

Content Analysis for Gender Bias in Turkish Elementary School Textbooks

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Abstract

This study analyzed the presentation of gender roles in Turkish elementary school textbooks. Gender roles and identity are among the primary social values that educational systems help their students to develop and internalize. Content and delivery of the educational materials reflect the values and ideals in a given society. Turkey, like other patriarchal societies, has values that put emphasis on male dominance and favor male priority. In this study the way that gender roles were presented and members of the two genders were depicted in two Turkish elementary school textbooks were investigated by utilizing content analysis method. Content analyses of *Turkish* and *Life Studies* textbooks for 3rd grades showed that there were important differences for two genders in terms of social values, roles, and relations both in school atmosphere and family environment. Results implied important directions for educational administrators and policy makers in the preparation and use of educational content.

Key words: Gender roles, identity formation, content analysis, textbooks

* This study was conducted as a part of the larger study that was led by Dr. Fatma Gök at the Bođaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey. All the authors and Sarem Külegeç analyzed different grades' textbooks during Fall 2001 and Spring 2002. Correspondence: ao7726@albany.edu (Asil Ozdogru).

Introduction

Education as a social process is under the influence, to a large extent, of the society that it operates in. Therefore any educational system can be understood by looking at the values and traditions of its surrounding social system. Changes and renovations in the values, organizations and the needs of a society will inevitably influence its education.

Images of sex, gender and sexuality take important places in all educational systems. Schools as a part of the social structure do not yield sex stereotyping against the inclination of wider society. Schools reflect the society in which they take place. Any attempt to confront the conventions of the society often finds a strong resistance to change. Students are heavily influenced by their homes and neighborhoods, and may disregard what teachers and textbooks say (Delamont, 1990). “But even if students forget, ignore, or reject what they encounter in textbooks, textbook content is still important because it withholds, obscures, and renders unimportant many ideas and areas of knowledge.” (Sleeter & Grant, 1991, p. 97).

Educational processes and relations within the school system contribute to the formation of gender identity (Posner, 2003) and maintenance of socially accepted gender roles. “Schools develop and reinforce sex segregations, stereotypes, and even discriminations which exaggerate the negative aspects of sex roles in the outside world when they could be trying to alleviate them.” (Delamont, 1990, p. 3).

Importance of the education in placing women into public sphere and giving their social statue is a controversial issue. The right of getting education is the basic right of woman as everyone. Because it opens the way for the ability to use other rights and prepares individuals to be able to take place as equal fellow-citizens in the society (Gök, 1999).

Concern of this study will be on Turkish elementary schools, because it is believed that elementary school is very important in children's lives as they learn about the society they live in.

In Turkey,

The elementary school gives an education at the basic level and prepares for the high school. The curriculum is uniform through the country. The offerings include Turkish, mathematics, social studies, general science, physical education, religion and ethics, arts, and music. A unique course developed around the concerns of daily life called life studies is also offered. Additional time is set aside in the course schedule for planning, organizing and implementing extra-curricular activities. The organization of teaching shows certain differences in the initial three and during the last two years. The activities are built around the single core of life studies in the first three years, with an emphasis on the mastery of basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. In contrast, social studies and general science are taught as separate subjects in the last two years, together with an increasing attention to the development of cognitive skills (Oğuzkan, 1997, p. 76).

There were many studies across countries in the literature that analyzed textbooks for gender discrimination. For example, content analysis of 41 Indian high schools, higher secondary and pre-university curricula textbooks showed that “instead of fostering the basic equality between men and women, the messages given to school children in the Indian textbooks sanction the dominance of males.” (Kalia, 1982, p. 187).

Examining 47 U.S. textbooks used in grades 1 through 8 between 1980 and 1988, Sleeter and Grant (1991) revealed an interesting finding that when compared to males, females were more likely to be depicted in nontraditional roles in social studies, reading and language arts, science, and mathematics textbooks. For instance, chances for a woman being an adventurous astronaut was more than for a man being a nurse in those textbooks. Content analysis of 13 of the top nationally ranked introductory geoscience textbooks in US was conducted by Nevada University (PROMISE, 2001). Results showed that the messages about gender, race and ethnicity were blended by messages about power. For example, while victims of natural disasters were people of color and non-Westerners, scientists were always white and male.

A study on 122 Pakistani secondary school level textbooks concluded that the educational content aimed only at males by maximizing their potentials and skills to take advantage of the opportunities around them. However, content did not represent the changing social status of Pakistani women from doing unpaid housework to production, service, and wage work (Zeenatunnisa, 1989).

During the first years of the Turkish Republic–1920s, women and men were presented in equal manner avoiding any stereotype in the textbooks until 1950 (election of the conservative party). Then the presentation of women was turned to the beginnings of twentieth century (Gümüſçüođlu, 1995 cf. Arslan, 2000). The passive role of housewife was adapted again to the women characters. The results were supported by Helvaciođlu (1996) studying the textbooks published between 1928 and 1995. The last findings regarding the issue stated that Turkish textbooks targeting primarily male students included stereotypic biases in which the woman’s role was limited to being a mother and a wife (Arslan, 2000).

Method

Content analysis is a method that looks at the content of any communication device like books and TV programs. It investigates for both explicit and implicit messages by utilizing quantitative and qualitative means. Quantitative analysis looks at the presence or absence of target words, images, and messages. Qualitative content analysis, which is also called discourse analysis, keeps track of implicit or underlying meanings (PROMISE, 2001).

In this study, 2 textbooks that were instructed in the third grades of Turkish elementary schools’ *Turkish* and *Life Studies* classes were content analyzed. Selected categories of occupations, social roles, and personality traits were examined through the content analysis of the books.

Results

In both textbooks, but heavily in *Life Studies* that had richer content; females were depicted along with traditional Turkish female traits such as hardworking, loving, caring, and child-raising. Most of the time male figures were presented as having traits of self-confidence, decisiveness, and adventurousness. Women figures were observed taking place in emotional relation with children more than men did. Except the female teachers and women working in the fields, women were basically shown at home settings, with their children, and in public markets for shopping.

Occupational models for two genders were clearly different. As seen in Table 1, males were presented in a wider range and higher level job opportunities than females (physician next to a female pharmacist or judge over a female typist). Women were illustrated less as working person figures and more in conventional and lower level works such as teaching, nursing, and agricultural fieldwork. Most of the women characters were seen in works related to being a housewife and child-raising.

Table 1. Frequency distributions of the occupations for two genders encountered in the *Turkish* and *Life Studies* textbooks.

Occupation	Male	Female
Administrator	6	
Civil servant	9	2
Doctor	2	
Farm worker	6	9
Housekeeper		4
Nurse		2
Police	2	
Sales clerk	4	2
Tailor		1
Teacher	8	6
Total	37	26

Family illustrations were nucleic type families in which father worked out of the home to sustain a living and mother was responsible for within house matters such as kitchen and child-care. As mother engaged more in loving relations with children, father did not reveal much of his emotions and feelings toward his children. In familial relations, gender depended relation pattern was observed like father-son and mother-daughter relations rather than across gender relations. In many within family communications, while father was information source for the child, mother was in a more supporting role. The role of caring with younger siblings was also assigned to elder sisters throughout many instances.

Students that were depicted in the two textbooks were happy, obedient, respectful, and helpful models. Students engaged more in emotional and caring relations with their female teachers. On the other hand, male teachers were seen more in regulating and controlling roles.

Discussion

Results of the present study were in parallel with the earlier studies on education and formation of gender identity. Although there were not major quantitative differences in the mere presence of two genders in the analyzed texts, there were important discrepancies in the way two genders were depicted in occupational and familial roles as parallel to the patriarchal values of Turkish society.

Female students within the educational system have lacked role models that could open a wider range of life opportunities (Gök, 1999). The primary model provided in the books for female students were housekeepers who did not have financial independence. It may lead to a false and inadequate impression as female students were expected to be nothing more than future housewives. While male students received a wider range of future outcomes, female students had more limited examples that were in line with traditionally accepted models.

For both within family and school settings, gender dependent relations were heavily present. Same gender dyads and relational qualities changing across genders might have oblique implications for young students. Female figures, in line with motherhood, had more caring and loving relations with children as consistent with the findings of Arslan (2000).

Contents of the books were consistent with the traditional values of Turkish culture. Although it is true that books represent the system that they originated, they could be used to develop a more equalitarian prospect and affirmative outcomes for female students (Delamont, 1990). Contents of the books could be modified to restructure existing social values and provide richer socialization opportunities.

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