
Formation of Gendered Identities in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to examine ways in which classroom discourses and practices are implicated in the construction and maintenance of a conventional gender order where each gender is formed as opposite to the other, with male identity ascendant and female identity subordinate. This gender order has been contested and also to some degree changed during the last decades and so have the theoretical understandings of gender and identity. The shifting images of gender in classroom research reflect these changes. The new “what about the boys?” research that appeared in the 90s can be seen, for example, as a major reaction against what was seen to be an unacceptable rise in girls’ educational success, a rise that destabilized boys’ position as members of the dominant gender. Whereas the early research tends to blame the teachers for gender difference, showing how they interact differently with boys and girls, the later research focuses more on the part young children, and then students, play through the desire to be, and indeed the social necessity of being, “normal.” Over time the research has demonstrated that gender and identity are more multiple and mobile than was originally thought, being different across cultures (with many children being bi- or multicultural), across social and political contexts and across historical times, with each space-time demanding something quite different, even contradictory, of each child and student. We argue for future gender research that makes the processes of gender construction more visible to both teachers and students, making classroom text and talk more readily accessible to critique.

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Introduction

Gender has many facets. It is a dimension of bodies and physical reproduction, individual identities and personal experience, language and discourses, and social relations and everyday interaction. Gender is also central to divisions of labor and to the structuring of institutions such as families and schools. How young children and students take up their position in the existing gender order is an intriguing question for gender researchers. The research indicates that the social and discursive processes through which gender is constructed and maintained make the forces at work in the construction of gender difference largely invisible. There are a number of ways of making sense of this invisibility that we will explore in this chapter.

Children and students accomplish their assigned gender as if it were a natural and normal characteristic of their identities. Children develop an emotional commitment to the gender they have been assigned as early as 2 years of age. And when they arrive in preschool, most children already act, speak, and behave in recognizably gendered ways as if taking up gender difference was a natural part of their identities. Yet gender is also a construct that varies across culture, historical period, social class, ethnicity, age, and individual circumstances. Images of gender also vary in the lifetime of any individual and from one context to another. Separation in the social relations and activities of girls and boys in middle childhood appears to be a relatively widespread as well as a highly context-specific phenomenon. Research indicates that gender separation among children interacts with specific social conditions and that gender segregation may also be institutionalized, for instance, in schools, classrooms, subjects, work groups, seating arrangements, and out-of-school activities. Classrooms have demonstrably been sites where a hierarchical binary gender order has been maintained, along with a shifting array of hegemonic or marginalized positions within each gender group.

In this chapter, we trace the changing understandings of the role of classrooms in the formation of gendered identities. Different theories have emphasized varied aspects of the process of learning gender in age-related ways throughout life. One axis of disagreement lies in the tension between *socialization and agency*: is gender imposed on the child from the surroundings or do children actively create gender with their peers? Another axis of disagreement concerns *identity versus interaction*: does gendered interaction have formative consequences for identity and behavior of the person over time or is it something that mostly exists in moments and immediate contexts of interaction? A third axis of disagreement moves between *the practical and the symbolic*: is gender linked to patterns of practice and material structures, to lived life, or should it be understood mainly as negotiated positions in cultural discourses? These tensions should not be framed as either/or. Gender works in a complex matrix of bodies, structures, materialities, symbols, discourse, interaction, practices, identity, desire, and power.

Early Developments

From Rousseau through to the 1950s, gender differentiation was an explicit *goal* of education. Children were to be explicitly taught appropriate forms of masculinity and femininity. This was challenged after the Second World War, with the emergence of equal rights and child-centered discourses. However, even though there were language shifts and structural changes which suggested that gender was no longer a defining feature of students' identities, many of the assumptions and practices constitutive of gender difference remained remarkably intact. "Boys" and "girls" had become "children" or "students" in policy documents, and mixed schools became the norm in most parts of the Western world. Inequality became less visible though not because it was not present. In a subtle twist, the new "ideal child" was based on boys' behavior and learning strategies. Furthermore, in classroom studies, the students who were observed and referred to as "students" were actually only the boys. Until around 1970, the few studies focusing on gender influences in primary classrooms had criticized the treatment of boys, suggesting that female teachers were unable to meet the boys' learning needs effectively (Brophy 1985). During the 1970s, feminist researchers began to make girls visible in the classroom and to reveal the problematic patterns hidden by the cloak of egalitarian educational discourses. They found that the assumed advantages enjoyed by girls at the primary level were not sustained. This led to important texts such as Spender and Sarah's edited collection *Learning to Lose* (1980) from Australia, Delamont's book *Sex Roles and the School* (1980) from England, and Wernersson's *Könsdifferentiering i grundskolan (Gender Differentiation in Compulsory School, 1977)* from Sweden.

Major Contributions

Gender and Class Structures in the Classroom: Research from the 1970s and 1980s

The first wave of feminist research showed that the supposed gender neutrality of the modern school was an illusion. Sex/gender had remained a major organizing principle of the classroom despite the claim and intention of gender neutrality. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was found that teachers, on average, paid less attention to girls than to boys (Brophy 1985; Kelly 1988). Kelly (1988), in a meta-analysis of 81 quantitative studies of primary and secondary schools, showed that in all countries studied, across all ages, school levels, subjects, and socioeconomic and ethnic groupings, girls received fewer instructional contacts, fewer high-level questions and academic criticism, less behavioral criticism, and slightly less praise than boys. Kelly's study also showed that, while girls volunteered to answer questions as often as boys, they were less likely to initiate contact. Other studies found that boys initiated more contact with teachers in classroom talk, while girls tended to contact the teacher outside this context (Brophy 1985; Nielsen & Larsen 1985). Qualitative studies revealed a typical discourse sequence in a primary school classroom: teacher asks a question; a girl raises her hand and is appointed to answer; she does so briefly and her answer is usually correct; a boy interrupts with an interesting comment on the topic, and the teacher leaves the girl and engages in an exchange with the boy; other boys then join the discussion; the girls silently wait for the next question or may use the time to whisper together on other matters.

Good, Sikes, and Brophy found that the level of academic achievement (often corresponding to socioeconomic and ethnic background) differentiated boys more than girls: low-achieving boys got more behavioral criticism, while the high-achieving boys "receive the best of everything" (1973, p. 81). High performance in girls gained ambivalent responses from the teachers: on the one hand, it was praised; on the other hand, it was often dismissed as the product of conformity and instrumentalism. As Walkerdine (1990) observed, an unruly, low-achieving boy could be perceived by the teacher as simply bored and having greater potential than a cooperative high-achieving girl. In general, girls' higher achievement and more cooperative style meant that they received less attention: while they were praised for their obedience and their desire to please the teacher, they were generally taken for granted and not registered in teachers' consciousness as individuals who were of any particular interest (Wernersson 1977).

Even though girls were often praised as good pupils in the primary school, performed better, and were reported to be more satisfied with school, several studies indicated a serious decrease in self-esteem of girls in secondary school (Lees 1986). Although girls continued to get better marks than boys, teachers often perceived girls' classroom participation to change dramatically and for the worse (Hjort 1984; Wernersson 1977). They tended to become less compliant, less self-confident, and participated even less in classroom discussions. Contradictory explicit and implicit norms for what was valued meant that while girls might meet the explicit demands of

obedient behavior, the (implicitly male) ideal was the more inventive and individualistic behavior that was rewarded in boys from the outset.

Gender Identities, Age, and Peer Group: Research from the 1980s and 1990s

In the 1980s, a different research focus emerged looking at the role children themselves play in constructing gendered worlds and in taking up gendered discourse. Already from preschool age, children are engaged in “category maintenance” (Davies 1989/2003) or “borderwork” (Thorne 1993) on themselves and each other. The expressions of, and significance attributed to, this creation and maintenance of borders vary with age, gender, and situational context. Boys tend to demarcate themselves more fiercely from girls than the other way around, and both genders engage more in borderwork in institutionalized or group contexts than in more informal and personal contexts. This new approach situated classroom talk in a broader cultural, linguistic, and psychological context, as part of a process of gender identity formation. This was an important interpretive shift in which girls’ cooperative style was no longer read negatively as obedience and passivity but as an active taking up of gendered identity and where female identities are often characterized as being relational and responsive to others.

Studies focusing on the formation of gendered identities and life-worlds indicated that girls’ cooperative and boys’ competitive and individualistic discursive strategies were mostly found and practiced in their respective single sex groups. Girls liked collaboration with peers and to do group work better than boys (Reay 1991). The girls were more active in classroom talk when human and social issues were discussed, and male dominance was found in science classes and when the discussion concerned politics and history (Hjort 1984; Kelly 1988). The drop in girls’ performance in secondary classrooms (Brophy 1985; Lees 1986; Öhrn 1991) was linked in the research to greater emphasis on abstract knowledge and facts, to more impersonal relations with teachers, to the more competitive atmosphere, and, related to this, to the limited area of application in school for the girls’ interactive skills (Brophy 1985; Hjort 1984). Generally it was found that girls were not taken seriously and were not given opportunities to develop their personal and social orientation.

The girls’ interpersonal interest was also seen in their dyadic friendships where their relational competence was used both as a means of establishing contact and in fighting and betraying each other. The boys’ more assertive and aggressive behavior was connected to their hierarchical and competitive social life, where getting public attention and admiration from the group of boys counted more than intimate relations and where demonstrating their generalized superiority over girls seemed to be a central purpose in establishing a collective male identity (Hey 1997; Paley 1984). The subtle interplay between the priorities and social orientations of girls and boys, the structure and content of classroom discourse, and the responses students got from their teachers were analyzed by researchers as maintaining and reinforcing

the gender order, though this was generally not a conscious intention of the participants.

The different social orientations of girls and boys were also seen as gender-specific platforms for strategies of resistance toward the power asymmetries in the classroom. These differed according to the class- and ethnicity-related cultures of the students. Studies of youth cultures analyzed different gendered identities as positions for gaining power and control both in relation to teachers and in peer groups. Some working class boys, for instance, seemed to oppose the middle-class culture of school through macho behavior, strengthening both their working class male identity and the likelihood of dropping out of school (Connell 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Willis 1977). Similarly, girls' docility could sometimes be used to gain facilities or advantages, and they could use their interactive skills to gain influence. Adolescent working class girls appeared to have their own patterns of resistance, using more personal weapons against teachers and school routines (Lees 1986; Öhrn 1991).

Gender as Discursive Practices: Research from the 1990s and the Early 2000s

While studies from the 1980s mostly saw classroom behavior and discursive strategies of girls and boys as part of a process in which gendered identity is accomplished, in the 1990s researchers in the social constructionist and poststructuralist traditions challenged the idea of such coherent and stable identities and such coherent and stable gender binaries. Gender should be deconstructed and seen as dynamic and processual: "We are and have gender; but we can also do gender, avoid gender, ignore gender and challenge gender" (Gordon et al. 2000, p. 3).

In studies informed by poststructuralism, the focus changed to the discursive practices through which culturally available meanings are taken up and lived out. They asked what positions were open for students to identify within classroom texts and talk and how students were positioned and how they positioned themselves within the texts and talk of gendered discourses (Walkerline 1990). According to this approach, to do gender in the classroom is to continuously negotiate, maintain, or oppose such positionings offered in classroom texts and talk. At the same time, because gendered images, metaphors, and narratives are seen as part of the everyday, unexamined discursive practices of the classroom, they may pass unnoticed by both teachers and students (Baker and Davies 1989). The binaries that structure Western thought (abstract/concrete, rational/emotional, independent/dependent) were, in this research, tied to the binary male/female in complex ways (Davies 1989/2003). Patterns of language usage are interpreted as containing and shaping the positions that are open to boys and girls in the discursive practices of the classroom and shape the meanings that are attributed by themselves and others to what they do. A number of studies emphasized the ongoing processes of subjectification by which children and students constructed themselves as gendered subjects within specific contexts and organizational framings (Ambjörnsson 2004; Davies and Kasama 2004; Gordon et al. 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Staunæs 2004; Thorne 1993). The result was not

seen as fixed identity categories but as an ongoing process where different students were included and excluded, according to what was seen as appropriate or inappropriate ways of doing gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality in each specific place/time. As a methodological consequence, the analytic focus was often on the borderline figures or incidents – on those who did not fit within what was perceived as “normal” in a specific context – and hence on making the naturalized categories visible and potentially transgressable (Staunæs 2004).

Intersectional and Integrated Approaches: Present Research Perspectives

In today’s research, we see a move toward an increased integration in new ways of some of the earlier approaches. School ethnographies combining observations, interviews, and visual material from the everyday life at school, with an analysis of the wider material and political structures outside the specific school, have become more prevalent. Gendered patterns in classroom talk are not understood in isolation but seen and analyzed in their intersections with other social categories like social class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Nielsen 2014; Robinson 2013). There is today more emphasis on the complexity, ambivalence, and multiplicity of masculinities and femininities among and within individuals, resulting in an array of different and mobile, but still also hierarchically ordered, forms of masculinities and femininities.

Recent studies have observed gendered discourse and social interaction not radically different from those seen in the 1970s, albeit providing a more nuanced picture of variation related to social class and educational context (Gordon et al. 2000; McLeod and Yates 2006; Nielsen 2014). Nevertheless from the early 1990s, a new figure in the classroom has become a centre of attention: the “new” active girl who keeps her relational interests and competencies intact but does not lose her ambitions and self-confidence in secondary school. She does better than the boys, not only with regard to marks but also with regard to coping with new qualification demands in school and society (Hatchell 1998; Nielsen 2004, 2014). But she may also be the one who drops out of the workforce later on, disillusioned with the ideal that she can be and do everything (Wyn 2000). New research indicates increasing problems with eating disorders, self-injury, and depression, especially among young women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011).

Running counter to the success of girls in school is the discourse of “failing boys” that has become prevalent in public and educational debate, reestablishing boys as the ones who are “really” of interest (Arnesen et al. 2008). Whereas girls have been seen as changing along with new demands of qualification in the work market and the increased emphasis on gender equality in society at large, boys have in the same period been perceived as the conventional, never-changing backdrop for the new girls. However, new research on boys in the classroom, for instance, from Scandinavia and Japan, indicates that boys are also changing. In a longitudinal and cross-sectional project from Norway, boys from preschool through to high school were found to combine their customary self-assertion with increased relationality and self-reflection

in their interactions with peers as well as with teachers. In Japan, Davies and Kasama (2004) found that dominant masculinity in Japanese preschools was expressed through cooperation with the teacher. The individuality of boys was not accomplished against relationality and awareness of others' needs but in harmony with them.

Some recent studies have argued for the importance of enabling students to see discourse at work in its construction of identities and desire. It is argued that neoliberalism has increasingly made critique of gender inaccessible with its emphasis on individualism and its claim that gender is both natural and irrelevant (Nash 2013). Some explore the production of texts for children and students that provide alternative imaginary possibilities for gendered beings (Davies 2014), alternatives that acknowledge the forces of normalization while seeking out the lines of flight through which transformations, however fleeting, might come about.

Problems and Difficulties

A difficulty in making sense of the research of girls' and boys' situations in school is that they are often analyzed from quite different perspectives – the “new” girls in terms of agency and the “failing” boys in terms of an assumed feminized school context. Whereas the 1970s and 1980s saw a tendency to analyze boys in terms of class, and girls in terms of gender, the opposite is the case today where the “new” girl is often individualized, white, and middle class and the “failing” boys are grouped together as the losing gender. The “what about the boys?” studies continue with the approach of the 1970s in which female teachers are blamed for boys' failure and unhappiness. The “multiple masculinities” agenda in contrast focuses on the varieties of masculinity and blames the dominant boys for not accepting difference (McInnes 2008). The more poststructurally oriented studies question the automatic assumption of masculinities of one kind or another being inextricably linked to the male-sexed body.

Another complexity is that even if school today is, to some degree, characterized by new ways of constructing gender identities among girls and boys, the teachers' interpretation of the students may not have changed to the same extent. Oppositional girls are seen as a bigger nuisance than oppositional boys and are disciplined for less disturbing behavior than are boys (Gordon et al. 2000). Öhrn (1991) found in her study of Swedish classrooms that being outspoken and active does not necessarily give girls individuality in the classroom. Teachers still described girls in groups and boys as individuals and now refer to active girls collectively as, for instance, the “girl mafia.” Öhrn also found that teachers overestimated the extent of the girls' oral activity, while the reverse applied for the boys. Boys were only judged to dominate when the gender difference was extremely marked. The discourse about failing boys has aroused much more immediate attention than the discourse of “silent and insecure girls” in the 1970s and 1980s. The old gender order may also be seen in the research itself where the attention of even aware researchers is easily drawn toward the boys, often because of government funding priorities, while the girls remain marginalized (Gordon et al. 2000). And whereas the study of different

“masculinities” in school appears to be an interesting and legitimate subject in contemporary gender studies, the study of different “femininities” does not gain the same attention.

Future Directions

Language is both a means for constructing and maintaining gender and a means for expressing gendered identities. Studies of “being” gendered and “doing” gender can be seen as functionally related and reveal different aspects of the social process of gendered identity construction. Studies of individuals cannot give any final account of the collective process of doing gender, since something new is accomplished/created in the ongoing process of doing and talking not tell us anything about the motives and desires of the individuals who engage in this meaning making, what positions they read as available to them, and how it is they find themselves taking up one positioning or another in the various space-times they inhabit – and with what consequences for their sense of self over time. Studies of gender in classroom discourse reveal both obvious differences within each gender group and an array of gender positionings the same girl or boy can take up. At the same time, gender difference is extraordinarily resilient. A theory of gendered identity should take account of both resilience and emergent differences.

Future research might examine the interactions among gendered text and talk in the classroom, gendered identity formations and positionings, and the processes of subjectification, as they interact with each other. Also relevant is the impact of economic changes and governmental policies as they affect schools, families, workplaces, and research-funding bodies. Further, the growing interest in comparative, longitudinal, and generational studies (Davies and Kasama 2004; Gordon et al. 2000; McLeod and Yates 2006; Nielsen 2014; Andres and Wyn 2010) opens up the possibility of locating classroom discourse in a much broader multicultural and space-time perspective. Gender identities intersect with age, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and each of these are shaped in turn by cultural and economic forces, as well as the micro-moments in peer group and classroom interaction (Davies 2014; Nielsen 2014). Research also needs to ask what the differences in teachers’ own gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity mean for these processes (Robinson 2013). It is important that these studies do not just focus on talk but also on texts that students read and write and view and hear. Closely linked to these close-grained and broad-ranging studies, we envisage classrooms as sites where teachers and students together engage in critique of existing discourses and practices. Critique that makes existing discourses and practices visible will enable students to become aware of the ways in which normalizing and gendered discourses work on them and through them, generating specific patterns of desire and invisibly coercing them into gendered patterns of dominance and submission. Researchers will continue looking at what *is* but will also work with what *might be*, developing texts, both fictional and curricular, that help students and teachers think their way beyond taken-for-granted discourses and practices that hold the hierarchical, binary gender order in place.

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