Gender differences in a selected Year 9 recommended English textbook

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Let us teach the boys how to cook, sweep, skip and do shopping.

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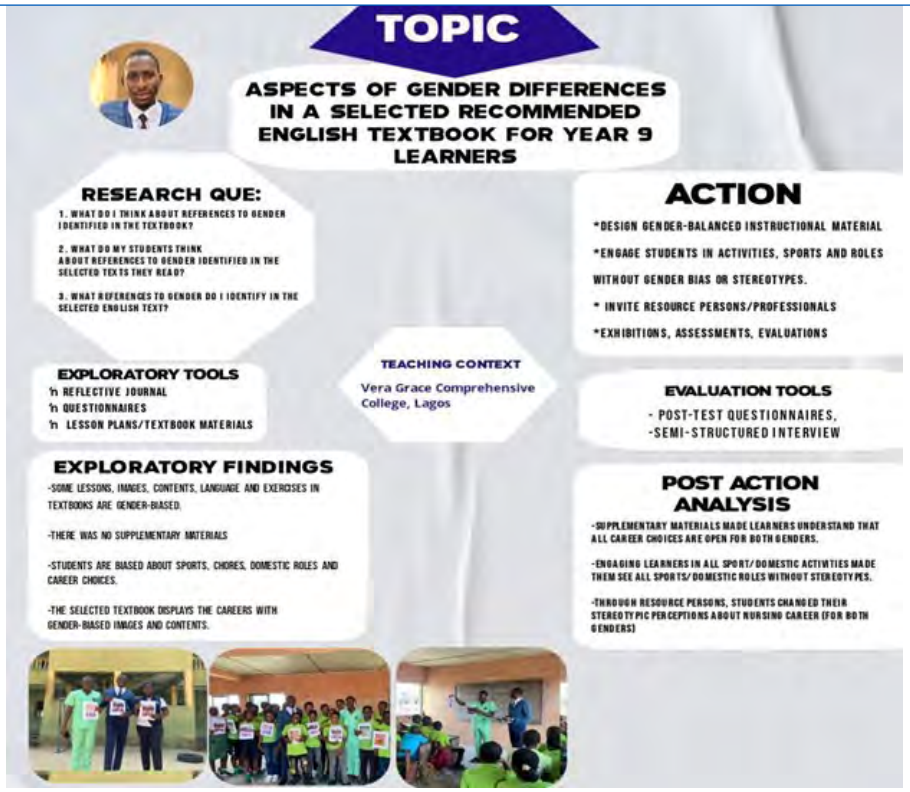

I am an English and literature teacher. I currently work with Almond College, Lekki, in Lagos state, Nigeria. During this exploratory research, I worked with Vera Grace College, a private school in Ojo, Lagos, Southwestern Nigeria. I taught students at their secondary school levels aged between 12 and 14 years. My class comprised learners from across the major tribes in Nigeria and from different social-cultural and religious backgrounds. This means that I had both Christians and Muslims in my class.

Vera Grace Schools at Era, Ojo, Lagos (Photo credit: Google Map)

In 2022, I came across a British Council course titled 'Exploring gender equality in education' on FutureLearn. This eye-opening course helps teachers to be gender-responsive and provides them with practical approaches to supporting every child without bias. Due to my interest in inclusiveness, I took the gender education course and got a certificate. I learned about how to inculcate equality in the classroom and the school system as a whole. I became gender-sensitive in all I did as a teacher to make sure none of my students were left behind. Hence, I incorporated the gender-transformative methods I garnered into teaching English in my lessons.

Since I became more sensitive to gender biases and stereotypes, I began to spot several places of gender bias in my textbook resources, hearing stereotypical statements from both teachers and students and methods of teaching the learners. I thought my students were significantly influenced by the text they use in class after I asked them to do homework on writing about their career choices as instructed in their textbook. The learners did the homework writing about their career choice based on what they saw in the pictures used in the textbook. They were stereotypical!

As a result of this, I got triggered to research the topic 'Aspects of Gender Differences in the Selected English Textbook for Year 9 Learners' and investigate the perceptions of my students about these differences. I wanted to understand whether their choices of career, domestic roles and games were influenced by the textbook they read.

In order to get the necessary data about what my students and I think about these differences in the textbook, I guided my research with the following exploratory research questions:

A. What do I think about references to gender differences identified in the selected text?
B. What do my students think about references to gender differences identified in the selected texts they read?
C. What references to gender differences do I identify in the selected text?

The first question guided my thoughts and assumptions about gender biases and stereotypes in textbooks used in teaching my students. To answer the first research question, I used my reflective journal from the course I took and class lessons in order to evaluate my perception of aspects of gender differences in English textbooks. This research question guided me through my students' perceptions about various aspects of gender biases and stereotypes. I used a close-ended questionnaire and an essay test to determine what my students think about references to gender differences as identified in the selected textbook. And for the third research question, I carried out an analysis of the selected English textbook, identifying aspects of gender differences in the passage contents, images and exercises in it.

After all of these explorations, I found out from the outcome of the classwork given to my students on essay writing that all their responses were based on the gender-biased pictures provided in the textbook exercises. The males preferred careers that were presented as male and vice versa. As a result, male learners picked careers in engineering, medicine and law among others, while females selected nursing and careers that were more nurturing-related, like nursing and catering among others. I deemed it necessary to enlighten my students on their chosen careers. The selected textbook for my Year 9 learners contains images that misrepresent the female and male genders in topics like chosen careers, roles and games, and also there was no supplementary material to balance the gender-based differences while I was teaching the topic.

As indicated in the extracts from the English textbook, out of the illustrated careers, only nursing is represented as a female career. Others (lawyers, police officers and bankers) are all represented as male careers. As a result of these stereotypes in the text, the majority of my students were gender-biased in their career selection. For instance, none of the boys except one chose to be a nurse. Others felt such a career (nursing) is for females and could be stereotyped for choosing it. In terms of domestic roles and games activities, the activities in the pictures presented in the selected English textbook were based on domestic chores and games and sports activities boys and girls regularly do.

The outcome of the first part of the questionnaires was presented to a total of 20 Year 9 students of equal gender proportion (ten boys and ten girls). Only three girls and nine boys responded that they engage in outdoor games and sports such as racing, riding a bicycle and hiking on a regular basis. There were no significant differences in the participation of boys and girls in domestic activities. However, eight of the responses from the girls and six from the boys indicated that girls' participation in domestic chores such as fetching water and going to the market outnumbered the boys'. In short, only one male student out of ten responded that he would regularly go to the market, while others would not.

In summary, the responses from the students indicated that male students engage more in sports and games, while female students do more domestic chores and activities. The selected English textbook did not change these wrong perceptions of the learners, as they are illustrated in the images in it.

In order to moderate these findings, I carried out the following action plans for a period of four weeks. In the first week, the first action plan was on designing gender-neutral instructional materials. I printed pictures showing gender-balanced domestic activities, games, sports and career choices. The copies of the supplementary materials illustrated male and female police officers fully kitted, male and female lawyers in their robes, male and female bankers in suits, male and female nurses and doctors in scrubs and stethoscopes, Nigerian male and female footballers in their jerseys and a picture of a man and woman riding their bicycles.

Sample gender-neutral supplementary materials

Images by Canva

In the second week, the action plan was to engage students in gender-balance activities and roles, such as girls racing and riding a bicycle and males skipping and singing, among others. These activities were to balance the biased activities in the textbook. In the third week, the action plan was to invite resource persons such as male nurses and female lawyers to address the students on why these professions are gender-neutral. I invited a nurse to give a talk on the topic 'Nursing: A career for both male and female'. I also sensitised the students about other jobs they can do irrespective of their gender, using supplementary resources.

Finally, in week four we had revisions, exhibitions, interviews and assessments. I distributed the questionnaires and printed instructional resources to the students for evaluation purposes. I asked my learners some interview questions in order to know whether my actions in weeks one to three influenced the perceptions of my learners about gender differences as illustrated in their textbook.

In order to measure the impact of the action plans on my research findings, I re-administered the questionnaire (as a post-test) and conducted some semi-structured interview questions and asked students to answer some close-ended essay questions from the selected English textbook. The evaluations assessed the effectiveness of the use of instructional strategies such as the application of supplementary materials, invitation of a resource person and engaging the learners in some gender-neutral activities.

The nurse and I sensitised the students on 'Nursing: A career choice for both males and females'.

The invited nurse (in his scrubs) and I in the midst of all the Year 9 students.

The interview with my students would evoke the answers to these questions and reveal their perceptions about career choice:

1. Do you agree that some professions are meant for men, while some are for women?
2. Do you think Nurse Olalekan Azeez, the resource person, is fit for a nursing job even though he is a male? Tell me why.

At the end of the evaluation, I discovered that the supplementary instructional materials made the learners understand the domestic roles, sports activities and career choices without bias. The colour-printed materials gave a better representation of both genders without bias, which subsequently helped to correct the misconceptions of my students about what career field they can choose from without looking at their gender as a significant factor. In an interview, a student commented, 'I am able to see that anyone can do anything', in reference to gender roles. Furthermore, the responses from the 20 interviewed students indicated that all of them agreed that nursing is a profession for both males and females. Inviting a male nurse not only wowed my students but also ignited the male students' passion for this career. They have been culturally disoriented that the job is for females only. I recall that only one male student initially chose to be a nurse in my class, but by the end of this intervention, after meeting with Nurse Olalekan Azeez, all the ten male students became passionate about the profession.

The outcome of the evaluation tools showed that the action plans had a positive effect on the perception of the students about their genders and gender roles.

The role-play-based teaching strategy I used while exposing the females to outdoor sports and games such as racing and riding bicycles increased the motivation of the students to do outdoor sports. A student said, 'I feel encouraged to participate in the sports' (interview). During the evaluation, both the male and female students responded that sports, games and domestic activities were not gender-specific. More so, all the students ticked all the listed career choices to mean they are for both genders.

This research journey has enormously influenced my understanding of gender issues related to my classroom, textbook resources and students. This process has exposed me to apply my knowledge about gender bias and stereotypes in my practical classroom. The British Council courses and workshops on exploring gender equality in education were eye-opening. I found it very resourceful during this exploratory action research.

Having properly analysed the selected English textbook and used instructional materials, I understand that textbook resources play a significant role in addressing gender-related issues. This is why teachers should be mindful of the texts learners are exposed to in the classroom. Moreover, I have learned that gender roles and activities are determined through erroneous beliefs and cultural practices exposed through textbooks. The images and texts must be scrutinised thoroughly against any gender misrepresentations.

Notwithstanding, gender bias can manifest from every stakeholder in education, such as schools, parents, teachers, publishers and even students through their sociocultural beliefs and sentiments. The kinds of duties and chores assigned by schools and parents to every child should not be gender-based, as this can leave a misconception in the mind of the child. Every child must be exposed to gender-neutral activities both at home and at school. More so, publishers need to deploy a more gender-transformative method in order to use the textbook as a tool in addressing the societal norms that are gender-biased. For instance, images and language use should not be stereotypic. Nigerian publishers need to be exposed to courses and practical workshops on gender and publishing in education. Meanwhile, the education ministry should play its role in overseeing published educational materials.

I have also learned that inviting professionals as resource persons from different fields (both male and female) can positively influence the career choices of the students. Resource persons are useful sources of information, because my learners got first-hand experience of these careers through them. My learners got inspired during a session with the invited resource persons after talking about their jobs and professions.

Finally, all students, both males and females, should be exposed to various activities, roles, games and sports that used to be traditionally gender-specific in order to give equal learning opportunities to the students. Let us teach the boys how to cook, sweep, skip and do shopping. Schools should provide extra support for teachers to inculcate these in their scheme of work.