
Gender and Literacy

Gemma Moss

Abstract

This article reviews the ways in which gender and literacy have been linked in educational contexts and the different patterns of intervention this has led to. In particular, it will highlight the switch in the literature from a focus on the formation of (girls') gendered identities to a focus on (boys') gendered patterns of attainment within the literacy curriculum. The emergence of boys' underachievement in literacy as a policy problem will be linked to the current dominance of performance-management cultures within governments and the accompanying processes of large-scale education reform which they have led to around the globe. Often, such interventions are designed with the aim of securing maximum homogeneity in outcomes from education. This provides a new context in which to consider the range of social explanations for inequalities in educational performance, their currency, and the challenges that "governing by numbers" (Grek 2009) poses for feminist politics.

Keywords

Attainment data • Gender • Literacy • Policy

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G. Moss (✉)

Learning and Leadership, Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK

e-mail: gemma.moss@ucl.ac.uk

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Introduction

This article reviews the ways in which gender and literacy have been linked in educational contexts and the different patterns of intervention this has led to. In particular, it will highlight the switch in the literature from a focus on the formation of (girls') gendered identities to a focus on (boys') gendered patterns of attainment within the literacy curriculum. The emergence of boys' underachievement in literacy as a policy problem will be linked to the current dominance of performance-management cultures within governments and the accompanying processes of large-scale education reform which they have led to around the globe. Often, such interventions are designed with the aim of securing maximum homogeneity in outcomes from education. This provides a new context in which to consider the range of social explanations for inequalities in educational performance, their currency, and the challenges that "governing by numbers" (Grek 2009) poses for feminist politics.

Feminism, Gender, and Literacy

Historically, feminist work on gender and literacy can be grouped under two main headings. On the one hand, there is a well-established tradition of feminist textual analysis that focuses on text content and examines the meanings texts hold for their readers or writers (Ang 1985; Moss 1989; Radway 1984). This work has largely arisen out of a broader feminist concern for the social construction of gendered identities and has followed a similar trajectory from a primary interest in the ideological constraints which produce femininity to an understanding of girls' appropriation and reworking of a range of cultural resources for a wider and often more oppositional set of purposes (Hey 1997; Williamson 1981/1982). The judgments made are about the value of the text and the contribution the text makes to the formation of gendered identities (Cherland 1994; Christian-Smith 1993; Gilbert and Taylor 1991).

This kind of attention to the relationship between gender and literacy attracted most interest through the 1980s and 1990s. One of the most hotly contested issues within the literature during that time was whether genres which were strongly associated with female readers, such as the romance and soap operas, should be condemned as part of the ideological apparatus which constrained women's sphere of action or whether they pointed to contradictions in the ideological construction of femininity which their readers could potentially exploit (Moss 1989). Radway's study of women romance readers provides a good example of how the tensions within this literature were resolved through direct study of readers of the texts as well as of the text itself (Radway 1984).

By contrast, a second strand of feminist scholarship has focused more closely on gender and literacy learning. Using ethnographic perspectives, this work has tracked how literacy has come to stand for a social good which enables full and meaningful participation in the broader society as well as access to the world of work. Research studies have considered the uneven acquisition and distribution of the competencies associated with the literacy curriculum in this light, drawing attention to gender inequalities in patterns of illiteracy. Early work in this area explored women's unequal access to education and the promise of literacy it brought with it (Horsman 1991; Rockhill 1993). Research centered on marginalized social groups such as adult women who were the target of basic skill courses or women and girls in the developing world who had been denied equal opportunities to learn to read or write in school. Much of the literature drew attention to the social constraints which shaped women's lives and in the process restricted their participation in education (Mace 1998). This became part of the backdrop to a nuanced exploration of the varied role literacy in different forms can play in people's lives (see chapter "► [Women, Literacy, and Development: An Overview](#)" by Robinson-Pant, Literacies and Social Institutions volume).

Although these two strands of work were in many ways quite distinct, nevertheless, they shared a common concern for social justice and were grounded in a feminist analysis of the difficulties both women and girls face in a world shaped often in disregard of, if not positively against, their own interests. From this point of view, they are complementary approaches in a longer campaign designed to bring about greater gender equality. There were some notable successes. Lobbying against sexism in children's books led publishers to review and modify their output. Meanwhile literacy campaigns in the developing world increasingly recognized the need to target resources on women and girls as well as boys and men. Yet as important as they were, reshaping the literacy environment in these ways did little to alter many of the structural inequalities which relegate women to second place economically and socially. Although the precise focus of debate in these two literatures has shifted over time, neither group of researchers considered that gender equality had been achieved by the point in the mid-1990s when the discourse over gender and literacy suddenly began to change.

Gender and Literacy as a Policy Problem: Should Boys Do Better?

By the mid-1990s, gender differences in performance in the school literacy curriculum had begun to attract a new kind of attention. In different countries, boys' underachievement in literacy began to surface as an issue of concern, whether in official reports based on outcomes from the education system, in media coverage of the same data, or in the academic literature (Commonwealth of Australia 2002; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Millard 1997; QCA 1998; Rowan et al. 2002). In many respects, this coincided with the increasing prominence given to performance data in education system management, whether the data were routinely produced by testing at the national level or through participating in international surveys such as PISA

(Programme for International Student Assessment). Isolate the data on literacy, and in countries where girls and boys have equal access to schooling, boys on average do less well than girls (OECD 2009). This is often in sharp distinction to other subject areas such as maths, where the advantage more frequently rests with boys. In fact, the gender gap in literacy attainment is relatively stable and of long standing (Cohen 1998; Rutter et al. 2004). How and why the data became so prominent in public discourse in the 1990s is a matter that requires consideration in its own right, including the changed conditions which made the data capable of being read in new ways.

Feminist commentators initially reacted to the news of boys' underachievement with suspicion (Epstein et al. 1998; Hallman 2000). Against a backdrop of substantial improvements in girls' attainment in a range of subjects, such as maths and science, where previously they had lagged far behind boys (Arnot et al. 1999), the sudden focus on boys' comparative failure in the education system looked like evidence of an antifeminist backlash (Hammett and Sanford 2008; Watson et al. 2010). Media reporting of the data certainly justified this response, as commentators demonstrated with reference to headlines or articles which had appeared in the USA, in Australia, and in the UK, all of which presented boys' failures as stemming directly from girls' success (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, pp. 4–5; Mahoney 1998, p. 46; Rowan et al. 2002, p. 15). Yet the assertion that girls' increasing educational success has been bought at the price of boys' educational failure is not supported by research. Studies of "boy-friendly" pedagogies, such as single-sex teaching groups; hiring more male teachers; switching to forms of assessment presumed to favor boys, such as multiple choice or final exams; or changing the curriculum to more closely match what are perceived to be boys' interests, do not significantly change outcomes (Carrington et al. 2008; DFES 2007; DCSF 2009). On the contrary, research shows that schools where the gender gap is lowest are characterized by high-quality teaching that treats all children as individuals rather than dealing in gender stereotypes (Younger et al. 2005). Moreover, not all boys are doing badly, just as not all girls are doing well (Epstein et al. 1998; White 2007). Indeed, there is an increasing recognition that gender and attainment need to be understood as intersected by both ethnicity and social class (Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Sharples et al. 2011). Inequalities in outcomes from the education system have multiple rather than singular causes.

The increased prominence given to boys' educational underachievement in literacy can be seen, not so much as evidence of a straightforward strengthening of patriarchal values, as a new twist in a more complex relationship between educational inequalities and the economy (Arnot et al. 1999; Machin and McNally 2005). What marks out the current education settlement are changes in patterns of work, the rise of new managerialism, and the increasing economization of social life in response to the pressures of globalization (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Governments increasingly expect education to demonstrate its value in economic terms. They export to education the kinds of systems for tracking data used to ensure quality in the commercial sector and the tools of accountability associated with this (Ozga 2013). In this context, children's performance in examinations increasingly counts as

output data, to be modeled against input data and then compared with other national systems. As new technologies make tracking and managing such data on a large scale easier, so governments increasingly put in place more extensive testing regimes which can generate more detailed information about pupil progress. It is the wide-scale use of performance data in the education system that produces the conditions in which boys' relative underachievement in literacy becomes much more publicly visible.

It has been in the interests of many governments to both collect and then make such data public as part of a broader discussion over the value of public services. They want to know and to demonstrate how well the education system is doing, as part of their contract with the voters. Being able to demonstrate that the system is working well operates as a means of winning consent for continuing support for a publicly funded system of education. Equally, publicizing apparent failures applies more pressure to that system to improve and deliver better value for the money spent. A new dynamic is put in place. Boys' underachievement in literacy gains its charge from this context. But it does so as one potential discrepancy in the dataset among many. In the UK, performance differences between schools and between local authorities (school districts) have exerted most influence on the direction of policy. Given the extent to which local schools are socially segregated, in effect, this means social class has trumped gender. Gender and literacy in the UK are contained by a broader discourse of improving educational performance in which the school and its effective delivery of the curriculum take center stage. This distances the system from the feminist goal of achieving greater gender equity. There are gains and losses from this state of affairs. Government policy-making in education eschews advocating strategies that might benefit boys at the expense of girls for the simple reason that this would not help raise results across the board (Ofsted 2003). Such a course of action does not fit with a managerialist impulse which insists on greater homogeneity of outcomes. Yet the more wide-ranging goal of using education in its broadest sense to create a socially just society has also disappeared from view, giving way to much more tightly defined and technicist objectives, expressed in purely numerical terms.

Success and Failure in the Literacy Curriculum: Reworking Feminist Ideas in a New Context

As unskilled manufacturing jobs have moved abroad, governments have committed to building a high-skill, knowledge-based economy at home. This aspiration has brought with it changed assumptions about the levels and spread of achievement in reading and writing required in the workforce. The need to see an improvement in boys' performance in the literacy curriculum gains traction in this context. Yet, it is still not clear how any gender gaps in literacy attainment can be accurately described, still less explained, or what the best solutions to the differences demonstrated in the data might be. From the PISA dataset, we know that boys, on average, report lower levels of engagement in reading; on average, they spend less time reading; and, on average, they show lower levels of attainment. The pattern is consistent across many

countries (OECD 2009) and is replicated in many quantitative datasets (Sullivan and Brown 2015). These are suggestive correlations but they also need to be handled with care. Without due regard to the distribution patterns in the data, as well as the summary average, it is easy to resort to gender-stereotyped explanations which are not well supported by research (Moss and Washbrook 2016; Oakhill and Petrides 2007).

In exploring the data, feminists have looked for possible explanations which make sense in a context where girls' competitive edge in the literacy curriculum does not always lead on to better educational achievement overall or better employment prospects in the wider society. This kind of disconnection has to be taken into account. As a first step, this has often meant returning to earlier understandings about the causes of girls' educational disadvantage and assessing whether and how they might apply to boys. This is not a simple matter of translation (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p. 21). By and large, the most common assumption is that boys' underachievement in literacy is created by a dissonance between aspects of masculinity and aspects of schooling (Francis and Skelton 2005). There is less consensus over precisely which aspects of masculinity or schooling matter most in this respect. This leads to different proposed solutions to fixing literacy attainment. In each case, the potential impact on girls is weighed as carefully as the consequences for boys. The following examples from the literature represent three different ways of addressing these issues.

Fixing the Content of the Literacy Curriculum

Elaine Millard's *Differently Literate* examines the differences between boys' and girls' interests in reading and writing and their respective fit with the content of the literacy curriculum in the secondary school (1997). Her work draws on studies of genre preferences. She proposes that the prominence given to specific kinds of narrative fiction and the emphasis on character and personal response in the study of literature in the secondary school present difficulties for boys because they do not match with their interests. She comments:

(boys') favoured genres are less in harmony with the English curriculum and the choices made for them in class by their teachers. The largest contrast is between boys' interest in action and adventure and girls' preference for emotion and relationships. (Millard 1997, p. 75)

In her view, the fact that the curriculum lines up with girls' not boys' existing interests matters because it reduces boys' full participation within the literacy curriculum. Many of them switch off reading. Outside school, boys unlike girls commit their time to other pursuits. They associate reading at home with female members of the household. If they have interests in reading, then they rarely share them with their peers. Overall, this means that they gain less familiarity with the structures of written language. They are less adept at dealing with the kinds of tasks the literacy curriculum

sets them. The picture Millard paints is of girls and boys acting as relatively self-contained communities of practice each constructed on gendered terrain. Rather than continuing to allow one group's interests to dominate over the other's, her solution is to try to rebalance the English curriculum so that it embraces a wider range of reading material, nonfiction as well as fiction, and a greater range of media texts. She argues that such an expansion in the range of texts taught would extend girls' repertoire with beneficial outcomes for them too while drawing boys into the classroom community of story book readers and writers (ibid, p. 180).

Fixing Boys (and Girls Too)

Rowan et al.'s (2002) *Boys, Literacies, and Schooling* occupies rather different territory. It draws more closely on feminist poststructuralist work on the formation of gendered identities. The authors are more circumspect about polarizing gendered interests, pointing out that there are different ways of doing masculinity and femininity and that consequently there may be as many differences within as well as between these two categories. One of their case studies sets out to challenge the easy supposition that boys will show a keen interest in new technologies and will be relatively skillful in this domain while girls will not (ibid, p. 137). They argue that this supposition does not provide a sufficient basis for reengaging boys with the literacy curriculum. Instead of seeking to identify and then incorporate boys' existing interests into the curriculum as a way of improving literacy attainment, they set their sights on the transformation of gendered assumptions about what and who both boys and girls can be. This means working with and against the grain of teachers' and pupil's expectations about their own and others' place within the curriculum. They describe this as a "transformative project" which seeks to remake gender identities.

If we keep looking inward to this same set of characteristics in order to come up with a solution to the "problems" produced by traditional discourses around masculinity, we run the risk of reproducing rather than critiquing those discourses that produce the problem. From a transformative perspective, we need to be able to imagine the new: new possibilities, new masculinities, and new ways of being and performing as a "boy" (ibid, p. 71).

They consider that the English curriculum is a good place for this kind of political project to unfurl because of the relative fluidity of the subject domain and its ability to incorporate new kinds of texts and practices that can help develop new kinds of stories. The traditional English curriculum is already under pressure because of the emergence of new technologies. They consider that the practical interventions that they document act as templates for explorations of the dominant mindsets on gender and on literacy pedagogy rather than as specific recipes for reform. There are no hard and fast answers here, rather attempts to get things right. By placing the transformation of gender identities at the heart of their work, they hope that they can begin to regear the curriculum toward a more equitable and expansive future.

Fixing Literacy Pedagogy

By contrast, Judith Solsken's *Literacy, Gender, and Work* focuses on the social interactions that surround learning how to read and write (1993), rather than the construction of gender identities per se. She draws primarily on literacy as social practice perspectives to demonstrate that both home and school literacy learning can be variously construed as self-directed play or adult-sponsored work, a distinction which she maps onto Bernstein's categories of visible and invisible pedagogies (ibid, p. 60). She argues that these contradictory orientations to the process of becoming a reader or writer present children with a series of dilemmas which they then have to resolve. The way they respond influences their development as readers and writers in school and at home. She draws out these contrasts by reflecting on the home and school literacy practices of two of her case study boys Luke and Jack, who seem to resolve these tension points in different ways:

Both Luke and Jack seemed to define literacy as a particular kind of work in the sense that it was an activity required and overseen by adults, rather than one engaged in for their own purposes or pleasure. . . . While Luke played a mischievous 'bad boy' role in resisting most literacy activities (except those he defined as play), Jack played a 'good boy' role by treating literacy activities as chores to be completed. (ibid, p. 36)

For Solsken, the positions children adopt in relation to literacy interact with their understanding of gender relations at home. Solsken argues that this in part happens because more women than men shoulder the burden of preparing children for the work of learning literacy at school and find themselves responsible for ensuring a successful outcome to that process. The high stakes involved in making a smooth and successful entry into the literacy curriculum provide part of the backdrop against which children negotiate over what literacy means for them and the position they will adopt as literacy learners. Solsken concludes that gender does not of itself determine whether children will align themselves with play-based or work-based pedagogies. Rather gender identities interact with and coalesce around children's experience of literacy learning. The consequences of the positions they adopt develop over time and in relation to the pedagogic culture of the classroom. Gender matters in this context.

Gemma Moss has extended this approach to literacy and gender in a study of how students aged 7–10 engage with the school literacy curriculum (Moss 2007). She has highlighted the particular salience that teachers' judgments of their pupils' proficiency at reading has in classrooms. The ways in which children are seated in class, the kinds of books they are expected to read, and the choices they are allowed to exercise over their reading both construct and make visible the categories of "able" and "poor" readers. Against this background, it is boys labeled as "poor readers" who show the most consistent preference for nonfiction texts. The nonfiction texts they choose are visually rich but use a print size normally associated with adult not children's texts. Moss argues that this combination of design characteristics enables this group to act as experts, whether they have read the text or not, thus allowing

them to escape others' judgments about their proficiency as readers (Moss 2007). She suggests that boys' genre preferences are thus created in response to and not ahead of the literacy curriculum and the hierarchy of readers it constructs. Girls and boys labeled as "poor readers" react differently to this designation. Girls are more willing to accept that label and work within it. They may suffer because others underestimate what they can do. Boys are more inclined to resist. This leads to different profiles of underachievement, which require different remedies.

Current Problems and Future Directions

Can the approaches outlined in brief above address the distribution problem within the performance data, namely, why different proportions of boys and girls struggle to do well within the literacy curriculum while others sail through? Are they specific enough about which boys (and girls) struggle most? Does it make sense to try and search for these latter categories, so that their problems can be fixed? Solsken and Moss's research suggests that the problems do not lie so much with a certain kind of boy (or girl) who stands apart from the content of the literacy curriculum, as with the demands that the literacy curriculum places on all children. Their work reorients debate away from consideration of the literacy curriculum as the place where gendered tastes are arbitrated and gender identities made to an examination of the conflicting modes of social control the literacy curriculum instantiates. This turn in analysis from what the curriculum says directly about gender to how the curriculum orders its knowledge base and regulates knowers is in line with Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein 1996). It may well be that this is the best direction in which to turn at a time when education itself is being reshaped and made accountable for what it does in new ways and when gender politics struggle to find a place in a managerialist culture.

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Bronwyn Davies: [Formation of Gender Identities in the Classroom](#). In Volume: Discourse and Education
Brian King and Ben Rowlett: [Language Education, Gender and Sexuality](#). In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education

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