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A historical reflection on literacy, gender and opportunity: implications for the teaching of literacy in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a historical reflection on gender and literacy, with a view to informing the present teaching of literacy in early childhood. The relationship between gender, literacy and opportunity in the labour market is examined, given that despite girls' achievement in literacy, in comparison with boys', women continue to earn substantially less than men. In order to understand this relationship, this paper reflects on literacy as a socio-historical construct as well as examining the ways in which the past is constitutive in forming enduring notions of gender that penetrate all elements of society, including the literacy classroom. This critical analysis of what is learned *about* and *through* the medium of literacy in the early childhood classroom has major implications for the teaching of literacy today. It is argued that in order to address this issue, early childhood educators need to value and nurture children's digital literacies as well as create learning environments that allow all children genuine opportunities to question, challenge and explore dominant discourses that are embedded in text.

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Introduction

Few would argue against the claim that children need to gain skills in literacy in order to improve their life chances. For example, the National Literacy Trust Report 'Literacy Changes Lives' (Morrisroe 2014, 5) argues that literacy 'influences individual capability' and that individuals and communities that have low levels of literacy are 'more vulnerable to inequality, increasing the risk of social exclusion and undermining social mobility' (Morrisroe 2014). Similarly, the 1970 British Cohort Study showed a strong link between poor basic skills and disadvantaged life courses when participants were aged 34 years (Parsons and Bynner 2005). More recently, a number of studies by the National Research and Development Centre provide indicators as to the place of reading and writing in relation to social mobility (e.g. Bynner and Parsons 2006; Parsons and

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Bynner 2008; Hodge, Barton, and Pearce 2010) suggesting that literacy skill is positively associated with such factors as health, well-being and family structure.

As a consequence, literacy is regarded as an 'agent of change' (Olson 1975); in other words, having skills in literacy is seen as having a 'power' to make one's life better. Yet if literacy really does have the power to 'change lives' and facilitate social mobility, this poses some very challenging questions with regard to gender and outcome in the labour market. It is very well documented that girls do better than boys in literacy. Research consistently indicates that boys do not do so well as girls in literacy assessment (Twist and Sainsbury 2009; DfE 2011a, 2011b, 2011c) and that this is the same for children across the world (Mullis et al. 2012). Yet while these studies continue to report this gap in literacy attainment, in favour of girls, this 'achievement' does not translate into occupational advantage. For example, the World Economic Forum (2014) has recently reported that the UK has now fallen out of the top 20 most gender-equal countries, with average earnings for women falling from £18,000 to £15,400, while earnings for men remain unchanged at £24,800. Of course inequality in the workplace is a vast and complex issue, relating to many factors, such as working conditions, access and participation. It is not the intention of this paper to examine these specific factors – rather this paper is taking discrepancy in pay as an indicator of occupational advantage. What is more, the difference between the pay of women and men is a global issue and as such is a useful indication of societal inequality. This has been reported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2015,2) which states:

Globally, women earn approximately 77 per cent of what men earn, with the gap widening for higher-earning women. The ILO has noted that without targeted action, at the current rate, pay equity between women and men will not be achieved before 2086.

Given that girls outperform boys in literacy, yet women are substantially over-represented in low-paid work, this raises some very important questions about the relationship between attainment in literacy in school and outcome in the labour market. Moreover, as formal literacy education begins in early childhood, it is crucial that this issue is discussed from the perspective of early childhood education. Much of this paper focuses on the teaching of literacy within contexts where English is a first language; however, the issues addressed in this paper are global therefore it is suggested that this paper has implications for many different international contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how the teaching of early childhood literacy connects with gendered opportunities in the labour market in order to inform present-day teaching practice. More specifically, this paper analyses what young children learn *about* literacy, as well as what children learn *through* the medium of schooled literacy, that impacts upon opportunity in the work force on the basis of gender. In order to do this, this paper takes a historical perspective, reflecting back on the ways in which changing constructions of literacy connect with issues of opportunity. It must be stressed that it is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the past as such, rather it makes a historical reflection in order to inform an aspect of the present and future teaching of literacy. The rationale for doing this can be summarised in the words of Green (2006, 8) who states that he remains 'thoroughly convinced that any inquiry into the future of English teaching, into the shape of things to come, must be historically informed'. Having traced movements in the curriculum and cultural politics of English teaching, Green

argues strongly that reflection on the past has a substantial role in informing future teaching, because the past is 'constitutive', meaning that it 'is never really past: but continuously constitutive of the present' (Bryant 1994, 1, cited in Green 2006, 8).

With this in mind, this paper reflects on the past in order to understand some of the factors that have influenced women's opportunities in the workforce and consider how the present teaching of literacy in early childhood education may be constitutive in maintaining these influences. This paper begins with a historical look at the notion of literacy, examining how social change and economic structures have influenced how definitions of literacy are created and developed. This provides a foundation for the next section which draws on historical data to explore why women have struggled to compete with men in the workforce despite sustained achievement in literacy. In doing so, this paper critically examines the relationship between literacy, gender and achievement beyond the school system. The implications of this for the teaching of literacy in schools today are then made explicit.

Learning *about* literacy

Given that girls do well in literacy, yet this fails to translate into financial success in the labour market in comparison with men, it seems prudent to begin with an exploration of the perceived values attached to literacy and, more specifically, attainment in literacy. Indeed there is much to suggest that literacy skills are highly valued in our society. This is evident in the fact that attitudes towards ownership of literacy skill are quite different from attitudes towards skills in numeracy. This is summed up in the words of Jennifer Ouellette (2010), in her exploration of calculus, when she said:

I think scientists have a valid point when they bemoan the fact that it's socially acceptable in our culture to be utterly ignorant of math, whereas it is a shameful thing to be illiterate. (2010, 13)

We live in a society that carries an expectation that it is unacceptable to have poor, or no, skills in literacy. In other words, it is expected that everyone should reach a basic level of skill in reading and writing, with the term 'illiteracy' being used over the years to describe individuals who have poor, or indeed no skills in reading and writing printed text. However, Ramsey-Kurz (2007) argues that it is important to recognise that 'illiteracy' is not an autonomous category, but rather it is part of a binary construct – an 'opposite' of literacy. She goes on to explain that constructions of 'illiteracy' can only ever exist in relation to literate cultures. She states:

Individuals or cultures without a script are not comprehended as illiterate purely on account of their orality, but only when they come into contact with a writing system or its users. It is only by virtue of their particular relationship to a literate civilization, then, they qualify as 'il', 'non-', or 'preliterate'. (2007, 19)

Harvey Graff, who closely examined the historical development of literacy, takes this point further when he asserts his growing belief that literacy is '*profoundly misunderstood*' (italics in original) (1987, 17). He argues that many discussions about literacy flounder because 'they slight any effort to formulate consistent and realistic definitions of literacy, have little appreciation of the conceptual complications that the subject of literacy

presents, and ignore – often grossly – the vital role of socio-historical context’ (1987, 17). A brief glance back into history soon reveals that present-day definitions of ‘literacy’, and indeed ‘illiteracy’, are not as fixed as we would often like to believe. For example, Eric Havelock (1976) argues forcibly that as human beings have used oral speech for far longer than the comparatively late invention of alphabetic literacy, then this should take precedence within a definition. He states:

The biological-historical fact is that homo sapiens is a species which uses oral speech manufactured by the mouth, to communicate. This is his definition. He is not, by definition, a reader or a writer ... The habit of using written symbols to represent such speech is just a useful trick which has existed over too short a time to have been built into our genes. (Havelock 1976, 12)

As Ramsey-Kurtz argues, this explains why Western societies did not begin to perceive or discuss concepts of ‘illiteracy’ as a concern much before the nineteenth century, because up to this point, an absence of ability to read and write printed text was regarded as a ‘cultural norm’ while literacy skill was an ‘exception to this norm’. Even into the early twentieth century, attitudes towards ‘illiteracy’ were less condemnatory than became apparent a few decades later, and indeed exist strongly today. This raises two vital issues for this discussion.

First, the necessity to be ‘literate’ is a relatively recent phenomenon, and only exists because an ability to read and write printed text has now become seen as ‘the norm’. However, there is now an expectation that all those living in Western society should not only be literate but have achieved a degree of mastery in literacy skill (Jones and Marriott 1995; Street 1997). But rather than suggesting that high achievement in literacy is therefore valued, this merely shows that poor performance in literacy is condemned. It is therefore important to reflect on the extent to which attainment in literacy in school is valued in comparison with attainment in other school subjects. This leads to some intriguing questions about the perceived status of literacy and literacy skill acquisition, when it is compared with other academic skills.

Indeed there is substantial literature to suggest that the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects are regarded as ‘prestigious’ and of ‘high status’ (Watts 2014) as well as being ‘difficult’ and labour intensive (Brea et al. 2012). This is exemplified in a research report by Coe et al. (2008, 1) who reported that ‘at A Level, the STEM subjects are not just more difficult than non-sciences, they are without exception the hardest of all A levels’. They go on to conclude that ‘to say that one subject is harder than another means that the same grade in it indicates a higher level of general ability’ (2). This clearly indicates that for many, STEM subjects are not only regarded as being more difficult than non-science subjects, but achievement in these subjects indicates a higher level of general ability.

This may begin to explain why literacy skill is perceived quite differently from skills in maths and science, in relation to prestige and perceived value. A degree of literacy skill is expected of everyone, but this is not the same for skills in maths and science. The fact that societal attitudes towards a lack of literacy are condemnatory suggests that literacy skill is regarded as unchallenging and attainable, whereas skill acquisition in maths and science is regarded as being substantially more demanding and requires greater academic prowess. To put it another way, mastery in literacy skill does not carry the same status as mastery in

STEM subjects. This has serious implications for all teachers, but especially those working with young children given that concepts and ideas about learning, and what it means to be a learner, are generated during children's earliest years in school (Aubrey et al. 2000).

Second, reflecting on the ways in which constructions of literacy have operated throughout history reminds us that the current definition of literacy is a product of social convention and is not a 'natural' state. This means that we must acknowledge that literacy is a fluid construct that adapts to accommodate time, place and context. This raises serious questions about the value of the literacy that children are 'attaining' when they achieve in standardised literacy assessment in school. Concepts of 'being literate' and indeed being 'good at literacy' are defined by narrow constructions of literacy, situated within a school discourse (Levy 2011; Lankshear and Knobel 2011). There is a wide body of literature to suggest that the school discourse uses accepted definitions of literacy that pertain largely to the reading and writing of print in paper-based text (Levy 2009; Wohlwend 2009), yet as we travel deeper into the twenty-first century we need to ask whether achievement in school-based literacy really serves to support individuals who are entering the labour market.

Moreover, as many studies have already documented, the culture surrounding computer and other technologies reveals a 'masculinisation of both tools and expertise' (Jenson and Brushwood Rose 2003, 169) situating technology within a paradigm that is traditionally male (Schofield 1995; Volman and Ten Dam 1998; Littleton and Hoyle 2002). Certainly much of the research into attitudes towards technology has focused on the skills of accessing technology, and studies have indeed shown that girls feel less competent than boys in this domain (Charles and Bradley 2006). However, further research into the ways in which technology use connects with identities has concluded that an overemphasis on technological skills is unhelpful. Indeed in their study of teachers' working identities, Jenson and Brushwood Rose (2003, 179) argued that 'the extent of teachers' use of new technologies in schools is not only socioculturally mediated, but at times has very little to do with how technologically skilled or unskilled teachers actually are'. Similarly, in their evaluation of 'Computer Clubs for Girls' (a high-profile publicly funded initiative in England, introduced to help increase female participation in IT courses and careers), Fuller, Turbin, and Johnston (2013, 501) concluded that strategies such as this were ineffective because they did not address the fact that 'the IT paradigm is ... culturally and historically male'.

By reflecting on the ways in which constructions of literacy are modified by time and place in history, we are forced to recognise that a disparity exists between the construct of literacy that is taught and assessed in schools today and the construct that is potentially needed for success in the labour market. Girls do well in school-based literacy assessment in comparison with boys; however, if schooled literacy is not aligned to the technological demands of twenty-first-century life, it is clear to see that 'attainment' in literacy may actually fall short of providing children with the literacy skills that are needed to achieve highly in the modern labour market.

Through a critical reflection on the ways in which literacy has been defined, perceived and valued over the years, we can see that what we teach children about literacy in schools today is related to opportunity for success in the labour market. It is clearly the case that the acquisition of literacy skill is regarded as essential for success in society; however, high attainment in literacy does not seem to carry the same status as high attainment in other

subjects such as maths and science – a message that children receive from their earliest years in school. In addition, history also teaches us that literacy is a mobile construct, shaped by the socio-historical context within which it occurs. As we progress further into the twenty-first century, it is evident that technology is having a powerful and enduring impact on the ways in which literacy is defined and utilised today, yet this remains largely unrecognised within the school discourse. It therefore stands to reason that if we want to help equip children for success in the labour market then we must ensure that they develop literacy skills that accommodate technology, regardless of whether or not they attain highly in school-based literacy assessment. Bringing this together, it becomes increasingly apparent that early childhood educators have a particular responsibility to recognise that what they teach children *about* literacy can have a major impact on opportunity in the labour market and can particularly disadvantage girls from achieving in the workplace.

The role of the early childhood educator will be returned to later in this paper, but before this is considered, it is also important to explore what children learn through the medium of schooled literacy, and how this impacts upon opportunity in the work force on the basis of gender. The next section maintains a focus on historical reflection in order to understand how gendered stereotypes are reinforced through the teaching of literacy. This means that the literacy classroom may in itself carry responsibility for promoting views that prevent girls from going on to achieve success in the labour market. This paper now reflects on the ways in which unhelpful gendered stereotypes penetrate the literacy classroom, and discusses ways in which this knowledge can be used to inform the teaching of early literacy.

Learning through literacy

It is no secret that a main reason why women do not achieve as highly as men in the workplace is due to established social norms that dictate that home and children remain primarily the woman's responsibility. In her book *Delusions of Gender*, Cordelia Fine (2010, 83) describes the 'psychological scrambles' of well-educated couples who could not resist the 'strength of the push to maintain gendered roles'. For example, Fine references the work of Tichenor (2005) who reported that husbands and their high-earning wives engaged in significant 'psychological work' to maintain gendered conventionality. Tichenor concluded that for many women, 'the cultural expectations of what it means to be a good wife shape the domestic negotiations of unconventional earners and produce arrangements that privilege husbands and further burden wives' (Fine 2010, 82). This is not to suggest that intensions towards gender equity do not exist. As Selmi (2005) points out, the vast majority of people born between 1965 and 1981 support the concept of equal caregiving for example, yet progress towards this has remained, in her words, 'glacial'.

Gender stereotypes relating to work, child-rearing and the home are both deliberately and unwittingly reinforced in almost every aspect of our lives, through the context of the media, the school system, the entertainment industry and so on. Moreover, these influences have an effect on children from the moment they are born, if not before (Eliot 2009), hence reinforcing the importance of addressing the issue as early as possible. One particularly powerful authority is the texts that children come into contact with.

Margaret Meek spoke specifically about this in her seminal publication of 1988 entitled *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*. Meek explains how text teaches children to not only make sense of print, but also how to decode image, understand context, read 'between the lines' and learn about culture and so on. Since Meek published this book, we have come to acknowledge that constructions of 'text' are changing rapidly and now include digital and screen texts as well as paper-based texts, as discussed earlier in this paper. However what is clear is that text, in all its forms, contributes greatly to the ways in which children make sense of the world they live in. Part of the function of education must be to help children to learn to read text, however as we know, reading is not just the decoding of print and image but includes a capacity to extract information, engage with concepts, understand ideas and form opinions. For this reason, early childhood education has a particularly important role in helping children to acknowledge the ways in which harmful stereotypes are introduced and reinforced in text.

However, this is not a straightforward issue. Davies and Saltmarsh (2007,12) argue strongly that while the learning of literacy is positioned as being 'desirable and innocent', literacy discourses 'are intricately entangled in the ways in which becoming masculine and feminine are accomplished'. They go on to describe the ways in which literacy learning feeds directly into the reproduction of gendered neo-liberal discourse when they state:

What is of interest here is the extent to which the gender order – which inevitably shapes the social and economic landscape out of which education policy emerges – is in turn shaped in literacy classrooms in ways that both reflect and reinscribe the hidden gender dimensions of neo-liberal discourse.

Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) are here arguing that the literacy classroom is part of a whole system that continues to reinforce gendered stereotypes, even though teachers are concerned about promoting equity. Davies and Saltmarsh (2007, 6) go on to explain that these constraints 'lie in the very practices of teaching reading, writing, speaking and listening', therefore making it very difficult for teachers to really step outside of the existing discourse, no matter how well intentioned. This raises further difficult yet important questions about what 'achievement' in literacy really is, and the extent to which this is reflected in student 'attainment'.

As already discussed in the previous section, notions of 'doing well' in literacy are generally marked by success in standardised tests, yet it is clearly the case that achievement is more than attainment (Francis and Skelton 2001). Attainment in literacy may well result in further reproducing gendered constraints that are at best unhelpful and at worst harmful. As Davies and Saltmarsh (2007, 8) point out, a system that is based on standardised testing claims to produce 'generic students for whom equity issues are no longer relevant'; however, this fails to 'get to the heart of the ways in which literacy, gender and social power are mutually constitutive'.

In order to understand this, it is again helpful to reflect back on how such stereotypical views have developed and permeated belief structures throughout history. Galbraith's (1997) account of the autobiographies of British men and women, born between 1860 and 1914, provides a particularly interesting insight into attitudes towards women and work. Galbraith documents the words of a number of middle-class women who all spoke regretfully about the years that their brothers went to boarding school, while they were left at home. For example, Katherine Chorley (born in 1897) talked about the

'separate spheres' marked by gender, which allowed men access to the 'big world' while women stayed at home. Galbraith notes that 'she remembered that after the 9:18 train had taken all the men off to work, a town of women was left behind' (1997, 15). Many of these women continued to receive an education at home however this was often met with resentment. To illustrate, Galbraith refers to Helena Swanwick, born 1864, who wrote of 'the intense desire ... for more opportunities for concentration and continuity' and her anger against 'the assumption that whereas education was important for my brothers, it was of no account for me' (Galbraith 1997, 15–16).

These women clearly articulated their frustration that opportunities for participation in the workforce were denied to them. However, major world events did have an impact on women's opportunities and this has been particularly well documented in relation to the Second World War. Founded in 1937, the Mass Observation Archive hosts a detailed and authentic record of the everyday lives of ordinary people, which spanned the Second World War. Sheridan's (2000) anthology of mass-observation records (1937–1945) provides a rare insight into the lives of women in wartime, many of whom responded to monthly open-ended 'directives' or themed questionnaires, as well as those who kept full personal diaries throughout the war. The opening pages of Sheridan's book present a quote from Miss K, a young Jewish woman working as a journalist in London, who writes, 'my horror of all this war business is qualified by an eagerness to be a unit of it'. This somewhat dichotomous view is a recurrent theme in Sheridan's anthology. While there is no doubt that these women were marked by the horror, uncertainty and disruption caused by the war, Sheridan also concluded that they 'recognised something that has now gained wider currency; that active participation in war might be advantageous for women, even, in a limited way, emancipatory' (2000, 1).

Twentieth-century war catalysed opportunities for many women in a way that had never occurred before, however what is especially interesting – and indeed important for the present-day discussion, are the attitudes towards women and work that prevailed after the war ended. In the January 1944 'directive' to members of the Mass Observation panel, respondents were asked the question, 'Should married women be able to go out to work after the war?' Sheridan (2000, 215) presents a range of responses to this question, but what is clear is that the entries suggest a tangible tension between the increasing realisation that being a full-time homemaker lacked mental stimulation and satisfaction for many, while there was also a belief that paid work for many women was an unnecessary indulgence and something that would damage families, and children in particular. Responses from women included; 'going out to work is incompatible with children', and a married woman can work 'provided she doesn't neglect the home too much and that her husband really feels happy about it'. Comments such as these were plentiful, however, so were concerns about the mundaneness of being at home all day. For example, a 45-year-old woman from Wembley wrote that she would be sorry to leave her job and worried that she would 'have not enough to do to occupy [her] intelligently in the home'. Another respondent wrote, 'I admit that very many women are bored by their homes and long to get back to work', while another stated 'that domestic work is on the whole so unpopular that men will do their damnest to push women back into it and keep them from "outside" jobs – and women must fight hard to hold their present positions'.

One particularly revealing comment came from a 53-year-old married woman from Reading, who claimed that ‘a lot of women will want to have their cake and eat it (i.e. have a husband, home and children, and a job)’. The view that a working women is somewhat selfishly trying to ‘have it all’ may have proliferated in the post-war era but what is truly remarkable about this statement is that the same sentiment still exists 70 years later. For example, in her longitudinal study of the ways in which young women who had gone to school, during an era of ‘equal opportunity’, made decisions about career and life-paths, Aveling (2002, 265) reported that:

More than a decade later, the problem of ‘having it all’ had begun to surface for some of them. Those women who had already become mothers increasingly found that instead of effortlessly being able to combine the demands of small children with the pressures of a challenging job, a more workable option was to put their careers ‘on hold’. While these women have demonstrated that they can succeed on male terms, a number of competing discourses, coupled with a workplace culture that enshrined male patterns of participation as the norm, ensured that their work patterns essentially replicated the employment patterns of women of an earlier generation.

By including a reflection into the past within this discussion, we can see that opportunities for women continue to be impeded by the maintenance of a social norm that dictates how roles are perceived inside and outside of the home on the basis of gender. As Aveling points out, we live in a climate that is supposedly committed to equality of opportunity, yet evidence indicates that ‘automatic gender associations’ (Fine 2010) which influences how we think and act, can actually undermine these conscious beliefs (Hochschild 1990).

This creates quite a challenge for those working with young children. Given the enduring and insidious nature of gendered norms, how can practitioners ensure that the early literacy classroom offers young children what they need in order to promote equality of opportunity for their future? In particular, what are the implications for the ways in which text is utilised? We know that children are exposed to a wide variety of texts, many of which present stereotyped views about gender and work. Much of the children’s literature available today continues to present themes related to traditional heteronormative notions of gendered roles (Lee and Collins 2009, 2010; Taber and Woloshyn 2011), even though there is an evident attempt in some books to portray females as active participants in events (Jackson 2007); for example, children now have access to books such as *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty (2013), *I Can Do It Too* by Karen Baicker (2003) and *The Kite Princess* by Juliet Clare Bell (2012). However, it would be a mistake to think that educationalists can ‘solve’ the problem by introducing and using these kinds of texts with children. As already discussed, it is important to recognise that text comes in many different forms including digital and screen versions, yet digital technology in itself is far from being regarded as gender-neutral. Indeed in their article entitled ‘New media, Old images’, Mendick and Moreau (2013, 325) found that online representations of women and men in science, engineering and technology ‘largely re/produce(d) dominant gender discourses’. Moreover, these themes are not just present in children’s literature, but penetrate all aspects of daily life. Mums still ‘go to Iceland’ in order produce satisfying meals that are compatible with a family budget (or more recently to swoon over Peter Andre), and the purchase of Kentucky Fried Chicken still allows mums to have ‘a night off’. This suggests that children from their earliest years need to be taught how to

respond to stereotypic ideas that are embedded within all texts, including media, screen and popular culture.

So what does this mean for teachers and practitioners working with young children? It is not the job of teachers to censor children's exposure to text on the grounds of gendered stereotypes. This is partly because we would be doing children a considerable disservice to assume that they are passive recipients of text and have no active engagement with these issues. Jackson (2007, 75) discovered in her analysis of early school reader illustrations that young children were 'active in making sense of gender rather than being social blotters, simply absorbing stereotypical notions of gender'. In particular she found that children were drawing on their understandings of gender from other contexts in order to bring meaning to text. This supports the suggestion that it is a futile exercise to attempt to eliminate texts with gendered constructions from children's reading diets or even to try and mitigate the damage by introducing texts that actively promote non-stereotypical roles. Rather there is a need to consider how we can support children in their everyday reading of text. As Wharton (2005, 249) concludes, 'the way that gender is portrayed in school books may be less important than the ways in which teachers and parents use these books with children'. The final section of this paper now turns to the role of the early childhood educator in ensuring that the teaching of literacy includes a concern for achievement in the labour market as well as in the school environment.

The role of the early childhood educator

This paper has demonstrated that the early childhood educator has an opportunity to take strides towards tackling the issue of gender and inequality in the labour market, through the context of what is taught *about* and *through* the medium of literacy. In respect to the former, the educator has an obligation to teach literacy, as defined by the curriculum; however, there is no obligation to teach that this *is* literacy. Rather, the early years classroom can be a place where children are taught that literacy is a broad and dynamic concept. The first step towards achieving this is for teachers and educators to show children that their own constructions of literacy are valued in the classroom. There is a vast and growing body of literature on technology and literacy which supports the argument that young children use technology in ways that are innate and natural (Prensky 2001a, 2001b; Bearne et al. 2007); as a consequence, many young children enter the early years setting with the ability to handle digital texts with confidence and skill (Levy 2009). Given that it is becoming more and more evident that success in the twenty-first-century labour market will demand a proficiency in literacy that accommodates technology, these are skills that teachers need to value and nurture in all children.

In addition, this paper has suggested that early childhood educators must also consider what is taught through the context of literacy study, focusing specifically on the role of text. Text, in all its forms, offers powerful constructions of stereotypical femininity and masculinity, yet Gilbert (1992, 191) argues that these can only ever be understood as 'plausible' if 'readers begin with particular cultural expectations of gender'. Gilbert goes on to argue that in order to challenge stereotypical constructions of gender (or any other social convention for that matter), it is necessary to become a 'resistant reader to what has come to pass as the socially conventional 'reading' of a story' (189). However, she makes the further

point that this can only be achieved if you have access to different discourses that challenge the text in question. She concludes:

It is less possible to be a resistant reader if you see nothing to challenge in the dominant reading position offered: if you cannot denaturalise the apparent naturalness and opacity of the language; or if you cannot conceive of other ways to construct a plausible narrative sequence of events; or if you are unable to reconstruct what counts as a narrative 'event' differently. (Gilbert 1992, 189)

This suggests that promoting skills of critical reflection need to be embedded within the teaching of literacy from children's earliest years in school. Helping children to consciously reflect on the sociocultural implications of a text will help them to not only develop their own awareness of stereotypical constructions of gender in text but also actively challenge a dominant discourse. However, this is not straightforward. Children are rarely given opportunities to challenge anything and this may be a particular issue for children in their early years of schooling. To illustrate this point, it is worth remembering that questions asked to children within a school context tend to be those that the teacher already knows the answer to, rather than a genuine invitation for children to offer views and opinions (Levy 2011, 128). This has implications for the ways in which teachers position themselves in relation to the child as well as the learning experience in itself.

Hare (1992) discusses this in relation to the acquisition of knowledge when he argues that teachers have a responsibility to ensure that children grow up understanding that knowledge is tentative and that the teachers' own answers are not necessarily 'the best'. Hare describes this as cultivating 'humility' within the teacher-pupil relationship. In other words, he is arguing that young children need to learn from adults who are positioned as engaging in the learning experience alongside them, rather than being an absolute authority over them. Similarly, in his iconic publication *Children's Thinking*, Bonnett (1994) claims that this has particular salience for teachers working with young children who are developing their own relationship with the learning process. Bonnet argues that in order for teachers to encourage children to become effective learners they must share the sense of curiosity with them and respond to them 'in a manner that offers mutual interest in what is being learned, is non-evaluative and non-judgemental and that children need to know that their responses are being taken seriously' (Levy 2011, 127). In other words, encouraging critical reflection means that teachers need to carefully consider their role in the learning process, and in relation to the children themselves, and actively create an environment where children feel confident and safe enough to challenge accepted discourses.

As well as creating a learning environment that offers young children genuine opportunities for questioning, challenging and consolidating, it is also important to remember that as Gilbert stated above, it is not possible to challenge an accepted discourse if you do not see anything in the text to challenge. This means that teachers and educators have a further responsibility to offer children a wide variety of texts that offer various views, ideas, opinions and perspectives. However as already stated, it is not enough to simply include these texts in school, but children need to be taught how to read with criticality and resistance.

Literacy is a broad and changing construct and as a result children are exposed to a wide variety of texts that exist in paper and screen forms. However, it has been further argued that picture books, which are strongly associated with the early childhood literacy classroom, offer unique opportunities to help young children engage with challenging concepts. Haynes and Murriss (2012) argue that picture books are ‘philosophical sources’ that provide teachers with opportunities to engage with ‘transformative pedagogy’ (218). These authors speak of their ‘delight in the philosophical thinking and dialogue’ (2012, 1) that picture books provoke, and call for teachers to be ‘intrigued by the controversy’ that they cause. Haynes and Murriss are arguing that pictures provide rich and fertile territory for adults to engage children in exactly the kind of philosophical discussions that are necessary if they are to learn how to think critically about issues. Similarly, Roche (2015, 3) argues that picture books can help children to become ‘real readers’ who are able to not only read for enjoyment and understanding but ‘who can look beneath the surface and challenge any assumptions and premises that may be hidden there’.

Roche and Haynes and Murriss agree that there is no manual on how teachers should use pictures and picture books to promote critical thinking and encourage children to challenge accepted discourses. While there is value in selecting texts for children that offer positive role models, this is more about encouraging children to respond to all texts with criticality and resistance. This is not about instructing children on ‘correct’ beliefs or courses of action, but rather it is about creating an environment that encourages thought and facilitates discussion. Central to this is the view that children must be really listened to, thus establishing what Haynes and Murriss call a ‘critical practice of philosophical listening’ (218–229).

In summary, this suggests that early childhood educators have a unique and vital role in helping young children to recognise and challenge accepted discourses that may inhibit their opportunity for success in the labour market on the grounds of gender. It is argued that in order to help children to challenge these discourses, educators need to focus on creating learning environments that allow all children genuine opportunities to question, challenge and explore ideas and concepts that are embedded in text.

Conclusion

This paper has critically reflected on the past in order to show how the teaching of early childhood literacy can help to address the issue of gender and inequality in the labour market, given that girls’ attainment in literacy at school does not appear to translate into achievement in the labour market, in comparison with men. This historical reflection has focused on two main avenues for consideration.

Firstly, history shows us that definitions of literacy are not only fluid and mobile but are embedded within a socio-historical context. This reminds us that current ‘schooled’ definitions of literacy are not as fixed as we have come to believe. As we move deeper into the twenty-first century, we see the impact of technology on constructions of literacy and indeed conceptualisations of what it means to be ‘literate’. We know that girls currently achieve more highly than boys in literacy, but if these skills do not match the literacy demands of the twenty-first-century labour market, then this ‘achievement’ will have little consequence in this domain. This paper has argued that early childhood educators

must value and nurture the digital literacy skills that children bring into formal education, as well as actively teach all children how to be literate in a digital society.

Second, this historical reflection showed that societal constructions of gender are resilient and enduring, and continue to prevail despite genuine attempts to challenge harmful stereotypes. This paper has shown that the literacy classroom may in itself perpetuate stereotypical constructions of gender, as they appear in all manner of texts. This paper has argued that the early childhood educator has the unique opportunity to help all children to become critical and resistant readers of text from their earliest years, and thus begin the process of challenging a dominant discourse. The first step must include a commitment to creating an environment where children feel able to question, challenge and discuss ideas, safe in the knowledge that their voices will be heard and that their views will be taken seriously. Only then will teachers be able to offer genuine opportunities for children to challenge accepted discourses that prevent equality of opportunity for children and the women and men that they grow into.

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