Discrimination and biases in textbooks used in South African public schools

Executive summary

It is generally accepted that education serves an indispensable function in any society, and that textbooks are one of the primary vehicles through which the aims of education are realised. The South African government's textbook policy gives priority to ensuring that every school learner has access to textbooks for all subjects. Yet it appears that not much attention is given to the qualitative importance of textbooks, particularly in terms of promoting egalitarianism. While publishers have long committed themselves to adhering to strict guidelines in order to ensure that biases on the basis of race, sex, gender and other forms of discrimination hidden in school textbooks are eradicated, many lapses still exist. It is therefore imperative to gain insight into the extent to which learners have access to textbooks that are learner-friendly, gender-balanced, and free from stereotypes and discrimination, and to address policy vacuums that may exist.

This policy brief draws on an assessment conducted on textbooks currently in use in South African public schools. The results reveal that various forms of discrimination are insidiously present in school textbooks. While discrimination was evidenced predominantly through imagery/pictorial presentations, there were also instances in which discrimination was expressed through language embedded in the text. This brief sets out policy recommendations for eliminating stereotypes and discriminatory practices that are manifested in these materials.

Introduction

The fundamental importance of school textbooks and other learner materials derives from the fact that they use language, and it is commonly accepted that language reflects the values of our society (Elwell 1999). Its use can perpetuate prejudice and discrimination, or reflect the celebration of diversity (University of Melbourne 2005). It is therefore important to ensure that the language used in textbooks and other supplementary learner materials is inclusive, and that we are sensitive to the risk of patronising, offending or excluding others through our use of it (Open University 2008).

Through the use of language, textbooks and other learner materials have the power to transmit knowledge and build skills. Indeed, textbooks are one of the most potent and versatile influences in the way learners interact with the world. This is because they are an authoritative source of information (Kobia 2009) and because they shape attitudes (Mkuchu 2004; Sumalatha 2004) and behaviours (Obura 1994). Textbooks can be the basis for positive social participation by serving as a vehicle for human rights, including the principles and practices of non-violence, gender equity and non-discrimination. The reported statistics on textbook usage further underscore the importance of these materials. Sadker and Zittleman (2007: 144) cite research which indicates 'that students spend as much as 80 to 95% of classroom time using textbooks and that teachers make a majority of their instructional decisions based on the textbook'. Similarly, a Canadian study found that the average teacher uses textbooks for 70 to 90% of classroom time (Baldwin & Baldwin 1992).

Under apartheid, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 made provision for an education system that was designed to maintain racial and gender prejudices and stereotypes, and to perpetuate inequalities (Fiske & Ladd 2004). In the post-apartheid era, the right to basic education for all is enshrined in the South African Constitution, and ensuring that this right is realised has been a priority since formal apartheid ended in 1994. In 2009, government intensified its campaign for basic education as a prerequisite for full and meaningful citizenship for all South Africans and a better life for all. One of the most recent policy documents giving effect to this is Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025 (Department of Basic Education 2011).

The Action Plan has 27 goals, with Goal 19 – 'Ensure that every learner has access to the minimum set of textbooks and workbooks required according to national policy' – being one of 5 priority goals for the period up to 2014 (Department of

Basic Education 2011: 9). Implicit in this goal is the recognition of textbooks as critical tools for the provision of quality education and the importance of ensuring access to textbooks. But while the Action Plan makes intermittent mention of the *right* textbooks and of *good* textbooks, it does not clearly state what would constitute such a learning tool. Much more emphasis is placed on ensuring that quantitative deficiencies with regard to textbook access are remedied. In other words, not much attention appears to be given to the qualitative importance of textbooks, particularly with regard to the extent to which their contents promote egalitarian values through the language and illustrations used in them. While publishers have long appeared to commit themselves to promoting egalitarianism by adhering to strict guidelines to ensure that biases on the basis of race, sex, gender and other forms of discrimination hidden in public school textbooks are eradicated (Britton & Lumpkin 1977), many lapses still exist. This necessitates an ongoing engagement with the extent to which discrimination manifests itself in textbooks and provides the rationale for assessing textbooks used in South African public schools.

Discriminatory language

Discriminatory language is that which creates or reinforces a hierarchy of difference between people (University of Melbourne 2005). It can be targeted to a range of different dimensions of identity, including sex and gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, political or religious beliefs, and physical, intellectual or psychiatric disability. Recognising the complexity of identity has very real implications for how we use language; it does not imply a limit on the options for speech, but argues for a more precise and accurate use of language (University of Melbourne 2005). According to Pauwels (1991), employing non-discriminatory language ensures that our differences in opinions, lifestyles, choices and

experiences are recognised, validated and reflected in our interactions with others. In order to use language more accurately and effectively, we need to be willing to recognise the assumptions and values that inform language choices. It also needs to be acknowledged that the majority of instances of discriminatory language occur unwittingly (Pauwels 1991). Sometimes words or phrases become so entrenched that we don't think of what they imply or signify to others. Listening to the voices around us opens up possibilities for more representative and inclusive language use (University of Melbourne 2005).

According to Grant (1975), schools have become very important in the institutionalisation of racism through the use of racially biased textbooks that serve as vehicles for transmitting values of racial superiority and inferiority. Meehan (1999), for example, has reported that the direct delegitimisation and negative stereotyping of Palestinians and Arabs are the rule rather than the exception in Israeli school textbooks. Blumberg (2008) has observed that gender discrimination in textbooks is a nearly universal, remarkably uniform, quite persistent, but virtually invisible obstacle on the road to gender equality in education. With regards to culture, it is believed that textbooks and instructional materials significantly affect students' development of knowledge and their perceptions of self and others (Hirschfelder 1982). Language, on the other hand, as it relates to sexual discrimination, is underpinned by a societal bias in favour of heterosexual lifestyles. This fosters assumptions that attraction to people of the opposite sex is the 'norm', and that attraction towards people of the same sex is therefore unacceptable (University College London 2013).

Research findings and implications

The study on which this policy brief is based is an assessment of 40 textbooks

currently used in South African public schools, and representing various grades and subjects. The study was conducted for the Department of Basic Education (Directorate: Social Cohesion and Equity) in 2014, and textbooks were chosen due to their accessibility and availability. The aim of the assessment was to examine the extent to which discrimination manifests itself in South African textbooks, focusing on the conceptual interpretation of a particular form of discrimination, and the frequency with which it occurs. The assessment was guided primarily by Sadker and Sadker's (1982) typology, with particular attention also being paid to trying to imagine how content affects students' perceptions of themselves, of others and of the world around them. Results of the assessment reveal the insidious presence of various forms of discrimination in the sample textbooks. While discrimination was evidenced predominantly through imagery/pictorial presentations, there were also instances in which discrimination was manifested through language embedded in the text.

Race

The most blatant expression of racial discrimination was through invisibility. This involves the relative exclusion of a group or groups from textbooks, in terms of both the language and the illustrations that are used (Sadker & Sadker 1982). While most of the books assessed had between four and seven authors, the names and surnames suggest that the textbook authors were largely white. There were only three multiple-authored books where one author had either a black- or Indian-looking surname – admittedly an imprecise proxy. Racism through invisibility also found expression in the contents of many of the books assessed. In the case of two books, the contributions of white men to the field of mathematics were highlighted, with no mention being made of the contributions of men from other races. This gives the impression that we owe what we know

about mathematics exclusively to white men. This discriminates not only against black men, but against women in general.

In addition to invisibility, racism also manifested itself through stereotypes. This happened mostly via the imagery and real-life photographs that appear in all of the books. Examples of these include the pervasive use of photos depicting blacks in inferior jobs, which could possibly reinforce stereotypical ideas about the occupational possibilities of black men and women. One book was littered with negative images about black people, including real-life photos of black male and female farm labourers; real-life photos of black male factory workers; a real-life photo of a black female street vendor; a drawing of a black female patient in a public hospital ward; a drawing of black females at an HIV clinic; and a drawing of a black boy studying by candlelight. In yet another book, a drawing that aims to highlight the effects of an unhealthy lifestyle on foetal development depicts a visibly pregnant black woman consuming alcohol. All of these images could perpetuate negative stereotypes about black people as being suitable primarily for unskilled labour, having lower class status, being more vulnerable to social ills such as HIV and AIDS, and being irresponsible and inclined to engage in unhealthy lifestyles.

Gender

Gender discrimination in the books assessed also found expression mostly through practices of invisibility and stereotyping. In one book, women are depicted in mostly traditional female roles such as a till operator, while men are portrayed as carpenters, painters, builders and farmers. The examples of men as farmers were particularly pervasive. In fact, there was not a single case where there was even an impression created that women could be farmers. If the farmer was not called by name,

such as Mr Buthelezi, Mr Peters or farmer Brown, the pronoun 'he' would follow the reference to a farmer in the text. These images and language could potentially reinforce stereotypical ideas about gender roles and occupational possibilities. There was one case where a female was depicted in a traditional male occupation (as a machine operator in a mine). While this image could serve to challenge stereotypes about traditional gender roles, it was the exception rather than the norm. In another book, there was extensive focus on Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi as leaders. The absence of female leaders could perpetuate the perception that women are not capable of leading and would reinforce the belief that the role of men is more important than that of women.

Disability

Discrimination against disabled people found expression mostly in terms of invisibility. Images or photos of disabled people were found in only two books. In one book, there was an image of a girl in a wheelchair, as well as one of Oscar Pistorius (a well-known South African athlete). In another book, three real-life photos serve to highlight the athletic accomplishments of Natalie du Toit (swimming), Ernst van Dyk (wheelchair marathon) and Oscar Pistorius (athletics). While this is commendable, it does not give any attention to the achievements of black disabled athletes, and thereby constitutes not only discrimination against disabled people, but also racial discrimination.

Religion

While the issue of religion was rarely addressed in the books assessed, there was one instance which constituted discrimination. In the book in question, the followers of Judaism, Islam and African traditional religions are referred to as 'non-believers' in reference to the Christian project of spreading Christianity

among people. This would perpetuate a view that denigrates non-Christian religions as not worth believing in and would thus constitute religious discrimination.

Sexual orientation

Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was manifested predominantly in terms of invisibility. In addition to this, there was a single instance that could be said to constitute outright discrimination on the basis of stereotyping against those considered to represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) movement. This involved a drawing of a same-sex couple with the caption 'What do people in your community think of gay people?' This serves to portray heterosexual relationships as the norm and same-sex relationships as deviant and different from the norm.

Conclusion

Results of the assessment suggest that biases and discrimination continue to find their way into textbooks. Although the manner in which this happens is often subliminal and not explicit, research suggests that this is by no means a less potent way of transmitting values of superiority and inferiority, and therefore it needs to be addressed. If this does not happen, education's ability to equip learners with the skills and values essential for learning to live together in a rapidly globalising world will be weakened.

The ability of textbook authors to promote the values of egalitarianism and empowerment is compromised by the language they use and the illustrations they choose to include, due to limitations imposed by the cultural lenses through which they operate. This inability can be remedied only through clear policies aimed at ensuring that textbook content, in terms of both language and illustrations, promotes egalitarian

values. The absence of such policies is likely to have implications for the ability of education to give effect to Article 29 1(d) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that education shall be directed to 'the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups'.

Policy recommendations

Based on the results of the assessment and past research, a number of recommendations that could potentially contribute towards eradicating discrimination from school textbooks are made.

Publishers

- A regime of incentives should be put in place to encourage publishers to work with authors, editors and artists to ensure that there is diverse racial, cultural and gender representation, etc., in textbook content.
- Existing structures responsible for textbook selection should be audited for their effectiveness in evaluating all learning materials in order to ensure that they comply with relevant policies and guidelines on the eradication of discrimination from textbooks.

Teacher support

- The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) should be reviewed in order to examine the extent to which they consider and address issues of bias and discrimination in accordance with the Constitution.
- It is important to provide teachers with a variety of resources to assist them in interpreting and conveying the syllabus, and in teaching issues of race, gender, sexuality and

culture in a sensitive manner at all levels. Teachers' guides that explain concepts in learner-focused ways that are free of discrimination would be particularly useful.
- Teachers should undergo continuous professional development (CPD) that includes formal training in gender and race sensitivity, as well as cultural diversity training. They should be trained on how to confront and deal with their own stereotypes regarding issues of race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. Such training could also potentially assist teachers who may be aware of discriminatory practices and the importance of eliminating stereotypes, but do not know how to address these issues.

Schools

- Schools should offer extra-curricular activities and programmes aimed at promoting an understanding of and appreciation for diversity among learners.
- Structures should be put in place to enable school principals, their management teams and school governing bodies to engage in effective curriculum management and monitoring with the aim of eradicating biases and discrimination from textbooks and other learner-support materials.

Development of a guide to non-discriminatory/inclusive language

- Resources should be made available for the development of guidelines for the use of non-discriminatory/inclusive language for teachers. Emphasis here should be placed not only on the explicit ways in which language is used to exclude and alienate, but also on the subtle and implicit but no less potent ways in which language perpetuates prejudice and discrimination.

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