

10th July 2000

Dear Sir / Madam,

Please find enclosed a paper to submit to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations on 'The Education of Boys'. It addresses boys literacy in secondary Australian schools.

I hope it offers some insights

Yours sincerely

Christine Egan

## **GENDER AND LITERACIES**

**A paper prepared for "The Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations" on *The Education of Boys*.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to review available literature, mainly in an Australian context, that deals with issues surrounding gender and literacy. This paper will summarise and evaluate several key writers as well as examine a range of peripheral material so as to test the major theoretical positions in relation to a central argument; being that gendered literacies are learned in the classroom and in the structures of the institutions where literacy is taught particularly drawing on the work of Alloway and Gilbert (1997a,1997b). The paper will then make some comments about how the research literature might best be applied to the classroom.

“What matters if I live it all at once?  
Endure that toil of growing up;  
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress  
Of boyhood changing into man;  
The unfinished man and his pain  
Brought face to face with his clumsiness”

from

*A Dialogue of Soul and Self*

W.B. Yeats.

## INTRODUCTION: SUBJECT ENGLISH AND GENDER

Goodson, I.F., & Marsh, C.J. (1996). Studying School Subjects: A Guide.

Although the first article I mention does not specifically deal with literacy, the paper does give an interesting historical overview of the development of subject English in Britain this century. Many of the key points factor in literacy to the way English developed and its perceived status by tertiary institutions. The status of subject English is still evident in boys' and girls' achievements (White 1996, Kenway & Lewis 1997) and in pedagogies of practice (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997).

Goodson and Marsh argue that English has been the subject of change but also of remarkable continuity this century. At the turn of the century English studies comprised Reading, Writing and Grammar with the addition of Shakespeare for older students. Interestingly, only the grammar section was labelled 'English'. As imperialism in Great Britain peaked, the introduction of more literature written in English was promoted. It sustained the authority of the middle class and helped homogenise the 'Empire', to play a key role in the "generation of a national and imperial culture" (p.104). Alloway & Gilbert (1997) and many others argue that English today still does not cater adequately for difference and particularly fails boys as its content and practices effectively homogenise boys to a dominant male culture.

However, English as a subject still faced many struggles at university because men had traditionally studied the classics in Latin and Greek. The article provides a detailed view of English's rise from low to high status. It emphasises the strong role professional associations had in both North America and Britain in the development of English and the debate over what subject English actually entailed - was the central focus on language, literature or literacy? This debate is very topical in 1998 as forums across NSW debate the nature of the subject to form a consensus for the development of syllabuses in K-6 and 11-12 (Board of Studies, 1998).

More important, for this paper, is the historical overview Goodson and Marsh give of English as a gendered discipline; particularly the relationship between women and grammar. The writers provide numerous examples of how, at certain points in history, men had masculinised the English curriculum when they felt English had become too feminised. The most convincing example of this is the cyclical return to grammar and the application of external contingencies on writing, to keep in abeyance use of expression, emotion and creativity. Thus English's journey from low to high status involved gender politics and roles of domination, particularly from the universities.

The recent attempts to reemphasise grammar as an important part of subject English in Britain through the national curriculum, and in NSW through the K-6 English syllabus and the accompanying adoption of the text type approach to English; could also be read in this vein. Green expounds this more eloquently, it "highlights the gender politics deeply inscribed in current traditional forms of curriculum and literacy, and the need accordingly to call into question the hegemonic regimes of gender and genre in the project of rational schooling, as well as those current research practices which effectively sustain them" (Green, 1993 pp.217-218). The perception of subject English as a feminine, masculine or neuter course and the classroom ( and whole school) practices which promote a particular view, either consciously or not, has an impact on boys' and

girls' achievements in English. I believe that English *is* seen as a gendered subject. The preference for extended prose, the perceived lack of concrete material to be learnt, and the requirement to explicitly deal with feelings and characters, make it difficult for boys to access this subject. The different theoretical perspectives to follow debate whether boys do actually need to access English as it stands or whether we need to change our content and practices to accommodate boys. Alloway and Gilbert (1997a, 1997b) claim the latter.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEMS

White, J. (1996). "Research on English and the Teaching of Girls".

Although many articles predict that they will discuss literacy and the teaching of English, in reality many narrowly define literacy as the ability to write. The article by White highlights this equation between writing and literacy but also introduces some of the major concerns about boys' and girls' achievements in literacy.

The thesis of the article is that while boys are performing consistently more poorly in GSCE examinations in English than girls, girls' success in English is not necessarily empowering them while at school, or for after school success [concurring with Alloway and Gilbert (1997c)]. Extensive research data is given in the article showing that "Girls have consistently been found to out-perform boys in both reading and writing across the entire age range" (p.102). This occurred irrespective of the system of marking employed. Girls had better control of written forms, particularly extended pieces and performed considerably better on tasks which the students had the responsibility to devise and shape content matter, as well as to define the readership. When writing folders were used for assessment purposes girls' folders tended to contain more imaginative based pieces while boys' contained more discursive writing. Typically, girls' narrative and descriptive writing was superior to any other type of writing. Thus boys and girls have differing levels of proficiency in literacy, as shown by GSCE exams over several years.

The cause of this may be that girls and boys learn to become literate in different ways. (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Clark, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Martino, 1997). For instance White's research shows that girls prefer reading materials which help them understand people and their problems while boys prefer reading material which gives them factual data about hobbies or how things work. Boys prefer more informative and symbolic writing. Boys read more texts which interrupt a linear narrative sequence, where the language is de-personalised and thus more distant from the narrative. Examples of these styles of writing include comics, computer-generated texts and scientific writing. This advantages them in terms of school learning but disadvantages them in a social context (Kenway & Willis, 1997). Boys and girls reading interests directly translate into their writing. Unfortunately, the narrowing of girls' interests in genres of writing puts them at a disadvantage educationally, particularly in post-school training and career choice (Clark 1997).

The author concludes by imploring teachers to intervene in the literacy development of their students with "clear explicit knowledge of the way language works to shape meaning and, *with it identity*" (p.108, emphasis mine). Thus we must understand the cultural practices which are encoded in language and help our students do so as well. It is a theme echoed by all major writers about gender and literacies (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Clark, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Martino, 1997)

confirming the central position of this paper, that gendered literacies are learned in the classroom and the institutions these seek to represent.

Schools do this by subtle and less subtle means. For instance, the pages dedicated to a yearbook for any particular school are usually dominated by sport and by graphics, mostly photographs. Space dedicated to student writing or achievement in English is small by comparison especially given its domination of time in the curriculum. Yet schools often only reflect (mimic?) society around it. Sciences, mathematics and physical pursuits are valued highly in contemporary Australian society. Workplace texts tend to be non prose with an emphasis on brevity and factual writing (consider memos, business letters, accident reports). Without some type of analysis and explicit exposure of such points to students, they cannot critically evaluate them, and then make decisions about their own learning in response to this knowledge. Alloway & Gilbert (1997d) have produced some excellent teaching materials to aid teachers to do this in English classrooms. I believe that it needs a whole school commitment to make it work.

This article was thoroughly researched and a range of clear prose and graphical evidence to support its thesis of boys' poor achievement in English. Yet the quantitative data was well grounded in social deliberations, considering the duality of girls' apparent success in school-based reading and writing.

Spear, M.G. (1989). "Differences Between the Written Work of Boys and Girls"

This is an interesting article as it only one of a few that examines how students' work is differentiated by gender. It is also useful to compare the findings to Levine & Geldman-Caspar (1996) below. This article examines science teachers' perceptions of boys' and girls' achievements in writing. Spears used a form of survey for her research, sending out samples of student work noted by gender and asking teachers to complete a series of set questions about them. Work attributed to a certain sex was not always originally completed by that sex, therefore for me this type of research has some serious ethical concerns. Nor were the findings discussed with the teachers, nor were they questioned about their responses or even asked to annotate student scripts.

Over 90% of responses which mentioned differences in boys' and girls' written work noted appearance and neatness (to me this is an issue of handwriting, rather than a writing concern). Girls were not only found to be neater but *expected to be neater*. Girls were described as being more conscientious while boys were seen as being careless. The language of scripts attributed to boys was generally considered to be poorer. Language included grammar and spelling. However, boys' work was credited with more understanding than girls. Boys' writing was briefer yet considered to cover the essentials while girls 'waffled' too much. Girls' propensity to write at length was considered unfavourably. In summary, Spears found work attributed to a boy was "generally rated higher for scientific accuracy, richness of ideas and organisation of ideas than identical work attributed to a girl" (p.277).

It would appear from this research that teachers' perceptions of writing in science are influenced by gender stereotypes. Practitioners should find such research instructive and give them more reason to deconstruct the literacy practices of their own classrooms. The Spears article and research seem weak with the simplistic nature of the survey and the non-reflective marking of student work by teachers.

The article does not make any suggestions to remedy a rather disturbing finding nor does it place the research in any type of social context. Some findings are refuted by Levine & Goldman-Casper (1996).

Levine, T., and Goldman-Casper, Z. (1996). "Informal Writing in Science produced by Boys and Girls: Writing preferences and quality."

Levine & Goldman-Casper conducted a literature review on writing and science and concluded that:

- girls write better and more frequently than boys
- girls and boys choose different topics in their writing
- girls produce more detailed written work than boys.

The writers then describe their own research into writing which used both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a 'writing-to-learn-across-the curriculum' project. Students used a range of text types in science and were assessed individually on each form:- expressive, descriptive, narrative, dialogue and free choice. There were a number of findings consistent with the literature review. Girls liked, and performed well in writing in the expressive mode; they wrote in more detail when describing an experiment and used more experimental terminology; girls' writing tended to be longer (on all tasks); they used more emotional vocabulary and more formal language where required. Finally, their writing in greater detail did **not** disadvantage them.

However, the **content** of both girls' and boys' science writing was poor and, overall, eighty percent of students were considered to have poor quality writing; the boys performing more poorly than the girls. Unlike the previous article, Levine & Goldman-Casper discuss ways that will promote learning and writing in the science classroom concluding that there is a strong need to integrate science and writing instruction; that it is better to use a variety of forms of writing in science as it encourages learning and that talking about or writing about a personal viewpoint in science helps students' understanding of a topic. The latter point concurs with early research in writing (Moffett 1968; Murray 1990; Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod & Rosen, 1975) while questioning the reconstruction of dominant text types in specific content areas (Martin 1985). It is difficult to ascertain from the article whether any of their implications for classroom practice would benefit girls or boys more, or whether the learning strategies are more gender neutral.

## **RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEMS**

Alloway, N., and Gilbert, P. (1997a). "Boys and Literacy: Lessons from Australia."

This is a thoroughly outstanding article not only as it seeks to explore the reasons behind boys' poorer literacy results but in its analysis of the social contexts in which these results occur and some of the contradictions apparent in the boys and literacy debate. Despite boys' literacy levels being lower than girls', boys still maintain positions of privilege socially and occupationally because (although the rhetoric says otherwise), literacy competence seems not to be highly valued in the economic world of work and school success at literacy is not a valued competence. These views are taken up by Clark (1997) and will be expanded upon later in the paper.

Extensive data from Australia shows that girls clearly “out perform boys in literacy-based tasks” (p.51) but this is too simplistic a gender analysis masks other differences such as socioeconomic ranking of family strongly correlating to literacy performance; low performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and those from rural and remote communities. Yet even in these disadvantaged groups, there is a clear pattern of poorer literacy achievements by boys. The authors reject a deficit theory which blames the child or social context rather than the curriculum, and present a strong argument that it is the content and pedagogy of literacy practice that alienate boys.

Literacy classes authorise particular knowledge and skills. Many boys have literacy skills that are not always recognised in the classroom (Dally, 1997) such as reading and writing computer-generated texts, visual texts and oral competence. Literacy classrooms need to adopt a wide range of text types to motivate all its participants. Further, and more fundamentally, “literacy, as it is constructed in the school, becomes a domain of knowledge and a set of technologies that run counter to various dominant constructions of masculinity.” (p.55). Often the focus of literacy (or English) classrooms is personal expression or personal response to teacher sanctioned texts. The moral nature and the sub texts of literature, and the practices used to teach this literature, are often contrary to ideologies and practices of masculine cultures (an example of this in the current 7-10 syllabus in NSW would be empathising with characters in a novel, or describing emotions a literary text has on a student in a public situation).

Hegemonic masculinity does not encourage or endorse personal and creative expression, self-disclosure, introspection, nor public performance of these acts. Rather it values an objectification of expression and use of symbol to distance writing. (White, 1996). It is hardly surprising then, that given economic rewards can be gained without literacy competence, and that the literacy classroom is sometimes (often?) opposed to socially endorsed views of masculinity that boys fail to do well in it. Yet for feminists it is seen as vitally important that boys become full and active citizens of our society. Some boys and men may see this as a type of deficit position.

I would like to work through some of the above issues more closely and find ways for boys to value literacy learning. Such programs as “Literature Circles” give boys the opportunity to make decisions about their reading material and respond to novels or poetry in a structured yet personal way, rewarding effort and opinion as opposed to skills. Just as girls can be empowered and taught to make decisions about their learning using a negotiated curriculum, so too can boys learn to take responsibility for their own learning, gradually increasing the amount of content and assessment decisions students actually make. Widening the text base and the audiences for composed pieces (spoken or written) can help boys value literacy learning. Having a variety of texts available and introducing choice in reading materials can also be useful. Choice is a major part of dominant male cultures. To be forced to read a text (often distributed by a woman) takes away perceived power. Poetry can also be used as a way of writing emotions using its cryptic and non linear nature to distance the writer and reader. Providing concrete or explicit material to be learnt also helps boys value literacy. Such things as recalling the structural features of a news report and learning specialist vocabulary makes English less vague and more like the sciences in which they do well. It gives them a sense of achievement in learning. More critical ways of promoting gender growth in literacy will be discussed at the end of the paper.



Unlike many of the other articles mentioned, Alloway & Gilbert make some suggestions themselves about how literacy might be promoted in the interest of both genders. At the heart of their approach Alloway & Gilbert seek to examine the social constructions of literacy learning by students and teachers becoming critically literate. Critical literacy offers boys and girls new insights into our social, personal and cultural worlds; a way to understand how we have been constructed, how we have constructed ourselves and how these processes (and products) have been naturalised. Thus, we need to critique a wide range of texts, for boys especially, that to go beyond print media. We need to be inclusive in our text selection providing a broad range of cultural experiences for students to engage with (cultural - gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, texts in translation, fiction and non-fiction, those with a distinct oral tradition are starting points).

Further, we need to use student-centred learning techniques. The latter point is rather revolutionary in the promotion of boys' literacy as common conception has it that girls learn best cooperatively (Hays, 1995). Finally teachers and school administrators must critique the literacy practices and assumptions of the school and how they reinforce the social construction of gender. To me, this means such things as the disruption, or acceptance of sporting achievement as the most powerful in the school, the methods of assessment and reporting, the reinforcement of gender stereotyping through teacher-centred classrooms, naming and allocation of executive positions in the school. Alloway & Gilbert provide an intellectual yet pragmatic position in the gender and literacies debate.

Alloway, N., and Gilbert, P. (1997b). "Everything is Dangerous: Working With the 'Boys and Literacy' Agenda"

In this article Alloway & Gilbert consider some of the issues associated with the boys and literacy debate. They argue that such an agenda is dangerous territory on four main counts and offer theoretical and pedagogical suggestions.

In the opening section the writers argue that the recent interest in poorer literacy results for boys is not surprising given the privileging of mathematics/sciences over the humanities and thus the interests in girls' perceived failures here. Literacy tests do show that "girls outperform boys on a range of literacy tests in a range of school contexts" (p.36). The writers give a number of examples from state wide exams across Australia that show boys' achievement in reading and writing to be poorer than girls. However, Alloway & Gilbert argue as to the value of literacy tests which measure reading and writing in certain genres, that are entirely print-based and that are not fully contextualised. Literacy tests are also culturally and class biased. Thus although there is an obvious gender difference in test results at all levels of schooling, treating boys and girls as homogeneous groups oversimplifies the problem.

The writers then struggle with the concept of girls' literacy and less earning capacity of male counterparts "Even groups of boys with low and very low reading achievement scores still earned, on average, more than groups of girls with high or very high reading scores" (p.37). Also complicating the agenda are issues of ethnicity, class and geography, with wealthy boys performing better than girls from working class and rural areas. Thus, although gender is a powerful indicator of a child's literacy performance, social and economic resources available to a child also have a large impact.

Further dangers can occur in over catering for boys' interests in the literacy classroom (for example by providing texts with male main characters and devoting disproportionate funds to remediation). This means female interests are often denied and boys are not asked to question the experience of masculinity texts or situations convey. Boys need to confront the dominant masculinities society and school presents rather than simply be immersed in them. For instance, Alloway & Gilbert argue that, "Boys are...unlikely to gain pleasure from passive, reflective, emotional pursuits, given that masculinity typically offers them pleasure from active, aggressive and embodied leisure activities" (p.40) and may feel that the English classroom causes too much friction with their masculinity. Boys who centre their studies in the humanities or the creative arts are often ambiguously positioned, especially in terms of their sexuality (Martino, 1997).

Alloway & Gilbert again question whether boys' lack of interest in literacy and in English is connected with how these subjects have been pedagogically and ideologically constructed and ask for a critical reassessment of literacy pedagogy and a deconstruction of the concept of literacy itself - as its own social construction. In conclusion the authors suggest that boys are more likely to achieve in literacy if they see it will benefit them, by making their lives richer and by offering different ways of conceptualising their lives; where student teacher relationships are more equal so that student skills and knowledge are respected; and where masculinity and literacy practices are seen as socially constructed not predetermined by gender. Yet Alloway & Gilbert do not acknowledge that this type of psychological literacy is difficult and cannot be done by English teachers alone in their classrooms. Whole school and societal changes would be necessary to make this possible.

Martino, W. (1997). "Dickheads, Poofas, Try Hards and Losers: Addressing Masculinities and Homophobia in the Literacy classroom.

In a provocative piece Martino describes the self-regulation of boys in literacy classrooms using Foucault's theory of "technologies of the self" (p.2) as an approach to studying gender in the literacy classroom. His approaches follow Alloway & Gilbert's questioning of social construction of masculinity with a tight focus on sexuality and test out the theories of the women in a pragmatic way and developing his own theoretical perspective as well.

Reading is seen as a set of social practices embedded in which are sets of moral technologies. It is these technologies that police boys' behaviours and responses. Martino's research with boys found that they enjoyed everyday, realistic and revelant reading, *including literature*. However, boys found reading boring in contrast to watching television, playing sport or playing on the computer. Using critical literacy techniques Martino worked with the boys to look at gendered literacy practices. He used short pieces of writing about adolescent boys to get students to deconstruct the masculinities presented in the readings - and their own selves. They engaged in reading willingly, wrote about their responses and wrote to explore their feelings. The texts presented a number of scenarios or characters which were used as a discussion point and to show how a text can be used for "morally inscribing and monitoring themselves" (p.12). He concludes that critical literacy is a powerful tool. He suggests that boys work with short texts to capture interest and to give them skills necessary to analyse longer texts.

The success of this study lies in Martino's complete openness and receptivity to the boys responses and his willingness to question all aspects of masculinity. Given a co-educational classroom, a female teacher, or a religious school philosophy (eg Christian or Muslim which condemns homosexuality) his techniques may not have produced such dramatic results. It would also be interesting to note, whether in later research, the boys carried through with these skills, or whether their attitudes were changed in a sustained manner. It is also possible to argue that many students lack a distinct moral framework and the provision of one, rather than the questioning of a vague 'other,' might give boys a framework to act and respond appropriately within.

Clark, M. (1997). "Gendered Literacies: Issues and Challenges".

This is another excellent paper which examines the gender differences in school literacy learning, retention rates to year twelve, TER averages and participation and achievement in subject English. Clark begins by quoting an OECD report in which 14/19 countries had boys as lower achievers in literacy but is guarded in indicating a crisis in boys' education given that:

- the top 10-12% of TER scores are not gender differentiated
- women still earn less than men
- women still undertake a narrower band of tertiary studies
- men still dominate language based courses (journalism, law, English professorships, scriptwriters).
- TAFE is still very much a male dominated institution.

These assertions concur with others (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Kenway & Willis, 1997) and add to the central dichotomies in studying gender and literacy; that is that, although boys are disadvantaged socially (Dally, 1997), by having poorer literacy skills, financially and career wise the evidence is not supportive of disadvantage while girls expertise in a narrow band of literacy skills seems to disadvantage them outside of school and even in some school subjects.

Much of what Clark then discusses is similar to other writers previously noted. She too questions the practices of the literacy classroom that so often fail to take into account boys' needs; also sees multiple masculinities and that patriarchy oppresses men and boys as well as women and girls. For many boys' English classes and the constraints of schooling conflict with boys' developing masculinities "literacy as constructed by the school comes to be seen as a domain of knowledge and a set of technologies that run counter to many understandings about what it means to be male" (p.6). Further, 'what it is to be male' is often defined in terms of what it is **not** (boys don't show emotion, boys don't...).

Clark supports the use of critical literacy for students to become critical analysers of text as a way of addressing the imbalance in literacy achievement. Students need to have access to alternative discourses, multiple perspectives, competing frameworks and assumptions, to learn to read how texts position them and (hopefully) how to resist these readings. How to achieve this in a busy school schedule with secondary students well conditioned in dominant masculinities is exceedingly difficult. Such skills need to be tackled when learning to read and then developed. Clark fails to acknowledge the everyday constraints in which English teachers work.

Clark suggests that having boys recognise the injustices they have experienced through dominant

forms of masculinities (such as 'macho' culture) is a good starting point to having them empathise with others. Clark also advises a broadening text base and to give more attention to speaking and listening as essential components of an effective literacy strategy. Teaching pedagogy must support risk taking, break down some of the barriers which alienate boys, and be collaborative. Lasting change requires a whole school focus and accompanying change in classroom practice. Clark succinctly deals with a range of issues dealing with gendered literacies, her ideas supporting the theoretical framework developed by Alloway & Gilbert.

Kenway, J., and Willis, S. with J. Blackmore and L. Rennie. (1997). "Are Boys Victims of feminism in Schools? Some Answers From Australia."

Although this article is not strictly about literacy, but the education of boys generally, there are a number of issues relevant to English teaching in it. The article takes a unique stance by examining boys' emotional experience of schooling and particularly English. They argue that gender reforms have usually not factored in boys' (or girls') emotional responses and that emotions need to be addressed for more effective policy development and implementation.

Taking emotional risks is not a strength of either sex but is especially difficult for boys. Boys use emotional neutrality as a weapon for controlling others and defending the self; deny their problems and often pass them onto women and girls to deal with. They do not talk freely about their emotional worlds and believe English is a feminine subject when asked to do so (Martino, 1997). They deal with some of their emotional pain by rationalising it away. Yet boys' emotional experiences of malehood and of schooling are central to the responses to gender reform. Friendship groups are very important to boys, especially in obtaining a sense of identity and community. Verbal and physical harassment are constant features of individual and group male relations in a classroom and within a school.

Masculine identity is very fragile yet gender reforms/programs often ask boys to problematise their masculinity in a culture where masculinity is seldom seen as problematic. This point has tremendous implications for the critical literacy position of Alloway & Gilbert since the very purpose and techniques of critical literacy are to problematise social constructions and is the strongest argument in the literature for caution in use of critical literacy. Boys are also asked to accept that they have structural advantages based on gender without being given any evidence or shown why. They are often named as problem in schools but they can't empathise with this and feel powerless to do anything about it. They resent their perception of preferential treatment of girls in discipline matters, and can deny girls' success by claiming the achievement is not worthwhile. Some boys police other's behaviour by Homophobia and that is a depressing and negative role for them. The authors conclude that inclusive education strategies for boys cannot simply mimic those for girls and that there is a need for a 'pedagogy of the emotions' (p.35) to help boys understand why they feel and act as they do.

Although feminist writers, Kenway & Willis take a sympathetic view of implementing gender reform for boys but do not simply outline a program or series of questions to stimulate debate. While their avocation for a pedagogy of the emotions is sound, they need to expound on specific techniques for practitioners.

Tsolidis, G. (1996). "Feminist Theorisations of Identity and Difference - a case study related to gender education policy."

This paper argues against false dichotomies based on gender and ethnicity - these being too fixed and rigid. The author finds little in national literacy policy which promotes biculturalism. She claims that there has been more work, at national level, done on *gender* than anything else but that ethnic minority girls have not featured well in any policy development or implementation. She concludes that biculturalism "contains strong challenges to sexism, racism and class oppression as these operate within Australian society" (p.276). She argues against essentialist positions in gender and ethnic policy development. Tsolidis' work concurs with Alloway & Gilbert in warning against treating gender groups as homogeneous and that even given vast amounts of research and policy development, change may be minimal. Yet none of the writers seem to grapple earnestly with providing solutions to this problem.

Stedman, L, C. (1996). "An Assessment of Literacy Trends, Past and Present".

In a very scholarly article, Stedman analyses the assessment of literacy trends over the last several decades using data from the National assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in North America. He warns that literacy is difficult to define and measure properly, that it is complex and multi-dimensional. The NAEP tests examine reading and writing in a wide variety of texts, with a wide range of question types including open ended, prose, and written work completed at school and presented in writing portfolios. His findings are remarkable.

- "students have maintained their reading performance for over two decades" (p.285)
- "overall writing performance has remained roughly stable at all (three) age levels" (p.286) since 1982
- that such stability suggests "enormous resilience by schools" (p.286) that deserves greater recognition and
- that reading achievement, general knowledge, civic literacy and history achievement have been stable throughout most of the twentieth century.

Thus, despite enormous changes in society and school populations, USA literacy and academic achievements have been stable for decades. However, there is nothing to be complacent about because, although stable, literacy levels remain low across the USA for adults and students, with 15-30% of the population having "trouble reading common materials - news articles, maps, report cards, coupons, recipes, tax tables and medicine directions" (p.293).

Stedman makes some comparative comments in terms of ethnicity and class concluding that minorities and the poor are disproportionately affected by low literacy levels which confirms Australian studies (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997b). In a very thorough article though Stedman only makes reference to gender once in a footnote, when authentic assessment techniques are used "8th and 12th grade males lagged 11 percent points behind females". No comment is made about this obvious discrepancy, nor is the issue raised again. Whether such a difference is acceptable in the US or whether a crisis in boys' literacy in Australia is being overplayed, is difficult to ascertain.

Stedman suggests that societal changes in attitudes and values are required, if the USA is to increase literacy rates. Society would exhibit this by rewarding scholarship, valuing learning over entertainment and consumerism and promoting reading. He also warns that the USA has learnt that simplistic assessment tools, such as multiple choice tests, mask real literacy problems. We should heed these warnings in light of the years 3,5,7,8,10 literacy tests done in NSW and others completed nationally.

## **ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEBATE**

### **Narrative Writing and Feminism.**

Some description of the concept of narrative and feminism is necessary in any discussions on gender and literacies since feminism claims that women have particular ways of knowing and writing that are often not validated by institutions. If this argument is convincing, we should be encouraging girls to write in particular forms such as the narrative and not simply reconstruct texts constructed by a male dominated society.

The lack of voice in traditional research reports, wrapped in notions of positivism and objectivity, disempowers accounts of women, making argumentative rationality more valuable than a narrative one (Lather, 1991) so that we smuggle our knowledge of social injustice into a discourse of science which fundamentally contains, and powerfully undermines the politics of feminism. (Fine, 1992). The current publication of research materials is dominated by non-feminist interests and uses male language (Fine, 1992; Harding, 1987; Mies, 1991; Neilsen, 1991) whose discourses we need to shatter (Lather, 1991). Often feminists present their work as narratives (Fine, 1992; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Lather, 1994; Smith, 1987), as do others writing about women (Lingard, 1995) or the research process itself (Kennedy, Lubelska & Walsh, 1993). Thus, the way women's stories have been traditionally told may conflict with women and girls' preferred writing styles.

In a recount of a critical literacy project in Canada, Gaber-Katz records how collaborative reading and writing of stories/narratives with adults, male and female, improved participant's ability to read dramatically. (Gaber-Katz, 1996). Each participant's story was published for use by others later in the program, suggesting there are various ways to teach literacy. In a substantial volume edited by Phelps and Emig (1995), several female composition researchers share their findings in a variety of written forms: contextualised case study, poetry, revisionist history, choric voices, contrasts, journals, personal narratives argument and interview; legitimising other ways of knowing and writing for girls and women - particularly writing without an argument (Bridwell-Bowles, 1995). The aim is to challenge students (and readers) to understand contexts and orientations different from their own (Hays, 1995) and to break the bonds of language (Bridwell-Bowles, 1995). Gannet discusses the gendering of the journal form affirming the intellectual and affective power of journals and their ability to encourage critical reflection (Gannet, 1995) while Connors argues all students need to develop rhetorical pedagogies which give them scope to deal with the outside world and that can be used for introspection (Connors, 1995).

Phelps, L.W., and Emig, J. (1995). (Eds.), Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in

## American Composition and Rhetoric.

Phelps and Emig pose the question "How and what might feminism in composition and rhetoric come to be?" (p.408) and in their collection decided to problematise feminism as a construct in composition (writing). Women's' and girls' experiences and their record attach extraordinary importance to narrative and poetry but reflect that such expressions of lived experiences is not unique to feminism in composition. They urge experimentation in genre and co-authorship, such as reconstructing history from women's journals and letters and finding the fissures that exist in the ways women's stories are currently told.

Women play a central role as teachers of democratic literacy and the study of their writing and how they teach writing could give valuable information on how to improve literacy results across gender. Phelps and Emig lament that the study of the ways women and girls' writing is only very recent and advise against simply breaking down male discourses about language by simply "adding women". Writing is far more complex and multidimensional than that. Nor should we simply overlay feminism onto the study of composition and rhetoric, because to do so misses the heritage of many literacies, and of plurality. Their key point is to open up the types of discourses acceptable, particularly in tertiary institutions to allow forms which represent "the contemporary complexity, density and intertwining of personal and professional experience that mark women's lived lives" (p.419). We should also be testing new pedagogies and theories of language learning that take into account gender issues. In a rare gesture of empathy for teachers, the authors conclude by saying "Any teacher of writing - especially in today's public schools - is a magician in dealing with multiplicity and complexity" (p.420).

What is appealing about this collection is the validation of using narrative discourse, the range of forms written in still with academic rigour, the acceptance of uncertainty in writing and teaching writing, the awareness of the bricolage of contemporary society and the focus on reflective practice. In contrast though are the findings that writing in a narrow band of genres, particularly displacing scientific and technical reading and writing, currently disadvantages girls in post-school options. Whether we have students reconstruct the current social world (Martin, 1995) competently and, therefore, participate in it more effectively; or to challenge the structures and discourses of this world and replace/add to them ones more amenable for women/difference, and thus be further excluded, is a dilemma that practitioners will need to face. As Kambler (1994) demonstrates it can be dangerous to have students unthinkingly reproduce dominant genres yet public examinations require strict adherence to set text types. The universities will need to continue to set the agenda and legitimise narrative and other written forms, so that writing 'in the academy' becomes a role model for other areas of schooling.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE.**

As a classroom practitioner and head of English in a busy secondary school how might I apply some of the research findings to better my own, and my peers,' classroom practice? It is a vexing issue not only because my current role is with boys and soon to be partly coeducational; but because some of the research contradicts with each other and/or with current political agendas (such as ELLA tests in NSW). There are a number of complementary features in the previously presented papers on gender

and literacies that can make an impact in the contemporary literacy classroom. These include:

- making sure the literacy classroom is student-centred, This means the teacher acts as facilitator and adviser. It also breaks down some of the barriers as teacher as 'expert' and authority figure that particularly alienates. Student-centred learning has had a successful career in girls' only classrooms and students respond readily to it.
- making sure there is plenty of talking and listening to explore ideas, concepts, experiences and feelings.
- making explicit the language features and structures of texts (particularly for boys).
- allowing students to experiment in a range of forms of writing, speaking, listening and reading across the curriculum.
- for boys - beginning with small texts in print form that ask students to validate/question their own oppression.
- for boys - to go beyond print text and to endorse "other than school" literacies (such as net surfing, reading graphics).
- to use expressive forms of writing to experiment with, and consolidate content.
- to select texts from a wide range of cultural backgrounds with both male and female protagonists.
- to model and promote varieties of masculinities and feminities both formally and informally (male author at speech day).
- encouraging and recognising all students achievements in cultural and language based activities (not simply sporting prowess).
- use a wide range of assessment tasks which measure students' ability to learn facts about a text as well as analyse or respond to it (Wellham, 1997).
- promoting successful make students especially in language arts, both past and present.
- making literacy a whole school focus.
- changing structures of the school to reflect modern learning theory.

Against this is the dilemma of supporting girls and women in exploring/developing ways of writing and knowing that oppose theories of writing espoused in public examinations like ELLA or to a lesser extent the HSC. However, the strongest and most powerful strategy to improve students' literacy skills is critical literacy. I have included a series of questions that may be used in part or whole to have students:

- question the way texts position them especially in terms of gender.
- respond to language and society in a reflective manner.

#### Questions to ask about a text to engender critical literacy.

*(A text is defined as any piece of language which creates meaning).*

1) What are my expectations of the text before viewing, reading or listening? (Do you expect the narrator of "Lord of the Rings" - audio book version, to be male or female (both/neither)? Why/Why not?



- 2) Who is the assumed reader/listener/viewer of the text? What information tells you this? (eg cost, type of publication, context of text, language structures and features, vocabulary choices, mode of delivery, cultural understandings.....)
- 3)
- a) What is/are the point/s of view?
  - b) Where are the gaps and silences? Whose voice is being heard? Whose voice is being suppressed?
  - c) How are these expressed?
  - d) What might be some resistant readings? (an animal welfare version of the wolf's role in "Little Red Riding Hood")
  - e) How do the points of view of the narrator/writer and author/speaker vary?
- 4) What message/s is/are being conveyed?
- 5) How much is this text an appropriation of another text? (How much of Clueless is based on Emma? and Are you expected to know the original text before you begin reading/viewing/listening?)
- 6) What type of gender messages are being conveyed by the text? Are these obvious or subtle? (advertising, particularly of toys, is a good way into this).
- 7) How does this text break conventions for its type/genre/form? (prose poems and modern fairytales are a good starting point for this activity).
- 8) What information does the reader/viewer/listener already know about this text?
- 9) What symbols, colours, words, images of the text are unique/particular to the culture of the writer/speaker?
- 10) To synthesise - how does this text position **you** and what is your response to this positioning?

Included as an Appendix is an example of one successful activity I have used with bright year 7 boys in an independent school in their study of The Hobbit. The boys were given ample opportunity to discuss their ideas (with a supervisory adult) before completing their written work. Other successful uses of critical literacy included a detailed analysis of toy advertisements for young children (2-8 years) with year 11 2U Contemporary students in a state high school and poetry unit with years 9 & 10 ESL girls in a state high school.

## UPON REFLECTION

Upon reflection, one can only conclude that the issues surrounding gender and literacy are complex, interdependent and solutions suggested by various authors are, at times, contradictory. The central thesis of this paper, that gendered literacies are learned in the classroom is validated by such

credentialed writers as Alloway, Gilbert, Kenway and Willis, and by emerging writers such as Martino (whose research is, as yet, incomplete). Literacy classrooms do not simply (attempt to) teach reading, writing, speaking and listening but teach powerful messages about what it means to be male or female, about appropriate responses to texts, about power and authority, about what constitutes text, about which texts are valid for study, about linguistic structures and features of texts and a myriad of other things. Each of these things contain messages about gender (such as sexuality, sexual orientation, the position of men/women). Beyond the walls of the classroom, in educational institutions themselves, there is further evidence of gendered literacy practices.

To unravel some of these, Alloway and Gilbert suggest we (teachers) work at deconstructing our teaching and our texts with our students using critical literacy techniques (Alloway & Gilbert 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). They provide an excellent theoretical framework for this and, unlike other writers reviewed for this paper, provide practical, well tested units of work to do so (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997d). Critical literacy works. Yet from my experience, it works best in situations where the students are already motivated and where students can already read and write well. Critical literacy works best when students have been exposed to student-centred learning, and where literacy is a whole school focus.

I am about to deconstruct some texts with my year eight boys. The texts are blurbs from computer games on the theme of war. The students are at best indifferent to subject English, at times rebellious. I am doubtful that the lesson will work. Why? Because their learned experience of the subject and of the way learning occurs prevents most of them thinking laterally. But I must. Some of them might realise how these games are positioning them as readers/players, and as males. This type of teaching is hard and although it can be rewarding, is fraught with risks. No writer acknowledges this.

Other challenges need to occur too. Small ones such as challenging the allocation of only two pages in the annual magazine for English/literacy while sport has at least a dozen. There is much more to be done. No one writes that parents must become involved. Only Stedman (1996) acknowledges society's role. No one accepts the enormity of the task. And as I move more towards narrative and personal reflection in my own writing, I once again face the dilemma of how to teach writing to the girls who have recently entered our school. Are they to be competent writers of predetermined text types? Or should we, as women challenge these structures and invent/use/produce our own? I hope to strive towards a mixture. To build skills, yet to challenge for **all** students, for **both** genders and in the main, I will endeavour to use critical literacy practices to do so.

Thus, this paper has summarised a number of contemporary papers in the area of gender and literacy. The agenda, in some ways, seems peculiarly Australian. It has attempted to make some evaluation on the papers and suggested some implications for classroom practice.

## Appendix 1

### EXTENSION WORK- POSITIONING THE READER.

Imagine you are working in **2137** *two hundred years* since The Hobbit was first published.

You are collecting books for a library to reflect the types of novels children read in the 1950s- 2000. (The books will obviously be stored electronically).

You are going to write a compendium to accompany The Hobbit so that it makes sense to current and future readers (ie those two hundred years from now).

What type of information would you need to accompany the book?

Consider:

1) *the language used*: Are there particular words and phrases that would need explanation? That would be archaic? That are gender biased?

2) *the type of story that is* : its narrative structure, its adventure based plot, the simplicity of the plot. How were stories written in the 1930s? Has this changed? (you might like to consider writers like Brian Caswell, John Marsden, Maureen Stewart). Is good versus evil a satisfying read for readers in a future world where visual and electronic texts dominate? (or for you now?). What was the importance of fantasy in the 1950s-2000?

3) *the moral values*: Can good always overcome evil? Who defines evil? Is singling goblins and elves out as evil, a type of racism? Is courage always to be revered? Are violence and wit both viable alternatives to securing victory? Which method is used most in the novel? Is stealing to be rewarded? (as the dwarfs are). Does history always secure possession? Do the wealthy always have a right to keep their riches to themselves? Are women unimportant? What type of behaviours do the dwarfs exhibit that make them manly (eg smoking)? And finally then, what type of society is reflected in the way the novel is written? How does this compare to your current world (in 2137)?

**After discussing this at length in a small group, write an extended prose response that would form the compendium.**

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