Anyone for Tennis?—A Case-Study on Gender Bias in a Japanese Junior High School English Language Textbook

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Abstract

The manner in which young learners are taught reinforces traditional cultural messages of many kinds, including those concerning gender. English language teaching (ELTs) textbooks have the potential to either reinforce or redress gender bias. Unfortunately the former is typically the case. There is a historical legacy of ELTs, which reinforce notions that boys are different from girls with different interests, abilities and career options; that boys are in control and have higher status; and that girls are silent, compliant and should assume a subordinate role. Without gender equity programs and deliberate teacher interventions these messages will continue to be sent through the "hidden curriculum". This paper employs a case-study research methodology in order to examine closely the first book in the New Crown series at a time when the economic role of women is under political review. It was found that while men and women are represented equally in terms of quantity, there exists a remarkable overt and covert (subliminal) gender bias which impacts the identities of Japanese females as economically productive citizens negatively.

Keywords: gender bias, hidden curriculum, Japan, textbooks

Introduction

This paper has been written as a timely reminder at a point when certain high-level elements of the Japanese government are promoting the role of women as powerful agents who can bolster a declining economy (Brookings Institution, 2013). Historically, the family rather than the individual has been the basic unit of Japanese society; however, this has been changing for some considerable time (Imamura, 1990). In response, provision should be made in public school textbooks for young learners to understand the potential impact that female participation has on the Japanese and global economy. In 2014, The Economist reported that raising female labour participation to the level of men's could add 8 million people to Japan's shrinking workforce, potentially increasing GDP by as much as 15%.

This paper builds on previous publications (e.g., Ansary & Babii, 2003; Otlowski, 2003;), which analysed the portrayal of gender in Japanese ELTs. A case-study research method (Yin, 2009) was applied to the first book of the New

Crown series (published by Sanseido), which was examined for gender bias – the depiction of women in unproductive and subordinate roles or engaged in stereotypical activities. Bias is communicated via the "hidden curriculum" – unspoken academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school. In one foundational study Otlowski (2003) emphasized that, "a number of textbooks, and especially textbooks published in Japan fail to represent accurately the substantial role women…play in the makeup and workforce of modern societies" (p. 7). The task of reform entails changing the cultural definition of masculinity to include equality with and respect for females (Paludi, 2004).

Orientation: A Brief Political History

Recent attempts at changing the politically driven momentum from women as child-bearers in the domestic setting and toward productive employees and employers is challenged by Japan's "retrospective modernism" (i.e. one eye on the past, one eye on the future). The emergence of the nuclear family in Japan meant that by the 1920s the modern gender division of labour, that assigned work to men and domestic duties to women, began to transform the Japanese family. It was in this climate of social change that the ideal of "Good Wife, Wise Mother" (Fukuya, 1988) that emerged during the Meijo period (1868-1912) gave positive meanings to the role of women as a wife managing the home and as a mother educating her child(ren) (National Institute of Educational Policy Research, [NIER], 2014). This ideal promoted the argument that education for women should focus on their role as domestic caretaker, which led to the inception and rapid growth of "practical" middle schools for girls. Practical meant home economics, (e.g., housekeeping and sewing), and by 1925 the number of students enrolled in girls' middle schools had exceeded the number in co-educational middle schools, and continued to rise.

After 1945, the US education mission forced a change in policy, stating that steps were necessary to provide girls in the earlier years of education with a sound and thorough education on a par with that of boys. This entailed a commitment to co-education (more recent research suggests that co-education operates to reinforce gender bias, see Clark, 2004) and equality of access to all aspects of education and employment (Hashimoto, 1992). This process continued, and by 1999 the Japanese government had implemented a system for child-care and family-care leave. Politically Japan had achieved gender equality in education, at least from the point of view of access (NIER, 2014). However, there is often a very great difference between central policy and social reality.

In 2014, the Switzerland based World Economic Forum reported that Japan ranked 104th for gender equality from 105 industrialised nations, and 142

nations in total. The overall rank is calculated by taking the average of four subscales: economic participation and opportunity (102nd); educational attainment (93rd); health and survival (37th); and political empowerment (129th). This low standing among industralised nations had been predicted by previous studies on the social asymmetry between males and females. For example, a 2008 Japanese Health Ministry study found that only 1.23% of fathers took parental leave as compared to 90.6% of mothers. Further, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (n.d) reported that women spend approximately 270 minutes per day on domestic work whereas men spent about 60 minutes (the OECD average being 131 minutes). Unsurprisingly, childcare is also the domain of the female with only 28% of Japanese children enrolled in daycare programs. This situation exists largely because Japan ranks 4th lowest in comparison to other OECD countries when it comes to public spending on childcare and pre-school services.

In 1996, the Japanese government drew up the Basic Plan for Gender Equality. Then, in a 1997 revision of the Program for Education Reform, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced their intention for the "enrichment of education to enhance consciousness of gender equality". The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society followed in 1999, which, as already noted, saw the passing of child-care and family care legislation. Yet, these initiatives had little influence over depictions of social relationships and roles in public school textbooks. Certainly, as time passed themes of global relevance began to appear in Japanese public school textbooks - in the 1980s, race and culture and in the 1990s, environmental issues. Yet, topics on gender (e.g. women's movements and female protagonists) were (and still are) a rare inclusion, "and only three women--Marie Curie, Mother Teresa, and Helen Keller--appeared frequently (Kato, 2002).

Indeed, the clear depiction of females as protagonists or heroes is completely absent from the New Crown textbook. The closest that the book comes to featuring an adventurous female is a feature on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and for some she is perceived as a hero, representing "a reality where women author their own tales, work out their own problems, expect the extraordinary, and speak their minds … young women do well to ask themselves, what would Alice do?" (Lloyd, 2010, p. 29). Yet, in Japan the Alice character is an unrealistic representation who lives in a Victorian and foreign fantasy world, and not the reality of a highly industrialised nation that weaves together unique traditions dating back thousands of years. For others, Alice is a victim of circumstance, and rarely ever in control of her environment, and thus she is an ambiguous character for feminist critics, seen as a slave by some (Garland, 2008). In a very real Japan the question that Lloyd (2010) puts ("what would

Alice do?") may have little meaning for young Japanese girls, or lead to socially unacceptable, and therefore maladaptive behaviours.

What Does Equality Look Like?

Based on the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted 1979), and the Beijing Platform for Action (adopted 1995), textbooks promote gender equality if they meet the following criteria: (1) females are protagonists; (2) females and males are not described according to a stereotypical sexual division of labor; (3) ways of living free of conventional ideas of femininity and masculinity are described positively; (4) topics encourage students to think about sexual discrimination and gender equality; (5) topics encourage students to reconsider various issues close to them from a gender perspectives; (6) topics encourage students to think about female's human rights as a global issue. In the case study of New Crown it will be seen that the textbook fails to deliver on any of the above criteria. A system of education is a product of collective thought and follows the changes of social values. It is then no surprise to find gender bias and stereotyping in Japanese public junior high school ELTs.

Foundational Studies

Some fifteen years ago Sano, Iida and Hardy (2001) gave a presentation on a range of Japanese junior high school ELTs (including New Crown) at which they presented various characteristics of bias. These characteristics included the empowerment of males as deciders and choosers; that remarks made by males had more substance; and chapter themes focused on male characters. Similarly, Otlowski (2003) found that women were portrayed as homemakers and mothers, a bias reinforced by a general lack of women in the workplace. Women were seen to participate in and oversee domestic duties such as laundry, shopping, and food preparation. In contrast, situations outside the home were the domain of male characters. Otlowski's (2003) study parallels that of Ansary and Babii (2003) who also found that women, where featured, were engaged in indoor activities and traditional roles. In a recent study of Japanese textbooks conducted by Lee (2014) it was found that "general disparities in the forms of female invisibility, male firstness and stereotypical images are still prevalent in the textbooks examined" (p. 1).

Two decades ago Pierce (1995) urged the English language teaching community to "alert students to the current terrain of struggle that characterize language and which the students enter as they learn the language (p. 106). The findings of Sano et al (2001) and Otlowski (2003)) were also published many

years ago. These background studies indicate that MEXT's mission to propagate gender equality through education has not been put into practice by textbook writers and publishers. Moving to the present day, New Crown is currently in its 4th edition, published only last year. It is now 2015, and the question that remains is: Has subliminal gender bias been eliminated from Japanese ELTs? In this case study the answer is a resounding "no".

Thematic Discussion

Many foundational studies, such as Hellinger's "For Men Must Work and Women Must Weep" (1980), employ a three-part framework to examine gender inequality. These are: (1) exclusion; (2) subordination and distortion; and (3) degradation. Exclusion refers to the disproportionate representation of males in textbooks. Subordination and distortion refers to an asymmetry in power relations, in occupations and careers, and in the type of activities in which males and females engage. Degradation refers to the depiction of women as weak or over-emotional, and as individuals who are often the butt of jokes or slurs.

While relatively recent studies on Japanese ELTs (e.g., Pihlaja, 2008) support the use of the "three points of bias" framework, it should be noted that it was devised in response to inequalities featured in textbooks in use across the 1970s and 1980s. Since the early 1990s ELTs in Japan no longer feature obvious gender inequality (e.g. words like 'chairman') which may suggest that the framework is now partially outmoded. Japanese ELTs have evolved so as to obsolete much of the framework's heuristic power, and therefore its capacity to reveal subliminal bias. It will be seen later that when New Crown's 4th edition (2014) was examined only the second dimension of bias (subordination and distortion) emerged as an issue (and a very significant one). However, the textbook contained numerous examples of bias that the framework does not capture. We therefore created a qualitative construct with which to analyse the text by looking at each textual vignette and picture related to females individually and also by looking for the presence or absence of corresponding words and pictures which apply to males and indicate bias. Specifically, themes of silence, compliance and the social status, social and employment roles and activities of women vis-à-vis those of males.

Silence and Compliance

It has been found that girls are often depicted exhibiting "healthy" behaviours typical for girls and not boys. They are, "silent, compliant, gentle, helpful, neat and polite" (Irby & Brown, 2011, p. 22). There is consensus among educators of various ideological perspectives that a great deal of that which children learn is

delivered through the so-called "hidden curriculum" (Barnes & Wane, 2000). Irby and Brown (2011) emphasise that "the lessons of the hidden curriculum teach girls to value silence and compliance, to view those qualities as a virtue" (p. 244). Young female learners are of course consciously aware of their roles. As one young student said, "teachers like us because we're nicer, quieter, and better behaved" (p. 244). Accordingly, teachers do often say that girls are "ideal" students. However, girls who remain academically engaged must negotiate between the compliance associated with being that "ideal" student and the active learning strategies required for success – a difficult if not impossible balancing act.

In practice many teachers reward, and therefore reinforce, assertive and aggressive behavior. The ironic consequence is that the attributes most valued in girls become obstacles to their success. The reinforcement of passive behaviours among females discourages them from experimenting with active, risk-taking learning strategies that serve them better in the long-run (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1991). Put another way, by adolescence girls have learned to get along, while boys have learned to get ahead (Bower, 1993). In their study Irby and Brown (2011) found that girls are often reinforced as helpful members of the classroom community. Similarly, Barnes and Wane (2000) found, in qualitative interviews with teachers, that boys typically want to be leaders while girls take a supporting recorder role during group work.

As the AAUW (2001) state, education policy needs to move beyond the "gender wars" and find ways to reach all children in the school system. It is not only students who must face bias. Female teachers themselves are not immune to the inequitable social gradient. As one teacher recounted, "when I teach high school boys put their arm around me and pat my head as if I'm a pet or something because I'm a woman" (Irby & Brown, 2011, p. 244).

There is consensus among experts that girls' spirits are being broken by a "hidden curriculum" that teaches silence and compliance (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1997). Pipher (1994), in her best selling book *Reviving Ophelia*, notes that to conform with the cultural definitions of femininity is to abandon the self. This, contends Pipher, leaves them only four ways to react to their cultural imprisonment "to conform, withdraw, be depressed or get angry" (p. 43). Whether they become depressed or angry depends on the direction of blame. If girls blame themselves they become depressed, and if they blame others, angry. The psychology of bias and male dominance is a subject of overarching interesting for educators in the 21st century. However, the purpose of this article is not to deconstruct the psychological constructs, which manifest social inequality. The next section will therefore present the findings and discuss how they were interpreted as instances of gender bias.

Analysis and Findings

In contrast to the studies presented in the earlier section of this article, (entitled "Foundational Studies"), there is little evidence to support claims of exclusion. That is, males are only marginally over-represented. There are 315 illustrations of males and 303 of females. However, it is worth noting that some pages do feature males only, while this is never the case for females. For example, there are 11 male images on page 80 and 23 on page 105. The closest corresponding page is page 81 where only 2 of the 12 images are of males. In general, it is not the quantity of males and females that creates bias in this case. It is the qualitative aspects of their lives as they enact their respective social worlds in words and pictures, and seen to engage in differing activities, which present them in ways that suggest biased social categorizations.

The Front Cover

Bias, what Lee (2014) describes as "male firstness", begins on the front cover which shows a young male and a young female. The male is dynamic and active, riding his bicycle at high speed as indicated by his hair flying behind him. He is waving his arm in the air; we imagine he is waving because he holds a hat. When hats are held aloft they are waved; the arm is not held in the air stiffly. For example, Lankton (1991) recounted the reaction of a crowd to a long anticipated event, "they rushed shouting…waving hats and handkerchiefs, and indulging in a thousand extravagant antics" (p. 13). Could we then as readers imagine that the boy is shouting to his girlfriend who stands in the distance as a shadowy and silent figure. His female counterpart is standing still, and there is no suggestion of movement or speech. She is waiting for him in the shade, a distant, passive and obscure figure.

"Ideal" Students, Silence and Compliance

Much of what happens in the textbook occurs at an imaginary school. Several pages into the textbook (pp. 6-7) the reader is presented with a plan view of the town in which the school is located as a double page feature. The main characters are depicted, as are other uncredited characters, all of which are engaged in various activities around the town. Boys are more active: running, riding bicycles, and walking dogs. The theme of female silence and reception is first encountered in this section of the textbook. A girl sits quietly at an ice-cream stall while her male companion speaks, his mouth wide. While there is only one instance of female silence on this page, it indicates why it is necessary to avoid a reductionist approach. Illustrations, which reinforce the theme of silent girls listening to

"chatty" boys recur throughout the textbook as a whole. For example, on page 70 a boy speaks as a girl listens and takes notes. Boys are seen to have ownership over the text rather than sharing it as they hold the books, and point to it while the girls stand at their side. When taken collectively (as a whole) they promote asymmetrical power relations in reality.

Further analysis of the double-page overview of the town illustrates two of the girls in the town demonstrating compliance as they walk obediently across the pedestrian crossings. The corresponding male image is of a handicapped boy in a wheelchair. These forms of subliminal bias are difficult to discern unless one takes a holistic approach. When taken together the corresponding individual images connect to create a whole image that reinforces girls for compliance, and suggests that less able boys are the same as girls.

Even though the conversations in the text are very short, there are clear examples of the female characters in the textbook taking a subordinate or caretaker role. On page 21 a girl compliments her male friend's prowess ("You're good Ken.") at basketball before going on to ask him "Are you thirsty?" This question is reinforced through repetition further down the page by a different girl. Another example of a girl in a caretaker role is to be found on page 62 as she organizes the school bags of her male friends. A further example of girls supporting boys occurs on page 102. The girl provides the boy with the information he requires to make a decision on what they will do ("I see. (he says) Then today let's take a bus"), and the conversation ends with no further contribution from the young girl.

A conversation on page 23 opens with the girl apologizing to the boy without any particular reason for doing so ("Oh, I'm sorry"). This is an example of those "healthy" behaviours that "ideal" (female) students in Japan should exhibit. That is, she is submissive and polite. Girls in the textbook are faced with an unfavourable discourse gradient in other ways:

Boy: "I have a cat."
Girl: "Really?"
Boy: "The cat is white."
Girl: "Oh." (p. 125)

The girl, while responsive, is mono-syllabic and mostly receptive. This is also one of two examples of male ownership ("I have ...") on this page without corresponding female examples.

There is a subliminal gender bias toward girls for linguistic competence (Emma: "I study Japanese before class." p. 74), and against girls for the traditional male dominated subject area of math. The same character (Emma) asks a male friend for help with her mathematics homework:

Emma: “Can you help me with tomorrow’s math homework?” (p. 90).

Both aspects conform to the widely held belief that girls are expected to be less capable than boys at mathematics (AAUW, 2014; Clark, 2004), but more linguistically able than male students. However, there is no explicit suggestion that Emma is actually good at Japanese here, only that she gets up early to study it. On the other hand, we know that she cannot do math.

Domestic Service

As noted earlier, there remains the general expectation that Japanese women will leave employment in order to organize and manage the household. In the case of the textbook, this is reflected in both words and pictures. On page 44 a boy and a girl are at the supermarket:

Emma: “I have a shopping bag.”
Ken: “Good.”

Even in this brief exchange, we see the female has organized for one of her primary functions – shopping, and we see the male reinforce her positively for that strategy. In the background of the same picture, two adult females are shopping in their roles as “good wives”, one of which is with a small child performing her role as the “wise mother”. The “healthy” female roles of shopping and food preparation are reinforced in the textbook. For example:

“How much is the blouse?”
“It’s 2000 yen.” (p. 141)
“Where is Mom?” (capital M in the original text).
“She’s in the kitchen.” (p. 142)

The picture associated with the latter exchange attempts humour showing dad sitting on the en suite toilet reading the newspaper; an activity that surely nobody would attribute to a female. There are further vignettes that depict females as domestic managers who make cookies and go shopping (see p. 107).
In this world men do what men do, and women do what they do. The domestic and social roles and behaviours are clearly delineated. In a further obvious example, a picture of a man dressed as a chef is paired with one of a woman dressed as a housewife. She is portrayed so stereotypically that she actually appears to be wearing her kitchen-work apron as her uniform (p. 124). Such images promote males who prepare food as engaged in more important bread-

winning roles outside the home while at the same time subordinating females to that of domestic duties in the kitchen.
Even when males are shown to be actively involved in domestic work it is the female who assumes some level of control:

"Wait. Don't wash the dishes.
Please use this paper." (p. 48)

In a different illustration (p. 104) a boy assists his mother in the kitchen. His mother is in control at the stove, yet far from redressing gender inequity it serves to reinforce the stereotype that she has dominion over the kitchen and her child.

Vocations and Activities

The personal and vocational supremacy of males is clearly evident on page 14 and 15. Of the 19 illustrations, only 5 are girls. So, while the overall quantity of appearances in the textbook is quite balanced, there is a very clear qualitative imbalance on these pages, which sends a very meaningful message to the readers. The pages feature males engaged in adventurous, superior or "cool" roles: astronaut, doctor, administrator, vet, father and pop singer. Males are also depicted as engaged in various activities that reinforce positive aspects of maleness: (1) opening a box in a way that suggests curiosity and risk-taking; (2) playing with a yo-yo skillfully and dynamically; (3) eating lunch with a large confident grin; (4) a boy with his mouth wide open in an exaggerated manner suggestive of social confidence; (5) writing his name on the classroom board indicating teacher-like status. In contrast, the five girls are not shown to be any of the above. None are shown in any kind of vocation. Instead they are shown: (1) looking pretty while silently drinking juice; (2) holding up a plate of food that we must assume she has prepared; (3) asking a question, suggesting ignorance. We know she is asking a question and not answering one because of the large question mark in the picture. The corresponding image appears on page 121. Here a boy has his hand raised to answer a question. We understand he knows the answer because the (male) teacher is pointing at him in order to elicit it from him; and (4) taking direction, albeit from an older female. The fifth illustration is of a girl, simply standing there and doing nothing at all. There are two small illustrations of a woman in a laboratory coat (e.g. p. 54), but it does not suggest authority. Rather ironically it serves to remind the reader of the remarkable paucity of such images. Another female is shown as working at a museum. She is on reception, her sole purpose is to receive and support others. Also, on pages 6-7, in the midst of the bustle of the imaginary town, there is a picture of a woman

pushing a pram, and we see that the uniformed authority figure (a police officer) is male.

Sporting activities

As the title of this paper foregrounds, sports can be used to present males and females differently. For example, an illustration of an aggressive looking male baseball player with his bat raised is paired with one of a girl in her school uniform smiling benignly. In basketball there is a sense of non-stop action and the potential for bodily contact. Baseball uses a hard bat and requires the players to hit hard and slide aggressively. Tennis, on the other hand is perceived as a relatively gentle game more suitable for passive females. Consequently, basketball and baseball are represented in the textbook as almost exclusively male activities. There are 12 illustrations of males playing baseball and 12 for basketball, whereas there is only 1 female baseball player and 2 female basketball players. For tennis, there are 15 female images and only 3 male tennis players.

There is a chapter themed around wheelchair basketball. This is the only chapter with an overtly male theme. However, the writers/publishers do appear to have made some effort to redress the male v female inequality in terms of relative quantity. Page 82 features 12 illustrations of which 10 are of females. Yet, even in a chapter devoted to basketball none are basketball players. While girls are never illustrated as basketball players, there is a photograph of four female players on the final page of the chapter; however, this is counterbalanced by 4 illustrations of males on the same page, one of which is a game official.

Qualified Teacher Status

There are five clear instances where male teachers are included in the textbook, either in a photograph or as an illustration. They appear in control and knowledgeable. Female teachers are represented by Ms. Brown (but very weakly) and in a small sketch of a woman reading to 3 very young, presumably elementary school children – the domain of Japanese women. In 2013, 89% of Japanese elementary school teachers were women (World Bank, 2015), and so this conforms to another vocational stereotype (although in this case it could be offensive to under-represented male elementary school teachers). The profession of junior high school teacher (or coach) is without question the domain of men in the textbook. On pages 28-29 a table-tennis coach is the subject of a conversation: “Is that man a teacher?”, it is then confirmed that in fact he is a coach. Further, the grammar drills on page 42 specify males as teachers:

“He is a teacher”

"Is he a teacher?"
"He is not a teacher"

One of the main characters in the textbook is a woman called Ms. Brown. She is a teacher, perhaps she is an assistant language teacher (ALT) who are often used in Japanese schools. She is never afforded any kind of official title. In conversations with her students she is consistently depicted as naïve and lacking contextual knowledge. For example:

Ms. Brown: "Is that a hawk?"
Ken: "No, it's an owl."

Ms. Brown (a young foreign woman), and her male counterpart Mr. Oka (an older Japanese male), appear rarely. However, when Mr. Oka is featured in a short conversation with a student he is involved in the conversation as the more knowledgeable interactant. In contrast, Ms. Brown is the object of a conversation between two students:
"Do you know that woman?"
"Yes, that's Ms. Brown".

Ms. Brown is never conferred any kind of status as teacher overtly, instead she is "that woman". However, males are specified as teachers, their status confirmed:
"He's Mr. Yoshida our science teacher." This not only recognizes his status as a teacher, but also reinforces the traditional dominance of males in the scientific disciplines.

Conclusion

The findings of this case study confirm those of earlier studies (Ansary & Babii, 2003; Lee, 2014; Otlawski, 2003) – that gender bias and asymmetry endures in Japanese ELTs, which reinforces the personal status and social dominance of males in Japanese society. However, it does not matter if men are depicted as adventurous, confident, knowledgeable and dynamic if textbooks included corresponding images and conversations that elevated females to an equal status, and promoted their learning identities beyond that of compliant caretaker. Unfortunately, the corresponding female vignettes are either absent or, where present, operate to exaggerate bias.

Despite the clear need for Japanese women as professionals, entrepreneurs and managers, ELT writers and publishers have not responded to this, and the situation remains largely unchanged from that of 30 years ago. As Otlowski

(2003) emphasized, "textbooks published in Japan fail to represent accurately the substantial role women…play in the make up and workforce of modern societies" (p. 7). Despite the important role for working women this case study revealed a "hidden curriculum" that communicates overt and subliminal gender bias, missing the opportunity to prepare young learners for a more economically viable future founded on gender equity. When analyzed holistically, bias accumulates to form a pervasive counterproductive theme of social and economic inequality between females and males. In this case study it is apparent that despite MEXT's stated intention, Japanese ELT writers and publishers neither meet the United Nations criteria for gender equity, nor those of the industrialized global community. Therefore, to use Paludi's (2004) remark, there is an urgent need for a reform agenda focused on the redesign of ELTs at school level in order to bring a fair and equal degree of gender equity in a Japan facing an increasingly urgent demographic crisis.

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