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Textbooks, Markets, and Meanings: Educational Reform in Postcommunist Romania

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Abstract

In 1995, the Romanian government launched the first large-scale education reform since the fall of communism. Largely financed through a World Bank loan, the reform targeted the sector's core dimensions: mission, content, governance, and subjectivities. Textbooks were placed at the center of these transformations, with more than half of the total reform budget allocated to creating a free market for publishing companies responsible for producing textbooks and educational materials. This paper seeks to uncover the explicit and implicit rationalities that underpinned this decision. It argues that, in line with neoliberal ideology, textbooks were regarded as the most cost-effective investment in education. By the same token, the introduction of open competition in the private sector for the publishing, printing, and distribution of textbooks was framed as the most appropriate way to ensure higher textbook quality. However, the decision to prioritize textbooks was not solely driven by economic considerations. Drawing on critical approaches to textbook research, the paper contends that in the post-communist context, textbooks were seen as key instruments for disseminating the "legitimate knowledge" associated with the emerging political-economic order. However, the textbook reform could not have been carried out without the support of Romanian education specialists, who were both ideological and materially co-opted. Finally, the article highlights the inherent contradictions embodied in the 'textbook' in postcommunist Romania, particularly in relation to centralization, student-teacher relations, and social justice.

Keywords: textbooks, education reform, World Bank, Romania, neoliberalism

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Introduction

After December 1989, the National Salvation Front (FSN), the political organisation that took power, was in charge of establishing the new directives for education, as schools were soon about to reopen. Decision makers had to ensure a smooth continuation of the existing school year and to start adjusting the Romanian education system to the new social and political realities of the country (Georgescu & Palade 2003). The first official decisions came in 1990: in January the former Institute of Pedagogical and Psychological Research, now renamed as the Institute for Education Sciences (IES), was re-established after eight years of non-existence, and in May a government decision (GD 521/1990) addressed the urgent topic regarding the organisation and functioning of that school year. Throughout the first post-communist decade, IES remained one of the most influential institutions in reforming the Romanian education.

In the aftermath of 1989, the education sector experienced a wave of confusion and ambitious demands, reflecting the turbulence that also affected industry. Education became one of the most intensely debated issues of the time, a period marked by both euphoria and genuine civic engagement. Newspaper headlines vividly captured this atmosphere of excitement, when possibilities seemed wide open and everyone appeared invited to take part in the national debate on education.

However, as Badea (2002, p. 48) observed, “the battle was lost. The technical priorities were becoming more and more important: organizational culture and school management, curriculum theory. The time has come for experts, for structuring educational policies and for precipitating change.” The “experts” Badea refers to were primarily from the World Bank, and the “technical priorities” represented neoliberal measures that sought to align education with the emerging political and economic order.

The World Bank undertook its first exploratory mission in Romania in 1991 and in 1992 opens its resident Mission. The same year the organisation publishes “Romania. Human Resources and the Transition to a Market Economy” a study that addresses the Romanian social sector and that has a substantial chapter dedicated to education. The focus on the social sector was justified by need to accompany the economic growth and rising living standards with affordable and effective policies and programs in the social sector. Education was high on their list of priorities because “systematic restructuring of social sector policies and programs (especially with respect to labour markets, education, and training) is vital to generate and sustain a supply response” (World Bank, 1992, p.2). In other words, a reform in the education and training sector was needed because it helped sustain economic growth by aligning the workforce available with the new market demands.

Transforming education and the other social sectors involved fundamental reforms in the way the state relates to the market and the civil society. The “competition state” called for a change in the conditions of governing and redrawing the public-private divide (Jessop, 2002). The above mentioned report lays down four directions that would alter

the organisation of social services provision: 1) reforming the policy framework to encourage cost-effective service delivery and ensure the smooth functioning of the market economy. 2) decentralizing management, operations, and financing. 3) privatizing services—or, as stated in the report, introducing multiple service providers to promote individual choice. 4) strengthening the role of NGOs in providing consumers with the information needed to make informed choices (World Bank, 1992). The allocation of scarce resources, privatization, individual choice, accountability, decentralised governance all are the part of the neoliberal economic vocabulary.

In many ways, that report laid the foundation for many of the education sector policy reforms that followed. The transition to a market economy needed more flexible, broadly skilled workforce that could adapt to changing market demands. Pedagogy, curriculum, textbooks, examinations, finance and management were the priority areas of intervention in pre-university education. The higher education sector would need to satisfy the social demand, so the government should encourage private higher education, under a regulatory framework, and cost recovery from the “consumers of education”.

Following that initial research visit, experts from the Ministry of National Education and the IES, together with World Bank specialists, proposed a comprehensive reform of Romania’s pre-university education system, called the Education Reform Project. In fact, Romania was one of the first Central and Eastern European countries to initiate a comprehensive, large-scale, World Bank financed education reform. The diagnosis outlined in the initial report was almost entirely incorporated into the reform strategy adopted by the Romanian Government two years later. While presenting the reform at international conferences, Cezar Bîrzea, director of the Institute for Educational Sciences, the organisation responsible for implementing the reform, clearly stated that the goal was to promote innovations rooted in neo-liberal ideology and the structural adjustment policies imposed by the World Bank (Bîrzea, 1995).

Although all elements of the reform were interconnected and considered crucial to its overall success, textbooks were viewed as the central component. Consequently, the largest share of funds, \$39.3 million, was allocated to establishing a free market for publishing companies responsible for producing textbooks and other educational materials. It was argued that curriculum changes and teacher training initiatives needed to be supported by updated textbooks. As a result, educational materials were revised, and a new competitive textbook publishing market was created.

But how did the textbook come to occupy such a central place in the agendas of global actors in education? Why did the World Bank advocate for investments in textbooks in countries that already ensured universal access to educational materials? The following section outlines the Bank’s rationale for investing in textbooks, while the next examines how this textbook discourse was applied in the Romanian context. The aim is to present an empirical study that explores the economic and social relations underlying the production and distribution of textbooks in post-communist Romania. Finally, I show how textbooks, as cultural artefacts, reflect the post-communist struggles over meaning

and how dominant groups during this period defined what counts as legitimate and truthful knowledge. However, prior to presenting the results, I take a necessary step back to clarify the conceptual framework and describe the methodology that led to these conclusions.

Textbooks as cultural and economic products. A literature review

Textbooks have increasingly attracted the attention of sociologists, especially following the publication of the now classical studies by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970, 1977), and by Bernstein (1971). Their focus on the mechanisms through which school systems contribute to the distribution of cultural capital mainly through language codes—and implicitly to the reproduction of social structures—has led sociologists to conduct extensive analyses of whose knowledge is taught and produced in schools, and what exactly constitutes *legitimate knowledge*. For most students, the textbook represents an entry point into particular fields of knowledge. Consequently, questions related to national, religious, and gender identity, within the framework of a specific ideal of citizenship, have also emerged (Hildebrandt-Wypych & Wiseman, 2021).

Initially, textbooks were relevant in this discussion primarily as physical objects through which the curriculum—that is, the knowledge of the dominant class—was materialized. Apple (1999, 2003) took this investigation further by posing a crucial question: how is the organization and distribution of textbooks mediated by economic and social structures, beyond the curriculum itself? In asking this, Apple starts from the premise that textbooks are embedded within a complex web of state–market relations. To fully understand the mechanisms through which textbooks contribute to the distribution of cultural capital, he argues, one must explore the tension between the “claims of commerce” and the “claims of culture”. Apple thus invites us to view the textbook not only as a cultural artefact but also as a market commodity, an approach that sheds light on the political economy of schooling.

Empirical evidence supports this perspective. Today, textbooks are integral to the global publishing industry. There are increasingly few countries in which textbooks are produced exclusively by the government. For more than four decades, the trend in textbook policy has been toward greater liberalization (Yuriy, Ievgen & Zaiets, 2023). In this context, where the free market functions as the main mechanism for the production and distribution of school knowledge, the main policy variation lies in whether systems employ a list of recommended textbooks or allow schools complete freedom of choice (Yuriy, Ievgen & Zaiets, 2023).

However, this has not always been the case. Roldán Vera (2018) conducts a socio-historical inquiry into textbooks and demonstrates how their role in education has been shaped by the characteristics of specific historical periods and the values attributed to textbooks within them. Up until recently, many states invested heavily in the production and distribution of textbooks, viewing them as crucial instruments in the socialization of younger generations, a type of education that had nationalist underpinning. The situation

was very different in former colonies, where textbooks were predominantly supplied by foreign publishers as part of a textbook-centered pedagogy that introduced European languages as the medium of instruction and examination (Kumar 1986, Roldán Vera 2018).

Yet globalization and the spread of neoliberalism have shifted the center of gravity that the state once held in textbook policy. Supranational organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD have promoted global education policies designed to reduce the role of the state in educational provision. As a result, national control over textbook production has weakened, fundamentally transforming the textbook's function within the educational process.

Textbook privatization is most obvious in the former socialist countries (Roldán Vera, 2018). Following the regime changes in the region and the transition from a centralized system of "universal textbook provision" to policies of "textbook choice, partially covered by the family" national and transnational publishing companies began to compete for larger shares of the textbook market. Unlike other cultural commodities, the textbook market offers both profitability and stability, since its consumers—students and partly teachers—are continuously renewed with each generation (Apple, 2003). Thus, the decision to allocate more than half the reform budget to create a free market for the publishing companies in charge of textbook production is part of this larger changes in the global political economy of education under neoliberal governing.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative multi-method design, comprising document analysis, archival research, and semi-structured individual interviews. To uncover the explicit rationales for financing textbooks, the document analysis focused on World Bank documents, including *Education Reform Project* (1994), *Human Resources and the Transition to a Market Economy* (1992), *Implementation Completion Report for the Education Reform Project* (2002), and *Evaluation of the World Bank's Assistance to Basic Education in Romania* (2007). Each policy document was examined using the concepts of *policy framework* and *policy text* as the main analytical lenses.

The *policy framework* refers to the underlying assumptions and problematizations that shape the formulation of a policy text and is part of a broader approach that Fairclough (1995) terms the "analysis of discursive practices," encompassing the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of texts. This methodological phase involved identifying and analyzing pre-existing discourses as reflected in World Bank education-related documents, particularly regarding textbook financing, in order to uncover the premises on which the coherence and structure of their policies were built. Furthermore, the analysis of the policy framework extended beyond uncovering the genealogy of "the textbook" as a discursive category to examining the specific historical

conditions under which this discourse emerged in Romania, and, consequently, the particular form it assumed.

The *policy text* analysis further investigated the latter aspect by examining various “proprieties” of World Bank reports—such as vocabulary, text organization, assumptions, and implications—to uncover the ideological underpinnings of neoliberalism in relation to textbook production. For example, the 1992 World Bank report arbitrarily assigned hierarchical positions to different countries, including Romania, based on their provision of textbooks. This hierarchy has clear ideological stakes as it is an attempt to legitimise power asymmetry. The focus on the “textbook” discourse history meant that findings were constructed through a continuous, interpretive argument rather than through thematic analysis. Since the study aimed to uncover how the idea of the “textbook” emerged, traveled, was domesticated, gained dominance, and ultimately became naturalized within the Romanian education system, the analysis went beyond examining data extracted from policies to examining newspaper interviews, biographical notes, expert articles, social interactions, etc.

To analyze the distribution and consumption of ideas, I used newspaper archives as a primary source. The main newspaper examined was *Tribuna Învățământului* (translated as *Education Tribune*), a publication dedicated to documenting the development and evolution of Romanian education. This newspaper was selected because it served as the principal communication channel for most decisions made within the Ministry of Education during the 1990s. It also published extensive interviews with pedagogical specialists, researchers, teachers, and students, while reporting more broadly on the state of education. Additionally, I examined articles from national general-interest newspapers that addressed the “textbook affair.” Examples of such publications include *Curierul Național* (*The National Courier*), *România Liberă* (*Free Romania*), and *Dilema* (*The Dilemma*).

Finally, the finding presented here also draw on semi-structured interviews conducted with World Bank and government staff, most of whom were directly involved in the early reforms of the Romanian education sector. In total, I conducted ten in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews with purposively selected participants, chosen for their expertise and involvement in the education reforms. The interviews were conducted both in person and online between January 2024 and January 2025 and lasted between one and three hours. For the purpose of this article, I focus only on the information related to textbook writing and publishing.

Even though it relies on multiple sources of information, this research shares the common limitations of qualitative inquiry, including potential researcher bias and subjectivity, limited generalizability, and non-replicability. A particular weakness of this study lies in the fact that the newspapers reviewed often presented conflicting information about the topic of textbook privatization, each reflecting its own ideological stance. Another limitation is that the Ministry of Finance’s online database provides fiscal data for companies for only the past five years. Consequently, it is not possible to trace

the long-term evolution of the turnover of private companies involved in textbook publishing and provide concrete data related to their financial interests in this area.

This paper was edited with the use of AI. Specifically, I used ChatGPT to correct grammar and punctuation and, occasionally, to modify sentence structure. The prompts I entered in the chat box were “correct this text” or “improve sentence clarity,” followed by a review and revision of the suggested changes. The AI-assisted editing process paralleled my writing process i.e. after completing each paragraph, I asked the AI to correct grammar and spelling. AI technology was not used in any other way during the research, analysis, or writing process.

Textbooks and the World Bank’s Education Reform Agenda

The World Bank is the largest international funder of education and has a long-standing tradition of conducting sector analyses, providing policy advice, and offering technical assistance to developing countries. For many years, the Bank’s main lending portfolio focused on large infrastructural projects in the so-called “Third World.” Education entered its agenda through the lens of human capital theory (Schultz, 1961), which posits that knowledge and skills constitute a form of capital, and that investments in human capital lead to higher earnings for individuals and, ultimately, to greater economic growth.

The Bank’s shift from “bricks and mortar” to “school textbooks and curriculum development” (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985) was accompanied by a series of empirical studies in developing countries that sought to identify which types of educational investments yield the greatest societal benefits. The issue of “education production” became increasingly prominent as the fields of economics and education became more closely intertwined (Brewer & Hentschke, 2010).

Underlying these efforts was the assumption that, to compete in a global economy that rewards higher qualifications, countries needed to build educational systems with market-oriented features—such as incentives and choice, competition mechanisms, decentralized decision-making, and a focus on efficient resource allocation. Consequently, decisions about how to produce “quality education” were often guided by an input-output framework, aimed at identifying the most cost-effective inputs (educational infrastructure, teacher training, textbooks, etc.) that could generate the best outputs, typically measured in terms of student achievement (Brewer & Hentschke, 2010).

Textbooks emerged as a strategic solution to a major challenge affecting the efficiency and legitimacy of the World Bank’s education projects in developing countries. Earlier research had indicated that school-level inputs often had only a weak or insignificant effect on student achievement compared with family background (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985). In response, the World Bank supported a series of studies that demonstrated the strong impact of textbooks on learning outcomes.

Heyneman, Farrell, and Sepulveda-Stuardo (1978), in a comparative study across 12 countries, found that the availability of textbooks was the most consistent school factor associated with academic achievement. Furthermore, the authors concluded that investments in textbooks were more likely to produce measurable learning gains than other school inputs, such as smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, or additional teacher training. A later study conducted in part by the same authors, in the Philippines found that the positive effects of increased access to textbooks and learning materials were particularly pronounced among disadvantaged children (Heyneman, Jamison, & Montenegro, 1984).

From a financial perspective, textbooks occupied an intermediate category between recurrent and capital expenditures. Teachers' salaries, by contrast, were classified as recurrent expenditures. What's more, textbooks were also considered a cost-effective measure, as they were relatively cheap to produce. However, as Psacharopoulos and Woodhall (1985) point out, the crucial distinction lies not in the durability of an item, but in how it is financed. Capital expenditures fell under the World Bank's loan-financing framework, whereas recurrent expenditures did not. Textbooks therefore provided a means for the Bank to expand its lending portfolio while reinforcing its legitimacy as the global education trendsetter. As Psacharopoulos and Woodhall (1985, p 171.) note:

If governments and international financing agencies recognize that educational expenditure produces long-run, rather than short-run, benefits, then they may be willing to finance a greater share of expenditure through loans.

By framing textbooks as a form of capital investment (at least the first purchase) and drawing on supporting empirical evidence, the World Bank began to emphasize textbooks and educational materials as the most cost-effective way to improve educational inputs. Consequently, since 1976, the provision of classroom materials has become a major component of the Bank's education loan projects. Between 1963 and 1969, none of the approved projects included specific support for classroom materials. However, by the early 1980s, textbooks and other learning aids had become a central element in two out of every ten projects financed by the Bank in the education sector (Heyneman, Jamison, & Montenegro, 1984).

With the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the World Bank drew on its prior experience with textbook provision and proposed a series of policies in Romania centered on curriculum reform. These policies aimed to channel both Bank and government resources toward textbook production. The World Bank specialist responsible for conducting the analysis of Romania's education sector, which served as the foundation for the forthcoming reform, was none other than Stephen P. Heyneman, who had previously advocated for investment in textbooks and educational materials on the grounds that they were not only essential tools for learning but also cost-effective investments in developing countries.

Despite later World Bank reports (for example the 2002 project evaluation report) suggesting that textbook privatization was initiated by the Romanian counterparts, newspaper archives reveal a different story. Following an initial meeting between

Romanian experts and the World Bank in June 1991, Sorin Cristea, then State Secretary for Pre-University Education, clearly outlined to the Romanian public the education agenda proposed by the Bank's experts for accelerating the transition. This agenda emphasized three main issues: the lack of alternative textbooks and supplementary materials, the overly early and narrowly focused vocational orientation in secondary education, and the limited access to higher education.² All these "problematizations" later became key areas of intervention supported through World Bank loans in the following years.

The interviews I conducted with World Bank staff suggest a partnership in which the state-owned publishing house (EDP), private publishers, and the Bank pursued largely converging interests, as the quote below illustrates. However, this partnership was characterized by a pronounced power asymmetry, both in its design and in its outcomes. In terms of design, the Bank held the financial leverage and institutional authority to impose conditionalities, which were explicitly detailed in the loan agreement.

What's happening in textbooks and books. So, the editors from the Didactica [EDP] were struggling to put textbooks in schools and there were these first private publishers starting to do things that looked really nice, and who wanted to be part of this story. So, what is a pathway forward there? The head of editorial Didactical Publishing, who I remember at the time as a real gentleman.... he was part of these issues because he wasn't getting the money to produce the books. So, these were, we were partners in problem understanding, and in problem solving. (WB2, management, 09.04.2024)

It is also important to note that the 1990s marked the height of structural adjustment programs, a period when education reform constituted only a minor component within the broader macroeconomic restructuring of former socialist countries. In terms of outcomes, the privatization of textbooks ultimately benefited private publishers far more than the state.

Yet, Romania already had a well-oiled system of textbook publishing in place. Since textbooks were the main channel for teaching the official curriculum—a curriculum that also served as a tool of communist political socialization—the previous regime had invested heavily in ensuring that every child had access to a textbook. Although the general economic crisis of the 1980s affected the paper industry and led to efficiency measures such as the "principle of transferability", which required textbooks to be used by several generations, overall, textbooks continued to be made available reliably, regularly, and in sufficient quantities to meet curriculum requirements. The World Bank reports clearly states the numbers: approximately 400 titles are printed in 12 languages every year (World Bank, 1992, p. 79) which meant approximately 22 million new textbooks in 1991-1992 (World Bank, 1994, p. 6)

² The article entitled *Educație și economie. Banca Mondială – raportul privind accelerarea tranziției în România* (Education and Economy. The World Bank – The Report on Accelerating the Transition in Romania) was published in *Tribuna Învățământului* on June 17, 1991.

Table 1.

Number of print runs and titles published by EDP in the early post-communist years. Source: Interviews with Constantin Floricel, Director of EDP, as reported in Tribuna Învățământului.

Year	Total Print Run	For sale	Textbook Titles	Rep. Moldova
1991	21.000.000	n/a	425	800.000
1993	20.000.000	2.840.000	425	1.150.000
1994	22.500.000	3.000.000	435	800.000

Moreover, the World Bank had prior experience working on education issues in developing countries, where textbooks served as the principal learning materials and were therefore the focus of major financial investments, whether by the state or through international aid donors. In contrast, Romania already had a well-established system of pre-service and in-service teacher training, and most schools were staffed with qualified educators. While it would be naïve to assume that there were no regional or institutional disparities in teacher qualifications or in the degree of reliance on textbooks as teaching aids, Romania's situation was nonetheless incomparable to that of countries lacking universal access to primary education. How, then, was the Bank able to transfer its "short education menu" (Heynemann, 2003) to Romania and still propose substantial investments in textbooks? The following section seeks to answer this question.

Textbook privatization in Romania

A partial answer to this question is that they first created a problem and then offered a solution to it. As I have shown previously (Solonean, 2023), in order to introduce policy shifts, Romanian education first had to be constructed as an object of knowledge. World Bank experts surveyed the sector and "diagnosed" its problems along with their underlying causes. Their discourse emphasized as dysfunctional precisely those features that the forthcoming reform was designed to address. Their neoliberal commitments informed both their policy approach and the framing of their examination.

As the first report states, the Bank's role was to "identify current waste in Romania's social sectors and suggest resource-saving measures" (World Bank, 1992, p.9). The organization of textbook production in post-communist Romania was identified as one such source of waste. *Editura Didactică și Pedagogică*, the state publishing company, was considered inefficient in terms of service delivery and, as a result, was to be replaced by a system in which incentives and competition would produce better and more affordable textbooks.

Furthermore, the privatization of textbook production was expected to generate multiple options for each subject, thereby encouraging choice and responsibility at both the school and family levels. Finally, the introduction of a free market was anticipated not only to lower costs but also to improve the quality of textbooks in terms of paper,

graphics, and content organization. This last argument, in particular, resonated with the Romanian education specialists leading the reform, most of whom were affiliated with the Institute of Educational Sciences.

To further support their arguments, the Bank drew on a global classification system that ranked countries according to educational achievement in relation to textbook access and the availability of multiple options. According to this global scale, Romania was placed in the third tier, alongside countries such as the People's Republic of China and Indonesia, and below nations like Chile and Malaysia. At the top of the hierarchy were the OECD countries, characterized by individualized learning paces, detailed records of achievement, and broad access to visual materials. This discourse exemplifies what Boatcă (2006) describes as the simultaneous process through which post-socialist societies are assessed in terms of "catching up" with advanced capitalist countries while Eastern Europe's *Third-Worldization* becomes increasingly apparent.

The outcome of this representational framework was the decision to allocate the largest share of funds to establishing open competition in the private sector for the publishing, printing, and distribution of textbooks and educational materials. This initiative was expected to provide "greater diversity, durability, and higher quality of textbooks in all schools throughout the country." (World Bank, 1994) The "abolition of the state monopoly on textbooks" (p. 8) also meant that the government would no longer contract with any state-funded publishers within the newly established textbook market. In this new arrangement, the government's role was limited to setting the content specifications and evaluating the results of the textbook competitions. The next section examines this very issue: the evolving role of the government, and particularly its key actors, in shaping the national textbook industry. It explores their involvement as reformers, specialists, textbook authors, and publishers, and, in some cases, their simultaneous engagement in multiple of these roles and argues that their engagement in textbook production is illustrative of the larger struggles over meaning.

Textbooks and struggles over the legitimate knowledge

It is important to recognize that even before the World Bank's proposals became public, both teachers and education specialists were already advocating for the streamlining of textbooks—specifically, for the removal of content that exceeded students' levels of understanding or was purely descriptive. Communist-era textbooks were often described as encyclopedic, overly focused on memorization, and lacking visual appeal. The textbook publishing system was also criticized for relying predominantly on university professors as authors, many of whom had little to no contact with the realities of pre-university education. Furthermore, with the transition to capitalism and democracy, the content of education was expected to address new pedagogical priorities aligned with contemporary global concerns, such as education for democracy, environmental protection, and the civic formation of young people. The introduction of optional subjects

emerged as a direct consequence of the reorganization of school curricula, which in turn generated the need for new textbooks. As a result, over the next years, new textbooks were developed in subjects such as geology, psychology, Greek language, history of religions, art history, foreign languages, philosophy, and economics.

In this context, there was little conflict between Romanian specialists, teachers, students, and World Bank experts. In fact, one of the new government's first measures targeted the revision of existing textbooks. Efforts to depoliticize and de-ideologize the educational content began with textbooks, all of which were subjected to what was described as "a careful and radical reconsideration." Directives issued by the Ministry of Education called for the removal of activities and textbooks with ideological content, such as those for moral-political and patriotic education. Precise instructions were issued from the central authorities: all portraits and images depicting the dictatorial couple were to be removed from textbooks, as well as texts referring to the national anthem, flag, or the coat of arms of the Socialist Republic of Romania. All themes related to the communist struggle against fascism, the building of communism in Romania and the Eastern Bloc, and workers' movements around the world were also to be eliminated.

In addition, throughout the first post-communist year, textbooks became the focus of intense public attention due to ethno-political and religious controversies but also because national examinations were based on the content of existing textbooks. On private initiative, history and geography textbooks in Hungarian began to appear in several schools in Transylvania. Combined with other ethnic tensions, the so-called "Hungarian textbook scandal" further inflamed the nationalist sentiments of conservative parties. In the same context of ethnic fluidity and the reconfiguration of spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, beginning in 1991, a large number of Romanian-language textbooks were shipped abroad for use by Moldovan students. The Orthodox Patriarchate began publishing books resembling school textbooks, focused on Christian moral education while newly established NGOs started developing textbook focused on applied economics.³

The battle over what constituted legitimate knowledge intensified over time, particularly as IES specialists, supported by the World Bank, initiated the curriculum reform. Alexandru Crișan, who had headed the National Curriculum Board since 1995, recalls meeting with the Ministry's director responsible for the education contents and engaging in a heated exchange over textbook reform. The director favored maintaining content that was rich in factual information, arguing that Western models did not necessarily apply to Romania and that skills such as critical thinking should be grounded in factual knowledge: "Would you like us to end up like the Americans who don't have a clue who Shakespeare or Tolstoy are, or where Romania is on the map?" (Bassler, 2005, p. 31). By contrast, Crișan, drawing on Western pedagogical approaches, emphasized the

³ For example, in 1993, the *Junior Achievement Romania* organization was founded to introduce an *Applied Economics* program for high school students, providing both textbooks and teacher training as part of its educational initiatives.

development of competencies, such as “debate, conversation, polemics, exchange of opinions, listening to others, suitable turn-taking, and so on.” (Bassler, 2005, p. 33).

But in no field was the debate more fierce than in relation to history textbooks. As Păraianu (2005) argued, textbooks were at the center of controversy after 1989 because they served as a primary instrument for shaping the political orientation of the new generations. He, like many others at the time, contrasted the old, ideologically driven history textbooks with the new versions that claimed to present the “true history” of Romanians. Although the public debate largely revolved around nationalist tropes, such as the inclusion or exclusion of information about major historical figures, a few historians went further, criticizing the broader framing of the textbooks. They argued that these materials emphasized individualism while marginalizing civic solidarity and that their content was Western-centered.⁴

From ideological conflation to material appropriation

Although both the grassroots initiatives related to textbooks and the central authorities sought to reform not only the content but also the system of textbook production, their visions of change were largely framed in terms of greater democratization and broader participation. For instance, in an early effort to update textbook content, the Ministry of Education invited English teachers from across the country to submit lesson examples for potential inclusion in the new textbooks. Sorin Cristea’s proposal for democratization underscored the need to establish a representative institutional framework founded on the principles of democracy and pedagogical competence. He argued that curriculum and textbook committees should function as creative teams open to local initiatives, without “entitled authors” or fixed, definitive versions. Consequently, across the country, a series of debates on textbook design were organized, bringing together the Minister of Education, researchers from the IES, representatives of County School Inspectorates, textbook authors, and teachers. Participants emphasized the need to develop multiple textbook versions and to select the best ones through a competitive process. In this version, textbook authors would submit their proposals to the ministry rather than to a private publishing company. Their discussion didn’t evolve around free market but around meritocracy and democratization.

As Ban (2016) argues, the common ground between the World Bank’s neoliberal policies and Romanian specialists’ calls for democratization and greater participation lay in their shared anti-statist sentiment. Although their motivations were quite different, the Romanian demand for the depoliticization of education converged with the Bank’s so called technical solutions centered on decentralization and market-based interventions. This “great conflation” of neoliberalism with democracy was a key factor behind the

⁴ Păraianu (2005) offers an overview of the different positions taken by Romanian historians on the textbook issue.

uncritical adoption of the textbook free market. The quote below enunciated by the same State Secretary clearly illustrates this point:

A clarification is also needed in the area of organizing the textbook development process, by allowing the practically unrestricted participation of potential authors—individuals who are currently constrained not only by their own timidity but also by the anachronistic and closed nature of certain decision-making structures. The democratization of this activity goes hand in hand with efforts to identify new sources of funding. The experience accumulated worldwide is not to be overlooked in this respect either: “In order to improve quality and encourage the diversification of textbooks, it will be necessary to eliminate the monopoly over publishing” (see World Bank Report, 4–15, XI.1991).⁵

However, this ideological convergence alone does not fully explain the isomorphism that characterized post-communist Romanian reforms. Other equally significant factors included the material interests in the reform of many Romanian specialists and their intensive re-socialization into the neoliberal paradigm through training programs, study visits, and workshops.

Regarding the latter, the Bank mobilized funding from the U.K. Know-How Fund, the Japan Grant Facility, the British Council, and the EU/PHARE program to provide technical assistance to its Romanian partners (World Bank, 1994, p. 9). In direct relation to textbook production, the International Book Development organization and the Soros Foundation organized several symposia on textbook design, bringing together teachers, inspectors, and researchers from across the country.

Soon, public officials from the Ministry as well as specialists from IES were advocating for the abolition of the state monopoly on school textbooks, the liberalization of the educational publishing market, the abandonment of the single textbook system, and the revision of the textbook subsidy system to benefit families directly. Over time, many of Romania’s most prominent education researchers became directly affiliated with the Bank, producing studies and articles that aligned with its policy recommendations. Their careers became deeply interconnected, as they moved between roles at the World Bank, IES, and the Soros Foundation, often holding simultaneous or successive positions within these institutions.

However, material appropriation extended beyond simply being on the Bank’s payroll. To shed light on this aspect, it is necessary to understand the mechanism through which the textbook reform was set in motion. From an operational perspective, the textbook development process functioned as follows: the Ministry of Education organized a series of national tenders in which publishing companies submitted their textbook projects, including both content proposals and price offers for each title. Evaluation committees assessed the submitted materials according to well-defined

⁵ Sorin Cristea, State Secretary, Ministry of Education in *Tribuna Învățămintului* no. 1, January 13, 1992.

criteria in two stages: first evaluating the content, then the price, and assigning a score for each. Based on the final ranking, the top three textbooks were declared winners. The publishing houses then printed 1,500 copies of each winning textbook, which were paid for by the Ministry of Education at the tender price. These copies were distributed nationwide, where teachers selected the textbook they preferred. Orders were then centralized by the Ministry and the publishing houses, after which the publishers printed the selected textbooks and delivered them to schools. The textbooks were purchased through the World Bank's loan at the tender price. The World Bank also determined the eligibility requirements and tender documentation for publishing houses.

As a result of the open competition for education-related books and materials, several major Romanian publishing houses emerged or developed, including Teora, Corint, Sigma, Humanitas, Aramis, Polirom, and All. Soon most of these publishing companies would join forces and form the Association of Pedagogical Publishers. As Romania's economic situation deteriorated and books increasingly became a luxury item, prompted many established publishers to shift their focus toward "essential books" — professional literature and school textbooks. Consequently, most publishing houses created dedicated educational departments and began producing textbooks annually, often prioritizing visually attractive and marketable editions to secure textbook contracts. This line of activity became one of their primary source of revenue and a strategic means of consolidating their positions within the Romanian book market.

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Finance's online database provides fiscal data for companies for only the past five years, making it impossible to trace the long-term profits of these publishing houses. Nonetheless, the information collected from newspapers, although incomplete, offers some insight in this direction. A ranking of Romanian publishing houses from 2005 illustrates the market landscape: with a turnover of €3,719,815, Polirom ranked first, driven largely by the success of its professional book series Collegium. In second place was Teora, with a turnover of €3,181,583, followed closely by Corint Publishing Group (€3,155,673) and Rao Publishing (€2,176,498). Humanitas occupied the fifth position, with a turnover of €2,047,394. All these publishing companies have an 'educational' branch in charge of textbooks and education materials.⁶

Although the initial procedure called for the approval of three alternative textbooks, soon private companies proposed a complete liberalization of the textbook market, arguing that limiting it to three per education level was restrictive, especially given that there could be multiple high-quality textbooks. The *Catalog of Alternative Textbooks 2000–2001*, published by the Association of Pedagogical Publishers, illustrates how the publishing industry flourished in just five to six years since the introduction of the reform. The number of textbooks available for each subject reveals a rather absurd situation: there were 23 English language textbooks for 9th grade and another 23 for 10th grade, as well as 15 mathematics textbooks for 9th grade and 29 for 10th grade.

⁶ Wall-Street.ro. (2006, October 23). *Polirom, primul loc în bilanțul editurilor pe 2005*. <https://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Companii/20887/polirom-primul-loc-in-bilatul-editurilor-pe-2005>

Moreover, teachers have pointed out that the same author's name would appear on the covers of three or four textbooks for the same subject and grade level. A striking example is that of Mircea Fronescu, State Secretary at the Ministry of Education, who, in 1999, was listed as the author of four different physics textbooks for 9th grade. As a result of this situation, Minister Andronescu mandates in 2001 that schools adopt only a selection of the textbooks approved by the National Council for the Approval of Textbooks, a decision that subsequently prompted the Association of Pedagogical Publishers to initiate legal proceedings against the state, accusing the ministry of "brutal intervention in the mechanisms of the free market."

In the absence of a well-defined legal framework to define conflict of interests, some of the authors submitting proposals on behalf of publishing houses were individuals affiliated with the Ministry or the National Curriculum Committee. George Palade, Alexandru Crișan, Dakmara Georgescu are examples of individuals who simultaneously or consecutively held roles as researchers, reform implementers, World Bank consultants, and textbook authors.⁷ The royalties that textbook authors receive from publishers range between six and ten percent of sales—a significant amount in the context of the economic crisis and precarity that characterized post-communist Romania. Beyond these direct financial benefits, authors also gain prestige, a form of symbolic capital that helps consolidate their position within the postsocialist context. Consequently, textbook authors "simply inundate the publishing house," as Diana Rotaru, Head of the Education Editorial Department at Teora Publishing, remarked in an interview with *Dilema*.⁸

Others benefit from the free market in even more direct ways. For example, Mihaela Singer joined ISE in the early 1990s after serving as a math inspector at the Bucharest School Inspectorate. She later became part of the national team responsible for preparing the TIMSS evaluations while also working as a World Bank consultant. Additionally, she and her husband became shareholders in Sigma Publishing Company, one of the leading textbook publishers. Sigma was among the companies supported by the World Bank through its textbook loan. Later, Singer leveraged her professional platforms to write and publish numerous articles advocating for the World Bank's educational reforms.

Asked whether it constituted a conflict of interest for Romanian specialists to simultaneously serve as World Bank consultants while having direct financial stakes as shareholders in private companies benefiting from the reform, such as publishing companies, a Bank representative responded that as long as it was legal under the national framework and competition rules were upheld, there was nothing objectionable. The absence of a legislative framework to curb the "primitive capitalism" that defined the 1990s (Georgescu, 2021) allowed public servants, such as those working for the IES to

⁷ See, for example, the article published in *Evenimentul Zilei*, no. 2228, 21 October 1999.

⁸ *Dilema*. No. 140, September 15, 1995.

benefit in a very direct, material way from the neoliberal reforms designed by the World Bank.

Contradictions and implications of the reform

Because no reform is purely technical but inherently political, in terms of who benefits and who loses, it is worth examining who the losers of this education policy were. I argue that those who bore the cost of the transition were the teachers, EDP - the state publishing company, and poor students.

Teacher's statute and teacher student-relation. As a result of this reform, a second major transformation occurred: the center of gravity in the education system shifted from the teacher to the teaching material—from the human to the object-product. Șerban Iosifescu, an education specialist affiliated with both the Ministry of Education and the IES, clearly articulated this problem. In several articles published in *Tribuna Învățămintului* he advocated for a shift in the focus of reform, arguing that⁹:

the system has to be restructured around the initial and continuing professional training of educational agents. This also implies a change in funding priorities, with emphasis placed on human resources, while other resources—such as curriculum, tools, and textbooks—should be subordinated to this primary objective.

By shifting attention from the teacher to technology—a process that has only accelerated in recent years—we risk undermining the very aspects that make teaching and learning profoundly human endeavors. As one professor once stated, “There are no good teachers who can be hindered by a poor textbook, nor bad teachers who can be saved by exceptional textbooks.” Ultimately, the question is one of priorities. In the teaching process, the most important element is the relationship that the teacher establishes with the student—a dynamic exchange of ideas, emotions, and responses. Education and learning are not technological processes, and no textbook, however well designed, can ever replace that relationship.

The current emphasis on digital tools in teaching—including AI, smart boards, communication platforms, and hundreds of learning applications—represents just the latest iteration of a long-standing trend in which technological solutions have been prioritized over consistent investment in the teaching force.

The question of EDP and state centralization: The criticism directed at the Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House (EDP) related to its inefficiency was only partially justified. In 1990, approximately 300 million lei were allocated from the state budget for the printing of 25 million copies in both Romanian and minority languages. The newly printed textbooks were distributed free of charge to students, while a portion was made available for sale in bookstores. Although some textbooks arrived after the start of the school year, over 90% of the textbooks were printed in time. Additionally,

⁹ *The Funded Monitoring of the Reform*. Article by Șerban Iosifescu, Tiberiu Mihail, and Adela Rogojinaru, *Tribuna Învățămintului*, no. 264, February 13, 1995.

most of the delays stemmed from the fact that printing took place in the same facilities that were now overwhelmed by the surge of newly established newspapers and publishing houses that had appeared after the fall of communism. In terms of paper, cardboard, and printing quality, these textbooks were indeed modest.

Since its founding during the communist period, EDP has operated on the principle of economic self-management, meaning that it funded its activities through the sale of textbooks and other publications. Yet EDP was responsible not only for producing textbooks but also had a long-standing tradition of publishing a wide range of educational materials, such as maps, charts, atlases, exercise collections, and workbooks. For example, throughout the 1990s, the publishing house participated in several international book fairs and received multiple awards for its atlas collection. In addition, EDP also produces textbooks for 14 national minorities, a role that none of the new publishing companies would take due to the low profits associated with small quantities.

More importantly, there is a contradiction between efforts to decentralize textbook production and simultaneous attempts to centralize the curriculum and examinations. Another key component of the reform was the introduction of a new examination system—the capacity exam—designed for entrance into secondary schools. These exams, national in scope, would be centrally graded in Bucharest and aligned with the unified national curriculum, covering all core subject areas. Under a system with uniform grading, it is unclear how multiple textbooks could accommodate the needs for individualized learning, teacher autonomy, or diversified educational opportunities the reform was promoting.

Social justice: Privatization neither achieved the anticipated reduction in textbook prices projected by the World Bank nor ensured their free distribution to all students. In 2000, the price of a special workbook ranged from 20,000 to 25,000 lei, while a foreign language textbook could cost over 200,000 lei. Since students have multiple subjects the total expenses for a family for purchasing the textbooks amounted to several million lei. For comparison, during the same year, the minimum wage fluctuated due to inflation—from 700,000 lei at the beginning of the year to 1,000,000 lei by its end (GD no. 101/2000; GD no. 1166/2000). The lack of free textbooks affected primarily students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who could not afford their cost. The safety net that the welfare state once provided has no place under neoliberalism, where the principles of profit, competition, and cost reduction dictate material distribution.

Moreover, while the public debate was dominated by discussions about alternative textbooks, many schools lacked even basic facilities, funding for maintenance and repairs being largely neglected. Meanwhile, illiteracy and school dropout rates emerged as increasingly urgent problems.

4. Conclusions

This paper examines the development of “alternative textbooks” and, consequently, the textbook market, as a result of the first reform project financed by the World Bank following the fall of communism in Romania. It argues that the introduction of alternative

textbooks—which became synonymous with education reform in post-communist Romania—served to obscure the fundamentally commercial nature of the textbook issue. Although their political motives may have differed, there was a clear ideological alignment between the World Bank and Romanian education professionals. Their shared perspective was rooted in anti-communist, anti-statist, and liberal-democratic rhetoric, emphasizing competence and meritocracy within the education system. However, beyond these common themes and ideological affinities, many local experts were motivated by the opportunity to advance socially and benefit in direct, material ways from the textbook reform.

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