Anatomy of a Dissertation: What Emily Discovered about Gendered Literacy

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The Problem with Gendered Literacy

When parents, teachers, and librarians distinguish between 'boy books' and 'girl books' they are enacting gendered literacy. It is not surprising that in Western culture girls prefer fiction while boys read non-fiction almost exclusively. Such gender-based preferences are reported by research findings in Australia: Girls read more and prefer narrative fiction rather than non-fiction. On the other hand, research tells us boys read less and prefer a wide range of non-fiction topics (Simpson, 1996). Studies of children in Taiwan and Hong Kong report similar reading preferences and behaviours with girls reading more than boys in elementary and secondary levels (Lin, 2000; Mok & Cheung, 2004).

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Standardised tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the United States consistently report an achievement gap in reading and writing between girls and boys since 1971. In 2013 '. . . female students scored 10 points higher in reading than males . . . with no change from either 1992 or 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). International assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress In International Reading Literacy Study) report similar findings: Boys underperform compared to girls on most measures of verbal ability. These results have precipitated a perceived 'boy crisis' in literacy. Girls are viewed as better readers who find reading enjoyable while boys are viewed as problematic. There is concern, however, for girls' low participation in digital media compared with boys, and their dismissal of non-fiction as enjoyable reading. With the shift in emphasis to meeting the needs of boys, will the literacy needs of girls be met?

> *There is evidence to suggest that boys are becoming literate in many ways through out-of-school activities (Blair & Sanford, 2004), but girls are not engaging in these same activities. Although girls appear more successful throughout school, are the literacy skills they learn there supplying sustained opportunities to acquire lifelong skills?* (Sanford, 2005)

This concern is highly relevant in a Digital Age that presents highly technical, information-focused skills that are changing what it means to be literate. Does gendered literacy create a dichotomy in literacy education that contributes to the achievement gap? Or is the achievement gap a symptom of the failure of gendered literacy practices?

Problems in School Literacy Practices

Gendered literacy in schooling operates in an environment of literacy practices that are not research-based, nor are they working to raise literacy levels. A view of literacy as an individual achievement that can be measured exclusively by test scores has marginalised important dispositions for developing good readers. These 'soft' approaches to the 'literacy problem' ignore rigorous empirical research findings (Bandura, 1993; Guthrie et al, 1996; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Wigfield et al, 2004; Gambrel, 2011; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2013) that demonstrate the importance of self-efficacy, reading motivation and engagement.

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In addition, schools persist in privileging books; alternative media preferred by boys is not validated as 'real' reading. Fiction, particularly 'good literature,' is the preferred genre. Mandated texts and commercially

prepared remedial reading materials trump Free
Voluntary Reading (FVR) (Krashen, 1993) which is not recognised as an effective way to improve emerging literacy. Reading remediation through direct instruction continues to be the preferred method despite research that demonstrates FVR is as, or more effective (Krashen, 1993). The classroom, rather than the school library, is seen as the laboratory for literacy development and the textbook, rather than the library's multimedia collection is seen as the object of study. Emerging literacy in schools is still restricted to traditional print. Often the only place in schooling where there is an application of the concept of transliteracy, or the ability to use information across multi-media formats, is the school library. As we have seen, the exclusion or marginalisation of alternative media, particularly digital media in mainstream education, is to the detriment of boys' reading development as well as to the detriment of girls who are spending most of their time reading books in order to score well on 20th century tests that ignore 21st century essential skills.

Studying Perceptions of Literacy

These unresolved issues in literacy education feed my interest in the role of teacher-librarians in literacy education as I search for new ways to look at literacy. As a professor and dissertation adviser I have served on committees to review the research of doctoral students who are looking at problems in practice in new and exciting ways. I am never disappointed as I learn from their work. Emily Seitz was one of those students in the doctoral program at Rutgers' School of Communication and Information in the U.S.. Emily was interested in exploring educators' perceptions of literacy and the consequences of these perceptions as they manifest in the reading preferences, attitudes and behaviours of youth. She conducted a dissertation study to develop and understand a more nuanced view of literacy and gender.

Literacy is defined in Emily's study as ". . . the reading and creation of texts both within school and outside of school". She views literacy practice as a gendered phenomenon (Seitz, 2015, p. 1) inside and outside of schooling. Her goal is to explore various perspectives of adults, children and young adults surrounding gender and literacy. Emily chose a qualitative design for her research study that takes place in a natural electronic setting called the KidLitosphere, a website that brings together over 550 blogs that address various aspects of children's literature. A sample of 23 blogs was drawn considering two criteria:

1. representation of the groups of interest noted in the research questions; and
2. the blogs' topicality relating to gender, reading, and youth.

The bloggers are: educators (parents, public librarians, school librarians, teachers); published authors, editors, and published illustrators; and young readers (children and young adults). This article presents Emily's data and findings on how educators and young readers view gender and reading and the roles they play in schooled and unschooled literacy education.

Literacy as a Socially Constructed Concept

Gender defined

Emily carefully chose a body of literature that addresses several dimensions of gendered literacy to inform her study, placing it in a body of research related to her work. The underlying premise of her dissertation is that gender is a social organising phenomenon that children learn as they develop.

> *Insofar as social practices communicate metamessages to the child, the acquisition of cultural knowledge can be considered a kind of subliminal pedagogy. In so far as the child gradually deciphers the meaning embedded in social practices, the acquisition of cultural knowledge can be considered more a matter of picking up information than transmitting it; in this case the culture itself is more a text to be read – and read by an active, meaning-constructing reader – than a lesson to be taught. This simultaneous transmission and pickup of information is initiated every time the active, pattern-seeking child is exposed to a culturally significant social practice* (Bem, 1993, pp. 140-141).

In addition to being socially constructed, gender is performative.

> *Gender is an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed; much of the script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again* (Butler, 1988, p. 526).

Literacy defined

Emily also defines literacy as a social process. She cites Vygotsky (1978): ". . . *human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them*" [emphasis in the original] (p. 88).

Emily also draws from the world of practice to define literacy. What we mean by 'literacy' is changing in the digital age to include literacies in various media contexts. As the meaning of 'text' broadens from traditional print context to digitised information communicated through multi-media formats and networks, the definition of literacy is broadening. Digital and technological literacies are not restricted to achieving a particular score on a reading test. Digital youth need to understand and use the information transported through these media. This expectation holds the promise that literacy education in classrooms will go beyond de-coding words and even comprehending text to include interpreting and making from the information we read. It is encouraging to teacher-librarians to see 'information' identified as a core component of reading outside of the world of librarianship.

> *Digital literacy is the ability to understand information and-more important- to evaluate and integrate information in multiple formats that the computer can deliver. Being able to evaluate and interpret information is critical … you can't understand information you find on the Internet without evaluating its sources and placing it in context.* (Gilster, 1997, p. 6)

This high expectation of information use as a learning outcome of literacy instruction complicates how educators define literacy in the digital age: Literacy as a social process; literacy as defined within a specific social context; and literacy as the reading and creation of diverse texts. An information-based approach also underscores the importance of school libraries in literacy education!

The intersection of gender and literacy

Emily documents the shift from a cognitive to a social focus in literacy education and reviews research on how children adopt gendered literacy through early socialisation and in connection with their mothers' influence. Emily also explores gendered literacy as a biological phenomenon and as a remnant of an historically gendered educational system that has feminised teaching. It is no wonder that in the enactment of gendered literacy by children boys resist school-based literacy and girls embrace it.

What Emily Learned

Emily posed four questions to guide her research. This article discusses two of those questions:

- What are the conceptions, their similarities and differences, of gendered literacy among literacy educators (parents, public librarians, school librarians and teachers) and children, young adults as represented in their blogging activities?
- What patterns of resistance to the dominant conceptions of gendered literacy may be found among the blog posts analysed?

(Note that Emily also studied creators of texts for children – published authors, editors, and published illustrators – that are not discussed in this article.)

Here is some of the data from Emily's analysis of the blogs that reveals gendered attitudes about literacy that reinforce what the research says. Educators perceive that boys are reluctant readers who are less advanced readers than girls. Iconic titles, such as *Captain Underpants*, appear often in the blogs. A mother stated:

> *I think* Captain Underpants *is dreadful with it's [sic] lowest common denominator kind of potty humor, but I would recommend it to a reluctant reader who likes that kind of book. The graphics, the actual kinesthetic appeal to the book, all make it worthy of being read. If a child is reading, I saw [sic] it's a good thing. Lay off the judging* (Seitz, 2015, p. 192).

Adults' disparaging remarks about books popular with girls and boys abound in the data. This is what a boy blogger wrote about *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*:

> *Jeff Kinney really writes funny stuff! (My Nannah doesn't get some of it, but that is okay because she is a girl.) Gregg out Heffley is the boy writing the diary about his day to day life. He writes about his family and friends and stuff that happens to him in school. It has lots of funny cartoons in it too. Two of my favourites were about a guy riding a skateboard and the second is about the things you can get away with saying when there is a substitute teacher. I can hardly wait to read the next book about Greg and his brother Rodrick* (Seitz, 2015, p. 192).

In contrast, a librarian expressed her view of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*:

> *When I initially reviewed this book my main reaction was: Ick. As the mother of boys, I imagined my own children exhibiting the unremitting lack of consideration that mars Greg's every action, and it broke my heart to think of a child so devoid of empathy. Doesn't mean I haven't recommended the book. There are some middle grade boys – boys who think fantasy is a ridiculous waste of time, boys who read* Calvin and Hobbes *and maybe* Captain Underpants *– and when I see those guys, I press* Diary of a Wimpy Kid *into their hands* (Seitz, 2015, p. 193).

Emily made four claims from her data that capture the categories of her findings:

- **Claim 1**: Gendered reading interests, particularly in terms of educators' perceptions of boys' reading interests and labeling of 'boy' and 'girl' books, are prominent.
- **Claim 2**: Gendered literacy behaviours (such as what students choose to read) and perceptions of these behaviors are important.
- **Claim 3**: Gendered reading interests, in terms of boys' and girls' expressions of differing reading interests, are evident.
- **Claim 4**: Participants describe the children's publishing industry in the United States as female and white (Caucasian) dominated.

Emily organised her data by these claims, forming categories of sub-claims and counter-claims. This scheme revealed an interesting finding in a counter-claim for Claim 3. 'Children's expressions of resistance – that is, not conforming to what would be considered gender-normative preferences . . . are evident (Seitz, 2015, p. 265). A parent blogged about a daughter who prefers traditional 'boy' books:

> *We have a 6 year-old girl who is just as interested in books on football, soccer, the vessels and characters of Star Wars and space . . . than anything else. Other favourites are Amelia Bedelia and Knuffle Bunny. So . . . in our house the concept that there are 'girl' books and 'boy' books is, well, simply not true* (Seitz, 2015, p. 265).

A teacher observed:

> *Having taught* Alice [in Wonderland] *for a billion years I can say with assurance that it is definitely not a girl book . . . In my experience boys tend to like it as much and even more than girls in my classroom* (Seitz, 2015, p. 266).

A public librarian wrote:

> *Another big myth is that guys won't read books with girls as main characters. I know for a fact that's not true because some of you have written reviews and said that you liked the book even though the main character was a girl.. . . (I saw a couple of guys today curl up in the library with* Nancy Drew *graphic novels! What guys want is a GOOD STORY [emphasis in original] . . .* (Seitz, 2015, p. 266).

Parents, teachers, and librarians recognise that young readers defy perceived gendered reading preferences.

Emily's Recommendations for Practice

Reading preferences of youth

Emily's research strongly indicates that educators who work closely with children to develop their literacy ". . . *are uniquely positioned to be change agents by encouraging youth and educators to read more broadly and to cross gender barriers*" (Seitz, 2015, p. 305). She recommends that:

- Librarians adjust their assumptions about what boys will enjoy reading, especially in light of the large numbers of youth in this study who expressed resistance to normative reading preferences of boys and girls. These young readers challenged assumptions about reading preferences, disagreeing with the expectations of educators that children are more likely to read books with protagonists of their sex rather than the opposite sex;
- Librarians avoid labelling of books according to boy/girl in reading lists and readers' advisory;
- When choosing books for curriculum and instruction teachers could choose materials that are gender-neutral in terms of their appeal;
- Librarians address parents' preconceived ideas about reading materials suitable for boys and girls and encourage youth who cross the gender line in their reading choices.

Reading attitudes and abilities

Educators perceive that boys do not like to read books and are reluctant readers who are less advanced in reading than girls. Parents perceive that there are not enough boy books available. Emily suggests alternatives to boys' reading clubs and activities, including:

- Librarians promoting gender-neutral themes that broaden boys' choices;
- Librarians promoting books that are appealing to boys and girls;
- Educators encourage youth to resist gendered reading decisions;
- Parents choose read-aloud books that challenge gender boundaries.

Resistance to gendered reading

While Emily's findings reinforce gender-driven reading interests for boys and girls, her data present many examples of resistance to these stereo-typed preferences by parents and youth. She recommends that educators encourage resistance to youth's choices and challenge gender boundaries.

Conclusion

From the results of her research Emily concludes that the perceptions around boys' and girls' reading may have created the literacy crisis. She suggests that perceptions that boys are reluctant readers may result in boys being less practiced readers who score less well than girls on tests of verbal achievement. Emily provides many examples of resistance to gendered perceptions of boys' and girls' reading as indicated by evidence that boys are avid readers. On the other hand, educators align boys' reading interests with stories with male protagonists, comics, graphic novels, science fiction, adventure, non-fiction, sports, fantasy, gross humor, stories featuring vehicles, and magazines. They disparage 'boy' books as less literary than other reading materials, judging non-fiction as a textual form that is boring and of lower worth than fiction. Educators rely on gendered perceptions of their ability to advise young readers. Their perceptions are gender-based in two different ways: Parents see their ability to be reading advisors as tied to their childhood experience as a boy or girl, thereby assuming that if they grew up a girl they could refer girls to books they enjoyed reading. They also related their readers' advisory ability to the sex of their children.

Once again, as shown in several studies of reading preferences, attitudes, and behaviours of children and young adults, the message is clear to parents, teachers, and librarians: Listen to young readers when they

communicate what they want to read in their words and actions. Respecting their choices will encourage them to read more and therefore, to read with better understanding.

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