First Israeli-Canadian Workshop Teachers and Teaching in the Era of Change
February 5-7, 2018, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Lessons from the field

**Textbooks are not welcomed anymore - a surprising resemblance between conservative and progressive teaching practices**

Adar Cohen, The Hebrew University

“Look, I come to class with a plan of what I am going to teach. Luckily, I know the textbook by heart; I don’t really need to prepare, I know exactly what I’m going to teach [...] in my case, I go back in time and my approach is like the old Prussian method, I dictate the summary of what we are discussing. [...] Today, textbooks are recommendations. And I don’t even use the textbook, because we don’t have a textbook.”

[Excerpts from an interview with a civics teacher from an Israeli high-school].

In this short paper, I would like to highlight a phenomenon that I recognized during the field research I pursued about Israel’s school systems, which, in my experience as a practitioner, I can testify to be quite prevalent: the disappearance of textbooks from students’ desks, especially in the humanities and social studies sphere. I would like to emphasize that this phenomenon is simultaneously characterized by teachers with conservative approaches who prepare their students for national tests, as well as teachers that utilize more progressive approaches and use alternative evaluation methods. The elements that I will present are primarily the description and analysis of the current situation that I witnessed in the classrooms.

My field of practice and research is civic education. More specifically, in the last few years, I examined teachers’ practices in the classroom as they address and deal with controversial political issues. Print (Print, 2012) presented three pedagogical approaches which civics teachers use on the continuum between traditional teaching approaches and higher order thinking approaches: (a) Teacher-dominated approach,
in which the teaching is focused on information provided by the teacher.; (b) Teacher-influenced approach, in which the teacher encourages the students to think independently, to inquire, mainly around problem-solving regarding the knowledge s/he is imparting.; (c) Engaged-learning approach, in which the teacher is an advisor in role playing, simulations, individual or group field research, with the goal of civic empowerment and pedagogic activism.

Although research has revealed a correlation between active teaching methods and the absorption of social activism and civic participation (Hahn, 1998), other comprehensive research on civic education in the UK (Keating et al., 2009) the US (Niemi & Junn, 1998) and even in Israel (Ichilov, 2003), reveal that the majority of practices used by teachers in the civics classrooms are traditional, meaning that the teacher, the knowledge and the textbook are the main focus and the students are quite passive. As a result, civic education researchers in Israel identified the analysis of textbooks as main lens through which they can best understand what is transpiring and what the trends are in this field (Wahrman, 2003; Pinson, 2007). Furthermore, textbooks have been at the center of huge public and political controversies in the last decade. On the contrary, scholars whose main method is analyzing textbooks acknowledge that they can not necessarily know what the significant influence of the books is on the teaching process (Davies & Issitt, 2005).

Context

Every student in Israeli high-schools has to take seven mandatory national external exams (matriculation exams). This is the reality of high-stakes tests, encouraging and even forcing teachers to use traditional teaching methods focused on memorization and not on higher-order thinking objectives or creativity. History and civics are two such subjects whose teaching has always been based on textbooks which were written specifically for the school system.

Civic studies curriculum is very extensive. The mandatory matriculation civics exam is considered very difficult, and teachers and schools are evaluated by the scores of
their students. In some cases, teachers are offered financial incentives to encourage them to improve the level of students’ scores. In parallel, in the last decade the Ministry of Education has provided instructions and incentives to introduce changes in the pedagogy and to embrace constructivist approaches and higher-order thinking methods leading to alternative ways of evaluations. In 2009, the Ministry introduced group inquiry projects as a mandatory component of the civics curriculum (Zohar & Cohen, 2016) and in 2014 similar alternative evaluation methods were integrated as obligatory components of the entire educational curriculum.

The phenomenon: Oral-centered teaching approach
I conducted a case-study based ethnographic research in a large typical Jewish urban state high-school (1,200 students; average SE level; typical right-wing voting patterns). This 30-year old school, which has a heterogeneous student population, is considered to have high tests scores and a rigorous discipline approach. Throughout two academic years, I examined the work of five civics teachers who ranged in age, seniority, professional ideology, gender, and ethnic identity. Some of them taught only in the national-test track classes, while others instructed classes of alternative constructivist teaching methods.
My findings were that the majority of the classes were characterized by a conservative teaching approach strictly following the formal curriculum, including teachers that defined themselves possessing progressive approaches. Surprisingly, in parallel, although the teachers and the knowledge were at the core of dozens of lessons that I observed, the use of written texts, including the textbooks, nearly disappeared.
My observations of the classes given by the veteran and respected civics teacher at that school - quoted at the beginning of this paper - showed that he has a ‘teacher dominated approach’ (Print, 2012). Just like his colleagues, he used to lecture, explain materials, provide examples, dictate the material and discuss current events with the class. The students mainly listened, wrote in their notebooks from dictation, asked
questions and took part in oral discussions. The interesting phenomenon was the absolute absence of a textbook, as well as any other kinds of written texts, that would serve as an alternative to the classic textbook. Furthermore, the students were not asked to search for any information on the web, nor the teacher distribute any academic or journalistic texts or ask for any written assignments.

My key findings in the observation of all the teachers was that the teaching was primarily oral, in spite of the large differences in regards to age, seniority, professional ideology, gender, and ethnic identity. I learned that the decision not to use textbooks at all was made collectively by the teachers in their staff meetings and was approved by the school management. From the interviews that I conducted, I discovered that all of the teachers were satisfied with this decision and none of them opposed it. Simultaneously, all of the civics teachers employed alternative teaching methods, such as group-inquiry projects or project-based learning (PBL). In these ‘Engaged-learning approach’ classes as well, none of the teachers encouraged the use of textbooks as a learning tool. Instead, in these lessons, the teachers usually asked the students to search for additional information in the web or from other sources.

The findings from this case-study resemble the impressions that I had in the last decade as the national civics supervisor at the Ministry of Education as well as a teacher trainer, that is the decrease of the use of textbooks in civics lessons. These findings require a larger and deeper research.

**Alternative explanations of the phenomenon**

The phenomenon that I described can be conceptualized as an oral-centered approach, that nearly abandons reading as a learning tool in the classroom. In my field research, I identified several alternative explanations, some of which are universal while others are unique to the Israeli case:

1. **Weak literacy skills:** 21st century students have a harder time reading long and high-level language texts due to the reading culture of social media.
2. Efficiency: the pressure to prepare for the tests serves as an incentive to use the time available in the most efficient manner in order to go over all bodies of knowledge needed. The use of textbooks is not perceived as an efficient of time by the teachers, but instead is perceived as something that holds them back. Moreover the availability of summaries in the web make it unnecessary to use such long and complicated texts from the textbooks.

3. Professional knowledge and conceptions: the big challenge of students’ poor literacy skills is not awarded sufficient attention during teacher training (with the exception of language teachers). This leads to teachers not seeing this challenge as part of their job, and trying to avoid dealing with it in the classroom setting.

4. Pedagogic innovation: Unlike the traditional teaching, teachers that adopt a more open and constructivist approach tend to believe that textbooks are not suitable for the culture of independent inquiry.

5. Political disagreements: In the last few years, civics textbook have been at the center of provocative political debates in Israel, and the teachers experienced extended periods of uncertainty of the validity of the textbooks.

6. Alternative formal teaching texts: In 2016, the Israeli Ministry of Education published a summary of all of the professional terms required for the matriculation exams. Many teachers regarded this document as a better and more efficient alternative to textbooks.

**Implications**

The described phenomenon requires a deeper research, however at this point, we can identify that is has several important implications. In regards to the reality of teaching in the 21st century, teachers should address both students’ decreasing literacy skills as well as the students’ perception that textbooks are outdated and represent the “old” teaching approach.
In regards to curriculum design and teachers' training, the dilemma is whether to try and change this phenomenon or to identify new ways of teaching in which textbooks are not central learning tools.

In regards to educational research, the new reality described here has the potential to lead to a shift in the focus of empirical research, decrease the academic analysis of texts within textbooks and increase the investigation of teachers' practices in the classroom with or without textbooks.

References


