

Gender and Literacy Issues and Research: Placing the Spotlight on Writing

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Abstract: In this introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Writing Research*, we review four decades of research, bringing writing to the forefront in conversations devoted to gender and literacy. We identify the impetus for much of the research on gender and writing and situate the four articles in this special issue within three themes: gender patterns in what and how students write, cognitive and socio-cultural factors influencing gender differences in student writing, and attempts to provide alternatives to stereotypical gender patterns in student writing. These interdisciplinary themes, further developed within the four articles, underscore the need to consider gender as a complex social, cognitive and linguistic characteristic of both reading and writing.

Keywords: writing, children, gender, development



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Gender issues in literacy learning and teaching have been raised to prominence in research (e. g., Alloway & Gilbert, 1997 in Australia; Blair & Sanford, 2003; Martino & Berrill, 2003 in Canada; Smith, E., 2003; Younger & Warrington, 2007 in the U. K; Hedges & Nowell, 1995; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009 in the US); in commercial teaching resources (e. g., Barrs & Pidgeon, 1993; Booth, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002); and in government documents and reports (e. g., Daly, 2002; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010; Ministry of Education & University of Auckland, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). For the most part, however, this extensive literature has focused on gender performance and social expectations regarding reading practices and processes, or on attitudes toward reading, and reading preferences; overlooking or minimizing the influence of gender on teaching and learning to write. Although there are excellent examples of research and teaching resources examining similar aspects of writing (as reviewed in this paper and throughout this issue), they have not, to our knowledge, become part of the mainstream discussions on gender and literacy to the extent of the parallel work on gender and reading. This may be part of a more general lack of attention to issues of writing, often referred to as the forgotten 'R'. With its focus on gender and writing, this special issue of the *Journal of Writing Research* brings to the forefront the importance of including writing in conversations devoted to gender and literacy.

As is the case with interest in exploring gender issues in reading, the starting point for research and policy initiatives exploring gender influences on writing is often a consideration of the persistent gender disparity found in large-scale writing tests across international borders (Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2011; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004). Similar gender patterns continue to be found in research examining patterns of performance on writing for different purposes, as girls perform significantly better than boys. An analysis by gender of cross-sectional writing performance data obtained from a large, nationally representative sampling of student writing in New Zealand from students in Years 5 to 12 of schooling (N = 20,824) shows an average effect size for gender of .43 favouring girls, with the gap increasing after year 7 of schooling through secondary school (Ministry of Education & the University of Auckland, 2006; Parr, 2010). The gap was at its greatest at year 9 where girls scored on average 80 points or two school years ahead of boys. This gap narrowed at years 11 and 12 and, in fact, for transactional writing purposes, showed no statistically significant difference. While the general trend of an increasing gap between boys and girls is similar to that noted internationally, the narrowing by years 11 and 12 of schooling is at variance with the analysis of the National Association for Educational Progress writing data in the US for 2002 where the gap is greater at Grade 12 than Grade 8 (Smith & Wilhelm, 2009).

The underachievement of boys relative to girls has given rise to arguments regarding which boys are at risk (Martino, 2008), as the gender disparity tends to be greatest among students from less favourable socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2004, p. 8).

As Mead (2006) notes, for certain groups of boys (and girls) there may indeed be a literacy crisis where ethnic and economic factors are also in play. A simple look at gender and achievement masks considerable diversity and heterogeneity.

Also important to consider is the stabilization of gender inequalities in achievement over the last 15 years. The achievement gap in language ability (English in this example) has been stable for 40 years and currently is, in regard to writing, at its lowest (Smith, 2003). In addition, these inequalities favouring females are not, as yet, reflected in the wider society in terms of earnings or in senior civil service or company positions (Younger & Warrington, 2007). Further, boys' absolute level of performance is actually increasing; it is simply that girls' academic performance is also increasing (Warrington & Younger, 2006).

Other arguments have arisen regarding whether school curricula and teaching approaches should be changed to reflect essentialised views of masculinity (Martino & Berrill, 2003; Newkirk, 2002). Educators taking up this perspective view boys not as being deficient in writing, but rather as being differently literate (Millard, 1997). While some policy documents (e. g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004) advocate teaching approaches such as those that address boys' learning styles, or finding positive male role models, many researchers argue that such practices cater to a stereotypical view of boys as being more active and needing more hands-on activities (Martino, 2008). Furthermore, researchers and educators question whether there should be great attention paid to helping the boys, as such attention "tends to pit boys against girls" and "too much attention on boys tends to pathologize them" (Newkirk, 2002, p. 20).

There continues to be a need to learn more about gender issues in teaching and assessing writing. This is evident in the considerable response to our call for abstracts for this special issue. We received 15 abstracts outlining research conducted in Europe and North and South America. The abstracts came from a number of fields, including social, cognitive, developmental and educational psychology, sociolinguistics, sociology, learning and teaching, and information and communications technology, indicating that gender issues in writing cross disciplinary boundaries.

This special issue opens with a paper entitled "Mapping the landscape: Gender and the writing classroom" by Susan Jones that situates the work on writing development and gender within three of these perspectives: cognitive, social and linguistic. She examines the contribution of each of these theoretical approaches, focusing on the way gender is positioned and shown to operate in the classroom, in curricula, and in assessment. In this introduction we complement Jones's overview of the field, discussing two avenues of research on gender and writing: the first identifying gender differences and similarities in students' writing, and the second examining influences on girls' and boys' writing.

1. Research Identifying Gender Differences in Student Writings

Researchers have been examining the influence of gender on writing styles, interests and motivation for more than 40 years. Over that time, their research has shown us that primary-aged girls tend to write about themes related to the home and family and boys tend to write about themes in secondary territory beyond the home and school (Graves, 1973); that children tend to write about characters of their own sex and often stereotype those characters (Tuck, Bayliss & Bell, 1985; Romatowski & Trepanier-Street, 1987), and that a feminine orientation, regardless of the sex of the student, tends to have a positive effect on writing grades (Pajares & Valiante, 2001).

Research that describes the differential performance of boys and girls has drawn on what might be considered stereotypical notions of gender as well as on features of the learning context. For example, writing is viewed as a passive, reflective act that is incompatible with the stereotyping of boy as being more active than girls (e. g. Browne, 1994). Boys are viewed as differently literate (Millard, 1997) and preferring non-fiction texts and genre although this may be overstated (Daly, 2002). Such preferences may lead them to write pieces with content and writing styles that are less likely to meet with teacher approval. Boys often write narratives that draw on visual literacies from television and computer games and the resulting pieces lack detail (Millard, 1997).

However, there are two lines of research that support the idea that there is little or no difference in the nature of the writing. First, research has demonstrated that raters have been unable to identify, at greater than chance, the gender of writers of scripts written by undergraduates (Francis, Reed & Melling, 2003). Second, attempts to demonstrate systematically that the writing of boys and girls is different in terms of the linguistic characteristics and processes have yielded only small differences (Jones & Myhill, 2007). In contrast to the results of large-scale tests showing gender disparities in performance (Department for Education and Skills, 2006; Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2011; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004), the research of Jones and Myhill showed limited evidence at both sentence and paragraph level of any gender differences. Furthermore, Jones (2007) reported that, with regard to composing processes and strategies, there is scant evidence to support the notion of boys as weak writers; rather their patterns were more similar to those of successful writers.

Two papers in this special issue contribute to our understanding of gender differences and similarities in students' writing practices and views of the role of writing in their lives. In their research conducted in Argentina, Nora Scheuer, Montserrat de la Cruz, Ana Pedrazzini, Maria Sol Iparraguirre, and Juan Ignacio Pozo highlight gender differences and similarities in the conceptions of learning to write of children from kindergarten to 7th grade. Through their detailed methodology for analysing discourse about writing, they found that boys tended to talk about their independence as learners, whereas girls tended to identify teachers and family members who had supported their learning to write. Many girls integrated writing into their play, as well as their academic lives, whereas many boys associated writing with school and the world of work.

Koutsogiannis Dimitrios and Adampa Vassiliki's research concerning digital literacy practice illustrates well the notion that within a gender group, there may be as much or more variability as there is between gender groups. This reinforces the idea that gender should not be viewed as a fixed variable. The data they present from a large-scale survey of girls and boys, in both private and state schools in Greece, show no gender differences in almost all aspects of literacy practice reported by boys and girls in private schools, whereas differences exist in state schools. In addition, there are marked differences in the written communication practices of girls, according to the type of school they attend. Girls report using digital environments for writing and communication and the analysis focuses on the relationship between use in the settings of home and school, arguably the two most important socialisation institutions. However, the authors also acknowledge and explore the personality of the girls who were seen, in their own unique ways, to filter their social experiences. Two detailed case studies show the disparity in digital writing practices amongst girls and the operation of socialisation and personal factors. While demonstrating patterns of similarity and difference, the authors also suggest the influence of social and personal variables. This article, while descriptive, also suggests gender differences attributable to social and personal factors.

2. Research Identifying Factors Influencing Gender Differences

The article by Dimitrios and Vassiliki illustrates the considerable variability in literacy practice within a gender group and calls attention to socio-economic factors in explaining this. The fourth article in this special issue takes a different perspective and contributes to our understanding of cognitive factors associated with gender differences. The paper reports research conducted by Lorna Bourke and Anne-Marie Adams, based in schools in northwestern United Kingdom. They measured cognitive and linguistic factors that might influence young children's writing. The performance of children aged 4-5 years on an extensive range of language and cognitive measures, including the volume and range of vocabulary in the children's writing, showed that approximately 15 percent of the variation in children's performance on the national writing assessment profiles can be accounted for by gender.

This research is important in a field that has largely focused on socio-cultural rationales for gender differences in writing and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding male and female students' writing. There have been suggestions, for example, that the ways in which writing is commonly assessed may underestimate the performance of school-aged boys. There is evidence that elementary and middle-school girls' narrative writing may be privileged in assessments (Peterson, 1998) and that their writing is more aligned with the approved literary canon than that of boys. In their descriptions of boys' and girls' writing, sixth-grade Canadian teachers identified girls' writing as more fully developed with greater detail than boys' writing. They perceived girls as being more likely to use conventions correctly and willing to revise and edit their writing than boys.

It was not only the elementary and middle-school teachers, but also their students who revealed a fairly uniform perception that girls' writing is more likely to conform to the criteria assessed on many scoring schemes than boys' writing. Furthermore, boys tend to choose content that could alienate assessors (Myhill, 2001). Consistent with this hypothesis, Peterson (2000) found that girls tend to see themselves as being successful both in their use of writing conventions and in writing descriptions. Boys, in contrast, tend to identify audience appeal and creativity as their writing strengths.

These perceptions of gender differences in students' writing and their writing motivation and commitment to their writing were also reflected in grade six teachers' feedback to girls and boys on their writing (Peterson, Kennedy & Childs, 2004). Although there were no significant differences in scores and no trends favouring girls in participating teachers' scoring of two narrative and two persuasive papers, teachers wrote more comments about mechanical, grammatical, lexical or syntactic changes to boys than to girls. They wrote relatively equal numbers of comments requesting students to make higher-order revisions and praising the writing to both girls and boys. Teachers' gender perceptions appear to have a developmental dimension that largely parallels the gender differences shown in the cross-sectional data of writing performance across school years (Parr, 2010). The elementary and middle-school teachers' perceptions contrast with those of post-secondary writing teachers who valued the more linear, impersonal writing style that they attributed to male students' persuasive writing over the contextual, more emotional style of female students' writing (Barnes, 1990; Earl-Novell, 2001; Haswell & Haswell, 1995; Roulis, 1995).

It has also been suggested that boys reject written texts that are "schoolish" and divorced from texts that they read, write and view at home (Cavazos-Kottke, 2005). Fourth- and eighth-grade students showed, in their writing-choices and small group conversations, that their choices of narrative writing topics were constrained by the range of discourses available to them as girls or boys (Peterson, 2001; 2002). Poststructuralist theory explains these gendered choices as taking up "subjectivity [that] is more readily recognizable and acceptable when the subject position offered is compatible with a number of other dominant and powerful discourses" (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991, p. 42). Boys, in particular, feel uncomfortable writing about the topics and composing text forms that dominant discourses represent as feminine. However, both boys and girls attempt to demonstrate to their peers that they are aware of and capable of performing masculinity and femininity in recognizable and acceptable ways. Peers, in turn, show approval or disapproval in their responses to what they consider to be gender-appropriate (Peterson, 2002).

Boys may simply choose not to engage in the kinds of literate activity privileged in schools, according to Smith & Wilhelm (2009). In their study, boys were shown to be engaged in numerous literate activities but largely outside of school. However, this applies to girls, as well as to boys. The contexts of instruction in reading and writing, in adopting too narrow a definition of what counts as literacy (Alvermann, 2006), are problematic for many students in that they are far removed from students' outside-

school literacies (Cavazos-Kottke, 2005) and thus, do not maximise learning for all students by making appropriate links between and among contexts.

3. Interventions Addressing Differential Writing Performance

In this final section, we add to Jones's mapping of the landscape of gender and writing examples of research that attempts to address differential performance in writing. This research includes interventions aimed at particular groups (of which boys may be one) that are represented disproportionately in the lowest centiles in terms of writing achievement. The interventions take a number of forms. They encompass efforts to mitigate the influence of students' and teachers' gender expectations on writing and writing assessment; efforts to strengthen students' control of their learning through being clear about learning and performance expectations and the creating of specific opportunities for students to write in ways that challenge traditional gender positions. Such work suggests potential directions for future gender and writing research.

One potential way to close the gender gap is to challenge inaccurate expectations that teachers may hold about the performance of groups of their students, according to Younger and Warrington (2007). Valid evidence of performance serves this function and also enables teaching to be honed to meet specific learning needs. Ensuring that teachers could interpret and use evidence of their students' writing performance to enable teaching to learning needs, that is to addressing gaps between current and desired performance, was a major aim in a national Literacy Professional Development project in New Zealand. This project, which involved three cohorts of schools each of two years, aimed at raising achievement in writing (or reading) and was targeted at the lowest 20 per cent of students. For writing, boys were represented in this group at double the rate of girls; in each cohort they began the project, on average, scoring significantly below girls. The teachers on the project, through professional learning, became more skilled at interpreting data about their students (Parr & Timperley, 2008) and in obtaining an accurate picture of their strengths and weaknesses, providing hard evidence to challenge any misconceptions. Feedback on classroom practice aimed to challenge the bases for teacher practice and beliefs in terms of the evidence on which they were based (Timperley, Parr & Berantes, 2009). Teachers built their knowledge about teaching writing which, in turn, translated into more explicit teaching, including sharing specific learning aims for writing and providing more detailed, quality feedback facilitating transfer of responsibility for learning to the student and the level of this knowledge related significantly to the extent of progress of the students (Parr & Timperley, 2010; Timperley & Parr, 2009). The project achieved average improvements in writing performance well beyond normative expectations. These gains were particularly marked for the students in the lowest 20 per cent whose rate of gain was between four and six times greater than the national average over a two year period. With a few exceptions (boys in the very lowest socio-economic schools and, in one cohort, boys in a particular year of schooling) in all cohorts both boys and girls, on

average, reached national expectations (Timperley, Parr & Meissel, 2010). The trajectory of progress for both boys and girls was accelerated, however, the difference between boys and girls remained and was only slightly attenuated. While the changes in teaching practice worked very well for boys, particularly previously low progress boys, they also were effective for girls.

While interventions that may act to raise boys' achievement in writing are still limited in number and scope, research in the theory of motivation regarding situational interest (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000) and the classroom features that may be related to situational interest indicates potential ways to promote learning for all (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Although Daly (2002) argues that we over-generalize the belief that boys are more disposed to non-fiction texts, there is some support for a narrowing of the gender gap in performance according to the purpose for writing (Parr, 2010). The gap between the performance of boys and girls narrows for transactional writing purposes like writing to report, to explain, to persuade and to instruct.

Drawing on poststructuralist and sociocultural theories, some researchers have attempted to create opportunities for students to write in ways that challenge traditional gender positions. In two contexts, researchers initiated after-school writing clubs where adolescent girls could explore powerful gender identities in their writing (Harper, 1998; Luce-Kapler, 1999). Two studies, Marsh (1998) and Strough and Diriwachter (2000) initiated collaborative writing activities that led students to try out alternatives to gender stereotypes in their writing. This also illustrates that students can take up non-stereotypical gender positions in writing that takes place within classrooms.

4. Contributions to Conversations on Gender and Literacy

In this introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Writing Research*, we have reviewed research and highlighted key issues that have been taken up across four decades of research on gender and writing. We identified the impetus for much of the research (e. g., gender disparities in large-scale assessments of writing) and discussed themes arising in the research: gender patterns in what and how students write, cognitive and socio-cultural factors influencing gender differences in student writing, and attempts to address gender disparities in student writing.

Devoting this special issue of the *Journal of Writing Research* to gender and writing provides some needed attention to writing when considering gender and literacy. Contributing researchers, and we as editors, hope that the interdisciplinary research discussed in this special issue enriches and extends theoretical, practice-oriented and policy-oriented conversations examining gender and literacy.

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