

Gendered stereotypes in the School Textbooks: Research and a teaching intervention

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Abstract: School textbooks have been a key field of research on gender inequalities throughout the world due to their role as carriers of the prevailing social and cultural values. In Greece, research on textbooks has shown that regardless of their subject matter or the level of education they are written for, they share common characteristics, such as the underrepresentation of women and their restriction to traditional roles. This paper studies the illustrations of a textbook used for the teaching of English in junior high schools in Greece, under the gender perspective. Based on the research findings, a teaching proposal is suggested, engaging actively the students themselves, with an aim to raise their awareness towards gender inequality both in the school context, and in social and professional life.

Keywords: gendered stereotypes, teaching, school textbooks

1. Introduction

It is commonly agreed that both in Europe and in the rest of the world, boys and girls choose to do different jobs. As Berman (2017) [1] stresses, girls are much less likely to seek a job in a number of male-dominated fields. Such an occupational segregation of sex, which leads to “male” and “female” professions is, according to Charles (2003) [2], both vertical (unequal distribution along the manual-non manual divide) and horizontal (status differentials within these sectors). As a result of the above, women are not treated equally, which limits their participation in the public sphere but also reflects on their salaries, as they are paid less money for equal work offered. Thus, although the choice of profession seems to be a product of free choice, research shows that it is rather the result of a long process of socialization, a significant part of which takes place at school. As emphasized by Kaur (2018) [3], “whatever the images of gender (male and female) are portrayed in textbooks will have impact on child’s personality”. It is necessary, therefore, for teachers to be able to recognize cases in which textbooks present sexes as stereotyped, but also to make, when required, the necessary modifications to the teaching material, so as to deconstruct gender stereotypes and promote gender equality.

2. Literature Review

It’s been more than half a century since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) [4] and the Treaty of Rome (1957) [5] which is the first legal text of the European Union to address gender equality. Nevertheless, the issue continues to be of concern to both international and European organizations.

As referred to in the European Charter for Equality of women and men in local life (2006, p. 5) [6], “Women and men do not enjoy the same rights in practice. Social, political, economic and cultural inequalities persist – for example, salary disparities and political under-representation.

As far as education is concerned, the offering of equal opportunities to boys and girls is an important aspect of gender equality policies, as the school is one of the most important domains for the reproduction of gender stereotypes (Spender & Sarah, 1980 [7]; Delamont, 1990 [8]; Arnot & Mac Ann Ghail, 2006 [9]). According to Hardalia & Ioannidou (2008) [10], the first studies on textbooks date back to the 1970s and concern various subjects, including foreign languages. According to the above researchers, these studies focus on the under-representation of women in the textbook titles and on the main characters, the stereotypical presentation of gender roles and fields of activity, the exclusive association of women with the home space and the concealment of the presence of women in the field of work. Such a stereotypical content of books has a negative effect on girls, as it encourages passive and dependent roles and prevents girls and boys from completing their full mental and social development (Yolen, 1967 [11]).

Concerns about the reproduction of gendered stereotypes in the curriculum have led to revisions of gender representations. However, while the most common goal of equality policies in education is to challenge the traditional roles and stereotypes of the sexes, both the language of the textbooks and the way the sexes are portrayed continue to show gender differences both quantitatively (showing men more often) and qualitatively (showing men in a wider set of roles), as reported by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (2012: 26-27) [12].

The stereotypical representation of the two sexes in school textbooks is achieved either explicitly, by giving men and women different roles, depending on their gender (Magno & Silova 2007, p. 651) [13], or covertly, through the hidden curriculum (Nunan, 1989) [14], which is transmitted to students through disparities which arise between what is said in the classroom and what actually takes place there. According to Humm (1989: 95) [15], the hidden curriculum conveys to students a set of messages that reinforce gender stereotypes, thus supporting a gender division of labor through the socialization offered by the school. The above is confirmed by Pliogou, et al. (2017) [16] who, making reference to both

national and international research on the field, conclude that not only there is, in general, an unequal representation of the sexes, but that the male sex is always the prevailing one.

The effect of textbooks acquires even greater weight in the Greek context, as there is one and only official textbook which is used for the teaching of each subject. However, teachers are still allowed to create their own teaching material, provided that it complies with the curriculum aims and this offers them the chance for teaching interventions towards the issue under consideration.

Regarding the use of images in secondary school textbooks, Meniki (2002) [17], researching a series of books used in Greece, which however do not include foreign language books, finds a strong presence of gender stereotypes and speaks militantly about the changes that need to be made with the aim to educate students in equality issues. Indeed, education, as Froisi et al. (2001) [18] point out, is characterized by a contradiction, since it is not only a means of social control, but also the field within which it is possible to offer the conditions for the promotion of equality of men and women in the political, economic and social sphere, in a word to cultivate and promote social change. The role of teachers in promoting such changes is particularly important as, according to the Teacher Manifesto for the 21st Century (2014) [19], they are the ones who can either choose to impart participatory values that support sustainable democratic societies or to perpetuate discrimination.

Taking the above into consideration, a redefinition of education is required, and the necessary adjustments need to be made so that it acquires a non-sexist orientation. As the life span of textbooks in Greece is rather long, and until new textbooks which would reflect a non-sexist approach are produced, it is important for teachers not only to be able to identify potential problematic areas in the content of the textbooks they use but also to make any adjustments considered necessary towards gender equality.

3. The Research

3.1. Aim

The aim of the present research is to investigate how the male and female sex are visually presented in the textbook (Giannakopoulou et al., 2011)[20] which is used for the teaching of English in the 2nd grade of Greek Junior High Schools, in order to find out whether they are equally represented in the various social and professional roles.

3.2. Methodology

The research presented is part of a broader research that aims to study the entirety of the textbooks which are used for the teaching of English in junior high schools, in Greece, since no similar research has been carried out so far. The particular textbook is the first to be approached by the researcher and was chosen at random.

The analysis was done using Content Analysis (Content Analysis, n.d.) [21] which is a very popular method for investigating gender representation in the school textbooks (Hogben & Waterman, 1997). As reported by Hardalia and Ioannidou (2008: 31) [10], it is a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, something particularly useful in the study of images as, according to post-structuralists an image is not just a snapshot but a "communicative artifact" (Graddol 1994: 41) [23], which conveys a multitude of messages at multiple levels.

The researcher defined the 'image' as the unit of analysis. The term refers to anything anthropomorphic is presented in pictorial form including photographs of real people but also sketches, paintings, and statues.

The research used one of the analysis systems used by Floriotis et al. (n.d) [24] and specifically the frequency of appearance of men and women in the images in the book. After modifying the categories as they emerged after a preliminary study of the findings, five thematic categories were defined, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The system of analysis and the thematic categories

System of analysis	Thematic categories
Frequency of appearance of men and women in the images of the book	1. Men and women (men, women, men and women)
	2. famous persons, (historical personalities, artists, persons easily recognizable)
	3. Scientists (students, higher education graduates)
	4. Athletes and sports persons
	5. Protagonist roles (when both men and women appear in a picture)

Finally, it should be noted that in the few cases where the gender of those appearing was not clear, the images were not taken into account.

3.3 Presentation of Results

Starting with the first category, i.e. the appearance of men and women in the pictures, the research identified a total of 261 images which show men, women or both sexes together. In them, the male sex prevails dramatically. Thus, men alone appear in 167 cases, while

women in only 53, a ratio of 3 to 1. Finally, 49 pictures show both men and women. Figure 1 shows the distribution of sexes in the images of the textbook.

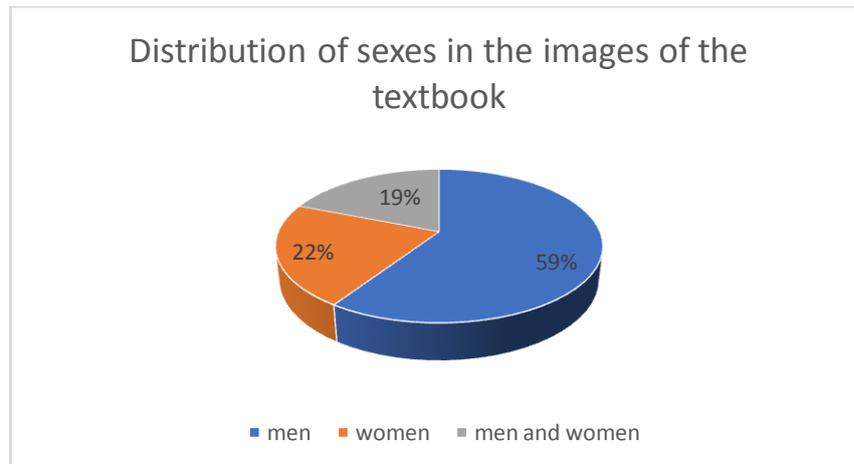


Figure 1: The distribution of sexes in the images of the textbook

Continuing, Figure 2 which follows shows the distribution of the depicted men to the thematic categories. As shown, 40% of the male figures cannot be assigned to any category, as neither the text nor the images provide any information whatsoever about them. A 22% of men are shown as athletes or sportsmen. Professionals such as bakers, shopkeepers, reporters etc. are 17%, while scientists account for 11%. These are students, usually sitting in front of a computer, archaeologists, doctors, teachers, and school principals. Finally, famous men make up 10% of the total men depicted. These include ancient Poseidon and Odysseus, Gutenberg, Columbus, Shakespeare, Vivaldi, Beethoven, Picasso and Elytis (a Greek Nobel prize winner in poetry).

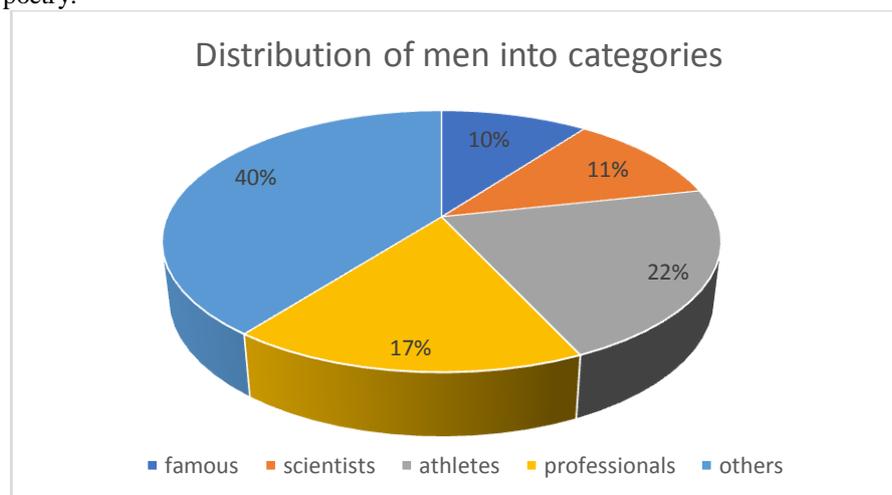


Figure 2: The distribution of men into the thematic categories

Moving to the way women are presented, Figure 3 shows the distribution of the depicted women to the thematic categories. As shown, 77% of the female figures cannot be assigned to any category, as neither the text nor the images provide any information whatsoever about them. This is almost double compared to the percentage of men presented above. Scientists make up 9% of the women depicted, a percentage which is quite close to that of men. However, of the 5 women who fall to this category, 4 are students and only one is literally a scientist. Both the professionals and the athletes take 6% each, while the remaining 2% refers to famous people. However, it should be noted that due to the small number of the women depicted, the percentages which refer to women are rather misleading. For example, when we say that famous women make up 2% of the total, this refers to just one woman, the aviator Amelia Earhart.

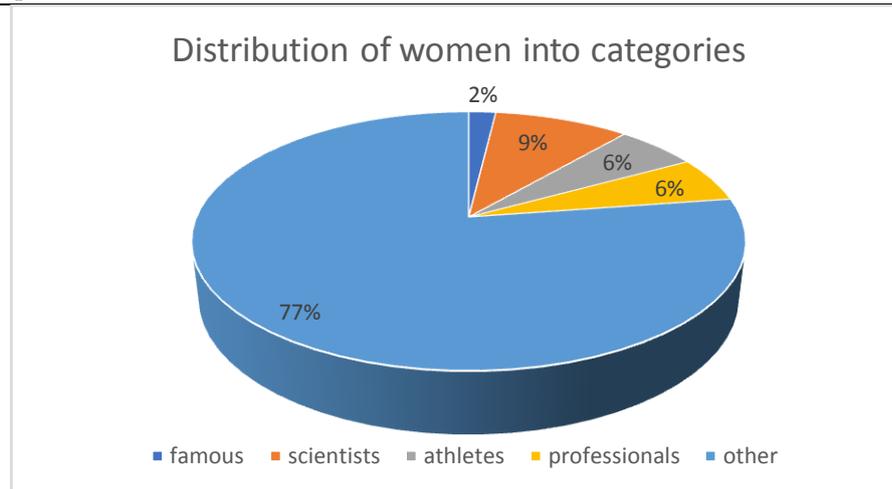


Figure 3: The distribution of women into thematic categories

Finally, with regard to leading roles in the images where both men and women appear, the findings show that 76% of the images do not reveal any leading role. The rest 24% is almost equally divided between men and women, with men taking 13% and women the remaining 11%. The abovedistribution is shown in Figure 4.

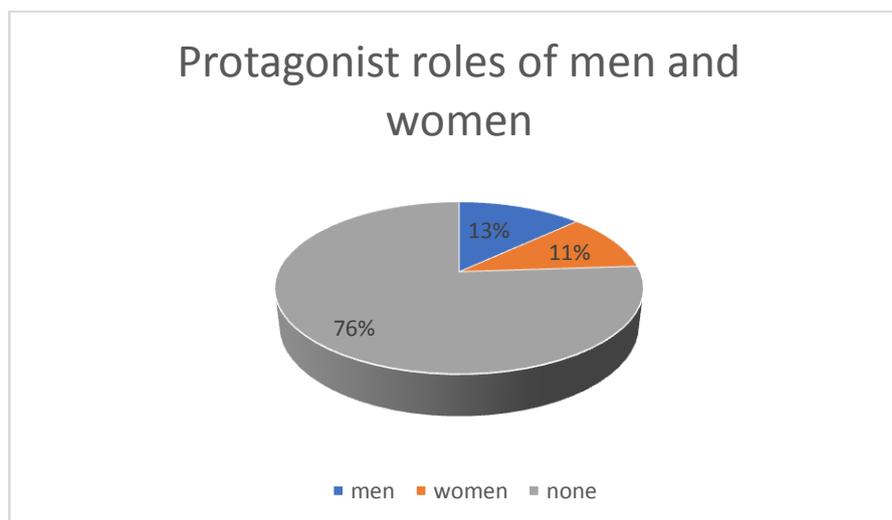


Figure 4: The distribution of men and women into protagonist roles

4. Discussion

The above findings confirm similar research done on other textbooks, (Kantartzi, 2003 [25]; Maragoudaki et al., 2007 [26]; Rentetzi, 2006 [27]). In the textbook under consideration, men excel women both quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus, they appear in the pictures three times more often than women. In addition, they are the ones who are famous, to whom humanity is grateful for the advancement of science, arts and literature, from antiquity to the present day. In addition, they are the ones who deal with highly prestigious professions. It is characteristic that even archaeologists are men, although it is known that in the humanities the presence of female students is predominant. Women are limited to the teaching profession, and even in this case, the managerial positions appear to be held by men. Athletic games and sports are also presented as a purely male affair. Finally, it is important to emphasize that while men who cannot be classified in any category is 40% of the total, for women this percentage rises to 77%. We can, therefore, assume that it is considered much more natural for women to be presented without any social or professional identity than men.

In view of the above, we conclude that the researched textbook treats men and women in a stereotypical way, as it cultivates specific perceptions of the role of the sexes. In this way, it also contributes to the perpetuation of the perception that women do not have the same abilities as men, which is the basis for the discriminatory attitude towards women in the public sphere. There is, therefore a need to improve the education provided by adopting approaches to gender equality, in order to fundamentally restructure the various stereotypes. In this regard, the reform of school textbooks is considered particularly important.

5. The teaching intervention

In view of the above, it was considered appropriate to suggest a teaching intervention, in the form of a modification of a specific lesson of the textbook under consideration which is considered to be problematic in terms of the way the two sexes are presented. As will be explained below, the intervention complies with the existing curriculum (Unified Curriculum of Foreign Languages, 2016) [28] and, following Aggeli (n.d.) [29], is based on updating the existing material rather than adding a new one.

The intervention is a coherent part of a detailed teaching scenario, and reflects up-to-date learning theories and teaching practices, promotes autonomous learning, and helps students develop their ICT skills, according to the Digital Competences Framework (2017) [30]. In brief, the basic elements of the design are the following:

5.1 The basic elements of the teaching intervention

- **Description:** This is a teaching proposal for the modification of the activity that appears on page 52 of the textbook for the teaching of English in 2nd grade of junior high schools in Greece. (Giannakopoulou et al. (2011) [20] in which two boys, George and Alex, visit a theme park. The activity presents sports as a predominantly male business and is suggested to be modified so that the two sexes are represented equally.
- **Class:** 2nd grade of junior high school
- **Level of Proficiency:** B1 according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2020) [31]
- **Connection to the current Curriculum:** The Unified Curriculum for Languages(2016) [28] promotes the creation of teaching material by the teacher, according to the language proficiency of the students, as determined by the CEFR (2020) [31]. The teaching intervention which is proposed is a small project work, something students are familiar with, since their textbook contains several similar activities. It is important to emphasize that during the activity preparation the students are doing English, as the whole searching, collaboration and communication are done in the target language.
- **Duration:** Two teaching hours. During the first hour, the students work in groups on a project. They identify a problematic activity in their textbook and modify it, so that it does not treat sexes stereotypically. In this way they not only become aware of gender issues, but they also produce their own teaching material, which in this way becomes student-centered. Nunan (1988)[32], emphasizes that when students are involved in the creation of teaching material that concerns them, their participation increases, as they incorporate in it issues of their own interest. In the second hour, students work on the activity they themselves have created.

5.2 Aims

The language aims of the teaching intervention comply with those of the official curriculum (Unified Curriculum of Foreign Languages, 2016) [28]for B1 level of proficiency, as defined in the CEFR [31]. More specifically, the activity aims at helping students develop the following skills:

Comprehension of written language: "to navigate a website and understand its structure and content". **Production of written speech:** "to compose or summarize information from various sources by composing a new, well-structured, coherent text"

Production of oral speech: "to discuss (with one or more interlocutors) about familiar issues of daily life (personal, professional, social)".

In addition, following Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) [33], students are expected to work towards the following goals:

Cognitive goals (emphasis on knowledge): Through the activity, students will have the opportunity to learn about gender stereotypes, while cultivating the target language, since everything unfolds through it.

Emotional goals (emphasis on emotions): students will have the opportunity to communicate, collaborate and approach with attention and receptivity issues related to gender stereotypes, so as to react critically to various stimuli.

Psychomotor goals (emphasis on motor activities) Students will work in their group, organize, research, prepare material and finally present their activity.

5.3 The two parts of the intervention

The intervention consists of two parts. In the first part (1st teaching hour), the students reshape the activity of their school textbook, while in the second one (2nd teaching hour), the groups exchange the activities they have prepared, and each group works on the activity they have received. The process is presented in detail, below.

First part: project work

Project work follows a four-stage planning (Fragkaki, 2007) [33], as follows:

Stage 1: problematization, planning

- The teacher informs the students that the next lesson presents a series of sports. Through a brainstorm, she asks them to report which sports they like, writing them on the board. If ICT is available, students collaboratively create a word cloud, using an online application, such as WordArt (<https://wordart.com>)
- Based on what has been recorded, a plenary debate follows, where students discuss their favorite sport and whether there are male and female appropriate sports.
- At the end of the discussion, students vote for the most popular sport.
- The teacher asks the students to form mixed groups of boys and girls and to carefully study the photos in their textbook.
- The teacher encourages a discussion about the representation of boys and girls in the photos and proposes the modification of the specific activity, under the perspective of equal presentation of the two sexes, so that gender stereotypes cease to exist.

Stage 2: Implementation

- The students are divided into groups and each group undertakes to edit a sport or to add a new one.
- With the help of the teacher, each group creates a small reading comprehension activity for the sport they have dealt with, using images and texts from the internet. An activity-building software such as LearningApps (<https://learningapps.org/>) can be used by the students to build the activity online
- An electronic collaborative bulletin board is created, using software such as Padlet (<https://el.padlet.com/>), where each team uploads their work.

Stage 3: presentation

- After completion of the activity, the collaborative Padlet is presented in plenary, where a discussion takes place, potential changes or improvements are proposed and its final form is decided.

Stage 4: report

- The report takes the form of formative assessment, which can be done using a questionnaire, through which students can check whether the goals (linguistic and others) set from the beginning, were met.
- Based on the questionnaire results, the teacher can plan similar activities in the future, highlighting topics that may not have been understood by some students.

Second part: students work on the activity

During the second teaching hour the students exchange their work and each group tries to complete the activity some other students have prepared. In the end, the group which has prepared the activity checks the answers and gives feedback.

6. Conclusion

The provision of equal opportunities for men and women has been legally achieved in Western societies, however this does not ensure its implementation in practice, as long as gender stereotypes are part of our daily routine. The present study confirms similar previous research by concluding that school textbooks adopt stereotypical perceptions of the role of the two sexes. It therefore becomes necessary for teachers to be trained to both reveal gendered practices in the school context, when they appear, and to deconstruct them through targeted activities. The proposed teaching intervention is an indicative example of how a problematic area in the teaching material could be modified so that sexes are presented in an equal manner. The intervention does not deviate from the official curriculum and it is not particularly demanding either in its planning nor in its implementation. Moreover, it invites students to become actively involved in its creation. All the above promise a good chance of success and make worth trying it.

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