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**Reading Between the Lines:
An Analysis of Gender Representations in EFL
Textbooks for Grade 4**

Mellan raderna:

En analys av genusrepresentationer i engelska läroböcker för årskurs 4

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Preface

Our interest for this topic was sparked when we learned about the hidden curriculum, and we understood the impact learning materials can have on students' perception of themselves and the world around them. As future teachers with a shared commitment to creating inclusive classrooms, we found it meaningful to critically examine gender representations in textbooks we may one day use in our own classrooms. The work has been divided equally between us, and we have collaborated closely throughout the writing process.

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Abstract

Gender can be understood as something you perform, based on what your environment conveys is expected from you. A big part of children's environment is school, and English textbooks are therefore naturally one of many elements that can affect how a child's perception and expression of gender is influenced. Despite this, several international studies demonstrate that English textbooks used for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) commonly include stereotypical portrayals of female and male characters in the books globally. This thesis examines the portrayal of gender through text and visuals in three EFL textbooks aimed at Swedish fourth graders. Research on gender representation in the Swedish context is limited, creating a gap this study seeks to address. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework inspired by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), while focusing on three main themes. Representation of gendered visibility and agency is the first, representation of bodies and appearance is the second, and the third focuses on gender roles. The results establish that the books have a combination of traditional and non-traditional representations of gender, with an overall lack of non-binary representation. This can be considered to reinforce gender norms, while simultaneously challenging others. Ultimately, the study argues that there is room for improvement in the portrayal of different genders in EFL textbooks used in Sweden, despite being more progressive than several other textbooks used around the world.

Keywords: gender, representation, English as a foreign language (EFL), textbooks, Sweden.

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1. Introduction

English textbooks constitute a central component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Swedish primary schools (Celce-Murcia, 2014). Beyond providing linguistic input, textbooks play a crucial role in shaping learners' understanding of sociocultural norms, values, and identities, thereby influencing how students engage with language and culture (Fithriani, 2022; Xiong et al., 2017). As recurring classroom resources, they also contribute to the communication of social norms and values. Research has shown that textbooks are not neutral representations of reality but reflect broader social power structures (e.g., Ammert, 2011; Losioki & Mdee, 2023).

Within the field of EFL education, numerous international studies have identified repeated patterns of gender imbalance and stereotypical portrayals (Gebregeorgis, 2016; Sánchez Aguilar, 2021, Xiong et al., 2017). For example, male characters tend to be more visible and associated with authority and a wider range of professions, whereas female characters are often described in more domestic or traditionally feminine roles. These patterns have been identified in both textual and visual representations, highlighting the multimodal nature of gender construction in textbooks. However, despite this growing body of research, limited attention has been paid to gender representation in English textbooks used in Swedish primary education.

The Swedish national curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr22) emphasises democratic values, gender equality, and norm-conscious teaching (Skolverket, 2022). Teachers are expected to actively promote equality and critically reflect on how notions of what is considered female and male may influence students' opportunities and life choices. Since textbooks play a significant role in everyday classroom practice, examining how gender is portrayed in these materials becomes a matter of professional responsibility. With this background, the present study investigates how gender is portrayed in three English textbooks for grade 4 used in Swedish primary schools. By analysing both textual and visual representations, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender norms may be reproduced or challenged in EFL teaching materials in Sweden.

2. Research Questions

The aim of this study is to analyse how three English textbooks for fourth graders used in Swedish primary schools portray gender in textual and visual representations. The analysis will be conducted through answering the research question:

How is gender portrayed in the texts and images of three English textbooks for grade 4 used in Swedish primary schools?

3. Background

This section provides background information on the key concepts relevant to the study, which establishes the foundation of the analysis. First, the concept of gender is discussed. Second, the role of textbooks in EFL teaching is explored. Third, an overview of gender and representation in EFL textbooks is presented, followed by a section about the Swedish curriculum and norm-conscious teaching. Lastly, the theoretical lens through which gender in the textbooks is examined is introduced through the two complementary frameworks: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA).

3.1 Gender as a Social Construct

The existence of *gender* and its meaning has been widely discussed from various perspectives for several decades. Given the complexity of the topic, this paper does not attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of gender, but instead provide a concise overview relevant to the analysis in this paper. As a starting point, the World Health Organisation defines gender as socially constructed characteristics of girls, boys, women and men (World Health Organization, n.d.). It highlights that gender is context dependent and that it can change over time. Gender is distinguished from sex, which many argue is more dependent on biological factors than gender, as the latter is often explained as a social perspective on biological sex (Hirdman & Manns, n.d.). *Gender identity* is another concept, which explains how someone personally experiences their gender, without it necessarily corresponding to the sex they were assigned at birth. However, the binary division of concepts such as gender and biological sex is not to be considered an absolute truth, as argued by Judith Butler (2002). Accordingly, in this essay, gender is understood as a social construct.

Butler is an influential voice in the discourse on gender, especially known for their theory of gender *performativity*. This theory suggests that gender is produced through repeated actions and behaviours, and not an innate quality (Butler, 2002). However, this performance is not necessarily a conscious act, but rather a repeated reinforcement of gender norms (Butler, 2011). In a Swedish context, pink is associated with femininity (Ambjörnsson, 2011), and dressing babies assigned female at birth in pink therefore contributes to how gender is produced and understood. The expressed gender is however not automatically the same as a person's self identified gender identity. Butler (2002) argues that individuals are

compelled to conform to gender norms through what Butler explains as the *heterosexual matrix*. If a heterosexual man who was assigned male at birth performs in a masculine way, he is considered intelligible with the matrix since the different parts of his identity align in the culturally expected way. Individuals who do not conform with this alignment, such as intersex, transgender and homosexual people, fall outside the matrix. People who fall outside of the matrix are considered unintelligible and unviable (Butler, 2002). *Non-binary people* constitute another group that falls outside the matrix, as their gender identity does not align with either female or male (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Yvonne Hirdman is a Swedish historian who explains that gender is a notion that can be used as an analytical tool that is performed and entails a power structure (Hirdman, 2003). She describes, from a binary gender perspective, that men and women can be explained through different formulas that reveal a certain power structure between the genders. An example of this is that women can be considered as *non-men*, the opposite of the men. Another example is that a woman can be regarded as what Hirdman refers to as *a small man* - not complete on her own. "To be a man is to not be a woman. To be a man is to be the bearer of a norm." (Hirdman, 2003, p. 65, own translation). In other words, Hirdman establishes a clear distinction between men and women, where men can be regarded as the superordinate default. This perception of gender, grounded in dichotomy and hierarchy, is what Hirdman refers to as *the gender system* (2003). Hirdman further emphasizes what she refers to as *the gender contract*. It consists of an invisible set of rules that outline what is expected from women and men, albeit in different ways. Within this contract, women are expected to be caring and domestic, while men are expected to be autonomous and authoritative (Hirdman, 2003). Deviation from these expectations can lead to consequences of various degrees for both men and women, depending on who has deviated from the contract and how. It can be considered impressive when women show qualities often associated with men, such as being a good driver, although consequently countered with moralized criticism and other social sanctions (Hirdman, 2003). However, since the gender system makes it clear that qualities associated with men are more desirable, men who challenge normative masculinity through engaging in behaviours culturally coded as feminine can be shamed and face other social sanctions too.

While men can be considered a societal ideal, there are also certain types of masculinity that are considered superior, which can be explained through what the sociologist

Raewyn Connell refers to as *hegemonic masculinity* (2005). This describes the type of masculinity that is culturally desired due to its social status in society, which is something that can change over time. In a Swedish context, it is often associated with toughness, authority and heterosexuality. If a man does not live up to the current standards of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (2005) explains that he can face subordination and/or marginalization, reminding us that “To recognize gender as a social pattern requires us to see it as a product of history, and also as a producer of history.” (Connell, 2005, p. 81).

3.2 Textbooks in EFL Teaching

EFL is mainly taught in countries where English has no official status, such as Sweden, which is why it is considered a foreign language (Celce-Murcia, 2014). In Swedish EFL classrooms, textbooks are frequently used, although other teaching materials are also used as complementary resources (Skolverket, 2006). Through the selection of content, representations, and examples, textbooks can communicate ideas about acceptable behaviour and social roles, including gender roles, and thereby influence how learners understand their place in society (Gebregeorgis, 2016). As recurring classroom resources, they form a central part of students’ meetings with language and culture, and research demonstrates how content in textbooks does not convey neutral representations of reality. On the contrary, as Ammert (2011) argues, textbooks often carry rather strong political or ideological perspectives, especially in relation to the representation of social categories such as gender.

Rather than applying direct political power, textbooks influence more sensitive processes by shaping perceptions of identity, belonging, and normality (Ammert, 2011). In addition to their explicit messages, textbooks also convey implicit messages through what is often referred to as the hidden curriculum. Jackson explains the hidden curriculum as implicit expectations placed on students, which are taught through norms and organizational structures (1968). This includes underlying values, norms, and expectations that are not stated overtly (Kärner & Schneider, 2023). Such implicit messages can reinforce gender stereotypes and shape learners’ perceptions of appropriate behaviour for males and females (Losioki & Mdee, 2023). Textbooks do not only function as tools for delivering knowledge, but also play an important role in socialising learners into societal norms and values, such as gendered expectations. Exposure to gender representations in learning materials may influence how young students understand behaviors, identities, and future possibilities. Research suggests

that such representations can affect students' motivation and self-perception, particularly when certain roles are consistently associated with one gender (Leach, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2006; Sunderland, 1992, as cited in Sánchez Aguilar, 2021). For example, through portraying a mother as a caring character, a textbook could be normalizing the traditional view of motherhood and the expectations placed on women.

Furthermore, EFL textbooks communicate meaning not only through written language but also through images, layout, and design. The multimodal nature of textbooks means that social norms may be conveyed through both textual and visual representations. Widodo (2018, cited in Fithriani, 2022) argues that textbooks function as cultural texts that mediate power and privilege. This influence is particularly significant in primary education, where children are still developing their understanding of the world and may be influenced by the behaviours and roles they encounter in learning materials (Fithriani, 2022).

3.3 Gender and Representation in EFL Textbooks

A growing body of international research explores how gender is represented in EFL textbooks. Studies conducted in various international contexts have identified repeated patterns of gender imbalance and stereotypical portrayals. Male characters tend to be more visible and are often associated with authority, activity, and a broader range of professions, whereas female characters are more frequently depicted in domestic or traditionally feminine roles (e.g., Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Gebregeorgis, 2016; Sánchez Aguilar, 2021). These tendencies have been observed in both textual and visual representations, indicating that gender norms are communicated multimodally through language, images, and narrative structures.

A study about EFL textbooks used in Mexican primary education revealed that male characters were often more visible than female characters, particularly in illustrations, while representations in photographs tended to be more balanced (Sánchez Aguilar, 2021). The same study also demonstrated that occupational roles were frequently gendered, with male characters associated with a wider range of professions, including leadership and active roles, while female characters were more often linked to a limited number of traditionally feminine occupations such as teaching or caregiving (Sánchez Aguilar, 2021). Research focusing specifically on primary-level textbooks highlights the importance of visual representation, as younger pupils rely heavily on illustrations when interpreting meaning (Sánchez Aguilar,

2021). Because students spend a considerable amount of time working with textbooks in school, repeated exposure to gendered representations may contribute to shaping their beliefs and expectations about gender roles (Fithriani, 2022). The ways in which characters are positioned, described, and depicted visually may therefore contribute to shaping pupils' understandings of gender roles from an early age.

In a study of a widely used textbook series for primary schools in Guangzhou, Xiong et al. (2017) found male characters were more visible than female characters in both illustrations and written texts. The study also showed the same patterns as mentioned before, male characters were associated with a wider range of professions, whereas female characters were more often associated with domestic tasks and family roles that represented a caring woman. In addition, male characters were more often mentioned before female characters when both genders appeared in the same text, suggesting that gender inequality was embedded not only in the representation but also in discourse structure.

Significantly, these patterns have been identified in both textual and visual representations, suggesting that gender norms are communicated multimodally through language, images, and narrative structures. Research focusing on primary-level textbooks further highlights that illustrations often play a particularly obvious role, as young learners rely heavily on visuals shown when interpreting content (e.g. Sánchez Aguilar, 2021). As such, the gender patterns found in EFL textbooks may contribute to shaping students' understandings of gender roles at an early stage.

Research has also highlighted the role of the hidden curriculum in reinforcing gender inequality in educational materials (Kärner & Schneider, 2023). Studies from Tanzania show that even when efforts are made to improve gender balance in textbooks, stereotypical representations often carry on through implicit messages embedded in the content. These include traditional gender roles, unequal distribution of activities, and limited representation of females in professional or leadership positions (Losioki & Mdee, 2023). Furthermore, such representations are not always explicit but are conveyed through patterns of behaviour, roles, and expectations, which may unconsciously influence learners' attitudes and beliefs about gender (Losioki & Mdee, 2023).

Despite the increasing number of international studies on gender representations in EFL textbooks, relatively limited research has examined it in a Swedish context with focus on primary education, particularly in the lower grades. This gap is noted given the central

role textbooks play in everyday classroom practice and the importance of gender equality within the Swedish educational context (Skolverket, 2022). Investigating how gender is portrayed in Swedish EFL textbooks therefore contributes to addressing an underexplored area within the field.

3.4 The Swedish Curriculum and Norm-Conscious Teaching

According to Lgr22 (Skolverket, 2022), schools are expected to "actively and consciously influence and stimulate pupils to embrace the common values of our society" (Skolverket, 2022, p. 5). These values include democracy, equality and respect for individuals. The curriculum further emphasises that education should promote gender equality and that schools have a responsibility to address how norms related to what is considered female and male may influence students' opportunities and life choices (Skolverket, 2022).

This highlights that schools are not only responsible for transmitting subject knowledge, but also for critically engaging with the norms and values that are communicated in educational context. In this regard, norm-conscious teaching can be understood as an approach in which teachers reflect on which norms are made visible, reproduced, or challenged in the classroom. Rather than treating teaching materials as neutral, a norm-conscious perspective highlights how textbooks may present certain roles, behaviours, and identities as more normal or expected than others. (Losioki & Mdee, 2023).

This is particularly relevant in EFL teaching, where textbooks often function as central classroom resources and can influence students' encounters with and understanding of both language and culture (Gebregeorgis, 2016). From this perspective, examining gender representation in English textbooks becomes important not only from a research point of view, but also in relation to teachers' professional responsibility to promote equality and critically address norms in accordance with the curriculum. If textbooks reproduce stereotypical or limited portrayals of gender, they may conflict with the values outlined in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2022). Analysing how gender is represented in these materials can therefore contribute to a better understanding of whether such textbooks support or challenge the aims of gender equality and norm-conscious teaching in Swedish primary education.

3.5 Theoretical Lens

FCDA builds on Critical Discourse Analysis but focuses specifically on how gendered power relations and gender ideologies are constructed and reproduced through discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Lazar, 2007). FCDA aims to critically examine how language and representations contribute to maintaining or challenging hierarchical gender relations in society. From a feminist perspective, discourse is understood as an important place where social meanings about gender are produced, circulated and negotiated. Through discourse, assumptions about femininity, masculinity and gender roles can become normalized and appear natural or taken for granted (Lazar, 2007). FCDA therefore seeks to reveal how gender ideologies and power relations are implemented through multimodality and everyday communication. Lazar, 2007 highlights that gender relations are not always in obvious ways, instead, gendered assumptions are often reproduced through indirect and implicit forms of ways and discussions.

Multimodality can be described as the combination of different semiotic modes (e.g., images and text), and the way in which they interact when combined (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The combination of two or more semiotic modes can affect how a message is understood, as it can enable it to be conveyed more explicitly or ambiguously. MDA focuses on the meanings created through the combination of two or more modes, such as images, language, and layout (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

4. Method and Materials

This section outlines the research design and methodological approach applied in the analysis of textbooks to address the research question: How is gender portrayed in the texts and images of three English textbooks for grade 4 used in Swedish primary schools? It describes the criteria used to select the textbooks and explains the analytical framework applied in the study. We begin by introducing the selection of textbooks included in the analysis. This is followed by a detailed account of the analytical procedure and the steps taken to conduct the textbook analysis.

4.1 Materials

Three textbooks were selected and included in this study. The books were chosen based on the criteria that they must be: published within the last 10 years, currently and commonly

used materials in Swedish classrooms – something that we have witnessed as pre-service teachers; accessible at the library, which is where we have been able to borrow the books for this analysis.

4.1.1 Magic! Textbook

Magic! 4 is a textbook aimed at fourth graders, published in 2020. This analysis focuses on the second edition, printed in 2020. The visual material consists primarily of illustrated images, with relatively few real-life photographs of people, environments, and animals. The textbook follows four recurring main characters, Kylie, Harry, Kate, and Gopal who are presented as children from different English-speaking countries. These characters are followed throughout the book, creating narrative continuity across chapters. Additionally, a recurring fairy-like character appears throughout the material. The textbooks analysed include accompanying audio recordings. However, as these were not accessible for the present study, the analysis is limited to the written and visual content of the textbooks.

4.1.2 Skills Textbook

Skills 4 is a textbook from 2018 aimed at fourth graders. In this study, the sixth edition printed in 2020 is analysed. It is part of the Skills series, which includes textbooks, workbooks, and supplementary online materials for each grade level from first to sixth grade. The visual material consists primarily of illustrations, although photographs of real people and environments are also included. The book follows five recurring main characters, Leo, Kat, Vega, Yoshi, and an alien named Tibbo. The presence of recurring characters enables cumulative visibility and agency across chapters.

4.1.3 Sparks Textbook

Sparks 4 is a textbook from 2020 aimed at fourth graders. This study analyses the first edition, printed in 2020. The visual material consists of a relatively balanced mix of illustrated images and real-life photographs of people and environments. Unlike *Magic! 4* and *Skills*, *Sparks* does not follow a set of recurring main characters. Instead, the textbook is organised into separate thematic units that introduce different characters and contexts across spreads. Several spreads do not include any human characters at all. This structure results in less narrative continuity and fewer opportunities for cumulative character development, compared to the other textbooks analysed.

4.2 Procedure and Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative textbook analysis inspired by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which builds on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003), and elements of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). The methodological approach is guided by the aim of examining how gender is constructed and represented in both textual and visual material in English textbooks used in Swedish primary school. A qualitative design is appropriate as the study aims to gain insight into how gender is represented in textbooks and whether gender norms are repeated or challenged, rather than measuring the frequency or distribution of such representations. The structural differences between the three textbooks, particularly regarding visual style and story continuity, are relevant for understanding how gender representation and agency are constructed across the materials. These differences were therefore taken into account during the analytical process.

The analytical process was inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2013) framework for thematic analysis. Following this approach, the textbooks were first read and re-read in their entirety to gain familiarity with the material. During this phase, both textual and visual elements such as illustrations, photographs, dialogues, and thematic chapters were examined. Initial observations were documented and preliminary patterns relating to gender representation were noted. Through repeated readings and discussion, recurring themes were identified across the material. This process provided an overview of how gender appeared to be constructed in each textbook and helped identify sections and examples for closer analysis.

The analysis is primarily guided by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which is used as an analytical lens rather than a full methodological framework. This means that the interpretation of the material is informed by a focus on gender, power relations, and ideological representations. Using this perspective, the analysis examines how gender is presented through both textual and visual elements in the textbooks, paying particular attention to how characters are portrayed, which roles they are given, and how agency, activities, and forms of participation are distributed among different genders, in relation to broader social structures and power relations (Fairclough, 2003; Lazar, 2007).

To apply this perspective, the analysis was guided by the following key questions:

- Who is visible in the texts and images?
- Who speaks and who acts?

- How are bodies, clothing, and appearance represented?
- What roles and activities are associated with different genders?
- How is language used to describe characters of different genders?

FCDA is used to analyse the verbal content of the textbooks, with particular attention to how language constructs gendered roles, identities, and social positions (Fairclough, 2003; Lazar, 2007). Dialogues, narrative texts, and character descriptions were examined to identify how gender norms may be reproduced or challenged through linguistic choices. In addition, elements of multimodal discourse analysis were applied to examine visual representations such as illustrations and photographs. This included analysing how gender is communicated through visual elements such as clothing, activities, positioning, and interaction between characters. The analysis focused on selected textbook chapters, recurring characters, dialogues, and visual representations to identify patterns in how gender is constructed both within and across the three textbooks.

5. Results and Discussion

This results and discussion section aims to answer the chosen research question, which is: How is gender portrayed in the texts and images of three English textbooks for grade 4 used in Swedish primary schools? The results are organised into three themes identified through the qualitative analysis, taking into account both textual and visual representation. The first theme is about representation of gendered visibility and agency, focusing on who is visible and active. The second theme focuses on the representation of bodies, clothing, and appearance. The third theme explores gender roles, activities and social positions in the textbooks. For each theme, the results from each textbook will be presented separately, followed by a cross-book comparison where the findings within each theme are discussed. Additionally, there is a fourth section that discusses the findings in all three textbooks in relation to Lgr22.

5.1 Representation of Gendered Visibility and Agency

5.1.1 Magic!

Both girls and boys are represented both visually and textually throughout the textbook; however, no explicitly non-binary characters were identified. Although the book features two girls and two boys as main characters, there are more double-page spreads that include only boys or men than spreads that include only girls or women. Harry, in particular, is given considerable visual standing. As a recurring character who appears frequently throughout the book, he accumulates narrative and visual agency over time, as his continued presence grants him sustained visibility and influence within the overall storyline.

In one of the spreads where Harry is the main character, he attends a football match with his father (pp. 38-39). Harry and his father are the only characters who can be gender-coded in this spread, as they are visible in the foreground and the rest of the crowd are portrayed as smaller in the background. During half-time, Harry and his father order food at a hot dog stall from a vendor referred to as “man”. The football players are vaguely visible in the distant background, but they all appear to have short hair. This, in combination with the male-coded context of the scene, positions them to be interpreted as male football players. In this spread, there are no characters who can be read as female, and the only characters who speak are male.

Although both male and female-coded characters are given space and voice throughout the textbook, this is not carried out in equivalent ways. One of the spreads portraying only female characters is when Kate and her mother are in the kitchen (pp. 18-19). They both speak, and Kate makes several humorous remarks. In contrast with the male dominated spread from the football match, they are in the kitchen which is culturally coded as a feminine space. However, as in the visual material, no explicit non-binary characters are clearly represented. Towards the end of the book, a “presenter” is introduced without explicit gender marking. The presenter is not explicitly gendered in the written text. As the accompanying audio material was not analysed, it cannot be determined whether gender is conveyed through voice.

5.1.2 Skills

The textbook follows two girls, two boys, and an alien character named Tibbo, who is referred to using the pronoun “she.” Tibbo is clearly positioned as a central character, and the narrative appears to be structured around her perspective and experiences. Visually, she is given sustained prominence throughout the book. There are a small number of double-page spreads that include only boys or men, and a similar number that include only girls or women. However, the majority of spreads present both male- and female-coded characters together. In many of these instances, female-coded characters constitute the numerical majority, particularly when Tibbo is included in the count. Overall, the visual material suggests a relatively balanced representation between male- and female-coded characters, with a slight prominence of female visibility due to Tibbo’s central role.

Textually, the distribution of representation largely mirrors the visual material. Both male- and female-coded characters are given space and narrative presence. However, Tibbo and a girl named Kat demonstrate particularly high levels of agency, as they are frequently portrayed as taking initiative, driving the narrative forward, and engaging actively in dialogue (e.g., 9, 54-55, 61). They are also among the characters who speak most frequently, which further reinforces their central roles within the storyline. Regarding non-binary representation, no explicitly non-binary characters were identified in the written text. Although Tibbo is an alien character, she is consistently referred to using feminine pronouns, which positions her within a binary gender framework rather than outside of it.

5.1.3 Sparks

Unlike the other textbooks analysed, *Sparks* does not follow one or a small set of recurring main characters throughout the book. As a result, cumulative agency is less prominent, since only a limited number of characters appear across multiple spreads. Most characters are introduced within individual units without sustained narrative continuity. The majority of double-page spreads display both male- and female-coded characters, and in most spreads, the distribution appears relatively balanced. However, there are slightly more spreads in which male-coded characters are given greater visual prominence, even when female-coded characters are also present. There are approximately equal numbers of spreads featuring only male-coded characters and only female-coded characters. No characters were identified who clearly departed from stereotypically male or female gender coding, particularly when names and visual markers were taken into account. On this basis, the visual material suggests an absence of explicitly non-binary representation.

Textually, the distribution of representation appears even more balanced than in the visual material. It is common to find spreads where one male-coded and one female-coded character share central focus, often demonstrating comparable levels of agency within the dialogue or narrative. In several instances, when a character of one gender is portrayed with high agency, a subsequent unit presents a character of another gender in a similarly active and central role. An example of this is when Space Girl is introduced (pp. 54-55), and Crazy Adventure Boy, who later becomes friends with her, is introduced shortly after (p. 62). This pattern contributes to an overall impression of structural balance in textual agency. As in the visual material, no explicit non-binary characters are clearly represented in the written text. However, one spread consists of diary entries of a character named Jamie (pp. 88-89). The character is not depicted, the name is unisex, and there are no accompanying pronouns.

5.1.4 Cross-Book Comparison

In terms of visibility and agency, the three textbooks differ in their narrative structure. *Magic!* and *Skills* follow recurring main characters which allow certain characters to accumulate agency across multiple chapters. In *Magic!*, Harry receives considerable narrative and visual prominence due to his frequent appearances. Although there are spreads with exclusively female characters and others with exclusively male characters, it is worth noting that these

frequently occur in gender-stereotypical contexts. For example, Harry and his father at the football match, and Kate and her mother in the kitchen. This aligns with the gender contract, as they are depicted in settings associated with their gender identities (Hirdman, 2003).

In *Skills*, agency is more evenly distributed among the main characters, although Tibbo and Kat often take the lead in conversations and actions. This is in contrast with Hirdman's gender contract (2003), since it states that men are expected to be autonomous initiators. This deviation from the contract by two female characters is however not portrayed as strange, which can be explained by the notion that male coded characteristics are seen as more desirable, which is made clear by the gender system (Hirdman, 2003).

Sparks, in contrast, does not follow recurring characters. Characters are typically introduced within individual units and rarely reappear. As a result, growing agencies are less prominent, and representation becomes more spread across multiple short narratives. While this structure creates a relatively balanced distribution of male and female-coded characters, it limits the possibility for individual characters to develop sustained narrative influence. This partly aligns with Xiong et al. (2017), who found that male characters were more visible than female characters in both illustrations and written texts in Chinese primary-school EFL textbooks. From an FCDA perspective, this uneven distribution of visibility and agency can be understood as reflecting underlying gendered power relations, where certain characters are given more narrative importance than others (Lazar, 2007).

These patterns of recurring visibility may contribute to reinforcing hierarchical gender relations, where certain representations become dominant and normalised. This aligns with Lazar's (2007) argument that discourse plays a central role in producing and sustaining gendered power relations. This pattern also reflects findings from a Mexican study of EFL textbooks used in elementary grades, where male characters are often given greater visibility and narrative importance (Sánchez Aguilar, 2021). Similar tendencies have been observed in other contexts, such as in an Ethiopian study where male characters were more frequently positioned as central figures, while female characters were less consistently represented (Gebregeorgis, 2016). This suggests that the uneven distribution of visibility is not unique to these textbooks, but part of a broader pattern in how gender is constructed in educational materials. It is a clear example of how societal norms reinforce men's hierarchical position in the gender system (Hirdman, 2003).

Across all three textbooks, *explicit* non-binary representation is entirely lacking. From an FCDA perspective, this absence is not neutral, but reflects how dominant gender discourses continue to privilege binary understandings of gender while downgrading alternative identities (Lazar, 2007). Since textbooks are commercial products, they are designed to adhere to certain societal expectations (Skolverket, 2006). Non-binary people fall outside of what Hirdman refers to as the gender system (2003) and what Butler explains as the heterosexual matrix (2002). The portrayal of non-binary characters would therefore challenge conventional gender norms, which can be considered a commercial risk, so including them in a textbook might therefore not be seen as a profitable choice and may explain their absence.

However, all three textbooks include at least one character who is not clearly coded as either female or male. In *Magic!*, the presenter is introduced in the text, but not explicitly gendered. In *Skills*, the alien character Tibbo might initially appear visually gender-neutral, however, the consistent use of feminine pronouns places her within the binary structure. In *Sparks*, one character named Jamie is mentioned in the text without explicit gender marking, and the name itself is gender neutral. While this may suggest a deliberate choice to present a character without explicit binary identification, the absence of additional textual cues makes it impossible to confirm.

The absence of explicit non-binary representation across all three textbooks can also be understood in relation to the role of textbooks as transporters of implicit norms and values. As discussed in Section 3.2, “Textbooks in EFL Teaching”, textbooks do not function as neutral teaching tools, but contribute to shaping students' understanding of identity and social roles (Fithriani, 2022). From this perspective, the consistent use of binary gender representations may reinforce the idea that gender exists only within a male–female framework, while other identities remain invisible. This can be understood as part of the hidden curriculum, where certain norms are reproduced indirectly rather than openly stated (Jackson, 1968).

5.2 Representation of Bodies, Clothing, and Appearance

5.2.1 Magic!

In the textbook *Magic! 4*, we see the bodies, clothing, and appearance are constructed through a combination of color-coding, hairstyle, contextual clothing, and appearance focused dialogue. In many Illustrations, gender is clearly signaled through clothing, color, and hairstyles. However, some representations challenge traditional gender stereotypes by depicting girls in less conventionally feminine clothing or portraying boys in emotionally expressive roles. Across multiple chapters in the textbook, the color functions as a repeated gender signal. Female-coded characters are frequently associated with the color pink or explicitly “girly” details, such as Harry’s younger sister wearing a pink shirt with a heart on it (pp. 40–41), Hannah wearing a pink jacket (pp. 60–61), and Kylie wearing pink shoes and later a glittery stage outfit (pp. 64–69).

In contrast, male-coded characters are often depicted in blue, green, or more neutral tones, such as Harry’s blue and green shirts (pp. 36–39) and Stephan’s green shirt (pp. 66–67). Hair also reinforces gender readability, as female characters are generally portrayed with long hair, while male characters have shorter hairstyles. At the same time, the visual material does not consistently reinforce strict gender coding. Kate is repeatedly illustrated wearing blue shirts (pp. 20–23), and Hannah is shown in blue jeans with hands in her pockets (pp. 58–59), creating a more neutral or even slightly “boy-coded” silhouette, although her long hair continues to signal femininity. These mixed-coded representations suggest that clothing alone does not always operate as a fixed gender marker.

In some contexts, clothing is shaped more by cultural or situational factors than by contemporary gender norms. On the pages where we see the school setting, uniforms clearly differentiate between girls (skirts) and boys (trousers), and the female teacher is also depicted wearing a skirt (pp. 14–15). In the chapter set in ancient Egypt, Hapu and his father wear draped garments that seen from a modern Swedish perspective may resemble dresses, but are culturally contextualized rather than gender-transgressive (pp. 44–47). Similarly, crowd scenes in the chapter “London and Harry” and the blurred audience in the chapter “Kylie’s

big night” make background characters’ genders less identifiable (pp. 48–51; pp. 68–69), although the main characters remain clearly gendered.

Textually, explicit references to appearance are most prominent in “Kylie’s big night” (pp. 68–69), where Kylie, her mother, and Bibi discuss makeup, clothing, and hairstyles. The dialogue centers on how Kylie should look on stage and includes evaluative terms such as “pretty” and “beautiful.” While the conversation reinforces the idea that appearance is significant for female characters, it also includes reassurance that Kylie is “beautiful as she is” and should not use too much makeup. Elsewhere, physical descriptions are brief but telling. Miss Prim is described as “tall and slim” (pp. 14–15), where “slim” aligns with socially valued feminine body ideals. Cleopatra’s necklace is described as “beautiful” (pp. 46–47), linking femininity to ornamentation and aesthetic value. Overall, the textbook *Magic! 4* relies on recognizable visual and textual gender markers, particularly through color and styling, while occasionally presenting more neutral or mixed-coded representations, especially in its portrayal of female characters.

5.2.2 Skills

In *Skills*, the body shapes of almost all of the illustrated adult characters are homogenous, regardless of gender. There is only one clear exception, which is a male teacher who is illustrated with a larger body size than the rest of the characters (pp. 39-40). Regarding the way children in the book are illustrated, the vast majority of them also have a similar body silhouette, although some characters are shown as being a bit taller or shorter than others (eg., p. 45). One of the book’s main characters is Tibbo who is a beige bald alien with four arms, two legs, purple eyes and an antenna. She comes from a planet where everyone appears to have the listed characteristics, although being of different sizes. In a spread that shows the different aliens, Tibbo describes there being many mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters on the planet (pp. 22-23). This makes it possible to assume that the dozen of aliens shown are a portrayal of different genders, despite not looking too different from each other in regards to appearance of curves, size or even clothes. Gender does not appear to be explicitly expressed through the body types of the illustrated characters throughout the book.

A characteristic that does differ a lot between characters of different gender identities is the hair. Girls and women are mainly shown with long hair, either loose or in an up-do, while boys are mainly shown with short hair (e.g., pp. 24, 43, 47). The main character Vega is

however an example of when a character's hair style goes against existing gender norms. She has a pink and blue undercut, with the hair being mainly in the front, meaning she has less hair than many of the male characters. Regarding her body language, it can be considered neutral compared to the other characters. She is shown with her hands in her pockets and other relaxed positions throughout the book (e.g., pp. 16, 54), which other characters also are, regardless of gender (e.g., pp. 20-21, 43). Characters of different genders are also portrayed smiling, crossing their arms, standing with their legs apart, or with their hands on their hips (pp. 20-21).

The clothes portrayed in the book are both uniforms (for school or work) and non-uniforms. When the main characters are wearing their school uniforms, they are all wearing a white shirt, a dark blue sweater, black pants and black shoes (e.g., p. 8, 16, 39). They have their own school bags (Vega's is the biggest) and different socks (Leo's are often colourful). In one chapter, there are photographs of school uniforms from three different schools (p. 43). The different school uniforms have different combinations of black, white and blue. The text mentions that the students all look the same when they wear their uniform. However, it fails to mention that all three examples featured in this spread show all children with long hair (presumably girls) wearing skirts, while the short haired children (presumably boys) all wear pants. The uniforms worn by adults are shown in the chapter about jobs, and since the body silhouettes are all so similar and there is limited information (other than their job) about each character, it is not always easy to guess what gender the illustrators are wanting to depict (pp. 20-21). For example, an engineer is depicted in a ponytail, wearing a yellow helmet, green shirt, grey pants and black shoes. The engineer is looking at a big paper and standing with her legs apart, conveying confidence. The text related to the illustration confirms that the engineer is a mother. This can of course be understood as a deliberate choice, to make the gender of the characters unclear in order to not reinforce preconceptions of the different jobs.

Beyond the uniform, each character is depicted in the outfits that remain largely consistent throughout the book, with small subtle changes in specific garment and not in the overall style of each character. Kat is consistently portrayed wearing an orange bandana with an orange short-sleeved shirt, with either a pink dress or a pink top and pink skirt (e.g., pp. 38, 76, 89). These clothes combined with her long hair create a traditionally feminine visual representation. In contrast, Vega with the short hair is depicted wearing a yellow shirt with

either blue overalls or blue pants (e.g., pp. 54, 76) , which can be interpreted as more gender-neutral or even slightly masculine. Leo's outfit consists of a brown hoodie, blue jeans and a red cap (e.g., 66, 76). This is a traditionally masculine visual representation. Yoshi is constantly portrayed in brown pants and floral shirts, often with pink elements, and sometimes a black jacket and a grey cap (e.g., pp. 55, 60). His portrayal challenges traditional expectations of what colors and prints a boy should wear. Tibbo's outfit also challenges traditional gender coding, as she goes by "she/her" pronouns but is constantly wearing black shorts/pants and a red shirt with a blue circle in the middle (e.g., pp. 10, 55). Paired with her physical characteristics, this creates a gender-neutral aesthetic, which applies to all of the aliens depicted in the book (p. 23). Another character with mixed gender cues, despite only appearing on one page, is Lily (p. 24). Lily is a baby with a blue pacifier, wearing blue clothes and has a single curl of hair. The text under the head-and-shoulders illustration of Lily informs the reader that the character is another character's brother, despite the name Lily being predominantly used as a female name in a Swedish context (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2024).

5.2.3 Sparks

The representation in the textbook *SPARKS* constitutes a combination of traditional gender-stereotypical portrayals and more neutral as well as norm-critical elements. Gender is frequently made visible through external attributes such as hair length, color schemes, clothing styles, and body language. At the same time, there are illustrations that challenge these conventions, creating a degree of complexity within the overall representation. Girls are predominantly depicted with long hair, either worn loose or tied up, whereas boys consistently have short hair. Most characters are portrayed with positive or friendly facial expressions, while neutral or "cool" expressions appear slightly more frequently among boys. Rosy cheeks are present on both girls and boys. Although this feature is culturally coded as feminine, its distribution across genders renders it relatively gender-neutral in this context.

The characters' clothing partly reproduce traditional gender patterns. Several boys are depicted wearing sports-related clothing, and the colors blue and green are commonly associated with them (e.g., pp. 13, 49, 51). However, these colors are also worn by many girls (e.g., pp. 12, 22, 46), which may indicate a partial loosening of color-coded gender norms. The only distinct pink garment that appears in the textbook is a pair of pointe shoes,

presented separately without being worn by any character (p. 73). In addition, there are minor pink details on a woman's clothing (p. 75), but otherwise pink is largely absent. Only one image clearly depicts a skirt or dress: a black-and-white illustration of a female computer scientist wearing a dress (p. 56). Uniforms appear in a spread portraying people working in a restaurant (pp. 34-35). All chefs, regardless of gender, wear identical white uniforms, signaling a more gender-neutral representation. The waitress, however, wears a black tie, which may be interpreted as a norm-challenging element, given that ties are traditionally associated with masculinity.

Another example of both the reproduction and negotiation of gender norms can be found in the depiction of two children wearing space suits (pp. 62-63). The boy's suit is white with red and yellow details and features a planet on the front. The girl's suit is yellow with red and blue details and bears the text "Space Girl" across the front, with the word "Girl" written in large, prominent letters. This explicit gender marking may suggest that a girl in the role of an astronaut is not assumed to be self-evident and therefore requires specific labeling. It may indicate that female astronauts are still perceived as less normative than male astronauts in popular representations.

5.2.4 Cross-Book Comparison

Differences between the textbooks are also visible in how bodies, clothing and appearances are portrayed. In *Skills*, the illustrated bodies are largely homogeneous regardless of gender, with most characters sharing similar silhouettes. Gender is therefore primarily signaled through hairstyles and clothing rather than body shape. The hairstyles and clothes in the textbook images function as a performative element, since they either reproduce or challenge norms through their repeated practices (Butler, 2003).

In *Magic!*, gender distinctions are somewhat more visible through body proportions and visual markers such as color-coding and clothing styles. Female-coded characters are often portrayed with pink clothing and long hair, while male-coded characters more frequently wear blue or green tones and have shorter hairstyles. However, female characters are also portrayed wearing blue clothes, but no male characters are seen wearing pink. This reinforces the connection between pink and femininity, while blue is portrayed as a more gender neutral color. This can be understood as an effect of the gender system, since an attribute associated with boys and men (such as the color blue) is considered acceptable on

girls and women, but not vice versa (Hirdman, 2003). Additionally, conversations in *Magic!* reinforces the idea that appearance is significant for female characters, while including reassurance that Kylie is “*beautiful as she is*” and should not use too much makeup. This can be interpreted as both maintaining and moderating appearance-related expectations.

A similar pattern regarding the colors worn by different characters can be found in *Skills*, as blue is worn by characters of different genders, but pink is predominantly worn by girls. These visual patterns can, through an FCDA perspective, be interpreted as part of a broader discourse in which femininity is constructed through appearance and aesthetics, contributing to the normalisation of gendered expectations (Lazar, 2007). However, there is one clear exception to the stereotypical color coding. The male character Yoshi’s consistent usage of florals and pink shirts challenges traditional expectations of what prints and colors a boy should wear. Yoshi’s clothes are not discussed throughout the book, but the consequent representation of him challenging hegemonic masculinity can be interpreted as a statement by the authors, since it is something that can lead to marginalization (Connell, 2005). While challenging hegemonic masculinity does not by default place an individual outside the heterosexual matrix, it can be argued that Yoshi’s clothes partially disrupt the heterosexual matrix, but not completely (Butler, 2002).

In *Sparks*, pink is notably absent from both male and female characters. Blue on the other hand is worn by both female and male characters throughout the book, although a lot more frequently by boys than girls, which is consistent with the findings in the previous books. In this book, blue can be considered a norm, even though it is generally considered as a male coded color according to the gender contract. Since men can be considered norm bearers, this male coded attribute becomes the default (Hirdman, 2003).

Additionally, hair is another attribute that follows the gender contract throughout all three textbooks. Female characters are mainly portrayed with long hair, while the male characters generally have shorter hair. This can be understood as an act of gender performativity, since the repeated portrayal of characters having a certain type of hairstyle based on their gender reinforces gender norms (Butler, 1990). These visual patterns are consistent with previous research indicating that gender representation in textbooks is often characterised by imbalances in visibility and stereotypical role distribution (Xiong et al., 2017).

5.3 Gender Roles, Activities, and Social Positions

5.3.1 Magic!

Gender roles and social positions in the textbook *Magic!* are constructed through patterns of activity, profession, authority, and emotional expression. While the textbook includes several examples that challenge traditional stereotypes, many representations align with familiar gendered expectations. In terms of professions and family roles, several illustrations follow conventional patterns. In Gopal's family, the mother works part-time and is shown making tea in the kitchen, while the father is a teacher and is portrayed reading the newspaper in the study (pp. 52–53). This visual and textual combination aligns with stereotypical divisions between nurturing, domestic femininity and authoritative, knowledge-based masculinity. From an FCDA perspective, these representations can be understood as reinforcing hierarchically structured gender relations, where certain positions are given greater authority than others (Lazar, 2007).

Similarly, Harry's mother is portrayed as a shop assistant, whereas his father drives a truck and is associated with football enthusiasm (pp. 40–41). The father is given more personal depth through references to his interests, while the mother's portrayal focuses primarily on her workplace role. However, the textbook also includes representations that complicate stereotypical role divisions. In the chapter about Hapu, the boy is portrayed as caring and emotionally attentive toward his injured father (pp. 44–45), challenging the association between masculinity and emotional restraint. The father, in turn, is depicted in a vulnerable state, which contrasts with traditional portrayals of male strength. Similarly, Hannah is shown actively working on a boat and taking initiative in problem-solving situations (pp. 58–61), positioning her as competent and action-oriented. Patterns of activity also reveal gendered tendencies.

In the textbook boys are frequently associated with video games, football, and cricket (pp. 8; 36–39; 54–55), activities often culturally coded as masculine. In contrast, some female-coded activities include horseback riding, singing, and discussions of appearance (pp. 10–11; 68–69). However, these distinctions are not absolute. Kate displays strong agency in academic contexts, helping Gopal with his homework and confidently leading conversations

(pp. 24–25), and Maisie is portrayed as active and adventurous, swimming and diving (pp. 28–31).

Authority and classroom dynamics also contribute to gendered positioning. In the classroom scenes we see the male teachers are addressed as “sir” and are depicted as clear authority figures who regulate behavior (pp. 42–43). In one spread, Harry is repeatedly corrected for interrupting, which frames him as disruptive, while female students such as Amy are positioned as needing protection of their speaking space (pp. 48–51). These interactions subtly construct boys as more prone to misbehavior and girls as more orderly.

In the chapters focusing on Kylie, her aspiration to become a singer and participate in a talent competition aligns with creative and performance-based roles (pp. 66–69). Her family structure, living with her father and visiting her mother also presents a non-traditional arrangement, although the gendered division of professions (mother as hairdresser, father as flight attendant, stepmother as surf instructor) blends both stereotypical and less stereotypical elements.

Taken together, the textbook *Magic! 4* presents a mixture of traditional and more progressive gender roles. While several depictions reinforce conventional divisions in activities and family roles, the textbook also portrays girls as competent, active, and academically strong, and occasionally depicts boys as emotionally expressive or vulnerable. The overall representation is therefore not equally stereotypical but reflects a combination of continuity and change in gender norms.

5.3.2 Skills

Skills depict gender roles and social positions in various ways, both traditional and norm breaking. A clear example of when traditional gender roles are shown is when girls in ponytails and skirts are shown cheerleading and short haired boys are shown playing cricket (p. 47). However, it is stated that cheerleading is a tough sport that requires one to be athletic, which is not mentioned for cricket nor hurling shown in the same spread.

Various illustrations throughout the book show girls and women in roles conventionally attributed to boys and men, and vice versa. For example, the character Kat frequently takes the lead in the conversations and acts as an informal group leader. In the spread with different professions (pp. 20-21), a doctor is portrayed through a character with long hair in a pony tail and a fringe, presumably being a woman. Another character (also

presumably a woman) labeled as a police *officer* is crossing her arms and standing with legs apart. The nurse has short hair and is waving, and is presumably a man. The hairdresser, also presumably a man, has short hair and a purple shirt. Although these four professions carry culturally gendered associations, the book depicts them in a manner that challenges these normative perceptions. There are also photographs in the book that challenge this, such as the astronaut (p. 65) and the surf star (p. 71) that are both women. Although there is a male astronaut pictured on another page (p. 19), there are no other pictures of men who engage in sports.

The text and language also demonstrates a more contemporary stance on gender roles in various cases. For example, the professions *police officer* and *firefighter* are expressed in a gender neutral way instead of the binary and more traditional options *policewoman* or *fireman*. Other examples are when Tibbo describes herself as the best pilot on her planet (p. 17), Yoshi states that he is a dancer (s. 44), and Kat talks about her football practice (pp. 44-45). However, there are also more traditional portrayals, for example in the spread when the children are going to have a picnic (pp. 54-55). Kat and Vega are the only ones preparing the food and drinks and packing everything they need for the picnic, performing this work for the others.

5.3.3 Sparks

In *Sparks*, a combination of traditional gender roles and more norm-challenging representations can be identified. Gender roles and social positions are constructed through activities, professions, emotional expressions, and everyday interactions between characters. Several activities and interests are presented in ways that align with typical gender associations. Sports and physical activities are frequently connected to male-coded characters. For example, boys are depicted playing basketball (pp. 8-9), another boy is telling the readers that he is playing football (pp.49). Male characters are often associated with sports related interests or adventurous activities. In contrast, some activities coded as more creative or artistic, such as dance or arts and crafts, are visually represented using color traditionally associated with femininity (pp. 44-45). These visual choices may slightly strengthen gendered associations between certain activities and particular genders.

At the same time, the textbook also includes several examples that challenge stereotypical gender roles. In the chapters about space exploration, girls are portrayed as

central figures in astronaut (pp. 54-57). These representations position girls within fields such as science and space exploration, which have historically been male dominated. Professions are also shown in ways that both repeat and challenge gender expectations. In the restaurant-themed spread, the main chef is portrayed as a woman, while the junior chef is a man (pp. 34–35). This goes against the more traditional association of professional chefs with masculinity. In another example, a waitress is explicitly referred to using the gendered title “waitress” rather than the gender-neutral “servant”, highlighting how language itself can reinforce gender distinctions.

Family roles and social relationships are presented through a variety of family structures. Some characters are described as living with both parents, while others live with a single parent or grandparents (pp.12-13), (pp.40-41). However, the families described remain largely heteronormative, and gender-neutral family structures are not explicitly represented.

The textbook also includes examples where characters challenge expectations regarding personality attributes and emotional expression. In one chapter, a boy named Sam describes becoming emotional and crying when thinking about his grandmother (pp. 86–87), which contrasts with traditional stereotypes that portray boys as emotionally restrained. Similarly, Patrick describes managing his emotions calmly (pp. 92–93), while another character, Elaine, expresses anger in a more outward and physical way. These portrayals complicate common assumptions about gender and emotional behavior. Several characters also challenge traditional expectations regarding interests and appearance. For instance, the character Oliver shows a strong interest in clothing and fashion, and his friend Jack is portrayed as knowledgeable about style and clothing choices (pp. 68-71). Interest in fashion is often culturally coded as feminine, and these examples therefore present a less stereotypical portrayal of boys' interests.

Overall, *Sparks* present a mixture of traditional and more flexible gender roles. While some activities, visual signs, and linguistic choices reproduce familiar gendered patterns. The textbook also includes several examples where characters challenge these expectations. Representations of girls in scientific contexts and boys expressing emotions or interest in fashion broaden the range of possible identities and roles available to different genders.

5.3.4 Cross-Book Comparison

Across the three textbooks, gender roles and activities reflect a combination of traditional and more norm-challenging portrayals. These patterns can be related to the understanding of textbooks as non-neutral resources, as discussed in Section 3.2., “Textbooks in EFL Teaching”. From an FCDA perspective, the representations contribute to shaping ideas about which roles, behaviours, and identities are considered normal or expected, while others are marginalised (Lazar, 2007).

Through both textual and visual representations, the textbooks contribute to shaping ideas about which roles, activities, and identities are considered normal or expected. Even when some norm-challenging examples are present, recurring patterns may still reinforce traditional gender norms. In *Magic!*, several illustrations follow familiar gender patterns, such as mothers associated with domestic tasks and fathers connected to work or sports interests. These findings align with previous research showing that female characters are often associated with domestic or care-related roles, while male characters are more frequently linked to active, professional, or higher-status roles (Fithriani, 2022).

At the same time, girls are occasionally portrayed as academically confident and active, and boys are sometimes depicted expressing vulnerability. An example of girls being portrayed as athletes in a challenging sport is found in the text about sports in *Skills* (p. 47). This text can be considered norm conscious, since it is in contrast with the common narrative that sports associated with men are considered more legitimate and serious (Swedish Research Council for Sport Science, 2017).

Skills present a relatively broader range of norm-challenging roles. Female-coded characters are shown in positions of authority or competence, such as doctors, police officers and engineers (pp. 20-21). Similarly, male-coded characters appear in professions traditionally associated with women, such as nursing and hairdressing (pp. 20-21). These portrayals suggest a deliberate attempt to challenge stereotypical assumptions about gender and professions, since they are deviations from the gender contract despite the possible consequences of this (Hirdman, 2003).

Sparks tends to present gender roles in a more neutral and balanced way, often pairing male and female-coded characters in similar narrative positions. While the textbook includes some stereotypical visual signals, the textual material frequently distributes agency relatively

evenly between genders. The presence of both stereotypical and norm-challenging representations reflects what previous studies have described as a coexistence of traditional and emerging gender discourses in textbooks (Gebregeorgis, 2016). This suggests that textbooks do not simply reproduce gender norms, but also participate in gradually reshaping them.

5.4 Alignment and Tensions with the Swedish

Curriculum

The findings of this study can be discussed in relation to Lgr22 (Skolverket, 2022), as outlined in Section 3.4, “The Swedish Curriculum and Norm-Conscious Teaching”, which emphasizes gender equality and norm-conscious teaching. The results show that the analysed textbooks both align with and challenge the curricular aims. On one hand, all three textbooks include examples that broaden traditional gender roles. For instance, girls are portrayed in active and competent roles, such as in scientific or problem-solving contexts, while boys are sometimes depicted as emotionally expressive or interested in areas such as fashion. These representations can be seen as supporting the curriculum's emphasis on promoting equality and challenging limiting gender norms (Skolverket, 2022). On the other hand, the analysis also demonstrates that many representations continue to reflect traditional gender patterns. Boys are frequently associated with sports, action and authority, while girls are often connected to appearance, emotions or traditionally feminine activities. In addition, the absence of explicit non-binary representations across all three textbooks indicates that gender is largely presented within a binary framework. From the perspective of the national curriculum (Skolverket, 2022), this may be seen as a limitation, as it risks reinforcing narrow understandings of gender and may not fully reflect the diversity of identities present in contemporary society.

However, a considerable portion of the findings are consistent with international research indicating that EFL textbooks may reproduce unequal gender norms through both textual and visual representations (e.g Fithriani, 2022), emphasising the importance of critically examining such materials in relation to curriculum aims. This suggests that educational materials do not always fully reflect the values outlined in national curriculums, thereby placing increased responsibility on teachers to critically engage with and interpret the

content. Even when textbooks contain gendered representations, teachers may either reinforce or challenge these through their classroom practices (Sunderland et al., 2001). This tension between policy and practice has been identified in previous research, where textbooks may simultaneously promote equality while still reproducing traditional gender norms (Gebregeorgis, 2016; Fithriani, 2022). From an FCDA perspective, this reflects a broader tension between the aims of the curriculum and the representations found in textbooks. From a norm-conscious perspective, teaching materials should not be treated as neutral, but rather as resources that may reproduce or challenge existing norms (Gebregeorgis, 2016; Fithriani, 2022).

From an FCDA perspective, the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and binary structures can be understood as an example of how dominant gender ideologies are maintained and reproduced through discourse in everyday texts (Fairclough, 2003; Lazar, 2007). These findings highlight the importance of a norm-conscious approach in the classroom. Since textbooks may both reproduce and challenge gender norms, teachers play a central role in critically engaging with the material and supporting students in reflecting on how gender is represented. In this meaning, the textbooks analysed can be seen as both resources and challenges in relation to the curriculum's goals. While they offer opportunities to discuss and question gender norms, they may also require critical mediation by teachers to ensure that the values of equality and inclusivity outlined in Lgr22 are upheld in classroom practice. The Chinese study by Xiong et al. (2017) suggests that gender representation in textbooks may reflect broader cultural and educational norms within specific national contexts. At the same time, when we see the recurrence of similar patterns across different countries and parts of the world, it indicates that stereotypical gender representation in EFL textbooks may not be limited to one context but rather reflect broader tendencies in textbook production.

6. Conclusion

The findings indicate that all three textbooks include both male and female-coded characters and attempts to distribute visibility relatively evenly throughout the textbooks. However, gender is still largely portrayed within a binary framework, and explicit non-binary representation is entirely absent. Across the textbooks, gender is constructed through a combination of textual descriptions and visual clues such as clothing, hairstyles, colours, professions and activities. Several patterns reflect familiar gender norms, for example the association of boys with sports and action oriented activities and girls with appearance-related themes or more traditionally feminine roles. At the same time, the analysis also identified examples that challenge such patterns, such as girls portrayed in scientific or adventurous roles and boys expressing emotions or interest in fashion. Overall, the textbooks present a mixture of traditional and more progressive representations of gender.

These findings are relevant for teaching since textbooks remain central resources in English classrooms and may influence students' understanding of gender roles and identities. In the Swedish educational context, where the curriculum emphasises gender equality and norm-conscious teaching (Skolverket, 2022), it becomes important for teachers to critically examine the norms communicated through teaching materials. The results suggest that while the analysed textbooks partly support more balanced representation, they may still reproduce certain stereotypes and binary assumptions that teachers may need to address in classroom discussion.

This study has several limitations. The analysis focuses on only three textbooks and therefore cannot be generalised to all EFL teaching materials used in Swedish schools. In addition, the study examines only the written and visual content of the textbooks. Audio material, the accompanying online material and classroom practices were not included, meaning that the analysis does not capture how these materials are interpreted or used by teachers and students in practice and real conversations in education.

Future research could analyse a larger range of textbooks or compare materials used across different grade levels. It would also be valuable to investigate how teachers work with textbooks in relation to gender representation, as well as how students interpret these portrayals. Additionally, further studies could explore how non-binary identities and broader

forms of gender diversity are represented in EFL teaching materials, such as from an intersectional perspective.

Ultimately, it is our responsibility as educators to critically evaluate the teaching materials used in the classrooms, as these have an impact on the students we teach. The students of today will become the adults in charge of tomorrow, and it is therefore essential that we provide them with materials that enable them to become inclusive and open-minded.

7. References

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