

# Moral panic? A reassessment of the gender issue in relation to children's writing

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Two research projects looking at writing were chosen as a vehicle to investigate the theoretical and practical significance of gender research. One analysed children's writing for gender differences in form and content. The other asked teachers to write comments evaluating children's writing for form and content, then looked at whether the nature of the comments seemed to be dependent upon the gender of the child.

The projects found some, but limited, gender differences and also gender similarities. It argued that a research focus on gender as a variable only serves to reaffirm differential gendered behaviour, and may obscure the complexities in behaviour and attitudes, and the interaction of behaviour with other societal influences such as cultural capital, and other aspects of cultural identity. Implications for the classroom are discussed. The authors argued that future gender research and future practice in classrooms should recognise a variety of gender identities – of masculinities and femininities – and should not constantly use a simplistic male / female dichotomy. One way of doing this would be to

focus on the perspectives of children themselves as gendered identities - as a way of looking at complexities.

## A Starting Point – The Gender Agenda

During the 1980's and 1990's girls' underachievement and their disadvantages in the classroom have been well-documented (Delamont, 1999; Joffe, Foxman and Jordan, 1988; Walden and Walkerdine, 1982; Walkerdine, 1989) (Walkerdine, 1989). In the last ten years this research has been overshadowed by the finding that boys are underperforming in relation to girls in a variety of areas. Boys are claimed to be underachieving in all areas of the language curriculum (Gorman, White, Brooks, Maclure and Kispal, 1988). At GCSE level in 1991 a similar proportion of boys and girls passed GCSE English, but nearly 15% more girls than boys gained an A-C grade (Millard, 1997).

*Boys do not do as well as girls in English in schools. There are contrasts in performance and attitudes towards the subject. The majority of pupils who experience difficulty in learning to write are boys. Boys' results in public examinations at 16 are not as good as girls', and many more girls than boys continue to study English beyond 16. OFSTED (1993: p.2)*

Similar results are reported in research from Australia (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001).

## Questioning Gender Research

A more considered reading of the complex area of the achievement of

boys and girls in school subjects leads to a questioning of any simple comparison of boys with girls, or of girls with boys.

In considering the data, there is a problem in looking only at averages, since these may obscure differences in performance at writing within the group of 'girls' or the group of 'boys'. Averages hide the detail. Indeed, data suggests that this is indeed the case – in terms of the evidence that no significant gender differences were found by Salisbury, Rees and Gorard (1999) at the *lowest* level of assessment. The difference seemed to lie primarily with high-achievement, as girls were statistically over-represented at the high grades while boys were statistically over-represented at the middle grades, at least at GCSE level. The gender attainment gap in GCSE English in 1999 was 0% at grades G and F, 8% in favour of girls at grade C and above, and approximately 30% in favour of girls at grade A. There is also a growing fear that the prevalent view that *boys are now underachieving in relation to girls* (author's italics) has been expedited by extensive and sensationalist media documentation, creating "a kind of globalised moral panic" (Epstein et al., 1998: 3).

A greater percentage of boys might be receiving particular lower grades in SATS (compulsory achievement tests for children in England) than that of girls – but this means that there are also many girls who are experiencing difficulty. A feature of research interpretation seems to be that the statement of percentages leads to a focus only on the group who achieved the smaller percentage and the construction of this as a problem, and not on all children experiencing difficulties, whatever their gender. There has been a focus in research on reasons for lower percentages in certain score in boys, ignoring the girls who achieved similar low scores. This had led to considerations of pupils' attitudes to learning, to schools and to writing in particular, and to teacher behaviour and attitudes.

Current concern with boys' achievement has been largely expressed in contrast, or in relation to girls. There are several reasons for thinking this might not help us to understand the educational experience of pupils, be they boys or girls. Whilst there are differences in the achievement of boys and girls, such differences are not found for all boys in relation to all girls. Boys and girls are not homogenous groups. Many writers are now questioning the continual positioning of boys Vs girls, and suggesting that other comparisons might be more important, such as different masculinities (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001, Mac an Ghaill, 1994), or different cultures (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001). For example, in Australia the underachievement gap between Anglo and Aboriginal achievement is greater than that between girls and boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001).

*Masculinity discourses are everywhere on display to boys in school arenas, and affect the ways in which boys might take up, and see as desirable, particular forms of masculinity. However, boys experience masculinity differently dependent upon their location in other discourses: their readings of their ethnic, racial and sexual selves, for instance, and their access to economic privilege*

(Mac an Ghaill 1994, Martino 1999) Gilbert and Gilbert (2001: 3)

### Focus on Writing

The research reported in this article chose children's writing as a way to investigate understanding of gender differences and to investigate the theoretical and practical significance of such research. It is an area in which there is current concern about boy's achievement. Research shows girls now out-perform boys in reading, handwriting, spelling, speaking and listening at Key Stage 1 and 2 (Arnot, Gray et al., 1998). Recent National Curriculum testing in Year 6 in England had revealed that 64% of girls achieve level 4 or above in

writing compared to only 49% of boys (Younger and Warrington, 1999). Writing is also an area in which one can look at several aspects of the process in order to investigate possible gender issues. Writing has content that could be open to gender bias, and quality of form. It is also an area, unlike reading, which now has detailed teacher evaluations for all pupils, and teacher evaluations could also be investigated in research.

### The Research

The authors were involved in two studies. One analysed children's writing for gender differences in form and content. The other asked teachers to write comments evaluating children's writing for form and content, then looked at whether the nature of the comments seemed to be dependent upon the gender of the child. These studies aimed to look again at children's writing outcome and teacher's behaviour towards children's writing to look at possibilities for gender differences with a view to developing understanding of the complexities which might lead to gendered writing identities. Each study is reported in turn, presenting a brief outline of methodology, relevant literature and results. These reports are followed by a discussion of the implications of the results of both studied for the relationship between gender research and understanding about gender significance in the classroom.

### Study 1: A Gender Comparison of the Form and Content of Children's Writing

#### Relevant Literature

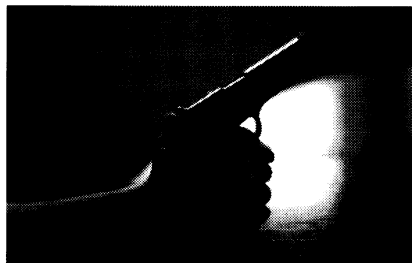
Although much research has documented the representation of male and female identities in the media - commercials (Seiter, 1995), romance novels (Christian-Smith, 1993) and in our overall culture (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994) – far less attention has been paid to the emergence of sex stereotypes in

children's writing. Some evidence suggests that socially imposed gender boundaries foster the tendency for both girls and boys to portray males as active and females as passive in their creative writing, bestowing stereotypical qualities of independence and dominance on the male characters and dependence and nurturance on the female characters. Boys were also shown to portray their main characters acting primarily on their own, while girls positioned their main characters in relationships with other people (Gray-Schlegel and Gray-Schlegel, 1995-6). This stereotypical characterisation is supported by MacGillvray and Martinez (1998), who found that most of the children

oriented'. However, despite finding significant differences in the length of pieces produced by girls and boys, Kanaris made no allowance for length variation when calculating other factors, such as number of adjectives and first person, third person references.

Further investigations suggested that girls were better at writing extended pieces, where they could communicate their feelings in extended, reflective composition. In comparison boys were better at writing argumentatively, preferring the factual and commentative detail required in non-fiction (Punter & Burchell 1996; Stobbart et al 1992, both cited in Arnot & Gray, 1998). The gender differences described in

length), and content (gender of subject, use of verbs, and use of words denoting emotion and 'aggressive' behaviour). In the Year 3 class, 14 were girls and 15 were boys and in the Year 6 class, 16 were girls and 15 were boys. The teachers of the two classes were instructed to assign their pupils a writing assignment, as per normal classroom procedures, since introducing a stranger may have caused distraction from the task. Pupils were asked to write a short story in 20 minutes, using one of three titles: "a dream", "a secret" or "a journey". Providing the children with suggestions for topics allowed maximum use of the allocated time, so that they did



*"It has also been suggested that boys are more prone to re-enacting violence and aggression in their writing than are girls."*

they studied created male heroes and female victims in their creative writing

Images of 'violence' and 'aggression' are increasingly prevalent in popular culture, and much concern has been raised about the effect of exposure to such negative social representation on children (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994). (Gray-Schlegel and Gray-Schlegel; 1995-6). Browne (1994) found many examples of such gender differences in the comparison of writing styles between selective children's work on similar topics. However, inferences based on selective sampling are somewhat limited since it is unlikely to be representative of the wider population.

Kanaris (1999) demonstrated that girls tend to write longer and more complex texts, making use of a wider range of verbs and adjectives, whereas boys' writing was found to be more 'event

McAuliffe's 1993 investigation of primary children's creative stories suggest differences in content. Girls' stories appeared to revolve around the norms of the community, where as boys stories focused largely on contest. Boys generally used male protagonists, compared to girls who used a variety of protagonists working in co-operation. 'Aggression' and 'violence' were repeatedly identified as male characteristics (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Peterson & Bainbridge, 1999). Therefore there appears to be clear gendered characteristics of students' writing, which may influence teachers' expectations.

#### **Outline Methodology**

The writing from two classes of children in year 3 (age 7/8yrs) and year 6 (age 10/11 yrs) was analysed in detail for gender differences in form (spelling, punctuation, descriptive devices, length of sentence and overall

not struggle thinking of something to write about. The titles were created to be deliberately neutral, to allow gender differences in content to emerge (i.e. titles that appear to suggest stereotyped gender-specific topics, such as aliens or fairies, were avoided). This study sought to find whether there were gender differences in the product of writing.

#### **Results**

Overall gender differences in writing attainment, as defined by spelling accuracy, sentence length, overall passage length, and use of descriptive words and devices were not found – although there were gender differences in overall length of writing and use of adverbs (with girls producing longer pieces and using more adverbs).

Content analysis revealed a tendency among girls and boys in both age groups to conform to gender stereotyping in their stories, particularly in the depiction of the

active/passive stereotype. Girls appeared to conform to sex stereotypes far less than the boys, who often excluded female characters completely from their stories, who rarely referred to passive males or active females, and who never wrote about female main characters

Study 2: An Investigation of the Gendered Nature of Teacher Evaluations of Children's Writing

## Study 2: An Investigation of the Gendered Nature of Teacher Evaluations of Children's Writing

### Relevant Literature

Previous research had found some evidence for teacher views of gender differences in children's writing. Peterson & Bainbridge (1999) conducted a series of interviews with teachers investigating how writing was perceived to be different for boys and girls. Teachers were able to identify various gender-related cues with girls' writing thought to include more description, emotional language, strong sentence structure, clarity and precision, attention to details, the use of more dialogue, well organised papers with a flowing style and excellent use of imagery. In contrast teachers perceived boys writing to include concise and straightforward language, little sensory description, action language, a focus on bare facts, the use of slang expressions with little detail and description. Therefore suggesting that teachers do hold gendered attitudes towards children's writing.

Peterson & Bainbridge (1999) and Peterson (1998) found that several teachers voiced recognition of their tendency to construct the writers' gender whilst reading student writing. However they often denied that it would have any influence on their marking. This has important implications as given the suggestion that children's stories often display gendered characteristics and that teachers have gendered expectations, then

*"...there is the suggestion that differential comments are used to describe boys' and girls' writing."*

if teachers are to construct the writers' gender when assessing work then this may influence their marking, even if this is a subconscious process. Peterson & Bainbridge found no significant influence of teachers' perceptions of writers, on the scoring of the majority of narrative papers. However, one paper exhibiting characteristics of boys and girls writing was scored significantly lower by teachers who felt that a boy had written it. Even when teachers' scoring showed no gender related patterns, their actual comments positioned girls as the better writers. Teachers spoke more positively about girls' writing and their comments usually focused on the positive attributes of girls' writing and the lack of those attributes in boys' writing. Therefore although research suggests that the marking of stories is often consistent across gender, which may be partly attributable to strict marking schemes, there is the suggestion that differential comments are used to describe boys' and girls' writing.

### Outline Methodology

A questionnaire given to 16 teacher of children in years 4, 5 and 6 (ages 8/9,9/10 and 10/11). The aim was to collect the comments and descriptions given by teachers to boys' and girls' writing. Teachers were given a set of tasks, in which they were required to comment freely on all areas of writing, as they would when marking children's classwork.

Each teacher was given a set of four pieces of writing, two labelled by boy's names (one a 'higher' standard than the other) and two labelled by girl's names (once

again, one a 'higher' standard than the other).

In each set of tasks, two of the stories had the correct gender name corresponding to the actual gender of the writer; two were mismatched, having a contradictory gender name. The name appeared clearly at the head of the page so that the name was read before the teacher began reading the story. This formed essentially two questionnaires, although containing exactly the same written stories, the gender of the names on questionnaire one were the opposites of those on questionnaire two.

Teachers were asked to evaluate samples of children's work on a number of characteristics. The names of the pupils on the samples was changes so that each work sample was given to half of the teachers as 'boys' work' and to the remaining teachers as 'girls' work'. This research looked at whether teachers' comments differed according to whether they believed they were marking 'boys' work', rather than to identical work attributed to girls.

### Results

Analyses of the comments given by the 16 teachers to different writing samples showed a varied overall picture. Some differences in the comments given to writing thought to be by a girl and writing thought to be by a boy occurred in comments concerning handwriting, grammar and punctuation, use of dialogue and in the comments offering encouragement and suggestions for improvement. For example, repeated comments were given to 'girls' writing suggesting that they should re-read to improve writing. No such comments appeared on any of the 'boys' writing, although it was suggested by one teacher that "Mark needs the opportunity to read aloud to correct punctuation". There were more than double the amount of specific suggestions and recommendations for improvements given to 'girls' writing than to 'boys' writing. For example;

<i>Descriptions used only for girl's work or used twice as often for girls than boys</i>	<i>Used equally for both</i>	<i>Descriptions used only for boy's work or used twice as often for boys than girls</i>
<i>Neat Well-formed Care with crossings out Small</i>	<i>Legible Attention to slope</i>	<i>Fluent Joined, good joins</i>
Table 1		

“Would benefit from a writing frame”; “Would recommend use of stronger verbs / adverbs”; “Would advise use of a thesaurus to make interesting sentences”; “Would suggest that this child bans use of commas for a while”.

Although different words seemed to be used to writing labelled by a girl's name and writing labelled as by a boy's name about handwriting – there were similar numbers of positive and negative comments to boys – as indicated in the Table 1.

Not all comments were gendered, with many similarities in the comments given to writing with a girl's name and writing with a boy's name, with no consistent evidence to suggest that writing with a girl's name received more positive comments. However, although 11 out of 16 teachers said that they did not construct the writers' gender, when asked to make a decision as to what they perceived the gender to be 12 out of 16 were able to do so correctly, providing supporting reasons for their decision, suggesting that teachers did hold gendered attitudes towards children's writing.

### Discussion

Detailed examination of research suggests that there are both differences and similarities: there were ways in which the writing of girls and boys is similar, and ways in which such writing is different. There seems to be similarities in the way teachers comment on writing and some broad gender differences in some of the comments. It was not clear whether the gender was a

causative factor in the differences in either research project. In the process of looking at the results there was a time in both studies when the authors realised that ‘differences’ were being searched for and highlighted more than ‘similarities’. The authors asked themselves whether they should focus on the *variety* of comments,



Figure 1  
Young girl-old women, brought to the attention of psychologists by Edwin G. Boring in 1930, created by cartoonist W.E.Hill, originally published in Puck in 1915

look for the aspects that show a *difference* with previous research findings or to look for evidence of stereotypical behaviour – i.e. that show girls using active language, male characters, boys and girls the same spellings and punctuation. The use in children's writing in study one of words conveying emotion were, in the first draft, written as showing a gender

difference in using words about emotion – since there were 33 examples of emotion words in girls' writing, and 13 examples in boys writing. But, this was a small proportion of overall words used in all the writing, and there were many girls who used no emotion words and some boys who did.

In the second study, the comments used by teachers were so very detailed and very individual for all children, that trying to make generalisations between the comments when teachers thought the writing was by ‘girls’, and when teachers thought the writing was by ‘boys’ seemed to ignore the rich variety in all writing - and to ignore differences in comments for the same piece of writing marked as the same gender.

The authors suggest that if the research community focuses on difference, then difference will be found. There seems to be alternative stories that can be told from data, and discourses in society seem to predispose us to focus on one story rather than another, that of difference rather than similarity. There were clues in how difficult it was to identify difference – in how each story seemed to have its own individual characteristics. Another discourse is that of labelling rather than resting with the diversity of individuals. The more we research difference, it is possible that we affirm difference in a way that might not reflect what is happening.

Discourses of difference, and well-used dichotomies, are being challenged in other areas of educational research. In disability research the categorisation of

children in terms of the labels 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' has been questioned (Allen, 1999, Armstrong et al., 1999, Corbett, 1996, Watson et al.,) by research into disabled children's perspectives of themselves:

*The categorisation of children as disabled also formed part of the adult world that bounded children's experiences. Such labelling often involved disability as a dominant status, where other differences or similarities remained muted or unattended to, and everything related to a child being explained by their impairment. Normality and difference were daily and institutionally reinforced by their use of social and physical space, and through both mainstream and segregated schooling. The children themselves were more ambivalent about the use of the category of 'disabled' both in relation to themselves and to others (Watson et al.,: 3)*

The authors suggest that many of the gender differences are seen because we are looking for them. There are, we suggest, many counter examples that are often ignored. Similarly, in a different context we might see the wheelchair instead of a person with ideas and abilities. In the visual illusion below, we see the old lady or the young – but we cannot see both at the same time. We perhaps are used to looking for particular things in classrooms, and not being able to see complexities. Our frameworks for the way that we see something affect our interpretation of what we see (refer figure 1).

What we often haven't found out, is about the perspectives of the children themselves. Disability research, and research into masculinities, has shown this to be a powerful way to understand what is happening in complex situations such as the classroom. The authors suggest the need for more research looking at how girls and boys talk about and think about themselves (Mac an Ghail, 1994). In the

example of the research discussed in this article, we look for research into children's perspectives on themselves as writers.

Policies to raise achievement cannot be aimed at 'all' boys or 'all' girls. It is also possible that instead of looking at finding 'different' approaches to girls and boys in order to help their achievement, that one should be fostering the same approach, explicitly giving **all** children a variety of models and taking steps to make all acceptable to all. To start to investigate this possibility it is suggested that gender research should be revisited, replicated, in a way that looks at the evident complexities. We need to think about the implications for the classroom of multiple masculinities and multiple femininities.

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