

Chapter 15

Gender in Finnish school textbooks for basic education

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Gender equality is one of the most widely accepted goals in education (e.g. UNESCO, 2007). In addition to struggling with such urgent and important goals as to eliminate gender disparity and ensure equal access to basic education all around the world, the documents also encourage paying attention to issues that affect the learning process itself, such as classroom interaction and teachers' treatment of students and the representation of gender in textbooks and other kinds of learning materials used in schools (Blumberg, 2007; Gordon et al., 2000). Interestingly, one of the most geographically widespread phenomena is the gender bias of school textbooks. Blumberg (2007) demonstrates that research on textbooks is numerous and available in all continents, and according to these studies, gender bias in learning materials follow the same pattern, namely that females are underrepresented and that both females and males are depicted in gender-stereotyped ways.

In this chapter, I analyse school textbooks for basic education in Finland, focusing on thirty books for Finnish language and literature education⁴². My aim is to study whether there is a gender bias in these books and in what ways gender is represented in the illustrations and texts of these books. My analysis is based on an earlier study involving quantitative and qualitative analysis of books that are in current use (Tainio and Teräs, 2010). All school textbooks in Finland are designed in the spirit of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2004). This document explicitly mentions that 'gender equality is promoted by giving girls and boys the ability to act on the basis of equal rights and responsibilities in society, working life, and family life' (National Curriculum, 2004, p. 12).

I take it for granted that all texts involve and communicate ideologies, and that those ideologies matter for the reader (Fairclough, 1989; Oteiza, 2003). Critical discourse analysts use the concept of naturalisation to refer to those

42 In the National Curriculum (2004) this subject is called Mother tongue and literature (L1). For the sake of clarity, I use the term Finnish language and literature.

recurrent explicit and covert ideological meanings, represented through linguistic or semiotic features that become common to the extent that they are seen to represent the natural and legitimate state of affairs (Fairclough, 1989, p. 91-93). The systematic and dominant character of these features make them influential, and strangely enough, also hard to notice. Fairclough (1989, p. 92) sees naturalisation as 'the royal road to common sense', meaning that when an ideology becomes dominant, it also becomes invisible to a certain point, and will be seen as core to the discourse or the institution it represents. This is why it is especially important to pay attention to and analyse the ideologies present in official textbooks used in schools. School textbooks have 'the power to impose cultural meanings and to structure student's perceptions of reality' (Oteiza, 2003, p. 640).

In classrooms, teachers often rely heavily on textbooks, spending sometimes eighty to ninety-five per cent of the teaching time by using them (see Blumberg, 2007, p. 6). According to earlier studies on Finnish basic education, also in Finland teachers seem to spend a lot of their time in classrooms using textbooks, and the contents of textbooks have been shown to influence both teaching practices and subject didactics (e.g. Heinonen, 2005). Although teachers are certainly able to make use of textbooks in their teaching in several ways—also in critical ways (Sunderland, 2000)—the importance of textbooks for teaching and learning should be taken seriously. While students learn subject matter through texts and through teachers' use of textbooks, students are not able to avoid the impact of the ideologies embedded in the texts, even if they read the texts in different or critical ways. Therefore it is important to find out how teachers perceive the ideologies of textbooks. This is why I explore teachers' ways of observing the gender ideology of textbooks in this chapter, analysing a discussion between two teachers as they study a set of textbooks.

Earlier studies on textbooks and gender

School textbooks are institutionalised and authoritative texts produced for the purpose of teaching and learning. In these texts, the authors' thinking is visible but it is constructed through several actors and instances, such as the national curriculum, the discourses connected to the scientific fields of different subjects, dominant educational ideas about learning and teaching, and of course, through the editor's and publisher's instructions (Oteiza, 2003). Finnish school textbooks usually consist of different kinds of material, for example, informational texts, extracts from other literary sources, exercises, examples, lists and abstracts,

and illustration (pictures and photos). The style of the informational texts has been described as factual, authoritative, objective, and general; it is also usual that facts and interpretations are provided as if they were the only ones. There are usually several series of volumes available in the market for teachers and schools to select.

Gender bias and the representation of gender in school textbooks has been one of the interests, although not a very popular one, for Finnish researchers on education and linguistics. One of the pioneering works was Elina Lahelma's (1992) analysis on textbooks for subjects connected to social studies. According to her analysis, women were seen as more responsible for care work and men as more powerful and active participants in society. Women remained more or less invisible, especially in history textbooks. Also more recent studies of Finnish school textbooks have recurrently reported gender bias and stereotyped images of gender (see Tainio and Teräs, 2010). Analyses of heteronormativity and heterosexism show that the diversity of sexes and sexualities are not represented or receive only minimal attention in school textbooks.

Earlier analyses of Finnish language and literature textbooks show that also in this field, women are underrepresented in texts and illustrations, and that gender images are traditional. This is displayed both in informational texts and in the numerous citations of fictional texts, which are typical elements in first language textbooks (Palmu, 2003). The textbooks for first grades contain a lot of fictional texts and illustrations, but the characters in the fictional texts as well as in the pictures are mostly masculine (Palmu, 1992). Also references to persons, for example to writers of fiction and other authors, contain more references to men (Palmu, 2003).

A closer look at textbooks

In this chapter, I analyse Finnish language and literature textbooks that are currently in use in grades 3, 6, and 9 (students aged nine, twelve, and fifteen), available on the market by the biggest publishers in Finland in 2011. I wanted to focus on this subject because, first, Finnish language and literature is seen to be one of the most important subjects for developing students' academic and literacy skills, such as reading and writing. Consequently, there are more Finnish language and literature lessons than there are of any other subject in basic education. Secondly, the image of this subject is said to be gendered: it is seen as a 'feminine' subject (Lappalainen, 2009). This might even be one reason behind the fact that, in average, female students achieve better results in language and

literature education throughout basic education, and they are more motivated to learn this subject than boys (Lappalainen, 2009). The gendered image of the subject appears also in the gender division of the textbook writers: the vast majority of the writers of these textbooks are women (eighty-six women to twenty-three men, see Tainio and Teräs 2010, p. 21).

I will analyse the texts and illustrations of the textbooks with the help of content analysis (e.g. Krippendorff, 2003). Content analysis is used as a method in studies that aim for an overall picture of very large data. In this analysis, I use both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to reveal a possible gender bias in the books. I also draw on critical discourse analysis to interpret the kind of cultural meanings of gender embedded in the books more qualitatively (Fairclough, 1989).

In this chapter, I also study the ways in which teachers observe gender in textbooks. Applying the method of conversation analysis, I explore a conversation between two teachers who talk about five text books for ninth grade and who I asked to pay attention to the representations of gender in the books. Conversation analysis is a method that analyses everyday interaction as a fundamentally organised social activity (e.g. Hutchby and Wooffit, 2001). According to conversation analysis, participants collaborate and negotiate during the course of an interaction with the help of shared practices on a turn by turn basis. The teachers were asked to 'think aloud' about what they saw in the books and on what grounds they would choose a textbook for themselves if they were able to select one of the books they looked at for use in their classroom (see Sasaki, 2008).

Objects for analysis: Illustrations, gender specific words and passages about gender

As in the earlier analysis (Tainio and Teräs, 2010), my first aim was to find out if there was a gender bias in the illustrations: every person and gendered fantasy character in the illustration (pictures and photos) was counted. Some characters and persons were impossible to categorise as male or female; they were categorised as 'other'. My second aim was to analyse the texts, or more precisely, the words used in the texts, to find out if there was a gender bias in references to persons (and fantasy characters); all those words that carry markings of gender were counted. Finnish language is considered to be genderless since there is no grammatical gender and, for example, even in the third person singular (cf. *he/she* categorisation in English) the personal pronouns do not carry reference

to gender (Tainio, 2006). This means that in Finnish there are gender markings only in certain nouns, such as first names, which in Finnish reveal the sex of the person, and certain nouns such as *tyttö* 'girl', *kuningas* 'king', and *lentoemäntä* 'air hostess'. My third aim was to explore if the textbooks contained information on gender equality or on sex and gender divisions in culture and society. In the following, I will present some of the findings of the quantitative analysis of textbooks together with more qualitative analysis of extracts from textbooks and of the teachers' conversation.

Illustrations

All the textbooks contained lots of pictures and photos; the majority of the pictures depicted persons and fantasy characters. Gender bias favoring pictures of males was clearly prominent (see Tainio and Teräs, 2010). From 7,762 pictures of persons or fictional characters, 61.5 per cent were of males and 33.9 per cent of females. Only 6.7 per cent of the persons were not clearly marked as male or female. The proportion of pictures of males was lowest in the textbooks for third grade (males 58.5%, females 24.8%) and grew steadily up to ninth grade (males 65.3%, females 33.2%). Interestingly, the gender/sex of fantasy characters in particular was overwhelmingly masculine (1,089 male fantasy characters, 271 female fantasy characters). The majority of pictures of persons were of adults (3,475 altogether), and most of the adults were men (2,267). There were slightly more pictures of boys in the pictures depicting children.

When a reader picks up a new book, the first thing she explores is the illustration and overall typography of the textbook together with the contents. This happened also in my data. Most of the teachers' comments about gender bias in the textbooks focused on illustrations. In the selection of books they explored⁴³, they paid attention to the illustration of especially one textbook, *Sisu*. In this textbook, the number of pictures of male persons and characters was exceptionally vast (304 males to 73 females) which was noticed by teachers. The illustration of *Sisu* includes pictures of two cartoon characters that are displayed on almost every page. These characters are called *Sisu* and *Pussi* (fictional names with no reference to gender). The teachers Mari and Sini are seated next to each other and the textbooks are in front of them on a table. At the beginning of the example, Mari is holding *Sisu* and Sini looks at it while Mari shows her a picture⁴⁴.

43 The textbooks teachers were studying are *Loitsu 9*, *Sisu 9*, *Aleksis 9*, *Taju*, and *Aktiivi 9*.

44 See over

Example 1. ⁴⁵

- 01 *Sini*: Siel on vähemmän ihmisten kuvii.=siel on luontokuvii enemmän
(.) jos aattelee
*There are less pictures of people.=there are more pictures of nature (.)
if you think*
- 02 miten (.) niinku esimerkiks sitä (1.0) sitä sukupuolta tuodaan siel
nyt (.) esiin.
how (.)for example the (1.0) the gender is presented (.) in it.
- 03 (0.5)
- 04 *Mari*: Tässähän on (.) tässä (.) on just nää Sisu (.) nää tällaset
sarjakuvahahmot jotka
*Here there are (.) here (.) are those special Sisu (.) these cartoon
characters who*
- 05 on niinku Sisu ja Pussi?
who are called like Sisu and Pussi?
- 06 *Sini*: Joo.=
Yeah.=
- 07 *Mari*: =Nimeltään?
=by name?
- 08 *Sini*: Onks ne sit jotenkin niinku (.) £neutreja£? he he=
*Are they then like (.) £neuters£ ('without reference to gender') he
he=*
- 09 *Mari*: =No niitten on tarkoitus olla, mä tiedän ku mä ((lines omitted))
=Well they are supposed to be, I know because I ((lines omitted)) ⁴⁶
- 10 *Sini*: Joo.
Yeah.
- 11 *Mari*: Et niitten oli tarkoitus olla mutta (.) onks £ne sun mielestä£.

44 The conversation was video recorded in September 2010. The recording lasted sixty-three minutes. The teachers Mari and Sini (pseudonyms) are experienced, acting teachers in mother tongue and literature. They did not know each other before the recording. They are about forty-years-old, and both teach on the upper grades of comprehensive school, including ninth grade.

45 Transcription conventions follow those of conversation analytic framework. Here are the key conventions: Brackets ([]) mean overlapping talk; pauses are marked as minimal (.) or longer (1.5), meaning length in seconds; £ means smiling or laughing voice; he he means laughter; = means latching of turns; intonation is marked as . /, /? marking falling/level/rising intonation; nonverbal behavior is described in double brackets (()). The translations are under rows of the original talk in italics; the translations of all examples are mine.

46 A line in Mari's turn is omitted since through the information in it her identity could have been revealed.

- So that they are supposed to be but (.) what £do you think£.
- 12 (0.5) ((Mari smiles, shows a page to Sini))
- 13 Sini: No mun mielestä ne nyt on kyl (.) mielummin niinku (.) maskuliinisia hah[moja.
Well I think that they are (.) much more likely like (.) masculine characters.
- 14 Mari: [Niin.
[Yes.
- 15 Mari: Niin munkin mielestä ne on (.) oli niinku alust saakka ihan selkeesti
That is what I think too (.) I thought like that right from the beginning that
- 16 kuitenkin poikia.=
they clearly are boys.=
- 17 Sini: =Mm.
- 18 Mari: Eikä (.) niinku m- ei minkäänlaista niinku sellasta
And not (.) like no- not a bit of any sort of
- 19 androgyn[iaa kuitenkin myöskään.
androgyny [either.
- 20 Sini: [Ei.
[No:.
- 21 Sini: Mm.

Mari appears to have more information about *Sisu*; she has been thinking about the gender of these cartoon characters already before this discussion (line 15). She also initiates the sequence about the two characters (lines 4-5). However, Mari points out only the existence of the cartoon characters but reveals nothing more about her reason for mentioning these figures. Sini acknowledges with a neutral uptake ('yeah'). While Mari continues, Sini takes it as an encouragement to continue on the topic and to talk about the gender of the characters (line 8). Sini's suggestion about the genderless character of *Sisu* and *Pussi* is formed as a question addressed to a knowing participant (e.g. Macbeth, 2004). Furthermore, the end of the turn is accompanied with laughter, a conversational cue of a humorous mode (Jefferson et al., 1987). However, the question is designed to predict a certain kind of preferred response, namely a yes-answer which, in this case, would have been something like 'yes, they are designed as genderless 'neuters''. However, in her answer Mari expresses some

reservations and continues displaying the position of an expert (lines 9, 11). She asks Sini for an opinion with a turn accompanied by a smiling voice and pointing gesture (lines 11-12). Both teachers end up sharing the same opinion (lines 14-16). They agree that the two characters are boys, not neuters or even androgynies (lines 18-19), no matter how they were meant to be interpreted by the illustrator. In the course of their negotiation, this opinion and agreement is carefully built up step-by-step, and when it is said aloud, the teachers continue in full agreement with talking about the characters as males.

The two cartoon characters Sisu and Pussi are shown in Picture 1. This picture is presented in the context of learning about language history and analysing the style of old texts.

Picture 1. Sisu and Pussi.



The characters are depicted as looking at another character from a distance; this character is identifiable female with no hesitation (she has, e. g., big breasts and long eyelashes, both typical features for extremely feminine cartoon characters). Sisu utters a humorous remark, the lines containing several wordplays (the translation into English being something along the lines of: 'In/inside the past/passing person there is a semen/seed for the future'). It is difficult to interpret these lines in any other way than as sexualising both the

female character and Sisu and Pussi, and as reflecting a (heterosexual) gender ideology.

As illustrations are the first things readers pay attention to, it is probable that these kinds of humorous cartoons have a big influence on understanding of gender in the context of textbooks. Also, teachers choose to talk about these characters, and they make visible the importance of these figures to each other from the point of view of their task, to reflect on the representations of gender.

Gender specific words

School textbooks contain several types of texts, and in this analysis, all gender specific words were counted regardless of text type and context. By paying attention to gender specific words, it is possible to gain a picture of the representation of gender in textbook texts. This kind of a quantitative analysis leaves many questions unanswered and may not reveal a fair picture about the ways in which genders are represented. However, with the help of this kind of a content analysis it is possible to get an overall picture of who the authorities and other persons referred to in the texts are. It also provides us with an overall view on how much males and females are discussed in textbooks.

Textbooks for Finnish language and literature education have a prominent majority of references to males. 33,430 gender specific words were identified through the analysis, and of them 58.9 per cent referred to males. All in all, references to persons and fantasy characters were common since language and literature textbooks contain many narrative and fictional texts. In the ninth grade textbooks, there were far more male than female specific words, with 60.5 per cent of the gender specific words referring to male persons or characters. The variation between different textbooks was remarkable, shifting from a male representation of 56 per cent (*Loitsu*) to a male representation of 65 per cent (*Sisu*). In addition, about 70 per cent of the names of actual persons referred to males (4,532 men to 2,519 women). Fictional characters also contain overwhelmingly more references to males (10 413 male to 6 504 female characters).

It is much more difficult to evaluate the gender bias of texts than of illustrations when leafing through a book. The teachers in my data discussed the texts mostly through observing the titles and searching for those aspects or persons, for example writers, that they seemed to consider important in advance from the point of view of gender. In this negotiation, the teachers used their

own professional expertise to evaluate the textbooks. However, they made fewer comments on gender in texts than they did on gender in illustrations. The most common discussion theme was the gender division of writers of fiction, as it is traditional for the textbooks for ninth grade to contain a section that introduces the history of literature in Finland. The next example illustrates Mari and Sini's attention to this fact.

Example 2.

- 01 (8.0)
- 02 *Mari:* Ihan niinku tavallaan ne (.) kirjailijat joita tääl nostetaan nin, (.)
niin kyl se on
*Just like those (.) the writers that are presented here so, (.) well it is
more or less*
- 03 lähinnä toi (.) Minna Canth joka=
this (.) Minna Canth who=
- 04 *Sini:* =Niin. [Se nousee sieltä.
= Yes. [She gets attention.
- 05 *Mari:* [naiskirjailijoista niinku (.) parhaiten, (.) on esillä mutta (.)
*[among the women writers well she (.) gets most, (.) of the attention
but (.)*
- 06 muuten se on aika (0.5) äijäin kirjallisuut[ta tää.
otherwise there is more like (0.5) male litera[ture here.
- 07 *Sini:* [Niin.
[Yes.
- 08 *Sini:* Mitäs (.) tekstei onks siin mitään novelleja mites (.) kenen novelleja
siin on tai muita
*What kind of (.) texts are there any short stories how (.) whose short
stories there*
- 09 tekstejä sitte tossa.
are printed or other texts then.
- 10 *Mari:* Tääl on täs (.) Siel on (.) Minna Canthin, (.) Canthilta on yks
novelli, (.) ja sitte
*Here you find (.) There is (.) Minna Canth's (.) Canth's short story, (.)
and then*
- 11 muuten täs ei kauheesti,
otherwise there are not many,

Mari and Sini are searching for references and texts about female writers. The most celebrated woman writer in the history of Finnish literature is Minna Canth (1844-1897) who fought for equal rights and welfare for women and poor people and whose personal life was colorful. These facts make her a self-evident candidate for the introduction of Finnish literature. This seems to be shared knowledge for Mari and Sini (lines 2-5). As in the earlier extract, also in this extract Mari seems to be positioned as an expert. This is understandable because at the beginning of the conversation she told Sini that she uses this book, *Taju*, with her students. Mari is also the first to evaluate the balance between male and female writers in this textbook (lines 5-6). According to her, the book favours men writers; Sini agrees (line 7). This observation is also in line with my quantitative analysis of gender specific words used in this book: there are 712 references to men/boys compared to 320 references to women/girls. This bias is common and even more prominent in some other textbooks (Tainio and Teräs, 2010, p. 46).

All in all, the teachers saw it as being important to pay attention to the fictional texts and references to male and female writers, at least when they were asked to reflect on the ideology of gender. They found the lack of the references to women writers as a problem. The expertise of Mari on this specific book (*Taju*) made it easier for them to uncover the gender bias in the textbook. Teachers made several remarks on the titles in the text and, with the help of it; they also made observations about other matters concerning gender. Nevertheless, underlying values and ideologies related to gender cannot be revealed in a short time and without a deeper look at the texts.

Questions about sex and gender

Although gender equality is mentioned in the national curriculum in Finland, the writers of textbooks have not taken advantage of the different possibilities to share information about gender issues and gender equality and to analyse the category of gender in language, culture and society. From the point of view of quantitative analysis, the textbooks have a gender bias with the vast majority of pictures and references representing males. However, after a closer look, several sections were found where students could get information about gender issues, or were guided to analyse gender in different contexts (Tainio and Teräs, 2010, pp. 47-55). For example, in sections devoted to the analysis of fiction, it was not uncommon for students to be instructed to explore texts or characters with

specific attention to gender. Gender issues were taken up also in the passages on sociolinguistics and media education.

For the casual reader of a textbook, it is often difficult to notice the covert ideologies embedded in the texts; this requires a careful analysis (Oteiza, 2003). The teachers who explored the five textbooks did not address detailed features of the texts, even though they are trained for linguistic analysis. However, some passages provided information about gender, and they did not always promote equality. I will analyse one such example here. The extract is about humour and joking as an important field of language use and as practices connected to social bonding; the title of the text is *Mikä suomalaisia naurattaa?* 'What do Finns laugh at?'

Example 3. (*Aleksis 9. Harjoituksia*, p. 67)⁴⁷

Obscene jokes are usually told by men, and they do not tell them in the company of women. If women, for example in the workplace, have to listen to obscene jokes, this could be considered sexual harassment.

Obscene jokes are part of the culture of men and boys. In obscene jokes a woman is usually depicted as a stupid object, as in popular jokes about blonds. Joking together strengthens male social bonding and helps men survive in the world of mothers, sisters, women teachers, girlfriends and wives.

In the text, the woman writer introduces several fields of humor to readers, and one of them being obscene joking. Right at the beginning of the extract, the writer presents a stereotypical view on the gendered nature of (men) telling obscene jokes. However, the writer addresses an important sexual harassment issue, informing the readers quite correctly about the nature of this activity. Nevertheless, in the next paragraph the writer states that obscene jokes belong to male culture. This sentence is presented in indicative modus in present tense, which makes it a general statement (Hakulinen et al., 2004, p. 1510). Again, this claim is based on a stereotypical picture of men as a homogenous group with a particular culture. The description of typical women in obscene jokes

47 In Finnish: "Rivoja vitsejä kertovat enimmäkseen miehet, eikä niitä yleensä kerrota naisseurassa. Jos esimerkiksi työpaikalla naiset joutuvat kuuntelemaan heitä halventavia rivoja vitsejä, sitä voidaan pitää seksuaalisena häirintänä.

Rivot vitsit kuuluvat miesten ja poikaporukoiden kulttuuriin. Rivoissa vitseissä nainen on yleensä hölmön objektin asemassa, kuten suosituissa blondivitseissä. Yhteinen vitsinkerronta lujittaa miesten ryhmätunnetta ja helpottaa elämistä äitien, sisarten, naisopettajien, tyttöystävien ja vaimojen maailmassa."

is mentioned but with no reference to the range of different kinds of sexual or obscene jokes.

The last sentence in the example is written straightforwardly from the male point of view. This sentence suggests that the habit of obscene joking is a positive practice in the process of social bonding among groups of men. Furthermore, the world outside these groups is described as if women were in power in all contexts and recurrently restrict the life of men. The list of different groups of women who are in charge include not only family members (mothers, sisters, girlfriends, wives), but also women teachers are mentioned as making it difficult for men and boys to survive. According to this sentence, women are also the reason for obscene joking among men. The passage provides contradictory information about the organisation of gender in society and culture. It depicts women both as potential victims (of sexual harassment) and as the powerful group that restricts the life of boys and men. Without a very careful discussion, students can get very odd information about gender in language use and culture.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have analysed Finnish language and literature textbooks, and I have also presented an analysis of a conversation between two teachers looking at five textbooks, and analysed a picture and a section of one of the textbooks in order to reveal the gender ideology embedded in them. The analysis of the conversation between two teachers shows that when teachers observe textbooks in order to discuss their suitability for different learning purposes, such as learning and discussing issues on the organisation of gender in culture and society, they analyse textbooks from particular perspectives. The teachers were asked to pay attention to representations of gender in the textbooks, and at least when asked to, they were able to identify the gender bias and comment critically on it.

Although the textbooks for Finnish basic education can be considered informative, rich, and attractive, they naturalise gender bias. Improving learning materials could start from the writers of textbooks and the publishing companies. They should pay more attention to illustrations, person references and the overall construction of texts. All texts are media for ideologies, including those of gender and sexuality. However, it is possible to diminish the gender bias of school textbooks (Blumberg, 2007; Stromquist, 2007). This appeared to be important also for the teachers in my data.

Finally, teachers are key actors in the process of promoting gender equality in schools. This leads us to take a critical look also at the teacher training programs in Finland. Teachers are the ones who use books in schools, and because courses on gender issues and gender equality still are rare in teacher training programs, they do not necessarily receive guidance on these issues. According to preliminary studies on textbooks used by teacher training programs, gender issues are not prominent or even considered an important focus area (cf. Zittleman and Sadker, 2002). This means that it is possible to graduate from teacher training programs without giving a second thought to gender issues in school, in the work of a teacher, and in Finnish culture and society. Without professional guidance on gender issues, future teachers may not be able to see ideologies of gender in school textbooks and to promote gender equality in their work.

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