

Changing Gender Biased Content Presented in Chinese Primary School English Textbooks

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Abstract. The issue of gender bias in educational materials has become a significant concern in contemporary scholarship. However, research on gender stereotypes in Chinese primary school English textbooks is still insufficient to address their impact on students and obstacles to reform. This paper critically examines the gender biased content in Chinese primary school English textbooks, with a focus on disproportionate descriptions of family roles and occupations that reinforce traditional gender norms and limit students' future development possibilities. This analysis will also identify the main systemic obstacles to reform, which include fiscal priorities, lengthy revision cycles, regional diversity, and cultural replication. Based on these findings, this article proposes practical measures such as incorporating gender perspectives into the National English Curriculum Standard, considering gender perspectives into school curricula and assessment practices, and emphasizing the importance and flexibility of teachers' instruction in classroom discourse. These measures enable education to move closer to fulfilling its role as a catalyst for equitable opportunities, striving to cultivate more diverse future citizens.

Keywords: English Textbooks, Gender Bias, Gender Representation, Gender Stereotype, Primary School Education

1. Introduction

Gender cognition plays a central role in shaping how young learners perceive themselves and others. Starting from early childhood, children begin to internalize social norms and expectations, which profoundly influence the development of their worldview and values [1]. Education, as one of the most important mechanisms of cognitive construction, is crucial in transmitting these social norms and ideas.

Among all types of textbooks, language textbooks are particularly influential in shaping social cues in students' minds due to their enriching portrayal of interactions with society and demonstration of values, both explicitly and implicitly, which makes them a breeding ground for socialization, including gender socialization.

Research on data collection has been conducted regarding gender stereotypes in China's English textbooks, yielding statistical results that prove the biased portrayals and proportions [2]. However, they lack illustration on their impact on the pupils, as well as more importantly, what barriers they faced in reforms that make in-time changes hard, and what approaches to carry out to tackle the

issue. This paper will first explain why textbook representation matters for early socialization, then document how family roles and occupations are currently skewed, before analyzing systemic barriers to reform.

2. The role of gender role content in primary school English textbooks in addressing issues

2.1. Textbooks play a foundational role in early childhood development

For many students--especially in China--textbooks are not just one source of learning; they become the de facto curriculum, where they serve as authoritative materials that are deployed as official instructional guides for teachers and portray "proper" ways of behaving and accepted values [3-5].

Among all types of textbooks, it is believed that language textbooks are particularly influential. They are filled with family roles, dialogues, and overall interactions with society. These are the materials where young children are most likely to encounter social cues. In other words, language textbooks constitute a significant source of early socialization. Socialization is the life-long process of acquiring society's norms, values, and behaviors to function within a group or society. Its primary sources, known as agents of socialization, include family, peers, schools, media, religious institutions, and the workplace, all of which influence how individuals learn and internalize social expectations and skills [6]. Moreover, students learn these social cues by heart.

This is especially true in countries with a centralized education system, where textbooks are nationally approved and widely used. Because of this, the messages embedded in these materials reach millions of children at once and carry significant weight. In many regions, teachers even require students to recite entire texts from English textbooks. Through repetition and memorization, they internalize them without question, perceiving them as societal gender rules that they may also follow. In this way, English Language textbooks in China create an influential breeding ground for producing gender meanings and constructing gender roles and identity [7].

2.2. Family roles gender stereotypes are widely present in chinese elementary school textbooks.

2.2.1. Biased depiction of family roles, reinforcing traditional domestic gender roles in china

Analysis of Chinese English textbooks reveals a clear gender imbalance in depictions of family roles. For instance, Success with English is a primary school textbook used in the Guangzhou region. Based on data collected, in the textbooks from grades 3 to 6, Male characters (fathers) are shown performing only 7 types of mostly relaxing activities (e.g., watching TV, reading) [2]. In comparison, female characters (mothers) perform 12 types of tasks, often involving cleaning, cooking, shopping, and childcare.

Additionally, female characters are consistently illustrated wearing aprons in domestic scenes, while male characters are not associated with any specific attire. These portrayals reinforce traditional stereotypes by framing household duties as women's responsibilities and leisure as men's. Such representations risk shaping children's perceptions of gender roles in unequal ways from an early age.

Moreover, the illustration also shows that women, as mothers, usually wear aprons, while men, as fathers, do not have any special clothing. The number and frequency of women wearing aprons as mothers in the illustrations of textbooks is a total of eleven times, with female characters and male characters never wearing aprons in the textbooks.

Therefore, based on the above findings, it can be concluded that gender stereotypes still exist in the representation of male and female roles in the family environment.

The traditional Chinese Confucianism belief that 'man is in charge of outside affairs; woman is in charge of inside affairs' remains, continuously puts women (wives) in a subordinate position, and excludes them from public life.

2.2.2. Biased depiction of occupations reinforces gender stereotype of professional capability and possibilities

Regarding the portrayal of occupations, Male characters have traditionally been assigned broader and more dynamic professional identities, defined as multifunctional problem solvers with high status, intellectual, or physical requirements, such as scientists, lawyers, engineers, or executives [2]. These depictions implicitly associate masculinity with abilities, leadership, and the capacity to excel in social and economic value domains.

In sharp contrast, female roles are often limited to a narrow range of professions, disproportionately manifested as nurses, teachers, or secretaries - roles that are often described as supportive, nurturing, or "low-risk" rather than authoritative or innovative. This distorted representation reinforces a destructive myth that women are inherently better suited for roles that serve others, rather than leadership, innovation, or occupying positions of power.

Over time, this description becomes self-fulfilling: when students, especially young girls, rarely see women in roles such as physicists, CEOs, or architects, they internalize the idea that these paths are "not for them," limiting their ambitions and narrowing their understanding of possibilities. Boys may also be under pressure to pursue only "prestigious" or "high-achieving" careers, believing that fields such as education, nursing, or social work are "feminized" and therefore below their abilities, resulting in men being underrepresented in nursing-oriented professions [8]. This dual restriction stifles individual potential and perpetuates a still gender segregated workforce.

3. Textbook reform

With the changing times, textbooks in China have also undergone facelifts and updates, but some innovative changes, such as eliminating gender bias, are not achieved overnight and smoothly. They are facing some challenges, including systemic barriers such as fiscal constraints, limited revision focus, and regional restrictions, as well as cultural barriers like the cultural reproduction phenomenon.

3.1. Fiscal constraint

According to a report from the Ministry of Finance, in 2022, education expenditure exceeded 3.9 trillion yuan; in 2023, it surpassed 4.1 trillion yuan; and in 2024, it is projected to exceed 4.2 trillion yuan. However, according to the budget report, this year's central government education spending is primarily focused on several key areas such as "advancing the universal and inclusive development of education"; "implementing student financial aid policies". This suggests that the primary focus of the national fiscal budget on education remains on significant issues, such as providing access to education for more. Therefore, compared with this primary issue, gender bias is not a priority in education textbook reforms.

Additionally, due to fiscal constraints, there is a fixed 10-year revision cycle for Chinese textbooks. For example, the new edition, to be implemented in September 2024, marks a major

update following the 2014 version, with significant revisions expected in 2034. This also leads to the issue that the textbook struggles to keep up with the latest values or discussions on gender topics. Students in 2023 may still be learning about social events and values from the 2014 era.

3.2. Limited focus of revision

The revisions of the current textbooks also do not highlight emphasis on gender bias, but rather other focuses. In an interview with Nanfengchuang, Gong Yafu, a researcher at the China Academy of Educational Sciences and chairman of the Foreign Language Teaching Professional Committee of the China Education Society, presided over the compilation of the 2024 Education Science Press primary school English textbook focus on "developing students' character, thinking ability, values, and language ability as teaching objectives", which is equally important as language learning and application ability. Therefore, the most important change will be the integration of cultivating students' character, thinking ability, and language learning.

The focus of the revision is on cultivating student-centered qualities and character. Although it has not yet been reflected in the transmission of social values, social influence in the process of cultivating students' values will definitely be increasingly evident in textbooks. Therefore, with this change, gender may also become an important issue in this embodied value system in the near future. The teaching objectives and corresponding changes for this type of student quality are long-term and continuous.

3.3. Chinese textbooks' regional diversity

In China, different regions use different versions of textbooks, making it even more challenging to unify and address the gender bias factors within them. According to the 2024 National Catalog of Teaching Materials for Compulsory Education, there are currently more than 20 different versions of primary school English textbooks in use across China. Different publishing houses develop materials tailored to the needs of various regions, while adhering to the National English Curriculum Standard.

This leads to a difficulty in revisions and future reforms-specifically, the difficulty of supervision and unifying standards. Currently, for academic revision, there is the National English Curriculum Standard; however, when it comes to more subjective factors, such as family roles and occupations by gender, even the standards become blurry. Moreover, different regions in China have stark contrasts in their social norms, values, and the acceptance level of ideas on gender issues; thus, it will be harder to apply a unified standard.

3.4. Cultural reproduction

Last year, a slight revision of one of the cartoons in the textbook led to a heated online debate. In a textbook picture, while the mom is the one calmly washing hair, the father is the one cooking in the kitchen, and asking the boy to also help. Although some netizens claim that it is great to demonstrate a father figure as the one in charge of the cooking chore, others complain that it is "make it special", not in line with the reality of most families, and can easily "mislead children". This is an excellent demonstration of cultural reproduction. Society instinctively maintains existing gender norms across generations, even in the face of progressive reforms. Cultural reproduction plays a much bigger role than is assumed. Without long-term structural support, reforms risk becoming symbolic gestures, appearing progressive but failing to shift actual perceptions of students, parents, and society.

Teachers' curriculum, parental perception, and these are all elements that should be updated along with the reforms of textbooks.

4. Suggestions

4.1. National textbook standard revision

The most direct way of improvement would be to consider adding gender caution in textbook revisions. Though in the National English Curriculum Standard, it is challenging to conduct detailed and gender "rules" that may limit the freedom of regional changes and creativity, it should be encouraged to include instructions or maybe reminders, such as, avoiding basic direct gender stereotypes, such as "only boys can become mathematicians" or "only the mom is in charge of housework", not limiting specific genders to specific family roles or occupations, and ensuring that the distribution of genders under such categories is relatively equal or randomly distributed.

4.2. School-level curriculum design.

At the school level, a practical and efficient way is to embed a simple "gender lens" across regular English teaching without disrupting language objectives. Although changes to textbooks are complex and slow, everyday materials such as class worksheets can be redesigned by switching dialogue roles or adding new information, like including an example of a female mathematician after the male mathematician example in the textbooks. Moreover, the classes provide an interactive environment for both students and teachers with no standardized answers. The teachers could ask students questions to directly address such gender biases, such as asking students, "What chores does your dad do?" Through classroom interaction, teachers can instruct students to think beyond the textbook, exposing them to a more nuanced and diverse world.

4.3. The role of teachers' instruction

In the teaching process, teachers play a significant role. Teachers can use the flexibility of the classroom to mitigate the transmission of content with gender bias risks in textbooks. For example, through classroom questioning, when encountering a text that only depicts female characters in family roles, the teacher can ask open-ended questions: "Do you think social expectations influence the choice of this character? What other life possibilities could she have?" This not only encourages students to conduct a critical analysis of the text but also cleverly challenges rigid gender norms.

Supplementary information is another powerful tool. Teachers can introduce diverse cases beyond textbooks: sharing stories of female scientists breaking through academic barriers and experiences of male nurses standing out in nursing positions, which can provide counterexamples to biased narratives and enrich students' understanding of gender diversity.

5. Conclusion

The issue of gender representation in primary school textbooks not being suitable for the new generation should not be ignored; it is the foundation of children's identity formation, participation, and future possibilities. Evidence from family role scenarios and occupational distribution suggests that current materials subtly convey unequal norms, while systemic constraints hinder formal revisions. A coordinated approach, featuring clear national representative guidance and rebalancing classroom conversations and tasks in daily school activities, can help eliminate these stereotypical

messages. When textbooks and teaching methods reflect all human roles, they cultivate fairness and better serve the curriculum goals of each child's personality, thinking, values, and language abilities, cultivating more confident, comprehensive, and healthy-minded students for the nation.

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