



GENDER PORTRAYAL IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM: THE CASE OF SEX STEREOTYPES IN PRIMARY ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

The study analysed primary school English language textbooks in Ijebu North Local Government Area of Ogun State in order to document evidence of sex stereotypes. It specifically investigated frequencies of male/female characters in pictorial illustrations and story/passages titles of the textbooks. The text analysis method (Kabura & Masinjila, 1985; Erinoshio (1997) was used to investigate gender portrayal in the Nigerian Primary English used in public primary schools and the Macmillan Primary English Course used in the private. Frequencies obtained were analysed using the chi-square statistic. Findings revealed that sex was related to the frequency of male and female characters in pictorial illustrations of primary school English language textbooks (X^2 calculated is greater than the X^2 table value; $p < .05$); although sex was not significantly related to the frequency of characters in story/passage titles of primary school English textbooks (X^2 calculated $> X^2$ table value; $p > .05$). Also, the type of school (public or private) was related to frequency of male and female characters in title and pictorial illustrations of primary English language textbooks. Based on its findings, the study called for the intervention of Ogun State Government and other stakeholders for immediate remediation.

Keywords: *Gender portrayal, Sex stereotypes, pictorial and title illustrations, primary English textbooks*

Introduction

Concerns about gender portrayal in the educational process have continued to grow in spite of the increased activities of researchers and women advocates in many parts of the world. Recent reports indicate that more efforts are still required to monitor hidden manifestations of gender bias and stereotyping in curriculum materials as part of efforts to address gender gap in education and human development globally and locally (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Dejene, 2017; Islam & Asadullah, 2016, 2018; UNESCO, 2018).

Education is the surest pathway to gender promotion. However, the school curriculum is the vehicle for conveying a people's culture and belief system which may work for or against gender issues. Through the curriculum, an educational system projects the values of its society at a given period of time. Any society that has not addressed the

marginalized position of women and girls in a meaningful and consistent manner cannot operate a gender-balanced education or school curriculum that will engender sustainable development. As averred by Kagia and Buvinic (2008: xxii), "Education and gender equality are intertwined; not only is education a critical path to gender equality and women's empowerment, but gender equality and women's empowerment are critical pathways for girls' education".

Arnot and Fennell (2008) reported that gender activists and theorists in Western societies have developed effective systems of monitoring gender inequalities in such areas as education, employment and civil society. However, such tracking mechanism is just emerging in developing societies, such as Nigeria, and there is need for concerted efforts to empirically investigate current practices such as sexism in



primary school texts as done in the present study.

Literature Review

Textbooks stand out clearly as the most common educational tools within the context of the classroom (Beiki & Gharaguzlu, 2017). They are a means of instruction through which the framework for the organization of the teacher's pedagogic practices are guided (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2016). Textbooks also "act as the interface between the officially state-adopted and sanctioned knowledge of the culture, and the learner ... (and) are a specialised means for the ritual introduction of children into a culture's values and knowledge" (Luke, 1988: 64). Toçi and Aliu (2013) add that textbooks serve as good sources of information and present an image of what is tolerable in a society or culture.

One of the major obstacles to the achievement of gender equity in the educational process is sexism or gender stereotyping. Blumberg (2007) remarks that gender stereotypes in school textbooks are "one of the best camouflaged - and hardest to budge - rocks in the road to gender equality in education" (p. 4). And it is possibly from this perspective that Bohan (2011) defines gender stereotypes as "preconceived ideas whereby males and females are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex" (p. 3). Gender stereotyping is at the root of sexism. It limits "the development of the natural talents and abilities of boys and girls, women and men, as well as their educational experiences and life opportunities" (Bohan, 2011, p.3). In addition, gender stereotyping affects the self-esteem of women and girl-children who are always at the receiving end of sexism (Barthelemy, et al 2016) and also creates an oppressive world for them (Falah & Saed, 2017). Indeed, as earlier argued by Litz (2005: 45), the continued manifestation of sexism and gender

stereotypes in textbooks "may reflect the unequal power relationships that still exist between the sexes in many cultures, the prolonged marginalization of females, and the misrepresentations of writers with social attitudes that are incongruent with the present-day realities of the target language culture". Efforts at advancing the status of women and girls through education must therefore continue to pay serious attention to curricular materials, especially textbooks, used in schools beginning from the early years.

Lee and Collins's (2010) study in Australian and Hongkong found that writers maintained the convention of "male-first presentation" while, on the other hand, females were presented in a "more limited range of social roles" which projected women as weaker and passive beings unlike their male counterparts. In Uganda, female role models were found to be under-represented in the "English in Use" book 2 which was a textbook recommended by its Ministry of Education (Amanda & Sakwab, 2012); reflecting insincerity of its government to gender equity and inclusion. Although the New Integrated English textbook used in Kenya tried to present gender neutrality, inclusiveness and sensitivity, the character portrayal in photographs and fitness in dialogue presented the male gender representation more than the female gender (Malova, 2012). In the same vein, despite the gender sensitivity of Kenyan government's education and training policy, the activity and attribute-based representations of characters in primary English textbook still reveal the 'existing stereotypical gender constructions of the society that fall in line with the functionalists' perspective on gender roles (Gebregeorgis, 2016). Also, the findings of Hall (2014) on gender representation in current EFL textbooks in Iranian secondary school revealed that there was high degree of gender imbalance in the textbooks



examined. All these buttress the conclusion of Odhiambo (2016) that text and language had been found to have greater negative effects on female students, and that girl/female students feel "alienated, devaluated and have their expectations lowered" which depicted some of the major challenges of published textbooks.

The study by Biemmi (2015) in Italy on primary textbooks largely puts the sexist dimensions in clearer perspective. One, all the ten sampled books presented more male characters than female ones, confirming underrepresentation of the female gender in books. Two, male gender dominated more prestigious and rewarding professions such as scientist, engineer, doctors to mention a few while the female gender settles for less dignifying and less prestigious profession. Three, adjectives used in those text books also connote gender discrimination. The male characters were qualified as brave, adventurous, concentrated, serious and honest, but their female counterparts were qualified to be shy, delicate, quiet, sweet and innocent (Biemmi, 2015). In fact, the overall picture suggests that publishers of primary textbooks in Italy lack commitment to address the issue of gender balancing or equality. This is surprising in view of current efforts going on in much of the Europe on addressing gender stereotypes and sexism as reported by Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2010). And this further underlines the need for the current study in Nigeria where efforts in that direction are yet to be fully concretised. In an assessment of the Nigerian gender situation by the British Council, it was concluded that:

Excellent policies and intentions have not translated into budgets or action to make the changes required if women are to contribute effectively to Nigeria's development. The

National Gender Policy has yet to bear fruit, while implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has (been) stalled" (British Council, Nigeria, 2012, p. iii).

One way of redressing this negative gender trend in Nigeria is to continually bring out evidence that can drive policy enforcement particularly in the educational process.

This study was therefore conceived to assess the level of gender-sensitivity of the current English textbooks used in some Nigerian public and private primary schools. Evidence from the pictorial and title illustrations of the texts would provide some additional information that could in turn influence policy and actions needed to address gender-stereotypes in primary English textbooks.

The Research Problem

Nigeria has a *National Gender Policy Strategic Framework* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008) which was to last till 2013. However, its impact specifically in the area of sexism in school textbooks may not have been fully assessed; as the development of text materials was hitherto "tackled largely through the initiatives of individual authors and subject associations" (Erinosho, 1997, p. 9). Accumulated findings indicate that, while there may not be formal instruments supporting the undermining of girls and women, there are several instances in the school system and wider society requiring immediate attention if sex-role stereotyping is to be effectively tackled in Nigeria (Ifegbesan, 2010; Fayankinnu, 2012; British Council, Nigeria, 2012; UNESCO, 2018).

This study was therefore designed to further create awareness on the challenge of curricular review in respect of eliminating sexist



stereotypes in primary school English textbooks in Nigeria. The study investigated the portrayal of boys/men and girls/women in primary English textbooks using Ijebu-North Local Government Area of Ogun State as a case study.

In specific terms, the study was designed to find answers to the following questions:

1. Is sex related to the frequency of characters in pictorial illustrations of primary school English language textbooks?
2. Is sex related to the frequency of characters in story/passage titles of primary school English textbooks?
3. Is the type of school related to frequency of male and female characters in title and pictorial illustrations of primary English language textbooks?

Methodology

The study adopted the text analysis method. This method, as outlined in

Findings and Discussion

Tables 1-3 below present the major findings of the study.

Table 1: Pictorial Illustrations in English Textbooks according to Gender

Textbooks	Male				Female				Total
	Adult		Child		Adult		Child		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
NPE BOOK 4	127	23.87	191	35.90	95	17.85	119	22.37	532
NPE BOOK 5	147	29.93	193	39.30	86	17.51	65	13.23	491
NPE BOOK 6	118	31.63	140	37.53	25	06.70	90	24.12	373
MPEC BOOK 4	93	42.66	53	24.31	31	14.22	41	18.80	218
MPEC BOOK 5	81	34.03	89	37.39	39	16.38	29	12.18	238
MPEC BOOK 6	90	42.45	49	23.11	30	14.15	43	20.28	212
Total	656	31.78	715	34.64	306	14.83	387	18.65	2064
Grand Total	1371	(66.42)			693	(33.57)			2064
									(100%)

X^2 calculated = 182.40; X^2 table value = 25.00; $p < .05$

Table 1 reveals that sex is related to the frequency of male and female characters in pictorial illustrations of primary school English language textbooks (X^2 calculated is greater than the X^2 table value; $p < .05$). One of the analyzed books (MPEC Book 5) has no female figure at all in its

the *ABC of Gender Analysis* (Kabura & Masinjila, 1985) and operationalized in Erinsho (1997), involves book review with focus on frequency of occurrence of male/female characters, nouns and pronouns in respect of story/passage titles, illustrations, content and activities. This report focuses mainly on the title and pictorial aspects of the text analysis.

Two textbooks used for pupils in primaries 4 - 6 in Ijebu-North Local Government Area of Ogun State were reviewed for this purpose. They are the *Nigerian Primary English (NPE) series* used in public primary schools and the *Macmillan Primary English Course series* used in private schools. The frequency counts of references to human characters in title and pictorial illustrations were summed up according to pupils' academic levels (primary 4, 5, 6) and the types of schools (public, private). Simple percentages were used to present the tables while chi-square (X^2) statistic was used to probe for relationship of sex with frequencies and types of schools.

cover page. Further analyses of the pictorial illustrations indicate that male figures are depicted as drummers, high chief or king, an engineer, fishermen, responsible citizen and scouts. On the other hand, females are shown dancing, selling, chatting, been helped and watching passively. This,



in the word of Shamsuddin and Hamid (2017), is biased and not empirically proven fair portrayal of female folks. While it is important to note that the low-value portrayal of girls and women in the analysed English textbooks could further deepen the entrenched patriarchal sentiments in that part of the country, such finding is not peculiar to the study. Similar

findings have been reported by Amanda and Sakwab (2012), Hall (2014), Biemmi (2015), Gebregeorgis (2016), Dejene (2017) and Islam and Asadullah (2018), among others. Indeed, the findings corroborate the conclusion of Dejene (2017: 6) on Ethiopia that "gender is still represented in a way that supports the status-quo"

Table 2: Story/Passage Titles according to Sex in English Textbooks

Textbooks	Male		Female		Both		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	l
NPE BOOK 4	12	46.15	5	19.23	9	34.6	26
						1	
NPE BOOK 5	15	57.69	7	26.92	4	15.3	26
						8	
NPE BOOK 6	30	43.33	4	13.33	13	43.3	30
						3	
MPEC BOOK 4	10	41.66	6	25.00	8	33.3	24
						3	
MPEC BOOK 5	15	50.00	5	16.66	10	33.3	30
						3	
MPEC BOOK 6	13	50.00	4	15.18	9	34.6	26
						1	
Total	78	48.14	81	19.13	53	32.7	162
						1	

χ^2 calculated = 6.46; χ^2 table value = 18.35; $p > .05$

As found in the case of pictures, most of the story/passage titles in the books project the male sex as strong/brave, active, skillful, thoughtful and powerful beings, while the female sex is presented as helpless, passive, fearful, weak and emotional. Also men/boys have more status than women/girls as shown in some of the story/passage titles. Men are often shown as achievers and are as well associated with development and positive things (e.g. "Mike the Engineer", MPEC Book 4, pg. 69) in contrast with their female counterparts. It is only in few cases that girl children are portrayed as achievers (i.e. Unit 9, pg. 41 in MPEC Book where a team of girls won a netball competition). However, the chi-square test revealed that sex is not related to the frequency of

characters in story/passage titles of primary school English textbooks (χ^2 calculated $>$ χ^2 table value; $p > .05$). One plausible explanation for this finding may be that mere mention of male/female in a story may not be as important as the way the character is portrayed as earlier explained. However, the finding of insignificance in the frequency of characters in story/passage titles calls for further investigation, given the conclusion in respect of Table 1.

Table 3: Overall References to Male/Female Characters According to Types of Schools

School Type	Male		Female		Total
	N	%	N	%	
Public	972	65.1	522	34.9	1494
Private	493	67.3	240	32.7	733
Total	1465	65.8	762	34.2	2227

χ^2 calculated = 21.75; χ^2 table value = 3.84; $p < .05$



In terms of overall distribution of male/female characters, Table 3 suggests that females are under-represented in English textbooks used in both the public and private schools. Statistically, it was found that the type of school was related to frequency of male and female characters in title and pictorial illustrations of primary English language textbooks with the public school text putting up a relatively better performance than the private. The immediate implication of this finding is that the State Government would need to intensify its supervisory roles especially in monitoring the textbooks used in private schools in the State. A situation where private schools use textbooks that promote patriarchal values and orientations for young Nigerians in the State should not be tolerated.

On the whole, the study has provided some additional insight into sexist stereotyping in Nigerian primary schools with the case study of English textbooks. The study found, like in previous studies (e.g. Erinosh, 1997; Ifegbesan, 2010), that early socialization of boys and girls into society-defined roles through school textbooks is well-pronounced in English language teaching in primary schools in the study area. This calls for immediate remediation, given the strategic position of English as the official language of the country, and its pre-eminence as the language of instruction at all levels of education; notwithstanding the *National Policy on Education's* (FRN, 2014) call for the use of mother-tongue in the early years of education in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Textbooks are major curriculum materials through which the prevailing sexist values are transmitted in the school system. Through school textbooks, sex stereotypes are passed to the younger ones who directly or indirectly accept the roles depicted

about women/girls and men/boys as the ideal. Therefore, school textbooks must be properly packaged to address the new challenges facing the society such as gender stereotyping or sexism. Since the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, it has become clear that the second fiddle position usually accorded girls and women in virtually all areas of life can no longer stand the test of time. The school system is usually expected to play a significant role in reversing this trend especially through its curricular contents and processes. It appears that the Nigerian school system is yet to fully rise to this challenge going by the mounting stock of evidence about gender role stereotyping that goes on through pedagogical practices, text and illustrational materials used, school policies, etc. This study has produced some evidence to suggest the need for immediate review of primary English textbooks used in the study area so as to eliminate instances of sex stereotyping which are widespread. However, further and broad studies are required before the findings could be generalized beyond the study area.

In the meantime, findings from this study call for urgent action on the part of the Ogun State and the Federal Government to intensify efforts in addressing sex stereotyping in school curricula generally and English textbooks in particular. Steps should be taken to follow through some initial efforts that were made through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in the mid-1990s to review school curricula for the purpose of gender mainstreaming. This step would have given the greatest challenge to book writers had it been fully implemented up to the school level.

The publishers of the primary school English series usually commission some "experts" to write these books. Many of these writers, if not all, are teachers and teacher trainers. This suggests the need to integrate gender



concerns in teacher education programmes while the capacity of all participants in the process (teacher trainees and trainers) are enhanced for improved gender mainstreaming in school curriculum and textbooks.

As at now, much of the activities meant to address sexist stereotyping at the level of the society are carried out by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Commendable as their efforts seem, there is need for coordination of activities in order to put pressure to bear on government particularly at producing school materials that would be gender-neutral because of the centrality of education to changing entrenched values like sex stereotypes. In addition, media practitioners require continuous education so as to complement the efforts of the school system in providing accurate information to the public on the need for gender re-orientation of the Nigerian society.

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