Mapping the landscape: Gender and the writing classroom.

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Abstract: This article maps the diverse theoretical disciplines that inform writing research and in particular, how these disciplines have researched the relationship between writing and gender. This is presented against the background of a changing theoretical landscape in research in gender. In particular, it will consider the paradigm shift from discourses of difference and disadvantage to discourses of diversity. Research on writing has not always acknowledged this changing lens, and gender research rarely focuses on writing. The aim therefore is to map out these different approaches, explore how they have impacted writing classrooms and to add to the call for a reconfiguring of gender in writing research as a complex and diverse category rather than as a fixed and essential characteristic we each possess.

Keywords: gender, gender theory, research methods

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1. Introduction

Writing research draws on a complex and conflicting theoretical background. The field of cognitive psychology has contributed much to an understanding of the writing process as an iterative cycling between three cognitive processes: planning, translation and revision (Berninger, Fuller & Whitaker, 1996a; Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980) and has explored the conditions which facilitate and limit this process as writers become increasingly mature (Graham, Berninger & Weihua, 2007; Graham, Harris & Mason, 2005; Olinghouse, 2008). Socio-culturalists, on the other hand, remind us that every act of writing is an act of socially-situated meaning-making in which writers create texts informed by historically-determined values and conventions, in contexts which are influenced both by individualised literacy experiences and by local social practices in writing (Haas-Dyson, 1997; Janks, 2009; Kostouli, 2009; Scribner & Cole, 1981). The field of linguistics has added to the complexity by highlighting the text itself and the complex linguistic alternatives writers face when making rhetorical choices (Hudson, 2004). Thus the three disciplines have fore-grounded different elements of the act of writing; cognitive psychology, writing behaviour and processes; socio-cultural theory its social context and linguistics the written text. Against this differing background of disciplines informing writing research, the gender of the writer has been seen as a possible determiner in both engagement and success, not least because there has been a constant focus on the under-performance of boys in language based subjects for the past 20 years. The different theoretical disciplines have highlighted different aspects of writing and these differences are echoed as each considers the impact of gender. From these different traditions gender is seen to impact on what writers do, be informed by the social context in which they write and influence the written language they produce. This article aims to explore how gender has been researched within these three disciplines and to consider the conclusions that have been drawn in the light of these varied research contexts. These differing perspectives will then be viewed in the light of a broader theoretical debate. In particular, it will consider the post-modern turn from discourses of difference and disadvantage to discourses of diversity. This complex theoretical scenario has, in turn, impacted on classroom practice as teachers, policy makers and advisers have mediated research from different theoretical disciplines informed by different assumptions and beliefs. In attempting to map this complexity as it is articulated in both research and pedagogy, this article will argue that students in our writing classrooms are best served by a more nuanced approach to gender research and will add to calls for gender to be reconfigured as a complex and diverse category rather than as a fixed and essential individual characteristic.

2. The cognitive psychology perspective

In researching the impact of gender on writing the field of cognitive psychology has, by and large, taken a gender difference approach using gender as a variable to divide experimental samples into two groups, thus generating data that tends to position gender as dichotomous. Often the focus of an experiment will not be gender itself, but gender will be included as a possible influencing variable and data will only be discussed where gender differences are observed. This approach can serve to mask the absence of gender differences and highlight their presence. Commenting on the reporting of gender differences using neuroimaging technology, Fine (2010) claims that "the publication process is geared toward emphasising difference rather than similarity" (Fine, 2010, p. 281).Research within the cognitive tradition presents a familiar pattern of female advantage in writing performance; across both primary and secondary phases girls have been shown to write more coherent, better organised texts (Swanson & Berninger, 1996), write more and demonstrate higher degrees of compositional fluency (Maleki & Jewell, 2003). Faster handwriting, more common in female writers, is seen to be indicative of increased automation, thus freeing up cognitive resources for idea generation (McCutchen, 1996). The link between attitude and motivation and writing performance has also been seen to explain the higher levels of female performance in writing; from the primary phase onwards girls are shown to be more positive about writing (Graham et al, 2007) while teenage boys are shown to be more apprehensive about writing tasks (Daly & Miller, 1975). Similarly, Pajares, Miller & Johnson (1999) reveal that the 8-10 year old girls in their sample believed themselves to be better writers than boys. Thus a familiar educational cycle of successful outcomes informing personal beliefs, leading to improved performance and the corollary of the downward performance cycle are demonstrated in the research.

It would be incomplete, however, to present cognitive psychology as a discipline that merely reports gender difference where it is observed. By focusing so clearly on the subtleties of cognitive processes, experimental research is in a position to challenge generalisations regarding the literate female and the struggling boy writer. Olinghouse (2008) points to a number of studies that have found mixed or non-significant gender differences when controlling for other variables. Berninger and her colleagues (1996b), for example, draw a distinction between transcription and text generation at the translation stage, arguing that when controlling for compositional fluency the gender differences in the quality of the text produced disappear. Olinghouse goes on to argue that this deficit in transcription is most apparent with younger students and becomes less evident as students progress through secondary school. The potential to underestimate boys as writers therefore may be misplaced; boys may be underachieving as a consequence of transcription problems rather than the want of ideas or an inability to engage with the language elements of the curriculum. Berninger and Fuller (1992) suggest that this early frustration with writing can lead to the habitual avoidance of school based writing tasks. This presents a more complex analysis than the simple presentation of a male deficit. Researching in the context of secondary-aged

writing classrooms, Jones (2007) observed that amongst teenage writers more girls than boys wrote adopting a profile designated as a 'flow writer.' This was a pattern typified by extended periods of writing rarely interrupted by pauses. In post observation interviews, girls identified as flow writers spoke of their own writing patterns, many of them describing themselves as being disinclined to plan, as writing in order to discover what to say and of writing as generative in terms of producing new ideas. A common experience was the need to abandon a plan in the light of ideas generated during transcription. While this may seem to echo the research on compositional fluency, the data in this study suggested that flow writers were also more commonly lower performing writers. A more complex interpretation of these varied research results might be that while compositional fluency may advantage younger writers wrestling with the cognitive demands of letter formation, the habit of writing flow or compositional fluency might not translate into an advantage as writers become older and rhetorical decisions and textual cohesion become more cognitively demanding than text production.

In the same way that a more complex picture regarding gender and the writing process might be emerging, the same can be shown in research exploring gender and motivation for writing. Pajares, Miller and Johnson (1999) investigated self-efficacy, focusing specifically on whether personal beliefs about writing performance might vary according to gender. They begin, however, by critiquing existing research, pointing out an inconsistency in results, and go on to highlight how gender differences themselves might be skewing the results. They cite Noddings (1996) who suggests that boys and girls may use a different "metric" when providing confidence judgments on Likert-scaled instruments purporting to measure self-efficacy. Thus any differences in confidence may be masked or accentuated by such a response bias. The 8-10 year old students in their sample, therefore, might articulate different levels of self-belief at task level rather than at domain level. Thus girls could, at the same time, see themselves as better writers than boys but be no more confident than boys in facing an individual task. That gender might be exerting an influence that operates to inform performance, espoused beliefs and self-confidence differently suggests a more complex approach to the data than the simple demonstration of gender difference.

Arguably, however, the experimental method itself, with its emphasis on comparing variables, might be placing limits on how this complexity is explored. Within the field of cognitive psychology our gender is perceived as a variable we each possess, a means of classification and, as such, a viable subject for comparison. Writing is a task that can be defined in terms of its cognitive demands, and writers can be observed as they move from novice to experienced writer. Any variable, whether it is gender, age or ability, can be observed as individuals engage in tasks requiring different levels of cognitive function, under different conditions and, provided the requirements of validity and reliability have been met, conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between these variables and experimental conditions. From this perspective, gender, writing and

even research itself are all neutral concepts, they are value free. In contrast, from the socio-cultural perspective, both gender and writing are value-laden concepts; perceived to be inscribed with meaning within a cultural context.

3. The socio-cultural perspective

Within the socio-cultural tradition it is within socially determined communities that written texts and writing processes are shaped and inscribed with values and purpose. Janks (2000), for example, maintains that learning to write and developing as a writer are intimately connected with issues of social identity, language and justice. By the same token, in different places and times and in different cultural and social settings, gender has been variously represented through practices that become marked as masculine or feminine and therefore enshrine legitimate ways to be a boy or a girl (Ivinson & Murphy, 2003). Peterson (2006) suggests that writing is one of the ways in which children come to understand the meanings of their culture, exploring and constructing their own gender roles in and through their writing. The view of writing as social practice means that it both shapes and is shaped by gender identities.

One way in which gender is researched by socio-cultural theorists is to focus on what children write about. As with cognitive psychology, some of this has been concerned with exploring gender difference and tends to highlight the stereotypical gender dichotomies. Keroes (1990) argues that women's writing tends to focus more on personal experience than does that of men, while Roen and Johnson (1992) report that men tend to be more competitive and aggressive in their writing, while women are more co-operative. Roger (1997) concludes from a study across both the primary and secondary phases that girls are more inclined to write texts that are relationship oriented, while boys write action oriented accounts. In accounting for this dichotomy, Millard (1997) argues that teenage boys rely too heavily on visual literacies such as TV and computer games and thus include too much fast action at the expense of other details: "It is as if the young male writer is observing a scene passing before his eyes and transcribing on paper only what has been heard, so that the reader is expected to reconstruct the events in the same way" (1997, p. 47). Similarly, in the 1980's Flynn had argued that males and females use language differently. According to Flynn (1988), teaching practices of the time marginalised women by adopting a masculine standard against which women were judged. These research findings speak of a masculine or feminine voice being articulated through the text; as to whether this voice confers a male advantage as Flynn implies may itself depend on the social context. In exploring why more male Oxbridge graduates have achieved first-class degrees than females, Clarke (1994) suggests, in line with Flynn's assertions, that in adopting a bold, self-confident and assertive writing style, male graduates wrote with a voice that is perceived as representative of a first class academic brain, a perception not made for the more conciliatory female voice. This stands in contrast, however, to the success of girls in language-based subjects in secondary education, where it is argued girls adopt a

voice more in keeping with school literacies. It is possible that "teachers and markers are alienated by what boys chose to write about regardless of their skill in crafting the writing" (Myhill, 2001, p.22). What these examples serve to illustrate, however, is the socially constructed nature of both what is valued as good writing and assumptions about a female advantage in writing performance. Learning to write within a classroom community is frequently a process of learning what is expected, "an acquired response to the discourse conventions which arise from preferred ways of creating and communicating knowledge within particular communities" (Swales, 1990, p.4). This sometimes involves tacit learning about what is and is not valued in writing. White (1996) suggests that in secondary schools English teachers value personal, affective writing more than transactional genres and private writing more than public writing.

In exploring these apparent gender differences however, socio-cultural research is more concerned to reveal how gender identity is being constructed than in the differences themselves. What is revealed in these texts is not necessarily seen to be symptomatic of fixed gender differences but rather as a marker of gender identity in the process of being shaped. Young writers are seen to reconstruct dominant gender discourses in what they write (Gray-Schlegel & Gray-Schegel, 1996; Trepanier-Street, Romatowski & McNair, 1990). Hallden (1997), for example, suggests that it is through the act of writing that teenage boys make sense of maleness. Peterson (2002) argued that boys performed their masculine identity through writing about sports or recording violent events and by avoiding emotive content and especially romance as a topic. The teenage students in her study insisted that only girls wrote romantic narratives. The policing of gender norms by peers was evident in students' explanation of the negative social consequences facing the boy who chose to write romantic fiction, in spite of the dominant positions available to male characters within this genre. Similarly Ivinson and Murphy (2003) observed how students in secondary-aged classrooms censored both their own and others' writing at different points in the production of texts, by bringing to the classroom approved social representations of gender that manifest themselves in behaviour, practice, text and classroom interactions. These representations are seen to constrain what boys and girls write. Peterson (2002) reports how through classroom talk students receive either confirmation or approbation of their performances of masculinity or femininity from their peers. Thus the recognized gender order of the powerful male and the empathic female are preserved through what students write and how they write it.

In contrast to studies that reveal how social gender norms are rehearsed by young writers are those that see in adolescent writing a struggle with and rejection of such constructs. Blake (1995) found adolescent girls used writing to "begin to name, to critique, and to understand their roles and their lives as urban, poor, young women" (1995, p.176) when writing in private contexts. In contrast, in public settings such as a writers' workshop, their writing appropriated "formulaic" constructions that presented female characters in normative ways or were "nondescript," being figures unlikely to attract attention or evoke controversy. Similarly, Marsh (2005) reports examples of

primary aged children resisting the normalization process and presenting contested and transgressive models of gendered constructions. Such research raises issues for the writing classroom as contexts that can either amplify or challenge existing gender norms, and writing as a vehicle to resist and negotiate as well as reflect normative discourses.

An additional factor in understanding how the social context of the classroom operates to create situated meanings with regards to gender and writing is the role of the teacher. Ivinson and Murphy (2003) contrast teachers' reactions to high ability and low ability teenage boys writing romantic fiction, suggesting that when lower ability boys chose romance as a genre, they wrote according to 'masculine' writing characteristics but that the teacher interpreted their ideas as a form of out-of-control sexuality. The texts were read, not in terms of the skills exhibited in producing the stories, but as manifestations of attributes and intentions associated with 'bad masculinity'. The classroom then is a site to which existing gender constructions are brought, and through interaction with teachers, students and texts they are re-enforced or reconstructed, and it is this process that socio-culturalists seek to capture. From this perspective, gender is not a neutral category that can be merely observed and reported, and the dissonance between this perspective and that of cognitive psychology is marked.

4. The linguistic perspective

As with cognitive psychology and socio-cultural research, the linguistic perspective includes a body of research that highlights gender differences. Much of this links the linguistic features of the text to academic performance and tells a predictable story. Verhoeven and van Hell (2008) point to gender as significantly predicting writing achievement for both children and adults, with text length and lexical variety being correlated with high performance and more typical of texts written by girls. This result is in keeping with the findings of Hartley (1991), who found that 7 and 8 year old girls tended to write longer texts with greater variety in the lexical items used. Implicit in these findings is the notion of an identifiable gender characteristic in the linguistic features of writing, a perception that is questioned by Francis and colleagues (2003). They demonstrated that university assessors were generally unable to identify the gender of the author of a piece they were marking. In contrast to the male deficit account, a recent report in the UK (Massey, 2005), looking at standards of writing in public examinations of 16 year olds over time, investigated the linguistic features of the texts being examined. The report repeatedly signalled the inconsistency of the findings in respect to gender ("gender differences lack consistency" p. 23; "small and inconsistent" p. 23; "no very obvious gender pattern" p. 24; "no consistent gender variation" p. 38) (Massey, 2005, p.60). Indeed, when the authors summarise the findings on gender differences, the picture depicted is one of variable patterns year on year, with many reversals of performance and considerable absence of difference. Jones

and Myhill (2007), working with a sample of over 700 texts from teenage writers stratified for gender and achievement, found only limited evidence to suggest that in terms of the linguistic characteristics of their writing, boys and girls are 'differently literate'. The statistically significant differences at sentence level were small and, at text level, though more differences emerged, these were considerably fewer than those identified by the different achievement levels represented within the sample. Thus the writing of high achieving boys had more in common with that of high achieving girls than with lower performing boys. Of those differences that were identified, boys' texts more frequently mirrored the patterns of high performing writers than did the girls; a paradoxical finding given the overwhelming perception of boys as weak writers. They found that boys' writing was more likely to be paragraphed appropriately and that their paragraphs were more likely to have good topical organization and to use a topic sentence than that of girls. Less favourably, boys also tended to write longer paragraphs that drifted off topic, a tendency explained as a consequence of the need to manage topical control over a more extended sequence of sentences and ideas. A similar pattern was seen at sentence level with boys writing longer more complex sentences that were more likely to suffer from a lapse of coherence. It is possible to construct these data in accordance with traditional gender accounts, as the ambitious boy taking linguistic risks with writing, and the conventional girl writing safe manageable texts. More purposefully, however, it is data that goes some way to deconstructing the strong coupling of boys with underachievement. It also illustrates how complex social constructs such as writing to achieve a grade, writing as self-expression and writing as a means of experimenting with linguistic conventions might be differentially informing the way writers approach classroom tasks.

The linguistic perspective frequently intersects with that of the socio-cultural approach. In part, this may well reflect the shared focus on cultural contexts and written artefacts, in contrast to the focus on behaviour or cognitive processing within cognitive psychology. Linguistic analysis is, therefore, used to explore not just gender differences but gender constructions, represented primarily in the way the writer addresses the reader. Argamon et al (2003), drawing on a large corpus of writing from writers of all ages, show that females use many more pronouns than boys; this is in spite of the fact that there is no difference in male and female texts to the referencing of 'things.' This use of pronouns is especially marked through the use of 'you' as a means of encoding the relationship between the reader and the writer. The same study reports that males use many more noun specifiers – such as temporal and spatial or quantitative adjectives, and it is argued that this focus on detail and information is gendered. More generally, even in formal writing, female writing includes more features signifying involvement, while male writing tends to be more informational, positioning the writer either as sharing knowledge or possessing knowledge. Analysing the writing of 8 -10 year olds in Melbourne, Australia, Kanaris (1999) points to the tendency for boys to use 'I' and girls to use 'we', arguing that in doing so boys become the agents in their own narratives, while girls position themselves as participants and

observers. She demonstrates an increased use of subordinate clauses and a wider range of adjectives amongst female writers, whom she describes as more skilled both at word and text level. In spite of the observation that girls are better writers, however, Kanaris maintains that the gendered picture of power and powerlessness revealed in young writers' written language will be more influential on future outcomes.

The field of linguistics is notable, in part, for revealing a more contested and varied set of findings with regard to gender difference within texts themselves, but also because within the field of socio-linguistics there have been very vocal calls for a re-analysis of gender as a binary category. In their book Rethinking language and gender research: Theory and practice, as editors, Bergvall, Bing and Freed (1996) argue that the gender categorization across several disciplines is shown as arbitrary in its attempt to split the human species into either biological or social closed systems of "male" and "female. They go on to suggest that such an approach results in research that is methodologically flawed, because the assumption of gender difference leads to researchers engaging in fishing expeditions in order to find them. As socio-linguists working in the field of spoken language, Judith Baxter (2002a) and Deborah Cameron (2005) have made similar calls to deconstruct binary oppositions and to conceptualise masculine and feminine identities in more diverse, subtly nuanced ways. Such calls echo a broader paradigmatic shift in response to post-structural theory, and it is the response to this changing perspective that most clearly articulates the fault line between experimental research designs common in cognitive psychology and the more interpretive approaches within socio-cultural and socio-linguistic traditions.

5. Shifting paradigms

In the fields of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic research, the theorising of gender has undergone a paradigm shift in response to post-modern and post-structural insights. More broadly, this is represented in the shift from second wave to third wave feminism whereby the focus has moved from articulating and exposing disadvantage, to enabling women and men to resist narrow, yet dominant, discourses of acceptable masculinity and femininity. Theoretically, this shift has changed the nature of what is contested. Where previously gender difference had been articulated in the context of the nature-nurture debate in psychology and the structure-agency debate in sociology, the emphasis has moved to consider gender as a diverse category. This change, therefore, represents a shift from questioning where our gender identity comes from and how deterministic this identity might be, to whether an essential gender identity is something we each possess at all. Cameron (2005) observes this shifting discourse in the context of gender and language research, pointing to the post-modern rejection of grand narrative such as monolithic gender constructions and the taking up of the post-structural emphasis on discourse analysis exploring multiple, contextually-shaped and overlapping constructions of masculine and feminine identity. For Baxter (2002a, p.7), this stance challenges the notion that "categories of gender are inherent, universal and

all-encompassing", and Baxter seeks instead to understand competing discourses and the plurality of interactions and influences. Peterson (2006) describes the shift in relation to the writing classroom as one in which a discourse of winners and losers; dominant and silenced or valued and undervalued writers has given way to an intention to challenge dominant gender discourses and represent gender as a diverse category informed by post-structural perspectives. From this perspective, not only is it argued that there is no homogenous masculinity or femininity and that individuals negotiate multiple gendered possibilities, but that this is not only true between individuals but within individuals. Thus, not only are all women different from each other, they were also perceived as endlessly performing and re-performing their own gender identity in multiple and varied response to different social influences and expectations (Butler, 1990b). This focus on gender diversity finds a surprising echo in a highly contested exchange within the field of neuroscience. Cordelia Fine(2010) critiques popularist writers of neuroscience who, she claims, selectively use research to construct a perception of the gendered brain, describing it as over-interpreted and overlooking the differences found within gender groups and over-stating the differences between them. Fausto-Sterling (2000, p. 118) has observed that ''despite the many recent insights of brain research, this organ remains a vast unknown, a perfect medium on which to project, even unwittingly, assumptions about gender.''

This re-conceptualising of gender as a fluid category has been captured in Butler's seminal claim that gender is not something you are, it is something you do. "Gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (Butler 1990a:272). If gender is constructed as a performative, fluid and unstable category, and that therefore there is no single gender identity that we each possess, then simply comparing the performance of boys with girls would be seen to be of limited value. As Bergvall argues "the categories of "women" and "men" should not be treated as presupposed, monolithic variables in the search for understanding of variation, but rather that they themselves should be subject to scrutiny and analysis" (1999, pp. 273-4)

The existing tensions between the different theoretical traditions informing writing research are made highly visible in terms of their response to the changing landscape of gender research. The work of cognitive psychologists, where gender is constructed as an individual variable, appears to be at odds with research adopting a socio-cultural or socio-linguistic lens, particularly that which takes a post-structural approach. This tension is played out in the writing classroom, not least because of the international moral panic that has ensued from the boys' underachievement debate in education (Delamont, 1999; Smith, 2003). Within education, therefore, policy makers are looking for pedagogic solutions that solve the 'problem with boys' or, alternatively, solve the problem of 'schools that don't suit boys'. In either case, boys are being constructed as a hegemonic group. Much of the ensuing policy initiatives to raise boys' achievement

have been premised on an assumption of gender difference rather than gender diversity. Challenging this approach, Jones and Myhill (2004) demonstrate that one outcome of focusing the debate in this way has been the strongly-held belief within the teaching profession that not only are boys 'naturally' weaker at language than girls, but also that boys do not like English, and especially that boys do not like writing. Such beliefs, it is argued only serve to normalise assumptions about the struggling boy writer.

6. Implications for the writing classroom

The concern that boys are less successful than girls in reading and writing is shared across the Anglophone world (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Evans, 1999). Different accounts to explain this disparity have been offered. Barrs and Pidgeon (2002) speak of underachieving boys across all age groups as lacking motivation and as reluctant revisers. Browne (1994) suggests that writing is perceived by boys as a passive, quiet, reflective activity and therefore associated with femininity, and she also suggests that this perception increases with age. In English speaking countries, therefore, there cannot be a school that has not been obliged to introduce ameliorative strategies to support boys' learning, and especially so in the literacy aspects of the curriculum. Many of these strategies implemented at policy level have tended to treat boys and girls as homogenous groups (Ivinson & Murphy 2003). In the UK, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA 1998) suggested boys would be more engaged if language were taught as a concrete rather than an abstract system: that boys enjoyed structured writing tasks, seeing patterns in language forms and analysing texts. Frater (2000) argues that boys perform best when there are short structured tasks with clear targets and deadlines; a suggestion that chimes with Martino's (1995) cross phase report that the open-ended responses required by many English tasks were seen as difficult by boys. In the United States Smith and Wilhelm (2002) explored boys' out of school literacies to discuss why boys embrace or reject certain texts or certain ways of being literate. In the UK, the Department for Education and Schools (DfES, 2003) advocated an integrated approach to literacy, with less of an emphasis on the technical aspects of writing and more on the process of being a reader or a writer.

In certain research and pedagogic contexts, therefore, the identifying of gender as a meaningful and coherent category goes un-critiqued. This is not only visible in strategies targeted at boys, but in the assumptions made about the relative performance, preferences and dispositions of boys and girls in our writing classrooms. One consequence of this has been the inclusion of 'boy friendly' resources to increase motivation for boys positioned as disaffected with language based subjects. Many of these resources reflect stereotypical masculine topics: science fiction, superheroes, horror genres, and video games (Newkirk, 2002). The 'differently literate' discourse has also argued for the use of ICT to motivate boys. McGuinn (2000) argues that this creates a synergy between boys' out-of-school literacy practices and in-school expectations. In contrast, girls' interests are perceived to align more closely with school culture and girls

are therefore constructed as learners who do not need special strategies nor targeted materials that mediate popular culture in accordance with perceived feminine identity (Millard, 2003). Nichols (2002) argues that an over emphasis on strategies, informed by a belief in essential gender differences, can result in girls being constructed as passive literacy learners and boys as active learners who need special encouragement to engage in literacy. Thus, schools have become sites that have amplified rather than challenged gender stereotypes. In spite of these strategies, however, the attainment gap between boys and girls has hardly changed in twenty years of reported assessment results (DfES 2006; OFSTED, 1996, 1998, 2002; QCA, 1998). Howells (2008) suggests that this may be because both boys and girls have benefited from the less passive teaching styles introduced to promote a perception of active 'masculine' learning.

A further consequence of gendered assumptions in the classroom relates to assessment and feedback. Peterson and Kennedy (2006) demonstrated that where teachers believed they were providing feedback to assignments written by sixth grade boys, they made greater numbers of corrections, were more critical and offered more suggestions for improvement. They suggest that teachers may have noticed the errors in writing attributed to boys more often because they were expecting to see them, and made more comments because they believed boys were more likely to need the additional support for their writing. Similarly, both Sharrocks et al (1993) and Reeves (2001) found a tendency to under-rate boys' potential as writers. Classroom practice, therefore, may be reinforcing gender norms whereby students experience gender as a range of constraints about what they can legitimately say, do, write and behave as a boy or as a girl, as they attempt to realise the writing skills, linguistic know-how and compositional practices that make up a writer's subject knowledge.

These approaches, however, do not come without their critics. While top-down initiatives might more commonly reflect gender difference approaches there are counter examples of pedagogy that draws on post-structural research. This is rarely offered as a neutral agenda. "We have a pedagogical and moral responsibility to expose 'myths' which would oppress both boys and girls. "If we do not actively engage with, challenge and subvert the narratives of femininity and masculinity, we will allow them to become truths" (Howells 2008, p. 511). Similarly, Ivinson and Murphy make their own perspective clear: "In our research we were concerned to challenge essentialist generalisations and recommendations about pedagogy"(2003, p.107). Baxter found that in the oracy classroom, alongside a dominant group of posturing adolescent boys, there were a significant number of less popular or less confident boys, who were constructing alternative masculine identities (Baxter 2002b, p. 494). In the writing classroom, a post-structuralist stance would recognize and encourage multiple, diverse and shifting practices in being a writer and challenge dominant discourse such as that which casts boys as failing or struggling writers. Furthermore, contesting a discourse of difference might draw the teacher's attention to able boy writers as well as to girls who struggle with writing, too (Jones, 2005, Jones & Myhill, 2007).

7. Reconfiguring research in gender and writing?

The discourse of difference is pervasive and difficult to resist, and it persists in research that conceptualises the relationship between writing and gender as principally an enquiry into characteristic differences (Cameron, 2005). Searching for articles that combine writing research with gender returns a significant number of papers where gender has been included as a variable in experimental designs. Further reading indicates that the paper does not focus on gender; indeed it may not feature in the discussion at all unless statistically significant gender differences have been found. Such research reveals the tendency to treat gender as a fixed, static and unproblematic category, and such designs would fall into Bervall's (1996) description of fishing trips. The failure to report or focus research attention on the absence of gender difference carries a story of its own, but may reflect the difficulty for researchers in writing and publishing articles that report the differences they did not find. Arguing for the advantage of feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis as a better way of understanding gender, Baxter maintains that although it is necessary to recognise that gender may be a factor, it is important "to problematise that category in its deconstruction of the multiple but nonetheless limited range of subject positions available to both girls and boys" (Baxter 2002a, p.6). Reconfiguring gender as a research category would require taking seriously the need to problematise it and to consider it as encompassing multiple possibilities rather than dichotomous characteristics.

The argument being made here is not to suggest that any one tradition provides a panacea for how research into gender and writing should be conducted but that an awareness of each other's traditions and approaches might be mutually beneficial. Different research disciplines ask different questions and have different aims in terms of research, each making a distinctive and necessary contribution. Represented within this research have been different attempts from all three traditions to problematise the category of gender and move away from the tendency to treat boys and girls as two separate, internally homogenous groups with stable, determined and predictable gender identities that position all boys (or girls) as somehow similar. For experimental designs, the routine reporting of no gender differences might off-set the tendency to only report research where differences have been found, a practice which itself is both informed by social assumptions and contributes to the fossilising of such expectations. At its simplest, the call for gender to be considered a complex category might involve more designs considering the interaction of gender with other variables. Myhill and Jones have frequently employed research designs that include achievement and gender as intersecting variables. One outcome of this approach has been to signal that achievement is invariably more predictive than gender in determining engagement and participation levels (Jones &Myhill, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Jones 2005, 2007). In a report on educational inequality, Gillborn and Mirza (2000) map the relative influences of race, class and gender and the complex interactions that exists among these factors. In the context of the boys' underachievement debate, such research has signaled that a

more sophisticated question than 'why do boys underperform in English?' might be to ask 'which boys underperform in English?' Indeed Gillborn and Mirza refer to underperformance as a consequence of social class as "the longest-established trend in British education" (2000, p.18), suggesting that while gender has been at the heart of ameliorative strategies, working class girls who struggle with writing might have been overlooked as a consequence (Fabian Society, 2006;Osler 2002; Jones 2000). There has been a longstanding feminist tradition exploring how young girls construct identities informed not only by dominant gender messages but also by the complex ways in which gender is mediated by social class. Steedman (1982) and Francis (1996) have shown that, in primary school, young girls' future aspirations are already shaped by gendered and classed identities. Steedman's work is notable because it tells this story through co-constructed writing, produced by three, eight-year-old working class girls.

Another commonly used research design is to work with an all-male or all-female sample. A key consequence of this is to show how a group of boys for example might differ from each other. In work that echoes that of Steedman, Blair uses the concept of "gender prints" to "discuss how the writings of a group of eighth-grade girls were infused with the multiple realities of their lives as girls living in a working-class neighbourhood in a large city in western Canada" (1998, p.11). Alloway et al (2003) explore the diverse constructions of masculinity in Year 10 oral English lessons, using four case studies: boys performing 'macho confidence', 'indigenous masculinity', the 'unwilling student' and the 'enthusiastic student'. Halldan (1997) uses the drawings and stories of 58 teenage boys and how they use `I 'and `we 'in their narratives to argue that, through the stories, the boys are exploring different ways of expressing masculine identity.

Within the field of education there has been a growing interest in action research and the concept of the teacher as researcher, rather than the teacher as the subject of research. The advantage of this approach is seen to be the increased engagement with, and ownership of, perceived problems and research findings and the possibility of creating a climate in which teachers can become critically intelligent (Prestage, Perks & Soares, 2003). In the context of research into gender and writing, engagement in such approaches have the potential not only to integrate research with practice but also to engage teachers in the complexities and contextualised nature of the debate, rather than seeing research as offering top-down solutions for problem boys.

Mixed method designs also permit the exploration of complex phenomena. Myhill and Jones (Jones 2007; Myhill 2009) combined observation data of children writing with interview data using the written texts and the classroom observations as a means of stimulated recall. The sample was stratified by gender, age, text type and writing achievement. The interviews enabled young writers to revisit the writing decisions and behaviour they had exhibited in the classroom and reflect on their own intentions and writing habits. This presents a complex data set for analysis but can reveal, for example, that children who demonstrate the same behaviour might do so for different reasons,

thus changing the way any dichotomous findings regarding observed gender behaviour might be interpreted.

One consequence of mapping the landscape of gender research in writing classrooms might be to conclude that, in order to truly represent gender as a complex category, all gender research should be undertaken in the interpretivist tradition, generating qualitative data analysed through grounded approaches or through post-structural discourse analysis, and such an approach would certainly have its advocates. It could be argued, however, that if experimental designs are preoccupied with generalisable categories, so interpretivist designs might be viewed as over-occupied with the particular. Indeed, this might be one reason why they are under-represented in research that informs classroom strategies and education policy, appearing only to tell local and contextual stories and therefore as having no broader application. A way forward may be to promote more inter-disciplinary research which is cognisant of all three perspectives and draws on different research practices; thus a research design seeking generalisability might be enhanced if the design included qualitative data which could illuminate the particular. This article has sought to represent a variety of ways in which researchers might move away from models of research that generate dichotomous data to a more complex analysis of the multiple ways that gender is negotiated in the writing classroom. The argument here is not to propose a single research strategy to achieve this but to call writing researchers of all traditions to resist the uncritiqued reporting of gender difference data and to find better ways to represent gender diversity within their research designs.

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