PROMOTING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH TEXTBOOKS

Paola Nicolini, Greta Mancini, Evelyn Manoni, & Veronica Guardabassi
Department of Humanities, Macerata University (Italy)

Abstract

Every child, regardless of gender, socio-cultural background and geographical provenience, the type of family in which they are born, religious background, disability and so on, has the right to develop to their full potential. However, the presence of inequalities in their own lives and in the lives of their caregivers creates significant barriers to achieving this goal (Unicef, 2019). In line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which serves as the overarching reference point for global commitments at national and international levels to identify shared solutions to the pressing challenges confronting the planet, the promotion of equality and overall the empowerment of girls and women worldwide has been identified as a key objective. In this regard, there is a consensus among international policymakers on the necessity to advocate for interventions within the domains of culture and education. Education and culture are the primary instruments through which the promotion of gender equality can be achieved, and schools have a pivotal role in this regard. In alignment with this perspective, the majority of school textbook publishers have directed their efforts towards the valorization of the female universe, thereby fostering the free construction of the imagination for both girls and boys. The significance of textbooks is further underscored by their pervasive use across the national territory, particularly in Italy, and the fact that they are utilised by individuals across the age spectrum. A substantial proportion of the population uses textbooks for at least 80% of their school time (Sadker & Zittleman, 2007). The notion that human development is significantly influenced by imitation and modelling (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Bandura, 2003) further reinforces the notion that textbooks, as a cultural authority (Blumberg, 2008; Kalmus, 2004; Witt, 2001), wield considerable influence over the mental representations of the world that children develop about gender roles (Stromquist, Lee, & Brock-Utne, 1998), encompassing lifestyle, employment, and career aspirations, even impacting their self-image (Britton & Lumpkin, 1977; Crawford & English, 1984; Macaulay & Brice, 1997; Witt, 2001; Heslop, 2016). In the event of the planning of cultural and educational support with the intention of maintaining equal opportunities in different situations, children are presented with the chance to encounter multiple situations, multiple people, multiple places, and multiple developmental trajectories within which to identify and build their own identity representation. In Italy, guidelines for publishers have been drawn up to bridge the gap (Progetto Polite, 2011). However, it still exists and is damaging the new generations. In the light of a collaboration with an Italian company that wanted to ensure equal opportunities in its own projects, a research was developed with two main objectives: the drafting of guidelines covering a wide range of considerations, including the gender of the textbook authors, the linguistic nuances used, the diversity of human representation and the presence of stereotypes; the revision of the textbooks published in order to close the gap in the new series.

Keywords: Equal opportunities, textbook, school, education, children, gender.

1. Introduction

A definition of gender refers to qualities, roles and responsibilities associated with women or men (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009). It is a social concept determined by values and cultural beliefs (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2014). The construction of the concept is influenced by parents, teachers, school, peers and mass media (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Every single child, male or female, has the right to develop his/her own full potential, but gender inequality in their own lives and in the lives of their caregivers makes it difficult to achieve this goal (Unicef 2019). Similarly, the UN 2030 Agenda, includes among its goals gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women around the world. In this area, there is agreement among international policy-makers on the need to promote interventions at the level of culture and education.

School has an important role to play in this promotion and, being an cultural authority (Blumberg, 2008; Kalmus, 2004; Witt, 2001), it represents an important source for the development of education and

culture. One of the main instruments of education adopted by schools is the textbook. Children use them at school for 80% of their learning time (Sadker & Zittleman, 2007). Textbooks may serve as a model for imitation (Bandura, 2003), and their content can influence students' development. Indeed, they influence beliefs about gender roles, such as lifestyle, job and career choices, and can even affect self-image (Britton & Lumpkin, 1977; Crawford & English, 1984; Macaulay & Brice, 1997; Witt, 2001; Heslop, 2016). Thus, textbooks strongly influence children's mental representations of the world.

In the Italian context, Biemmi's (2010) study, which analysed 13 publishing houses and 1,084 passages between 2008 and 2014, showed that parity had not yet been achieved. This violation of equal opportunities is also confirmed by Pizzolato's (2020) most recent publications. An analysis of three anthology series used in the fifth year of primary school, totalling five volumes, revealed disparities in both the linguistic content and the representation of male and female protagonists. Women are underrepresented, depicted primarily as housewives and mothers, and rarely engaged in activities outside the home. A similar result was found by Scaglioso and Del Chierico (2022), who analysed six Italian second language textbooks intended for children aged seven to eleven. Both the analysis of the written text and the visual content show a polarised representation of gender, suggesting the need to rethink school education with books free of cultural preconceptions.

Considering that textbooks are widely used throughout the Italian national territory, their power is clear, especially taking into account the age of the population that use them and the freshness of their mental schemes. If this kind of cultural and educational support is planned to maintain equal opportunities in different situations, children have the opportunity to encounter multiple situations, multiple people, multiple places, multiple developmental trajectories within which to identify and build their own identity representation. Textbooks can broaden the proposals and offer greater diversification of models, images and contents.

2. Design

Taking into account the results of the researches, most textbook publishers have turned their attention to offering the valorisation of the female universe in order to support the free construction of the imaginary for both girls and boys. The Italian company Eli, committed to equal opportunities policy, wanted to develop a collaboration to improve the quality of its production, not limited to gender inequality. An extensive analysis of its textbooks was carried out in order to have a broad representation of the presence of all the differences that humanity can bring into reality. The analysis were about different aspects of the books: the index, the language, the images, the actions and the locations of the characters presented, the kind of families, the presence/absence of people with disabilities and other kind of fragility, the presence/absence of people coming from different parts of the world, and so on.

3. Objectives

Two outcomes were expected from the research: (1) the production of a vademecum on gender equal opportunity that would be useful in the design of textbooks for all the people with different backgrounds and expertise involved in their design and production; (2) the improvement of the quality of the publishing house's production by identifying Eli's best practices and proposing an exhibition to showcase them. Through the synergy between the University of Macerata and the publishing house Eli, the research group also explored the theme of inclusion analyzing school textbooks and assessing how well they represent a reality as multifaceted as possible.

4. Method

Several meetings were organised between Eli and the expert team from the University of Macerata in order to share a common background and vocabulary. In the meantime, desk research was carried out to deepen the knowledge of the subject. The results were also shared and discussed, with the aim of applying them to the Italian landscape, as well as widening the competences of all the participants in the research team, allowing them to have a common framework for working together. The current production of textbooks published by Eli was also analyzed, under different perspective.

5. Results

As the aim of the research was to produce both a vademecum for publishers and an improvement to the textbooks published by Eli, in order to achieve full equality in its cultural and educational products, the team worked together to reach both the outcomes.

5.1. The vademecum

Based on the previous analysis, in order to overcome gender stereotypes and offer produce gender-sensitive textbooks and teaching materials, research was conducted and a vademecum was produced aimed at summarise the good practices identified, and at suggest practices that authors and illustrators can adopt when creating their products. The vademecum for authors is divided in three thematic areas (see Table 1). The first is dedicated to language and provide guidance on the use of masculine/feminine and no-stigmatizing language. The second deals with representativeness, i.e., the quantitative number of people belonging to a particular social group, and focuses on gender issues as well as other minority groups. The third section provides advice on how to overcome social stereotypes.

Table 1. Vademecum for authors.

Language	
Use of masculine and feminine	Include and alternate the feminine with the masculine
	Avoid using the masculine plural as including the feminine as well
	Choose expressions that refer to collectives, e.g., 'il genere umano' or 'la gente' instead of 'gli uomini', 'la classe' instead of "gli alunni"
	Choose expressions that refer to both male and female without distinction, e.g. 'docente/insegnante' instead of 'maestro' or 'professore', 'adolescenti' instead of 'I ragazzi'
	Declining professional and institutional positions for both men and women
	Balanced and careful use of qualifications, behaviours, characteristics and interests attributed to the characters or proposed in the texts (e.g. determined, courageous, sensitive, ambitious, rebellious, etc.)
Non-stigmatising language	Use the terms considered most appropriate by the scientific community or stakeholders and proposed debates on open issues (e.g., person with disabilities)
	Respect the indications also in the creation of titles, from which book indexes are derived
Representativeness	
Gender issues	Balancing the presence of male and female protagonists in stories and narratives
	Formulating dialogues by male and female characters, paying attention to equal turns and length of speech
Differences	Considering families in a broader sense (e.g. including adoption and fostering, reassembled families, single-parent families, etc.)
	Representing society in a realistic way, as diverse and composite as it is in terms of gender, disabilities, cultures, traditions, customs, religions, etc.
Stereotypes	
Gender stereotypes	Including the emotional dimension in male characters
	Presenting men and women with interchangeable roles and reciprocal relationships, focusing on situations of mutual cooperation
	Treating female characters with the same attention as male characters
Other types of stereotypes	Dealing with disability as an opportunity to be in the world with one's differences, weaknesses and strengths
	Inclusion of human differences as an element of learning
	In general, to represent and recognise all kinds of difference, avoiding stereotypical attitudes and expressions.

The vademecum for illustrators (see Table 2) included a section on representativeness and one on stereotypes. As in the other author vademecum, these sections contain various suggestion for promoting not only gender equality, but also minorities' equal opportunities.

Table 2. Vademecum for illustrators.

Representativeness	
Gender issues	Equal representation of male and female characters
	Representing the same image with male and female characters (e.g. teacher)
Differences	Include people of different ages, ethnicities, religions, abilities, intelligences, family types and represent society in many different ways.
	Representing a variety of characters in different roles, actions, contexts, gender, work and professional perspectives
	Considering families in a broad sense with interchangeable roles, reciprocity of relationships, situations of mutual cooperation
	Valuing human bodies in all shapes (e.g. tall and short) and characteristics (e.g. young and old)
	Including situations of disagreement and conflict as everyday occurrences that provide opportunities for mutual learning and negotiation.
Stereotypes	
Gender stereotypes	Choose from a wide range of colours, clothes and accessories to represent gender identities
	Represent people in different stages and situations of life with interchangeable roles and reciprocal relationships with special emphasis on situations of mutual cooperation
	Exchangeable roles and reciprocity of relationships with special emphasis on situations of mutual cooperation mutual cooperation
	Representation of men and women in indoor and outdoor spaces^
Other types of stereotypes	Representing people with physical and mental disabilities as active, dynamic people with strengths and weaknesses, embedded in a relational and social context

Referring to differences as an enrichment and opportunity for learning, rather than including the issue of differences as an element of learning

Represent and acknowledge all kinds of differences, avoiding stereotypical attitudes and expressions.

5.2. An exhibition

With regard to the second objective, the EquiLibri exhibition has been created with the help of the examples of non-stereotypical representation on display, which propose new models and use iconography, characters, language and content that pay attention to gender differences, but not only. The exhibition is the result of the work on the improvement of Eli's textbooks, which was carried out as a result of the research collaboration.

5.2.1. The images. Since images possess a strong expressive power and convey messages that can be of an explicit or implicit nature, the communicative attention that has been paid to them concerns both form and content. Characters of both genders are present in the pages and the development possibilities for both are expanded, going beyond the traditional division between "male things and female things" with respect to the roles and tasks performed, emotions, adjectives and character attributions, interests and sports, hobbies and professions practiced as well as the presence and ability to act of the characters themselves in public and private spaces and places. Objects, accessories and clothing are not gendered, and presented in a wide range of colours and possibilities. For example, colours such as green or yellow are suggested to break away from the traditional pink and blue scheme. The illustrations are rich in detail and include both able-bodied characters and those with different types of disability. The characters have a non-stereotypical aesthetic and a wide variety of somatic features and body morphologies. Domestic and family care tasks are performed by both genders, and generally all members are represented while contributing in different situations in a collaborative and interchangeable manner. Male characters express emotions and thoughts about their inner world in the same way that usually pertains to the female gender. The strategies adopted offer children different opportunities to identify themselves, thanks to a wide range of representations and characters that are more responsive to the reality that is by its very nature multifaceted, rich in variations, differences and alternatives.

5.2.2. The inclusion. Researching and promoting gender equality representation in school textbooks also means, on a broader level, examining the concrete possibility of establishing new balances within the editorial context. The aim is to describe reality in its complexity and thus to reflect the possible disparities present in the social context, that textbooks can play a role in reducing. Images of physical disability are presented within contexts of play and social interaction. Similarly, the story of a pilot who continues to practice sports after losing his legs promotes the development of a representation of disability considered as one of many possible expressions of human life. Portraits are inserted of children of different ethnicities playing and engaging in activities together, living within the same environments, creating a rich and varied community. In addition, the representation of the family as formed by biological, adoptive or foster parents and children, single-parent households or reconstituted after divorce has been enlivened. To portray society realistically, as diverse and varied in cultures, traditions, customs, religions and points of view was the effort.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Textbooks can promote equal opportunity also without explicit contents about inclusion. Semantic choices of words (nuns and adjectives), types of images, representativeness characters in stories and their personal characteristics can implicitly suggest and shape children' representation of women, men and all the minorities. In this sense, textbook can be defined as resilient tools. With this purpose, based on the example by the Italian Association of Publishers (AIE) and the self-regulatory code of the project "Equal Opportunities in Textbooks" (Polite, 1998), the present work reported the results of a collaborative research activity between the ELi publishing group and University of Macerata. The project developed not only a gender perspective but also a minority perspective, i.e. textbooks able to reflect the current development of society towards multiculturalism and multiethnicity, taking into account all minorities.

Future studies could further explore the role and the presence of equal opportunities in textbooks (Guardabassi et al. 2024) as well as find new way to promote an equal representation in books and other educational materials (Biemmi, 2024). In addition, the Vademecum elaborated as a result of the research, should be taken into account by other editors and publishers when preparing textbooks, being supported by appropriate training to ensure consistent implementation in different contexts.

References

Bandura, A. (2003). Social cognitive theory for personal and social change by enabling media. In A. Singhal, M. J. Cody, E. M. Rogers, & M. Sabido (Eds.), *Entertainment-education and social change* (pp. 97-118). Routledge.

Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977). *Social learning theory* (Vol. 1, pp. 141-154). Prentice Hall.

Biemmi, I. (2010). *Stereotipi di genere nei libri di testo. Il caso italiano*. FrancoAngeli.

Biemmi, I. (2024). Obiettivo parità. Linee guida per implementare il principio dell'uguaglianza di genere nei libri di testo della scuola primaria. *Lifelong Lifewide Learning, 21*(44), 164-175.

Blumberg, R. L. (2008). The invisible obstacle to educational equality: Gender bias in textbooks. *Prospects, 38*, 345-361. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-009-9086-1

Britton, G. E., & Lumpkin, M. C. (1977). For sale: Subliminal bias in textbooks. *The Reading Teacher, 31*(1), 40-45.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Brugeilles, C., & Cromer, S. (2009). *Promoting gender equality through textbooks: A methodological guide*. UNESCO.

Crawford, M., & English, L. (1984). Generic versus specific inclusion of women in language: Effects on recall. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, 13*(5), 373-381. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01068140

Guardabassi, V., Manoni, E., & Nicolini, P. (2024). *Le (im)pari opportunità nei libri di testo scolastici* (forthcoming publication).

Heslop, J. (2016). *Engaging communities in dialogue on gender norms to tackle sexual violence in and around schools* (Technical Brief). University College London, Institute of Education.

Kalmus, V. (2004). What do pupils and textbooks do with each other? Methodological problems of research on socialization through educational media. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36*(4), 469-485. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270310001630600

Luthar, S. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and Psychopathology, 12*(4), 857-885. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579400004156

Macaulay, M., & Brice, C. (1997). Don't touch my projectile: Gender bias and stereotyping in syntactic examples. *Language, 73*(4), 798-825. https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.1997.0048

Pizzolato, M. (2020). *Ancora stereotipi di genere nei libri di scuola. Analisi di testi di narrativa per la scuola primaria*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Polite. (1998). *Equal Opportunities in Textbooks: Self-regulatory code*. Italian Publishers Association (AIE).

Sadker, D. M., & Zittleman, K. (2007). Practical strategies for detecting and correcting gender bias in your classroom. In D. Sadker & E. Silber (Eds.), *Gender in the classroom: Foundations, skills, methods, and strategies across the curriculum* (pp. 259-275). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Scaglioso, A., & Del Chierico, A. (2022). Gender stereotypes in second language textbooks for primary school: An analysis of written and visual content. *Italian Journal of Educational Research, 29*(2), 145-168.

Stromquist, N. P., Lee, M., & Brock-Utne, B. (1998). The explicit and the hidden school curriculum. In N. P. Stromquist (Ed.), *Women in the third world: An encyclopedia of contemporary issues* (pp. 397-407). Garland Publishing.

UNICEF. (2019). *For every child, every right: The Convention on the Rights of the Child at a crossroads*. New York: UNICEF.

UNICEF Italia. (2023, November 14). *Posso essere quello che voglio: La campagna UNICEF per l'8 marzo delle bambine*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.it/media/posso-essere-quello-che-voglio-campagna-unicef-8-marzo/Codice_gen2011

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2014). *Teaching and learning: Achieving quality for all; EFA global monitoring report, 2013–2014*. UNESCO.

Witt, S. D. (2001). The influence of school texts on children's gender role socialization. *Curriculum and Teaching, 16*(1), 25-43.