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Nothing just-is. The depiction of socio-economic (in)justice in ELT coursebooks and its implications for young learners

One of my fields of research is coursebook analysis. I consider coursebooks to be much more than only teaching materials for specific subjects. Coursebooks also represent what a society considers to be worthy of being taught to younger people. They contain and establish knowledge, norms and values, and present a desirable society. Even so, I'm often devastated by the way in which the representation of specific identities situates these in a wider socio-cultural setting. This is particularly the case regarding minoritized groups and the effect this has on learners. The following essay exemplifies this by addressing the depiction of social justice in coursebooks for 8th graders learning English as a foreign language in Germany.

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Social justice in a nutshell

Social justice is generally understood as an equitable sharing of social power and benefits within a society (Osborn, 2006). It is a lens with which to look onto the world and into societies to examine in how far people have the chance to unfold their individual potential. Nieto differentiates social justice into a "political project" as a question of "power: who has it, who makes the key decisions that can improve people's lives – or not – and who benefits from these decisions" (Nieto, 2006, p. 5). Yet, it is also a "democratic project because it promotes inclusiveness and fairness. It is about understanding education and equal access to it as a civil right" (ibid.). Particularly in the context of education, social justice "challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences" (ibid., p. 6). As to avoid injustice, it is essential to balance the unequal distribution of capital, so as to "de-marginalize people who have been marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, social class and other differences" (Westerlund, 2015). One option to de-marginalize is

education. However, which kind of education and who receives what kind of education needs to be scrutinized. In order to create socially just societies, it is paramount to provide "all students with the resources necessary to learn to their full potential [which] includes *material* [and] *emotional resources* (Nieto, 2006, p. 6, italics in original). Here, Nieto demands that students receive similar, if not equal, resources that actually enable them to participate in society, that they can benefit from a qualitative and quantitative just distribution of resources in order to balance prevailing injustices. While these include monetary resources, also teaching materials themselves are part of this dimension, and essential within a critical, social justice teaching framework (Randolph & Johnson, 2017). This implies to "select a variety of authentic resources that provide counterpoint to dominant narratives, which more often than not requires going beyond the coursebook and its ancillaries" (ibid., p. 110).

As my analysis below shows, social inequalities not only exist in the world, but also in the world depicted in coursebooks. Indeed, and as prior research has revealed (e.g., Alter et al., 2021; Block & Gray, 2017; Gray, 2013), these are all but free from certain ideologies.

Research questions, method and corpus

This article summarizes the preliminary results of a pilot study on the visual representation of social justice in coursebooks. I'm interested in exploring how far ELT coursebooks pay tribute to social justice in terms of the representation of US American society to learners at different school types. Hence, based on the understanding of social justice shared above, I read coursebooks from a power-critical perspective that scrutinizes how far these offer equal opportunities to all members of society and how far these stereotype and discriminate against certain members. I thus focus on the depiction of poverty, technology, homelessness, and child labor, and who the coursebook represents in terms of race and ability, dimensions of analysis that are also referred to in the literature (Nieto, 2006, Randolph & Johnson, 2017).

In my analysis, I focus on images and only take verbal into account when this directly accompanies the visuals as captions or short texts. First, I approached the visual representation from a quantitative perspective and counted all the images, the people represented in those, and how they fit into the categories "White", "BIPoC" (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), and "people with mental and/or physical variety." I also counted all images that show technological devices such as laptops or cameras. I then investigated the framing of the aforementioned topics to analyze the protagonists' agency and geo-political contextualization, thus, applying a qualitative perspective.

To make the findings within this article comparable, I here present the results of an analysis of coursebooks by one publisher only. The corpus consists of four coursebooks for teaching English as a foreign language. The Klett publishing house offers individual coursebooks for German school types corresponding to four different levels: *Blue Line* (*BL*, Haß, 2017a) for middle schools, *Orange Line* (*OL*, Haß, 2017b) for comprehensive schools, *Red Line* (*RL*, Haß, 2017c) for secondary schools, and *Green Line* (*GL*, Weisshaar, 2017) for grammar schools. The analysis includes all of the units of each coursebook, the sections "More about" and "Extra" which offer

additional reading texts, as well as the skills pages which contain learning strategies (only included in *GL*). I decided for the 8th grade, because this is the year in which students can take student jobs, do internships, and engage in job orientation. They gain first-hand insights into the job market, earn their own money, and are actively involved in the system that determines social class. Social class is also a main indicator that expresses social (in)justice.

Results

The USA is the main topic in all four coursebooks. *BL*, *OL*, and *RL* present similar content and follow a similar structure. All three include units on New York City, teens in the Midwest, the northeast of the US, southern life, and California. *GL* thematizes the USA as a country of contrasts, kids in America, school life, New York, inventions and the pacific northwest.

BL, *OL*, and *RL* contain between 227 and 241 images each, 55.6% to 60.4% of which show human beings. *GL* contains 184 images, 66.8% showing humans. Students at grammar schools are offered less images; the space is filled with verbal text instead, yet, the percentage of images showing humans is higher. In general, my analysis revealed a strong difference between the content presented to middle school and grammar school students. Hence, the following reflection contrasts *GL* and *OL*, as a representative of the books for middle schools which are very similar in structure and design.

Both coursebooks present a White, ableist, and middle-class perspective on the United States. Only 31% of the people in *OL* and 26% of the people in *GL* are BIPoC. The only wheelchair user in *OL* is an elderly White male who only appears once; *GL* does not depict a person with a physical variety at all. One indicator for class is the display of (handheld) technological devices such as computers, laptops or smartphones. In *OL*, students encounter a total of 10 images showing these; in *GL*, these amount to 19 images, including action cameras which cannot be seen in *OL*. In both coursebooks, teenagers like to go shopping and spend time with friends. Money, or a lack therefore, are never problematized.

The coursebooks for comprehensive and grammar schools differ in their presentation of US American society, for which the depiction of classrooms serves as an example. In *OL*, all of the classrooms are dark, plain, equipped with outdated furniture and technology (Haß, 2017b, 33, 69). *GL*, on the other hand, presents bright modern classrooms with individual desks and sometimes multiple laptops and tablet PCs that allow for dynamic teaching and learning (Weisshaar, 2017, 18, 91).

GL offers a strikingly stereotypical representation of lifestyles. The unit on the USA as a country of contrast almost exclusively depicts poverty with BIPoC while Whites are rich (ibid., 9, 41, 49). A similar dichotomy is presented in the context of child labor, when only White people demonstrate against child labor (ibid., p. 23). Child labor itself is depicted with Black children in an unidentified African country (ibid., p. 30). Particularly reprehensible is a text on the American Dream that states that “isn’t for everyone” and is illustrated with a Black young male (ibid., p. 28). While the American Dream more often than not remains a myth, this visualization reestablishes a stereotypical perspective on young Black males at the bottom rungs of a social ladder. Parallel to

this, *GL* puts grammar school learners on top of the social ladder from where they are the ones who help others in need (ibid., 21, 33). Accordingly, they are also familiarized with language material with which they can express charity and supporting others compared to being affected by poverty or needing to worry about materialistic aspects in life. *OL* does not offer such content at all.

As indicated above, in Germany learners in grade 8 engage in questions of employment, e.g., by internships. Accordingly, *OL* contains 13 incidents in which needing, applying for, or looking for a job are mentioned. In *GL* there are none. Students at grammar schools do not even learn the word "unemployment" (ibid., p. 256), whereas secondary school students do (Haß, 2017b, p. 249).

While *GL* addresses topics such as slavery and the Native Americans, this is done in a rather superficial and distorting manner (Haß, 2017b, 96-97, 106). For example, information on mansions on former plantations are offered under the headline "Plantation houses: Southern Hospitality" (Haß, 2017b, p. 104). Students learn that Native Americans make money from casinos but are otherwise poor and unemployed, but do not learn why this is the case (Haß, 2017b, p. 137); Native American peoples are labeled as "tribes" (ibid.).

Discussion and implications

These results reveal that with the stereotypical depiction and underrepresentation of socio-cultural diversity, these coursebooks for 8th graders leave a lot of potential to address social justice unused. The coursebooks draw a one-sided and superficial picture of the USA as a country that privileges and normalizes Whiteness, masculinity, and ableism. Disregarding people with physical varieties and limiting BIPoC to contexts of struggle disempowers them from participating in society and devoices their experiences and contributions to community life.

These coursebooks offer a colonial perspective and distort US American history by ignoring counterpoint narratives, e.g., in terms of the casino example addressed above. There are no instances in which learners are asked to take on a more critical stance, in which they are offered incentives to leave a tourist perspective on US society by challenging what is depicted and become a sojourner who receives "the opportunity to learn and be educated, acquiring the capacity to critique and improve their own and others' conditions" (Byram, 1997). Rather, as exemplified in the analysis above, the coursebooks "ignore historical and current injustices forced upon [respective] communities" and limit learners' capacity for reflection by taking the privileged positions for granted "without acknowledging the realities of race, class, power, and oppression" (Randolph & Johnson, 2017, p. 102).

The differences the coursebooks make with regard to the target group are significant. On the one hand, this refers to the insights the coursebooks offer to the USA. The perspective grammar school students get describes a US American society that is even more White, able, and upper middle class than the coursebooks their peers attending other secondary schools use. For them, Americans are fairly rich, generous with charity, and social and financial problems are only relevant for BIPoC. The lack of the word "unemployment" in the *GL*, also from the word lists in the

books for 6th, 7th, 9th and 10th grade speaks volumes. In contrast, middle, comprehensive, and secondary school students learn that US Americans can have difficulties finding a job and worry about money. Therefore, social (in)justice is already grounded in the very design of the coursebooks.

Finally, it could be speculated what the intention of such an imbalance in the representation of US society implies for the German learners of English. It is my hope that it is not the case that the way issues of social justice are depicted in these coursebooks functions as a means to have learners grow into the socio-economic segment that their respective school types imply: grammar school paves the way to academic jobs and employment while secondary schools lead to blue collar jobs and potential unemployment. This is far from offering an education that allows learners to unfold their individual potential.

Conclusion

This critical perspective on the depiction of issues related to social justice in ELT coursebooks for grade 8 revealed that indeed "[t]here is no such things as a neutral educational process" (Shaull, 2015, p. 34). Nothing just is. Instead, these coursebooks suggest that education "functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system" rather than inviting them to "discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (ibid.). In order to implement education for social justice in classrooms, it is paramount that teacher education and teaching practice abide by a critical pedagogy agenda that enables participants in educational settings to challenge "ideologies embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms that combine to shape the way we think about the world" (Randolph & Johnson, 2017, p. 108). It is my hope that means such as critical coursebook analysis allow to unveil seemingly hidden constructions of social (in)justice and to transform education to allow everyone to unfold their full potential.

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