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The imagery of gender in Italian textbooks. Research into primary school books

Lo imaginario de género en los libros de texto italiano. Una investigación sobre los libros de las escuelas primarias

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Abstract: In Italy, the theme of equality in textbooks has been accepted much later than in other European and international contexts, and studies and research dedicated to this subject area are still insufficient today. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Department for Equal Opportunities - in collaboration with the IEA (Italian Publishers Association) - promoted the Polite project (for equal opportunities in textbooks): a self-regulating European project for educational publishing, with the purpose of eliminating gender stereotype in teaching texts. This essay begins with a short review of studies carried out in Italy since the 1970s, with particular reference to studies of linguistic sexism introduced by Alma Sabatini in the mid-Eighties. This is followed by presentation of research focusing on samples of primary school reading books published in the early 2000s. The research makes combined use of quantitative and qualitative assessment methodology. The results demonstrate that the guidelines offered by the Polite project are still not being applied by publishers, and textbooks continue to project an image of femininity and masculinity which is profoundly sexist and anachronistic.

Keywords: gender; education; textbooks; stereotypes; equal opportunities.

Resumen: En Italia, la cuestión de la igualdad en los textos escolares se recoge con notable retraso respecto a otros contextos europeos e internacionales, y los estudios e investigaciones dedicados a este ámbito temático son actualmente muy escasos. Entre finales de los años noventa y principios del año dos mil el Departamento de Igualdad de Oportunidades, en colaboración con la AIE (Asociación Italiana de Editores) promueve el proyecto Polite (Igualdad de oportunidades en los libros de texto): un proyecto europeo de la autoreglamentación para la editorial escolar dirigida a la superación de los estereotipos de género en los manuales didácticos. En el documento se propone en primer lugar una breve reseña de los estudios llevados a cabo en Italia a partir de los años 70, con especial referencia a los estudios sobre el sexismo lingüístico inaugurado por Alma Sabatini a mediados de los años 80. A continuación, se presenta una investigación realizada sobre una muestra de libros de lectura de la escuela primaria editados a principios del año dos mil. La investigación utiliza una combinación de metodología cuantitativa y cualitativa. Los resultados de la investigación demuestran que las indicaciones del Polite tardan en ser incorporadas por los editores escolares y los libros de texto siguen vehiculando un imaginario sobre la feminidad y la masculinidad profundamente sexista y anacrónico.

Palabras clave: género; educación; libros de texto; estereotipos; igualdad de oportunidades.

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1. Studies in the Italian context: from Alma Sabatini to project Polite

Since the early Seventies in the Anglo-American context, the issue of equality in educational texts has led to a vast amount of research, often followed by measures to ensure a more equitable representation of both genders in educational materials. In 1974, the U.S. publisher McGraw-Hill had already published a series of *Proposals for a non-discriminatory treatment of the sexes* for the benefit of the editorial staff and its writers. This represents one of the earliest attempts to activate a discussion of equal treatment of the sexes, as the authors state:

Our intention, in the preparation of these recommendations, is to help eliminate sexist assumptions from the publications of the publisher McGraw-Hill and to offer each individual greater freedom to pursue their interests and achieve their potential. In particular, we aim to raise awareness in the staff of writers and editors of The McGraw-Hill of the different ways in which males and females are stereotyped in the publications; to emphasize the role of language in reinforcing such stereotypes, and to pinpoint concrete solutions in our publications aiming to give a fair, correct and balanced treatment to both sexes (Gianini Belotti, 1978, p. 51).

In Italy, this issue was embraced much later and only in the mid-Eighties did the issue of sexism in textbooks become the subject of serious consideration, thanks to a series of initiatives promoted by the National Commission for the application of Gender Equality between Men and Women. In particular two important research projects carried out during those years, and published by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, should be mentioned. The first was conducted by the linguist Alma Sabatini and its theme was linguistic sexism (Sabatini, 1987).

The notion of «linguistic sexism», was put forward in the 70s by the feminist movement in the United States, taking into consideration the image of women that emerges from linguistic practice and the increasingly obvious contrast between the social advancement of women and the rigidity of a language built by and for males. Alma Sabatini's work was the first in Italy to deal specifically with this issue in two subsequent publications: *Recommendations for a non-sexist use of the Italian language*, which was released in November 1986, and *Sexism in the Italian language*, published in April 1987. Both works are the result of research into the language of the media and educational publishing, in which the author set herself the dual aim of raising the question of sexism in Italian – identifying the forms of discrimination – and proposing alternative forms (Recommendations). In her analysis, Sabatini focuses on the use of the so-called «unmarked masculine» which consists of a dual function of the male gender that can refer to either male or both genders (while the female tends to be more

marked in the sense that its use is restricted to the female). The linguist explains the issue in these terms:

The Italian language, like many others, is based on an anthropocentric principle: man is the parameter around which the linguistic universe rotates and organizes itself. A paradigmatic example: the very word «man» has a double meaning because it can refer to both the «male of the species» and also the «species in general», while the word «woman» refers only to the «female of the species» (Sabatini, 1987, p. 24).

In the case of the Italian language, like many other languages with grammatical gender, the principle of the unlabelled masculine spreads through the entire language, since «any masculine noun (singular or plural) referred to a person may also represent the two sexes or only male: «Italians» can be either «Italian men» or «men and women»» (Ivi, p. 25). There follows a supremacy and universality of men in language that contrasts with the bias and marginalization of women. On this matter, Sabatini states that a false neutrality of the masculine exists, which, although claimed to be universal, belongs solely to the «male» (marked).

In 1986, a second major study was published, *Male and female images in elementary school texts*, in which the author, Rossana Pace, summarized the results of research into reading books and subsidiaries in elementary schools. The hypothesis that motivated this research is that school textbooks should at least offer a realistic image of society and suggest a variety of models to boys and girls, situations to draw from, in order to build a coherent image of the self and the outside world so as to prepare them for change, social mobility and transformation of roles. The conclusion she reached was quite different:

Besides great efforts to modernize content and images, there is a prevailing tendency to immobility, which is lack of realism: in the representation of the world of work, where trades are often those of the past, slowly disappearing; in language, which is often outdated, and most importantly, in the allocation of roles and tasks, with women relegated to the traditional positions of busy housewives and at times – being the ultimate concession – of charity workers, and assigned to the role of mothers, according to obsolete cliché (Pace, 1986, p. 11).

The backwardness of the textbooks had already been reported in the early Seventies by Umberto Eco, who pointed this out in *I pampini bugiardi* (Eco and Bonazzi, 1972), emphasizing the distorted reality presented in these books, the conformism and the idiocies of primary school textbooks that were substantially still fascist, tied to archaic stereotypes and certainly not corresponding to the complexity and contrasts of those difficult 1970s.

From the mid-Eighties to the late Nineties, in Italy, the discussion which had just begun on sexism in textbooks abruptly ceased¹. The topic was only introduced again in 1998, with the Polite project (Equal Opportunity in textbooks) in an attempt to recover lost ground and catch up with other European countries. Polite, a European self-publishing project for schools, was created with the aim of promoting cultural reflection in teaching and publishing, rethinking textbooks so that men and women, protagonists of culture, history, politics and science, would appear in the textbooks without gender discrimination. The project – which was promoted by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers- Department for Equal Opportunities and in collaboration with the IEA (Italian Publishers Association) – forms part of the «IV Programme of a community action in an average time period», which gathered the requests of the Intergovernmental Conference in Peking (1995), especially in the field of mainstreaming and promotion of women taking part in decision-making. Polite was developed through two subsequent editions. In the first project edition (1998/99), a preliminary study was conducted in different European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Netherlands, UK, Sweden, Spain, Portugal) in order to detect equal opportunity policies adopted with regard to textbooks. Based on the results of European research, they later drafted a *Code of Practice for editors* aimed at providing some guidelines to ensure that the gender perspective became a guiding criterion in the writing of textbooks. The Code is not intended as a legal guideline or censorship; on the contrary, it relies on the innovative skill of publishers, authors and writers, and assigns them the task of creating new texts and teaching tools according to their own freedom and culture².

The second edition of Polite was structured over two years (1999/2000 and 2000/2001) and its most important products were two Handbooks (Serravalle Porzio, Ed., 2000; Id., 2001) – complementary to the Code of practice – which propose a review of the various disciplines (philosophy, literature, history, maths, science, language, economy) from a gender perspective, in an attempt to give visibility to important contributions from women. The initial premise is to overcome the supposed neutrality of know-how that has come to overshadow the two genders, male and female:

[A neutrality] so alleged that in reality and in language this third gender does not exist, and not only in Italy, while the male almost always prevails. Perhaps for historical necessity, and today most likely out of habit and laziness, but never without concrete

¹ Except the research conducted by Ulivieri (1990).

² Editors and authors are asked to follow these «good suggestions»: to avoid sexism and stereotype sexistis; include balanced representations of differences; promote culture formation of diverse gender; rethink language; update and adapt the choice of images.

historical and ideological justifications, theorized in time, at times even biological and psychological. But never without a high price for the female gender, who indeed tends to be marginalized from the public official sphere for faults variously distributed, and somehow also for the male gender, forced to adapt to roles and grandstanding that only appear to be freely chosen and rewarding (Serravalle Porzio, 2001, p. 11).

2. Research into textbooks of the 2000s

One of my recent research projects (Biemmi, 2010) proves that the objectives promoted by Polite are still far from being fulfilled. The survey examined a sample of books for the fourth grade by ten major publishers (De Agostini, Nicola Milano, Piccoli, Il Capitello, La Scuola, Giunti, Elmedi, Piemme, Raffaello, Fabbri), published at the beginning of the millennium. Stories for boys and girls greatly influence the development of their identity because they provide a simplified model with which it is easy to identify. In particular, with regard to gender identity, the stories offer stereotyped patterns of masculinity/femininity and implicitly ask their readers to accommodate such models identifying themselves with the character of their own sex (process of identification with the adult models). As recalled by Elena Gianini Belotti:

We believe children's stories to be more harmless than they actually are. Instead, with this method, the cultural values of the society in which we live are transmitted, thus precise indications of how to live, should do or wish to do, what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is ugly, what is desirable and what is not. And through this ability to identify with the characters and the story they are living, the children make these values theirs, internalizing them: children's literature is far from being just a visual thing or a way to entertain the child, it is a powerful cultural transmission agent of values to which we all respond (Gianini Belotti, 1978, p. 8).

If it is true that stories and their characters have a significant influence on children, it is even more true that reading books adopted in the classroom have a considerable impact on the perceptions that children create about themselves and the world around them. In particular, books in primary schools are presented in an authoritative context –the school– and are the children's first approach to a structured view of the world, offered by an institution outside the family. In addition, the contents of these texts must be studied by the children –implying that they are right and indisputable– and are used continuously for a long period of time. It is evident that they play a decisive role in the formation of gender identity: «In this respect, textbooks are of decisive importance, particularly those in primary school, whose images and content with such uncontested models may be fixed in the children's minds so strongly when the school does not help to develop a critical eye» (Pace, 1986, p. 11).

On this basis, the survey was divided into two levels. The first was a quantitative analysis of the stories which aimed to work out how many times, in images and texts, men and women are represented, in which role they appear and in what context. The second, qualitative level investigated in greater depth the association between masculine and feminine that emerges in the stories, through the identification of gender stereotypes and possibly alternative models to traditional, anti-stereotypical ones. The research results show that the representation of the two genders is far from being defined as «equal»: males are significantly overestimated, both in quantity and quality; females are placed in a subordinate position and do not have equal visibility and merit.

3. Results of quantitative analysis³

3.1. *Where are the women?*

One of the most widely discussed aspects of gender discrimination present in textbooks is the so-called «invisibility of women». This is a progressive eclipsing of young and adult females, giving them less space than males, and also minor roles (secondary characters of a story). The sex of the central character is crucial because the hero of the story is the focus of interest for both boy and girl readers, often through an identification process with the character belonging to their own sex. The first objective of the quantitative analysis was therefore to check the percentage of characters of both sexes; even the distribution of male and female roles between the secondary characters of the story is significant.

From my analysis, it appears that males play a leading role in 59% of the stories while females are featured in 37% of the stories examined⁴. If we create a simple ratio between the two percentages ($59/37 = 1.6$), we discover that for every ten females with leading roles, there were sixteen male protagonists.

These are the overall results and it is interesting to see whether differences exist between publishers. The significant data, although there are meaningful differences, show that none of the ten books examined reaches a perfect numerical equality between males and females: in all the books there are far more male characters than female ones. There are only three cases (Fabbri, Elmedi and De Agostini) in which the proportion of the two sexes, although

³ For purposes of simplification and clarification the results will be given only in percentages and not absolute values. I just wish to mention that in the quantitative analysis 340 stories were taken as samples.

⁴ The remaining 4% of the protagonists is made up of «mixed groups» (groups with males and females) and a small percentage (1%) when it is impossible to know the sex of the protagonist of the story.

not perfectly equal, is however quite balanced⁵. Thanks to them the outstanding cases of numerical inequality, on a global average, are concealed⁶.

Thus, the issue of a lack of women in textbooks is confirmed: in all the texts analyzed, females are less present in leading roles than males in the stories. Young and adult females may not be wholly invisible, but they are certainly obscured by the stronger male presence.

It may be interesting at this point to see how leading roles are distributed between the sexes. As the existing disparity between the sexes in leading roles is quite evident, one might suppose they intended to make up the difference in the secondary characters of the stories: young and adult women, instead of being placed in the role of the main actors in the story, could be chosen as «mates» acting as companions to the male ventures. The hypothesis of a greater female presence among the characters is immediately contradicted by data: even among the supporting actors of the stories the masculine gender prevails⁷.

The world represented in textbooks, therefore, is mainly an idealistic one, populated almost exclusively by men and children. It is right to think that this inequality is not the result of a harmless oversight but is instead indicative of a difference at a deeper level: since women represent about half of the population, if there were not sexist prejudices against them, they would be present in at least half the contents of the texts examined.

3.2. Male and female professions: scientists, housewives and fairies

If we examine in more detail how male and female characters are represented, we see a difference in treatment and a clear desire to create two symbolic universes of reference for boy and girl readers, divided on the basis of gender. The central point of these two universes is above all a clear definition of the professional roles «suited» to either sex. Reconstruction of the professional roles

⁵ Fabbri Editors presents 47% male protagonists against 44% females; Elmedi Editors 45% males against 52% females; De Agostini Editors 47% males against 49% females.

⁶ In the books of Giunti Editors, La Scuola, Raffaello and Capitello there are twice as many male protagonists (The School), or even more (Raffaello, Capitello and Giunti), than female. This means that in these texts, on average, for every girl represented there are two boys, for every woman, two men. The most outstanding case is Raffaello in which the ratio of the two genders rises to 3.3 (23 males versus 7 females): for every female there are 3 males. Piemme Editors also presents a significant difference (64% males versus 36% females), and the same goes for Nicola Milano Editors (60% males versus 36% females) and Piccoli Editors (60% versus 40%). Yet again the remaining percentage consists of mixed groups or the groups in which the sex of the protagonist is unknown.

⁷ Making a comparison among the protagonists, surprisingly, the results are almost identical. It was calculated that the relationship between male and female protagonists is 1.6; between male and female characters it is 1.7: for every 10 female protagonists there are 17 males represented. It is concluded that the numeric discrepancy among the characters of both genders is even (slightly) superior to that shown among the protagonists.

assigned to the two sexes in educational texts is particularly important because the range of occupations attributed to men and women will have a strong impact on future career aspirations, corresponding to male or female readers of those texts. The boys will draw from the male professions just as the girls adapt their own career desires according to the list of professions for women.

First we calculated the percentage of men and women represented in a professional role: in the texts analyzed, there were 70% men and 56% women. We need to see what kind of profession they both have. In the texts I have identified as many as fifty different professions assigned to men⁸ against fifteen professions attributed to women⁹. It should be pointed out that the difference is not only quantitative but also qualitative: the masculine professions are much more prestigious and rewarding than female ones. This brings us back to the dual problem which still characterizes the division of labour between the sexes: besides a «horizontal division of labour» (division of work between the sexes and careers that give rise to male and female occupations), there also exists a «vertical division of labor» (unequal pay and prestige between the sexes).

Male child readers will have a wide range of job opportunities: they can dream of becoming scientists, writers, doctors, poets, journalists, engineers, explorers, architects, orchestra conductors, etc. The girls will have to settle instead for a teaching role (by far the most popular occupation among women), unless they wish to become witches, fairies and diviners (other cases frequently recurring) or happy housewives. It is clear that the texts examined do not provide «equal employment opportunities» for pupils of both sexes. The message implicitly conveyed by these books, is that there are jobs reserved for men and jobs for women and that the two categories are not at all interchangeable.

Vanna Iori comments on this subject: «The division of areas and spaces still characterizes the sexualization of work today, which make a division between «men's work» and «women's work», very different both in place and skills. The constant presence of this division in time and in different civilizations reveals how work experience is a way to define one's gender identity» (Iori, 2001, p. 64).

⁸ The male professions are: king, knight, teacher, equerry, writer, wizard, doctor, poet, fisherman, painter, pirate, pageboy, cabin boy, doctor on ship, mechanic, umbrella repairer, nobleman, navigator, sculptor, pupil, scientist, pageboy, woodcutter, scholar, sheik, traveller, president of football club, prophet, upholsterer, salesman, barber, Father Christmas, artist, librarian, singer, woodman, architect, craftsman, knife-grinder, journalist, card player, sailor, geologist, farmer, commander, ship captain, crusader, train driver, explorer, tax collector.

⁹ The female professions are: teacher, witch, writer, sorceress, kindly old witch, noble lady, wet nurse, painter, actress, princess, fairy, housewife, lady of the castle, librarian, fortune-teller.

3.3. *Females: sweet and patient; males: strong and adventurous*

Among the various semantic asymmetries identified by Alma Sabatini there is one that relates to the use of asymmetric adjectives stereotypically male/female. The linguist writes: «adjectives such as sweet, delicate, gentle, petite, delicate, refer to female gender, while bold and powerful, in the manly category, can be defined as masculine» (Sabatini, 1987, p. 33).

Inspired by this insight, I decided to select the adjectives in the texts which refer only to males (men and boys) and those referring to females (women and girls) and found that adjectives also have a «gender». Masculine adjectives are: safe, brave, serious, proud, honest, ambitious, threatening, thoughtful, concentrated, brute, adventurous, authoritarian, furious, generous, proud, tough, selfish, angry, righteous, superior, wise, determined, bold, free, impudent. The female gender is instead qualified by these adjectives: nasty, gossipy, jealous, vain, spoiled, flirt, arrogant, affectionate, anxious, distressed, humiliated, caring, patient, kind, tender, shy, quiet, helpful, understanding, gentle, charming, delicate, desperate, hypersensitive, sweet, innocent.

Alma Sabatini's thesis is thus more solidly confirmed than ever: there is a clear discrepancy between the adjectives applied to males and females. And it shows once again that the difference is, first of all, of a qualitative nature: males are qualified on the basis of the adjectives that sum up positive qualities or otherwise positively connoted in our culture (strength, courage, virtue, wisdom), while the attributes associated with females more often have a negative connotation (vanity) or denote weakness and fragility.

3.4. *Spaces for men and women*

Some studies¹⁰ have shown a close relationship between the gender of the protagonist and the space in which the story takes place. In particular, the female gender is usually associated with confined spaces, while the male gender to the open spaces: the woman is relegated to a private sphere, a familiar one, while the man is projected into a public employment context. The results of my research confirm this fact: it is clear that if the story is set in closed spaces, in 57% of cases, the protagonist is a male and in 39% a female; instead, when in the story is placed in open spaces, there will certainly be a male in 65% of cases versus 28% of female protagonists. Thus, a first important fact to be noted is that males are

¹⁰ Giani Gallino (1973); Pace (1986); Gianini Belotti (1978). See also the project *Quante donne puoi diventare?* promoted by Torino's City Council (at this link: <http://www.comune.torino.it/quantedonne/>) its purpose to analyse illustrated registers since they stand for socially accepted gender models. Among the results of the project the *Guide for sexist stereotype deciphering in registers*, means to teach adults (teachers, librarians, parents) to decode the symbols of family and society in the imagery proposed in the illustrated registers.

«omnipresent», more present than females in all places (both closed and open spaces). In open spaces the male presence, however, is much more pronounced: it is more than twice that of women. This means that in stories set outdoors, two out of three protagonists are male.

I believe there is even more interesting data regarding the nature of the spaces in which males and females are present. Closed spaces for females are, in the vast majority of cases, represented by the home, classroom or school (where the girls are very much in the role of students and adult women in the role of teachers). Other «female places» mentioned in the stories: library, hair salon, beautician, dance hall, hotel, carriage. Confined spaces in which men are present often seem to be the workplace or means of transport (car, train, plane, ship). In the latter case the space is of course closed but it assumes movement, moving in the outside world. The males are then placed in faraway locations (for example: a tent in the desert, a cave, the galley of a ship, a monastery) or in places dedicated to entertainment (the maze, a room for the puppet show, the circus). Similar differences are found in enclosed spaces. Male spaces are many and varied (the sea, a forest, a beach, a wood, a road, a desert, the mountains, the plains, an island) while female spaces are much more limited and appear closer to the domestic context (a garden, a park, the terrace of the house). Once again men and boys are represented in a greater variety of spaces and situations than young or adult women.

3.5. *Games for him and her*

The different preferences of boys and girls regarding games (Ricchiardi and Venera, 2005) are not the result of a spontaneous choice but are the natural consequence of the education imparted by parents and the social context so that children of both sexes choose games suitable to their sex: «In the child there is of course an innate tendency to play, but the ways in which the game is set out, its rules, its objects are undoubtedly the product of a culture» (Gianini Belotti, 1973, p. 82). Boys and girls learn very early on that there are «right» toys and «wrong» ones for each sex and therefore, after a certain age, do not even try to ask their parents for an unsuitable toy because they know perfectly well that this will be denied. The request for a «wrong» toy is a source of concern for parents since it is a sign that the training process of the sex roles has failed: «The differentiation in games presented to males and females is such that «certain preferences» after the age of four or five begin to signify that the male or female child has not accepted their role, therefore something went wrong» (Ivi, p. 88).

Research conducted by Istat (Sabbadini, 2005) showed that even today tastes expressed by boys and girls in terms of games are modelled on traditional gender stereotypes: playing football, with cars, with video games and computers

are the preferred activities for males; dolls, puppets, games of household activities are favourites among females.

From my analysis a more complex picture arises, with some clear signs of change. Favourite games of male protagonists in the stories include: remote controlled tanks, space rockets, robots, playing cards, using the computer and playing chess. For females we have: dolls, Barbie, chess, checkers. As for sports, boys play football, basketball, ice hockey, and go swimming, while females go skiing, skating, swimming and play basketball. Other male activities are: cycling, listening to music, singing, playing the flute, playing the electric organ, drawing, horseriding, playing tricks, watching TV, making up stories, reading and writing fairy tales, reading adventure books, reading comics, learning magical arts. Young male protagonists of the stories later claim to have a passion for cars, music, physics and mathematics. Instead, the leisure time activities of female protagonists are: enjoying nature, running along country lanes, collecting stamps, collecting postcards, cooking, cleaning, drawing, giving big parties, watching TV, reading, acting in plays, receiving friends as well as constructing a barometer and making small scientific experiments. The girls also state their interest in mathematics and reflection on language.

Critical analysis of this data reveals that while the male children's favourite activities are those typically associated with their sex, in the girls' world, the situation is much more varied. Regarding males, only traditional masculine games are mentioned (such as a space rocket, a tank and a robot); for females, alongside traditional games (dolls, Barbie), there are new games like checkers or chess. Even in sports we see a remarkable convergence between the sexes that, once again, is one-directional: male children play football, basketball, ice hockey (men's sports) and go swimming, while the girls practice not only skating (women's sports), but also skiing, swimming and basketball. The same applies to pastimes: the males are fond of music, reading, physics and mathematics while among girls, in my opinion, some contradictions emerge. There are some girls who enjoy doing the cleaning, cooking and giving big parties, while others revel in drama, build barometers and make scientific experiments. Some girls are portrayed according to old stereotypes, such as future «little housewives»; while others express wishes and interests entirely new to their sex.

A general comment on this data being required, I would say that it is quite encouraging. Besides some gender stereotypes there are also clear signs of transformation, but only concerning girls (who are growing nearer to the male model, while the reverse process does not occur).

3.6. *A general evaluation of the quantitative data*

The results obtained from the quantitative analysis are overall quite demoralizing. From the quantity of data collected we can draw two legitimate conclusions. Firstly, in the world shown by textbooks, the masculine gender is much more widely represented. Secondly, there are substantial differences in the roles and characters attributed to males and females. All the data flows in this direction and tends to create a distance between the two sexes. Men carry out a wide variety of professions and are free to move in public spaces; women have a narrow range of employment opportunities, they spend most of their time in the home and are much more tied to their role as mothers than their husbands. Men are described as brave, determined, proud and gratified; women as caring, sweet, patient and sensitive. To complete the picture we must reassert the important data, the quantitative one, as shown by the analysis: men and children are represented to a far greater extent than women and girls.

The images, on the other hand, merely confirm the fact of inequality between the sexes, making things worse. In the overview, the male gender is still favoured, while the female remains in the background, as if less important and interesting.

The overall picture is therefore quite discouraging. To sum up, the publishers examined demonstrate a lack of commitment to addressing the issue of gender equality. Most of them cannot even solve the most obvious problem: balancing numerically the protagonists of both sexes. But the quantitative disparity between males and females is symptomatic of differences on a deeper level, as is revealed from the qualitative analysis.

4. The results of the qualitative analysis

4.1. *Stereotypical representations: the woman in the house, the man at work*

Starting with the stereotypes applied to the female gender, we can make a comparison between women and girls. Concerning psychological and behavioral characteristics, the girls are represented according to traditional clichés: they are fearful, weepy, well-mannered, thoughtful, good, helpful, vain. In physical terms, girls are described as pretty, flirty, graceful, quiet, fragrant. More complex is the framework that covers adult women. They are depicted as apprehensive, weepy, fanatically tidy, vain, good, sweet, affectionate, and of course provided with a strong maternal instinct.

One recurring detail that emerges from my analysis concerns beauty, seen as a necessary requirement for a woman. In various texts, I found stereotypes of female beauty that is interpreted as a necessary quality, even as a fundamental

criterion for judging a woman. Reading these texts, the idea is reinforced that being beautiful for a woman is a merit while being ugly is a demerit, almost a fault. Hence, in the passage *Aunt Ada* by Nicola Milano, the fact that his aunt is «tall and thin» (ie, ugly) is used as an excuse to devalue the woman, also in character. Still in the book by Nicola Milano there is another text, *Ms. Scarpa* (Shoe), in which the male child protagonist expresses a true feeling of hatred for his neighbour, simply because she is ugly («I hate that woman. [...] she has two grey hairs at the corners of her mouth, and with glasses and a moustache looks like some kind of monk seal»). Thus a dichotomy of beautiful/ugly is created, which has very precise connotations: beautiful is the positive pole, ugliness is the negative one. This undue attention to the physical appearance of women is inappropriate, as well as demeaning, for a simple reason: the same attention to the physical appearance of males is non-existent. In other words, beauty, for the male gender, is not seen as a value. None of the protagonists of the stories analyzed is judged using «beauty» as a parameter, perhaps because this would be offensive: a man must be assessed for his intellectual qualities, certainly not because he is «tall and thin». One can therefore say that, as far as physical descriptions and their meanings assigned are concerned, a strong asymmetry emerges between males and females.

Another interesting area is that of the activities and the roles assigned to women. Stereotypes in this context flourish: the mother takes care of the chores at home, loves cooking and embroidering. Domestic activities in textbooks, still appear as the main occupation of women.

If we compare the stereotypical characteristics related to women with those referring to girls we observe a strong correlation. The similar aspects are many: being good and well-behaved, loving, caring, but crying easily, beautiful and vain. This conformity is easily justifiable. In fact, girls consider adult women as reference models and then try to imitate them. In the texts analyzed the process of «training» the girls to become good women and mothers of adults is clearly evident. I refer to training, and not education, and it seems that the roles and features which are mostly stereotyped, traditionally applied to their own sex, are a real imposition on young females. Sometimes the girls are represented as miniature women, who already know how to take care of household chores and already seem to possess a kind of maternal instinct. Emblematic in this regard are two books: *The cool pudding* (Elmedi) and *Parents-children* (Capitello). In the first we see a pathetic scene: a little girl offering her loving care to a sick pudding. The thoughtfulness that the protagonist reserves for the pudding is comparable to that of a worried mother concerned about the health of her own child. In the second, Samantha's mother begins to behave like a child, so the child is forced to take the place of mother-housewife. Samantha, though still a child, is able to

attend to all the household chores: washing, ironing, cooking. In short, she is a real «little lady of the house».

Needless to say how harmful and limiting this insistent proposal of degrading and often outdated feminine models can be for the development of a female child. In fact, in school textbooks, stereotypical characteristics are attributed to the female gender, <as well as old-fashioned roles compared to those existing in reality.

Regarding male gender stereotypes, we can also distinguish stereotypes applied to men and children, and then compare them. The young central characters of the stories are represented as: resourceful, autonomous, active, stubborn, independent, brave, self-confident, practical, rude, mischievous, lively. The men are: adventurous, strong and brave. It makes you wonder if that is all they are. Surprisingly, the traits applied to the male gender are narrow and limited. Instead, women are described in relation to a wide variety of attitudes and feelings, while the vast majority of men are characterized by three words: strong, adventurous, brave (note that the three adjectives express positive qualities).

It is important then to analyze the roles attributed to these strong and brave men: men work (occupations outside the home are reserved for them), drive a car, maintain their family and, as that was not enough, they make important scientific discoveries and «make history». It is clear that we are witnessing an idealized depiction of the male gender.

Another stereotype is that of the scholarly man, cultured, wise, sometimes presumptuous. A comparison swiftly comes to mind: note that while women are described and evaluated on the basis of their physical appearance, men are more often judged by their intellectual talent. The judgment is obviously not always positive: men are sometimes criticized for being too confident about their knowledge and skills. But the significant fact is that whilst beauty was used as the only criterion for judging a woman, for the male gender the criterion for judging is culture, not to mention intelligence.

Finally, the characteristics of the father protagonists in the stories is worth mentioning separately. Put simply, we can say there are two main types of fathers: «bad dads» and «good dads». The bad dad is a silent father, detached, severe, sometimes violent. These dads have a bad relationship with their children. An example of this is the father of the protagonist of the book *Some gestures by dad* (De Agostini), being absolutely unable to communicate verbally with his children, he resorts to gestures and glances in order to communicate at table. Or Mark's father (*Let's give satisfaction to parents*, Capitello) who shows a total disregard for his child's questions (—Daddy where's India? Are Pirates still there? His father raised his head from his newspaper and said to him: —I don't know

... I don't have time now, I'll explain later...). Another interesting example is the passage *Pink Rose Rose* (Raffaello) in which the girl protagonist, guilty of having ridden on a bicycle with a friend, has to undergo «a sentence with no appeal» by a strict and violent father («If they tell me you go to school on a bike with someone, I'll come and slap your face in front of everyone»).

On the other hand, there are the «good fathers» who I would define as «absent but exceptional». On two occasions¹¹ I witnessed idealization of a father figure: the father, who is absent all week for work, spends only Saturdays with his child (male) but is able to conquer all the child's esteem and affection («And I say to myself, I have the most wonderful dad in the world. And it is true!»).

The picture created of fathers is not therefore homogenous: there are fathers who have detached, cold relationships with their children and fathers who instead have great relationships with them. The result can still be identical: the amount of time and attention that fathers devote to their children is much lower than that of mothers. The «bad dad» does not seem to want to invest his energy and attention in his children: he establishes rigid, detached, dismissive relationships with them. The «good father», on the other hand, also devotes very little time to his children: he is good, that is true, but only for one day a week. This suggests that, in the imagery conveyed by textbooks, the education and care of children are still considered exclusive duties of the mother.

4.2. Alternative models: women who work (and do not have time to devote to their children)

During the qualitative analysis I decided to go in search of alternative models that represented the two sexes in atypical roles and activities for their own sex. For the female gender, I found some good examples of girls and women with alternative characteristics compared to traditional stereotyped ones. For girls, there are numerous models of young protagonists who by no means embody the traditional canons of a good, polite and kind girl. I read about girls who are brave, active, adventurous, lively, disobedient, studious, intelligent, resourceful, imaginative, creative, brilliant, witty, outgoing, untidy, spiteful, sports enthusiasts, experienced with computers. Less frequent, but still significant, are the cases of women who are determined, intelligent and free, witty and self-confident, smart and imaginative.

As for the alternative models relating to family and professional roles, we have women who work and come back late in the evening, women who do not like children, women who do not know how to cook or do not have time to do so. The problem is that women with these characteristics are invariably criticized.

¹¹ The two passages are: *A super dad* (Raffaello) and *A day with dad* (Elmedi).

Of the four passages in which new models of women are explicitly criticized, three are contained in the book of Nicola Milano: *Teo, Charlotte, Aunt Ada*. In the first, Teo's mother refuses to give him a little sister saying she cannot stand children, especially very young ones. The text aggravates the annoyance that this mother feels towards children and that has the effect of mocking and demeaning this «unnatural» woman without a maternal instinct. Indirectly, this definitely confirms the traditional model of a woman who must have a predisposition to motherhood. In the second chapter, Carlotta is described as a child who is always on her own and sad because both parents work outside the home. The guilt for the child's unhappiness falls solely on the mother: in fact, it cannot be the father's fault if the child stays alone too long, since it is normal that he should go to work. What could be «avoided» is that the mother works as well. The moral of the story is that, for the children's welfare, it would be better if mothers did not work. This passage, therefore, proposes the model of an unconventional mother who works outside the home, but it is absolutely rejected. In a third chapter by Nicola Milan, Aunt Ada is criticized because she cannot cook and has no desire to do so. Her nephews and nieces consider this incapacity as further proof of how little their aunt is worth: knowing how to cook is used as a yardstick for a woman and aunt Ada is therefore devalued and ridiculed. In this passage an unconventional model of a woman who cannot cook therefore reaffirms a stereotype according to which knowing how to cook is an important quality for the female sex.

Therefore, models of unconventional women are widely criticized whereas no criticism is given to unconventional girls. On the contrary, the young female protagonists (represented by the friendly *Pippi Longstocking*) are brave and creative and often positively connoted in the texts. The message that comes through, in my opinion, is contradictory. On the one hand, girls are encouraged to move away from traditional models, on the other, adult women are severely condemned when they try to do the same thing. The contradiction arises from the fact that women act as a model for the girls, thus the latter come to a dead end: they are required to be different from their main reference model.

Considering unconventional models applied to the male gender, two important facts emerge: they are definitively fewer than female unconventional models and are applied almost exclusively to boys, and not men. Of all the texts analyzed¹² I have identified only three pleasant portraits of boys who are shy, insecure, weak and quiet, and they are described with affection and sympathy (positive connotations) by the authors. On the other hand, I was not able to find even one case of a man who takes on non-traditional family roles: there are no cases of fathers who take their children to school, cook, go shopping (activities

¹² In the qualitative analysis I examined 104 stories.

carried out daily by modern fathers). This almost total absence of new models for men leads to a simple deduction: feminine representations reveal a desire for change while the male image adhere rigidly to traditional stereotypes, with little desire for innovation. Women begin to merge their feminine traits with ones typically considered masculine, thus embodying a wide variety of facets. The men, however, are still represented as a compact homogeneous group, which has very few cases of «deviance». It can be reasonably assumed that representation of the male is much more stereotyped than that of the female, especially because it is not countered by alternative images.

I wondered about the reason for this reluctance to abandon the male model and the answer came quite easily. There is a dichotomy that emerges from the complexity of the texts analyzed: the male model is the positive pole as opposed to the female's negative one. The stereotypical traits attributed to males are almost always good qualities: courage, strength, resourcefulness, cunning, intelligence, autonomy, self-confidence. The traits traditionally attributed to females are much more frequently negative connotations: females are good, affectionate fearful, insecure, naive, apprehensive, weepy. To demonstrate the different connotation of masculine and feminine, it is sufficient to compare the meanings attached to the term «tomboy» with «sissy». For a girl to be called a tomboy can be considered a compliment, but for a boy to be called a sissy is almost an offence, an insult. Given the way things are, it is understandable that men refuse to give up their «throne», their natural privileged position over the female sex.

5. A final judgment and a suggestion

If I were to give an opinion that intersects the quantitative and qualitative data, I would say that, overall, the ten textbooks analyzed provide a discriminative representation of both sexes. The female gender is assigned roles and characteristics very distinct from those assigned to the male gender. Also – and most significantly – a kind of hierarchy is subtly created between the sexes, in which the male serves as the main parameter and the female is created by exclusion from the first.

Males, as shown by the quantitative analysis, are the masters of the scene, their importance is underlined by the fact that everyone is constantly talking about them. The texts constantly describe their actions, their heroic deeds and adventures, their travels, their crafts, their characteristics of strength and courage, their culture, their intelligence. In this context, there cannot be as much space to talk in detail about females. Some textual fragments are reserved for them, the space left by that devoted to be males must be sufficient to define them. In this dull and demoralizing setting, qualitative analysis brings to light some, albeit limited, attempts at innovation, such as the proposal of new models or the

criticism of existing ones. It was revealed that both criticism and proposal were applied mostly to the female gender and rarely to the male. This one-way change in direction is not highly desirable, not even for males, since the definition of rigid, stereotyped gender roles is harmful and limiting for both sexes, not just for females. It would be appropriate, therefore, for breaking of gender stereotypes to come from both directions: the female model should come closer and merge with that of the male and similarly the male pattern should learn to relate and integrate with these characteristics (sensitivity, sweetness) and roles (care of children) previously considered feminine.

Regardless of individual results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative analysis, my research revealed an underlying problem: the issue of gender differences and equal opportunities in textbooks has not yet been adequately treated in our country. On the whole, there seems to be a superficial awareness, which is perhaps indicative of a misunderstanding about the concept itself of equal opportunities: equality is still seen as adaptation of the female to the male. I remember a passage by Sabatini regarding this theme which is extremely relevant:

«Equality» does not mean «adaptation» to the «standard man», but the real possibility of full development and realization for all human beings in all their diversity. Many people are convinced of this, and yet they continue to say that «a woman should be equal to a man» and never that «a man should be equal to a woman», and not even that «a woman and a man (or a man and a woman) should be equal»: what a strange concept of equality this is, in which the parameter is always a man (Sabatini, 1987, p. 103).

In fact, the few attempts to change things recorded in my analysis, all move in this direction: women and girls try to get closer to the male model while men and boys do not express the slightest desire to integrate with the female model. In this way, we tend to give credibility to the idea that the female gender lacks something while the male gender is perfect as it is and can be a standard model for both genders. We are still linked to the idea of the protection and promotion of the «weaker sex», whereas other countries are trying to carry forward a much more complicated argument: to recognize and appreciate the culture of which both genders are carriers, in full respect of their differences. I believe that this is really the key to solving the problem of fair representation of both sexes in textbooks. The starting point is to recognize equal dignity and importance for males and females. The aim is to offer both the same opportunities to think about their own work and private life, without constraints related to their gender affiliation. I think the most ambitious project is the perfect interchanging of roles. Textbooks should represent both women and men cooperating together in the family (sharing household work and child care) and work (the man is no longer

the only one supporting the family, as women also work and contribute to the maintenance of the home and children).

If I had to offer a modest suggestion for the contents of future textbooks, I would say this: in order to fight sexism, it is first necessary to break down the rigid division of roles between men and women; that is, we need to give boy and girl readers positive adult role models for inspiration. Instead the trend that I have found in my research goes in the opposite direction: the few attempts at innovation are applied to the young protagonists of the stories, to boys, and especially to girls. Unfortunately, the adult models are still traditional, showing distinct tasks for both sexes: father works and mother stays at home to take care of the children and the home. But I wonder what value is conveyed: if female readers are shown models of dynamic, brave and intelligent girls, why are the same girls likely to become mothers/housewives, financially dependent on their husbands? It is a known fact that girl readers identify with the female protagonists of the story, make the characteristics and the roles their own and want to become like them. Similarly, male children identify with men and take them as role models.

Showing patterns of non-stereotyped women and men, with equal dignity and worth, is the first step towards really offering pupils of both sexes equal opportunities to plan their future, regardless of their gender.

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Keywords: China; primary schools; English textbooks; gender Introduction Education is a main way to achieve an equal, harmonious and reliable human development (UNESCO 1996). Biases in contents of learning materials are one of the four factors that matter in promoting gender equality in education (UNESCO2007). Textbooks are the most powerful instruments in shaping children’s belief, attitudes and values (Sumalatha 2004). This study examines the changes of gender representation in three sets of primary English textbooks published and used in China during the past over thirty years. The Status o