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# Constructing the Meaning of Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion in Indonesian EFL Textbooks

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) within Indonesian EFL textbooks developed under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. As social artifacts, textbooks function not only as language learning tools but also as carriers of ideological and social values through complex multimodal systems. This research aims to bridge the gap between pedagogical functionality of visuals or illustrations and the identity analysis of male and female disproportions and the lack of the representational patterns of GEDSI and identify the systemic factors influencing inclusivity in EFL materials. Using a qualitative descriptive design grounded in Social Semiotics, the study analyzed three digital textbooks published in 2022, triangulated with twenty-five stakeholders through focus group discussions (FGDs), including preservice teachers, practitioners, and NGO representatives. Data were processed using NVivo and interpreted through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), specifically applying Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. The findings reveal that while the textbooks have initiated the integration of GEDSI principles, the representation remains uneven; male and able-bodied characters still dominate visually salient and agentive roles, while disability often remains at a symbolic or "tokenistic" level. Furthermore, stakeholders highlighted a significant gap in inclusive aesthetic standards within the illustration process as a barrier to authentic representation. The study highlights a "dilution of inclusivity" as educational levels increase, suggesting that future iterations require a more intentional positioning of minority groups. These results offer both theoretical contributions to multimodal discourse studies and practical insights for textbook developers in creating more equitable and justice-oriented learning resources, such as embedding minority characters into active conversational roles and pairing inclusive visuals with empowering texts, and for teachers to create a learning atmosphere where students can be trained to critically evaluate the surface-level diversity in the textbooks that often undermine the positioning of minority groups.

**Keywords:** *Digital Textbooks, Disability, Gender, Meaning Construction, Social Inclusion*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy, textbooks have moved beyond their traditional role as simple language tools. They have become powerful instruments for sharing ideological, cultural, and social values. As social products, these materials are never neutral; they reflect specific worldviews, deciding who is given visibility and who is pushed to the margins of social discussion. In Indonesia, the launch of *Kurikulum Merdeka* represents a major effort to integrate the "Pancasila values," as the national ideology, which emphasizes cultural and global diversity, social inclusiveness, and justice. This digital era has changed educational practices, requiring teachers to adapt not only their teaching methods but also how they critically evaluate learning materials. Consequently, English textbooks in this curriculum play a key role in building


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students' language skills while also shaping their views on social values, especially Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI).

As EFL materials, textbooks are not passive tools but social artifacts that often reproduce cultural ideologies. Through multimodal features, such as texts, illustrations, and digital media, textbooks construct meanings that influence how learners perceive identity and inclusivity. Previous research shows that multimodal texts change how learners process information, moving from simple reading to a more critical interpretation of visual meanings (Aleidan & Alharbi, 2025; Elmiana, 2019; Fitriana & Wirza, 2021; Ghoushchi et al., 2021; Handayani & Tungka, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2023; Mushtaq et al., 2022; Qi, 2024; Ryu et al., 2022; Tungka, 2018; Tungka & Mukminatien, 2018). In Indonesian context, Elmiana's study, for instance, found out that the visual images in the Indonesian senior high school EFL textbooks generally met the pedagogical objectives, though some gender bias and irrelevant cultural contexts were observed, with a gender bias towards male reached 66% over females. The textbooks, though represented Indonesian cultural, historical and religious customs, also included some non-relevant western contexts (Elmiana, 2019). Another study by Fitriana & Wirza provides information regarding the procedure of using Halliday's systemic functional linguistics and Kress and Van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design in examining the ideational function of the verbal elements and the patterns of representation, interaction, and composition in the visual elements in the Pathway to English textbook used in Indonesian secondary schools (Fitriana & Wirza, 2021). Their findings showed that the images presented in the textbook provide pedagogical benefits for students in building context and understanding the passages. However, the study also suggests that the textbook could be improved by using more colorful and sharper images to further enhance student engagement and interest.

The third study from Handayani and Tungka examines the representation of gender equality in the illustrations of two English textbooks used in senior high schools in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. By comparing these two textbooks using Mills's perspective of gender stylistics and Kress and Van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design, the findings reveal that the government-endorsed textbook promotes a more balanced representation of male and female illustrations as well as a more equal portrayal of both genders in leisure activities than a commercially distributed textbook. Both textbooks still exhibit some gender bias with a predominance of male illustrations, which is more pronounced in the commercial textbook. The findings highlight the need to address gender equality issues in textbook illustrations (Handayani & Tungka, 2023).

These three studies in Indonesian context provide valuable insights into how gender perspective can enrich the pedagogical design. However, these current studies focus largely on the pedagogical functionality of visuals or illustrations and on the identity analysis of male and female disproportions. Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate how multimodal elements in the textbook construct the GEDSI meaning within the Indonesian EFL textbooks as required by the Pancasila ideology. Individuals with disabilities, for instance, often face what is called "symbolic annihilation" in educational materials. When they do appear, they are often shown in passive roles or through a "medical deficit" lens, rather than as active participants in society. This lack of representation or stereotypical framing makes it hard to create a truly inclusive learning environment. It prevents students with disabilities from seeing themselves represented and stops other students from understanding the full range of human diversity.

To address these gaps, this study focuses on two main questions: (1) How are meanings related to GEDSI constructed in Indonesian EFL digital multimodal textbooks? and (2) How do multimodal elements work together to communicate these values? This research is urgent because it provides a framework for teachers and developers to ensure that textbooks align with the goal of equitable education.

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The novelty of this study is seen in the use of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach based on the visual grammar theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to address a theoretical blind spot of a comprehensive GEDSI-meaning construction framework. In doing so, the analysis discussed in this study follows three dimensions. First, representational meaning looks at how images and texts show social actors and actions. Second, Interactive Meaning examines the relationship between the visuals and the reader through gaze, social distance, and modality. Third, compositional meaning explores how the layout and visual importance (salience) create a coherent message. By combining MCDA with GEDSI principles, this study investigates whether modern textbooks still follow old stereotypes or promote truly inclusive representations. To keep the findings practical, the research also includes insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) with various stakeholders, including preservice teachers, practitioners, and NGO representatives such as Sikola Mombine. This approach ensures that the interpretation of GEDSI is both theoretically strong and socially relevant to the goals of curriculum, especially in the context of Indonesian education.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design based on the principles of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) to investigate how Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) are constructed. The primary research data consists of three digital English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture in 2022 under the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework. These books include My Next Words (elementary), English for Nusantara (junior high), and Work in Progress (senior high). These textbooks, in PDF format, were downloaded from the official catalogue website and represent the first major transition toward digital-first learning materials in the Indonesian national curriculum. Supplementary materials, resources, and the teacher's book were excluded from the analysis. The analysis is guided by the Social Semiotic Theory of Multimodal Analysis from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), focusing on three dimensions: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning.

The unit of analysis in this study was a visual-textual frame, which refers to each illustration frame and its textual elements such as captions, dialogue bubbles, descriptions, or sentences surrounding the frames that construct meaning related to the GEDSI representation. Visuals with no textual element and similar characters that occurred repeatedly were excluded from the data. For the gender equality dimension, the data were illustrations and their accompanying texts representing gender roles, interactions, and relationships. The criteria were: (1) frames including male characters only, coded as L; frames including female characters only, coded as P, and (3) frames showing both male and female characters, coded as LP. For the disability dimension, the data were frames showing characters with disabilities. For the social inclusion dimension, the data were frames showing social diversity such as minority ethnic groups, elders, children, economically disadvantaged people, refugees, migrants, discrimination, and bullying.

This study involved twenty-five participants, including twenty preservice teachers from the English Education Department, four experienced EFL teachers, and one representative from Sikola Mombine, an NGO in Central Sulawesi focusing on social justice and gender advocacy. The participants were recruited through a purposive sampling technique based on their background and familiarity with English materials. Prior to the data collection, all participants received a consent form containing information on the objectives of the study. procedures and risks, including their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Those who gave their consent were invited to Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions. The discussions were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, this study anonymized their

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identities by using codes during transcription and data reporting. The data analysis followed a systematic process, starting with identifying GEDSI-related sections, followed by coding the linguistic and visual data using NVivo-assisted thematic analysis. Insights from the FGD participants were used as a member-checking mechanism to refine the themes. This is to ensure that the interpretations remain connected to the real-life experiences and professional views of key educational stakeholders.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Result

This study focuses on how gender, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) are represented in three Indonesian EFL digital textbooks of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* through their visual modes. Table 1 shows the themes and indicators developed as a framework for categorizing and analyzing the data.

**Table 1.** Theme and Indicators of GEDSI Representation in Textbooks Illustrations

| GEDSI Dimension | Theme and Indicators | Sources |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender Equality (GE)** | **Gender balanced representation:** Visual-textual frame represents male and/or female characters in learning or social contexts, appear with similar frequency and importance in the textbook visuals, interact, cooperate, or communicate as equals such as working together, talking, or playing together. | (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Fithriani, 2023; Handayani & Tungka, 2023; Leach, 2003; March et al., 1999) |
| | **Neutral:** Male and female characters are shown engaging in similar activities without gender-based restriction, shown playing, learning, speaking, drawing, or completing tasks, both wearing outfit in neutral colors, both represented as students, teachers, or other social roles, | |
| | **Sensitive:** Female characters are shown outside house, male characters are shown in family roles/inside house, male characters are represented beyond dominant or leadership roles, for example, surrounding the female character, participating in daily learning or social activities; female characters are positioned at the centre of the frame doing various activities, size bigger than other elements. | |
| | **Stereotypical:** Male and female characters are represented doing stereotypical roles, not equal in terms of size and positioning, wearing stereotypical colors, etc. | |
| **Disability (D)** | **Disability representation:** Visual-textual frame shows male/female characters with a visible disability characteristic using wheelchair, cane, hearing aid, prosthetic device, etc. | (Aleidan & Alharbi, 2025; Florian & McLaughlin, 2008; Ibda & Wijanarko, 2023) |
| | **Assistive device representation:** Visual-textual frame includes disability-related tools or accessibility devices (wheelchair, cane, hearing aid, prosthetic device, etc.) | |
| | **Participation of persons with disabilities:** Male/female characters with disability is shown participating in learning/social activities with other characters | |
| | **Interaction with persons with disabilities:** Male/female characters with disability interact together with peers/family/community | |

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| GEDSI Dimension | Theme and Indicators | Sources |
|---|---|---|
| | **Accessibility representation:** Male/female characters with disability using accessible facilities and participating in adapted spaces: a school building entrance with a ramp beside stairs, School bathroom with accessibility symbols, Classroom screen with captions or visual notifications | |
| | **Non-stereotypical disability representation:** Male/female characters with disability appears in ordinary roles (student, friend, family member, worker), not consistently shown being carried, helped, or rescued | |
| **Social Inclusion (SI)** | **Diverse social groups:** Visual-textual frame includes different social identities or groups represented in society (various skin colors, hair types, outfits representing professions/jobs) | (Clough & Corbett, 2000; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2021; Gilmore, 2017; Group, 2019; Ibda & Wijanarko, 2023; Mabasa-Manganyi, 2023; Malebese, 2019; Mitchell, 2014; Samuels, 2018) |
| | **Social relationship:** Visual-textual frame shows relationships such as friendship, family, or community activities | |
| | **Intergenerational:** Three-generational age groups, appear together in meaningful activities and relationships such as children with parents/grandparents, not consistently shown being carried, helped, or rescued | |
| | **Inclusive participation:** Characters with different backgrounds/identities share the same space/activity without exclusion (children, parents, elders, male/female) | |
| | **Support and cooperation:** One character helps, supports, or collaborates with another character | |

The findings are organized around three main dimensions of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA): representational, interactional, and compositional meanings, which together reveal patterns of inclusion, marginalization, and stereotyping across the elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels. Table 2 precedes the analysis by presenting the distribution of GEDSI representation across the textbooks.

**Table 2.** Distribution of GEDSI Representation in Textbooks Illustrations

| Visual Indicators | Book, Level, Number of Frames | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | My Next Words, Elementary, 30 | English for Nusantara, Junior, 47 | Work in Progress, Senior, 19 |
| | | | |
| **Gender Equality** | | | |
| a. Number of occurrences for male characters | 43 | 74 | 45 |
| b. Number of occurrences for female characters | 45 | 67 | 17 |
| Gender representation patterns: | | | |
| a. Neutral (i.e., clothing, activity, profession) | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| b. Stereotypical (i.e., dialogues showing stereotypical gender roles such as woman's cooking, man's cleaning the yard, man as P.E teacher, etc.) | 1 | 6 | 0 |

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| Visual Indicators | Book, Level, Number of Frames | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | My Next Words, Elementary, 30 | English for Nusantara, Junior, 47 | Work in Progress, Senior, 19 |
| c. Sensitive (i.e., both genders shown in diverse roles) | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| **Disability** | | | |
| a. Disability representation | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| b. Assistive device representation | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| c. Participation of persons with disabilities | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| d. Interaction with persons with disabilities | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| e. Accessibility representation | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| f. Non-stereotypical disability representation | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **Social Inclusive** | | | |
| a. Diverse social group | 20 | 31 | 0 |
| b. Intergenerational | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| c. Inclusive participation | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| d. Support and cooperation | 0 | 0 | 0 |

This study examined how meanings related to Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) are constructed through the interaction of visual and textual elements in three Indonesian digital EFL textbooks published under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. It addresses a gap in previous Indonesian textbook research, which has primarily focused on the pedagogical functions of visual materials and the numerical representation of male and female characters (Elmiana, 2019; Fitriana & Wirza, 2021; Handayani & Tungka, 2023), while paying limited attention to disability, broader social inclusion, and the multimodal processes through which these meanings are produced. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and stakeholder perspectives, this study examines how nationally endorsed EFL textbooks meaningfully translate the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Pancasila commitments to diversity, equality, and social justice into their multimodal representations.

The data shows that while all three textbooks try to include both male and female characters, there is a clear difference in the proportion and depth of this representation across grade levels. In My Next Words (Elementary), female characters actually appear more frequently than males. However, this balance changes significantly in the Junior and Senior High school textbooks, where male characters become more dominant. This suggests that as the educational level gets higher, the visual narrative tends to focus more on male figures.

The representation of persons with disabilities is another major concern, as it is extremely limited. Across all three books, there are only about one to four characters with disabilities. Similarly, themes of social inclusion, which show diverse backgrounds and the acceptance of differences, are also rare and have not yet become a central part of the visual stories. These findings are summarized in Chart 1.

The quantitative distribution shown in Chart 1 reveals a significant 'representation gap' as students' progress through the academic stages. In My Next Words, the elementary textbook, the frequent appearance of female characters (approximately 51% of gender-specific frames) suggests an early-stage commitment to gender visibility. However, this visibility is predominantly domestic or classroom-bound. In contrast, Work in Progress shows a sharp decline in female visibility in professional or technical contexts, where male characters occupy 73% of the "activated" roles in vocational settings. This trend suggests that while the textbooks successfully achieve numerical

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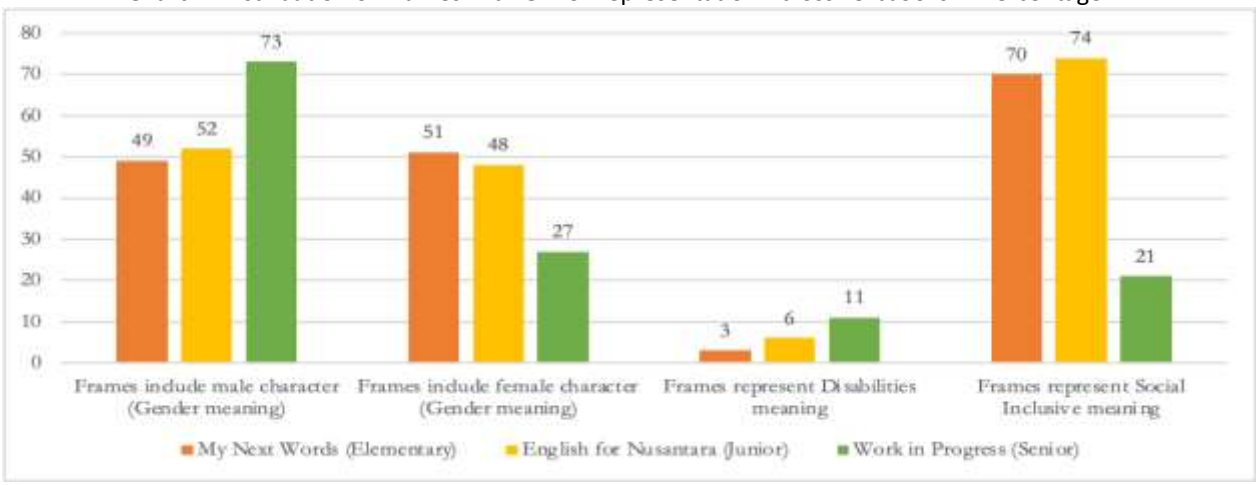
presence at the elementary level, they struggle to sustain this gender-neutral narrative when introducing more complex social and professional environments. Furthermore, even though the data on disability indicates a progressive increase, which is from 3% only in the elementary textbook to 11% in the senior textbook, this growth does not necessarily translate to integration yet suggests that disability is still treated as an 'exceptional' occurrence rather than a common facet of Indonesian demographic reality. This scarcity makes it difficult for students to develop a naturalized understanding of disability, as the few examples provided are often disconnected from everyday social interactions.

**Chart 1.** Distribution of Frames with GEDSI Representation Across Textbooks in Percentage




In terms of gender roles, the study finds a clear imbalance. Male characters are more often portrayed as “primary agents,” that is, the ones who lead activities or take action. On the other hand, female characters often appear in supportive or secondary positions. Using Kress and van Leeuwen’s theory, we can see that males are frequently shown in “narrative processes” (doing things), while females are more often shown in “conceptual processes” (just being present). Regarding disability, despite its proportional increase in the senior textbook, the representation is mostly “tokenistic.” This means characters with disabilities are included only as a sign of presence, but they rarely participate in meaningful ways or interact equally with other characters. Finally, social inclusion is not presented consistently; while the elementary textbook and the junior textbook demonstrate a robust percentage of social inclusion, this focus drastically weakens in the senior textbook where it is reduced to a merely symbolic presence.

### 3.1.1 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) Interactions

In understanding how visual choices construct the relationship between the characters and the readers, this study analyzes specific examples from each textbook. The first example is taken from the elementary-level textbook, My Next Words.

In terms of Representational Meaning, Figure 1 depicts four primary school girls gathered around a table, engaged in a numeracy activity. One girl wearing a hijab and three girls without hijabs are present. Notably, there are no male students, which indicates that gender balance is not achieved. Furthermore, disability is entirely absent. The Interactional Meaning creates an “offer” image, inviting the reader to observe as an outsider. The eye-level angle is a positive feature, establishing equality. Compositionally, the national emblem at the top signifies authority, while the central focus on students highlights the learning message.

The Interactional Meaning of Figure 1 is constructed through gaze, social distance, and point of view. The students avert their gaze from the viewer, which creates an “offer” image. This invites the reader to observe the scene as an outsider rather than participating in a direct interaction. The

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medium shot creates a familiar classroom distance, positioning the viewer as a teacher or a peer observing the activity. However, the eye-level angle is a positive feature, as it establishes a sense of equality and avoids a vertical hierarchy. In GEDSI terms, this suggests a relational equality between the viewer and the students, even though the representation itself lacks diversity because only girls are shown.

Figure 1. Illustration from *My Next Words*, Unit 8
(source: My Next Words book, page 73)

Finally, the Compositional Meaning is organized through information value, salience, and framing. At the top of the page, the national emblem and portraits of the President and Vice President signify national authority and a formal educational setting. The middle section highlights the students' interaction as the central message, while the bottom displays learning tools like pencils and books. The most salient elements, which are the girl in the hijab with bright white and blue colors, the speech bubble, and the teaching aids, emphasize religious diversity and academic activity. However, because these elements are so dominant, they overshadow other aspects of GEDSI, such as disability or broader gender representation.

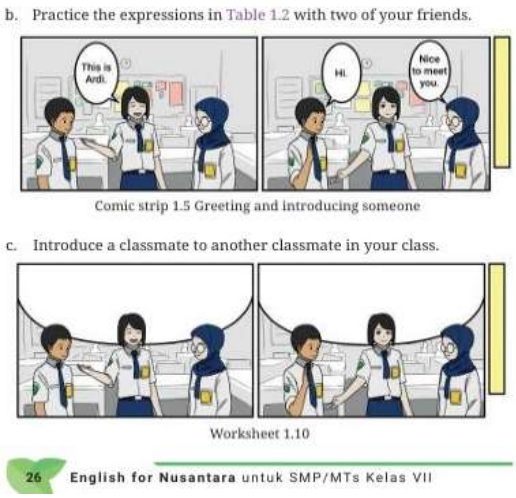


Figure 2. Illustration from *English for Nusantara*, unit 1
(Source: English for Nusantara book, page 26)

In Figure 2, the scene features three students introducing themselves. From a GEDSI perspective, the image displays gender diversity and religious representation. However, it does not portray disability or signals of socio-economic differences. The Interactional Meaning utilizes an "offer" gaze,

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positioning the viewer as a peer observer at an eye-level angle. Compositionally, the layout organizes the interaction into a logical left-to-right progression.

In terms of Representational Meaning, the scene features a boy, a girl with short hair, and a girl wearing a hijab and glasses. They are shown pointing, greeting, and shaking hands as part of an activity for "greeting and introducing someone." This is a narrative representation because it emphasizes actions and a specific sequence of events. From a GEDSI perspective, the image successfully displays gender diversity and religious representation through the hijab. However, similar to the previous example, it does not portray disability or provide any explicit signals of differences in socio-economic backgrounds.

Regarding Interactional Meaning, the characters in the panels do not look directly at the viewer. Instead, they look at one another, creating an "offer" gaze that positions the viewer as an observer of the classroom interaction. The medium shot, which shows the students from the waist up, establishes a social distance that feels natural—much like a teacher or classmate watching the activity. The eye-level angle is also significant as it signals an equal relationship between the viewer and the students, without any sense of hierarchy. Therefore, this interactional arrangement is broadly consistent with inclusive principles, as it presents the students as peers.

Finally, for the Compositional Meaning, the layout is organized into rows with two horizontally aligned panels. For example, in the left panel, a boy introduces his friend, and in the right panel, the students respond by greeting or shaking hands. This creates a logical left-to-right progression. All three characters are placed in the center of the panels to ensure they are the main focus, while the simplified classroom background uses neutral colors to avoid distracting the reader. Within each panel, there are no visual dividers between the students; their close positioning and matching uniforms convey a strong sense of togetherness. However, because only one girl in a hijab is shown and there are no indicators of disability, the diversity narrative focuses more on mixed-gender collaboration and religious inclusion rather than a broader spectrum of social differences.

From a sociopragmatics perspective, the interaction in Figure 2 illustrates the standardization of social inclusion. While the visual suggests a harmonious classroom, the pragmatic force remains highly conventional. The close proximity and uniform appearance function as a semiotic shorthand for social cohesion, yet this is built on the 'genericization' of the characters. By removing markers of socio-economic status or physical impairment, the textbook presents a 'neutralized' version of the Indonesian classroom. In GEDSI terms, the interaction is inclusive in its 'politeness' but exclusive in its 'homogeneity,' as it does not challenge the students to interact with characters who exist outside the able-bodied, middle-class norm.

The third example is taken from the Senior High School textbook, Work in Progress. Figure 3 features Leani Ratri Oktila, a renowned Indonesian para-badminton athlete. Representational Meaning focuses on her achievements, but visually, her disability is not apparent. The image highlights her identity as a champion athlete, while her disability remains an implicit dimension reliant on the text. Interactionally, Leani looks directly at the audience, creating a "demand" image that invites admiration. Compositionally, the photograph is central within an "Enrichment" section, positioning a woman with a disability as a source of inspiration. However, without explicit visual markers like prostheses, the responsibility for communicating disability falls entirely on the written text.

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Figure 3. Illustration from *Work in Progress*, Unit 1
(Source: Work in Progress book, page 27)

In terms of Representational Meaning, Figure 3 focuses on Leani's achievements at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. The accompanying text explains her success and describes the accident that resulted in a seven-centimeter difference in her leg length. However, visually, Leani's disability is not apparent because the photograph only shows her upper body in a national team jacket. Since her legs are not visible, the information about her disability depends entirely on the written narrative. As a result, the image highlights her identity as a champion athlete, while her disability remains an implicit dimension that the viewer can only understand by reading the text, rather than through explicit visual markers.

The Interactional Meaning in Figure 3 is constructed through gaze, body language, and camera distance. Leani looks directly toward the audience with a calm and confident expression while raising her medal. This creates a "demand" image, which invites viewers to recognize and admire her achievement as if she were directly sharing the moment of victory with them. The medium close-up framing, from the shoulders upward, creates emotional proximity. This guides the viewer's attention to her facial expression and the symbols of her success, which helps to build a sense of respect and empathy.

Finally, regarding Compositional Meaning, the photograph is placed at the center of the page within an "Enrichment" section titled The Paralympic Heroes. The layout uses a pale green background and a red frame to channel the viewer's gaze toward the central photograph and then downward to the narrative text. This arrangement is positive because it positions a woman with a disability as the main subject and a source of inspiration. However, it is important to note that it is nearly impossible for a viewer to identify her as a person with a physical impairment from the image alone. Because there are no visual markers such as prostheses, wheelchairs, or visible asymmetry, the responsibility for communicating the "disability" aspect of GEDSI falls entirely on the written text rather than the visual mode.

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## 3.2. DISCUSSION

### 3.2.1 Synthesizing the Multimodal Patterns of GEDSI

The analysis of the three textbooks reveals that their multimodal configurations display recurring and uneven representational patterns. From the perspective of the ideational meta-function, the visuals and accompanying texts frequently position men as “activated” participants in narrative processes. These male characters are often placed at the visual center and given higher salience, which emphasizes their roles as the primary agents of action. Women, on the other hand, although appearing frequently in the elementary textbook, are more commonly embedded in relational or conceptual structures. This positioning limits their degree of agency, often casting them in supportive roles that are less foregrounded.

Furthermore, the near-total absence of disability from the visual narrative reflects a clear pattern of systematic exclusion within the framework of social actor representation, as suggested by van Leeuwen. This absence undermines the implementation of GEDSI values and suggests that inclusion is portrayed more as a symbolic gesture rather than a fully integrated principle within the textbooks’ multimodal discourse. This representational analysis further indicates that while the textbooks include various social actors, the selection and depiction of characters continue to reflect a gendered asymmetry. Minority groups, whether defined by physical ability or specific social backgrounds, are often represented marginally or omitted altogether through processes of “backgrounding” and “genericization.”

In terms of the interactional meta-function, many images project an “offer” gaze rather than a “demand” gaze. This specific choice positions the readers as external observers instead of active participants in the social scene. Variations in social distance and camera angles further encode implicit power relations. These visual choices tend to elevate majority actors, usually able-bodied males, while diminishing the presence and voice of minority groups. From a compositional perspective, elements such as information value (including the ideal/real and given/new structures), framing, and center-margin arrangements often position minority actors in low-salience or peripheral zones. In contrast, dominant groups consistently occupy the most visually prominent spaces, such as the “Ideal” (top) or “Center” positions. These semiotic choices reinforce existing social hierarchies by subtly legitimizing majority representations as the standard norm.

The findings clearly indicate that while there is partial progress in integrating GEDSI principles, the gaps remain substantial and problematic. For instance, the predominance of male representations in Work in Progress shows a retreat from the more balanced inclusivity observed in the earlier My Next Words textbook. This systemic invisibility of disability across all datasets suggests a lack of meaningful prioritization in the national curriculum. Although certain markers of inclusion are present, they remain largely symbolic and do not challenge the deeper ideologies of exclusion embedded in the multimodal structures of the textbooks. By applying Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this study demonstrates how representational, interactional, and compositional meanings work together to sustain subtle but persistent biases.

Finally, the patterns observed in this study point toward a 'hidden curriculum' that subtly influences how students perceive social hierarchy. Under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the 'Pancasila Student Profile' emphasizes ‘Global Diversity’ and ‘Social Maturity.’ However, when visual discourse consistently positions able-bodied males as the ‘Ideal’ and relegates minority groups to the ‘Real’ or ‘Margin,’ there is a semiotic tension between policy and material. The 'Ideal' space in these textbooks is rarely shared with characters with disabilities, reinforcing the idea that authority is associated with the majority. To align with the curriculum goals, multimodal design must move toward ‘spatial equality,’ where marginalized groups are placed in positions of high information value.

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### 3.2.2 Stakeholder Perspectives and Comparative Discourse

To strengthen the multimodal findings, the focus group discussions (FGDs) provided critical qualitative evidence that aligns with the visual analysis. One of the key informants, who is also a researcher in the field of gender representation (Handayani & Tungka, 2023), noted that the lack of inclusivity in these modern textbooks is a persisting issue. Their previous study on senior high school materials consistently found that textbooks fail to act as neutral pedagogical tools, functioning instead as mirrors of existing social imbalances. The current findings in English for Nusantara and Work in Progress confirm that, despite the transition to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the core problem of gendered asymmetry and the marginalization of minority groups remain unresolved. This suggests that the shift to digital formats is primarily a technical upgrade rather than a substantive ideological transformation toward GEDSI principles.

Furthermore, a poignant perspective was shared by an educator from a special education school (Sekolah Luar Biasa or SLB) who works daily with students with disabilities. This informant emphasized a crucial psychological dimension that is often overlooked by textbook developers, which is the desire for agency and independence. According to this practitioner, students with disabilities do not wish to be viewed through a lens of lack or deficit. Instead, they aspire to be seen as independent and capable social actors who can navigate daily life without constant assistance, as seen from the following excerpt.

> *"One experience that has stayed with me involved a student with visual impairment. Every morning, some teachers offered to guide the student from the school gate to the classroom, but the student consistently declined, explaining, 'I already know the route. I have memorized every step I need to take.' That moment taught us that our students do not want to be viewed through the lens of dependence. They want to be recognized for what they are capable of doing independently. Textbooks should reflect this reality by portraying persons with disabilities as ordinary members of society who participate in everyday activities—not only as recipients of help or as extraordinary achievers." (FGD Participant, Principal of an SLB)*

When this perspective is compared with the visual analysis, such as the representation of Leani Ratri Oktila in Work in Progress, page 27, a clear disconnect emerges. While the textbook attempts to be inclusive by featuring a Paralympic athlete, it focuses on her extraordinary achievement rather than her ordinary agency. As the SLB teacher suggested, inclusivity should involve integrating characters with disabilities into mundane activities, such as buying groceries or studying in a library, without making their disability the sole focus of the narrative.

Adding to the technical perspective, a focus group participant with experience in illustration competitions shared a critical insight regarding the industry's aesthetic standards. The participant noted that in many professional evaluation frameworks for illustrators, GEDSI-related criteria, such as the authentic depiction of diverse skin tones or eye shapes representing various ethnic groups, are often overlooked. Instead, the focus remains primarily on technical neatness and general visual appeal. This suggests that the lack of diversity in textbooks is partly rooted in a broader professional gap, where illustrators are not yet systematically encouraged to prioritize racial and physical inclusivity as a core element of their craft. This lack of an 'inclusive aesthetic' in the creative process further explains why digital materials still lean toward standardized and homogenous representations.

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### 3.2.3 Limitations and Implications

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis is limited to three digital EFL textbooks published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture in 2022; therefore, the identified patterns may not represent all EFL textbooks used across Indonesia. Second, the study excluded supplementary materials, resources, the teacher's books, visuals without textual elements, and similar characters that occurred repeatedly, which narrowed the multimodal data examined. Third, although the FGDs provided perspectives from preservice teachers, experienced EFL teachers, and one NGO representative, the findings do not directly capture how school students interpret the GEDSI representations. Finally, as MCDA is interpretive, the analysis is shaped by the theoretical framework and the researchers' reading of the visual-textual frames, even though the FGD insights were used to refine the themes.

This "invisibility" or "sanitized representation" serves as a form of symbolic exclusion. To achieve true GEDSI integration, EFL textbooks must move beyond celebratory depictions and adopt a social model of disability where the environment and discourse accommodate all individuals. These findings are particularly significant for regional contexts, such as Central Sulawesi, where the textbook often acts as the primary authority on social norms and social scripts. In areas where access to diverse social environments may be limited, the textbook serves as a vital window into the world; therefore, any bias in its pages can have a long-lasting impact on students' perceptions of justice and equality. Consequently, teachers are encouraged to act critically by pointing out these representational gaps during lessons. For instance, when using Work in Progress in their classrooms, teachers can initiate discussions with their students on why certain professional roles are visually gendered or why disability is only shown in a certain context. By engaging in the discussion on multimodal elements in the book, teachers can help students decode the biases inherent in visual grammar and hence transform a limited textbook into a tool for critical GEDSI awareness. This pedagogical intervention is necessary to bridge the gap between the sanitized world of the textbook and the complex, diverse reality of Indonesian society.

Future research should examine a wider range of government-endorsed and commercially distributed EFL textbooks, including supplementary and teacher materials, to determine whether these patterns occur across publishers, regions, and curriculum levels. It may also include students from diverse social groups as participants to investigate how they interpret GEDSI representations and whether teacher-guided multimodal questioning influences their GEDSI awareness.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis results, the GEDSI meanings construction in the Indonesian EFL textbooks demonstrates a non-linear path that is characterized by a shift from early-stage numerical equality to marginalization in more advanced materials. The multimodal elements in the texts work cohesively to reinforce traditional hierarchies. Textually, male characters are positioned as active agents with dialogic authority, while female and disabled characters are frequently assigned passive linguistic roles. Visually, male characters consistently dominate active "narrative processes" and occupy highly salient and central compositional spaces. In contrast, despite a progressive increase in the percentage of disability representation across the textbook levels, female and disabled characters are largely restricted to static, conceptual processes and marginal framing within the page. The textbooks attempt numerical representation on the surface, the cohesive interaction of this visual passivity and textual silence subtly reinforces traditional hierarchies and marginalizes GEDSI values in complex social environments.

This study observes that although the three *Kurikulum Merdeka* EFL textbooks have initiated the integration of GEDSI principles within their multimodal designs, there remains a constructive

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opportunity to further refine the balance of gender representation and broaden the depiction of disability and social inclusion. Through the application of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), it was noted that certain representational patterns currently maintain a focus on more traditional social roles, particularly as the complexity of the material increases across grade levels. These findings suggest that future iterations of these materials could consider more varied and intentional positioning for female characters and persons with disabilities to better reflect the diverse reality of Indonesian society.

Furthermore, while the textbooks include inclusive characters numerically, there is potential to further explore their depth within the learning narrative. Moving forward, curriculum developers and authors might consider transitioning these characters from supporting roles into more central, agentive social actors. By presenting marginalized groups as individuals who drive the story forward and solve problems independently, pedagogical materials can continue to align with the evolving and noble goals of inclusive education in Indonesia. This shift from “presence” to “agency” is essential in ensuring that inclusivity is not merely a symbolic addition but a functional part of the students' language learning experience.

The insights from stakeholders, particularly practitioners and those in the creative field, suggest that these representation gaps are also rooted in a lack of inclusive aesthetic standards in the illustration process. Therefore, this study offers MCDA-informed insights as a supportive resource for refining material development frameworks. By establishing clearer guidelines for 'inclusive aesthetics' and adopting a social model of disability, future editions can continue to evolve as valuable resources for fostering critical and inclusive citizenship. Such enhancements would allow the textbooks to serve as powerful "social scripts" that normalize diversity, especially in regional contexts like Central Sulawesi where the textbook acts as a primary authority on social norms.

Finally, this research encourages future studies to expand their scope to include a wider range of textbooks, including those used in vocational or religious education streams. It is also recommended to investigate the classroom interaction between students and these multimodal elements. Bridging the gap between design intent and practical interaction will provide a broader perspective on the successful application of inclusive design. By continuously evaluating and refining these materials, the Indonesian education system can move closer to achieving a truly representative and justice-oriented curriculum for all learners.

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