Gender Stereotype Analysis of The Textbooks for Young Learners

Anja Soviča*, Vlasta Husa

*University of Maribor, Faculty of Education, Koroška cesta 160, 2000 Maribor, Slovenia

Abstract

Visual images are often treated as decorations, although they are much more than that. Young learners learn from illustrations which help them to formulate their own roles in the society. Books and textbooks are role models for our children who can form stereotypes by the age of five. Children’s books are an important source of gender stereotype because they present a model to children on which they organize gender behaviour. The gender stereotype analysis of three textbooks for young learners (Playway to English 1, Magic Adventure 2, Cookie and Friends) showed that these textbooks need some corrections according to child’s cognitive development and their visual perception. Textbooks all include a lot of gender stereotypes. Male characters are much more presented than females in all textbooks. What is more, in all textbooks males present more active and females present quiet, socially approved roles.

1. Introduction

Visual images are often treated as decorations, although they are much more than that. Illustrations also contain stereotypes. Young children are bombarded daily with language and images that influence their formation of gender roles (Narahara, 1998). Hartley proved that by the age 4 girls realize that their primary role is “housekeeping” and the boys’ is “wage-earning.” According to Schlossberg and Goodman, children have formed rigid stereotypes by the age five. Calvert and Husto found that children at age six can identify female or male commercials. By age seven and maybe as early as age four, children begin to understand gender as basic component of self. When children enter school, books begin to play a huge influence on children. Books are the medium used to teach social studies

* Anja Sovič. Tel.: +386 41 986 085
E-mail address: anja.sovic@guest.arnes.si
Gender stereotypes have not always been an issue worthy of discussion. Literature in the nineteenth century focused on family and also on childhood. Books have always reflected the traditional values and served as socializing tools to pass values to the next generation. Books were divided in two groups, one for boys and another for girls. Books written specially for boys or girls began to increase during the last quarter of the nineteenth century to provide literature that addressed gender appropriate behaviours. Books for boys emphasized leadership and action while books for girls stressed girls' virtue such as obedience and humility. In the 1960s and the 1970s researchers began to take notice of gender stereotypes in children's books. First research that confirmed huge gender differences was made by Weitzman in 1972. He confirmed that in children's books females (girls and women) were almost invisible while men were leaders and presented an active role. They also found an underrepresentation of females in the titles, central roles and main characters at a ratio 1:11, occupation roles of males had a higher status than women, and character differences described women as passive and immobile. On the other hand males were described as leaders, independent and active (Narahara, 1998). Researches followed and the 1987 research found a majority of the female characters failed to express any career goals, female role models were lacking and male characters were still presented as independent. It was like they found positive trend in children's picture books. In the 1990s a research suggested that the traditional portrayal of women is giving way to more equal depiction for both men and women. Gender differences show in context, behavior and language development. Gender role stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves. In children's responses, especially older children, gender differences start surfacing, but it is crucial to realize importance of developing stereotypes. Young children have not yet developed a strong identity are especially vulnerable. There were also studies which confirmed that girls and boys who were exposed to a strong female/male story character increased their scores on a self-concept measure significantly. It is really important that a child can identify with characters in books otherwise children can assume that their lives are not very important and this may leave a negative impression on a child (Narahara, 1998). Researcher first though continued trend of male representations may be due to whom the authors are, but Alberts (1996) found out that the presence of a higher percentage of female authors appeared to have no influence on male dominance in illustrations. It was also proven that children experience positive effect if they are exposed to non-sexist literature. It has been shown in their self-concept, work habits, attitudes and their behaviour (Narahara, 1998).

To see gender symbolism we have focus on some segments which confirm existence of gender symbolism: female and male participants in images; where are female characters and on the other hand where are males? Are participants often depicted in the private sphere (indoor, home) or in the public sphere (outdoor, institutional building); Role type of the participant: social (such as playing with a ball or flying a kite or male characters as driver and female characters as nurses), institutional (reading, writing; institutional setting tends to imply that there is male dominance in education), political (giving a speech), personal (washing dishes, eating or cooking), relational (sons or daughters, mothers, fathers). Yasin (2012) explained there are lot of gender stereotypes in illustrations. He did an analysis of Malaysian English school textbook and analysis carried out on the textbook revealed a clear gender imbalance in favour of males mostly. The analysis proved that the domain relegated to female participants is still the private sphere while male participants are predominantly represented in the public sphere. Women are presented as mothers, wives and nurturers. They are largely confined to the private world of the home and garden. Males are depicted in a wider range of activities, some indoors but especially those that involve outdoor setting namely in the playground, in the park, at the beach and at the playing and they partake in active sports such as cycling, playing...
football, basketball. Bahiyah (2008) explained that stereotypical perception of Malaysian women in sports is that they are not up to par with their male counterpart. Yasin's analysis proved that a number of images especially in the school environment (classroom) depict girls in marginal roles in contrast to boys who are presented as assertive, intellectual and decision making individuals who are capable to take leadership. Further study claims that there is absence of positive female role models for girls to identify with (Yasin, 2012).

Gender stereotypes are also present in Slovenien society. According to Jogan (1998) we have been struggling to establish gender equality for twenty years in Slovenia. Today Slovenian society is facing “hidden” form of gender discrimination. All western society divisions are always connected with gender (Kavčič, 2011). According to Cankar, Slovenian boys and girls learn their sex roles, specific rules and values in early childhood. They grow up in a world of clear sexual duality. In an effort to act correctly they adopt the socially approved conceptions and develop a self-image: behaviour, emotions and the role which is connected with the accepted image of male and female (Cankar, 2004). Even today in the 21st century, Slovenian society still approves this male-focused tradition. This means the male is the one who is the guardian of the family and also represents the family in public, which signifies that he dominates his wife and children. The male dominated tradition also means that the man's main role in marriage is to earn money, but the female's role is 'only' to care for housekeeping and family (Jogan, 1998). We have to realize that Slovenian society is still under the great influence of the Roman Catholic religion where the female's main role is motherhood. Any female who doesn't decide to be a mother is marked as being immoral, unusual and selfish (Furlan, 2008). These hidden forms of gender discrimination can be seen in all social areas in Slovenian society: in Slovenian popular music, in salaries, in job application criteria, in television programs, academic promotions and also in the use of the Slovenian language (Klančar, 2011), so we can predict that gender stereotypes will also be present in Slovenian books and illustrations.

2. Methodology

Research sample

The research sample consisted of three main publishers of the English textbooks for young learners (age 6) in Slovenia. These textbooks were: **Playway to English 1** (Cambridge), **Cookie and Friends** (Oxford: University press) and **Magic adventure 2** (RokusKlett). For each textbook gender analysis was made.

3. Results

3.1. Gender analysis of the textbook Cookie and Friends

In this textbook the main characters are animals with human personalities. One character is a cat and another is a kangaroo. The kangaroo represents a female character, and the cat is male. The female character can be recognized by the accessories (flowers on the head and on the shoes, a heart on her nose and pink cheeks) and small details like long eyelashes that are stressed and pink cheeks. The male character is presented in red, but doesn't have stressed eyelashes or cheeks. He also wears blue trousers and red shoes with a buckle. The total number of participants in the Cookie and Friends textbook is 67. Twenty-five of them are female and 42, male. That means 63% of participants are males and only 37% are female.

In Cookie and Friends it isn't easy to identify characters roles, because in most illustrations they are shown playing. Nevertheless, we can still decode gender stereotypes if we look more closely. For example, the picture below shows the two main characters playing with their toys. Each character has its own toy. The male character has a yellow plane, while the female has a female baby doll.
The cat is running around with his yellow plane, and the kangaroo with her doll remains still and only rocks her baby doll. The movement of the characters can be decoded with the help of the white lines that are drawn behind the cat's body. There are no white lines surrounding the kangaroo's body, only around the doll. The male character is described as an active one, one who is playing. In contrast the female character is shown as patient and caring. She doesn't run around and is playing in preparation to be a socially accepted character – a mother. So, they both interact with their toys to create motion, but only the male himself is in motion. Also interesting is the direction of the toy motion, the plane is uni-directional, goal oriented; the doll's is back and forth, repetitive. The girl is static. Let's turn our attention to colour gender stereotypes. The female character is blue and the male character, red. That is completely opposite to the social colour classification: red for girls and blue for boys. This could be seen as a positive move by the illustrator to contract the pink/blue stereotype. Furthermore, the characters' height deserves attention. The male character is much smaller than the female character. That is the opposite of the height stereotypes in society, where males are generally shown as taller. From another point of view, we can still see gender stereotypes in the position of their apartments in the tree-house, which is shown in the right upper corner in the picture above. The cat lives above the kangaroo; this can be decoded from the colour of the doors. The upper doors are red, while the lower are blue. It appears to indicate the domination of the male character over the female. To sum up, gender stereotypes can be detected and decoded in *Cookie and Friends*. Male figures appear much more often (63%) than female figures (37%). They are mostly presented at play, where toys represent their future social roles. The male is presented as active in play, as an agent who does what he wants. On the other hand, the female character is shown as one who does what is the right thing for society and not what she wants. This line between duty and desire is so intertwined that the female character may not even realize that all her actions are subconsciously directed towards those which are socially desired. So, we can see the female character smiling as she rocks her baby doll. In contrast there are some characteristics that counter gender stereotypes. These can be seen in the characters' height and coloration. In *Cookie and Friends* the female character is blue and much taller than red male figure.
To conclude, gender stereotypes can be seen in the illustrations in Cookie and Friends textbook. Stereotypes are present in gender representation and gender roles. On the other hand, the illustrator Gascoigne tried to go beyond some gender boundaries and gave to the main characters some opposite gender characteristics.

3.2. Gender analysis of the textbook Magic Adventure 2

In general, the analysis reveals a total of 300 participants. Analysis of gender among the participants depicted in the textbook Magic Adventure 2 reveals that overall 172 participants were female, while 128 were male. This means that females constitute 57% of all participants. Subordination can be seen in characters' activity. In many illustrations the girl is shown as following the boy and looking up to him. In the picture above, a boy shows and explains to everybody the rooms in a house, while males constitute only 43%. So, in another words, the girl has the passive role and the boy has an active one. The boy plays the role of society leader whom everybody follows. Moreover in the textbook Magic Adventure 2 there is not a single illustration where a girl gives a presentation to others or where a boy follows a girl character.

![Fig. 2. Presenting a house.](image)

The girl character is shown as active only when she is cooking or taking care of a baby. The picture on the left may imply that cooking is a female domain. There is no picture in Magic Adventure 2 where a boy is cooking or preparing food. He is only presented as a person who eats. In contrast, we can't find a single picture where boys are with their family or babies. What is more, a girl presented with a family can be seen in at least three photos and seven illustrations. We have to keep in mind that children can easily identify with photos because of the increased realism. So, it is clear that the textbook Magic Adventure 2 encourages the female role of a mother. On the other hand, males are in mostly presented with their male friends, usually playing football. Football is a male domain sport in Magic adventure 2. Only once is a women illustrated playing football. Even then she has a ball that contains a sandwich, and she is wearing a skirt – clothing unlikely for serious football. On the other hand, a male character is presented as a waiter and he is taking an order from two male characters, which runs counter to gender stereotypes. What is more, a girl is shown in one picture as a totally independent climber and skater, which also can be described as a pleasant challenge to gender stereotype. We can't say that men are more visible in this textbook, because males constitute only 43% of all human characters. On the other hand, male social roles are clearly shown as more active than those for females; boys are the leaders and girls follow. The male is presented as the one who does what he wants (playing football with friends) and society approves that. Girls are family members and are shown as babysitters. Females are presented as attentive, warm persons who obey their parents and are surrounded with love.

To conclude, male and females are presented in just the way society wants them to be; both are introduced with gender stereotypes, despite the fact that we are in the 21st century. On the other hand, illustrator Franfou tried to include some details which could counter gender stereotypes (male professions and hobbies).

3.3. Gender analysis of the textbook Playway to English 1
In the textbook *Playway to English 1*, the main characters are a girl, a boy and one non-human character who has male characteristics. The boy and girl have typically gendered visual characteristics. The girl wears red trousers, a pink shirt and red shoes, while the boy is dressed in blue trousers, a white-blue shirt and blue shoes. The total number of participants in *Playway to English 1* is 218. 131 of these are presented as males and only 87 are presented as females. That means 60% of characters are male and 40% are female. In *Playway to English 1* there are illustrations where a boy shows a girl how to do some action. This presents the boy as the active character and the girl as passive. The girl is the one who should follow the boy and not the other way around (according to the graphics in *Playway to English 1*). There are also illustrations which confirm that girl do what society approves as good. The boy character is shown as the one who does what he wants. What is even more, the male character in non-human form is the one who doesn't obey rules and constantly does what he shouldn't (eats cactus, doesn't clear away and tidy up, hides so nobody can find him etc). In contrast, the boy character is shown as the one who plays and who will teach students (readers) how to play. I have to stress that you can't find a female character in *Playway to English 1* who teaches children, anything other than socially approved actions. Girl teaches children what they have to do every morning (brush teeth, do exercises). On the other hand, boy character shows to children how to have fun, how to play.

To conclude, gender stereotypes can be seen in the textbook *Playway to English 1*. First, if we focus on the presence of female and male characters we can see that the male character dominates the female character. The male character is presented in 60% of illustrations and the female in only 40% of illustrations. Secondly, gender stereotypes could also be seen in the character's clothes where red dominates for the female and blue for the male. Thirdly, the male and female characters are presented as performing social actions for girls and boys. Girls are the one who do what is socially approved, while the male character does what he wants and continually tests the limits. What is even more interesting, the female character is also presented as the one who shows the boy when he did something wrong and also scolds him for not following society's rules. From this perspective, the girl takes on maternal characteristics. I must stress that nowhere in *Playway to English 1*, is a boy presented as a father paternal figure in a similar manner. Despite the illustrator's best intentions, the graphics in this textbook still uphold gender stereotypes. This shortcoming needs to be kept in mind when choosing textbook for teaching English in the first class.

4. Discussion

If we consider all the researches, we see what a huge role a teacher can play in gender stereotypes. What is the most important thing is to teach children how to recognize them. Librarians and teachers need to make a concerted effort to stock their shelves with books that are equally representative of both genders and represent all ethnic groups. On the other hand Universities need to train teachers to be aware of the use of male-dominated illustrations and positive effect of using non-sexist books. On the other hand we can see that illustrators are trying to break gender stereotypes (number of female and male characters; Magic Adventure 2) colors and size of main characters (Cookie and Friends).

This study proves that gender perspective must be integrated into teacher education and training. That is the only way so a teacher may play a crucial role in issues of gender, inclusiveness and equality, providing valuable input for the formation of gender equitable curriculum, pedagogy and policies.

5. Conclusions

• Gender awareness is crucial for children’s formation of gender roles.
• Gender stereotypes can be decoded in illustrations.
• Gender stereotypes can be seen in the number of female and male characters and their roles (active and passive).
• The number of male characters is dominant in two textbooks (Playway to English, Cookie and friends) in Magic Adventure it is 43%
• All textbooks present male characters as more active.
All textbooks present female characters as the one who are taking care of children (dolls) and male characters as the one who are playing.

References

Cankar, F. (2004): Vloga in pomen spolnih stereotipov v samopodobi učencev in učenek. Anthropos: časopis za psihologe in filozofe ter za sodelovanje humanističnih ved, 36 (1/4). 315–326.

Eisenberg, K. N. (2002). Gender and ethnicity stereotypes in children's books. Dissertation abstract International. Science engineering, 63. 1–8.

Furlan, N. (2008): Negativni spolni stereotipi in predsodki v slovenski družbeno-regijski sferi. Monitor, 10 (1). 61–67.

Gerngross, G. and Puchta, H. (1998): Playway to English 1. Cambridge University press and edition Hebling: Gostinf. Monitor, 10 (1). 61–67.

Harper, K., Reilly, V. and Covill, C. (2006): Cookie and Friends Starter. Oxford: University press.

Jogan, M. (1998): Akademska kariéra in splošna (ne)enakost. Teorija in praksa, 35 (6). 989–1014.

Kavčič, U. (2011): Seksisem in sodobnost: vpogled v simetrijo reprezentacije spolov. Diplomske delo, Koper: Univerza na Primorskem, Fakulteta za humanistične študije Koper.

Klančar, S. (2011): Jezik in družbena konstrukcija spolov. Diplomske delo, Ljubljana: Univerza v Ljubljani, Fakulteta za družbene vede.

Mol, H. and Joseph, N. (2011): Magic Adventure 2. Učbenik za zgodnje učenje angleškega jezika. Ljubljana: Rokus Klett.

Narahara, May M. (1998): Gender stereotypes in children's picture books (Raziskovalno poročilo). Long Beach: University of California.

Taylor, F. (2003): Content analysis and gender stereotypes in children's books. Teaching Sociology, 31. 1–11.

Yasin, M., Hamid, B. (2012): A visual analysis of a Malaysian English school textbook: Genders matters. Asian social science, 8. 154–163.