The target analysis criteria essentially converge to the identification of the main coordinates that can be seen in these texts (human typologies, values, gender characteristics, cultural, social characteristics, etc.); these may be prerequisites to explore, at this age, the idea of “inequality” and its implications in the relationship / socialization / communication. Starting with the elements identified in the textbooks, primary teachers may propose / use, on the one hand, certain methods to approach – critically / personalized / adapted and, at the same time, responsible, anchored in everyday life and in contemporary world, and on the other hand, alternatives to literary texts (from Romanian / universal children's literature) and non-literacy (older or newer, distributed through mass-media, social media, etc.).

Keywords: *Inequality; primary school; literary/ non-literary texts; alternative textbooks;*

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1. Introduction

Both activities with children and the materials used in these activities are ways of preparing them to cope with multiple variables in everyday life situations: values, cultural, social, individual data, challenges in relationships, in the communication process, etc.

In this context, the texts in the alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian / The Romanian language and literature, used in Romania, in primary school, contain a number of elements that can be analysed through the inequality grid - as examples and counterexamples.

The aim of this paper is to identify these elements (in the fourteen analysed textbooks, four for each grade: first grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade; for the preparatory class there are no alternative textbooks) and to contextualize them so that they can be the basis for exploring the idea of inequality in activities carried out with children of this age.

2. Literature Review

The specialized works devoted to the issue of inequality in education generally reflects the following coordinates: datum - initial inequalities; forms / manifestations / concretizations of inequality in education; consequences of inequality in education; solutions to reduce / eliminate inequalities in education; positive consequences of equality in education; positive outcomes of attempts to reduce / eliminate inequalities in education.

2.1. *Datum - initial inequalities*

In the scientific literature (Antoninis, Delprato, & Benavot, 2016; Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008; Coady & Dizioli, 2017; Cortesero, 2015; Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016; Gauthier, 2009; Noguera, 2017; Oppedisano & Turati, 2015; Page, 2005; Rochex, 2017) one may distinguish, as types of initial inequalities (which we include in the “datum” category) elements such as: gender differences; various skills; differences in race, ethnicity, class; birth differences; disabilities; territorial provenance; migration / emigration phenomenon; economic inequality / family income; family / parental environment - linguistic, moral, learning / school discontinuities; the surrounding environment (neighbourhood, peer group); educational inequality - school characteristics; dominant strategies, etc.

It is also noted as analysis directions, the theory of “cultural discontinuity” and the theory of “systemic discrimination”. According to Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine (2016), the

basis of these two theories is a reality enlisted „in the very nature of the hierarchical societies: that of the initial inequalities between children, even before having first contact with the school” (p. 36). However, there are also differences between these theories: “they do not concern the role of the school institution in the same way” (Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 36); the first theory underlines the idea of cultural discontinuity, “which is not - or is little - considered as such by the school, and it remains indifferent to the initial differences between children” (Bourdieu as cited in Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 36); the second theory “insists that the supply of education varies according to the initial level of the students, their family, their cultural, ethnic origin, etc. and that these variations strengthen inequalities” (Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 36).

2.2. Forms / manifestations / concretizations of inequality in education

Education and educational policy specialists have reported a series of general data on the forms of inequality: “educational inequality can be examined using indicators that capture different aspects of education ranging from resources to access, participation and attainment” (Antoninis, Delprato, & Benavot, 2016, p. 63; see also Duru-Bellat, 2009, p. 1; Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 7). For example: “unequal distribution of goods distributed through school” (types of learning, diplomas, skills), referring to “socially defined groups especially through the socio-economic environment, the cultural capital of the parents or the migratory route” (Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 7); gender inequalities in education (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008, p. 319); classroom structure, composition of the children’s group, school climate (Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 8); the quality of education (Coady & Dizioli, 2017, p. 15; Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 8) etc. Along with the general types of inequality, particular information is provided from various educational systems (from the United States, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, etc.). According to Gamoran & Bruch (2017, p. 777), for example, “educational inequality is a pressing problem in much of the English-speaking world and especially in the United States”. More specifically, Oppedisano & Turati (2015, p. 3) show that inequality “decreased in Germany and Spain [...], whilst it increased in France and Italy”.

2.3. Consequences of inequality in education

Generally, in individual and social evolution, inequality in education can have consequences such as: the deepening of the initial inequalities (Felouzis, Fouquet-Chauprade, Charmillot, & Imperiale-Arefaine, 2016, p. 15); an increased risk of conflict (Antoninis, Delprato, & Benavot, 2016, p. 63) etc.

2.4. Solutions to reduce / eliminate inequalities in education

The specialized studies illustrate, as solutions for diminishing / eliminating inequalities in education, elements such as: highlighting the individual strengths/ individual-level characteristics (Agasisti & Longobardi, 2014, p. 8); school involvement as an intergenerational mediator (Rothstein, 2018); the use of some school factors (extracurricular activities, involvement of school management - Agasisti & Longobardi, 2014, p. 8); the quality of educational actors; the relevance of the didactic strategies used in the classroom (Gauthier, 2009); developing strategies that respond to “the social, psychological, emotional needs” of children (Noguera, 2017, p. 132).

2.5. Positive consequences of equality in education; positive outcomes of attempts to reduce / eliminate inequalities in education

Regarding the positive consequences of equality in education, the researchers note, on the one hand, the increasing impact of education on the development on various levels: individual, social, cultural, political (“eliminating inequality in education will amplify the positive influence of education on the achievement of other development outcomes” - Antoninis, Delprato, & Benavot, 2016, p. 63) and, on the other hand, as a particular case, the reversal of gender inequality in schooling and academic success (Rochex, 2017), in the sense that girls have a higher school success rate than boys.

By reference, on the one hand, to the ideas and examples of the related literature and, on the other hand, to the experiences of life and the educational system in Romania, I consider that the relevant elements for this approach are: the existence of the initial inequalities and the risk their deepening in the classroom and, in contrast, the idea that the teacher / school can change something in this direction - by focusing on empathy, tolerance, uniqueness, individual evolution of each person, socio-emotional development and didactic / strategic approach, in positive key, of any aspect initially contextualized as negative.

3. Elements from the alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian / Language and Romanian Literature for Primary School – Approaches on “inequality”

Two alternative textbooks for each grade (Part I and Part II) were analysed searching the idea of “inequality”: first grade - 2014, Litera; 2015, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică; 2nd grade - 2014, Humanitas; 2014, Ascendia Design; 3rd grade - 2015, Corint Educational; 2016, Art; 4th grade - 2016, Intuitext; 2016, Art. The objectives of this study were: (a) to identify, in the texts of the alternative textbooks, the main coordinates that can be analysed through the grid of the idea of “inequality” (human typologies, values, gender, cultural, social characteristics, etc.) and (b) to identify the prerequisites for approaching (in primary school) the idea of “inequality” and its implications.

3.1. Elements identified in alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian for first grade

Analysing the manuals presented above in terms of the idea of “inequality”, I noticed that the texts in the alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian for first grade contain references to: (a) stereotypical roles, gender inequality: Olga and Agata play the restaurant, and the client is a little boy, Iuga - “The restaurant” (Bărbulescu, Beșliu, Chifu, & Niculae, 2014a, p. 6); “Barbu rides a bicycle. [...] Bianca helps her grandmother to work.” - “To grandparents” (Bărbulescu, Beșliu, Chifu, & Niculae, 2014b, p. 17); female stereotype role - “nurse” (Bărbulescu, Beșliu, Chifu, & Niculae, 2014b, p. 8); twin sisters “work in the garden”; their mother “bakes a pie” (Bărbulescu, Beșliu, Chifu, & Niculae, 2014b, p. 22); male roles: Xenopol, Maxim are characters in the “Eccentric Inventor” (Bărbulescu, Beșliu, Chifu, & Niculae, 2014b, p. 39); (b) differences between individuals: “the giant Dino [...] the little Dodi” (Norel, Pădureanu, & Mălureanu, 2015a, p. 54); (c) family environment: “In my family I feel / appreciated and protected” (Norel, Pădureanu, & Mălureanu, 2015b, p. 7). Therefore, one can distinguish both clear examples of inequality (stereotypical roles, differences between individuals) and examples that may be a pretext for discussing possible inequalities between the characteristics of the family environment (my family versus other families).

3.2. Elements identified in alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian for 2nd grade

The texts analysed in the alternative textbooks of Communication in Romanian for 2nd grade contain, from the sphere of inequality, references to: (a) origin of another country: “the boy from Calabria” - “The first snow”, after Edmondo de Amicis (Matache & Mălureanu, 2014a, p. 62); (b) the family environment: “her father refused to buy books” - “Matilda”, after Roald Dahl (Dobra, 2014a, p. 24); (c) the financial income of the family: “It would not be enough my whole salary to pay for them!” - “The Adventures of the Little Onion”, after Gianni Rodari (Matache & Mălureanu, 2014b, p. 22).

3.3. Elements identified in alternative textbooks of Romanian Language and Literature for 3rd grade

In the 3rd grade Language and literature textbooks, the references to the idea of “inequality” are more numerous and varied, more nuanced, by elements such as: (a) Differences between individuals: “The meaning of letters [...] is not to be eaten, no matter what colour they have, but to be respected” - “The island of children who eat letters”, after Sonia Larian (Bălan & Andrei, 2015a, pp. 14-15); “You are three very different little girls [with the same name, Maria]” - “The first day of school”, by Mihaela Deleanu (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016a, p. 10); “a fat boy of about ten or eleven years” - “The Neverending Story”, after Michael Ende (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016a, p. 38); “He was short, he was wearing a hat [...] and an overalls” - “Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver”, after Michael Ende (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016b, p. 8); reporting on differences: “How did you make so many friends? [...] I helped them [...] and respected them, even if they were animals” - “The Secret Garden”, after F. H. Burnett (Bălan & Andrei, 2015a, p.45); (b) family / home environment: “Her grandmother reads it every night at bedtime” - “The story of the story book”, by Emilia Căldăraru (Bălan & Andrei, 2015a, p. 23); a maiden loves her mother, because “she cared and educated me as well as your parents do” - “My mother”, after Anna Sewell (Bălan & Andrei, 2015b, p. 34); “In front of an orphanage. Here, the children looked sadly out the window.” - “Snail”, after Claudia Groza (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016a, p. 67); Birth Differences: “You must learn to play like all the other children who have no brothers and sisters” - “The Secret Garden”, after F. H. Burnett (Bălan & Andrei, 2015a, p. 44); “She was the smallest and the most spoiled” - “Legend of the Snowdrop” (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016b, p. 24); (c) disabilities: each of the seven ducks,

despite their disabilities (deafness, blindness, locomotor disability, etc.) “saw itself as the most beautiful in the world!” - “The Story of the Seven Ducks”, by Vladimir Colin (Bălan & Andrei, 2015b, p. 59), the dog “was lame” - text by Silvia Kerim (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016b, p. 69); (d) economic inequality: “he had no money to send him to school” - “The Child with Golden Hands” (Bălan & Andrei, 2015b, p. 14); (e) the problem of working in a foreign country: “the Romanian [inventor] could have lived all his life in France” - “Who invented the stylus?” (Bălan & Andrei, 2015b, p. 7); “He went to find his glory and happiness in Paris” - “The Child with Golden Hands” (Bălan & Andrei, 2015b, p. 15); (f) rural - urban difference: “The Country Mouse and the Town Mouse” (Bălan & Andrei, 2015a, pp. 50-51); the children “have spent their entire lives in the city, but now their father has a new job in the village” - “The Enchanted Wood”, after Enid Blyton (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016b, p. 72); (g) reporting to a specific territory / culture: “dear children in this country” - “Children's Christmas”, by Octavian Goga (Bălan & Andrei, 2015a, p. 62); “The country where Lukas lived [...] was unimaginably small” - “Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver”, after Michael Ende (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016b, p. 8); reporting to the community: a snail who had no house was very upset because his brothers “laughed at him and did not want to receive him in the Big Community of Snails” - “The Story of the Snail without a house” after Adina Popescu (Mihăilescu & Pițilă, 2016b, p. 64).

3.4. Elements identified in alternative textbooks of Romanian Language and Literature for 4th grade

Multiple and nuanced references to the idea of “inequality” are also visible in the alternative textbooks of Romanian Language and Literature for 4th grade: (a) differences - physical, dressing, behavioral, hierarchical - between individuals: “He was not a beauty [...] and moreover, he was clumsy” - “Cipi, this giant dwarf”, by Fodor Sándor (Radu & Jeler, 2016b, p. 26); “Our Empress Miorlana of the Miau Dynasty” - “The story of two tiger, called Ninigra and Aligra”, by Nina Cassian (Radu & Jeler, 2016b, p. 34); Pippi Longstocking: “a red hair like carrot, [...] Her dress was really curious. [...] had long socks, one brown and one black” - “Pippi Longstocking”, by Astrid Lindgren (Radu & Jeler, 2016b, p. 44); “Harap-Alb, son of the Emperor, but also the servant of the glabrous man” - “The Story of Harap-Alb”, after Ion Creangă (Radu & Jeler, 2016b, p. 56); (b) family inequalities / birth differences: “Pippi was nine years old and lived alone. She had no mother or father” *versus* “In this house lived a mother, a father and two cute children” - “Pippi Longstocking”, by Astrid Lindgren

(Radu & Jeler, 2016b, p. 44); “Her parents did not have time to read her at bedtime” - “Dina”, after Victor Cîlinca (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016a, p. 53); “Poor James was always put to work” - “James”, after Roald Dahl (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016a, p. 55); “I will give it to your brother, Mayrie, because he is the youngest” - “How little Mayrie got scared”, after Lyman Frank Baum (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016a, p. 62); (c) social inequalities: “a family of very poor people [...] One day, a boyar was fond of them” - “The wretched poor girl”, after Petre Ispirescu (Radu & Jeler, 2016b, p. 78); oppositions like: married - unmarried, rich - poor, master - servant: “an old teacher [...] He was not married and lived in a huge house with the maid and three servants” - “The Chronicles of Narnia. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”, by C. S. Lewis (Radu & Jeler, 2016a, p. 64); (c) stereotypical roles: the text “Where is Dad?”, after Jack Canfield - the counterpart of roles assumed by the mother driving the car (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016a, pp. 46-47); (d) urban - rural difference: “A tram passed from time to time. An endless city flows over the window” - “Butterflies with hundreds of wings”, after Mircea Cărtărescu (Radu & Jeler, 2016a, p. 35); “Yesterday I left it to the children in the city” - “How little Mayrie got scared”, after Lyman Frank Baum (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016a, p. 62); (e) elements specific to certain areas / cultures: “folk costumes” - fragment of an exercise (Radu, & Jeler, 2016a, p. 57); the implications of life in another country: “A friend called Faruk”, after Don Rowe and Jan Newton (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016a, pp. 62-63); (f) access to sources of information / to classical books and to electronic books: “I have scraped the bookstores and the internet” - “Butterflies with hundreds of wings”, after Mircea Cărtărescu (Radu & Jeler, 2016a, p. 35); “Another library”, Dan Rădulescu, in the review “World of Books”, no. 2/2016 (Radu & Jeler, 2016a, p. 41); unequal access to resources; physical inequality - people were watching television, and the Giant had no one on his own, which he considered incorrect; the solution found: he took all the televisions and made them a “huge screen” - “The impatient giant”, after Roald Dahl (Mihăescu, Pacearcă, Dulman, Alexe, & Brebenel, 2016b, p. 72).

One may distinguish, among the elements presented above, both examples and counterexamples that can be used in addressing the idea of “inequality” in primary school (see, for example, stereotypical female roles: mother, grandmother, daughters who cleanse, cook etc. *versus* the mother driving the car; the family environment in which the parents / grandparents read stories to their children *versus* the family environment in which parents

do not do this; warm, loving home *versus* orphanage; complete family *versus* the orphans, the children of parents who left to work in another country; poor – rich; access to resources / education *versus* lack of opportunity, etc.). As it is natural, given the higher number of literary texts in the alternative textbooks for 3rd and 4th grades, the related examples are more numerous and varied, more nuanced than those in first and second grades (where the texts are, most often, created by the authors of textbooks, careful to avoid the idea of “inequality” of any kind). In addition, children’s experiences accumulate, diversify, and may be associated with examples of the literary / non-literary texts analysed in real debates of the problems of contemporary world.

4. Conclusions

The texts under scrutiny reflect, in particular, the datum - the initial inequalities - and, in some cases, alternatives to the issue of “inequality”. The identified elements are therefore considered to be prerequisites for the approach of the idea of “inequality” in the activities carried out with primary school children.

We consider that such an analysis would be useful for specialists in other education systems, because: (a) To obtain information considered relevant to the Romanian education system, by analysing the selection of texts made by the Romanian authors of textbooks; (b) to identify possible texts from Romanian literature to be studied by children from other countries, as a way to better know the social, cultural realities from Romania, the manner in which Romanian writers and typical characters in textbooks refer to the idea of “inequality” etc. Given that inequality exists, education may offer an optimal approach to this reality through various activities, such as: the proposal, by students and / or teachers / parents, of solutions for overcoming / eliminating inequality; carrying out activities that involve an optimal approach to inequalities of different types; teachers proposing support texts that provide alternatives to the issue of “inequality”; the development of programs during the initial / continuous teacher training, that focus on the issue of “inequality” etc.

The paper reaches the conclusion that inequality in education is a topic that has to be tackled at various levels: individual (as a teacher / student / parent, etc.); didactic (school / extra-curricular activities); institutional / educational policy, always involving adaptations, resizing.

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