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## Hidden Curriculum and Subliminal Gender Bias: A Japanese Case-Study

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IAN CLARK

### Abstract

Bias is communicated via the “hidden curriculum” - the vehicle for the unspoken academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school. Revealing the hidden curriculum entails an analytical approach to the content of conversations and illustrations appearing in school textbooks. Such analysis requires the exploration of female depictions and their interconnectedness with corresponding depictions of males that often differ and create subliminal gender bias. This article reviews existing international research on the hidden curriculum before going on to present a Japanese case-study of a textbook in widespread use in Japanese public junior high schools. It was found that while men and women are represented equally in terms of quantity, there exists a remarkable subliminal gender bias, which impacts young learners’ worldviews of female and male roles in society.

**Keywords:** gender bias, school textbooks, hidden curriculum

### Introduction

The hidden curriculum is a global phenomenon of significance to educators around the world because school textbooks play a crucial role in shaping students’ worldview of female and male roles in their respective societies. A qualitative case-study research method (Yin, 2009) was applied to the first book of the *New Crown* series, which was examined for gender bias – the depiction of women in subordinate roles or engaged in stereotypical activities. The series is published by Sanseido and targets students at middle schools.

A previous study on Japanese English language textbooks (ELTs) conducted by Otlowski (2003) emphasized that, “a number of textbooks, and especially textbooks published in Japan fail to represent accurately the substantial role women ... play in the make up and workforce of modern societies” (p. 7). The task of reform is very challenging, and differs according to national and cultural circumstances. The over-arching task is one that entails changing the cultural definition of masculinity to include equality with and respect for females.

Based on the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted 1979), and the Beijing Platform for Action (adopted 1995), textbooks promote gender equality if they meet the following criteria: (1) females are protagonists; (2) females and males are not described according to a stereotypical sexual division of labor; (3) ways of living free of conventional ideas

of femininity and masculinity are described positively; (4) topics encourage students to think about sexual discrimination and gender equality; (5) topics encourage students to reconsider various issues close to them from a gender perspectives; (6) topics encourage students to think about female's human rights as a global issue. In the case study of *New Crown* it will be seen that the textbook fails to deliver on any of the above criteria. A system of education is a product of collective thought and follows the changes of social values. It is then no surprise to find gender bias and stereotyping in Japanese public junior high school ELTs.

## **Comparative Studies**

### **Inequity in International Contexts**

A significant body of research which focuses on ELTs has been produced by various nations around the world. For example, a recent Iranian analysis found that only 18% of females were portrayed in occupational roles, whereas for males this was 82% (Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012). In a Greek ELT, only 13.6% of women were portrayed as paid workers compared to 53% of men (Deiyanni-Kouimtzi, 1992). A Jordanian study (Hamdan, 2010) found that males were shown to be the major element in the labour force in society, filling 79% of the occupational roles. This finding is paralleled by a Malaysian study (Kumard, 2002), which found males were engaged in a greater variety of occupations and the active participants in many outdoor activities. In contrast, females were limited to a small range of occupations and engaged in passive indoor activities. Similarly, in Pakistan, Mattu and Hussain's study (2003) emphasised that textbook publishers are "resistant to women's rights and believe in the status quo" (p. 91). The study noted that girls are portrayed as unobtrusive. In contrast, boys are curious, active and ready to take the initiative.

Even in nations with a national commitment of gender equity there are no guarantees. For example, in Sweden, Holmqvist and Gjörup (2006) found that most occupations were held by men and women were described without an occupation or with a stereotypical one. Such problems don't necessarily recede with the passage of time. For example, Lee and Collins (2006) analysed ELTs in Hong Kong across a period of some 30 years, and reported that there had been no discernable improvement across this time. This finding is well supported by the results of this study.

### **Inequity in Japanese Contexts**

There is historical background for gender inequity in Japanese textbooks that indicates the generalisability of the findings in this case study (Kato, 2002; Lee, 2014; Otlowski, 2003; Sano, Iida & Hardy, 2001; Sakita, 1995). Some fifteen years ago Sano et al. (2001) gave a presentation on a range of Japanese junior high school ELTs (including *New Crown*) at which they presented various characteristics of bias. These characteristics included the empowerment of males as deciders and choosers; that remarks made by males had more substance; and chapter themes focused on male characters. Similarly, Otlowski (2003) found that women were portrayed as homemakers and mothers, a bias reinforced by a general lack of women in the workplace. Women were seen to participate in and oversee domestic duties such as laundry, shopping, and food preparation. In contrast, situations outside the home were the domain of male characters. Otlowski's (2003) study parallels an earlier Japanese study by Sakita (1995) which found that males were depicted as mountaineer, sailor, colonel, priest and carpenter. Females filled occupations such as student, maid, actress, ballet dancer and mother. Topics on gender (e. g. women's movements and female protagonists) were (and still are) a rare inclusion in Japanese textbooks, "and only three women--Marie Curie, Mother Teresa, and Helen Keller--appeared frequently" (Kato, 2002). In a recent study of Japanese textbooks conducted by Lee (2014) it was found that "general disparities in the forms of female invisibility, male firstness and stereotypical images are still prevalent in the textbooks examined" (p. 1).

The findings of Sakita (1995), Sano et al. (2001) and Otlowski (2003) were published many years ago.

These background studies indicate that the Japanese education ministry's mission to propagate gender equality through education has not been put into practice by textbook writers and publishers. As Lee and Collins (2006) noted, one should not be surprised that gender inequity exists even when considering that the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the *New Crown* series was published as recently as 2014. The textbook under review contains numerous examples of thematic bias, specifically themes of silence, compliance, subordination and the social status, occupational roles and activities in general of females vis-à-vis those of males. The question that guided the construction of this article is: Has subliminal gender bias been eliminated from Japanese ELTs? This case study confirms earlier research in the Japanese context, concluding that the answer is a resounding "no".

### Qualitative Analysis

Studies often report that females are less visible than males and are excluded from the textbook which favours the inclusion of males. However, this was not found to be true in this case study. There are 315 illustrations of males and 303 of females (3.9% more males). However, it is worth noting that some pages do feature males only, while this is never the case for females. For example, there are 11 male images on page 80 and 23 on page 105. The closest corresponding page is page 81 where only 2 of the 12 images are of males. In general, it is not the quantity of visual images of males and females that creates bias in this case. It is the qualitative aspects of their lives. As they enact their respective social worlds in words and pictures they are seen to engage in differing activities, which present them in ways that suggest biased social categorisations.

#### The Front Cover

Bias of the kind that Lee (2014) describes as "male firstness" begins on the front cover which shows a young male and a young female. The male is the dominant figure, large and in the foreground. He is dynamic and active, riding his bicycle at high speed as indicated by his hair flying behind him. He is waving his hat in the air. We may also imagine that the boy is shouting to his girlfriend who stands in the distance as a shadowy and silent figure. His female counterpart is standing still, and there is no suggestion of movement or speech. She is waiting for him in the shade, a distant, passive and obscure figure. While the first book of the series is the focus of this case-study the front cover of book two exhibits similar favouritism towards males. In that case a boy and girl are in a hot air balloon. The boy is empowered by the possession of a telescope so that he may see further and with greater clarity.

#### Occupations and Activities

The social and economic supremacy of males is clearly evident on pages 14 and 15. Of the 19 illustrations only 5 are girls. So, while the overall number of appearances in the textbook is quite balanced, there is a very clear imbalance on these pages devoted to occupations and activities. The pages feature males engaged in adventurous, superior or 'cool' roles: astronaut, doctor, administrator, vet, father and pop singer. Males are also depicted as engaged in various activities that reinforce positive aspects of maleness: (1) opening a box in a way that suggests curiosity and risk-taking; (2) playing with a yo-yo skillfully and dynamically; (3) eating lunch with a large confident grin; (4) a boy with his mouth wide open in an exaggerated manner suggesting great confidence; (5) one of the main male characters writing his name on the classroom board indicating teacher-like status. In contrast the five girls are not shown to be any of the above. None are shown to have an occupation. Instead they are shown: (1) looking pretty while silently drinking juice; (2) holding up a plate of food that we must assume she has prepared; (3) asking a question, which can only suggest a gap in her knowledge. We know she is asking a question and not answering one

because of the large question mark in the picture. The corresponding image appears on page 121. Here a boy has his hand raised to answer a question. We understand he knows the answer because the (male) teacher is pointing at him in order to elicit it from him; (4) taking direction, albeit from an older female. The fifth illustration is of a girl, simply standing there and doing nothing at all; the very example of passivity. There are two small illustrations of a woman in a laboratory coat (e. g. p. 54), but rather ironically it serves to remind the reader of the remarkable paucity of such images. Another female is shown as working at a museum. She is on reception, her sole purpose is to receive and support others. Predictably, the uniformed authority figure of the town (a police officer) is male.

**Sporting activities.** Sports can be used to present males and females differently. For example, an illustration of an aggressive looking male baseball player with his bat raised is paired with one of a girl in her school uniform smiling benignly. In basketball there is a sense of non-stop action and the potential for bodily contact. Baseball uses a hard bat and requires the players to hit hard and slide aggressively. Tennis, on the other hand, is perceived as a relatively gentle game more suitable for less powerful females. Consequently, basketball and baseball are represented in the textbook as almost exclusively male activities. There are 12 illustrations of males playing baseball and 12 for basketball, whereas there is only 1 female baseball player and 2 female basketball players. For tennis, there are 15 female images and only 3 male tennis players.

There is a chapter themed around wheelchair basketball. This is the only chapter with an overtly male theme. However, the writers/publishers do appear to have made some effort to redress the male v female inequality in terms of relative quantity. Page 82 features 12 illustrations, of which 10 are of females. Yet, even in a chapter devoted to basketball none of the images on this page portray females as basketball players. While girls are never illustrated as basketball players, there is a photograph of four female players on the final page of the chapter; however, this is counterbalanced by 4 illustrations of males on the same page, one of which is a game official.

### **Female Silence and Compliance**

It has been found that girls are often depicted exhibiting “healthy” behaviours typical for girls and not boys. They are “silent, compliant, gentle, helpful, neat and polite” (Irby & Brown, 2011, p. 22). Irby and Brown (2011) emphasise that “the lessons of the hidden curriculum teach girls to value silence and compliance, to view those qualities as a virtue” (p. 244). This is reflected in the composition of the *New Crown* textbook.

Much of what happens in the textbook occurs at an imaginary school. Several pages into the textbook (page 6–7) the reader is presented with a plan view of the town in which the school is located as a double page feature. The main characters are depicted, as are other uncredited characters, all of which are engaged in various activities around the town. Boys are more active: running, riding bicycles, and walking dogs. The themes of female silence and passive reception are first encountered in this section of the textbook. A girl sits quietly at an ice-cream stall while her male companion speaks, his mouth wide. While there is only one instance of female silence on this page, it indicates why it is necessary to avoid a reductionist approach. Illustrations, which reinforce the theme of silent girls listening to ‘chatty’ boys recur throughout the textbook. For example, on page 70 a boy speaks as a girl listens and takes notes. Boys are seen to have ownership over the (con)text rather than sharing it as they hold the books, and point to it while the girls stand at their side. When taken collectively (as a whole) they suggest asymmetrical power relations.

Two of the girls in the town are demonstrating compliance as they walk obediently across the pedestrian crossings. The corresponding male image is of a handicapped boy in a wheelchair. These forms of subliminal bias are difficult to discern unless one takes a holistic approach, but when taken together the indi-

vidual images create a whole image that reinforces compliant behavior among girls, and suggests that less able boys behave in the same way as girls. There are a number of illustrations that depict girls as passive recipients and boys as the dominant interlocutors.

Even though the conversations in the text are very short, there are clear examples of the female characters in the textbook taking a subordinate or caretaker role. On page 21 a girl compliments her male friend's prowess ("You're good Ken.") at basketball before going on to ask him "Are you thirsty?" This question is reinforced through repetition further down the page by a different girl. Another example of a girl in a caretaker role is to be found on page 62 as she organizes the school bags of her male friends. A further example of girls supporting boys occurs on page 102. The girl provides the boy with the information he requires to make a decision on what they will do ("I see. Then today let's take a bus"), and the conversation ends.

A conversation on page 23 opens with the girl apologizing to the boy without any particular reason for doing so ("Oh, I'm sorry"). This is an example of those "healthy" behaviours that "ideal" (female) students should exhibit. That is, she is submissive and polite. Girls in the textbook are faced with an unfavourable discourse gradient in other ways:

Boy: "I have a cat."  
Girl: "Really?"  
Boy: "The cat is white."  
Girl: "Oh." (p. 125)

The girl, while responsive, is mono-syllabic and mostly receptive. This is also one of two examples of male ownership on this page without corresponding female examples.

There is a subliminal gender bias toward girls for linguistic competence; Emma: "I study Japanese before class." (p. 74), and against girls for the traditional male dominated subject area of math. The same character (Emma) asks a male friend for help with her mathematics homework:

Emma: "Can you help me with tomorrow's math homework?" (p. 90).

Both aspects conform to the widely held belief that girls are expected to be less capable than boys at mathematics, but more linguistically able than male students. However, there is no explicit suggestion that Emma is actually good at Japanese here, only that she gets up early to study it. On the other hand, we know that she cannot do math and that her male counterpart can.

### **Domestic Service**

As noted earlier there is a general expectation that Japanese women will leave employment in order to organize and manage the household. In the case of the textbook, this is reflected in both words and pictures. On page 44 a boy and a girl are at the supermarket:

Emma: "I have a shopping bag."  
Ken: "Good."

Even in this brief exchange, we see the female has organized for one of her primary functions – shopping, and we see the male reinforce her positively for that behaviour. In the background of the same picture two adult females are shopping in their roles as "good wives", one of which is with a small child performing her role as the "wise mother" - traditional roles of social significance in Japan (Fukaya, 1988). The "healthy" female roles of shopping and food preparation are reinforced in the textbook. For example:

“How much is the blouse?”

“It’s 2000 yen.” (p. 141)

“Where is Mom?” (capital M in the original text).

“She’s in the kitchen.” (p. 142)

There are more vignettes that depict females as domestic managers who make cookies and go shopping (p. 107).

The domestic and social roles and behaviours are clearly demarked. In a further obvious example a picture of a man dressed as a chef is paired with one of a woman dressed as a housewife. So stereotypically is she portrayed that she actually appears to be wearing her apron as her uniform (p. 124). Such images promote male cooks as being engaged in more important breadwinning roles outside the home while subordinating females to that of a domestic kitchen.

Even when males are shown to be actively involved in domestic work it is the female who assumes some level of control:

“Wait. Don’t wash the dishes.

Please use this paper.” (p. 48)

In a different illustration (p. 104) a boy assists his mother in the kitchen. His mother is in control at the stove, reinforcing the stereotype that she has dominion over the kitchen as the “good wife” and over her child as the “wise mother”.

### Conclusion

The findings of this case study confirm those of earlier Japanese and international studies introduced in the literature review of this article. It is of course perfectly acceptable to depict men as adventurous, confident, knowledgeable and dynamic if textbooks then include corresponding images and conversations that elevate females to an equal status, and promote their learning identities beyond that of compliant caretaker. Unfortunately, the corresponding female vignettes are either absent or, where present, operate to exaggerate bias. There are of course examples of boys doing housework, such as washing a plate and cleaning his room, and one illustration of a girl taking out the rubbish. There are others; however, they are notably infrequent instances, which provide only cosmetic attention to gender equality.

Historically, the family rather than the individual has been the basic unit of Japanese society; however, this has changed to some degree. The ideal of ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’ (Fukaya, 1988) that emerged in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, becoming increasingly institutionalised by the 1920s, is now under review by high-level elements of the Japanese government. Provision should be made in public school textbooks for young learners to understand the economic impact that female participation may have. In 2014, *The Economist* reported that raising female labour participation to the level of males could add 8 million people to Japan’s shrinking workforce (down 40 % by 2050), potentially increasing GDP by as much as 15 % . Yet, as Otlowski (2003) emphasized, “textbooks published in Japan fail to represent accurately the substantial role women ... play in the make up and workforce of modern societies” (p. 7). Despite the important role for working women, this case study revealed a “hidden curriculum” that communicates overt and subliminal gender bias, missing the opportunity to prepare young learners for a more economically viable future founded on equitable social and economic participation. When analyzed holistically, bias accumulates to form a pervasive counterproductive theme of social and economic inequality between females

and males. In this case study it is apparent that despite MEXT's stated intention, Japanese ELT writers and publishers neither meet the United Nations criteria for gender equity, nor those of the industrialised global community.

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