

**“Crossing the borders of own culture,
stepping on frontiers”:
Textbooks and intercultural communication¹**

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Abstract

The article presents the results of an analysis of English textbooks used in Sweden and Poland and addresses questions related to their intercultural dimension. The textbooks were subject to content analysis performed with a tool created specifically for this study and providing both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings show some significant differences between textbooks used in the two countries, highlighting the ways Swedish textbooks promote issues related to an intercultural perspective and showing the relative drawbacks of the Polish sample in this respect. The comparative character of the analysis allows for reflection on the role of textbooks in crossing intercultural borders with regard to teaching particular values in different cultural contexts as well as improvements that might be made in this field. The conclusions resulting from the comparative analysis may prove both useful and inspirational for textbook authors and teachers and, in many ways, innovative in the context of promoting intercultural values in education.

¹ The quotation used in the title comes from Nikitorowicz (2007: 47).

Keywords

textbooks, diversity, values, hidden curriculum, comparative analysis, intercultural dimension

**“Przekraczanie granic własnej kultury,
wychodzenie na pogranicza” – podręczniki
i komunikacja międzykulturowa**

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki analizy polskich i szwedzkich podręczników w kontekście ich wymiaru międzykulturowego. Podręczniki zostały poddane analizie treści przeprowadzonej za pomocą narzędzia stworzonego specjalnie na potrzeby tego badania i dostarczającego zarówno danych jakościowych, jak i ilościowych. Wyniki świadczą o istotnych różnicach między podręcznikami używanymi w obu krajach, wskazując sposoby, w jakie szwedzkie podręczniki promują kwestie związane z perspektywą międzykulturową oraz słabe strony polskiej próby w tym aspekcie. Porównawczy charakter analizy pozwala na refleksję nad rolą podręczników w przekraczaniu granic międzykulturowych, nauczaniu wartości w różnych kontekstach kulturowych, a także na doskonalenie praktyki edukacyjnej w tej dziedzinie. Wnioski wynikające z analizy porównawczej mogą być przydatne zarówno dla autorów podręczników, jak i nauczycieli, jako inspirujące i pod wieloma względami innowacyjne w kontekście promowania wartości międzykulturowych w edukacji.

Słowa kluczowe

podręczniki, wartości, program ukryty, analiza porównawcza, wymiar międzykulturowy

1. Introduction

Although contemporary education relies to a great degree on various teaching aids rooted in information technology, the use

of textbooks seems not to be at risk. Either in paper or in digital form, they are commonly used in classrooms all over the world, delivering a particular content which not only broadens learners' knowledge but also shapes their skills and attitudes. Whatever subjects the textbooks are intended for, they provide learners with factual information and transmit the system of norms and values which dominate in a given society (see e.g., Barrow 1990, Hatoss 2004, Woodward 1994). As it might be less evident in science-related subjects, the courses devoted to linguistic, social or cultural studies give significant opportunities to teach and learn dominant paradigms of culture. Thus, textbook research can be focused on specific didactic aspects but can also be directed towards a cultural perspective in order to "uncover cultural codes" (Pingel 2010: 76) or "to map the meanings encoded in the textual and visual choices made in the textbook" (Weninger 2018: para. 2). As foreign language acquisition is inseparable from learning the culture and has a significant impact on intercultural perspective (Damen 1987, Chamberlin-Quinlisk and Senyshyn 2012, Savva 2017), the focus of our analysis was on the way English textbooks in two countries, Poland and Sweden, promote particular socio-cultural values which might or might not contribute to opening up ways for intercultural understanding. The choice of the textbooks from these two countries was determined by their linguistic coverage, but the main reason for choosing Swedish textbooks resulted from the fact that they are designed and published by Swedish publishers, for the Swedish market. This factor makes them quite unique, as in most European countries, including Poland, schools use materials published for the global market by publishers operating worldwide (for example Macmillan, Pearson, Oxford University Press). Equally important was the fact that although in both countries the textbooks are designed to teach the same language, we assumed they might transmit different sets of values. The degree to which these sets of values are correlated with the intercultural dimension of education was the main aim of the analysis. The comparative character of the research might be its

additional asset, as, although textbooks have been subjected to a multi-faceted culture-related analysis (see below), not many of the studies focused on comparing transmitted values (Lee and Manzon 2014). We hope our analysis will contribute to fill this gap and play an inspirational role for researchers and teachers.

2. Theoretical framework

In connection with theory, the presented analysis anchored in critical pedagogy with its notion of a hidden curriculum on the one hand and concepts related to teaching intercultural values on the other. The hidden curriculum is defined as the element of education that refers to the *unspoken curriculum* (Holly, 1990), “unintended outcomes of the schooling process” (McLaren 2009: 75) or “unstated norms, values and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure routines and social relationships in school and classroom life” (Giroux 2001: 47). Thus, the elements of a hidden curriculum, although not planned or declared in the official program, shape the opinions and attitudes of the participants of the system of education, perpetuating in an indirect way the values and attitudes of the dominant culture (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Chomczyńska-Rubacha and Pankowska 2011, Janowski 1989, Meighan 1993). In the context of textbooks and their intercultural aspects, a relevant explanation of the hidden curriculum was offered by Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 21), who stated as follows:

Grammatical exercises can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes or challenge them. For instance female subjects may be linked to stereotypically female activities or actions (Mary likes cooking; John likes football); stereotyping generalizations may be encouraged about groups (The French like...; Germans are...; Older people...).

The hidden curriculum, particularly its presence in textbooks, has been the subject of numerous studies whose authors concentrated on such dimensions as gender, ethnicity or religion, to give just a few examples (for further examples see Ahmed and Narcy-Combes 2011, Aliakbari 2005, Barton and Sakwa 2012, Brugeilles and Cromer 2009, Chmura-Rutkowska *et al.* 2016, Harrison 1990, Lee 2011, Pogorzelska 2016).

Regarding the (inter)cultural aspects, our research draws upon the view of culture as consisting of five inter-correlated dimensions: products, practices, communities, perspective and persons (see Moran 2001). We focused on the last dimension – persons – as the direct subject of the examination. This choice was dictated by the fact that it is persons who “embody the culture and its communities in unique ways” (Moran 2001: 15). Another reason for choosing persons is their crucial role in developing the inter(cultural) competences of learners (Kim and Paek 2015, Moran, 2001), as investigating people’s identity means also recognizing their multi-faceted cultural affiliation which can effectively combat “stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity” (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 2002: 9).

3. Methodology

The focus on persons and values they represent in connection with the intercultural dimension created the conceptual ground for the research questions. In addition to the theoretical concepts listed above, the guiding principles of the methodology were derived from Byram, Gribkova and Starkey’s (2002) definition of intercultural communication as based on “respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction [...]” (p. 9). Referring to developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey’s (2002: 10) stated that:

[it] involves recognizing that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

The above reflection on intercultural communication has been described metaphorically by another author as “crossing the borders of one’s own culture, stepping on frontiers (cultural borderlines) to come back internally enriched [...]” (Nikito-rowicz 2007: 47).

Thus, the research questions arising from the theory were as follows:

1. What values do the selected characters embody in the textbooks used in Poland and in Sweden?
2. Is there a difference between the textbooks used in the two countries in the values the characters present?
3. To what degree does the choice of characters in the textbooks allow the development of learners’ intercultural competence and contribute to cultural understanding in the two countries?

All of the analyzed textbooks were chosen on the basis of Internet research in which the most popular textbooks in leading Internet bookshops were identified. Having selected the textbooks, we carried out interviews with teachers of secondary schools in Karlstad (Sweden) and Opole (Poland) which confirmed the choice of textbooks as a representative sample. Finally, the research was based on four textbooks from each country, further referred to as the “Polish sample” and the “Swedish sample”. The selected textbooks represent the intermediate level, but it is worth mentioning that the widely used CEFR levels are not emphasized in the Swedish curriculum, so finding the relevant sample for comparison posed a number of problems. Having chosen the Swedish textbooks at the mentioned language level, all used in the last classes of lower secondary education in

Sweden (last grade of primary school and the first grade of secondary school in Poland) and having made an initial analysis of the textbooks used in Poland at the same educational level, the potential irrelevance of such a comparison was verified. In the Polish sample the number of characters qualifying for the analysis was much lower than in the Swedish textbooks, so, if conducted, the Polish component of the analysis could severely lack relevant examples. Thus, the authors decided to choose textbooks used in Poland in secondary schools only, as in all the crucial aspects (the number of characters, length of texts and language level) they resembled the Swedish textbooks.

Concentrating on persons meant the authors of this article had to determine who exactly (what kind of textbook characters) would be subject to the analysis. The first idea to focus on all characters appearing in the books was modified after initial close reading and re-reading of the material. The main reason for this change was the adoption of a sociocultural approach to the exploration of content, which requires identifying "cultural themes" (personal, social, religion/ arts/ humanities, political systems/ institutions, environmental) in the examined material (Ramirez and Hall, 1990). It turned out that many of the characters presented on the pages of the textbooks are shown in ways that are hard to recognize or distinguish, which made it difficult or impossible to apply the sociocultural approach that required an examination of the different aspects of a person's identity. Because of this, the characters chosen for the analysis included those people who really existed and who could be defined as publicly known and/or famous. In some cases, when the characters' public existence was uncertain, we relied on Internet resources to confirm both their real existence and their public recognition. Such a choice of the examined characters gave us an opportunity to characterize them in a more detailed way, comprising different aspects of their identity (for example, if the textbook article lacked information on a known character's colour of skin or nationality, it was possible to complete this information using other sources). To a great degree, as the

assessment of characters was connected with the analysis of the values they represent, we relied on Lester's concepts of examining characters' values in literary texts, based on Rokeach's values classification (Lester 1982, Rokeach 1968, 1973), which recognizes instrumental and terminal values.

The textbooks were subject to content analysis performed with a tool created specifically for this study and providing both qualitative and quantitative data. The latter were obtained with the application of a coding book, comprising coding categories allowing the characters' description and frequency of appearance of their particular features (e.g., gender, nationality, ethnicity, colour of the skin, social role, profession) to be identified. All depictions of the selected persons were also subject to a qualitative analysis focused on the cultural themes they represented in relation to the intercultural dimension.

In our analysis a character qualified for further examination if his or her depiction was not just a simple mention but a "description beyond sentence level" (Toprak and Aksoyalp 2015: 96) In this way, the basic characters' features referring to the research questions were traceable. Thus, the characters elected for the study were present in passages defined as logical, consistent texts (such as emails, blog entries, advertisements, letters, reading passages, or short notes) and were distinguished individually rather than collectively (as a group or a pair). The length of the passages varied considerably as did the depth of the persons' description; however, for the purpose of the study the availability of information on each character's social role and activities within this role made them eligible for further examination.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative indicators

The first set of data comprised of quantitative indicators related to various aspects of the characters' identities. The main

categories used in the quantitative analysis were as follows: gender, geographical origin, colour of skin, main social role in the text, a number of social roles mentioned or indicated in the text and represented values. Out of the total number of 56 characters identified in the Polish textbooks and 59 in their Swedish counterparts, the distribution of the characters by their gender showed that although in both samples there is a predominance of male characters, the quantitative gap between textbooks is wider in the Polish sample. Women made up only a quarter of all figures in the Polish sample whereas in the Swedish sample their number was one third. What is interesting, in the Swedish textbooks there was a place for a drag queen, identified as queer and serving as an embodiment of the insufficiency of simple gender divisions (TB2: 24-27).² The results from this area of analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of characters by their gender

Gender	Polish sample	Swedish sample
Men	75 %	66.1 %
Women	25 %	32.2 %
Queer	---	1.7 %

As for another important element of the characters' identities – their geographical origin, the distribution of that aspect was quite similar in both samples regarding general tendencies. Approximately 57 % of all the characters came from various European countries. The differences in the remaining 43 %, however, indicated more diversity in the textbooks used in Sweden, particularly concerning characters from African countries, as is illustrated in Table 2.

² Information relating to the textbooks is followed by the assigned number of the book (TB) to which it relates to and the relevant pages. The titles of the textbooks to which each number is assigned are placed at the end of the text.

Table 2
Distribution of characters by their origin

Characters by their origin	Polish sample (representatives of 14 countries)	Swedish sample (representatives of 19 countries)
European countries	57.1 %	57.6 %
North American countries	35.7 %	28.8 %
Asian countries	---	1.7 %
African countries	5.3 %	10.1 %
Other continents	---	---

Moreover, the proportions related to skin colour distributed among the characters showed twice as many of them as black (17 %) in the Swedish sample, compared with 8.9 % in the textbooks used in Poland.

During the coding process the characters were also examined with respect to their social roles. In connection with this, the coding focused on the main social role as indicated in the text as well as the total number of roles performed. In the whole analysis, 48 different social roles (related to the characters' professions, family or social status) were identified. The analysis of the number of social roles fulfilled by particular characters showed their quantitative predominance in the Swedish sample, where up to 30.5 % of the characters were described in reference to three or more social roles compared with 21.4 % by the same indicator in the Polish sample. Given the variety and dispersion of roles, the comparisons between the two samples were limited, but some regularities may be traced. Most of them will be discussed in the section devoted to the qualitative analysis, but as for the quantitative indicators, the visible traits are presented in Table 3. The categories identified were only presented in the table if their frequency exceeded 10 % in at least one sample.

Table 3

Distribution of characters by the specificity
of the main roles they perform

Main role related to	Polish sample	Swedish sample
artistic activity*	30.5 %	16.9 %
social activity**	8.9 %	28.8 %
inventing things	5.3 %	15.2 %
science	14.2 %	5 %
sport	12.5 %	10.2 %
other roles (e.g., family roles, business, various professions)	28.6 %	23.9 %
* The characters in this category: actor, actress, writer, composer, singer, musician, artist, designer, film director.		
** The characters in this category: social campaigner or activist, politician, whistleblower.		

The main part of the presented analysis refers to values represented by the textbook characters who were chosen. Ascribing character to a specific value was done after we examined how the person was depicted, including behaviour, activities, declarations, or reactions to events. Following Lester and Rokeach's classification (see Lester 1982: 323-326), the characters were coded with regard to instrumental and terminal values. After the initial coding, we decided to focus only on terminal values, which indicated the person's life goals. This choice was determined by the fact that the instrumental values in numerous cases were similar to each other and their meaning could be interpreted in different ways. Thus, assigning a character to a concrete value (expressed in adjectives, like *intellectual*, *capable*, *creative*) was burdened with subjectivity and resulted in discrepancies during coding. On the other hand, coding terminal values allowed for a high interrater reliability and showed a high degree of compatibility as the interpretation referred to the main message carried by the character as described in the text. Moreover, in the context of this research, the terminal values were ones which could clearly indicate possible differences in the promoted systems of values in the two samples as well as

the intercultural potential of the characters. Table 4 below, presents the terminal values ascribed to the characters in both samples. The categories were distinguished and presented in the table only if their frequency exceeded 10 % in at least one sample.

Table 4

Distribution of characters by terminal values

Terminal values in the Polish sample	Terminal values in the Swedish sample
1. sense of accomplishment (53.5 %)	1. equality and freedom (33.1 %)
2. equality and freedom (10.7 %)	2. sense of accomplishment (15.2 %)
3. world of beauty* (3.6 %)	3. world of beauty (10.1 %)
*the “world of beauty” category refers to “beauty of nature, well-composed/well-formed world” (Lester 1982: 326). In the context of this research, the category comprised the characters whose activity was focused on environmental protection.	

In the Polish sample, the majority of characters (53.5 %) embodied a sense of accomplishment: they were shown as people who had succeeded, for example, in the entertainment business, science or sport. The same category (a sense of accomplishment) was ascribed only to about 15 % of the characters in the Swedish sample in which, in comparison, values related to equality and freedom distinguished a large proportion of the characters (33.1 %). The third position in the Swedish sample was occupied by characters whose activity was aimed at creating or preserving nature (10.1 %) whereas, in the case of the Polish sample, it was impossible to single out one coherent group in this category, as the representations were scattered among various other values.

4.2. Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis of the Polish and the Swedish textbooks revealed several tendencies regarding how various values are illustrated, which values predominate and which values are similar or different in both study groups. In the Polish sample there are two dominant values, while in the Swedish sample, three values are revealed. There is a clear difference, however, in the quality of representation of these particular values in both samples.

The value prevailing in the Polish textbooks is a sense of accomplishment, which is embodied in the characters described as people whose main feature is the achievement of success in science (by inventing or discovering something), art and entertainment (acting, directing, painting, creating music), business (setting up a successful company) or sport (being a champion, winning medals). In most cases the successes are described without any socio-cultural context – they are typical “success stories”, supported with facts, yet lacking reflection on their possible cost, side-effects or long-term consequences for society. The exceptions are texts about people who somehow exceeded their limits determined by a disability and achieved spectacular success. In this category there is Christy Brown (suffering from cerebral palsy, the author of *My left foot*, TB8: 28), Helen Keller (a blind and deaf woman, an author and a speaker, TB8: 29) and Billy Bob Thornton (an actor from a disadvantaged social group, TB8: 29). Their stories are not just descriptions of “success for success” but are situated against a specific socio-cultural background, although brief in its description. In comparison, a sense of accomplishment is represented by far fewer characters in the Swedish sample. Nevertheless, the ones who reflect it are presented within quite a rich context, either related to exceeding one’s own limits because of, for instance, disability (Margaret Maughan, the first gold medalist in the Paralympic Games in Britain, TB4: 94), being rejected (Jennie Finch, a softball player, TB4: 108), grieving after the death of a parent (Danil

Ishutin, a computer games champion, TB4: 95) or facing a life crisis (Jim Braddock, a boxer, TB6: 23). All of these people are shown through biographies in which their accomplishment is the result of some event, leading to other activities and posing questions to the value of the success itself. In the Swedish sample this category also includes characters whose accomplishment was related to improving the life of a particular community; for instance, the story of Peter Kariuki and Barrett Nash who created a safe, cheap, reliable and efficient motorbike taxi service in Rwanda (TB2: 98).

The leading values in the Swedish sample are equality and freedom. Analysis of the character selection made by the textbook authors indicated some interesting features. A distinctive group of textbook heroes are persons involved in actions aimed at promoting gender equality. One of them, the actress Emma Watson, is presented on the pages of the textbook as a United Nations Women Goodwill Ambassador, who delivers a speech to launch a UN campaign called HeForShe. In the speech she recalls her development as a feminist through different personal experiences, deconstructs the myths around feminism, lists areas of social life marked by gender inequality and finally invites men to participate in the feminist movement (TB2: 52). Moreover, promoting gender equality on the pages of the Swedish sample also includes questions related to sexual identity. The story of an unusual alliance between Welsh miners and LGBT activists who supported one another in the battle for their rights in the 1980s can serve as an example of how these issues are presented. Apart from the description of the situation of the two social groups, similar in that they were both deprived of basic rights, it is also the story of human solidarity across divisions. Furthermore, equality in the Swedish sample was also promoted by characters whose activities are aimed at minimizing inequalities resulting from a lack of basic resources. Representative characters are, for example, young people from different African countries whose inventions or initiatives provided their communities with energy, food or economic support (TB2:

96-98). An example is Tolu-Sola-Aydemi, a teenage lobbyist who through his activities wanted to "raise awareness of important issues and push people in power to make changes" (TB2: 99).

What is more, in the context of equality and freedom, the issue of racism is explored in the Swedish sample with the examples of such leaders as Martin Luther King or Barack Obama. The authors of the texts describe these characters set against ideas promised by the American Dream, on the one hand, and the colonial context, on the other. Colonization, presented as a disaster both for Native Americans and Africans and resulting in slavery, serves as the background to introduce Martin Luther King through a famous speech he gave connected to this issue (TB4: 31). The topic is continued by presenting another character, Barack Obama, as the president trying to "get back to the original ideas that created the American Dream" (TB4: 33). Again, his ideas are not just described but expressed by the character himself in his speech (TB4: 33). The collection of the characters associated with freedom and equality with respect to race is enriched by the story of Mary Prince – whose autobiography as a black woman and slave was the first of its kind and played an important role in ending slavery in the British Empire (TB4: 82). Mary Prince's narrative in the textbook gives the readers not only an insight into her contribution to human rights issues but also to the injustice and cruelty of the everyday life of a slave (TB4: 84). Another character worth mentioning within the freedom and equality category is Harry Leslie Smith. The extracts of his speech, delivered in support of a National Health Service in Britain (TB2: 62), refer to him experiencing extreme poverty and witnessing terrible diseases, which tortured and/or killed people in his neighborhood and family, because of a lack of medical care, which was available only to the rich. Finally, on the pages of the Swedish sample, readers can find Edward Snowden, described as a whistleblower who, fed up and disgusted with his professional activity revealing the personal secrets of people and doing an illegal job for a legal government, decided to disclose to the general public what he was doing (TB7: 46).

Equality and freedom are embodied in the Polish sample by very few characters, none of whom are directly involved in promoting issues of equality, although a form of voice in the matter of gender equality can be found in the statement of a child psychologist who talks about the harmful effects on a child's personality of identifying girls with the colour pink and boys with the colour blue: it could lead to a limiting of their life choices. Nonetheless, her opinion is counterbalanced in the same paragraph with a reference to other experts who "argue that colours have no influence on our personalities" (TB3: 39). As for issues related to racism, a seemingly representative character is Nelson Mandela. However, in the text in which Mandela is introduced, readers are only given general information about his activity. Could this mean that the authors assumed that learners would have some basic knowledge about the situation in South Africa or that Polish teenagers are not interested in discussing social issues? For example, Mandela is presented as a person who dreamt "that one day all people in Africa would become equal", while his "involvement in politics and anti-white majority protests" (TB1: 241) is shown without any context. Readers might ask why Africa needs equality and what the reasons for the protests were, but the context of colonialism is not explained so that it is doubtful such a question would be raised.

A different illustration of the value of equality, this time regarding social and/or economic inequality, is Janina Ochojska. In the Polish sample she appears twice as the representative of a charity organization which helps people in countries affected by wars or natural disasters (TB1: 240; TB5: 9), however, her depiction also lacks any context: "Not only does she go to the aid of victims of natural disasters, but also builds wells for the inhabitants of South Sudan and helps the underprivileged in Poland" (TB5: 9). Again, it could be hypothesized that the potential context could, for example, comprise the Western contribution to environmental disaster or, in the case of Poland, developing an understanding of the reasons for people being "underprivileged", but these strands are missing, thus questions

regarding these issues are avoided. Equally superficial is a short reference to Gerald Holtom, the designer of the peace symbol. As we read, the symbol "spread all over the world, among others to the USA, where it was used as a symbol of peace and anti-war movements" (TB1: 241). The potential questions of why it fell on fertile ground in America or what war it was connected with are not addressed. An exception to this argument that the Polish sample lacks a clear social/cultural context representing the value of equality and freedom is a text which focuses on William Kamkwamba, a character actively working for his community; a person who "harnessed the wind" by building a windmill and providing his village with electricity (TB8: 79).

The third terminal value that appears to predominate in the Swedish textbooks and which is absent in the Polish textbooks is the world of beauty meaning the appreciation and protection of the natural environment. The Swedish sample shows characters who create innovative solutions for the environment (e.g., a bin from recycled materials for chewing gum, biodegradable cutlery, a cardboard bicycle, clearing oceans of plastic garbage, creating clothes by upcycling old things or designing houses with respect for the environment). In comparison, in the textbooks used in Poland, only three out of the 56 characters identified are somehow engaged in rescuing animals; for instance, two of them run their own zoo, taking care of animals in need (TB5: 102; TB3: 65), while the environmental interest of the third character, Stella McCartney, is mentioned as just one among the other fields of her activity related mainly to designing clothes, operating stores, being a creative director and making perfumes and cosmetics (TB3: 114).

Examining the textbooks used in Poland, a tendency worth noticing is the appearance of characters who have the potential to convey an important message related to intercultural values, thus promoting socio-cultural diversity and sensitivity. Unfortunately, this potential is not pursued but is even neglected or erased. Descriptions of the same or similar characters in textbooks from the two countries can serve as a good illustration.

One of them is Emma Watson, whose presence in the Swedish sample was accompanied by a multidimensional introduction of gender equality issues. The same person in the Polish sample is presented as involved in designing fair-trade clothing, but also as “one of the most frequently photographed women in the world” (TB5: 54), drawing attention to her physical attributes and omitting her feminist engagement. Meanwhile, a person who could be an example of a woman who succeeded thanks to her great intellectual skills, Marie Skłodowska-Curie, is presented in one of the Polish textbooks in an irrelevant way. Her short biography is focused on her romantic life and not on her scientific achievements. The text begins as follows: “There were two loves in Marie Skłodowska-Curie’s life”, after which readers are given a description of the problems in her personal life and her love-affairs, such as her relationship with Pierre Curie (“a brilliant scientist”) with whom she worked and went on long bicycle rides, as well as creating the ideal couple. Being the Nobel prize winner in Chemistry and Physics is given simply as additional information to all the personal details (TB8: 37). The “intercultural potential” of characters seems to be neglected in other cases as well. The enterprise such as the Virtual Choir, created by Eric Whitacre, is described rather as a technical challenge than a powerful means of connecting and integrating people from all corners of the world (TB1: 149). In one of the textbooks there is a story of a slave that could be compared with the one from the Swedish sample described above. Unfortunately, the story of Solomon Northup is limited to his description as a free black man who, having led a happy life, was kidnapped and sold as a slave. The fact that he was also an activist for abolitionism is not mentioned in the text (TB3: 102). Another character, Banksy, famous for his sharp criticism of politicians and politics, is depicted in a superficial way that does not give any insight into his very definite political views (TB3: 104). Moreover, the presentation of Mark Boyle is similar. He is described as a person living without money and serves as an illustration of an eccentric. Mark Boyle’s attitude towards money,

rooted in his deep political engagement in the *Freeconomy Community*, is not mentioned in the text (TB3: 124). In this vein, Helen Keller is described as being politically active, without any reference to her involvement in the Socialist Party of America campaigns for women's suffrage, labor rights, socialism and antimilitarism (TB8: 29).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The comparative analysis of the two samples of didactic materials for teaching English from Poland and Sweden shows some significant differences with respect to the values which are promoted, particularly concerning the intercultural perspective.

Firstly, in the textbooks used in Sweden there is a smaller gender gap related to the number of characters, who also perform more social roles and are more culturally diverse as far as their origin and colour of skin is concerned. Learners see these characters as multi-dimensional and performing different social roles. Furthermore, as for the values represented by the characters, the difference between the two samples highlights two different approaches to what are viewed as desirable values and this difference has much to do with the intercultural dimension. The sense of accomplishment expressed by the characters in the Polish sample is related to promoting the value of economic success, a professional career and either material wealth or its symbolic dimension, like fame. The characters do not contest the world; they foster adjustment rather than any kind of transformation. On the other hand, in the Swedish sample the predominance of values connected with equality and freedom carries a contrasting message as they clearly embody faith in an individual's role in changing the world. Approximately a third of the characters are involved in social or political activity but the total number of the ones shown as engaged in various social actions is even higher reaching almost 50 % (while it is only 20 % in the Polish sample). In this group it is possible to distinguish people who fight for gender equality, including LGBT community

rights, racial discrimination or equal access to resources (energy, health system, jobs).

In contrast, in the Polish sample it is not possible to find explicit and clearly defined characters engaged in anything, let alone issues perceived as “controversial” (racial, gender, environmental). Most of the characters are presented without a wider context which would give the learners an opportunity to reflect on universal problems: violence, inequality, discrimination, colonization, poverty or refugee crises. The world shown through the lens of the textbook, without any references to current problems, is sterile and one-dimensional. It is striking too, how an analysis of textbooks in Poland in the 1980s fits the current Polish sample:

The world around, without social inequalities and technological backlog, is demonstrated as complete and ready-to-use [...] with all the problems solved and as such it remains immobilized in time, resembling a realized utopia. As there is nothing to change or repair in this world, it does not appear as a challenge or a field of potential activity [...] (Szacka 1987: 144-145).

In the Polish sample the characters harmonize with this vision, being shown as if they are “ready-made”, “complete” or “frozen”. The focus is solely on accomplishment and unquestionable facts rather than the process of change allowing for variety and a multidimensional perspective. This may mean the development of the reflective skills of learners who are recipients of this kind of content will not be prompted or worse still, blocked, because they are not shown the complexity and intersectionality of different elements of personality. In comparison, the Swedish sample shows a number of characters who embody one textbook protagonist’s words:

There is freedom outside the box [...]. The truth who you are is not defined by your clothes [...] You are not your religion. You are not your skin color. You are not your gender, your politics, your career,

or your marital status. You are none of the superficial things that this world deems important (TB2: 24-27).

These words, expressed by one character of a Swedish textbook RuPaul (presented as a spokesperson for LGBT rights and a drag queen) are emblematic of other characters in the Swedish sample. Representing different cultural backgrounds, identities and minorities they make learners challenge their perception of cultural diversity and pave the way for deep intercultural understanding.

Moreover, as Byram *et al.* (2002: 22) noticed:

One important contribution to an intercultural perspective is the inclusion of vocabulary that helps learners talk about cultural diversity. This can include terms such as: human rights; equality; dignity; gender; bias; prejudice; stereotype; racism; ethnic minority; and the names of ethnic groups, including white groups.

Presenting characters in the way that dominates in the Polish sample actually deprives learners of this kind of vocabulary, limiting their ability to reflect on the issues mentioned above and, if need be, to express their views. In the Swedish sample, on the other hand, the characters, whose activity is often related to political or social activities, can have a substantial impact on raising students' awareness related to equality, democracy, solidarity, cultural diversity and allowing them to practice self-expression in these topics.

The two samples stem from different socio-cultural contexts but, as any learning is inseparably connected with an intercultural perspective, presenting the Swedish approach might be useful for both textbook authors and teachers as inspirational and, in many ways, innovative, providing learners with a chance to face and discuss intercultural issues in the classroom. In this way, crossing the borders of their familiar culture with its traditions, habits but also stereotypes and prejudices, both teachers and students might enter cultural borderlines – the

moments of creative and enriching reflection opening ways for understanding and the acceptance of human diversity.

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