

Exploring “girl power”: Gender, literacy and the textual practices of young women attending an elite school

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ABSTRACT: Popular discourses concerning the relationship between gender and academic literacies have suggested that boys are lacking in particular, school-based literacy competencies compared with girls. Such discourses construct “gender” according to a binary framework and they obscure the way in which literacy and textual practices operate as a site in which gendered identities are constituted and negotiated by young people in multiple sites including schooling, which academic inquiry has often emphasized. In this paper I consider the school-based textual practices of young women attending an elite school, in order to explore how these practices construct “femininities”. Feminist education researchers have shown how young women negotiate discourses of feminine passivity and heterosexuality through their reading and writing practices. Yet discourses of girlhood and femininity have undergone important transformations in times of ‘girl power’ in which young women are increasingly constructed as successful, autonomous and sexually agentic. Thus young women’s reading and writing practices may well operate as a space in which new discourses around girlhood and femininity are constituted. Throughout the paper, I utilize the notion of “performativity”, understood through the work of Judith Butler, to show how textual practices variously inscribe and negotiate discourses of gender. Thus the importance of textual work in inscribing and challenging notions of gender is asserted. I argue that critical literacy is just as important, but perhaps no more guaranteed, within elite girls’ education as it is within boys’ education.

KEYWORDS: Gender, discourses of femininity/sexuality, girl power, literacy, textual practices.

INTRODUCTION: “GENDER” AND “LITERACY” AS DISCRETE CATEGORIES

Dick said, “It is a big house. Maybe a big family will live in it.”

“Yes,” said Jane, “a big, big family. Maybe the family will have girls. I want girls to play with.”

“Oh no!” said Dick.

“I want boys to play with. I want boys to live there. Maybe the family will have boys.”

(Luke, 1988, p. 109).

Popular in primary school classrooms in the 1950s, children’s books such as the *Dick and Jane* series appear reductive and prescriptive in terms of the gendered identities they portray. Indeed, they appear decidedly “pre-feminist” in their representations of stereotypically “masculine” and “feminine” behaviours and interests. Learning to read in the 21st Century may not involve such blatant messages about how one should

behave as a boy or girl, although this suggestion is open to debate (Jackson & Gee, 2005).

Nevertheless, popular debates and discourses about “literacy” in 21st century Australia continue to construct gender according to a binary framework in which “boys” and “girls” are constituted in relation to each other, usually with one in a dominant, superior position. These discussions have often highlighted differences and inequities with regard to the attainment of school-based academic literacies that are thought to be divided along binary gendered lines which favour girls. Nationwide literacy test results are consistently interpreted in such a way that girls are shown to be outperforming boys. Across Western nations test scores have generated government inquiries into the education of boys, (see for example *Boys: Getting it Right* {Education and Training Committee, 2002}), and academic engagements with the links between gender, schooling and achievement (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Epstein et al., 1998; Young & Brozo, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). This furore around “failing” boys has taken hold despite evidence that gender is not the only, or even the most salient, factor shaping the attainment of educational and post-educational success and literacy competency.

Literacy and gender are frequently constructed as discrete, unproblematic entities through these popular discourses. Media reports and government inquiries often tell us that in contemporary times girls are outperforming boys at all levels of the education system. They stick to a binary gendered framework whereby all boys are constructed in relation to all girls. In such texts, “literacy” too, tends to be defined rather unproblematically as a competency with dominant practices of reading and writing that are commonly used in schools.

The following statement, made by the then Australian Federal Minister for Education Dr. David Kemp, expresses a concern that boys are not doing as well in schooling as they should be:

When you stand back and look at the overall picture – low levels of literacy, disaffection with school, early school leaving, failure to go on to higher education – it is clear that boys don’t do as well as they should (David Kemp, Federal minister for education, 2000).¹

Kemp’s words are an example of a textual practice in which “literacy” and “gender” are defined as discrete, static and knowable. Boys are constructed as a uniform group of people who, as a whole, are disaffected with schooling and performing badly in literacy-related practices. Literacy, in this statement, is understood as an identifiable and contained set of skills, with which boys are struggling. In 1996 the Australian Federal government administered a survey into the literacy achievements of children in Australian schools. Two reports were released analyzing the results of the survey in 1997: *Mapping literacy achievement: Results of the 1996 national school English literacy survey*, and *Literacy standards in Australia*. Literacy was defined as reading, writing (including spelling), speaking, listening and viewing; these were the aspects of literacy covered in the survey. The survey results indicated that “[i]n each aspect of literacy, girls consistently outperform boys, and this does not change significantly

¹ Retrieved March 1, 2007 from <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/ministers/kemp/nov00/k0230221100.htm>).

between Year 3 and Year 5" (ACER, 1997, "Literacy achievement by particular groups of students", Para 1.)

By comparing boys as a group with girls as a group in this way, the text cites recognizable notions of gender, divided along binary lines in which "boys" and "girls" are already gendered prior to undertaking school based literacy activities. Further, literacy is understood in terms of a discrete and static set of skills. The two are constructed in a relationship through the survey results but as though they pre-existed each other prior to the release of the survey.

Academic scholarship has acknowledged more complex relations between literacy and gender and has sought to show how, although boys consistently achieve lower results on literacy test scores than girls, there are certainly some boys who achieve better results than some girls. Academics have often noted that media texts constructing *all* boys as behind *all* girls tend to polarize debates around gender issues, such that boys themselves are seen as deficient (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Blair & Sanford, 2003).

Accounts of academic literacy that construct it as a decontextualised set of skills may provide some insight into which children are performing well in relation to which other children in terms of *particular* practices associated with formal education. But these accounts do not provide any insight into people's everyday textual practices or the complexities around relationships between schooling, literacies and identities. Nor do they provide insight into the significant role of textual practices in constructing and mediating gendered identities. As Bronwyn Davies and Sue Saltmarsh note:

Discourses of literacy are generally not constructed within official policies as fundamentally implicated in this complex process of constituting subjects... Literacy is presented, rather, as a desirable but neutral generic skill. Resistance to literacy is construed as being willfully (and irrationally) engaged in by specific troubled and troubling students and/or as a fault deriving from particular social backgrounds (2007, p. 7).

Indeed, by appearing to be neutral straightforward accounts of the relationship between gender and literacy, these discourses and policies obscure their own role in performatively constructing intelligible notions of gender and literacy.

Young women attending elite² schools are implicitly positioned as the "cream of the crop" by discourses emphasizing boys' disadvantage. It is elite private schools that tend to generate the highest university entrance scores, and graduates of such schools tend to be over-represented in undergraduate courses at prestigious universities compared with their government school peers (Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006). Walkerdine et al. (2001) observe a pattern within educational research whereby "those who are achieving well at school, staying on at school and going on to higher education do not need to be explained. There is nothing more to say about them, they simply 'are'" (p. 164). Yet feminist researchers are increasingly showing interest in schooling as a site

² The Victorian secondary education sector is divided into three main categories of school: Government, catholic and independent. In this paper I use the term "elite" to refer to those schools in the independent sector that require the highest tuition fees. Thus my use of the term refers to the schools rather than the students who attend them.

in which elite and high-achieving young women’s identities are shaped in contemporary times, characterised by various discourses of “girl power” (Walkerdine et al., 2001; Harris, 2004; Renold & Allan, 2006). These studies show how schooling operates as a site in which young women negotiate and work out their gendered identities in relation to broader girl power discourses, which emphasize choice, personal autonomy and desiring (hetero) sexuality. In this paper I explore the school-based literacy work of girls in an elite Melbourne secondary school and consider how “femininities” are constructed within these textual practices, in relation to a cultural backdrop of girl power discourses. I use the analytical framework of performativity, understood through the work of Judith Butler, in order to illuminate how femininities are constituted in and through academic literacy practices. Thus I consider the importance of critical literacy in the lives of young women attending elite schools, as well as in the lives of boys.

GENDER AND LITERACY AS INTERTWINED

Public discourses about boys and literacy are problematized by the field of New Literacy Studies, in which “literacies” are understood to be grounded in social practice (Heath, 1982; Gee, 1991; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). New Literacy Studies perspectives illuminate multiple ways of being literate and the unequal power relationships between different literate capacities in different social contexts. Working alongside this field, other academic engagements present a more complex relationship between gender and literacy, drawing attention to the ways in which gendered identities are actively performed and negotiated through everyday textual practices. These engagements tend to take a much broader view of literacy than the generic skills-based approach. They illuminate the role of language and textual practices in constructing and producing accounts of gender and gender relations.

Utilizing poststructural theories and methodologies (St Pierre, 2000), recent scholarship on gender and literacy has explored how particular “discourses” about femininities, masculinities and sexualities are actively constituted and negotiated by young people through literacy practices both within and outside schooling. They consider arguments as to why boys may reject school literacy practices as part of a performance of culturally endorsed masculinities (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Martino, 2000, 2001; Millard, 1997) and consider the ways in which texts produced by boys in school literacy practices may cite and inscribe hegemonic masculinities (Charles, 2005; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). They draw attention to the importance of critical literacy practices that might support boys’ interrogations of the hegemonic masculinities that shape their rejection of academic literacies in the first place, and expand the repertoire of intelligible ways of being male (Davies, 1997, Martino, 2001). Alloway and Gilbert assert the need for school literacy practices to challenge and potentially dismantle hegemonic masculinities, asserting the importance of addressing the “dangers” (1997, p. 51) of boys’ devaluation of school-based literacies. The authors go on to explain that the dangers of which they speak concern the risk that boys will not become competent in literacy practices that may move us “towards a more equitable and just society” (p. 51). In order to do this they recognize the importance of including boys’ out-of-school literacy practices, stating that “we need to access a range of skills and technologies that will help in such critiques and understandings” (p. 57).

It is important to note here that boys’ struggles to be recognized as masculine do not always require an outright rejection of academic literacies (Hurrell, 2001). Furthermore, they are not necessarily disadvantaged in relation to post-school outcomes and life chances. In particular, they may possess competencies in literacy practices associated with new technologies that are valued in life outside schooling (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, 1998; Blair & Sanford, 2004). Davies and Saltmarsh illustrate how boys are positioned as “*choosers* and *doers*” in relation to school literacy tasks, which ultimately supports their adaptation to neoliberal economies in ways that girls’ literate subjectivities do not (2007, p. 16, italics in original).

Similar work has been undertaken by feminist education researchers in relation to girls’ textual practices, both within and outside the classroom, and the role these practices play in the rehearsal and negotiation of discourses of femininity (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997). In particular, discourses of romance which “lead women into dependency and to their apparent compliance with their own subordination” (Taylor, 1993, p. 128) were important for feminists researching girls’ reading and writing of popular romance fiction. Moss (1989) observed that young women use the conventions of the romance genre to engage with issues of importance to them in their writing practices, stating that this writing:

interweaves several different, often contradictory threads: youth, romance, couples, friends, each of which evoke their won stories, lying beyond the text...What emerges is a sense of the confined space within which the heroine, as a girl, has to operate, a space crisscrossed by contradictory demands made on her as a friend, girlfriend, lover (p. 70).

Others consider girls’ negotiation of a good girl/bad girl dichotomy through reading popular fiction (Enciso, 1998), the negotiation and resistance of culturally sanctioned notions of female sexuality and agency (Cherland & Edelsky, 1993) and the negotiation of the male/female binary in children’s readings of images and popular stories (Davies, 2003). Davies emphasizes the importance, for both girls and boys, of learning to read beyond gender dualities and confining gender stereotypes (1993, 2003).

In these constructions of the relationship between gender and literacy, there is a strong interest in critical literacy, and thus, a construction of literacy as a practice through which dominant discourses of gender and gender relations can be illuminated and dismantled. Thus “literacy” is constructed in terms of school-based practices, although it is suggested that schools and educators would do well to respond to the changing nature of young people’s out of school literacy practices. The value and necessity of such action tends to be conceptualized in terms of its potential to enable the critical literacy practices that are seen as desirable for deconstructing dominant notions of gender.

Many of the studies discussed above have shown how girls explore and negotiate discourses of femininity through their school-based reading and writing practices. Yet discourses around femininity and girlhood are shifting in contemporary times. Such discourses of femininity are often associated with label “girl power”. This discursive field, how it shapes young women’s constructions of femininities and sexualities, and

how it is filtered through girls' school-based textual practices, warrants further inquiry.

If boys are portrayed as a disadvantaged group in popular discourses, the implication is that young women are thriving. They are often constructed as living in "post-feminist" times, no longer subject to some of the constraints on women's freedom of earlier generations. As McRobbie notes, young women are "now 'dis-embedded' from communities where gender roles were fixed" (2004, p. 260). Girls today are invited to recognize themselves through various discourses of empowerment and self-made success. Harris observes that "features of the late modern self pick up on key elements of some general feminist principles about young women's new opportunities for choice, individual empowerment, personal responsibility, and the ability to 'be what you want to be'" (2004, p. 8). Popular cultural representations of girl power invite young women to recognize themselves through "supergirl" identities in which girls can be both sexy and brainy, confident go-getters and "girl heroes" (Hopkins, 2002). In this girl power universe, notions of feminine passivity and subordination seem to have been "kick-boxed out of the picture by the successful feisty 'girl power' icons" (Gauntlett, 2002, cited in Gill, 2007, p. 3). Yet these popular cultural representations of girl power do not necessarily challenge ongoing associations between appearance, beauty and femininity (Hopkins, 2002; Harris, 2005). Incentives to girl power are tied up with embodied, desiring (hetero) sexual femininity that commentators have variously described as "emphasized femininity" (Currie et al., 2006) and "hyper-femininity" (Renold & Allan, 2006). This also raises questions around the extent to which girl power challenges the hegemony of heterosexuality.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: PERFORMATIVITY AND GENDER

Texts such as *Dick and Jane* illustrate the notion of gender performativity precisely because they are so obvious. It's not hard to see how such representations of children bring into being the very notions of binary-gendered identity they appear to merely reflect. In Judith Butler's terms, they are part of the "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993, p. 2).

Feminist education researchers have drawn on poststructural perspectives about language and subjectivity in order to assert that students' textual practices cannot be understood as direct expressions of fully-formed "selves". Rather, they must be understood as a site in which pre-existing frameworks and conventions are constituted and reconstituted (Moss, 1989; Gilbert & Taylor, 1991). Butler's influential work on gender performativity is useful to me because it builds on more general poststructural perspectives about the relationship between language and subjectivity and applies them specifically to thinking about the constitution of gendered subjects and gendered discourses. Butler challenges the notion of a pre-existing, already gendered subject who is "in charge" of their own gendered performances and constructions. For Butler, rather than being inherently already gendered, bodies and utterances "cite" pre-existing and recognizable notions of what constitutes male or female. This process begins at birth, when a child is recognized as male or female and continues throughout life:

The doctor who receives the child and pronounces – “It’s a girl” – begins that long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girded: gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation (Butler, 1997, p. 49).

The doctor, in this example, neither declares something that already exists, nor invents the concept of “girl”. Both the child’s morphology and the doctor’s utterance combine to performatively institute the subject girl. Rather than *beginning* with the child’s body or the doctor’s utterance, the concept of “girl” pre-exists them and they cite this ongoing framework. Subjectivity and agency are installed as an “after effect” of a discursive citation. Over time, the appearance of a wilful agent occurs. As Butler argues, “It is *through* the citation of the law that the figure of the judge’s ‘will’ is produced” (1993, p. 225). Butler applies the metaphor of the judge to thinking about gender because it is through the repeated citation of frameworks of gender intelligibility that the notion of a pre-determined gendered subject appears. In this paper I use these perspectives about language, gender and subjectivity as my analytical framework for understanding girls’ school-based textual practices.

EXPLORING THE TEXTUAL PRACTICES OF ELITE GIRLS’ SCHOOLING

How do the textual practices of young women attending an elite school constitute a space in which these discourses about girl power can be negotiated and worked out? Furthermore, do these textual practices constitute critical literacy, in which dominant normative discourses of femininity might be dismantled? In order to explore these questions, I will consider students’ responses to two literacy events that occurred in an English classroom in an elite girls’ school in Melbourne. Lyla Girls’ Grammar School (LGGS) prepares its students for leadership and success. As one student explained, LGGS encourages students “to get the job that you want as well, not just any job but the job that you actually want, and to strive for that” (Davida, 16, October 2005). I worked as a teacher/researcher in two, separate Year 10 English classrooms.

I spent eight weeks in the first classroom during 2004 and repeated this process in 2005 with Davida’s class, in order to find out how young women attending LGGS constructed relationships between femininities, sexualities and empowerment through the everyday textual practices of schooling. I worked collaboratively with the students’ class teacher, Wil, planning curriculum around a film. Examples of students’ class work were collected, as well as small group interviews outside class time, as sources of data for the project. A total of 40 students participated in the project by consenting to provide me with copies of their classroom work. 17 of them also participated in small group interviews. In both the following events, Wil was present and the curriculum represents a collaborative effort.

Rather than understanding the girls to be the “authors” of their constructions of femininity, I conceptualise them to be “citing” pre-existing frameworks for thinking about femininity. Thus the study assumes a poststructural epistemological approach, in which particular discourses through which femininity is understood, and the way these discourses shape people’s accounts of femininity, are a priority. Saukko (2003) argues for the importance of understanding the way people’s individual voices are in dialogue with broader local and global discourses. Saukko interviewed anorexic

women, arguing that their stories were “shot through with discourses that define anorexia and all their contradictory national, transnational and highly gendered political and social agendas” (p. 33). I aim to understand how the girls’ textual constructions of femininity constitute a space in which their own “voices” intermingle with the cultural milieu of girl power, and the discourses of femininity that are part of this milieu. I consider the extent to which discourses of girl power are cited and the extent to which they are negotiated and explored through academic literacy practices.

Event 1: Text response

The class was studying for a text response examination on the Australian feature film *Muriel’s Wedding* (Hogan, 1994). In preparation for the examination I was asked to go over some questions with the class about key scenes in the film. Carolyn was a high achieving young woman. Here is an excerpt of her scene analysis:

Q1 (In the bar): On what basis do Tania and her friends attempt to exclude Muriel from their group? Is this a realistic portrayal of female friendships?

The basis for excluding Muriel is based on her musical tastes, her appearance, the harshest comment being “you’re fat”, and that she belongs at a lower class level than they do. Even though the girls consider themselves to be cooler than Muriel because they “listen to the Baby Animals and Nirvana”, the fact remains that even today, the grounds that they exclude Muriel from the group equally apply in female friendships.

Q2 Why does Muriel break up with David? Compare her appearance, behaviour, speech, facial expressions and mentality with those in the wedding-shop scene with Rhonda.

Muriel has finally realised that marriage doesn’t equal happiness and that she needs to find her identity as a person not as a wife, like her mother tragically had done. Muriel looks more relaxed and confident in telling David, and at peace with herself. She is no longer awkward or trying to get her words out. She is able to express her feelings freely, as opposed to earlier in the movie.

It is evident that Carolyn has successfully identified the elements of the film text that enable her to answer the question adequately. She suggests that the harshest insult hurled at Muriel by her “friends” is that she is fat. Indeed, the girl power association between appearance and empowerment arises in Carolyn’s constructions of herself in the future. In one task, completed immediately after viewing the film, students were asked to construct a timeline of their imagined future lives, based on an example we had created of Muriel’s life post-film. In addition to becoming the manager of a stockbroking firm, and buying a house in Toorak³ by the time she is 30, Carolyn suggests that, at 33, she will have “Wrinkles appearing” and that “botox injections start in order to maintain face. Starting to feel the aging process”. She was one of a number of students who indicated they would undertake cosmetic surgery including liposuction and breast implants in their early thirties. Citing and inscribing a girl power discourse in which beauty and youth equal empowerment, the textual practices of the English classroom constitute a site in which girls work out these discourses.

In the second question, Carolyn is asked to explain why Muriel breaks up with her husband, David. She explains that, “Muriel needs to find her identity as a person, not

³ Toorak is one of Melbourne’s most established and upmarket suburbs.

as a wife". Rather than commenting on the status of Muriel and David's romantic connection, Carolyn's response is couched in terms of discourses about the importance of finding one's identity independently of a man.

Other students also respond to this question in terms of Muriel's plan and priorities:

She [Muriel] realises that David wasn't what she was looking for, her priorities have changed. Muriel realises that after getting what she wanted (getting married) it wasn't that great, especially when she was married to a man who didn't even really like her or love her (Frida).

Muriel breaks up with David because she realises that marriage was not the answer to her problems. She felt that she needed to stop lying to herself and others, and to just be herself. This shows how much she has matured since the beginning of the film as she finally accepts her for herself. In the wedding-shop scene, she seems really pathetic as she is crying, looks tear-stained and blotchy, compared to this scene in which she looks confident and knows what she wants (Karen).

Muriel sees that this wasn't what she wanted. Her priorities had changed and she realised she didn't need David to make her happy. Muriel was sick of lying to herself and other people. Her facial expressions showed that she was being calm about the whole situation. She wasn't over the top like she was in the wedding store and she wasn't emotional. She realised what she had to do and she did it (Isabella).

Muriel breaks up with David because she came to realise that her priorities have changed and this was not the life she wanted to be living. Muriel realises that she needs to stop lying. Muriel's behaviour, especially her desperateness, has toned down, she has come to realise that there is more to life than being married (Anna).

Muriel breaks up with David because she realises that "(she) doesn't love him". Her look in this scene is much more sensible and mature. She now wears black clothing and not white like her in the wedding shop. She is much calmer (Penny).

Muriel decided she had lied all her life and made herself out to be someone she was not, as she was not confident in herself. In this scene she sees David as just one more of those lies that take over her life. Muriel found her confidence in herself which gave her the power to do what "she" wants with her life (Rosey).

"I can't stay married to you David; I've got to stop lying now. I've told too many lies, and now I'm undoing it." Muriel breaks up with David as she feels that he wasn't what she was looking for and realized that he wasn't what she wanted in life. Muriel has a much greater sense of self-determination now and realises she doesn't need him anymore and she knows that she needs to stop lying (Ruby).

Only one student, Penny, focuses entirely on love or romance being part of Muriel's decision to leave David in the film, and she quotes Muriel, who says to David "I don't love you." Frida also mentions that Muriel may have felt that her marriage did not meet her expectations, given that David did not "even really like her or love her". Many of the students draw out other reasons for Muriel's decision, related to her changing priorities, her growing sense of self-determination, and her commitment to stop lying to people and living a "lie".

These reasons are all acceptable in terms of demonstrating an understanding of the film's narrative and themes. During the first part of the film Muriel is a young woman who lacks self-confidence and insists upon trying to be friends with a group of other young women who ostracize and belittle her. She dreams of being a bride and eventually responds to an advertisement seeking a marriage of convenience for a South African competitive swimmer, David, who wishes to remain in Australia. David offers little attention or affection toward Muriel and does indeed act as though he doesn't particularly like her for some time.

All the responses provided by the students to the question are adequate in terms of demonstrating some knowledge of the film, the personal journey of its protagonist and its themes, although clearly some have been answered with more detail and provide quotes. Their responses are thus understandable and predictable in relation to the content of the film. What I am interested in for the purposes of this paper, however, is the way in which the students' responses also draw on discourses of girl power.

A significant aspect of the discursive field of girl power is the importance of self-determination. As McRobbie notes, "girls must have a life plan" (2004, p. 260). They are constructed as well able to adapt to neoliberal conditions in which responsibility is transferred from the state to the individual. They are presented as self-making subjects who are flexible, responsible and individually empowered. These discourses are cited in the students' responses to the film question. Rosey, for example, suggests that "Muriel found her confidence in herself which gave her the power to do what 'she' wants with her life". Here Rosey cites a discourse of young female empowerment, which involves confidence and the freedom to "be what you want to be" (Harris, 2004, p. 8). Rather than considering the way Muriel's initial lack of self-determination is shaped by her gender, class and rurality, Rosey constructs an association between self-determination and "confidence", which is construed as an individual capacity.

Ruby suggests that Muriel realizes that David "wasn't what she was looking for and realized that he wasn't what she wanted in life". Here there is an emphasis on the importance of knowing what one "wants" in life, and the ability to make appropriate decisions in order to get it. Karen suggests that in the break-up scene, Muriel "looks confident and knows what she wants", compared with an earlier scene where she looked "really pathetic as she is crying, looks tear-stained and blotchy". For Karen, too, being confident is associated with knowing what you "want" and how to get it.

The notion of flexibility also arises, as many students comment that Muriel's priorities have changed. This cites girl power discourse around being able to define one's priorities and make decisions in order to achieve desired outcomes. According to these discourses, success and empowerment for girls are individualised. Connections between social class, gender and the ability to become an autonomous and self-determined individual are not emphasized in these discourses. Instead, success and empowerment are constructed as the result of hard work, and individual confidence and autonomy.

The point here is not to suggest that these broader discourses of girl power directly caused the students' responses to the film questions. As I have already acknowledged,

their responses are commensurate with the depiction of Muriel, who is initially presented by the film-makers as a shy young woman, lacking in self-confidence, who dreams of being a bride and eventually learns to be self-assured. Rather, I am pointing out the way these responses are in dialogue with broader discourses about girl power in the contemporary milieu. Studying the film opened up opportunities for exploring these discourses about young femininity further, as I shall now show by sharing some more students’ responses to the timeline activity.

In Penny’s timeline of her imagined future life, she responds to a question we posed at the end relating to who gets to decide what happens in the life of a girl:

Depends on what part/s of the world, cultures means different things to girls. Like if they come from Australia, they are free and have a wide range of choices. But if they come from a country of China or Japan, most girls are required to get married and have children (Penny).

Penny moved to Australia from China when she was 12 and in this response she acknowledges the role of culture in shaping the life of a girl. She suggests that in Australia girls are “free and have a wide range of choices”. Another student, Julie, explores the possible way in which social class, as well as culture, might intersect with discourses about freedom and self-determination:

In some cultures, girls have very little freedom. Some of them don’t even have the right for freedom of choice, so it is mainly their parents who make decisions for them, such as who they would marry, what kind of jobs they would do, etc. In a country like Australia, girls have much more freedom. They have their own rights, freedom of choice, and they eventually lead their own life with support from their parents.

If a girl was from a family of high class, she would probably have much more than a girl from the lower class. A high-class girl would have the best education, which leads to getting into an excellent university, which then creates a pathway to a good career. A girl of lower class would not have so many choices. Her family would not be able to afford good schooling, and there would be fewer opportunities in life for the girl (Julie).

What arises in these responses is a suggestion that in Australia, girls are free to become self-determining subjects of girl power, although Julie does acknowledge that class may shape opportunities for higher education and a “good career”. She acknowledges that choice might be connected in some way to the possession of economic capital. Other students respond differently, suggesting that individual choice is what determines life trajectories:

I think that many things influence the lives of girls, but ultimately it is you who decides what happens in your own life – be you a girl or a boy (Georgie).

It’s all up to what we want, it doesn’t matter what others think it’s what we want out of our lives and what we want to achieve. It has nothing to do with anyone else it’s all up to us and how we want to spend our lives (Clara).

These classroom-based textual practices sit in dialogue with broader discourses about girl power as individual autonomy, characterised by freedom, choice and the ability to make good decisions that will determine one’s life trajectory. They present

opportunities for critically examining girl power discourses, and unpacking the suggestion that girls in Australia have more freedom of choice than girls in other countries.

Event 2: The literacies of new technologies

At the time of my study, LGGS had just purchased a new software package called Adobe Acrobat Connect Professional (ACP). This online conferencing software allowed students to access and discuss Microsoft PowerPoint files or video files through their laptop computers during class. Described as a web communications system for business professionals to “communicate and collaborate instantly”⁴, the use of APC in the classroom appears to support the development of the literacies associated with new technologies. Would such software use in the English classroom be conducive to critical literacy practices in which constructions of femininities might be illuminated and discussed? I uploaded a PowerPoint presentation of different images of women, some recognizable icons of girl power popular culture, such as the Spice Girls, and others deliberately chosen to contrast with these. Students were invited to engage in an online chat about these images.

Throughout this chat, which generated many pages of transcript, students cited and discussed a number of constructs of femininity such as the virgin/whore dichotomy, the association between girl power and youth, the association of certain embodied femininities with lesbianism. Their use of digital media to engage with these notions correspond with feminist research into girls’ out-of-school, digital literacy practices, thus highlighting the potentially important role of new digital literacies in inscribing and negotiating dominant, normative femininities (Beavis & Charles, forthcoming; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Davies, 2004; Harris, 2003; Thomas, 2004; Driver, 2006; Kearney, 2006). I encouraged the students to take their interrogations about constructions of femininity further during the ACP discussion than the film techniques discussion would allow. Yet the nature of the digital pedagogy meant that our authority to direct the discussion as teachers was displaced. Students would move quickly from one observation to the next, not necessarily responding to our prompts. At one point during the chat, students were responding to an image of k.d. lang:

Claire: You must know who this is
 Casey: gangster
 Shali: bikie chick
 Domenica: IT’S... THINGY
 Bron: who is that?
 Jackie: a bikey
 Wil: k.d. lang
 Bron: I like his bike
 Domenica: OMFG KD LANG
 Domenica: she’s cool
 Bron: OMG.....she must be gay
 Domenica: she is
 Claire: she is gay
 Shali: she looks different

⁴ Retrieved February 25, 2007 from the “launch demo” option
http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnect_pro/.

Jackie: isn't she a singer?
 Eva: if Flo was here she would be going nuts
 Domenica: yes
 Claire: why?
 Wil: why would Flo be going nuts??
 Jackie: doesn't she like her
 Eva: she loves k.d. lang

In the image pictured, lang is riding a motorcycle and wearing dark glasses. Thus the comments about her being a bikie chick and a gangster are not as significant as they might be if she were not depicted in this way. Shali comments that lang "looks different", which could potentially indicate that, for Shali, she transgresses norms of embodied femininity. However, it is unclear whether Shali means different from some unspecified "norm" of femininity or different from how she usually looks. Thus it is difficult to make any significant reading of this comment. This difficulty is not separate from the characteristics of the digital media through which the conversation occurred. Collins et al. (2000) suggest that different media have different affordances for learning environments. They note that face-to-face communication is a form of media that allows for interaction and emotional involvement, as long as there are not too many listeners. They contrast this with print media in which, they argue, there is a "distancing of people from emotional involvement with events" (p. 157) and no chance to interact and clarify meaning.

Software packages such as APC are media networks that include some of the characteristics of face-to-face communication. Students were able to respond emotionally to media texts and representations and interactively share their thoughts. Yet it does not follow that this resulted in critical engagement with discourses of girl power. This would involve critically reflecting on one's responses to media and coming to understand their implication in particular constructions and ideals of femininity. The students' comments about media icons did not always indicate extended engagement with normative constructions of gender and sexuality. Had I attempted to stimulate such engagement by asking, for example, "different from what?", it is by no means guaranteed that Shali would have considered this question in any detail, if at all. The relentless pace of the chat was not always conducive to reflection and deliberation on any of the comments made. Wil and I were sometimes left behind as the students charged ahead of us, quicker at typing and responding.

The way in which I immediately responded to Eva's comment is significant. I was invested in allowing even the smallest hint of non-heteronormative sexual identity to have a voice in the classroom. However, as I discovered throughout my time at LGGS, allowing this voice into the classroom was extremely difficult and even impossible. Sensing immediately that Eva's comment might provide an avenue for permitting non-normative sexuality into the classroom, I asked her to elaborate on her comment by explaining why Flo would be "going nuts". Eva informed me that Flo "loves k.d. lang". The conversation moved on relentlessly, however, and I was left to speculate as to whether Flo loved k.d.'s singing, had a romantic attraction to her, or both of these things. Since Flo was not present that day, her voice and commentary remained absent from the discussion. I felt frustrated by this event. I was certainly not able to ask Eva for any further details about Flo's idolization of k.d. lang, since such an act on the part of a teacher would hardly be appropriate. The ACP chat acted as a

site in which non-normative feminine sexualities were raised but not necessarily discussed or deliberated at any length.

The purchase of a software application such as ACP could be understood as equipping elite young women with some of the skills needed in their future work places, where they may continue to be high-achieving subjects of girl power. It appears to be an attempt to enable their access to the technological literacies desired in contemporary digital work places, at the same time as attaining the more "traditional" text response and written literacies of the English classroom that Wil was under pressure to ensure they attained. Thus the desired academic literacies of English students at LGGS appear to include competency and excellence with film analysis and text response essays, as well as competency with new digital literacies. The place of critical literacy, defined as the illumination and exploration of cultural constructions and regimes of intelligibility for young femininity, remained a more difficult task in which to engage.

CONCLUSION

Popular discourses about gender and literacy have drawn attention to boys' apparent lesser competence with desired academic literacies. These discourses tend to construct "literacy" in relation to particular school-based competencies and skills, without including attention to the myriad textual practices, both within and outside school, in which young people engage. Furthermore, they do not consider the ways in which negotiations and constitutions of gender are bound up in textual practices, making these practices significant sites for understanding and studying the gendered identities of both boys and girls in contemporary society.

Investigations into boys' textual practices and disaffection with academic literacies has led to some suggestions that dominant discourses of masculinity are in conflict with school-based literacy work, which is understood as "feminine". Thus the importance of critical literacy has been asserted, whereby boys might engage with school literacy practices in order to interrogate the hegemonic discourses of masculinity that associate literacy with femininity in the first place. Similar work has been undertaken in relation to girls and the inscription and negotiation of dominant normative femininities through textual practices.

In this paper I have argued that discourses of female passivity and subordination have been challenged by contemporary discourses of girl power. Thus I have suggested that young women's textual practices, and the way they might constitute a site for the exploration and negotiation of femininities against a cultural backdrop of girl power, are significant. I have shown how the textual practices of young women attending an elite school, in the context of the English classroom, can constitute a site in which girl power discourses are inscribed, as well as enduring discourses around embodied femininity. I have suggested that critical literacy is thus important for young women, just as it is for boys.

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