

***Gender Representation in Learning Materials:
International Perspectives***
edited by Sara Mills and Abolaji S. Mustapha (2015)
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Reviewed by Lydia Namatende-Sakwa

Gender Representation in Learning Materials: International Perspectives provides remarkable insight into research on gender and textbooks from an international perspective, illuminating diverse contexts, methodology, raising new questions, and providing pointers for further research. The book comprises three parts – Part 1 provides an overview of the field, Part 2 focuses on how gender is constructed in textbooks, while Part 3 highlights teacher and student interactions using textbooks.

The authors offer perspectives on gendered textbooks from diverse contexts: Poland (Pawelczyk and Pakula); Japan (Appleby); Germany (Ott); Nigeria (Mustapha); Finland (Tainio and Karvonen); Turkey (Bag and Bayyurt); Qatar (Eslami, Sonnenburg, Ko, Hasan and Tong); and Hong Kong (Lee and Collins). While dominant research has focused on English textbooks, this book addresses mathematics (Ott), science and mathematics (Eslami et al.), literacy (Moore), as well as mother tongue, literacy, mathematics, vocational and educational guidance (Tainio and Karvonen). It also examines teacher use of texts (Moore; Pawelczyk and Pakula), going beyond the text as such, to clarify enactments of gender, recognising that readers do not necessarily take up gendered constructions as produced in textbooks.

Additionally, the book showcases studies that have extended research, raising questions marginal to the field, but vital to its growth. Insights into

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teacher and student attitudes towards textbook gendered constructions are provided (Eslami et al.; Pawelczyk and Pakula; Tainio and Karvonen). Appleby focuses on how textbooks affect the construction of a gendered pedagogical self, particularly, the performance of a heterosexual masculine self. Ott raises questions regarding whether gender is considered in conception and approval of texts. Pawelczyk and Pakula examine teachers' workbooks for instructions as regards gender in co-constructing classroom performances, also challenging textbook heteronormativity. Mustapha focuses on how visual images construct gender in Nigerian texts. Bag and Bayyurt examine current educational policies in Turkey, recommending possibilities for equitable gender representation in the curriculum. Moore investigates gendered models four-year-old Russian children are presented with in their everyday interactions with adult caregivers.

Further, some authors grapple with what Sunderland refers to as the desiderata of the field – that is, the question as to what 'ideal' gendered textbooks should look like. This question, which has remained looming within the field, is taken up and discussed. Sunderland proposes an asymmetrical representation of female and male characters, rather than a representation that mirrors social and professional realities of a given context. Mustapha and Mills challenge the idea of simply applying Western feminist models to contexts with different gender ideologies. Eslami et al. observe how teachers from a Muslim background reject Western notions of gender as presented in textbooks.

In engaging with, and extending avenues of textbook research, the book employs diverse methods such as discourse analysis (Appleby); textual analysis (Pawelczyk and Pakula); Wordsmith Tools 5.0 and critical discourse analysis (Eslami et al.); corpus linguistics, specifically concordance technique (Lee and Collins); feminist critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and critical heteronormativity (Pawelczyk and Pakula); multilevel linguist discourse analysis (Ott); critical image analysis (Mustapha); content and critical discourse analysis (Tainio and Karvonen). On her part, Sunderland offers great insight into methodological considerations towards more nuanced textbook studies.

This notwithstanding, I take issue with implications in some chapters that textbooks necessarily affect students disparagingly (Moore; Mustapha; Pawelczyk and Pakula) – influencing students' stereotypical thinking, career choices, learning effectiveness (Lee and Collins) and motivation for language learning (Bag and Bayyurt). Lee and Collins, in fact, use socialisation as the rationale for their focus on Hong Kong textbooks. Mustapha and Mills's introduction does not problematise or complicate this notion – citing more references to uphold the socialising effect of textbooks: 'The

place of textbooks in socializing learners cannot be overemphasized' (page 10). Mustapha and Mills also add that few studies have explored the effects of textbooks on learners, calling for longitudinal research. As demonstrated by Sunderland (2000:153), 'the effects on learning of any text are impossible to predict because we cannot predict a given reader's response to that text, including what the reader will "take" from it'. Rather than focus on 'effects', then, I recommend attentiveness to student and teacher opinions regarding how gender is constructed in their textbooks. This promises to throw light on their perspectives as well as their agency to trouble and disrupt gendered constructions.

Further, the call for researchers to study texts in which gender is explicit (Pawelczyk and Pakula) or in which there are 'gender critical points' (Sunderland 2000) should be re-examined. Given that gender is produced both explicitly *and* implicitly, analyses should take both covert and overt constructions into consideration. Bag and Bayyurt's definition of 'gender equality', for example, as referring to '50 per cent reference to females and 50 per cent reference to males' (page 66) reduces gender to visible representations, disregarding implicit representations which are likely to be more potent given their elusiveness. The *absences* can be critical in specific analyses: What, for example, does it mean when men are never presented as child-carers or when female mechanics are erased? Finally, the analysis of gender using international perspectives largely overlooks its intersections with identity categories like class, race, ethnicity, disability and sexuality. Studies can become more complex and rich by taking these interlocking systems of power into consideration.

Overall, I recommend the book for researchers, publishers, teachers and teacher educators. It provides a wealth of literature and methodology, providing insight for textbook publishers and curriculum developers regarding how to interrogate and rethink textbook gendered constructions. For teachers, it illuminates dominant pedagogical practices, providing a mirror for reflexive practice. For teacher educators, it is eye opening to enactments of gender in curriculum materials and classroom practices to meaningfully inform teacher education.

References

- Sunderland, J. (2000) New understandings of gender and language classroom research: texts, teacher talk and student talk. *Language Teaching Research* 4(2): 149–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136216880000400204>