Content analysis of Iran's Middle Secondary School Textbooks based on Van Dijk's Ideological Square

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A R T I C L E I N F O	A B S T R A C T
   K E Y W O R D S 	The curriculum seeks to transmit the values, norms, and beliefs of powerful social systems such as politics and religion to the young generation, both visible and hidden. The purpose of this study is to analyze the content of Iran's Middle Secondary school textbooks based on Van Dijk's ideological analysis. The researchers collected data through a documentary method. The data included Farsi and social studies textbooks of Grade 9 that were selected through purposeful sampling method. Findings showed that the authors in both school textbooks have used various axes and strategies in structure of the text to convey ideological discourse. Also, the polarization strategy has been used more than other strategies. Another finding of research indicated that the authors' emphasis on providing information that includes positive traits about oneself and negative traits about others. In addition, the findings reveal that in the Farsi book, the text space is mainly based on the use of epic-emotional approach, while in the social studies book, the negative role of foreigners is mainly highlighted. While these findings well demonstrate the dominance of ideological discourse over school textbook, naturally the centralized structure of the Iran education system does not allow for a reform in the current visible and hidden curriculum objectives.

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1. Introduction

The mission of educational system in transmitting the experiences of the older generation to the young generation is a well-known idea for curriculum planners. These experiences include a wide range of information that various social systems - especially powerful institutions such as politics, religion and the family - seek to teach children, adolescents and young people. The extent to which the educational system serves the purposes of these powerful social systems depends on several factors such as the political structure, degree of religious influence and organizational structure of educational system (Shrestha, Williams, Al-Samarrai, Van Geldermalsen, & Zaidi, 2019). Generally in societies where the education system is not "politicized", "education about religion" is allowed instead of "religious education", and structure of education system is "decentralized", domination of social systems over the education system is "balanced" (Kuburić, & Moe, 2006). In this situation, defining a "balanced limit" is a difficult task that again leads to the intervention of people such as philosophers, social reformers, politicians, and other social groups in the education system. Thus, the definition of a balanced level in different societies also allows for a different degree of involvement of social institutions in education. Despite this complexity, the level of intervention can be divided into three modes: low, medium and high, and then determine the position of each country on a hypothetical continuum (Figure 1):
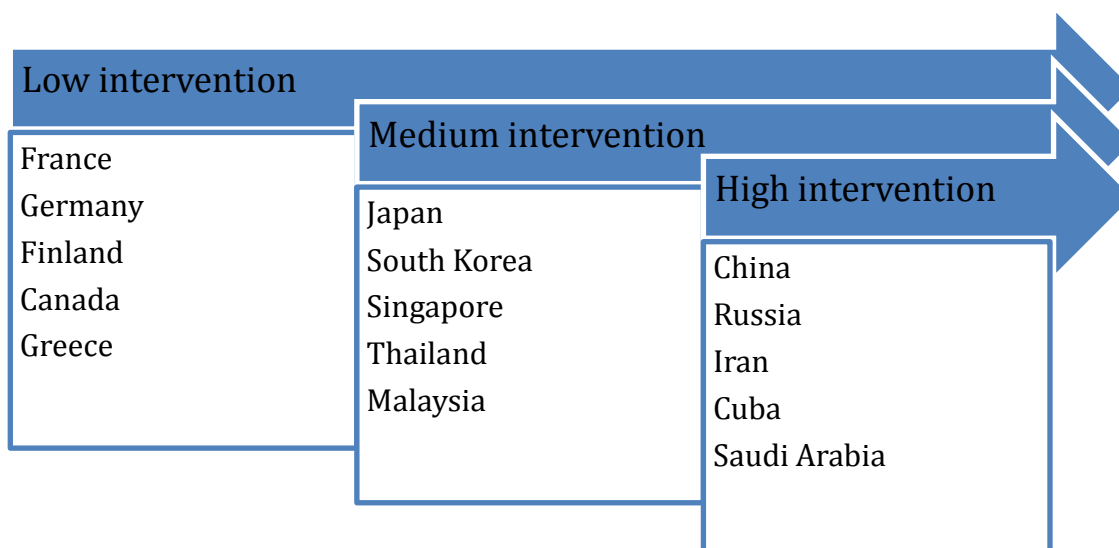

Low intervention

France
Germany
Finland
Canada
Greece

Medium intervention

Japan
South Korea
Singapore
Thailand
Malaysia

High intervention

China
Russia
Iran
Cuba
Saudi Arabia

Figure 1: Hypothetical continuum of the degree of involvement of social systems in educational system

There are a few things to keep in mind when interpreting this continuum: First, it is a hypothetical continuum that current researchers have designed solely to express their own goals. Therefore, the position of countries in it can be confirmed or rejected by other researchers or other countries can be replaced. Second, despite the hypothesis of continuity, there is empirical evidence and research support that largely confirms the position of selected countries in the continuum. For example, these studies show that in the first group of countries, the structure of the Federal and Decentralized Ministry of Education, the teaching of a particular religion to students is prohibited, the politicization of the education system and degree of interference by social institutions in education are usually minimal (Wallner, 2012; Eberle, 2006; Custos, 2006; Lavonen, 2017). Third, successful or unsuccessful educational systems can be found in all three groups. For example, based on students' performance on international tests such as the TIMSS, Russia, South Korea and Finland are successful countries with varying degrees of intervention of social systems in their education system (IEA, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this article is not to determine whether the intervention of social systems in the educational system is pleasant or unpleasant. In fact, the main message of the authors is that - regardless of the degree of influence of social systems in the educational system - what the social systems have in common is the transmission of their desires and expectations to young generation mainly through schools and curriculum. Naturally, in countries with low intervention, the reflection of these demands and expectations in school textbooks will be low. Thus, in the third group of countries, school textbooks carry many visible and hidden messages of social systems for the young generation. Therefore, to determine degree of social intervention, content analysis of textbooks can be the first step. In fact, as Van Dijk & Teun (2004) emphasized ideologies are institutionalized through textbooks.

Indeed, one of the goals of the hidden curriculum is to support the ideas of the social systems of their community while at the same time approving or rejecting the ideas of outsiders. Van Dijk, one of the leading theorists in the field of critical discourse analysis, proposed the ideological square theory, emphasizing that ideologies can be represented through linguistic words. According to him, the ideological square - which consists of four sides: emphasizing own positive trait, emphasizing the negative trait of others, downplaying own negative traits, and downplaying the positive traits of others -; can show the contrasting features of discourses and polarization inside and outside societies (Kasaei & Rahimian 2014). According to Van Dijk & Teun (2004), various textual-linguistic mechanisms have the ability to highlight and marginalize the meaning of the text.

They describe these textual-linguistic manifestations that reflect ideology as follows: vocabulary and word-choice (which can carry a positive or negative value burden), rhetorical forms (such as exaggerating other negative and positive internal actions), and formulating external structures (which makes the behavioral actions of the "insider" positive and the actions of the "other" negative). Naturally, the use of these mechanisms has a greater impact on children, adolescents and young people - according to their mental and psychological characteristics. For this reason, all social systems are interested in shaping the thoughts and behavior of the young generation through textbooks and educational activities in favor of their goals. Many studies show this.

For example, Llorent-Vaquero (2018) surveyed religious education in schools in Western European countries and found that the majority of these countries offer it to students as an optional subject. In Brazil, Kroba, & Steffena (2015) found that culture and religions encourage violence against women. In this situation, there is a need for an educational system that does not reproduce gender relations based on the patriarchal system and teaches and encourages fair relations between all people. Faour (2012), studying the schools of Egypt and Tunisia, recommends that religious education be replaced by education about religious, given the linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity of students, and to avoid escalating differences between people. Roux (2005) argues that while the South African constitution emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity of values, religious and belief systems - especially in schools - teachers should be required to facilitate learners' learning about others. The impact of the political system on educational system and what is commonly referred to as "education politicization" is also an international challenge. A very familiar example of the negative impact of politics on education is the African continent. The impact of violence on society due to political and ethnic rivalry is a well-known phenomenon on this continent. As a result, many political conflicts have spread to schools and classrooms. In his recent article, Afzal (2020) shows the impact of Boko Haram Islamist attacks in Nigeria on school dropouts and the abduction of female students. In South Africa, apartheid-influenced political and ethnic conflicts have for many years had a negative impact on the education of children and young people, with consequences still affecting society (Ntshoe, 2012). Yumoto (2017) shows that while the ruling party and local authorities in Japan are trying to implement their planned reforms in schools, teachers do not devote much class time to these programs to avoid politicking. In India, Borah (2012) mentions corruption in the education system and the role of parties in it.

During the four decades after the victory of the Islamic Revolution (1980-2020) in Iran, the educational system has been strongly influenced by the intervention of the two social systems of politics and religion. There is ample research evidence to support this: First, the education system follows a centralized structure, and school textbooks for all students - regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, gender, religious or cultural differences - are the same across the country and published by the Ministry Education (Baqeri, Birjandi, & Moftoon, 2017). These studies also show that Iranian students are not very familiar with critical thinking due to the influence of the centralized structure of the curriculum. Second, while the centralized structure of the educational system has weakened the role of other social systems, it has provided the ground for the influence of the political system (Soleimani, Ali Asgari; Hosseinikhah & Attaran, 2018). Third, considering that the majority of the population of Iran are Shiites, in all upstream documents, the position of religion and education based on the principles of Islam (and its Shiite interpretation) has been strongly emphasized (Irannejad & Monemi, 2017). The consequence of this situation is the transmission of hidden messages through textbooks. For example, Samadi (2017) shows that in most cases, the hidden curriculum has a greater effect on changing the attitudes of high school students than the visible curriculum. Mir Arab Razi & Akbari (2017) found that the emphasis on high marks and momemorizing is a consequence of the hidden curriculum in Iran's high schools. Sobhaninejad & Amiri (2014) found that the hidden curriculum has influenced the formation of Islamic-Iranian identity of female high school students in Tehran. Mirshamshiri & Mehr Mohammadi (2009) also point out that the hidden curriculum of textbooks does not pay much attention to the talents of learners.

Also in Iran, several researches have been done on textbook content analysis, especially using Van Djik method. For example, Taherzadeh, Abolhassani Chimeh & Siamian Gorji (2019) compare the two books "History of Middle Iran" and emphasize that ideological strategy are inevitable in the narrative of history. They also found that Iranian writers highlighted positive aspects and foreign authors highlighted negative traits for the Iran's people. Rashidi & Saeedi (2014) analyzed the critical discourse of the book "Persian Today for Foreign Students" and found that the author has mainly used the level of description in Van Dijke's theory. Kasaei & Rahimian (2014) by examining the content of the book "Islamic Thought" which all Iranian students have to read it indicated that the authors are subject to limitations such as providing incomplete reasoning, using irrelevant examples, trying to prove agreeable ideas and not Introducing inconsistent views.

In view of what has been said, a few points can be deduced to explain the necessity of the present study: First, the dominance of strong social systems such as politics and religion over the Iran educational system provides a good opportunity for researchers to study the effects of these systems. However, due to legal restrictions, such an opportunity does not exist in many countries. Also, the research literature shows that there are not many researches that have analyzed the content of Iran school textbooks using Van Dijke's theory. The present study attempts to briefly compare the performance of authors in two different disciplines - literature and history - according to Van Dijk's theory.

2. Research Method

Considering the purpose, the present research method is qualitative using Van Djik's discourse analysis approach. The method of data collection was documentary and through the study and analysis of primary and secondary sources. The research population of primary sources includes all lessons of the Grade 9 school textbooks of middle secondary school (32 lessons) and the research sample includes lessons in two books of literature and social studies that have been selected through purposive sampling method (6 lessons). Secondary sources include all publications that were thematically relevant to the present study. These sources were found through keywords and searching them in open sources (including Internet databases such as Google Scholar) and closed sources (such as databases of universities and research institutes in Iran). To determine the content and face validity of the data, the triangulation approach was used and to determine the reliability, the review method was used by two colleagues and a senior researcher (Research supervisor).

3. Findings

Secondary education is important for conveying ideological ideas for two reasons: First, students' readiness in terms of ability to read relatively complex material and second, students' mental readiness to understand and accept various social, political and religious content (Yar Ali, Shavakhi & Orizi, 2008). Therefore, this period can be considered the best time to transmit ideological ideas (different values, beliefs and norms) to the young generation. Due to this fact, the research results are presented in three stages of description, explanation and clarification:

First) Description

Using Van Dijk's discourse analysis approach, the present study describes the text of the "Farsi Book" with 160 pages and the "Social Studies Book" with 200 pages, which were published by the

Ministry of Education of Iran in 2020. The researchers sought to determine the extent to which the authors used ideological strategies - and the hidden and visible layers of language - to narrate literary and historical-social events through textual analysis of selected courses. Although the manner and extent of the use of these strategies can to some extent reflect the positive and negative views of the authors about each event, but the words and sentences used in the texts are mainly considered as reflecting the interests of the political system. With these points in mind, the titles of the selected lessons for each book are:

- Farsi book: Lessons of coexistence with the motherland, another Arash, a gateway to heaven (Ministry of Education, 2020a)
- Social Studies book: Iran in the era of Nader Shah to Nasser al-Din Shah, efforts to maintain Iran's independence, and in search of progress and liberation from foreign domination (Ministry of Education, 2020b)

In the Farsi book and in the lesson "Coexistence with the motherland" - which according to the authors' suggestion should be read in an emotional tone - the teacher tries with great enthusiasm to arouse the students' national zeal and strengthen their patriotism. The name of the second lesson, "Another Arash ", is taken from the name of one of the legendary heroes of Iran, who lost his life due to the demarcation of this country's border. In this lesson - which is presented in the style of poetry - refers to a teenager who in the Iran-Iraq war with a mini in his hand, threw himself under a tank and lost his life. The atmosphere of the lesson is epic - a narrative that tries to convey the spirit of heroism and courage of the hero of the poem to the listener with a striking and firm tone. The third lesson called "Gate to Heaven" is a description of the heroism of another hero in the Iran-Iraq war. In the book Social Studies and in each selected course, the authors try to acquaint students with the history of Iran over the past three centuries and topics such as the negative role of kings, the positive role of clerics, and the struggle against foreign domination. In terms of time, the common denominator of these courses is the attention to historical events in the last three centuries of this country.

Second) Explanation

Before reviewing and analyzing the content of selected lessons, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that usually historical events provide a very good opportunity for authors of school

textbook to pass on the dominant ideology to the younger generation. In fact, history is the mirror of every nation, and by redefining it, one can show own superiority to others (Swoboda & Wiersma, 2009). Accordingly, Mick (2014) believes that individuals and communities - each in different ways - can look at a single historical event. These different approaches lead to the formation of the concept of "self-identity" and its differentiation from the "others' identity" (Adams, Van de Vijver, de Bruin & Bueno Torres, 2014). Van Dijk's analysis model has two micro and macro levels. At the micro level - which is the objective and tangible level of the ideological discourse structure - axes are used to analyze the text. The macro level is an abstract level that uses it to analyze and explain the relationships between individuals, groups, social activists and internal and external powers (Taherzadeh, Abolhassani Chimeh & Siamian Gorji, 2019). In this section, the content of the selected lessons is presented at the micro level and according to the following axes:

1. Axis of Meaning: According to Van Dyke, the axis of meaning is where the ideological content is presented in the most direct way. This axis includes several strategies:

1-1. *Testimonial strategy:* The speaker / writer use it to prove his point and bring evidence. For example:

Farsi book: <u>You have heard</u> the composition of motherland (p. 58) / <u>we have seen</u> it many times throughout history (p. 59).

Social Studies book: According to <u>European tourists</u>, including <u>Jean Chardin</u>, the living conditions of Iranian peasants in the Safavid period were far better than those of the peasants in the fertile regions of Europe (p. 62) or <u>European tourists</u> have written extensively about road safety in Iran and the favorable treatment of passengers by road officials (p. 64).

1-2. *Example strategy:* Usually examples are better in mind than facts and they are easier to learn (Rashidi and Saeedi, 2014). Considering the following examples:

Farsi Book: Homeland treats all its allies and inhabitants <u>motherly</u> (p. 58) or If you go to a <u>garden</u> (p. 59). It roared like a <u>wave</u> (p. 76).

Social Studies Book: Iran has been the cradle of some major scientific centers (<u>such as the military and famous universities like Jundishapur</u>) throughout history (p. 79).

1-3. Polarization strategy: Through this strategy, the author depicts two poles or opposite fronts.

Persian book: Whenever the enemies and <u>haters</u> of oppression have reached out to this <u>seal</u> of the homeland (p. 59). The <u>enemy</u> of the unjust covenant; the houses of <u>dust and blood</u>; the cradle of the brave and the <u>lions</u> (75)

Social Studies book: Afghans were not <u>able</u> to rule all of Iran; Nader ascended the throne after these victories (p. 70). During the reign of Fath Ali Shah, Russia invaded Iran with an <u>army</u> equipped with new weapons, but the Iran's army had simple <u>weapons </u>(p. 74).

1-4. *Ambiguity strategy*: Through this strategy, the speaker / writer try to highlight or downplay the importance of events or hide their ignorance by using ambiguity .Three examples to highlight this strategy are as follow:

Farsi book: <u>Throughout history</u>, we have seen many times that whenever enemies (p. 59). <u>Hundreds of thousands</u> of eyes became the picture frame of a child (p. 76)

Social Studies book: Some of these schools .... had <u>serious differences</u> with the style and culture of education in Islamic Iran (p. 88). In the First World War, <u>several million people</u> lost their lives due to famine (author's ignorance of the exact number of Victims of war) (p. 89).

2. Syntax axis: Although there is a set of rules and relationships in each language that are often non-ideological, the speaker / writer can articulate them in a way that carries an ideological burden. This is done through the use of verbs and phrases such as "you know perfectly well"; "Obviously" and "it is necessary that" and adverbs such as "definitely" and "absolutely" are possible and cause different representations of events in words and sentences. Consider these examples:

Farsi book: <u>In any case</u>, Iran belongs to all Iranians (p. 61).
Social Studies book: Nader Shah was aware of the importance of the Navy, <u>Therefore</u> ... (p. 70).

3. Style axis: To refer to events or people, you can use words that contain a positive or negative evaluation of the speaker / writer and affect the mind of the listener / reader:

Farsi book: Enemies have <u>put their finger in their mouth</u> (p. 61). The war was an <u>unequal</u> war (p. 74). The enemy was <u>confused</u> (p. 74).

Social Studies book: One of the religious figures who played <u>an effective role</u> in the <u>awakening</u> of the Iranian people was Seyyed Jamaluddin Asadabadi (p. 88).

Third) Clarification

Examining the results of the two sections of description and explanation shows that the authors of Iran's school textbooks of middle secondary school have used ideological axes and strategies to convey their messages to students. In the context of the meaning and strategy of testimony, the authors have used two methods to prove the accuracy of their messages: First, referring to their own experience and that of students, and second, referring to the experience of others. In the first method, they have tried to convey their speech to the students as a completely obvious and proven subject by using verbs such as listening and seeing. They also try not to give students a chance to ask questions or criticize them. In the second method, the authors again use general terms and ambiguous references such as "European tourists" to refer to "others" without naming a number of these tourists – indicating the exact details of the book or articles for more information to be used by pupils. In reviewing and analyzing the content of the selected lessons, the results show that the authors - especially in the Farsi book - have used the example strategy repeatedly. These examples are mainly used by the authors to highlight the main purpose of each lesson. In this case, they have mainly used the metaphor technique (using the attributes of nature such as roaring river, height of mountain, beauty of flower) to describe Iran, war heroes, and historical figures.

The authors of both books have used the polarization strategy more than any other strategies. The common feature of both books is that events and people are divided into good and bad groups (or friends and enemies). In these polarizations, mostly positive traits and characteristics have been given to the authors themselves, Iranians, and some Iranian political figures approved by the authors. Negative traits are also attributed to others, Westerners, and some Iranian political figures

that are not endorsed by the authors. In addition, the strategy of ambiguity has been considered by the authors in such a way that they have tried to interpret historical events without using accurate scientific sources to prove their statements, to make students' mentality about these events positive or negative. For example, regarding the prevalence of modern style schools in Iran, the authors have considered this phenomenon as a result of the influence of colonial countries, whose education is in conflict with Iranian-Islamic education. On the other hand, they have approved the establishment of modern schools with a positive view of the role of people like Hassan Rushdieh (1851- 1944) in the establishment of these schools. Naturally, this duality and ambiguity confuses students.

In addition, the text analysis of the selected lessons shows the authors have used both syntax and style axes to convey their messages to students. Although the syntax axis has been less considered by the authors than other axes, the style axis has been used by them many times. The authors of both books easily use positive and negative attributes for different events and people without making the slightest effort to prove the correctness of these attributes. The authors - especially in the Farsi book - have tried to impress the students by using words such as homeland, war, history, culture, Iran, Islam, courage, enemy and creating an epic-emotional atmosphere to transmit their values, beliefs and norms to pupils. From a comparison point of view, the following are also significant:

- There is a similarity between both books in terms of the authors' use of the axes and strategies of the ideological discourse structure,
- The polarization strategy has been used more than any other strategy by the authors of the two books,
- Extreme use of polarization strategy indicates the authors' emphasis on separating "self" from "others" by conveying positive and negative concepts to learners,
- In Farsi book, the text space is mainly based on stimulating the feelings and emotions of learners,
- In social studies book, the text space is mainly based on its separation from aliens,
- In Farsi book, the example strategy has been used more than social studies book,
- In social studies book, the testimonial strategy has been used more than the Farsi book,
- In both books, there is an emphasis on providing information that contains positive points about self (war martyrs, Iranian heroes, clerics),

- Both books emphasize the provision of information that contains negative points about the others (enemy, Russia, Britain, France).

4. Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to analyze the content of Iran's middle secondary school textbooks based on Van Dijke's ideological square. The main premise of the present researchers is that the centralized structure of educational systems can provide an opportunity for powerful social institutions - such as politics - to intervene to convey ideological messages. This assumption is naturally true of the Iran education system, which follows a centralized structure. Also, the research literature showed that one of the methods for measuring how and to what extent social systems intervene in the educational system is the content analysis of school textbooks. In Iran, the Ministry of Education publishes exactly the same textbooks for all students across the country. In view of these facts, the research findings showed that based on Van Dijke's method of ideological analysis, the authors have used various axes and strategies in Farsi and social studies books. Another finding of the research clarified that in both books, the authors have tried to show a positive image of themselves (Iran, motherland, national heroes). Authors have also repeatedly used negative terms to describe others (aliens and enemies). This finding is similar to findings of Faour, 2012; Gorba & Stefana, 2015; Mir Arab Razi & Akbari 2017; Samadi, 2017, and Taherzadeh, Abolhassani Chimeh & Siamian Gorji, 2019. In view of these facts; the research findings showed that based on Van Dyke's method of ideological analysis, the authors have used various axes and strategies in Persian books and social studies. Another finding of the research clarified that in both books, the authors have tried to show a positive image of themselves (Iran, motherland, national heroes). Authors have also repeatedly used negative terms to describe others (aliens and enemies). This finding is based on the results of Faour, 2012; Gorba & Stefana, 2015; Mir Arab Razi & Akbari 2017; Samadi, 2017, and Taherzadeh, Abolhassani Chimeh & Siamian Gorji, 2019 which have revealed the impact of the hidden curriculum. Also, research finding indicated that the two strategies of testimonialization and polarization have been well used by the authors of the books to guide learners' views on historical events, Iranian and foreign actors, and values and norms. This finding has been emphasized in previous researches (Rashidi & Saeedi, 2014; Sobhaninejad & Amiri, 2014; Taherzadeh, Abolhassani Chimeh & Siamian Gorji, 2019). Another finding of the study is that the authors tried their best to make students accept their messages by creating an epic-emotional atmosphere. By using terms such as "we have all heard / we have all seen", they have closed the opportunity to critique the content of books. This finding is consistent with the results of

previous studies that have shown that the structure of Iranian textbooks does not provide much space for fostering creativity and criticism (Akbari & Ahmadlou, 2008; Kasaei & Rahimian, 2014; Mir Arab Razi & Akbari, 2017; Mirshamshiri & Mehr Mohammadi, 2009; Yar Ali, Shavakhi & Orizi2008). Of course, as long as the Iran education system is influenced by a centralized government structure, we cannot expect the role of the political system to be decrease in the visible and hidden curriculum.

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