

Gender Stereotypes in EYL Textbook Visual Imagery: Implications for Inclusive Classroom Learning

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Abstract: This study investigates gender representation in the My Next Words English textbook series, a nationally endorsed resource for Indonesian elementary schools. Using Critical Content Analysis (CCA), 882 human illustrations containing 2,150 characters were analyzed through Harper's Framework of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature. The findings reveal that male characters outnumber female characters (54.3% vs. 45.7%) and are more frequently portrayed in diverse occupations, leadership positions, sports, and public activities. Traditional gender stereotypes accounted for 50.6% of all illustrations, whereas gender-sensitive (27.2%), gender-restrictive (19.3%), and gender-neutral (2.9%) representations were considerably less frequent. The study also identifies an invisible gender barrier, characterized by the implicit visual segregation of boys and girls within shared educational settings. By integrating Harper's Framework with Hidden Curriculum, Social Role Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, this study extends current scholarship on gender representation. It offers a new conceptual perspective for advancing inclusive textbook development and equitable English language education.

Keywords: Critical content analysis, English textbooks, gender stereotypes, inclusive education, visual representation



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A. Introduction

Achieving gender equality remains a central objective of contemporary education because schools shape not only learners' academic competencies but also their social identities, values, and aspirations. As emphasized in Sustainable Development Goal 5, education should promote equal opportunities and challenge discriminatory practices that limit participation based on gender. However, educational institutions may simultaneously reinforce unequal gender norms through the implicit messages embedded in teaching materials and curricular practices (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007). Within English for Young Learners (EYL), textbooks are particularly influential because children rely heavily on visual cues to construct meaning. Illustrations therefore perform

a dual role: they facilitate language learning while simultaneously communicating cultural values, social expectations, and normative assumptions about gender. Through repeated exposure, children may gradually internalize beliefs about what boys and girls are expected to do, how they should behave, and which social roles are considered appropriate for each gender (Adukia et al., 2023).

This perspective is consistent with the concept of the *hidden curriculum*, which argues that schools transmit far more than formal academic knowledge. Educational materials implicitly communicate social norms, ideologies, and expectations that shape learners' beliefs and behaviors (Apple, 2004; Jackson, 1990). Textbook illustrations, in particular, repeatedly expose learners to socially accepted images of masculinity and femininity. Even when curriculum documents explicitly promote gender equality, visual representations may continue to normalize unequal power relations by portraying males and females in predictable social roles. Such implicit messages often go unnoticed but may significantly influence children's future aspirations and perceptions of acceptable behavior.

Gender stereotypes, one of the most common manifestations of the hidden curriculum, refer to socially constructed beliefs concerning the characteristics, behaviors, occupations, and responsibilities considered appropriate for women and men (Lee & Collins, 2009). Traditionally, women are associated with caregiving, emotional sensitivity, and domestic responsibilities, whereas men are portrayed as rational, independent, competitive, and responsible for leadership and economic provision. These portrayals reflect historically constructed social expectations rather than inherent biological differences. Social Role Theory further explains that such stereotypes emerge because societies repeatedly assign men and women to different social roles, leading children to perceive these divisions as natural (Eagly, 2013). Similarly, Critical Pedagogy argues that textbooks are never ideologically neutral but instead embody particular cultural values and relations of power (Freire, 1970). Consequently, analyzing textbook illustrations involves examining not only whether males and females are represented equally but also how visual discourse legitimizes, negotiates, or challenges dominant gender ideologies.

Research across diverse educational contexts consistently demonstrates that gender stereotypes remain embedded within school textbooks despite increasing commitments to gender equality. Studies from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East have shown that male characters are more frequently portrayed as active, independent, professionally successful, and publicly visible, whereas female characters are commonly associated with caregiving, domestic activities, and supportive social roles (Habib et al., 2020; Gallerani, 2017; Muzdalifah et al., 2021; Yasin et al., 2012). Although some recent studies have reported improvements in the numerical balance between male and female characters and greater representation of women in professional occupations, numerical equality does not necessarily indicate ideological equality. Female characters may still be portrayed through conventional personality traits, occupational roles, emotional characteristics, and

social interactions that reinforce traditional gender expectations. Consequently, simply counting male and female characters provides only a partial understanding of gender representation because stereotypes are often communicated implicitly through visual narratives rather than explicit textual statements.

This limitation is particularly significant in EYL because illustrations frequently serve as children's primary source of meaning before they fully engage with written language. Visual representations communicate gender through posture, clothing, facial expressions, spatial positioning, interpersonal interaction, and everyday activities. These visual elements often appear natural and familiar, making the stereotypes they convey more difficult to recognize than those expressed in written text. From the perspective of the hidden curriculum, repeated exposure to illustrations depicting boys as adventurous, physically active, and independent while portraying girls as caring, obedient, or domestically engaged gradually shapes children's assumptions regarding socially acceptable identities and aspirations. Educational materials may therefore reproduce social inequalities even when their explicit learning objectives promote fairness and inclusion.

Although scholarship on gender representation in educational materials has expanded considerably, several important gaps remain. First, most previous studies have concentrated on textual content or quantitative indicators such as character frequency, occupational distribution, and dialogue allocation, providing limited insight into the implicit meanings communicated through visual discourse (Islam & Asadullah, 2016; Rong et al., 2021; Setyono, 2018; Tajeddin & Enayat, 2010). Second, much of the literature remains descriptive, focusing primarily on identifying stereotypes without explaining how textbook illustrations function as part of the hidden curriculum, reproduce socially constructed gender roles, or reflect broader relations of power. A theoretically integrated approach is therefore needed to move beyond categorizing stereotypes towards understanding their educational significance. Third, empirical evidence from Indonesia remains relatively limited despite continuing curriculum reforms promoting inclusive education. Existing Indonesian studies have examined gender representation (Karsena et al., 2024), learners' developmental needs (Rafli et al., 2025), Pancasila values (Anggraeni et al., 2024), and English language learning outcomes (Syahid et al., 2024), yet research investigating implicit gender stereotypes within the complete *My Next Words* textbook series remains scarce.

The *My Next Words* series provides an appropriate context for addressing these gaps because the Indonesian Ministry of Education officially endorses it and it is widely used in primary schools nationwide. As one of the principal English learning resources for Indonesian children, the series has considerable potential to influence learners' understanding of gender roles, aspirations, and social participation during an important stage of cognitive and social development. This study therefore adopts *Harper's new Framework of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature* (Adam & Harper, 2023), which classifies visual representations into four categories: gender stereotypical, gender

restrictive, gender sensitive, and gender neutral. Harper's framework serves as the principal analytical tool, while the findings are interpreted through the complementary perspectives of Hidden Curriculum, Social Role Theory, and Critical Pedagogy. This theoretical integration enables the study to move beyond descriptive categorization towards a critical interpretation of how textbook illustrations reproduce, negotiate, or challenge dominant gender ideologies.

The study contributes to the literature in three ways. Theoretically, it integrates Harper's framework with broader educational theories to provide a more comprehensive explanation of gender representation. Methodologically, it foregrounds visual discourse as an independent object of analysis by examining the complete six-level *My Next Words* series rather than a single textbook. Practically, the findings are expected to inform curriculum developers, textbook authors, illustrators, teachers, and policymakers in designing more inclusive English language teaching materials. Against this background, the present study investigates how male and female characters are visually represented in the *My Next Words* textbook series and examines whether these illustrations reinforce, negotiate, or challenge traditional gender norms, thereby contributing to the development of more inclusive textbooks and equitable educational practices in Indonesia.

B. Method

Research Design

This study employed Critical Content Analysis (CCA) to examine gender stereotypes in the visual content of the *My Next Words* English textbook series for Indonesian elementary schools. CCA extends conventional qualitative content analysis by moving beyond describing and categorizing textual or visual elements to examine how educational materials construct, legitimize, and reproduce broader social ideologies and power relations (Johnson et al., 2017). Rather than merely identifying the presence of gender stereotypes, CCA seeks to understand how visual representations contribute to the hidden curriculum by normalizing particular constructions of masculinity and femininity while marginalizing alternative identities.

CCA was selected because the objective of this study was not simply to determine whether gender stereotypes existed, but to critically interpret how textbook illustrations may reinforce, negotiate, or challenge dominant gender ideologies within the context of English language education. The approach is therefore consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Hidden Curriculum, Social Role Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, which conceptualize educational materials as cultural artifacts that both reflect and reproduce social values. Throughout the analysis, visual representations were interpreted not only as illustrations supporting language learning but also as ideological texts that communicate implicit messages concerning gender roles, occupations, emotions, social participation, and relationships.

Research Context and Data Sources

The primary data consisted of visual illustrations contained in the six-volume *My Next Words* English textbook series for Grades 1–6 (EYLC Team, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b; Gemala et al., 2021; Rahmawati et al., 2021). The series is officially endorsed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and is widely implemented in Indonesian elementary schools. Both printed and digital editions are publicly available, with the digital versions freely accessible through the Ministry's official textbook repository.

Prior to the document analysis, preliminary interviews were conducted with five English teachers from primary schools located in different regions of Indonesia. The interviews were not intended as research data for addressing the research questions; instead, they served solely as a preliminary needs assessment to identify the English textbooks most commonly used in Indonesian primary schools. The interview findings confirmed that the *My Next Words* series was the most widely implemented textbook, thereby providing the rationale for selecting it as the corpus of analysis. Consequently, the findings reported in this study are derived exclusively from the document analysis of the textbook illustrations.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study was a single human illustration or photograph appearing within the textbooks. Each illustration depicting one or more human characters was treated as one analytical unit because the objective of the study was to investigate how gender identities were visually represented within complete scenes rather than to analyze isolated individual characters. A single illustration often portrays multiple characters interacting within a shared social context, allowing gender roles, relationships, occupations, and activities to be interpreted holistically.

Only illustrations and photographs containing identifiable human figures were included in the analysis. Decorative icons, symbols, typography, maps, animals, objects without human figures, purely environmental images, and other non-human visual elements were excluded because they did not provide evidence relevant to gender representation. During the screening stage, repeated illustrations appearing more than once within the same textbook or across different textbooks were identified and analyzed only once to prevent disproportionate weighting of identical visual representations. Following the screening process, the final dataset comprised 882 unique human illustrations and photographs, distributed across the six textbooks as follows: Grade 1 (113 illustrations), Grade 2 (118), Grade 3 (148), Grade 4 (142), Grade 5 (121), and Grade 6 (240). These illustrations constituted the complete corpus for subsequent analysis.

Operationalization of Harper's Framework

The coding scheme was developed based on Harper's new Framework of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature (Adam & Harper, 2023). To enhance analytical consistency, Harper's conceptual categories were translated into operational coding indicators that guided the identification and interpretation of visual representations. These indicators (Table 1) functioned as analytical guidelines rather than rigid categories. During the coding process, each illustration was interpreted within its broader visual

context, including the activities performed, interactions among characters, spatial positioning, occupations, emotional expressions, clothing, and implied social relationships.

Table 1. Operational Coding Indicators

Category	Indicators
Gender stereotypical (traditional)	Illustrations portraying traditional gender roles, occupations, personality traits, emotions, clothing, or activities that reinforce conventional masculine or feminine expectations.
Gender restrictive (traditional and non-traditional)	Illustrations that initially challenge traditional gender expectations but ultimately reinforce conventional gender norms or maintain implicit gender boundaries.
Gender sensitive (non-traditional)	Illustrations depicting males and females participating equally in diverse occupations, activities, emotions, and social roles while challenging traditional stereotypes.
Gender neutral (ungendered)	Illustrations presenting characters without emphasizing gendered expectations, allowing multiple interpretations and avoiding stereotypical gender markers.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic coding following Saldaña (2013) while incorporating the critical interpretive principles of Critical Content Analysis. The analytical procedure consisted of five stages.

Stage 1: Data identification and screening. All visual illustrations contained in the six textbooks were systematically identified. Only illustrations and photographs containing human figures were retained for analysis, while non-human visuals and repeated illustrations were excluded.

Stage 2: Open coding. Each illustration was examined independently to identify observable visual characteristics related to gender representation. Initial descriptive codes included variables such as occupation, activity, domestic and public roles, leadership, caregiving, emotional expression, clothing, interpersonal interaction, and participation in social settings.

Stage 3: Categorization. The initial codes were subsequently compared and organized according to Harper's four categories of gender representation. Illustrations sharing similar characteristics were grouped to establish broader coding categories.

Stage 4: Theme development. Relationships among the coding categories were examined to identify recurring patterns of gender representation throughout the textbook series. Rather than treating each illustration as an isolated example, the analysis considered how repeated visual patterns collectively constructed dominant representations of masculinity and femininity.

Stage 5: Critical interpretation. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted through the principles of Critical Content Analysis. At this stage, the analysis moved beyond descriptive categorization to examine how the illustrations reflected broader ideological assumptions concerning gender, power, and social participation. Drawing upon the

perspectives of Hidden Curriculum, Social Role Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, the findings were interpreted in relation to the ways textbook imagery may reinforce, negotiate, or challenge traditional gender norms within Indonesian primary education.

Figure 1 below summarises the analytical procedure employed in this study.

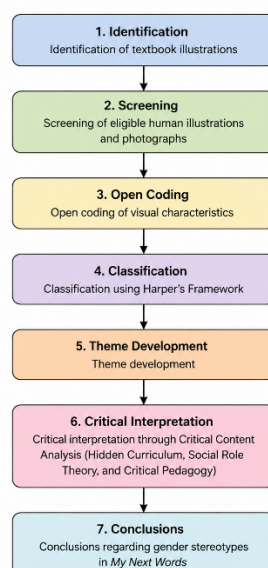


Figure 1. Analytical procedure

The combination of thematic coding and CCA enabled the study to systematically classify visual representations while simultaneously examining their broader educational and ideological significance. Consequently, the findings extend beyond identifying gender stereotypes to explaining how textbook illustrations may contribute to the reproduction or transformation of gender relations within English language education.

C. Results and Discussion

Results

The final corpus consisted of 882 unique human illustrations and photographs extracted from the six volumes of the *My Next Words* textbook series. These illustrations contained a total of 2,150 human characters, comprising 1,167 male characters (54.3%) and 983 female characters (45.7%). As shown in Table 2, male characters were more visible than female characters in five of the six textbooks. Only the Grade 1 textbook contained more female than male characters. The data in Table 2 indicate a noticeable imbalance in character visibility. Male characters constituted 54.3% of all characters appearing throughout the series, whereas female characters represented only 45.7%. The disparity was particularly visible in Grades 3, 4, and 6, where male characters substantially outnumbered female characters.

In terms of gender representation, analysis using Harper's Framework identified all four categories of gender representation throughout the six textbooks. However, traditional gender stereotypes were the dominant category across the series. Of the 882 illustrations analyzed, 446 illustrations (50.6%) were categorized as gender stereotypical

(traditional), 170 illustrations (19.3%) as gender restrictive, 240 illustrations (27.2%) as gender sensitive, and only 26 illustrations (2.9%) as gender neutral.

Table 2. Distribution of Male and Female Characters in the *My Next Words* Series

Grade	Male Characters	Female Characters	Total Characters
1	103	130	233
2	108	101	209
3	295	250	545
4	224	128	352
5	133	131	264
6	304	243	547
Total	1,167	983	2,150

Table 3. Distribution of Gender Stereotypes in the *My Next Words* Series

Grade	Total Illustrations	Traditional	Restrictive	Sensitive	Neutral
1	113	53 (46.9%)	21 (18.6%)	34 (30.1%)	5 (4.4%)
2	118	65 (55.1%)	11 (9.3%)	38 (32.2%)	4 (3.4%)
3	148	78 (52.7%)	24 (16.2%)	44 (29.7%)	2 (1.4%)
4	142	61 (43.0%)	27 (19.0%)	51 (36.0%)	3 (2.0%)
5	121	53 (43.8%)	41 (33.9%)	26 (21.5%)	1 (0.8%)
6	240	136 (56.6%)	46 (19.2%)	47 (19.6%)	11 (4.6%)
Total	882	446 (50.6%)	170 (19.3%)	240 (27.2%)	26 (2.9%)

Based on Table 3, traditional stereotypes accounted for more than half of all illustrations analyzed and were the dominant category in each grade. Gender-neutral representations appeared least frequently, representing fewer than 3% of all illustrations.

Traditional Gender Stereotypes

A total of 446 illustrations were categorized as gender stereotypical according to Harper's framework. These illustrations met one or more of the following indicators: (a) portraying traditional masculine or feminine characteristics, (b) reinforcing conventional gender roles and occupations, (c) depicting stereotypical gendered activities, or (d) maintaining rigid gender boundaries.

Several recurring patterns emerged, namely (1) traditional appearance and gender-typed visual markers, (2) domestic and public division of labor, (3) occupational segregation, (4) gendered recreational activities, and (5) gendered recreational activities. As seen in Figure 2 above, female characters were consistently represented through stereotypically feminine visual markers, including dresses, skirts, floral patterns, long hair, braids, and ponytails. In contrast, male characters were typically depicted wearing shorts, sportswear, trousers, and other clothing associated with masculinity. These visual cues served as immediate indicators of gender identity and reinforced conventional expectations regarding feminine and masculine appearance.



Figure 2. Traditional appearance and gender-typed visual markers

Another prominent pattern involved the division between domestic and public activities, as seen in Figures 3 and 5. Adult women were frequently portrayed preparing food, cooking, serving meals, shopping, caring for children, watering plants, or performing household duties. Conversely, adult men were more commonly shown working outside the home, traveling, driving vehicles, participating in community activities, or engaging in physically demanding tasks.



Figures 3-5. Domestic and public division of labor



Figures 6-9. Occupational segregation

Additionally, occupational representation revealed substantial gender imbalance, as illustrated in Figures 6-9. Female occupations were largely concentrated in nurturing and service-oriented professions such as teachers, nurses, librarians, and canteen workers. Male occupations displayed significantly greater diversity and included police officers, pilots, drivers, sailors, farmers, office workers, postal workers, and physical education teachers.



Figures 10-11. Gendered recreational activities

Based on Figures 10-11, sports and leisure activities also reflected traditional gender expectations. Boys were frequently shown playing football, flying kites, riding bicycles, and playing marbles, whereas girls were more commonly depicted engaging in less physically demanding activities or passive forms of play. Female participation in traditionally masculine activities was limited.



Figure 12. Invisible gender barrier

An additional pattern emerged across multiple illustrations, as seen in Figure 12. Even when boys and girls occupied the same physical environment, they were frequently represented as interacting primarily within same-gender groups. This pattern appeared in classrooms, playgrounds, and recreational settings. Boys often sat with boys, played with boys, and participated in activities associated with masculinity, whereas girls tended to interact primarily with girls and engage in activities coded as feminine. This recurring pattern was identified as an *invisible gender barrier*, referring to the implicit visual separation of boys and girls despite their shared educational and social spaces.

Gender Restrictive Representations

A total of 170 illustrations (19.3%) were categorized as gender restrictive. These illustrations partially challenged traditional gender norms while simultaneously preserving conventional expectations. For example, boys and girls were often shown studying together, participating in classroom activities, or occupying the same public spaces. However, these interactions were frequently accompanied by traditional gender markers.



Figures 13-15. Male and female characters interacting with certain limitations

It is implied throughout Figures 13-15 that female characters continued to be represented through strongly feminine appearances, while male characters maintained traditionally masculine characteristics. Similarly, some women were portrayed working outside the home, yet these occupations remained concentrated in traditionally feminine professions. As a result, the illustrations appeared to promote gender inclusion while simultaneously reinforcing conventional gender expectations.

Gender-Sensitive Representations

A total of 240 illustrations (27.2%) were classified as gender sensitive. These illustrations met Harper's indicators for non-traditional representation by depicting boys and girls engaging in similar activities, sharing common experiences, and participating equally in educational and social settings. Examples included boys and girls reading books, studying together, traveling, listening to music, watching television, and participating in classroom learning activities. In these illustrations, gender did not function as a barrier to participation. Furthermore, in Figures 16-17, male and female characters were occasionally represented interacting naturally and collaboratively without explicit restrictions regarding what activities each gender could perform. These representations suggested greater flexibility in gender roles and broader opportunities for participation.



Figures 16-17. Non-traditional stereotype representations

Gender-Neutral Representations

Gender-neutral representations were the least frequent category, accounting for only 26 illustrations (2.9%) of the total dataset. These illustrations depicted characters engaging in activities or occupations that transcended conventional gender expectations. Examples included female characters participating in activities traditionally associated with boys, such as kite flying or hiking, as well as women working in professions commonly perceived as masculine. Similarly, some male characters were portrayed engaging in activities associated with caregiving or domestic responsibilities. Unlike traditional or restrictive stereotypes, these illustrations in Figures 18-19 did not rely on rigid gender boundaries and instead presented a broader range of possibilities for both boys and girls.



Figures 18-19. Professions that challenge the traditional gender norms

Overall, the findings reveal three major patterns. First, male characters were more visible than female characters across the textbook series. Second, traditional gender stereotypes dominated the visual content, accounting for more than half of all illustrations analyzed. Third, although examples of gender-sensitive and gender-neutral representations were present, they remained substantially less common than traditional

portrayals. The findings also revealed a recurring pattern of implicit gender segregation, conceptualized in this study as the *invisible gender barrier*, whereby boys and girls were visually separated within shared social spaces despite participating in the same educational environments.

Discussion

Textbook Illustrations as the Hidden Curriculum

The present study demonstrates that traditional gender stereotypes continue to dominate the visual discourse of the *My Next Words* textbook series, accounting for 50.6% of all analyzed illustrations. Although gender-sensitive representations were identified, they remain substantially less frequent than traditional portrayals, suggesting that recent curriculum reforms promoting inclusive education have not yet been fully translated into textbook design. Rather than functioning solely as pedagogical resources for language learning, textbook illustrations act as ideological artifacts that communicate socially accepted assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Through repeated visual exposure, children are encouraged to perceive these representations as ordinary and desirable, thereby shaping their understanding of gender long before they develop the critical literacy necessary to question such assumptions.

This finding reinforces a growing body of international evidence demonstrating that gender bias in textbooks remains remarkably persistent despite increasing policy commitments to equality. A recent large-scale automated analysis of 1,255 textbooks from 34 countries found that women and girls continue to be underrepresented, portrayed as less active, less professionally accomplished, and more closely associated with domestic settings than their male counterparts. The study concluded that gender bias is a systemic characteristic of school textbooks rather than an isolated feature of particular educational contexts. Likewise, a systematic review of cross-country studies concluded that textbook gender bias is multidimensional, emerging simultaneously through language, visual representation, occupational roles, and everyday social activities rather than through isolated stereotypical images. The review argues that these dimensions should be analyzed holistically because they collectively construct children's understandings of gender and social participation.

The present findings extend these recent studies in two important respects. First, rather than limiting the analysis to character frequency or occupational distribution, this study demonstrates that gender ideology is embedded within the broader visual organization of illustrations, including body positioning, interpersonal interaction, emotional expression, and patterns of participation. These multimodal resources work together to construct masculinity and femininity as socially differentiated identities. Consequently, equal numerical representation alone cannot be interpreted as evidence of gender equality because ideological bias may remain embedded within the visual relationships among characters.

Second, the findings suggest that current approaches to textbook evaluation may underestimate the persistence of gender inequality by focusing predominantly on quantitative indicators such as character counts or occupational diversity. Recent work (Huang & Liu, 2024) similarly argues that gender representation should be examined through patterns of social interaction because illustrations communicate ideological meanings not only through individual characters but also through relationships between them. Their analysis demonstrates that even when women increasingly occupy non-traditional occupations, subtle interactional patterns may continue to reinforce conventional gender expectations. The present study supports this argument while extending it to Indonesian primary English textbooks, demonstrating that ideological meanings emerge from the interaction of visual composition, occupational representation, and peer relationships rather than from any single representational feature.

These findings therefore contribute to contemporary scholarship by suggesting that gender-inclusive textbook evaluation should move beyond descriptive measures of representation towards a multimodal examination of visual discourse. Such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how educational materials reproduce gender ideology while appearing pedagogically neutral and highlights the importance of analyzing illustrations as integrated systems of meaning rather than collections of isolated images.

Reinterpreting Occupational Gender Stereotypes through Social Role Theory

Beyond differences in numerical representation, the findings reveal that male and female characters continue to occupy markedly different social and occupational roles. Male characters were portrayed across a substantially broader range of occupations, including police officers, pilots, farmers, sailors, drivers, and physical education teachers. In contrast, female characters were primarily associated with teaching, nursing, librarianship, food service, and domestic responsibilities. Although these occupations are socially valuable, their unequal distribution demonstrates that occupational diversity remains gendered, potentially limiting children's perceptions of future educational and professional opportunities.

Recent scholarship suggests that occupational stereotypes remain one of the most persistent forms of gender bias in educational materials despite increasing policy commitments to equality. A global analysis of more than one thousand school textbooks found that male characters continue to dominate representations of leadership, science, technology, and public decision-making. In contrast, women are disproportionately portrayed in caregiving and supportive roles. These recurring patterns indicate that educational materials continue to reproduce historically established divisions of labor, even within contemporary curricula promoting inclusion (Crawford et al., 2024). Similarly, Adam and Harper (2023) argue that children's literature increasingly presents female characters in visible public roles while simultaneously maintaining conventional expectations regarding emotional expression, caregiving, and interpersonal relationships.

Consequently, improvements in numerical visibility do not necessarily represent substantive progress towards gender equality.

The present findings support these observations while extending them to the Indonesian context. Unlike previous studies that primarily interpreted occupational imbalance as unequal representation, this study demonstrates that occupational stereotypes operate as part of a broader visual discourse in which profession, activity, emotion, and interaction collectively construct gender identity. For example, male characters were represented in more diverse occupations and were consistently associated with physical movement, outdoor environments, leadership, and problem-solving. Female characters, by contrast, were more frequently positioned within caring relationships and domestic environments. These recurring combinations suggest that occupational stereotypes are reinforced through multiple interconnected visual cues rather than isolated illustrations.

This pattern can be understood through contemporary developments in Social Role Theory. Recent research argues that gender stereotypes emerge not merely because children observe occupational differences but because they repeatedly encounter coherent social narratives linking occupations, behaviors, emotional characteristics, and interpersonal expectations (Master et al., 2021). Educational materials therefore contribute to children's understanding of what constitutes socially acceptable identities by repeatedly presenting specific combinations of roles and behaviors. In the present study, these combinations consistently associated masculinity with agency, authority, and public participation while linking femininity with caregiving, cooperation, and domestic responsibility. Consequently, textbook illustrations function not simply as reflections of existing social norms but as mechanisms through which those norms are reproduced and legitimized.

However, the findings also reveal indications of gradual change. Approximately 27.2% of the analyzed illustrations were categorized as gender-sensitive, depicting boys and girls participating equally in learning activities, collaborative tasks, and everyday social experiences. Although these illustrations remain considerably fewer than traditional portrayals, they indicate an emerging shift towards more inclusive visual representation. Similar transitional patterns have recently been observed in comparative analyses of children's educational materials, where contemporary textbooks increasingly incorporate inclusive imagery without entirely abandoning conventional gender narratives (Huang & Liu, 2024; Jehle et al., 2024). Rather than interpreting these mixed representations as inconsistency, they may instead reflect the negotiation between long-established cultural expectations and contemporary educational reforms promoting equity and diversity.

These findings contribute to current scholarship by suggesting that the persistence of occupational stereotypes cannot be explained solely through cultural tradition or unequal character visibility. Instead, occupational representation should be understood as one component of a broader multimodal system in which visual composition,

interpersonal interaction, emotional expression, and spatial organization collectively shape children's perceptions of gender. Consequently, future analyses of textbook inclusiveness should evaluate not only who is represented but also how occupational identities are visually constructed and connected to wider patterns of social participation. Such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which educational materials continue to reproduce—or potentially transform—gender ideologies in the primary school classroom.

The Invisible Gender Barrier: A Conceptual Contribution to Gender Representation Research

Beyond the unequal distribution of occupational roles and stereotypical activities, this study identified a more subtle yet theoretically significant pattern, conceptualized as the *invisible gender barrier*. This phenomenon refers to the recurrent visual separation of boys and girls within shared educational and social settings despite the absence of explicit textual messages encouraging gender segregation. Across numerous classroom, playground, sports, and recreational scenes, boys were predominantly portrayed interacting with other boys, while girls were more frequently shown engaging with girls. Although these illustrations appear ordinary and pedagogically neutral, their repeated occurrence implicitly constructs gender-specific social spaces, reinforcing the notion that same-gender interaction is the normative pattern of peer relationships. Unlike overt stereotypes that explicitly assign different occupations or personality traits to males and females, the *invisible gender barrier* operates through visual composition, spatial proximity, and interactional patterns, making it less visible but potentially more pervasive as a mechanism of gender socialization.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized that gender representation in educational materials extends beyond the visibility of male and female characters to include the broader organization of visual discourse. For example, Adam and Harper (2023) argue that illustrations communicate gender ideologies through multiple visual dimensions, including posture, gaze, body positioning, and interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Huang and Liu (2024) demonstrate that multimodal features such as spatial arrangement and interaction patterns contribute significantly to children's interpretations of gender roles. Nevertheless, most contemporary studies continue to examine illustrations primarily through the distribution of occupations, activities, or linguistic representation, paying comparatively little attention to how patterns of social interaction themselves become ideological resources. The present study therefore extends this emerging body of scholarship by demonstrating that gender ideology is also embedded in who interacts with whom, how characters are visually grouped, and how social relationships are organized within textbook illustrations. Consequently, gender segregation should be understood not only as a characteristic of individual representations but also as a relational feature of visual discourse.

The *invisible gender barrier* can be interpreted through the lens of the hidden curriculum, which proposes that educational materials communicate implicit social norms

alongside formal learning objectives. Although contemporary curricula increasingly advocate inclusion, collaboration, and equality, the repeated visual separation of boys and girls may unintentionally convey different messages regarding appropriate social relationships. Because these representations are embedded within seemingly routine classroom and recreational scenes, learners are unlikely to recognize them as ideological constructions. Instead, repeated exposure may gradually normalize gender-specific friendship networks, collaborative practices, and leadership structures. In this sense, the hidden curriculum does not operate through explicit instruction but through the cumulative effect of repeated visual experiences that shape children's perceptions of what constitutes socially appropriate behavior.

This interpretation is also supported by recent developments in Social Role Theory, which increasingly emphasize that gender stereotypes emerge from repeated exposure to coherent social patterns rather than isolated examples of role differentiation. (Master et al., 2021) argue that children's beliefs about future educational and occupational opportunities develop through observing recurring associations among activities, behaviors, and social relationships. Extending this perspective, the present findings suggest that peer interaction should also be considered a social role through which gender expectations are reproduced. When boys are repeatedly represented as collaborating primarily with boys and girls with girls, children may internalise gender-segregated interaction as both natural and socially desirable. Thus, textbook illustrations contribute not only to occupational stereotyping but also to the construction of gendered patterns of participation and belonging.

From the perspective of Critical Pedagogy, the *invisible gender barrier* illustrates how ideology may be reproduced through subtle visual practices rather than explicit discrimination. Contemporary educational materials frequently avoid overtly sexist portrayals, yet they may continue to reinforce hegemonic assumptions through seemingly neutral design choices. Recent research on visual discourse similarly argues that educational images often communicate dominant social values through composition, framing, and interpersonal positioning rather than through explicit textual messages (Jehle et al., 2024; Nandi et al., 2024). The present findings support this argument while extending it by proposing that interactional segregation constitutes an additional dimension of gender representation that has received limited scholarly attention. This suggests that evaluating textbook inclusiveness requires analyzing not only the identities of individual characters but also the relationships constructed among them.

The theoretical significance of this finding lies in its contribution to the expanding existing analytical frameworks for textbook evaluation. Most current approaches assess gender equality using indicators such as character frequency, occupational diversity, or speaking roles. While these indicators remain valuable, they provide only a partial understanding of how gender ideologies are reproduced. The concept of the Invisible Gender Barrier introduces a relational dimension to textbook analysis by demonstrating that visual interaction itself constitutes an important mechanism through which gender

norms are communicated. Accordingly, future studies should evaluate peer relationships, collaborative structures, spatial organization, and visual proximity alongside conventional indicators of representation. Incorporating these dimensions would enable a more comprehensive assessment of gender inclusiveness and better capture the subtle ideological meanings embedded within educational materials.

Furthermore, this conceptual contribution has broader implications beyond the Indonesian context. Similar processes may occur in educational resources across different cultural and linguistic settings because visual organization represents a universal component of textbook design. Comparative studies examining whether similar interactional patterns appear in textbooks from other countries could therefore determine whether the Invisible Gender Barrier reflects a culturally specific phenomenon or a more widespread characteristic of educational materials. Such research would not only refine current understandings of visual gender representation but also contribute to the development of more comprehensive theoretical models for analyzing ideology in children's textbooks. Consequently, the *invisible gender barrier* should be regarded not merely as an empirical finding but as a conceptual framework that opens new directions for future research on visual discourse, inclusive education, and textbook development.

Implications for Inclusive Textbook Development and Future Research

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of English language textbooks that better support inclusive education. Although the *My Next Words* series demonstrates a gradual shift towards more equitable gender representation through the inclusion of gender-sensitive and gender-neutral illustrations, traditional stereotypes continue to dominate the visual discourse. This suggests that improving gender equality in educational materials requires more than increasing the numerical visibility of female characters. Instead, textbook development should adopt a multidimensional understanding of gender representation by considering occupational diversity, leadership opportunities, emotional expression, patterns of peer interaction, and visual composition. Recent research similarly argues that gender inclusiveness should be evaluated through the interaction of textual and visual elements because children construct social meanings from multimodal representations rather than isolated images (Adam & Harper, 2023; Huang & Liu, 2024).

The findings also indicate that current textbook evaluation frameworks may underestimate the persistence of gender bias because they primarily rely on quantitative indicators such as character frequency or occupational distribution. While these indicators remain useful, the present study demonstrates that they cannot fully capture the ideological meanings embedded in visual discourse. The proposed concept of the *invisible gender barrier* highlights the importance of examining how illustrations organize social relationships, collaborative activities, and spatial arrangements. Consequently, future textbook evaluation frameworks should incorporate relational and interactional dimensions alongside conventional measures of representation. Such an approach would

provide a more comprehensive assessment of gender inclusiveness and enable curriculum developers to identify subtle forms of bias that may otherwise remain unnoticed.

These findings are particularly relevant within the context of Indonesia's continuing educational reforms, which emphasize equity, diversity, and learner-centered education. UNESCO (2021) argues that achieving inclusive education requires learning materials that not only provide equal access but also challenge social inequalities and encourage learners to question discriminatory norms. Likewise, recent international studies emphasize that textbooks play a critical role in shaping children's aspirations, self-efficacy, and perceptions of social participation because they represent one of the earliest and most sustained sources of cultural knowledge encountered in formal education (Jehle et al., 2024; Master et al., 2021). In this regard, textbook illustrations should portray boys and girls as equally capable of participating across academic, scientific, artistic, recreational, and leadership contexts while also depicting meaningful collaboration between genders. Such representations would better reflect the principles of inclusive education and provide children with broader and more equitable models of social participation.

The findings also highlight the importance of strengthening critical visual literacy in teacher education. Because illustrations often appear objective and pedagogically neutral, teachers may unintentionally reproduce the implicit gender ideologies embedded within textbooks. Developing teachers' capacity to analyze visual representations critically would enable them to transform textbook illustrations into opportunities for discussion rather than passive sources of information. Classroom dialogue that encourages learners to question why certain occupations, activities, or leadership roles are associated with particular genders may help reduce the influence of stereotypical representations and foster more inclusive understandings of identity and participation. This pedagogical approach is increasingly recognized as an important component of socially responsive English language education, where language learning is integrated with critical thinking and intercultural awareness rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic competence.

The present study also contributes methodologically to textbook research by demonstrating the value of CCA for examining visual discourse. Previous investigations have frequently employed descriptive content analysis to quantify the presence of male and female characters or identify stereotypical occupations. While these approaches provide valuable baseline information, they often overlook the ideological processes through which visual representations reproduce unequal social relations. By integrating CCA with Harper's Framework, Hidden Curriculum, Social Role Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, this study illustrates how visual images can be interpreted as sites where cultural values, power relations, and educational ideologies intersect. This integrated analytical approach provides a richer understanding of gender representation than frequency-based analyses alone. It may serve as a useful framework for future studies investigating equity and inclusion in educational materials.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The study examined only one nationally endorsed English textbook series and focused exclusively on visual illustrations of human characters. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to all English language textbooks used in Indonesia or other educational contexts. In addition, the analysis investigated the representations embedded within the textbooks rather than examining how teachers and learners interpret these visual messages during classroom interaction. Future research could therefore combine CCA with classroom observation, interviews, or learner response studies to explore how gender representations are negotiated, reinforced, or challenged in authentic educational settings. Comparative investigations involving textbooks from different publishers, educational levels, or national curricula would also help determine whether the *invisible gender barrier* represents a broader characteristic of textbook design or is shaped by specific cultural and institutional contexts. Such studies would further refine theoretical understandings of visual gender representation while contributing to the development of more inclusive educational materials.

D. Conclusion

This study investigated gender stereotypes in the visual imagery of the *My Next Words* English textbook series used in Indonesian elementary schools through the lens of CCA. The analysis of 882 human illustrations revealed that traditional gender stereotypes continue to dominate the visual discourse, with male characters appearing more frequently and occupying a broader range of active, leadership, and professional roles. In contrast, female characters are more often associated with nurturing, domestic, and supportive roles. Although gender-sensitive and gender-neutral representations were identified, they remain limited compared to traditional portrayals, indicating that textbook illustrations continue to reproduce conventional gender norms despite ongoing educational reforms promoting equity and inclusion. More importantly, this study proposes the concept of the *Invisible Gender Barrier*, demonstrating that gender ideology is communicated not only through character visibility and occupational roles but also through patterns of peer interaction, spatial organization, and visual composition. This conceptual contribution extends existing research by highlighting the relational dimension of gender representation, thereby enriching current approaches to analyzing visual discourse in educational materials.

The findings have important theoretical and practical implications for textbook development and inclusive education. By integrating CCA with Harper's Framework, the hidden curriculum, Social Role Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, this study demonstrates that evaluating gender inclusiveness should move beyond counting male and female characters to examining how visual narratives construct social relationships and gender identities. These findings provide evidence-based recommendations for curriculum developers, textbook authors, illustrators, publishers, and teacher educators to design learning materials that promote more balanced, diverse, and collaborative gender representations. Nevertheless, the study is limited to one nationally endorsed textbook

series and focuses exclusively on visual illustrations. Future research should examine textbooks across different subjects, educational levels, and cultural contexts while incorporating classroom-based investigations to explore how teachers and learners interpret these visual representations. Such studies would further validate the proposed concept of the *Invisible Gender Barrier* and contribute to the development of more equitable, gender-responsive, and inclusive educational materials.

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