

LEARNING ECONOMICS: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TEXTBOOKS FOR LOWER GRADES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

According to Viviana Zelizer's theory, child has in the last hundred years gone from economically beneficial to the economically useless and emotionally priceless child. Child is, therefore, protected from labor and profit, and learning economic concepts is mainly conceived as a second-rate issue. Generally accepted value is the financial dependence of children on adults, and this dependence continues into adolescence, but also into post-adolescence. This paper presents results of content analysis of textbooks for lower grades of elementary school (Croatian language, mathematics and nature and society). The aim of the research was to examine the relationship between the educational system and the social transfer of the economic knowledge. The presentation of basic economic concepts such as money and labor, as well as described economic activities were determined and socio-cultural context was taken into account in the interpretation. The research showed the absence of some economic concepts and social values typical of market economies, such as entrepreneurship, innovation or initiative. Child labor was depicted as domestic and unpaid.

Key terms: Economic knowledge, children, textbooks, educational system, socio-cultural context

1. Introduction

School textbooks are instruments of socialization. Although their main purpose is to transmit facts and information to their readers (children) they also represent social norms and values and acceptable or desirable social knowledge. According to the way a certain field of knowledge is presented in textbooks, we can bring out some conclusions about how society treats that field or would like its children to treat it. Also, we can learn something about social construction of childhood and the position of child in that society, regarding the type of information and knowledge it receives.

This paper deals with the presentation of economic topics in school textbooks for lower grades of elementary school (from 1st to 4th grade). There are two main reasons for this. The first one is that Croatian society has recently passed through transition from planned to market economic system and there are no analysis so far on what kind of economic knowledge is indirectly taught in schools through textbooks in different school subjects. The way this content is exhibited in text, largely depends on social values. The second reason is the very relationship of society towards child and childhood. The childhood in modern society experienced many changes: it is longer and it is perceived as a special period in the life of a human being. Modern society tends to protect children and therefore they are separated into special non-risk environments (Qvortrup, 2004), transferred from labor market to schools (Zelizer, 2004) and protected from those information and knowledge which are considered harmful. Financial dependence of a child has become a social norm in modern, more developed societies.

The objectives of the research are, therefore:

- to determine the way and frequency of transmitting and forming knowledge about different economic elements in school textbooks for lower grades of elementary schools (from 1st to 4th grade);
- to determine if this way of transmitting and forming economic knowledge is more in accordance with pre- or post-transition type of economy, if it is more anti- or pro-entrepreneurially oriented;
- and, if possible, to determine the desirable relationship of a child towards money and labor.

2. Theoretical framework and previous research

The most common topics in textbook analysis are about gender roles and historical narratives (Kalmus, 2004). This applies to Croatian research as well. A few conducted analysis are about gender roles (Baranović et al., 2010) and ideology in historical narratives (Marković, 2006). Other topics are scarce. Watts (Watts, 2001) analysed ideological bias influencing the selection of positive (what is?) and normative (what should be?) ideas when teaching economy in schools. Watts concluded that many textbooks in USA (both economics and non-economics) present an interpretation of reality within neoclassical tradition (Watts, 2001).

When talking about social values in the context of economic systems in Croatia, the most important author is, probably, Županov. Županov coined a term egalitarian sindrom for a battery of collective attitudes that includes several main components (Županov, 1995): zero-sum-game (the quantity of positively valued goods is limited), egalitary distributed salary norm, redistributive ethics (it is a moral duty of a human being to share with those who do not have), anti-entrepreneurial attitude (a-priori negative attitude towards entrepreneurship), obsession about private earning (similar to anti-entrepreneurial attitude), intellectual uravnilovka (abilities are equal for all people), anti-professionalism (negative attitude towards professional knowledge and norms) and anti-intellectualism (negative attitude towards intellectual labor and glorification of manual labor). These values were according to Županov dominant in Croatian socialist society and are, therefore, slowly transforming and/or disappearing. Other dominant values he mentioned were individual utilitarianism at individual level (but not social level), solidarity and authoritarianism at societal level (Županov, 1995). Authoritarianism is also mentioned by Sekulić, who in his longitudinal research on social values from 1985 to 2010 stated that the most persistent value in Croatian society appears to be authoritarianism (Sekulić, 2011).

Another characteristic typical of socialist economy was paleoindustrial strategy of development, which defined urbanization as physical spreading of city subjected to paleoindustrial¹ sector of economy (Rogić et al., 1996). Transition to market economy ment society was reaffirming entrepreneurship and inovation, or at least it should had been. How much it was an actual reality was evident from research on sociocultural capital, as one of key pre-conditions for development of positive attitude towards entrepreneurship. The level of sociocultural capital was relatively low (Štulhofer, 1998).

Beside dominant social values that affect attitudes towards money, labor, entrepreneurship and other economic elements, another issue in this research is the relationship between society and child and childhood, since the children (and, indirectly, their families) are a target group when it comes to school textbooks. According to Viviana Zelizer's theory, child has in the last hundred years gone from economically beneficial to the economically useless and emotionally priceless child (Zelizer, 2004). Child is, therefore, protected from labor and profit, and learning economic concepts is mainly conceived as a second-rate issue.

Generally accepted value is the financial dependence of children on adults, and this dependence continues into adolescence, but also into post-adolescence. Schneider argued that reductions in the availability of full-time work, greater participation in school and tertiary education as well as some government policies lead to the increase of financial dependence, which in turn leads to poorer well-being of young people (Schneider, 2000).

¹ The term paleoindustrial refers to industrial sectors such as metallurgy, naval architecture, etc.

The only accepted form of child labor is domestic labor and labor within or with school, usually unpaid (Zelizer, 2004). There are some exceptions to this rule, such as children actors, models or athletes (Zelizer, 2004).

There is also a preconceived opinion that certain kinds of knowledge or information is too complex for a child to understand. Economic knowledge, especially that concerning showing initiative or acquiring money, seems to be undesirable to connect with innocent childhood times. Schug showed in his research (Schug, 1987) that a child in lower grades of elementary school can understand economic concepts, following some kind of developmental pattern (for example, quicker understanding of concept of scarcity than concept of money value).

3. Methodology

Quantitative content analysis was used to collect data. Teaching units were selected for recoding units. It was concluded that paragraphs or sentences would be too small for a recoding unit, since the language in textbooks for lower grades is simple and there is a relatively small amount of information in one teaching unit.

Categorical variables were defined: subject (Croatian language, mathematics and nature and society), grade (first, second, third and fourth), publisher (Alfa, Profil and Školska knjiga), topic (money, labor, saving, economy, etc.), topic direction (positive, negative, neutral and ambivalent), learning context (geography, mathematical operations, economy and socialization into responsible behaviour), values (solidarity, sharing, giving, responsibility, etc.) and economic sectors (agriculture, tourism, industry etc.). Additional categories were used when labor was topic of recoding unit and when child was mentioned as a subject: labor inside and outside family, labor inside or with school and outside school and paid and unpaid labor.

4. Sample

The sample contained 26 textbooks in three subjects: Croatian language, mathematics and nature and society. Textbooks were chosen from Catalog of obligatory textbooks designed and approved by Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of Republic of Croatia, which contains over 50 textbooks for lower grades for selected subjects. The trouble with the Catalog was that textbooks were not equally distributed by subjects, nor grades (the most of the textbooks were for Croatian language and the least of them were for nature and science). Also, in some cases a title from one publisher was not approved for all grades and one publisher dominated in all subjects and grades (having several titles). This is why it was decided that only two publishers (two titles) per subject should be selected to improve data comparison. The dominating publisher was selected for each subject and the other ones were chosen on the basis that they had the same title for every grade. See the list of selected textbooks at the back of the paper.

5. Research results and discussion

Research results are presented and discussed. Analysed material contained 169 recoding units or teaching units with economic concept as a dominant topic.

Table 1 Recoding units per school subject

School subject	N
Croatian language	12
Nature and society	53
Mathematics	104
Total	169

The most of recoding units were found in mathematics textbooks and the least of them in Croatian language textbooks (Table 1). Although a substantial amount of recoding units were expected in mathematics textbooks, it was a little bit of a surprise to find so little economics-related topics in language textbooks, since they have more text than other textbooks.

Table 2 Recoding units per grade

Grade	N
1st	31
2nd	52
3rd	51
4th	35
Total	169

The most of recoding units were noted in the 2nd and the 3rd grade, and there are less of them in the 1st grade when textbooks have smaller and simpler texts (Table 2). It is not quite clear, though, why the number of units reduced in the 4th grade.

Table 3 Recoding units per publisher

Publisher	N
Alfa	27
Školska knjiga	97
Profil	45
Total	169

The publisher Školska knjiga had the most of recoding units, since it dominated the list of textbooks (Table 3).

Table 4 Dominant topics in recoding units

Topic	N
Labor	30
Money	18
Money and purchase	56
Saving	11
Economy	23
Traffic	6
Professions	8
Purchase	5
Sales	7
Factory	1
Salary	1
Donating money	1
Bank	2
Total	169

The most frequent topics were money, money used for purchase (shopping), labor and economy (Table 4). Money related topics dominated in mathematics textbooks and labor and economy related topics dominated in nature and society textbooks. Topics such as entrepreneurship or innovation did not appear.

Table 5 Direction of topics

Topic direction	N
Positive/ Neutral	160
Ambivalent	3
Negative	6
Total	169

The most of topics are positively or neutrally directed, with small and unclear difference between the two (Table 5). Rare cases of negative direction referred to money² and ambivalent referred to saving. Saving is desirable, but the authors warn in some places in literature textbooks that the habit of saving could easily be transferred to parsimony.

Table 6 Learning context

Context	N
Geography	38
Economy	3
Mathematical operation	101
Socialization into responsible behaviour	27
Total	169

The learning context of topics could be divided into categories above (Table 6). The most of topics were used as an instrument of learning mathematical operation (in most cases it was money and purchase), and usually topics of labor and economy shown up when learning geography or economy lessons in nature and society textbooks. Literature textbooks usually taught about socialisation into responsible behaviour and that was why they talked about money or labor in combination with saving.

² In some cases an evil character called Black Man appeared in money related activities in mathematics textbooks.

Table 7 Social values in recoding units

Social values	N
Solidarity	12
Helping	11
Participation	4
Responsibility	14
Learning perceived as labor	4
Order maintenance	9
Redistributive ethics	3
Hard work	4
Giving	8
Sharing	9
Anti-entrepreneurial attitude	1
Individual utilitarianism	2
Encouraging saving	8
Saving can lead to parsimony	2
Right kind of consuming	4
Love for work	3
All professions are equally valuable	2
Total	97

The most prevailing social values were solidarity, helping, responsibility, order maintenance, giving and sharing and encouraging saving (Table 7).

Table 8 Economic sectors in recoding units

Economic sectors	N
Agriculture	34
Animal husbandry	34
Fishing	3
Industry	7
Food industry	4
Metallurgy	2
Textile industry	2

Chemical industry	6
Tourism	13
Wood industry	12
Traffic	14
Trade	4
Maritime	4
Naval architecture	3
Exploitation of oil and gravel	3
Total	147

The most common economic sectors mentioned were agriculture and animal husbandry (Table 8). This was because economic sectors were almost exclusively mentioned in geography lessons in nature and society textbooks. It is taught that these sectors are possible only where there are resources for them. The same logic was applied for different types of industries. This is more typical of planned economies than market economies. IT sector, for example, as well as many others, did not appear at all.

Table 9 Child as a subject in labor, N=10

Labor within home	5	Paid labor	0	1st grade	3	Croatian language	1	Geography	0
Labor within school	2	Unpaid labor	10	2nd grade	3	Nature and society	5	Economy	0
Labor with friends	3			3rd grade	4	Mathematics	4	Mathematical operation	4
				4th grade	0			Socialization into responsible behaviour	6
Total	10		10		10		10		10

Child as a subject in labor appeared rarely (Table 9). The labor was executed in home or school (familiar and non-risk environments) and it was unpaid in all cases. This is completely in accordance with authors such as Qvortrup or Zelizer.

Table 10 Social values in recoding units presenting child as a subject in labor

Social values	N
Solidarity	5
Participation	1
Responsibility	1
Order maintenance	1
Helping	4
Total	12

Social values connected to a child as a subject in labor were solidarity and order maintenance (Table 10). Group activities (collectivism) and authoritarianism are, therefore, dominant, although caution is necessary because of the small sample.

6. Conclusion

The research showed the absence of some economic concepts and social values typical of market economies, such as entrepreneurship, innovation or initiative. Children were directed into collective values and activities and economy was depicted in a manner that was more typical of planned economies. Child labor was presented as domestic and unpaid and its main purpose was socialization.

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The list of textbooks for lower grades (1-4) of elementary school used in content analysis

Croatian language

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Mathematics

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