

GENDER BIAS IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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ABSTRACT

Gender bias in school textbooks has been a contentious issue in the last few decades. The systematic representation of one gender as more powerful or subservient to the other, or the association of stereotypical descriptions with a particular gender, becomes part of the hidden curriculum, which can have harmful repercussions on students' social and psychological development. In Malaysia, the last status check on gender bias in the primary English language textbook was conducted on textbooks published prior to 2015, and there has been no published study since assessing the textbooks that are currently in use in state-funded schools. This study sought to determine the extent of gender bias, namely, inclusion/exclusion of gender and gender stereotyping in the English language textbooks used in Malaysian state-funded primary schools. Content analysis using a corpus-assisted approach was employed to examine selected reading texts and their question sets in the Year 5 and 6 textbooks. The findings show that although, overall, there is a small positive development in gender representation in the current selection of English language textbooks, the improvement was not uniformly seen in the two textbooks examined. Differences are observed between the representations of males and females in the textbooks with reference to inclusion, family relationships, occupations, and character descriptions, notably with females overrepresented in the family domain but underrepresented in a range of occupations compared to males. In light of the findings, it is recommended that gender bias be included as part of the textbook evaluation criteria used by textbook selection committees, and that textbook writers and producers should ensure that the books they produce are free of gender bias.

Keywords: gender bias; gender representation; Malaysian primary school English textbooks; corpus-assisted analysis

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INTRODUCTION

An issue of grave importance in education is that of gender bias and gender stereotyping as it brings harm to individuals and society, especially when it is ingrained in children at an impressionable age. Stereotypical representation of gender may harm children's development, limit their career ambitions, shape their opinions about their future duties as parents, and even influence their personality traits (Hamilton et al., 2006). According to Sovic and Hus (2015), researchers started to be concerned about gender stereotypes from the 1970s. One of the earliest works was by Weitzman et al. (1972) who found that in children's books, women were almost invisible while men were often depicted in active roles such as leaders. One decade later, women were still not mentioned enough to be seen as important (Porreca, 1984). As pointed out by Asadullah et al. (2018), achieving gender equality would be a real challenge if gender stereotypes are continually introduced to school children in school textbooks.

Gender representation refers to the way both men and women are portrayed. According to Sekhar and Parameswari (2020), textbooks play a major role in creating gender imbalance in education as many teaching aids used in school promote gender prejudices. This is because the portrayed characteristics of gender in the educational materials tend to reinforce stereotyping of gender roles, thus making students associate these stereotypes with their own developing gender identity (Sekhar & Parameswari, 2020). With regard to children's dreams and ambitions, gender stereotypes may affect children's way of thinking and limit their future occupational choices (Teliousi, Zafiri & Pliogou, 2020). Textbooks used in elementary schools are an important medium used to not only convey knowledge but also serve an important function in developing the minds of children. Textbooks play a role in shaping young learners' understanding of themselves and others, and the world, from which they develop attitudes and patterns of behavior (UNESCO, 2010). Considering the strong influence of textbooks on young learners, it is imperative that the content of textbooks be given due attention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Bias in Textbooks

Past studies analyzing gender representation in textbooks have shown that both men and women are represented differently and that gender bias exists in school textbooks. This can be seen in the language and visual representations in the textbooks. Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) found that men hold a wider variety of occupations than women as depicted in Iranian high school textbooks. A study conducted by Tajeddin and Enayat (2010), also on Iranian EFL textbooks, investigating gender in images and character representations found that women are more likely to be represented in less influential and less powerful settings such as in the home. According to the study, women are also less visible in outdoor locations and in roles with greater authority and social significance. Lee (2014) examined Japanese EFL textbooks and found that gender bias against women was a norm. The frequency of women and men mentioned in the books was uneven, indicating women to be less worthy to be made visible. Further, men working outside the home were mentioned more than women in such activities. Jobs which demand physical or mental skills were more often held by men and those which do not require physical or mental skills were associated more frequently with women. While the terms boys/men and girls/women are often used when discussing gender bias, these terms are inadequate at least in the context of representation in textbooks, where animals or objects associated with the male and female

gender are often depicted. For example, a study on early years textbooks in Korea found rabbits and foxes portrayed as female and lions and tigers as male (Republic of Korea Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2018, cited in UNESCO, 2020, p. 40).

In contrast to the studies reviewed, gender representation in Hong Kong primary English textbooks was found to be more positive. Yang (2011) concluded that females are no longer invisible compared to previously conducted research, and are represented as people who can handle various types of tasks.

In the Southeast Asian region, gender bias in school textbooks has also been an issue. A study by Darni and Abida (2017) on gender bias in Indonesian primary school language textbooks showed that the content of the textbooks conveyed a strong ideological assumption that the public sphere is dominated by men, while the private sphere is populated by women. Also, Tyarakanita et al.'s (2021) analysis of English language textbooks used in Indonesia revealed that males are more dominantly represented than females in both written texts and visuals used in the textbooks. Similarly in Thailand, Khanunthong et al. (2021) found males were more highly represented than females in textbooks with the difference being 39.7% in favor of males. Vu's (2008) examination of the portrayal of gender stereotypes in primary school textbooks in Vietnam with a focus on visual representations revealed the presence of strong gender stereotypes. Within these textbooks, females were depicted less frequently and were predominantly linked with conventional female roles, thereby frequently conveying an impression of lower social status when contrasted with their male counterparts. In contrast, the depiction of males covered a broader social and occupational field. Similarly, another study on English textbooks in Vietnam conducted by Vu and Thuy (2020) concluded that the characters used in the textbook are mostly men who are shown to have better occupational roles than women.

In Malaysia, few studies evaluating gender bias in school textbooks have been conducted in the last 15 years. One of these was a study in 2008 by Abdul Hamid et al. examining gender representation in the primary school Year 3 and Year 6 English textbooks that were published in 2004. The researchers found that females were represented more poorly compared to males. Male characters were the majority, mentioned 28% and 30% higher than female characters in the Standard 3 and 6 textbooks, respectively. Lim and Chan (2012) explored gender representation in Malaysian secondary school fifth-form English language textbook focusing on the reading comprehension passages and questions sections, and found gender disparity in representation, with females fewer in the number of mentions. Moreover, female characters are confined to narrower and stereotypical roles, often portrayed as submissive, passive, nurturing, and emotionally expressive individuals. The settings of their appearance tend to be predominantly indoors. In contrast, male characters enjoy a broader range of roles, frequently depicted in leadership positions, as active and competitive individuals, and as engaging in a wider variety of outdoor activities. Following this, Yasin et al. (2012) examined the Year 1 primary English textbook published in 2004 analyzing images in the textbooks also came to similar conclusions about stereotypical gender roles assigned to both genders. Boys were twice as many compared to girls in the images; girls were seen serving food to boys; and boys were seen giving answers more often than girls were some of the findings. Ayufiza Asmuni's (2023) examination of the Malaysian primary school Years 4 to 6 textbooks published between 2013 to 2015 using thematic analysis reported that females were represented as weak, gullible, and powerless and males as smart, brave, and strong in stories in the textbooks. The study utilized

thematic analysis that focused on a qualitative description rather than the extent of gender bias in the sample textbooks.

Hashim et al.'s (2018) study examined the portrayal of gender in Malaysian English language textbooks focusing on the images. The study found that female characters are often depicted in private spaces, while male characters are mostly represented in public domains outside of the home. Women are more frequently associated with various indoor tasks, particularly domestic chores, such as in the kitchen, garden, and in the back yard of the house. On the other hand, men are shown engaging in a wider range of activities, both indoors and outdoors, such as at playgrounds, parks, beaches, and playing fields. They are also shown to be actively participating in sports like cycling and playing basketball.

Finally, a study comparing secondary school 9th grade textbooks used in state-funded schools in Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh by Islam and Asadullah (2018) reported there was a bias towards males in terms of frequency of mentions. Specifically for Malaysian textbooks, female representation in images was only 35.2%; however, for text and pictures combined, the female share was 44.4% which is closer to the equal mark of 50%. Pakistani and Bangladeshi textbooks were found to be the most unequal in terms of female representation with only 24.2% and 37.3%, respectively. Regarding gender stereotypes, similar to findings of other researchers who have described gender bias in textbooks, females were shown in traditional and domestic activities and less prestigious occupations, and with passive personality traits. Males are more likely to be shown to hold professional roles.

From these studies reviewed, it is clear that gender bias exists to some extent in school textbooks in both the linguistic and visual modes. The findings of most of the past research point to the existence of gender bias in textbooks in those periods of time the studies were carried out, particularly the underrepresentation of females, and stereotypical representation of both genders. Both under-representation and stereotypical representation of gender in textbooks are not ideal and may lead to negative consequences if left unattended. Therefore, it is important that regular status checks on textbooks adopted be conducted to ensure appropriate textbooks are selected for use by students. For Malaysian textbooks, only four published studies have been found to examine primary school textbooks – Abdul Hamid et al. (2008), Hashim et al. (2018), Yasin et al. (2012) and Ayufiza Asmuni (2023). However, the textbooks examined by these researchers were books published in 2015 and before, which are no longer in use since textbooks in schools are updated regularly. Moreover, since 2018, Malaysia's Ministry of Education had implemented a policy where only English Language subject textbooks published by well-known international publishers would be used in state-funded schools. Hence, textbooks for the English subject written by local authors are no longer used (Chin & Rajaendram, 2017). This is yet another reason for a status check on these textbooks that originate from outside the country that are now currently in use in Malaysian schools.

Gender Bias: Language Sexism, Gender Role Stereotyping and Exclusion

Gender, in contrast to biological sex, is "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men" (WHO, in Council of Europe, 2024). Hence, the understanding of gender and how people define gender roles are not a natural given, but are influenced by how gender is represented in social practices through language and images.

One of the most common ways for gender bias to be perpetuated is through forms of language. A clear form of gender bias in language is language sexism, which is defined as "any

language that is supposed to include all people, but, unintentionally (or not) excludes a gender” (Umera-Okeke & Nneka, 2012, p. 2). Sexist language indicates a preference for one gender over the other gender. He (2010) who analyzed sexism in the English language observed that gender discrimination is closely related to sexism in language. For example, in the English language, many feminine terms are derived from their masculine counterparts using suffixes such as *-ess* (for instance, the words *manageress* and *princess*). This practice implies that women are derived from men and it often carries connotations of triviality or lesser status for women.

Apart from language sexism, gender role stereotyping is also a common phenomenon contributing to gender bias. Gender stereotyping is connected to society’s construction of gender roles. Gender role refers to the expectations of society towards the attitudes and actions of an individual based on their gender. For instance, society expects boys and men to be strong and powerful, and as a result, they begin to act in this manner to conform to society’s expectations (Molla, 2016). On the other hand, women are believed to be weak and less competent compared to men, which explains the different treatment given to males and females, and which subsequently accounts for different experiences underwent by both genders in their lives (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). This is where gender stereotypes emerge where men are assumed by society to be strong and females are expected to be feminine or possess softer traits (Kachel et al., 2016). For example, in some societies, in terms of appearance, women are expected to have a thin or curvy body and dress modestly while men are expected to have strong athletic bodies. In terms of career, men tend to be associated with professions such as politics, law enforcement and the military while women tend to be over-represented in occupations that are care-related such as nursing and childcare (Diamond, 2002).

The extent to which a particular gender is mentioned represents the extent of its inclusion/exclusion. Imbalance of gender represented in textbooks has serious implications. As explained by Jones et al. (1997) who analyzed dialogues in English language textbooks, an excluded gender among dialogue participants represents a silenced gender. This may lead to students of the less represented gender getting fewer opportunities to participate in dialogue. Similarly, if the initiator of dialogues is often represented by a certain gender, the less represented gender may become demotivated to initiate talk and become disempowered.

The notion of exclusion aligns with the critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, as articulated by Fairclough (1995), which delves into how language and discourse intertwine with power dynamics. Within this context, CDA scrutinizes how the presence or absence of references to a specific gender can be indicative of underlying power inequalities. For instance, if one gender consistently finds itself underrepresented or deliberately excluded from texts, this could signal a broader trend of marginalization or disempowerment directed at that gender. It is not only the presence of reference (inclusion) that results in influencing attitudes towards gender, but absence of reference (exclusion) may also serve to do the same by reducing or deflecting attention from gendered entities. Thus, when analyzing the content of textual material for gender bias, the representation of gender in terms of sexist language, gender stereotyping, and its exclusion all contribute to the extent to which gender bias is present in the text.

Gender stereotyping is damaging to the development of gender identity in children. Students often identify with same-sex figures as role models in books they read, and female students may bear the most negative consequences as stereotypical representations frequently suggest that professional and prestigious careers are male occupations (Rong et. al, 2021). This

may lead to the limiting of young girls to reach their true potential in later life, apart from the perpetuation of gender discrimination in the society.

In this study, we sought to examine gender representation in the current Malaysian primary school English Language subject textbooks, from the point of quantity and quality of representation, where quantity relates to the proportion of male and female genders included, and quality refers to how the genders are represented, that is, the manner in which gender stereotyping manifests in the text. Specifically, the study analyzed the texts from the aspects of sexist language, gender inclusion/exclusion, family relationships, occupations and activities, and descriptions of characters.

We discuss the results in the light of past research findings on Malaysian primary school English textbooks to determine the extent to which gender representation has or has not improved over the years. Findings of this research can help educational authorities exercise informed decisions on the selection of appropriate textbooks, and raise awareness for writers and publishers of textbooks to incorporate a healthy balance of gender representation in textbooks. As proposed by Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012), publishers must take into consideration gender equality, social justice and human rights when producing textbooks to realize the objectives of a good educational program.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a corpus-assisted analysis of texts sampled from the primary Year 5 and 6 English Language textbooks used in Malaysian state-funded schools. Corpus linguistics as a methodological approach enables researchers to explore language patterns, features, and variations within a large body of texts to gain insight into its patterns of language use. It offers a systematic approach to studying language through the analysis of authentic language data stored in corpora (Bennet, 2010; Lu et al., 2021).

The analysis of the content of the textbooks is anchored in the framework of inclusion/exclusion and the quality of representation (Islam & Asadullah, 2018). Inclusion is where the quantity of gender presence in the text, and exclusion is the extent to which the gender is absent or unseen. This may be reflected through frequency counts of gendered images or number of mentions of characters and gendered pronouns, or symbols associated with a particular gender, for example. Quality of gender representation, on the other hand, refers to the description of gender stereotyping, where attention is focused on the activities, occupations, settings, appearance, and personality traits of characters associated with a particular gender.

Data and Sampling

The data comprises selected texts from two primary school English Language textbooks: the Year 5 and Year 6 textbooks. The texts which are the data for analysis comprise the reading passages and the comprehension question sets in the reading comprehension section of the textbooks.

The details of the textbooks are as follows:

1. Year 5 textbook: English Plus Level 1 - student's book
Year of Publication: 2021
Publisher: My Bookstore Sdn Bhd (collaboration with Oxford University Press)
Number of Units: 8

Number of pages: 119

2. Year 6 textbook: Academy Stars Year 6 - pupil's book

Year of Publication: 2021

Publisher: Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia Berhad (collaboration with Macmillan Education)

Number of Units: 10

Number of Pages: 143

Purposive sampling of the texts from the textbooks was employed, where reading passages (including the comprehension question sets) in the textbooks were selected if they fulfilled at least one of the following criteria:

- a) Featured at least one male or female character (whether human or non-human).
- b) Incorporated the use of male and female pronouns.
- c) Used words that index a particular gender, such as “lioness”, “guy”.

Table 1 presents the details, including the number of units taken from each textbook, the number of pages, and the total number of words in the sampled texts.

Table 1. Sampled data

Textbook	Number of units selected	Number of pages	Total number of words
Year 5	8	20	3195
Year 6	10	41	6151

Corpus Analysis Tool and its Affordances

Corpus analysis tools are software applications that can be used to explore and analyze language in a corpus. Common functionalities of corpus analysis tools include Concord, Wordlist and Keyword analysis functions (Lewins & Silver, 2021). The Concord function allows users to create interactive concordances for exploring language and syntax within text corpora. It generates lists of occurrences of user-specified words or phrases within a corpus, displaying each occurrence along with textual context information such as position within sentences, paragraphs, and documents. It is usually known as Key Word in Context (KWIC) functionality. The Wordlist function offers diverse methods for qualitative and quantitative exploration of texts which allows users to generate lists of words to analyze vocabulary within a single text, across multiple texts, or an entire reference corpus.

Further, the corpus tool allows annotation of the collection of text. This is adding linguistic or metadata information to linguistic structures, providing supplementary information about the texts' content, including part-of-speech tags, syntactic structure, named entities, sentiment, and other linguistic features (Garside et al., 1997). Annotation enables the researcher to identify the structures of interest and allows easy recall and management of the large body of texts.

Overall, corpus linguistic tools provide researchers with a range of functionalities for exploring language structures, patterns and usage within text corpora. The current study used a freeware corpus linguistic research tool, *AntConc*, developed by Anthony (2002) which has the functions for exploring linguistic data, including assisted word and word class category search, frequency counts, and annotation of word meanings.

Data Preparation and Analytical Procedure

Once the process of compiling the texts was completed, the data were digitized and converted into a ".txt" file format. Subsequently, all text files were uploaded into the *AntConc* software for analysis. The analysis targets two dimensions of gender bias, which are quantity and quality of representation: the extent of the inclusion or exclusion of genders, and the manner in which gender stereotyping manifests in the texts.

The study utilized the top-down approach, where categorization of words was predetermined using categories such as sexist language forms, nominals, pronouns and adjectives which were searched and coded for their reference to gendered entities. Activities and occupations were also tagged for their connection to male or female characters in the text. The first step was the generation of the word list, which is a list of all the individual words in the corpus. The words are screened to identify sexist language forms, nominals, pronouns, adjectives/descriptions, activities and occupations. After identifying the potential candidate words, the Concord function was employed to access the sequence of words surrounding the word of interest, in order to obtain the meaning of the word used in the context of the text. Where needed, a bigger chunk of the text in which the word is embedded is called up and the entire paragraph is read.

Next, annotation of the words associated with gender was carried out manually. All the words and their contexts were closely examined. Nouns, pronouns, or any gender-indicative elements were classified into the categories of male and female. These categories were further tagged-in as gendered nouns, pronouns, nouns related to family members, occupations and activities, and descriptions in relation to gender or gendered characters. For example, family-related nouns like 'father' and 'mother' were tagged as (F)(FFAMILY) or (M)(MFAMILY) to denote female and male family relationships respectively, and occupations and activities associated with gender were annotated as (FACTIVITIES), (MACTIVITIES), (FOCCUPATION), and (MOCCUPATION). Figure 1 is an example of the annotated raw data of an excerpt of a Year 6 comprehension text.

Abi(F)(FNOUN) was playing a virtual tennis game(FACTIVITIES) on her(F)(FPRONOUN) tablet.
 'Why don't you go and play tennis outside?' suggested Grandma(F)(FFAMILY).
 'Why would I go outside?' replied Abi(F)(FNOUN). 'Virtual tennis is just as good as real tennis.'
 'Ha!' said Grandma(F)(FFAMILY). 'I prefer playing tennis outside. Fresh air is important and we won't have it forever!'
 Oh, Grandma(F)(FFAMILY),' laughed Abi(F)(FNOUN). 'Of course we will!'

The next day was Abi's(F)(FNOUN) birthday. She(F)(FPRONOUN) ran outside to Grandma's(F)(FFAMILY) workshop. It was full of wonderful inventions - a flying trum

Figure 1. Sample of annotated raw data for Year 6 comprehension text

The annotated categories were then grouped according to gender and their related references and activities. Finally, to obtain the extent of inclusion of each gender, frequency counts of all the gendered references (nominals and pronouns) were recorded. In computing the

frequencies of words, the lemmatization function was not used, so the words ‘brother’ and ‘brothers’, for example, were tagged separately. This is because each mention or appearance of a gendered word contributes to the presence of a gender in the text and should, therefore, be accorded a separate count. The analytical procedure is described as follows:

- Sexist language: Textual representations were analyzed by observing word forms and interpreting their inherent meanings for exclusion of either gender.
- Gender inclusion: Frequencies of all words mentioning each gender are recorded to determine the extent of inclusion or exclusion.
- Family relationships, occupations and activities and descriptions of characters: These are identified through lexical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the main aim of the study was to examine the status of gender representation in the current Malaysian primary school English textbooks published in 2021, the findings are compared with the two key studies conducted by Abdul Hamid et al. (2008) and Hashim et al. (2018), and also Yasin et al. (2012) and Ayufiza Asmuni (2023), where relevant. These studies examined textbooks published in 2015 and before, making them good comparisons for the status of gender representation in the current textbooks. A brief discussion of the results in light of studies done in other countries in the region is also presented.

Sexist Language Forms

The first result is sexist language found in the texts. Use of sexist language is the most explicit form of gender bias which is sometimes overlooked as the language is part of the linguistic system of the language itself, and often bypasses our conscious scrutiny.

The texts were processed using the wordlist function in the *Antconc* software, where all the words in the texts were listed individually. The words were read through manually to identify sexist word forms. The analysis of the textbooks reveals minimal use of sexist language forms. In fact, attempts to use gender neutral terms were observed. The gendered terms *Actor/Actress* were found in the Year 5 textbook, and *Businessman* and *Watchman* were found in the Year 6 book. On the other hand, the gender neutral terms *Police Officer* and *Firefighter* instead of *Policeman* and *Fireman* were used in the Year 6 book.

The use of a different term to refer to female actors has the effect of limiting the female actor’s professional scope of work, to roles traditionally thought of as only suitable for women. The term *Actor* as a professional title, on the other hand, is unmarked by gender and does not carry the same connotation. The gender-specific terms *Businessman* and *Watchman* both use the masculine gender as reference for the occupations, which exclude women as potential job candidates. Such language reflects gender stereotyping, where both navigating business strategies and keeping security are deemed work requiring powerful personalities which are traditionally associated with men. Gender neutral alternatives should be *Businessperson* or *Entrepreneur* and *Security personnel/guard*. While sexist language forms exist in all languages, it is imperative that textbook writers be aware of them to avoid inadvertent use of them.

Gender Inclusion

The overall frequencies of the mention of each gender represented by gendered nouns and pronouns are presented (Table 2). Each mention contributes to the salience of the gender in the text and represents the extent of its inclusion.

Analysis of the Year 5 textbook revealed a near-equal proportion of references to both the male (49.8%) and female (50.2%) genders. However, a clear imbalance emerges in the Year 6 textbook, where male mentions (61.4%) outnumber female mentions (38.6%). When combined for both textbooks, males (56.8%) were more frequently mentioned compared to females (43.2%). From the perspective of gender inclusion, this result appears to be unsatisfactory.

Gender exclusion and stereotyping have been a global concern and an issue in education in the last few decades (see UNESCO, 2020). In some of the countries reported in the UNESCO (2020) report, efforts have been made by governments to improve gender representations in textbooks with some success. However, looking at the results of the current study, the movement towards less gender biased textbooks may not be consistent. Both the Year 5 and 6 textbook editions were published in 2021, but their extents of gender inclusion are not comparable.

Table 2. Number of mentions of each gender in the texts

Textbooks	Male Frequency	Female Frequency	Total Frequency
Year 5			
Nominals (e.g. boy, mother, Abi)	94	111	
Pronouns (he/she, him/her, his/hers)	71	55	
Total	165 (49.8%)	166 (50.2%)	331
Year 6			
Nominals (e.g. boy, mother, Abi)	214	120	
Pronouns (he/she, him/her, his/hers)	129	62	
Total	304 (61.4%)	191 (38.6%)	495
Total (Year 5 & 6)	469 (56.8%)	357 (43.2%)	826

To determine the extent to which gender representation has progressed in the Malaysian primary school textbooks, results from the last status check conducted by Abdul Hamid et al. (2008) on Year 3 and Year 6 2004 editions are compared. Abdul Hamid et al. (2008) reported that in the Year 3 textbook, male characters were mentioned 114 times (64%), and female characters 64 times (36%) (Note: all percentages are added by the authors of this paper). In the Year 6 textbook, male characters were mentioned 375 times (65%) and female characters 201 times (35%). This makes the overall inclusion 64.9% for males and 35.1% for females. In Islam and Asadullah's (2018) survey of textbooks in several countries, inclusion of females in Malaysian textbooks was reported to be only 35.2% in images, and 44.4% in both images and texts. As for results reported by Yasin et al. (2012), boys appeared twice as many times as girls in the visuals examined (i.e. 66.67% male) in the Year 1 textbook. Compared to the overall

result of the current study with 56.8% for males and 43.2% for females, there seems to have been some improvement in the inclusion of females in the English Language textbooks at the 2021 year point from previous years.

Next, we discuss the details of results to reveal further insights into how gender stereotyping manifests in the texts as we try to interpret and explain its occurrence.

Gender Role and Family Relationships

Themes in the English Language primary school curriculum revolve around the self, the home and school. On the home theme, family relations are usually denoted by referencing family members. These words are identified and their frequencies recorded to determine the extent to which male and female relations are given more prominence (see Table 4).

Table 4. Words denoting male and female family relations

Textbook	Male family members	Frequency (%)	Female family members	Frequency (%)
Year 5				
	Brothers	4	Sisters	3
	Brother	3	Sister	4
	Sons	1	Daughters	1
	Dad	4	Daughter	5
	Father	1	Mum	16
			Mother	1
			Granddaughters	1
	Total	13 (29.5%)		31 (70.5%)
Year 6				
	Brother	4	Daughter	1
	Dad	3	Wife	3
	Grandpa	1	Mum	5
			Grandma	13
	Total	8 (26.7%)		22 (73.3%)
Total (Year 5 & 6)		21 (28.4%)		53 (71.6%)

The analysis shows that words denoting female family members (71.6%) occur more than twice as frequently as those denoting male family members (28.4%). This shows that the textbooks place a stronger emphasis on female family roles. For example, the term "Mum" alone appears 16 times, which is the highest frequency among all family member words. Overall, this difference suggests that the textbooks place a greater focus on maternal and sisterly roles within the family context. While the prominent representation of female family members may be regarded as natural and desirable, as caregivers of young children are usually female in the majority of societies, the relatively lower mention of male family members may be a cause for concern. It suggests an imbalance in gender representation, which could reinforce traditional gender roles and perceptions of family dynamics where female figures play prominent roles in the world of young children while male figures remain in the background. Such representation could promote a less than ideal perception of gender roles within family settings among primary school pupils. Efforts should be made to ensure that both male and female family members are depicted equally to reflect the diverse and evolving roles within modern families.

Comparing the results with those of Abdul Hamid et al. (2008) on textbooks published in 2004, it is interesting to note that dominance of female family members in the English Language

primary school textbooks was not the norm one and a half decades ago. In fact, family member representation was strongly in favor of males (freq = 118, 72.4%) than females (freq = 45, 27.6%). (Note: the percentages are added by the authors of this paper). It appears that from 2004 to 2021, there was a change towards highlighting female members in the home which made female family representation the dominant one.

Occupations and Activities

Occupations and activities found in the texts were coded according to their association with either male or female characters. The types of occupations and activities were counted to determine the range of occupation and activity types attributed to each gender (see Table 5).

Table 5. Total occupation and activity types associated with male and female characters

Textbook	Number of Occupations		Number of Activities	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Year 5	4	7	6	7
Year 6	18	9	8	6
Total Year 5 & 6	22	16	14	13

In terms of occupations, males were assigned a bigger range of occupations (22 occupations) compared to females (16 occupations). However, differences exist between the Year 5 and Year 6 textbooks, where the book for the younger pupils showed a smaller range of occupations for males. This may be consistent with the focus on family members (female members) for the younger pupils. In the Year 6 textbook, which has expanded to themes outside the home, a bigger range of occupations are depicted, and more of them are attributed to male characters. For activities, both male and female characters appear to have the same number of types of activities associated with them.

Table 6 lists the occupations and activities associated with male and female characters. For occupations, it is clear that male characters are predominantly assigned occupations that are high in power status and physical activity (e.g. king, police, cycle courier). Only a few occupations are exceptions, such as actor, artist, and baker. Female occupations on the other hand, are mainly indoor occupations (e.g. blogger, writer, nurse, servants), with a number of high-power exceptions (e.g. zookeeper, rescue pilot, veterinarian, paramedic, builder). It is observed that male occupations are still male-stereotypical with a small addition of non-male traditional occupations, whereas female occupations have expanded to include more male traditional occupations while still retaining the female-stereotypical ones. This shows there is attempt by the textbook writers to expand female occupation types, but unfortunately the range of occupations assigned to females still lags behind that for males, hence, excluding females from many occupations available to males.

For activities, there is no clear pattern of gender stereotyping as the types of activities attributed to males and females are varied. Both activities traditionally seen as male or female activities are equally distributed to male and female characters. This indicates a positive development in depicting activities in the textbooks where gender stereotyping is avoided.

In Abdul Hamid et al.'s (2008) analysis, there was significant gender stereotyping in terms of occupation and activities in both the textbooks. They found that female roles were characterized by narrower and less diverse assignments compared to males, who were depicted holding a broad spectrum of occupations. Moreover, females were predominantly portrayed in

domestic settings, engaging in homely tasks like household chores, while males were shown participating more actively in society, earning income, own more possessions, and were in more decision-making positions. Likewise, in Hashim et al.'s (2018), there is stereotyping of male and female activities in terms of the outdoor-indoor, public-private space, professional-domestic, and passive-active delineations. Ayufiza Asmuni's (2023) finding that females were underrepresented in professions that require leadership and critical thinking skills and in settings outside the domestic sphere also pointed to occupational gender bias in the previous textbooks. Compared to these three studies on past textbooks used in schools, there is some improvement in gender representation in terms of occupations and activities in the current samples.

Table 6. Occupations and activities associated with male and female characters

Textbook	Occupations		Activities	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Year 5	President Baker Actor Athletes (football player, runner, long jump player)	Blogger Teacher Writer Housewife Nurse Pilot Actress	Cooking Watching TV Traveling Playing video games Taking photos Taking care of children Playing sports (tennis, football, surf and skateboard)	Cooking Shopping Having a picnic Listening to music Playing sports (basketball, swimming, climb) Doing house chores Reading and studying
Year 6	Police Emperor Artist Instructor Author Paramedic Engineer Farmer Businessman Doctor King Soldier Gardener Guard Watchman Cycle courier Manager Chef	Zoo keeper Rescue pilot Veterinarian Paramedic Teacher Photographer Servants Actress Builder	Doing a science experiment Doing house chores Writing a diary entry Drawing and painting Watering plants Playing sports (horse riding, sailing) Watching TV Cooking	Driving Doing homework Painting Cooking Playing sports (skiing, kayaking, canoeing, tennis) Writing a blog Inventing scientific devices

The results of the current study do reflect the findings of stereotyping by these past studies to some extent, especially when considering the long list of male-traditional occupations assigned to male characters. Advances in gender role representation are more clearly seen in the occupations assigned to female characters, as explained earlier, reflecting the overall change in the social status of women in modern society.

Descriptions of Male and Female Characters

Another layer of investigation examined how male and female characters are described. Are there systematic patterns associating certain types of descriptions with each gender? Descriptions of male and female characters were identified and categorized according to their semantic notions of emotions, physical appearance, personality, and status.

Table 7. Descriptions of male and female characters

Semantic Categories	Male		Female	
	Year 5	Year 6	Year 5	Year 6
Emotion/Mental State (Total occurrence: Male=6, Female=8)	-	Astonished Embarrassed Scared Worried Apologetic Pitiful	Happy Sad Lonely Tired	Unhappy Worried Angry Annoyed
Physical appearance (Total occurrence: Male=5, Female=9)	Beard and moustache Wears glasses Good looking Fair hair Blue eyes		Famous Excited Beautiful Short hair Big brown eyes Long straight dark hair Wears glasses Long curly hair	Sweet
Personality/Personal Attributes (Total occurrence: Male=8, Female=5)	Strong	Strong Kind Lazy Bad-tempered Strange Healthy Energetic	Brave	Caring Helpful Adventurous Cooperative
Status (Total occurrence: Male=4, Female=0)	Successful Professional	Famous Powerful	-	-

It is observed that more emotion and mental state descriptions are attributed to females than males. Notably, there is a total absence of emotion words associated with males in the Year 5 textbook. Physical appearance descriptions are also used more frequently to describe females than males, almost all of which were found in the Year 5 textbook. Personality, and particularly

status descriptions, favored males over females. The total lack of status descriptions attributed to female characters is especially telling, as stereotypes of women have been holders of low-status positions compared to men. Qualitatively, the personality descriptions for females revolve around the notions of “social approval” such as “helpfulness” and “cooperativeness”, while those for males cover a larger range of attributes that are more individually-oriented, such as “energetic”, “bad-tempered”, and “strange” and “lazy”. This suggests that women are defined in relation to acceptance by others, while men are free to realize their individuality, even if the traits are frowned upon as undesirable in society. These imbalance of gender descriptions found in the textbooks where females are portrayed through emotional states and socially conforming traits can potentially reinforce societal stereotypes that limit women’s freedom to be unique individuals. Comparatively, these descriptions are more nuanced and less extreme than the traits attributed to male and female story characters in Ayufiza Asmuni’s (2023) study of the 2013 and 2015 textbooks. From her thematic analysis of the stories, she concluded that females are portrayed as weak, gullible, and powerless and males as smart, brave, and strong. As the examples shown in the analysis appear to be fairy tale stories (involving traditional prince and princess tales), it might be possible that the characters were made to adopt the clear-cut stereotypical roles following the genre of such stories.

Comparison with Other Studies Within the Region

Few studies have examined textbooks published in the recent years; among those available are Tyarakanita (2021), Khanunthong et al. (2021) and Vu and Thuy (2020) whose studies evaluated textbooks in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam respectively. All three studies found that the presence of males dominates that of females in texts and images, in addition to clear elements of gender stereotyping. This shows that even in recent textbook publications, gender bias awareness of textbook writers is still at the lower end. Older studies as that done in Hong Kong (Yang, 2011) actually indicated a healthy representation of genders with females visibly represented as capable individuals. This is in contrast with the situation found in many other countries in the region including Japan (Lee, 2014) where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks favoring men was common, and Indonesia (Darni & Abida, 2017), where textbooks assigned roles of males and females into the public and private spheres respectively.

CONCLUSION

While much success has been obtained over the years in closing the gap of disparity between men and women in education, a bigger issue arises about how women are still excluded from achieving their full potential through gender bias in education in general and more specifically to this study, gender bias in textbooks that has wide repercussions. As indicated in the UNESCO gender report that reviews efforts and the status of gender equality in education, among the 15 key findings that detailed how girls and women are disadvantaged in education is one on textbooks: “Countries still produce textbooks with gender-based stereotypes and limited references to women and girls” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 3), and that textbooks are slow to change even when the society around them strives to change (p. 65).

Gender bias in textbooks, sometimes described as the hidden curriculum, serves to limit women from realizing their highest potential (Blumberg, 2007). The effect of such barriers is real, as can be seen in the lack of women in the field of science, for example. Gender bias in textbooks, especially in books read by younger children, wields its effect on the minds of

developing children, becomes entrenched in the society and continues to perpetuate gender disparity. Language represents society to some extent, and there are the mutual effects between language use, gender equality and sociocultural shifts in society (Su et al., 2021).

The Malaysian textbooks have shown good progress, where notable changes were seen in the expansion of types of occupations and activities for females, and in inclusion where the disparity between the genders has somewhat narrowed. Female characters are shown to be capable of holding powerful jobs and can engage in activities requiring strong problem-solving skills. However, males are seen to hold on to their territory of male-dominated professions, with some concession to female-associated occupations.

While most gender bias studies focus on women as the disadvantaged group, it should be pointed out that exclusion of the male gender in some areas of social representation is equally undesirable. For example, fewer mentions of males in the family setting (as found in the current study) may lead to perceptions of a diminished role of males in the family institution. The current study reporting the status of gender representation in the primary school textbooks in Malaysia shows mixed results in that the two textbooks examined did not show similar levels of inclusion and stereotypical representations. However, on the whole, there is marked progress when considered in light of findings from previous studies conducted. While the scope of occupations for females have somewhat been expanded to include more male-traditional ones, occupations associated with males cover a wider range and appear to be still a mostly male-protected territory. Descriptions in physical appearance and emotions occurred more frequently for females, and personality and status were mentioned more frequently for males. On inclusion in the family setting, female roles outnumbered male roles, and this appears to be a reversal from the findings by a previous researcher (Abdul Hamid, 2008) where males had a higher rate of inclusion in families. The findings of the current study indicate that gender bias is still an issue to be contended with when selecting appropriate textbooks for Malaysian schools.

Textbook selection authorities should include gender representation as part of the evaluation criteria when deciding on textbooks to be adopted for schools. Textbook writers and producers, too, should be aware of gender bias when writing textbooks to ensure the textbooks do not inadvertently contribute to harmful consequences in the development of young minds. As recommended in the UNESCO (2020) report on gender equality in education, textbooks require regular gender audits to be conducted, and all phases of textbook development must have the participation of publishers, teachers, public authorities and parents' associations, and most importantly, to ensure the involvement of women.

There are limitations to the current study. The study did not sample the lower primary textbooks which have a bigger proportion of images than texts. Future studies focusing more on visual representation could more effectively analyze these samples. Further, more in-depth analysis of the findings can be undertaken to reveal the exact nature of the representations that could not be seen through frequencies of occurrence alone. For example, when considering gender roles in family relationships, are males represented as power figures in the family, or depicted in a caregiving role? Equal mention of male and female in the light of such information would provide a more nuanced understanding of gender bias in the textbooks.

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DECLARATION

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