Reinforcement of Gender Stereotyping in Malaysian Primary English Textbooks

Puteri Ayufiza Asmuni
English Language Centre
University of Technology and Applied Sciences Al Musannah, Oman
Corresponding Author: putriayu.asmuni@gmail.com

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Abstract
Many primary school students have been exposed to gender stereotyping since they were young, with educators, parents, and their peers shaping their thoughts, behaviors, and their perceptions of gender. While several previous research studies have been done on the depiction of gender-stereotyped roles in Malaysian textbooks, very little has fully explored how stereotypical gender characteristics are assigned to the male and female gender, and how reinforcement of occupational gender roles is done through images and text in Malaysian primary English textbooks. This study seeks to investigate the reinforcement of gender stereotyping in Malaysian Primary English textbooks through images and text. The study addressed the following research question: What stereotypical gender characteristics are assigned to the male and female gender through the images and text incorporated in Malaysian English Primary textbooks? Using the Thematic Analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), the results show that the themes obtained from the analysis were consistent with results from previous studies, which suggested that there was a biased characterization of the male and female gender, and those female characters were still underrepresented leading to the reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles. This study sheds new light on the reinforcement of gender stereotyping and provides important insights into the creation and development of primary English textbooks in Malaysia.

Keywords: gender stereotyping, images, primary English textbooks, textbooks, texts

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Introduction

Textbooks are among the most essential educational tools for teaching and learning as it plays a significant role in transmitting culture, apart from their primary function, which is to provide learning content, teaching and learning strategies, and language skills and assessments (Kaba & Abdullah, 2020). For primary school children in Malaysia, the habit of reading is mainly encouraged and inculcated in schools through school textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (Hamid, Yasin, Bakar, Keong, & Jalaluddin, 2008). Therefore, the content that these children learn concerning the world, other subjects, and themselves must be appropriately designed and curated. Moreover, the fundamental role of textbooks in the learning process is crucial, and it cannot be denied that they provide a stable and comfortable way to learn (Richards, 2009). This is because they fulfill several functions such as imparting educational knowledge to students, influencing their behavior and attitudes, exemplifying positive social and cultural interactions, and preparing the next generation to be knowledgeable about various subjects and ethical principles. (Hamid et al., 2008).

The Council of Europe (2011) defines gender as appropriate roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that are socially constructed and assigned by society. The World Health Organization (WHO) supported this by adding that “characteristics of women, men, girls and boys”, and they include “norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other” (p.16). On the other hand, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund or UNICEF (2017) stated that gender stereotype would happen when specific attributes, characteristics, and roles are ascribed to people based on gender. It also involves associating traditional gender expectations with one’s assigned sex at birth.

The significant impact of textbooks on children’s mental has been acknowledged by previous research (Sadker & Zittleman, 2007). Understandably, visual images are fundamental in any language textbook. They are deemed as solid tools in building pupils’ learning relating to the real world that cannot otherwise be shaped in classroom activities (Canning-Wilson, 1999). Furthermore, visual representations in EFL textbooks depict places, situations, and personalities that will enable students to see what the actual world entails and improve their comprehension of the target language, culture, and worldview (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). This is because, since ancient times, man has always created visual representations of reality and used visual stimuli to transfer information (Domin, 2007). Today, our world is highly characterized by the popularity and control of images and visions as means of communication and transferring messages, ideas, and ideologies, where the image is a vital semiotic resource used to convey meaning (Jewitt, 2005). The teaching and learning process requires the application of visual aids because they support the effectiveness of teaching materials. Chavatzia (2017) reported that teaching and learning materials frequently reinforced gender stereotypes and that biases in gender and stereotypes were significant, especially in math and science textbooks, with images of women being severely under-represented.

While the vital role of textbooks cannot be denied within the context of education in Malaysia, previous studies done on textbooks in Malaysia have also proposed that gender
representations should be more equal in textbooks and that gender stereotyping ought to be reduced (Liew, 2007). Rosaldo (1974) claimed that the depiction of women in textbooks had placed them in a negative light, characterized as irrelevant and inferior to the male gender. Yasin et al. (2012) supported this by arguing that the gender characteristics of Malaysian males and females in textbooks were still mainly determined by traditional beliefs and practices. On the other hand, Yasin et al. (2012) proposed that more studies must be conducted on the analysis of the visual images found in textbooks and their impact on establishing gender awareness among primary school students in Malaysia. Among the prevalent issues was the confinement of women as homemakers to the domestic sphere (Yasin et al., 2012). Smith (1995) proposed that pupils in primary schools needed to be exposed to a positive representation of both male and female genders throughout their formative years.

Therefore, the key findings in this study may provide significant contributions to the creation and development of primary English textbooks in Malaysia:

1. Primary school students: Students will be exposed to textbook content that features gender characterization that is more balanced and fair, with an emphasis on reducing gender stereotyping. This will shape their minds and attitudes towards gender stereotypes and bias perceptions in gender.

2. Teachers or educators: Teachers or educators will be more alert and sensitive in identifying and dealing with gender-related issues in the classroom.

3. Curriculum developers: Curriculum developers will be able to use the findings in this study as a basis for designing gender-balanced content materials that suit and accommodate children’s cognitive and societal needs at the primary level.

This study seeks to investigate the stereotypical gender characteristics that are assigned to the male and female gender through images and text that are incorporated in Malaysian English Primary textbooks. Furthermore, it aims at exploring how gender-stereotyped occupations are being reinforced through the images and text presented in the textbooks.

Below are the research questions that were addressed in the study:

1. What stereotypical gender characteristics are assigned to the male and female gender through the images and text incorporated in Malaysian English Primary textbooks?

2. How are gender-stereotyped occupations being reinforced through the images and text incorporated in Malaysian Primary English textbooks?

To explore the reinforcement of gender stereotyping in Malaysian Primary English textbooks, the present study analyzed Primary Year Four, Year Five, and Year Six English textbooks which operate on the flipgrid digital platform. The following sections in this paper present reviews and discussions on previous studies, the research procedure employed for data sampling, collection and analysis, and finally share the findings of the study.
Literature Review

Common Gender Stereotypes

According to the report on gender stereotypes in education prepared by OECD (2022), the belief that females are more nurturing and better suited for occupations that provide professional care, such as nursing, teaching, and counseling, is common. This is because, in retrospect, women have been stereotyped as weaker, less capable of managing crises, and more emotional than the male gender (OECD, 2022). Rosaldo (1994) argued in his study that the portrayal of the female gender had been biased due to how they were portrayed as less interesting and irrelevant in textbooks. Bahiyah et al., (2008) supported this through their research study, which revealed that men were often depicted in a more significant domain while women were confined to the domestic sphere. Narahara (1998) concluded in her research that females were characterized as passive and immobile, whereas the character of the male gender pointed out their leadership and independence quality. Similarly, Yasin (2012) claimed that the representation of a positive female role model was almost absent in his study, as women were depicted in minor and marginal roles while the boys were portrayed as having intellectual and decision-making skills. In a recent study by Benlaghrissi (2023) on gender stereotypes in Moroccan EFL textbooks, it was reported that almost all images in the textbooks “show men in higher-ranking positions, such as doctors and engineers” (p.10), whereas “women were more depicted in non-valued tasks” (p.11), which revolved around spending their free time with friends, family members or relatives.

Previous Studies on Gender Stereotypes in Textbooks

In the context of education, apart from serving the purpose of illustrating teaching and learning materials, there is a pressing issue concerning the images that represent the male and female gender in textbooks (Smith, 1995). He argued that ensuring a positive representation of males and females throughout their formative years is essential. However, in the context of education in Malaysia, the gender characteristics of males and females in textbooks are still heavily influenced by traditional beliefs and practices (Shamsuddin, Keong, & Hamid, 2016). Lim and Chan (2012) proposed this by stating that in textbooks, female characters were often confined to doing indoor activities and exhibiting passiveness. This scenario is evidenced in the findings of Benlaghrissi (2023), which pointed out that girls were typically depicted to be engaged in leisure activities like sleeping, shopping, and watching TV.

Yasin et al., (2012) revealed that a gender imbalance in favor of males in their research study on a Year One Primary English textbook in Malaysia. The study, which emphasized visual analysis, discovered that the stereotypical gender roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers were assigned to women, and the domain relegated to women remained in a private sphere. On the contrary, male participants were mainly represented in the outdoor setting engaging in sports activities such as cycling, playing basketball, and football.

In a study by Hamid et al., (2008) on linguistic sexism and gender role stereotyping in Malaysian English Language textbooks, the authors explored the occurrence of sexism, linguistic
sexism, and sex-role stereotyping through the frequency of appearances or invisibility of characters, representations of characters in social, occupational and political activities and their personalities. The corpus of this research study consisted of 21 textbooks that were taken from primary school (Years one to six) and English language secondary school textbooks (Form one to Form five). This study was segmented into two phases that began with creating the main corpus database, followed by an analysis of content. The data were later analyzed using computer software (Wordsmith 4) and further interpreted using Fairclough’s (1989) three-stage critical discourse analysis. The findings of this study indicated that male dominance was being perpetuated and promoted in the books, and the portrayal of characters in social, occupational, and political activities favored the male characters. For example, men were showcased as risk takers, leaders, and more independent, while at the same time, the female gender appeared to be more dependent and subservient in the textbooks selected in the research study.

On the other hand, the research by Sovič and Hus (2015) shared some insights into the embedment of gender stereotypes in textbooks. In the research study, the content of three English textbooks for young learners in Slovenia was analyzed, and the findings revealed that the male characters in the books were often portrayed discussing and showcasing leadership and action. In contrast, the female characters were amplified to be girls who were humble and obedient. The study also claimed that females were not adequately represented as being independent or active. Instead, they were portrayed as being subservient and passive. The results from the research also identified several significant findings which showed the dominance and dynamic portrayal of the male characters compared to the female characters.

In a study on gender-stereotyped images of occupations in Malaysia Primary English Textbooks, Shamsuddin et al. (2016) argued that issues about gender stereotypes incorporated in primary English textbooks needed to be addressed. Images extracted from an English Primary textbook in Malaysia were collected and analyzed for their representational, interpersonal, and compositional meaning using van Leeuwen’s (2005) explanation of semiotic inventory. The findings in the research study reported that roles that were assertive, independent, and competitive such as farmers, storekeepers, firefighters, and garbage collectors were assumed by male characters. These male characters were shown to be having discussions and making decisions as opposed to female characters, that were depicted to be less agentic. The findings in the study also pointed out that apart from having specific qualities, the male characters in the textbooks were also given more professional roles than the female characters.

In a study by Kostas (2021), textbooks from two primary schools in Athens were analyzed regarding their gender representation, and a qualitative research project involving 80 participants (40 boys and 40 girls) was conducted. The findings revealed that the number of female characters was fewer than the male characters, and that stories about women were shorter in length compared to those of men. Besides that, stereotypical roles and professions for men were associated with dominance, while the roles and occupations for women were mainly related to caregiving tasks. On the rare occasions that women were portrayed as professionals, they were depicted as assuming
the stereotypical ones like nurses, teachers, and actresses. Moreover, representation in the textbooks analyzed in the study also reported that women were often reduced to performing household chores like sewing and cooking.

Yong et al., (2022), who conducted a study on gender stereotypes involving a Form 5 Malaysian English textbook, argued that ensuring textbooks were free from gender stereotyping was important. Due to that, the aim of their research targeted at identifying gender representation, and exploring perpetuation of gender stereotyping in the textbook. By employing Fairclough’s (1989, 2001) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, which are text analysis, processing analysis and social, societal, and cultural background for data analysis, the authors disclosed that there was a significant bias in terms of the representation of lifestyle between both genders.

In a more recent study on gender stereotypes in Chinese junior high school English textbooks, Ouyang (2022) highlighted that significantly few female roles depicted in the textbooks were linked to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, thereby perpetuating the notion of girls being less competent in STEM. Along the same lines, the research revealed that only male characters were presented within the political domain. In contrast, girls and women were characterized through their abilities and contributions in assuming roles as mothers, wives, or grandmothers (Ouyang, 2022).

Although several studies have addressed the presence of gender stereotyping in Malaysian school textbooks and its impact on students, the analysis of images and text in Malaysian Primary English textbooks concerning stereotypical gender characteristics describing the male and female gender and how gender-stereotyped occupations are being emphasized on men and women have not been done. Therefore, this study investigated the stereotypical gender characteristics assigned to the male and female gender through images and text incorporated in Malaysian English Primary textbooks. Furthermore, it was also done to study how gender-stereotyped occupations were reinforced through the images and text presented in the selected textbooks.

**Methodology**

**Semantic and Latent Themes**

It is important to note that the centrality or importance of a theme does not necessarily represent the frequency of its appearance within the data, but rather provides essential insights that address the research questions. The semantic themes which emerged in this study illustrate the explicit or surface meanings of the data items gathered from the observation, while the latent ones represented underlying meanings and assumptions that are deeper (Boyatzis, 1998). Table one highlights the differences between semantic and latent themes by Braun and Clarke (2006):
Table 1. Semantic and latent themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic</th>
<th>Latent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Themes are identified based on the explicit or surface meanings of the data.</td>
<td>- Themes are identified or analyzed based on the underlying ideas and assumptions in the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The thematic analysis process begins with describing images and texts, followed by organizing and establishing the significant themes that emerge from the data.</td>
<td>- The thematic analysis process is based on interpreting text, images, and patterns, followed by organizing and establishing the significant themes that emerge from the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The data is summarized and interpreted, and an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications is performed.</td>
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Materials and Sampling Procedure

The data sampling method was purposive sampling, and the samples were taken from national school Primary Year 4, Year 5, and Year 6 English textbooks. The rationale for selecting Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6 textbooks was due to the themes in the books that largely revolved around occupations, indoor and outdoor activities, and the incorporation of contemporary literature sections as opposed to other irrelevant themes like animals, colors, shapes, and numbers which were emphasized in Years 1 to 3. The data obtained were from four Malaysian English Primary textbooks which operate on the anyflip digital platform.

Research Procedures

Following the sampling procedure, the data obtained from the selected textbooks were grouped according to their respective categories (Primary Year 4, 5 and 6), and they were later analyzed according to separate themes, adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed to analyze the images and texts selected for this study. The method adopted in this study leaned more towards a recursive rather than a linear process where one subsequent step followed one another. Patton (1990) supported this by stating that some flexibility should be applied in the analysis to suit the research questions and data. In the recursive process, the steps in the analysis moved back and forth as needed throughout the steps of reviewing and defining themes. Table two illustrates the six (recursive) steps:

Table 2. Thematic analysis

| Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Step 5 | Step 6 |
In this study, the authors addressed their research objectives and research questions that could assist them in recognizing and establishing solid themes that emerged from the data collected. To determine whether a specific pattern is “prevalent” enough to qualify as a theme, Clark and Kitzinger (2004) claimed that prevalence could be confirmed through the frequency of a specific pattern that resurfaces throughout the data, the number of times a specific character uttered certain keywords or showcased repeated stories across the data set.

Findings

Stereotypical Gender Characteristics Assigned to the Male and Female Gender

To address the following research questions in the study, this section presents the analysis of the data collected from the selected textbooks. It also provides an in-depth discussion of the results obtained. The semantic themes that were identified from this section were based on the surface or explicit meanings found in the images and text. Following that, they were organized and established into significant themes:

Research question 1: What stereotypical gender characteristics are assigned to the male and female gender through the images and text incorporated in Malaysian English Primary textbooks?

Overall, the results presented below addressed the first research question, which studied the stereotypical characteristics assigned to the male and female gender through the images and text found in Malaysian English Primary textbooks. To respond to the question, samples taken from the selected textbooks were analyzed to construct semantic themes based on the explicit or surface meanings of the data. The following emergent themes were identified from analyzing images and text in the selected textbooks for this research study.

Female Gender Depicted as Weak, Gullible, and Powerless

In the Year six Primary English textbook, the Language Arts section of the English textbook consisting of images and text was analyzed. In Figure one, the female character or the “daughter” was being forced to submit to the mighty king, whose character appeared to be more dominant and feared by her. This can be seen in his speech bubbles, where the mother of the young, helpless lady voluntarily “offered” her to the king, and the young lady was not prescribed any agency to decide, but to just remained subservient. This can be seen in the fourth speech bubble, where the mother described her daughter’s ability to weave beautiful clothes and spin straw into gold to the king. However, instead of refusing or fending for herself, she said that she did not know what to do. Towards the end of the conflict, the young lady was positioned on the floor, crying and depicted as being helpless.
In the following selection (Figure two), the portrayal of the same female character being gullible and powerless was further emphasized through her constant crying, which can be seen in the image below. The text accompanying the image revealed that the lady allowed her fate to be decided by the king, and she was willing to surrender her gold necklace if she was allowed to leave the palace and go home.

A similar theme also emerged from the Year five English Primary textbook (SK) where the images and text that made up the Listening and Speaking section of the book presented a narration of a helpless and powerless princess who had to wait for a prince or a male character to come and rescue her after she was kidnapped and locked in a dungeon. In this section, the princess or the female character was not given any agency or opportunity to showcase her ability to think, speak...
up or even engage in any problem-solving act. On the other hand, the prince or the male character was placed on a more superior level, where he embodied the hero archetype. It is worth noting that the stereotypical characteristics of the male characters (king and prince) in both sections of the textbooks were depicted as more powerful and brave and identified through their agentic qualities as opposed to the female gender, who was presented as the opposite.

Figure 3. Female character waiting to be rescued (Adopted from English Year 4 SK, 2013, p. 50)
In the following reading section taken from the same textbook, the images and text of the reading article implied to the readers that regardless of any situation, a woman would only be successful in a crisis even with the help of the opposite gender, or in this context, male mythological creatures, or gnomes (as depicted in Figures four and five). As presented in the third paragraph in Figure three, the kind, helpful, and beautiful princess who lived with fairies and elves was characterized as helpless and she could not do anything to save the people in her village. Feeling determined to help the villagers, she resorted to seeking help from male gnomes.

Figure 4. A princess seeking help from gnomes (Adopted from English Year 4 SK, 2013, p. 51)
This was strengthened further by the descriptions of the male gnomes in Figure Four, who planned an attack on the monsters because they felt sorry for the princess. Even though there was a trace of empowerment given to the princess, revealing that the princess and the male gnomes eventually released all those who were captured, there was no descriptive word or adjective used to describe the character of the princess. On the other hand, as evidenced in the last paragraph of Figure Five, the male gnomes were characterized as “brave”.

Figure 5. A princess and brave gnomes freed prisoners (Adopted from English Year 4 SK, 2013, p. 52)

Male Gender Depicted as Smart, Brave, and Strong

Because gender stereotypes are often reinforced by expectations in school, children in their formative years might perceive these gender stereotypes as mandatory, and this can make them become less tolerant of any behaviors that do not agree with the stereotypes that they have observed (Brussino & McBrien, 2022).

In the Year Five (SJKC) Primary English textbook, two different male characters presented in the Reading and Grammar section were portrayed as intelligent, brave, and strong. In contrast, the young lady and the princess (Figures three, four, and five) were mainly illustrated as helpless, gullible, and powerless, as revealed in the previous findings. However, another “prince” or male character in this section was given attributes that ultimately outlined the difference in characteristics between both genders. The Reading section incorporated images and text which illustrated the prince assuming the role of a leader, where he is portrayed being actively involved in decision-making and problem-solving during a theft that took place in the village. This depiction is evidenced in Figure six, where the prince’s image is shown as strong and complemented by Figure seven, where the male character or the prince is seen discussing and giving orders to his followers. Besides that, the last sentence confirms the characteristic given to the prince, where the word “wise” is used to describe him.
Figure six below shows the depiction of the “strong and powerful prince”, which marked a significant difference between his character and the young lady (Figures one and two) and the princess in Figures three, four and five.

![Figure 6](image)

*Figure 6. Male character being a strong and powerful prince (Adopted from English Year 4 SK, 2013, p.80)*

In the image below (Figure seven), it was explicitly stated in the first excerpt that the prince, upon finding a note, chose to keep it secretly. This narration about the prince clearly described his character as intelligent and able to solve problems, which was set out to be completely different from the portrayal of the female characters in Figure one to five. The last line of the final excerpt revealed the adjective “wise” (as underlined in the figure) to further affirm and enhance his character.

![Figure 7](image)

*Figure 7. Male character being a leader (Adopted from English Year 4 SK, 2013, p. 84)*

The Grammar section in the textbook continued to emphasize the stereotyped characteristics of the male gender by showcasing how men have been prescribed to possess problem-solving skills as opposed to the female gender. If the two female characters (the young lady and princess) were depicted as helpless and submissive in the previous examples while the male characters remained strong and decisive, the character of the Chief Minister in Figure eight only further reinforced the stereotype of men being intelligent, brave, and strong. In the dialogue between the Chief Minister and the farmer, the Chief Minister convinced the farmer to share his problem with him.
and told him that he could help. This depiction was then strengthened in the final line of the dialogue, where he claimed that solving the farmer’s problem was easy and later offered to share his expertise. The conversation between the farmer and the chief minister is shown in Figure eight, and the key ideas have been circled.

![Figure 8](image_url)

**Figure 8.** Male character being a wise problem-solver (Adopted from English Year 4 SK, 2013, p. 88)

**Reinforcement of Gender-Stereotyped Occupations**

**Research question 2:** How are gender-stereotyped occupations being reinforced through the images and text incorporated in Malaysian Primary English textbooks?

The latent themes identified from this section were based on the analysis of images and text from the selected textbooks that were interpreted, followed by generalizing significant patterns that emerged from the data.

The purpose of this section is to address the second research question on how gender-stereotyped occupations are reinforced in the English primary textbooks. The following themes were identified from the analysis based on the underlying ideas found in the data.

**Gendered Representation of Chefs and Homemakers**

Although gender-stereotyped occupations were deemed as complementary in the sense that each gender balances out its weaknesses and strengths (Jost & Kay, 2005), primary school children who are in their formative years would perceive this scenario as an expected requirement and will then react against the norms that they were exposed to due to the limitations in their cognitive development (Su et al., 2021). Unfortunately, gender stereotypes still happen at home, in schools, and society (OECD, 2012). Examples of gender stereotypes related to occupations are explicitly seen in the following images (Figure nine) from Year six (SJKC) English primary textbooks, which provided comparisons between the occupations assigned to the male and female characters. In the collection of occupations shown in the figure below, there seemed to be distinct occupations.
between men and women involving culinary skills or cooking. For instance, though both genders were cooking, the two different males were characterized as chefs on two continuous pages (pages 65 and 66). At the time, women were depicted as homemakers who were cooking for their families (Figure nine). It is worth noting that, though both seem similar, they are different. According to Cambridge English Dictionary (2022), a chef is a trained and skilled cook who works in a hotel or restaurant. In contrast, a homemaker is a person who does housework and often looks after children instead of earning money from a job (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). To elaborate, the context in which these images are presented reinforces gender-stereotyped occupations that could potentially impose the idea on primary school children that within a domestic sphere, a homemaker is a woman who prepares food for her family, but a chef is an exclusive profession for the male gender. This context could also potentially impose the idea on students that cooking at home or preparing meals for the family is exclusively for women while being a skilled, professional chef is an occupation for men.

This finding is supported by Chen et al., (2020), who revealed that there was a striking difference in the representation of male and female chefs, in which the latter were underrepresented, and mainly depicted as homemakers in a domestic setting. Other previous studies also reported that the dominance of male chefs could be seen in cookbooks where stereotyped depictions of male and female chefs were displayed (Johnston, Rodney, & Chong, 2014; Matwick, 2017). According to Johnston et al., (2014), female chefs were given the roles of caregivers and domestic workers while male chefs were portrayed as knowledgeable, professionally skilled and hardworking. In other words, male chefs were mainly shown as masculine, intellectual, and talented. In contrast, female chefs were presented as feminine, and caring domestic cooks.

Figure 9. Chef vs homemaker (Adopted from English Year 5 SJKC, 2015, pp. 29, 71 and English Year 6 SK, 2015, pp.65, 66)
Stereotypical Masculine Occupations

A research study by Hadjar, Krolak-Schwerdt, Priem, and Glock (2014) reported that gender-stereotyped occupations could reinforce workforce separation wherein female students would tend to become nurses or venture into the teaching profession while male students would prefer occupations that are characterized by power or authority, status, and prestige. A reflection of this report can be seen in Figure 10 of the Grammar section in Year six (SJKC), where on two separate pages, the occupations of a police officer and doctor were assigned to the male gender. In the first image of Figure 10, two male police officers were seen investigating a boy, and in the next column, another male police officer was portrayed doing the same. This situation resonates well with the findings in Hadjar et al., (2014) study, which indicated gender stereotyping in occupation could lead to the belief that occupations that required authority, status, and prestige belonged to the male gender. Another example can also be seen in the same figure, where the image showcased a male doctor examining a patient. This image, though seems subtle and harmless, may strengthen a common stereotype that associates prestigious, high-paying jobs like that of a doctor with men, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Figure 10. Male police officers and doctors (Adopted from English Year 6 SJKC, 2015, p. 67, 93)

Underrepresentation of Women in Certain Occupations

In the Listening and Speaking section of the same textbook, the headlines in the newspaper revealed an underrepresentation of women in occupations or professions that required bravery, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills. This is evidenced in the headlines of the news in Figure 11, which reported “Postman helps the police” (headline 1), “Taxi driver rewarded for returning a bag of jewellery” (headline 2), and “Manager honored for his leadership” (headline 3). Within the contexts of the headlines provided in the newspaper, jobs that demanded bravery and problem-solving skills were performed by male characters (as shown in headlines 1 and 2), while a manager who received an award was honored for his leadership skills (headline 3) was also granted to a male character. As presented in the text and images in Figure 11, no female representation was included in all three pieces of the news, which incorporated the occupations of postman, taxi driver, and manager. Female characters, however, were presented in headlines that illustrated a woman as a nurse who was “selfless” (headline 4) and a little girl who was praised for
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having an “honest heart” (headline 5). In summary, it can be established that the gender-stereotyped occupations for men were classified as more demanding and challenging regarding soft skills and talent required for the jobs. On the other hand, the stereotyped occupations for women were limited and very much confined to indoor settings and domestic spheres, with honesty, selflessness, and caregiving qualities being expected from them.

Figure 11. Underrepresentation of women in certain occupations (Adopted from English Year 6 SJKC, 2015, p. 102)

Discussion

The primary goals of the study were to address issues concerning gender stereotyping in Primary English textbooks and to gain some insights into the stereotypical characteristics assigned to the male and female gender through the images and text in the selected textbooks for the study. In addition, it also aimed to investigate how gender-stereotyped occupations are being reinforced in textbooks.

The findings in the study indicated that the themes obtained from the analysis were consistent with results from previous studies, which suggested that the content in some textbooks in the Malaysian national curriculum was deemed to be male-dominated (Hamid et al., 2008) and that female characters in textbooks were still underrepresented (Yasin et al., 2012) leading to the reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles Yong et al., (2022). Another finding that resonated well with the results of this study was the insights shared by Sovic and Hus (2014), who concluded that females were not fairly presented possessing leadership skills in the books but instead being portrayed as subservient and passive. On the other hand, the male gender in the study was characterized as proactive and independent.

While not all the results obtained from the study were significant, the overall findings in this study have highlighted some essential key points that could potentially contribute to the direction of future studies concerning the issues of gender stereotyping embedded in the Malaysian national curriculum. For example, despite previous studies proposing the removal of gender stereotypes from primary textbooks, the result of the first research question pointed out a marked prevalence of gender stereotypes. Female characters were still depicted as weak, gullible, and helpless, waiting to be rescued while having little to no agency to empower themselves. On the
contrary, the male gender embodied characteristics which remarkably placed them in a superior position, displaying bravery, leadership, and problem-solving skills. The second research question, on the other hand, analyzed how the images and text included in the textbooks contributed to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in various occupations. The themes which emerged from the analysis revealed that women were still underrepresented in male-dominated professions which were set outside a domestic sphere and required problem-solving, leadership, and critical thinking skills, like doctors, police officers, taxi drivers, and managers. Another significant finding from the analysis indicated that there seemed to be a polarization of chefs and homemakers, with the male gender appearing as chefs in separate sections of the textbooks. In contrast, the role of homemakers preparing meals for the family was assumed by women.

It is worth noting that the female gender is still being portrayed as the supporting role next to their male counterpart, mainly as mothers or wives. In the family setting, females are still associated with the role of nurturer or caregiver, working alongside males who were shown as the sole breadwinners in the family. It can be established that the curriculum writers and graphic designers have not steered away much from placing importance on male characters to highlight their superiority in the public sphere while minimizing the significant role of the female gender.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the research study consisted of limited samples which were only primary English textbooks of Years four to six, it might be argued that they were not substantial enough to be generalized, though consistent results from this study matched the findings from previous studies. This implies that if a more significant number of samples were to be analyzed in future research, more established and unified conclusions could be drawn to contribute to the field of this research topic. Therefore, it is proposed that other studies are done to determine whether their results could reflect and complement the findings of this study, and later offer further improvements. By expanding this study, the issue of gender stereotyping involving male, or female-dominated occupations, misrepresentation and underrepresentation of genders and their characteristics can be reduced or avoided in textbooks for schools in Malaysia, particularly at the primary level. Properly addressing this issue is very important as the reduction or elimination of gender stereotypes in textbooks would shape and guide children in their formative years to behave freely, acquire skills and decide on their career options based on personal preferences, not based on societal, cultural, and traditional beliefs.

Conclusion

In the earlier sections of the study, a discussion on the context of the problem, the background of the study, and previous research done on the topic were presented in detail. The purpose of the current study was to examine how gender stereotypes were perpetuated in Malaysian Primary English textbooks through the use of images and text. The most significant finding that has emerged from the analysis is that through the samples that were selected and
analyzed, gender stereotypes continue to be ingrained and integrated into the textbooks, as evidenced in the grammar, reading, listening, and speaking sections. Furthermore, the research has also revealed that gendered representations of certain occupations were subtly perpetuated. In contrast, a striking underrepresentation of women in specific jobs scopes appeared to be depicted in the textbooks.

Designing educational materials and teaching resources is a challenging task, and deciding on the content creation of textbooks is equally complex due to the bearings they have on children’s cognitive and societal development, the way they perceive the world at large, and how they carry themselves in the presence of the opposite gender. One of the ways to ensure that teaching and learning materials are designed and created to suit children’s cognitive and societal needs is by promoting gender equality and challenging gender stereotypes. It is of paramount importance that this is effectively implemented through the creation of school textbooks. Internationally, among others, the Council of Europe (2019) proposed that textbooks and the materials used to teach students at all school levels should be examined and evaluated for any sexist language, illustrations, or gender stereotypes. It was also recommended that the textbooks are revised to ensure that gender equality is promoted (Council of Europe, 2019).

Although the sample drawn for data analysis was small, the results strongly indicated some interesting and significant findings which supported and complemented the findings from previous studies. The results from this study have significantly provided further evidence to strengthen the claim that gender stereotyping is still prevalent in primary English textbooks in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings in the study can be utilized by policymakers, curriculum planners, and academicians as a basis for them to design gender-balanced content materials for school students in the future, particularly those who are at the primary level. As stated by Smith (1995) in the earlier chapter, pupils in primary schools needed to be exposed to a positive representation of both male and female genders throughout their formative years. It is highly recommended that the content in the form of images and text contain none, or if not, a reduced amount of gender stereotyping and the incorporation of a more balanced gender representation of both genders in terms of characteristics, occupations, and other gender-stereotype elements are introduced. Understanding and recognizing gender stereotypes are keys to identifying and developing promising policies and practices for all students.

About the author

Puteri Ayufiza Asmuni is an English lecturer at University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al Musannah (UTAS-A), Oman. She holds an M.A. in Applied Linguistics, a B.A. in English, and professional English language teaching certificates of TEF and TESL. Her research areas include second language acquisition (SLA), curriculum development and applied linguistics. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3906-9526
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