
Discourse Analysis on Textbooks – A Knowledge Overview

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Abstract

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The aim of this presentation is to discuss an ongoing study of how discourse analysis is being used as a theory and research method for analyzing textbooks. The study is a part of a larger project we have been working on for two years, which is a knowledge overview focusing on discourse analysis in educational science research in Sweden 2000–2022.

The need for textbook research has currently been highlighted in Sweden as a new goal has been introduced in teacher education programs as of this year of 2024, a goal that e.g. stipulates that students shall "demonstrate the ability to use and value textbooks". Discourse analysis can make visible how power relations, locally and globally, create inequalities and injustices, conflicts or false information, as shown by for instance Norman Fairclough (2015) and Teun van Dijk (2008). Therefore, discourse theory and methodology are relevant for critical analysis of representations in textbooks as well as for analysis of the actual use of textbooks in an educational context.

The material consists of Swedish theses, i.e. dissertations from Swedish higher education institutions, during the period 2000–2022. Thus, one criterion is that the research problem in the thesis must be anchored in educational sciences and discourse analysis must fill a central function overall. Methodologically, we used data bases containing most of the theses being produced in Sweden within educational research. We first read the abstracts of the theses found, when we sought on the term discourse analysis and selected relevant theses. Of the 294 selected theses, we identified 21 studies on textbook analysis. The research questions to our material are: How can the research questions be described – what is the focus? What discourse analytical methods and theories are used and what knowledge do they contribute to the field of textbook research?

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Our analysis so far shows that the research field is dynamic and interdisciplinary including literary studies and pedagogics as well as mathematics, sociology, and studies in nursing/health care. Our analysis also shows that the research problems in our material concern different subjects and contexts from preschool to higher education, and theoretical as well as vocational studies, such as gender, race/ethnicity, technology, legitimations of literature, multimodality, religion, civics, history, music, physics, and the use of digital resources. Both macro, such as Foucauldian or critical discourse analyses (CDA), and micro analytical perspectives, such as discursive psychology or ethnomethodology/CA, are represented in these studies.

One finding so far is that discourse analytical textbook studies make visible the use of dominant discourses on certain subjects or didactics, that risks making education in certain subjects or contexts biased. Another finding is that textbook studies that focus on critical content or global conflicts, have a democratic potential that can help teachers discuss such issues in the classroom.

We hope that our knowledge overview gives an insight in how various discourse analytical textbook studies can contribute to developing students/pupils critical abilities, such as independent thinking and a norm-critical approach. Thus, the knowledge overview could inspire to a more critical pedagogy that is concerned with how discourses and power interact in textbooks in different ways and contexts, which will also broaden the theoretical and methodological skills of pupils/students.

References

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