

SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AND THEIR IMAGES AS SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION:

an interview with Ana Badanelli Rubio

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEW

Interview conducted on January 31, 2025, at the National University of Distance Education (UNED) with Professor Ana Badanelli Rubio, a UNED faculty member and director of the MANES Research Center. The conversation addressed key topics related to textbook studies, highlighting their differences from historical documentary research and the MANES criteria for categorizing schoolbooks. The analysis of images in textbooks, its methodological particularities, and the importance of historical contextualization in iconographic interpretation were discussed. Badanelli reflected on the challenges of reading and decoding images, as well as on the evolution of studies in the history of education in Spain. She also commented on the MANES agenda in Latin America, especially in Brazil, and recommended essential resources for those beginning research on schoolbooks and images.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Ana Badanelli Rubio is the director of the Department of History of Education and Comparative Education at the National University of Distance Education (UNED), in Spain, and of the MANES Research Center, an internationally renowned project in the research of the History of Education based on the study of school textbooks, linked to the UNED.

She holds a degree in Philosophy and Language Studies, specializing in Educational Sciences, from the Comillas Pontifical University, an institution affiliated with the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (1995), and a degree in Philosophy and Language Studies, specializing in Educational Psychology, from the same university (1996). She earned her doctorate in Educational Sciences from the UNED (2004), defending her dissertation, "Illustrations in School Textbooks (Spain, 1900-1970)," under the supervision of Federico Gómez Rodríguez de Castro. In this work, she presented an in-depth analysis of illustrations in Spanish

school textbooks throughout the 20th century, demonstrating the evolution of visual representations and their impact on education.

Within the framework of the MANES project, Badanelli Rubio plays a prominent role in the development of methodologies for the analysis of images in school textbooks, with a focus on the History of Education in Spain, especially in the period from 1900 to 1970. Her research has contributed significantly to the study of educational iconography and writing practices in the history of Spanish education.

INTERVIEW

C.N.B. – Cristiano das Neves Bodart;

A.B.R. – Ana Badanelli Rubio.

C.N.B. *Tell us a little about your academic background, your joining MANES, and your research on school textbooks.*

A.B.R. Well, here, inevitably, I have to mix a bit of the professional and academic side with a part of my personal life, because I could almost say that I am privileged. A long time ago, by chance and because he was a friend of my father, I met the man who would later become the founder of the MANES Research Center¹, Federico Gómez Rodríguez de Castro².

And I was fortunate enough to study Pedagogy, a field heavily influenced by him, someone I deeply admired and still admire, and I was lucky enough to have him as my thesis advisor. From the very beginning, he immersed me in the study of school textbooks, which, moreover, was—I won't say it was in its infancy—but the MANES project was still practically a teenager; we were just starting to develop it. He was even the one who introduced me to the world of illustrations, because, indeed, at that time there were very few studies on school illustrations.

I'm talking about a time when textbook research was nothing like it is now. We'd go to conferences and analyze a book, not even knowing if it had been

¹ The MANES Research Center is a research project affiliated with the National University of Distance Education (UNED) in Spain, dedicated to the study of the history of textbooks in Ibero-American education. Established in the 1990s, it investigates the production, circulation, and impact of these books on teaching. Its collection and research provide valuable insights into the evolution of educational policies and school curricula.

² Professor of History of Contemporary Educational Systems, UNED.

used; we didn't even consider what to say. Methodologically, we were practically beginners in this research field.

And he was the one who got me into school textbooks, and I wrote my thesis on two types of texts: subject-based lessons³ and religious instruction. Because, from the beginning, I realized that religious textbooks, perhaps because they have to teach concepts that don't exist—like, for example, the guardian angel — make images fundamental. We all have it in our heads that a guardian angel is a dove. So, I realized that school textbooks introduce images earlier and in greater numbers.

And the ones with object lessons, based on Pestalozzi's intuitive principle, also had many images. So, what I did was a didactic comparison of the images, analyzing how the earthly, material, and tangible world is taught, and how the world that doesn't exist, the intangible world, which is what religious textbooks project, is taught. And that's where my journey began: I got into other material aspects, like databases, digitization, and the creation of virtual libraries. At that time, we were all absolutely enthusiastic and working in a completely rudimentary way.

I created my virtual libraries at home by photographing the books. But, of course, all of that led me to become very familiar with school textbooks, or at least the MANES collection, in great depth.

C.N.B. *And how are you currently exploring this theme of images in books?*

A.B.R. Well, I think there has been a significant leap forward in recent years in the field of images in Spain. I believe this has been facilitated, firstly, because we all obviously recognize that images are fundamental historical documents, also in the educational sphere. And, furthermore, I think that in Spain, in recent years, there has been a tremendous leap forward.

First, driven by digitization processes, which are making numerous resources available to us, and second, because people have really become aware that,

³ The books titled “Thing Lessons” were school textbooks widely used in Spain during the first half of the 20th century. These textbooks aimed to introduce students to the objects and phenomena of the real world, promoting direct observation and experimentation as learning methods. Inspired by the New School movement, these books emphasized the importance of intuition and sensory experience in the educational process, aligning with the pedagogical principle of “from thing to word, from word to idea.”

many times, the iconographic world provides us with much more information than any document.

And let me give you an example outside of education: we know that, in certain periods of history, women worked not because there are any written records—which there aren't—but because genre painters depicted them harvesting grapes. Later, there isn't much documentation because, at that time, perhaps they weren't even recorded; women weren't considered workers.

I believe this has greatly influenced the world of education. And I think images were even more important in some past eras, when, obviously, many students couldn't even read.

There were times when literacy rates were very low and, practically, the only thing students understood were the images they saw.

I can give you another example with an interview we did with Professor Manuel de Pueyes, who was the director of the MANES Research Center and one of its founders. He told me, when I started studying religious imagery, that the only thing he remembered from his school textbooks, or the one that stuck with him the most, was an image of a child on a bridge holding onto a little angel.

And the next image was the broken bridge. Imagine the emotional power of this image I'm about to describe: the broken bridge, a demon pulling the child by the feet, and below it, the inscription: "To the bad child."

That was what young children understood far better than any text. And I believe that, with this idea and with authors who have greatly influenced us, such as Peter Burke—whom I will mention again later—people are studying not only the illustrations in school textbooks, but the analysis has also expanded to include posters, maps, catalogs, and photographs from schools.

C.N.B. *I would like to address a central question about manualistic studies: what differentiates manualistic studies, especially in relation to school books of the past, from documentary historical research?*

A.B.R. Well, I think they differ in several aspects. The fundamental one is that documentary historical research addresses a much wider range of written sources and allows for the construction of historical facts, processes, and contexts. But research that focuses specifically on school textbooks has, in my opinion, an important difference.

Textbooks have been present in classrooms since educational systems began in the 18th century. They are manuals, universal tools. In fact, not only in Western classrooms: if you look at current Arabic or Chinese school textbooks, you know it's not a dictionary, you know it's not a novel, you know it's a textbook. Because even the layout and design are common. There are absolutely shared patterns. And these tools, right now, when historians want to look inside the classroom, are essential.

It's a device that has always been present and continues to be. And I predict it will continue to be for a long time. This peculiarity is not shared by other documentary texts.

There comes a point, I believe, when historians of education stop writing the history of grand pedagogical theories, of great authors like Comenius or Rousseau, and begin to ask ourselves: what was happening in the classrooms? What was going on in a classroom in a remote village, where a teacher had seven children of different ages?

And when you look inside the classroom, the documentary evidence is usually scarce. The most reliable documentary evidence, the one that was certainly present in the classrooms, is always the textbook.

I believe it provides very accurate and truthful information about school culture, about what the culture of the past was like.

C.N.B. *In the context of the MANES project and its research, how are the books used in the school setting by students and teachers conceptualized and categorized?*

A.B.R. We make a clear distinction between a school textbook and a pedagogical textbook intended for teachers, because our research focuses exclusively on school textbooks. This is what we categorize and catalog in the MANES database, as well as what we purchase or receive as donations of old books to expand our collection.

But it's true that textbooks tell us about educational intentions. They never tell you what happened in the classroom, you don't know how they were used. That is to say, like all documentary sources, they only go so far: they give you information about certain things, about the intentions of the authorities at that time, about the prevailing mindsets in society, the values, and so on. They show you what needed to be taught, what kind of citizen they wanted to create, but

they don't tell you if that was actually achieved. Textbooks don't tell you what the student learned and took home, for example.

In that context, we do use supplementary sources. One of them, for example, which we have worked with extensively, is school notebooks: what content was transferred to the notebook, and how it was transferred. The notebook represents a further step, as it already tells you what was done at school.

In this context, we also frequently consulted the texts used to train teachers. A clear example is the manuals of object lessons. In Spain, these texts were published for almost a century, and when you want to study object lesson manuals, at least in Spain, you inevitably have to refer to an author named Pedro Alcántara, who edited and trained teachers in this type of teaching through these pedagogical texts. It's unavoidable: if you want to know what an object lesson manual was like, you must consult these kinds of sources, which for us are complementary, but necessary to complete the research with the texts themselves.

C.N.B. *What are the main methodological differences to consider when working with images present in school books compared to other types of visual records?*

A.B.R. Well, obviously, the images in textbooks do indeed need a specific methodological approach, since they present very significant differences from other types of images. Although other images may also be found in schools, such as posters, maps, etc., those in textbooks have their own particular characteristics.

I believe that, above all, their main distinguishing feature is that they are designed with a didactic purpose. They are not decorative elements, they are not simply decorative elements, they are never merely decorative. No image in any text is merely an embellishment; rather, it always serves to reinforce, sometimes contradict, or explain a piece of content, an idea. Therefore, their analysis must necessarily be carried out in relation to the text; otherwise, it is meaningless.

Furthermore, I believe they possess another unique characteristic compared to other images: a power of transmission that text lacks. They convey values, emotions, norms, and behaviors. In other words, they have an implicit, less explicit, latent dimension that requires a different methodology than textual analysis.

Another important point is that these images tend to be very simplified, not complex. This requires knowledge of and special attention to what we call visual language: colors, style, and focus. Let me give you an example. I've observed—though I haven't studied or published on this—that, for instance, during Franco's era, when the devil is depicted, he's almost always shown in green, practically in 100% of cases. This is because green is the color of mold, of decay. It's curious, isn't it? Just as hell is always red, but the devil constantly wears that color. And so, an image of a single devil actually conveys much more than it seems.

I'm talking about the emotional world, that affective component. And then, it's also very important that these images are linked to specific publishing processes. This is something that might not be so relevant in posters, but it is in textbooks. There were times when printing methods were extremely rudimentary, and the same image was reused for different subjects and disciplines. That repetition influenced the formation of mindsets, because children saw the same image in various educational contexts.

Therefore, I believe that interpreting images in textbooks requires an interdisciplinary approach, combining the history of education with pedagogy, content analysis, and, to some extent, graphic design. The way an image is conceived is significant. For example, today, if a black and white image appears in a textbook, this has a clear intention, as it seeks to convey a specific message. But if we look at books from the 18th century, the absence of color had no particular purpose; simply put, color printing did not yet exist at that time.

Therefore, this analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach encompassing culture, semiotics, and other fields of knowledge. And I believe this difference is substantial compared to other iconic sources, such as school photographs taken in the playground, which demand a different methodology.

C.N.B. *How have studies on the history of education that use images as a source developed in Spain in recent years?*

A.B.R. Yes, I'm glad you asked me this question, because I think that's one of the pending challenges, at least in Spain, regarding the analysis of images in general, not just in school textbooks, but also in school textbooks in particular.

And indeed, for a long time—and it continues to happen—we have published articles about what images say about gender, how they represent the world of others, for example, Arabs (we just published an article on this). However, these articles, curiously, don't explain how the images are being read; there's very little talk about methodology. When methodology is mentioned, it's usually to explain how the images were selected and what kind of images were used, but not how they are being interpreted. In this respect, given that it's a fundamental source, we still have a long way to go. And that's precisely what I've focused my efforts on in recent years.

I'm going to talk about image analysis, but I'll do so with a methodological and theoretical foundation. It's a complex process because, indeed, when you're faced with analyzing 50 images, systematizing a methodological process helps enormously to focus the search and avoid overlooking important details. It's not as simple as reading a text.

It is true that studies in Spain have evolved considerably, because we are indeed analyzing many images and working intensively with visual sources. We have even incorporated film; that is, not only still images, but also the analysis of what film reveals about the history of education, among other aspects.

And I believe that, fundamentally, there is a set of underlying methodologies in these studies, even if they aren't always explicitly defined. We draw on the cultural history of images, which allows us to understand how images reflect expressions, mentalities, and values, helping us to understand the context of a particular era. We also frequently turn to the fields of semiotics and visual analysis, with figures like Roland Barthes and Erwin Panofsky, who have worked extensively in semiotics, especially from the perspective of art, rather than education. Nevertheless, their studies help us break down images into meaningful elements, analyzing their composition, focus, colors, and other key aspects that allow us to structure their interpretation.

We are also incorporating visual pedagogy, recognizing that these images are not merely ornamental, but serve a pedagogical and didactic purpose. They always have a specific function within the teaching process.

However, when reading articles in this field, I notice that, although we are all using these tools, we haven't yet sat down to define a common methodology. And this is even more relevant because I believe that the image requires a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach.

C.N.B. In the article entitled “*Images and Their Interpretations in Spanish School Textbooks: A Methodological Proposal*” (Badanelli, 2020, p. 5), you stated that “iconography is reading images, just as we read a written text word by word, letter by letter, to finally understand what the author wants to convey and to intuit what they are conveying unintentionally.” From this statement, a relevant question arises. When we read written texts, each word has a relatively agreed-upon and decodable meaning that, as we decipher it, generates messages that others can easily confirm. When it comes to images, how do you understand this process of reading, decoding, and sharing that reading?

A.B.R. Well, this is complex, because this is precisely what we lack in this type of research. When I started my doctoral thesis, in fact, I had to rely entirely on art history studies and those kinds of theories and methodologies. But, indeed, as I say in my article, reading images implies, or should be similar to, reading a written text, with different characteristics and particularities that, I believe, make it even more complex.

Indeed, in a text, every word has a meaning, and that meaning is more or less agreed upon. What happens when we try to read the images in texts? They have as many interpretations as there are eyes looking at them, because when we encounter an image, we all project something of ourselves onto it: our own traditions, our experiences, our past. Surely, I won't feel the same way or give it the same interpretation as you. The same painting, for example, Munch's *The Scream*, can convey different sensations depending on who is looking at it. Moreover, perception also depends on our emotional state.

So, what I'm trying to do—I don't know if I'm succeeding or not—is create a method that helps me objectify, to some extent, what I'm seeing. First, just like with a text, I read each “word,” that is, I identify and list each element that appears in the image. I simply record what's there, without interpreting it. Then I take it a step further and analyze how each element appears. For example, whether it's in the center, at the optimal point where the eye tends to look, or if it's shifted. To understand this, just watch a news broadcast: the presenter never appears in the exact center of the screen, but slightly above, because that's where the eye naturally goes. The same is true for images in general: framing influences perception.

The angle from which the image is captured is also key. Franco, for example, was always framed from below, which enhanced his image. This is the same

framing traditionally used to represent God, because portraying him from below reinforces his greatness and superiority. So, I try to describe these elements point by point. Then I contextualize the image: I analyze what was happening at the time and how it relates to what appears in the image.

For me, this has been fundamental in learning to analyze the hidden curriculum that an image conceals. That is, what should appear in the image but doesn't? Because, by contextualizing, one becomes aware of certain significant omissions. A simple example: if a 21st-century book discusses roads and includes an image without cars, it would be strange, wouldn't it? Something similar happens with images from the past. This contextualization helps to uncover what is latent, what the sender transmits without necessarily being aware of it.

An image conveys not only what the sender intends to express, but also other meanings that may be unintentional or unconscious. And I believe that the process of sharing interpretations is key. Once this analysis is complete, I offer my own interpretation, based on each of these previous steps. This method helps me organize my image analysis systematically, ensuring that I analyze them all in the same way.

This isn't about a superficial or rushed reading, like saying, "Oh, here's a woman crouching and a man standing!" Images often contain much deeper meanings. And I think this is a challenge we image analysts face.

I believe we should conduct joint readings. If several people interpreted the same visual text, we could identify common visual patterns, even across different eras. We could begin to establish a consensus on meanings. For example, we could confirm that the devil in certain historical contexts is represented in green for a specific reason.

This already occurs in the history of art. We know, for example, that in artistic iconography, the presence of a cat often symbolizes infidelity. These are conventions that have been established over time. And I think we could make progress in this area within the analysis of images in school textbooks.

It would help us broaden our perspective to include content that isn't so explicit. I think we should, in some way, form a visual community.

C.N.B. *The images contained in school textbooks, being cultural representations, need to be interpreted in light of their context. In the aforementioned article, it was stated that it is necessary to “contextualize the work by analyzing the physical environment in which it is embedded, in this case the school textbook, the geographical and political environment, and the social environment in which it is produced” (Badanelli, 2020, p. 8). When dealing with the history of education, specifically in ancient times, what methodological approach should be taken to carry out this analysis?*

A.B.R. The meaning of the image must be contextualized. And, in this sense, the person who knows the most about texts and contexts, and who has worked extensively on this topic—to the point that almost all of us rely on her work—is Professor Kira Mahamud Angulo⁴, whose doctoral thesis represented a significant advance for the MANES Research Center. Methodologically speaking, her research was an essential step.

When I work with images, I consider three contexts. The first and most immediate is the text itself, because the image is embedded within a text. Let me give you some examples: I study the material. How is it made? What is the typography? How were the images printed? What are the printing techniques and the graphic design? Because we can often misinterpret things, like what we were discussing earlier about color. Black and white images didn't signify anything in particular in the 19th century, but now they do have added significance. Which publisher produced it? Is it a religious publisher or not? This is a fundamental factor.

And then, of course, I analyze the relationship between the text and the image. Does the image simply illustrate the content or does it complement it? Does it provide the main information? Does it even contradict the text? It's important to determine what function it's fulfilling there.

Next, I consider the geographical and political context. Who produced the book? Under what legislation was it written? Did it undergo ecclesiastical censorship? In Spain, there was a time when all books had to go through a censorship process. For example, in the case of the evaluation you conduct, it's essential to ask: Was the book approved or rejected? Was it actually used? Furthermore, we always try to work with publishers that were recognized and

⁴ PhD from the National University of Distance Education (UNED) with the thesis on Emotional indoctrination and political socialization in the first Franco regime (1939-1959): emotions and feelings in primary school textbooks (2012).

important at the time. We also prioritize texts that have been published multiple times, as this indicates their actual use. If a textbook has had 64 editions since 1940, it's clear that it was widely used. Otherwise, it wouldn't make much sense to research it as school material if it was relegated to a shelf and never used.

Finally, I analyze the social context. That is, who was the manual intended for? The bourgeoisie or working-class sectors with less access to formal education? This influences the images: whether they are simpler or more complex, for example. I also consider aspects such as literacy rates in each period. In many historical periods, young children only understood the images, especially when the texts were dry, dense, and difficult to access. For them, the image represented the essential content of the manual.

Thus, I contextualize all these aspects which, as I mentioned before, also help me understand the hidden curriculum of the image. I don't limit myself solely to what is shown, which is relatively easy to analyze, but I attempt a more iconological and profound reading of what is really happening in the visual representation.

C.N.B. *As director of MANES, how do you perceive the research agenda and the relationship with Latin America, especially with Brazil, in the coming years?*

A.B.R. From the MANES Research Center, we have always maintained a very close relationship with Latin America since its inception.

In fact, we have numerous Latin American universities associated with MANES, which have collaborated with us on many projects, and vice versa. We have worked with various universities in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil, of course, as well as with institutions in Cuba and Ecuador. We have even developed joint research projects on topics such as citizenship, social imaginaries, and symbols, among others.

Furthermore, there is a constant exchange of researchers. We have hosted fellows, doctoral students, and professors from Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina—many of them—Chile, and other countries. Some of our fellows have even undertaken research stays abroad; for example, we sent one researcher to the University of Buenos Aires for several months.

In the case of Brazil, I believe the largest number of visitors we receive come from there. In fact, we have hosted researchers from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology, São Paulo State University, and the Federal University of Santa Catarina. Among them, we have had academics such as Gladys Teide and Marcelo Cigales⁵, among others.

A clear example of our ongoing collaboration is the MANES database, which already contains hundreds of cataloged Latin American school textbooks. I could almost say that this database has become a shared tool between Latin America and the MANES Research Center in Spain.

As a demonstration of this commitment, we have just signed a cooperation agreement between the MANES Research Center and the Memory Center of the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil, to continue cataloging books in our database. These books will also be included in an international catalog being coordinated by the Georg Eckert Institute ⁶in Germany. Thanks to this effort, we will make hundreds of records from Latin America available to researchers throughout Europe.

C.N.B. *What is the direction of the agendas, of the investigations?*

A.B.R. Right now, what we are most clear about is that we are working intensively with Latin America on this database, within the GLOTREC project⁷(Global Textbook Resource Center), a global effort to create a multilingual catalog of bibliographic information on textbooks and teaching materials from collections in various countries.

This project includes not only the database but also joint initiatives. We are collaboratively investigating how others represent their culture and are also conducting in-depth studies of object-lesson books. I believe the methodology we are using is ideal, as we have carried out the same study of object-lesson

⁵ Doctor of Political Sociology from the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and professor at the University of Brasília (UnB).

⁶ The Georg Eckert Institute conducts applied and multidisciplinary research on textbooks and educational media, drawing primarily on history and cultural studies.

⁷ The international project Global Textbook Resource Center (GLOTREC) is a global effort to create a multilingual catalog of bibliographic information on textbooks and teaching materials from collections in various countries.

manuals in all the countries we collaborate with: Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, Chile, Brazil, among others.

We've already conducted the same study in each country, which now allows us to cross-reference data and carry out comparative work. And I'll even tell you—though I don't know if we'll manage it—that we're considering creating a virtual library as a comparison tool.

For example, imagine you could access the content of lesson plans on morals and civics and compare them across different countries. You could see what content appears in the Spanish textbooks and then cross-reference that information with those from Argentina or Colombia.

We are trying to develop these kinds of tools and leverage new technologies to facilitate comparative studies and analyze reciprocal influences. In other words, what influences has Latin America received from us and what influences have we received from you.

C.N.B. *For those starting research on school books and images, what books would you recommend as essential in this area?*

A.B.R. Well, I would first have them read, of course, general texts about textbooks. What are textbooks? What characteristics do they have? What function do they serve? I would start by looking at authors, almost the pioneers, those who began this field of research. For example, Alain Chopin in France. Or Agustín Escolano in Spain, who was a role model for us and continues to be one because we are fortunate that Agustín Escolano is still very active in this field of research.

I would refer to those who are key figures for us, for the MANES Research Center, because I know them personally, and I also know that they have been working with these sources since the 1990s, so they know the evolution of the research perfectly. I'm referring, for example, to Professor Alejandro Tiana. I'm referring to Professor Gabriela Usenbach, who was the director of MANES for almost 20 years. They know the source, the devices, the evolution—absolutely everything.

And speaking of this, I wanted to conclude by mentioning that we at the MANES Research Center have a fairly up-to-date bibliography on textbooks on our website, in which we try to compile everything published worldwide

on the subject. We organize it by country. This is another collaboration we have with Latin America. They are the ones who send us these bibliography updates, which allows us to maintain a fairly active and current bibliography. It includes entries for Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Colombia, Spain, and Belgium—quite international.

C.N.B. *Thank you for granting this enriching interview, which will undoubtedly be of interest to many people, especially those who wish to learn about the valuable experience of researchers, as well as their contributions to studies on school textbooks focused on image analysis.*

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