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**Author:** S. Saltmarsh and B. Davies  
**Author Address:** ssaltmarsh@csu.edu.au  
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Gender Economies: the gendered production of neoliberal subjectivities

ABSTRACT:

In this paper, we analyse the links between subjectivities as they are constructed through the intersecting discourses of gender and literacy, and we situate this analysis in the context of the current neoliberal social and economic order. We begin with a discussion of the background to the gender and literacy debates. We then describe what neoliberalism is and its implications for education, and provide an analysis of the ways in which gendered and literate subjectivities are formed. We introduce Certeau’s concept of the scriptural economy and illustrate this with four stories about children writing. In the final section we discuss some of the research on gender and literacy in school and home settings. Our overall trajectory is to show the relations among literacy, gender and the economy and to show the intensification of gendered differences that is taking place despite the neoliberal rhetoric that says such differences are no longer relevant.

Over the last decade the trend in the gender and literacy debates has been to direct concern away from the disadvantages girls suffer in education and in employment and toward the apparent plight of boys. The claim that boys are disadvantaged is perceived by many as a right wing reassertion of boys’ traditional gender dominance. But governments have nevertheless responded to this concern with a redirection of equity funds to boys’ education, and to boys’ literacy education in particular (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). This is despite the fact that post-school options for boys remain undeniably better for boys than for girls (see Teese, Davies, Charlton & Polesel, 1995; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000a, 2000b).

This recent debate that constructs boys as disadvantaged depends upon the assumption that boys are one homogeneous group and can be compared with girls who form another homogeneous group. The fact that girls and boys have greater within-group differences than between-group differences is ignored when such comparisons are made. Instead the two groups are constructed as being in competition with each other, and the ‘battle between the sexes’ is the mythical ground out of which the imagined problem is made real. Within this mythology, boys (as a group) cannot maintain unequivocal dominance if some girls can outperform them. The catch-cry “what about the boys?” can be read as a reaction to the
impossible affront to the history and continuity of patriarchal structures and processes when some girls, in some subjects, can outstrip some of the elite boys.

For those who pursue the “what about the boys?” agenda, masculinity and femininity are constructed in traditional oppositional and hierarchical terms. The “feminisation” of schools is seen to disadvantage boys who, it is claimed, need a male presence in order to develop into real men (West, 2002). Real boys, West (2002: 82) claims, do not want to listen to stories or write stories, or sing, or to cut with scissors or listen to instructions on how to behave: “Most of these activities are better suited to girls than to boys” he says. Blaming the disadvantages of some boys (and the disruptive behaviours of some of them) on the educational progress girls have made, and on the strong presence of female teachers in the early years, can be read simply as a backlash against feminism. And that backlash is undoubtedly part of the story. What we will do in this paper, however, is consider how the current economic order is playing a part in shaping gender differences through literacy. In order to do this we provide a fine-grained analysis of how gendered, literate subjectivities are formed, and tie this analysis to the broader economic context. That context can be characterised as a shift to neoliberal forms of government. In order to situate our analysis of gender and literacy in this economic global framework we first provide a brief sketch of what neoliberalism is and how it impacts on our thinking in education.

What is neoliberalism?

Fifty years ago, according to Susan George (1999), there was a widely accepted belief that the management of human lives and of the environment should not be abandoned to the vagaries of the market. In marked contrast, the newly ascendant neoliberal philosophy asserts that “the market should be allowed to make major social and political decisions; ... the State should voluntarily reduce its role in the economy, ... corporations should be given total freedom, trade unions should be curbed and citizens given much less rather than more protection” (George, 1999: 1). George sees the current ascendance of these beliefs as the result of a concerted campaign on the part of “neoliberals and their funders” to transform relations between human beings and the market:
Starting from a tiny embryo at the University of Chicago with the philosopher-economist Friedrich von Hayek and his students like Milton Friedman at its nucleus, the neo-liberals and their funders have created a huge international network of foundations, institutes, research centers, publications, scholars, writers and public relations hacks to develop, package and push their ideas and doctrine relentlessly.

They have built this highly efficient ideological cardre because they understand what the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci was talking about when he developed the idea of cultural hegemony. If you can occupy people’s heads, their hearts and hands will follow… They have spent hundreds of millions of dollars … [and] have made neoliberalism seem as if it were the natural and normal condition of humankind. (George, 1999: 3)

Just how concerted this campaign has been is, of course, a matter of dispute, with sociologists generally unwilling to explain any changes as the result of a conspiracy. That there has been a transformation, however, is not disputed. That the market has greater weight than people’s lives, is not disputed. That there has been a massive redistribution of wealth in favour of rich countries, and of corporate leaders is not disputed. And neoliberal systems of government are now the new and favoured forms of government on both the left and right sides of politics. Neoliberalism, one way or another, has achieved cultural hegemony.

The new contract between the state and people under neoliberalism is that the state takes over the maintenance of “the infrastructure of law and order,” while the people “promote individual and national well-being by their responsibility and enterprise” (Rose, 1999: 139). Neoliberal philosophy espouses “survival of the fittest” and unleashes competition among individuals, among institutions and among nations, freeing them from what are construed as the burdensome chains of social justice and social responsibility. Populations are administered and managed through the production of a belief in each individual in his or her own freedom and autonomy. Governing through freedom, however, as Rose (1999) points out, requires a great deal of complex manipulation of those “free” and “autonomous” individuals:
Constructing a ‘free market’ seems to entail a variety of interventions by accountants, management consultants, lawyers and industrial relations specialists and marketing experts in order to establish the conditions under which the ‘laws of supply and demand’ can make themselves real, to implant the ways of calculating and managing that will make economic actors think, reckon and behave as competitive, profit-seeking agents, to turn workers into motivated employees who will freely strive to give of their best in the workplace, and to transform people into consumers who can choose between products. (Rose, 1999: 65)

Within this competitive, consumer-oriented system individuals in pursuit of their own freedom must also be persuaded to freely accept responsibility both for themselves as individuals and for the success of their workplace. To this end an extensive audit system is needed since, in a neoliberal philosophy, trust and commitment to the collective well-being have been made redundant. The audit systems in turn add to the culture of distrust: “Whilst audits have become key fidelity techniques in new strategies of government, they generate an expanding spiral of distrust of professional competence, and one that feeds the demand for more radical measures that will hold experts to account” (Rose, 1999: 155). Litigation has flourished in this dual context of individual responsibility and distrust.

By the 1970s, Rose points out:

Neoliberalism took as its target not just the economy but society itself. All kinds of practices – health, security, welfare and more – were to be restructured according to a particular image of the economic – the market. Markets were seen as the ideal mechanisms for the automatic co-ordination of the decisions of a multitude of individual actors in the best interest of all. Hence these styles of governing sought to create simulacra of markets governed by economic or para-economic criteria of judgements in arenas previously governed by bureaucratic and social logics: the new techniques were those of budgets, contracts, performance related pay, competition, quasi-markets and end-user empowerment. (Rose, 1999: 146)
A direct implication of this shift has been the loss of job security and conditions. People must adjust themselves to whatever the market demands of them as workers and as consumers. So successful has been the naturalising and normalising of neoliberal discourse, that policy makers in education have moved to reshape policy in its terms. In Australia, for example, the stated purposes of the National Goals for Schooling state a clear relationship between education and the market. The processes of education are framed in neoliberal language with business and industry playing a central role, where the products of education are controlled, regulated and nationally standardised, producing generic workers who can move from one workplace to another as they are needed. Education thus reframed entails:

- further strengthening schools as learning communities where teachers, students and their families work in partnership with business, industry and the wider community
- enhancing the status and quality of the teaching profession
- continuing to develop the curriculum and related systems of assessment, accreditation and credentialing that promote quality and are nationally recognised and valued
- increasing public confidence in school education through explicit and defensible standards that guide improvement in students’ levels of educational achievement and through which the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of schooling can be measured and evaluated (MCEETYA, 1999, our emphasis)

Nowhere in these stated purposes are processes of learning and the social relations through which they occur afforded any significance or meaning. The overriding concern is the economic imperative and the regimes of assessment, measurement and evaluation that are intrinsic to neoliberal forms of governmentality. Papers are written suggesting that in “a process of adaptation to these new circumstances” (Lovat, 2003: 1) we must redesign what we do in order to shape up students to become that more flexible subject who responds to the market and its vagaries. Lovat (2003: 1) continues, in his discussion paper prepared for the Australian Council of Deans of Education:

The role of educators will need to be reconceptualized and teacher education will need to broaden its focus (ACDE 2001). The Australian Council of Deans’ (ACDE) vision recognises education as the key to economic prosperity, social cohesion and the promise of democracy. It also recognises that the major challenge for the teaching profession in the
twenty-first century is to prepare young people to live and work in a world characterised by constant change and uncertainty.

Lovat’s paper suggests that we offer to train up the new neoliberal subjects and to encourage surveillance—in return for more money for education. He imagines that the domination of the market can be combined with the ideals of social cohesion and democracy. In combining old rhetorics with the new, he fails to see that under neoliberalism, there is, as Thatcher famously said, no such thing as society. Democracy has much reduced salience except as an excuse by governments to wage war on other nations. And certainly social justice is passé in neoliberal forms of government. As Thatcher also said: “It is our job to glory in inequality and see that the talents and abilities are given vent and expression for the benefit of us all” (cited in George, 1999: 4, our emphasis). Lovat also celebrates the increased autonomy he thinks teachers will have in this new order. In failing to examine how neoliberalism works he has also failed to see that buying into neoliberal agendas means a greater commitment to individual autonomy on the part of those individuals, but that that autonomy is no more than an illusion of increased autonomy (Davies, 2005). And it means less, not more, money for public institutions. Education, under neoliberalism, is no longer a public, but a private good, something to be strived for in competition with others, to be paid for by the individuals who will in turn make their profit and consume in the market place (Davies, 2005; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Davies & Saltmarsh, forthcoming).

The discursive construction of gendered literate subjects

We begin this section with the question: in what ways do educational discourses and practices simultaneously constitute students as gendered and literate subjects? Henriques et al (1984) demonstrate in relation to the discipline of Psychology that psychological discourse is active in constituting the very individuals it sets out to describe and analyse. Similarly, educational discourses are implicated in shaping students both in ways they intend and in ways they do not. Literacy practices, for example, are often presented as liberatory, particularly in relation to populations who have been systematically disenfranchised (Freire, 1970) or nations that have not yet become part of the global economy (Honan, 2003). However, the discourses and practices through which literate subjects are shaped, may
include the inculcation of attitudes and understandings that run counter to gender equity and other forms of social justice. This inculcation may not necessarily be intended to undermine the ideals of equity and justice. Equity and literacy discourses exist in ambiguous and contradictory ways in the same discursive spaces, constituting us in ways we are aware of and in ways we are not.

The binary gender order is normalised and naturalised through discourses and practices of literacy in ways that are not necessarily easy to detect. Baker and Freebody (1989) analyse children’s first readers to show how literacy texts shape the subjects who learn to read from them. The shaping of gendered subjects also lies in the practices of “teaching-as-usual”, practices that are not automatically available to the teachers’ or the students’ reflexive, analytic gaze (Davies and Hunt, 1994; Davies et al, 2004; Kamler et al, 1994).

It is important to separate out intentions from interactional and textual effects. This does not mean we are passive recipients of social practices and structures. Individual subjects work hard to become recognizable members of their social groups (Davies, 2000a; Davies et al, 2001). Educational practices, and literacy practices in particular, can be said to produce the constraints through which we “improvise” ourselves as gendered subjects (Davies, 1993/2003). As Butler says: “If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (Butler, 2004: 1).

Those constraints lie in the very practices of teaching and learning reading, writing, speaking and listening. Those practices may undermine teachers’ attempts to liberate children from what they perceive as limitations of class, poverty, ethnicity or gender (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert and Henderson, 2003; Bjerrum Nielsen and Davies, 1997; Davies et al, 2001; Davies and Corson, 1997). Individual teachers and students are not free of the constraints of those practices and cannot create gendered subjectivities that lie outside what already exists. As Butler (2004: 1) points out:

…one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call “own” gender appears at times as
something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself).

Bakhtin (1981: 342) made a similar point when he said that language is spoken “not only as if it were one's own -- but in speaking it is taken on as one's own”. One's words inevitably carry the accretions of others’ past usages but are not merely recitations. They are the available fabric with which each person appropriates and is appropriated into the various collectives of which they are, or are becoming, members.

The words that become one's own, and the positions that these words make it possible to take up, form a base from which individual persons speak, and they form the world that is spoken about. It is both the case that being an individual involves the appropriation of the words of the collectives of which one is a member, and that that collective appropriates the individual at the moment that the individual speaks or reads or writes. Thus individuals’ participation in literacy practices may be understood as a process through which individuals and discourse are mutually constituted (Davies, 1993/2003).

Individuals thus negotiate gendered subjectivities in relation to the subject positions made available to them in particular historic and discursive locations (Davies 2000a). This is not to say subjects are entirely without agency. They can and do work on themselves, as they must, to bring about change. They can, and sometimes do, become aware of the constitutive effect of inequitable discourses and set out to change those discourses (Davies 1990, 1997, 2000b). A necessary step in opening the possibility of agency for teachers and students in this context of literacy and gender is the careful examination of literacy and gender discourses at work through the practices of critical literacy.

But any work on the development and practices of critical literacy must go hand in hand with the ongoing maintenance of the location of self within current discourses. This is a difficult contradiction that lies at the heart of critical literacy. While learning to critique discourses, students are also inexorably tied to them. The task of accomplishing oneself as appropriately
gendered—that is, of becoming a recognisably appropriate and appropriated subject (Davies, 2000a) within the normative frames of gender—takes place through the same practices through which one becomes appropriately and even critically literate.

The importance of recognition in this process of becoming appropriated cannot be underestimated. As Butler (2004: 31) puts it:

...to persist in one’s own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition. If we are not recognizable, if there are no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it is not possible to persist in one’s own being, and we are not possible beings; we have been foreclosed from possibility.

Each child makes her- or himself recognisable, so maintaining the possibility of being recognisably someone, of being able to persist in his or her own being. Butler (2004: 3) also points to the advantages of “remaining less than intelligible” when

...intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of social recognition according to prevailing social norms. ... if I have no desire to be recognised within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred.

Discourses of literacy are generally not constructed within official policies as fundamentally implicated in this complex process of constituting subjects in the way that we suggest here. Literacy is presented, rather, as a desirable but neutral generic skill. Resistance to literacy is construed as being wilfully (and irrationally) engaged in by specific troubled and troubling students and/or as a fault deriving from particular social backgrounds. In this reading the problem of illiteracy or resistance to literacy arises from the nature of individuals and the nature of their backgrounds. This is overlaid with pedagogical and systemic discourses in which the “problem” is constructed as stemming from poor teaching, or from the absence of government standardisation and control of educational processes. Where failure (or refusal) to acquire literacy is blamed on deficient backgrounds, it is often the dominant forms of masculinities and femininities in the groups in question that are seen to limit the opportunities and achievements of particular students.
Within a neoliberal framework differences in individuals and backgrounds are only of interest or value insofar as they feature in what Kelly (2001) refers to as 'processes of responsibilisation', through which individuals and families, in particular, are discursively constituted as fully responsible for management of the self in the myriad competitive, choice-making activities that make up life under neoliberal governance. Despite the discursive contradiction that demands at once a deployment of individual characteristics and background in order to gain competitive advantage, while concurrently effacing the significance of individual difference to complex processes such as literacy learning, the ideal end point in most national literacy programmes is constructed as one in which all children are the same. Differences are to be ironed out, at least as far as the performance of skills are concerned. Strategies for addressing disparities of access include the implementation of increased competition and surveillance through national testing, standardisation of curricula, reliance on evidence-based practice, increased reporting, and competition among schools for funding and recognition. These strategies are intended to push teachers and students alike to attempt to generate equal (and higher) outcomes for all students thus fitting them to be appropriate workers in the neoliberal economy (Davies, 2003).

A counter position to this construction of literacy as desirable and innocent, and of particular individuals and groups as guilty, is the position that literacy discourses and practices (including performances of illiteracy) are intricately entangled in the ways in which becoming masculine and feminine are accomplished—and in relation to this, in producing the knowledge of how one accomplishes agency and power in relation to one’s social group and to the economic order. Being gendered shapes individual interest and engagement in literate practices. Literate practices in turn shape the ways in which one becomes gendered. Current neoliberal strategies of standardisation, surveillance and increased competition that claim to produce generic students for whom equity issues are no longer relevant, do not get to the heart of the ways in which literacy, gender and social power are mutually constitutive.

Within capitalist countries the acquisition of literacy (and related economic benefits) is an indicator of differential access to power. That some middle-class girls have outstripped some boys does not, despite all the moral panic, undo the structures and practices that favour men. Globally, low levels of literacy and poverty are the province of “poor women and
women of colour” (Butler, 2004: 6). In neoliberal discourse the claim is made that everyone should conform to the same standards. This does not mean they should be equal since neoliberalism depends on competition and each person’s striving to be better than the others. Further, the free, autonomous, competitive individual who is successful within neoliberal economies is arguably white, middle class and male. Making difference irrelevant means that all subjects should strive to compete with him and also become like him.

Our search of the gender and literacy literature in educational contexts suggests, indeed, despite the neoliberal passion for standardisation and generic students, a heightening of gender difference in the accomplishment (or lack of accomplishment) of literacy. Gender, we suggest, has increasing significance as a site upon which the performance of oneself as an appropriately literate subject is played out. The desirable subject of educational discourse is increasingly one whose gender performativity and literate practices are aligned to (and indeed, re-produce) normative versions of the idealised gendered economic subject. This paper aims, therefore, to re-read recent literature on gender and literacy with a view to examining the ways in which gendered literacy practices and pedagogies figure in the discursive shaping not of the post-gender generic subject, but of the gendered economic subject.

The scriptural economy: the blank page on which the economic subject is written

Introducing the term “scriptural economy”, Michel de Certeau (1984) directly links literate practices, or the deciphering and production of written scripts, with the economy. In doing so he reconfigures language and identity in terms of production. Certeau links the development of scriptural/writing practices to social changes that emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries, and argues that for the past three centuries in Western cultures, “learning to write has been the very definition of entering into a capitalist and conquering society” (Certeau, 1984: 136). Through the elements of the blank page, the constructed text, and the production of meaning through which change is effected, Certeau argues, subjects are constituted according to the capitalist terms of modern Western societies.

The blank page, as understood by Certeau, is “a space of its own [that] delimits a place of production for the subject” (Certeau, 1984: 134). Simultaneously a site of isolation and
distance from the world, as well as a site of mastery and autonomy over the production of text, the blank page is a means by which particular subject positions are made available. Thus through the very space of the page, the scriptural subject is, he says, constituted within a particular set of discursive understandings and possibilities: “In front of his blank page, every child is already put in the position of the industrialist, the urban planner, or the Cartesian philosopher—the position of having to manage a space that is his own and distinct from all others and in which he can exercise his own will” (Certeau, 1984: 134).

Certeau tacitly enters here into the construction of the writing subject as masculine through his choice of images and of pronouns. The active subject who asserts his will on the blank fabric of the social world and who accomplishes himself as able to make a difference is readily mapped onto the masculine subject and onto neoliberalism. For that masculine subject, the construction of text occurs in/on this space, and can be understood in terms of productive activity through which the components and structures of language are deployed to produce, rather than interpret, exterior realities, and to produce, rather than interpret, the individual masculine writing subject. While Certeau’s interest here, it may be argued, is in showing how the economic (rather than the gendered) social subject is produced through the subject positions made available/taken up in conjunction with textual practices, his argument (and the tacit masculine subject to which he refers) enables us to explore the production of the economic subject through literate practices as a gendered production. Indeed, extending his argument to include the gendered nature of the literacy discourses and textual practices through which the economic subject is (in part) produced, offers new possibilities for understanding the significance of gender and literacy discourses to disparities of access, participation and outcomes in the broader social order. We are interested in exploring, through our re-reading of the literature, not only how gender hierarchies and power relations are re/produced and negotiated through literacy practices, but also how these processes map onto, and are implicated in producing, neoliberal economic discourses in distinctly gendered terms.

To illustrate this idea we will consider two examples of young students placed in front of blank pages. Our first example is drawn from an exploration of the subjectification of schoolgirls through writing practices. Davies et al (2001) used the method of collective biography to recover memories of schoolgirls’ literacy-in-the-making. In the following collective biography story of learning to write, the girl creates a flawless script on the page
and so produces herself, painfully and with intense effort, as the award-winning subject, and simultaneously as the docile subject. The external reality of the classroom is produced as a place in which one strives for mastery of the body, of the pen, of the script and in which perfect scripts win prizes:

I dip the pen into the inkbottle, careful to wipe off excess ink. I can imagine the ugly blot if I let a drop spill on the page to spoil it – please don’t let it happen – sometimes these things seem beyond my control. My hand aches from the effort of control, my whole body is tightly sprung. The capital “A” starts at the top line, a smooth curve down, done with a heavy stroke, then it must start up again, a lighter stroke this time, and meet back where it started. I am good at this but there is no room for relaxation – the lines insist on being obeyed. Start down again, break away just exactly on the dotted line – ink stains my forefinger, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth in concentration. “A is for Actil sheets”. It’s a long slow journey, laboriously making the correct marks on the paper, until I reach “Z is for...”, but determination steels my muscles. I will win the award again. (Davies, et al, 2001: 177)

The image here is not one of becoming the industrialist or philosopher, but of the effort invested in becoming the appropriate/docile girl. A girl, moreover, who makes her obedient and disciplined bid for recognition in the language of the female consumer: “A is for Actil sheets”.

In this story the girl struggles to produce again a reality in which her perfect writing mimics the book from which she copies, making no changes. Her obedience makes no room for Certeau’s masculine economic subject who acts upon the world in order to change it. Rather she is her own product, and her work accomplishes no more than enabling her to be recognised as the obedient feminine one who should win a prize. She fashions herself according to the discursive norms through which the good girl student is accomplished. She persists in her own being as one who strives and one who is recognised for that striving. She is not foreclosed from that possibility, but is foreclosed from the position of the masculine economic subject acting upon the world. In becoming literate, she is also working to accomplish herself as appropriately gendered—appropriately situated in relation to the economic world.
In our second example, we will explore the practices of a boy who acts upon the world to change it. This boy works to maintain himself as unrecognisable in his classroom. His concept of masculinity does not fit the prevailing norms of his classroom. In Butler’s (2004: 3) terms, his “sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred.” In this story (Davies, 1996: 180-182) the boy had habitually performed himself in his classroom as illiterate. Like many other boys from similar backgrounds he did not find the required performance of literate practices compatible with his idea of who he was willing to be.

The story begins when the boy finds himself in a feminist classroom. The teacher reads a story about a woman who was a pirate and who befriends a big bad pirate and persuades him to be her friend and to do good deeds with her instead of his usual bad deeds. The boy is outraged. He declares that these are not real pirates engaging in real violence. They don’t even know what real violence is, he says. Real violence means cutting people’s throats. The teacher asks the students to write their own pirate story taking up some of the possibilities opened up in the story she has read them. The boy, who until that moment had performed himself as illiterate, produced instead a highly literate story called “Barbie and Ken in Pirates”. In the boy’s story, Ken colludes with the pirates to capture Barbie and to kill her in a grotesque fashion and then throw the parts of her body into the sea.

The boy deploys literacy to change reality in the ways Certeau writes about and to position himself powerfully, as Butler (2004: 3) suggests he might, as one who does not accept the new set of norms the teacher offers him. He deploys a rhetoric of violence often associated with working class boys’ attempts to establish their status as masculine subjects. He refuses to recognise a world of gender equality (or, as he may well have read it, dominance of feminine principles) in which women, as in the pirate story that was read to him, and his teacher, can challenge his right to a world in which men occupy an unassailably dominant position.

The violent dismemberment of Barbie (well established as an icon of girls’ popular culture) can be read as a declaration of an unassailable right of men to dominate absolutely in cultural spheres. Both his production of himself as literate and as illiterate are gendered
positions and involve a struggle for recognition in ways that make sense to him. This is not just a bid for recognition of himself as a particular kind of individual but also as a bid for a world in which there are positions he can recognize as potentially his own. His rebellion against the order of the classroom is not necessarily a rebellion against power in the larger social and economic scene, where positions of power are generally taken to be masculine, but rather a rebellion against the possibility of a social and economic scene in which women might occupy positions of equal or greater power than men.

When mapped on to the genre of ‘pirate stories’, the boy’s story connects broader discourses of the economy with the gender order. The genre of pirate stories makes women largely irrelevant. It tends to cast boys and men, through a series of binaries (heroes/villains, wealthy/thieving, good/bad, and so on) as adventurers who are either charged with the responsibility for conducting international trade, exploration, and colonial expansion, or as adventurers whose untamed/untameable masculine ‘nature’ enables them to exploit the vulnerability of other men in order to achieve wealth and notoriety. In this genre the movement of capital (and the forms of domination that accompany it) is preserved as an almost exclusively male domain. Masculine entitlement to dominate absolutely in economic spheres is clearly not overlooked in the boy’s story, in which the binaries of heroes and villains, allies and enemies, and so on, are collapsed through the collusion between Ken and the pirates. Masculine domination is preserved through the violent re-inscription of the male/female binary, as the boy draws on and subverts the teacher’s efforts to reconfigure the gender order of the classroom. We see illustrated in this story the capacity of even the very young to use literacy to police the bounds of the gender order in ways that extend well beyond the immediate spheres of homes and classrooms (see also Clarricoates, 1978; Walkerdine, 1981). And we see the ways in which literacy, gender and the economic order implicate each other in complex ways.

To recast this in the language of Certeau, the manipulation of exteriority through scriptural practices involves both subjection and constitutive capacity, and these together are crucial to expansionist capitalist agendas:

The island of the page is a transitional place in which an industrial inversion is made: what comes in is something ‘received,’ what comes out is a ‘product.’ The things that go
in are the indexes of a certain ‘passivity’ of the subject with respect to a tradition; those that come out, the marks of his power of fabricating objects. The scriptural enterprise transforms or retains within itself what it receives from its outside and creates internally the instruments for an appropriation of the external space. It stocks up what it sifts out and gives itself the means to expand. Combining the power of accumulating the past and that of making the alterity of the universe conform to its models, it is capitalist and conquering (Certeau, 1984: 135, original emphasis).

Certeau’s argument has a number of implications for studies of gender and literacy, which have a long (albeit varied) tradition of voicing concerns about the ways in which girls, in particular, experience the effects of educational disadvantage in numerous aspects of social life within and beyond schooling. If, as Certeau suggests, scriptural practices are a discursive means by which subjects are produced primarily as economic subjects, then gender debates within literacy studies might usefully be re-read. We might ask, for example:

- in what ways can the intersections between gender and literacy be understood in relation to the prevailing patterns of dominance in the economic order;
- in what ways are economic discourses inserted into discourses of gender and literacy, making those economic discourses appear natural and desirable; and
- to what extent do the gender debates function to facilitate a reconfiguring of gendered subject positions and power relations that are more readily aligned with current economic agendas?

In the following section of this paper we will explore these questions through the research on gender and literacy.

Gender in/differences: gendered literacy practices and the economic order

In this last section of the paper we will focus on the discursive locations of literacy classrooms, of parent-child interactions around text, and of schools and classrooms more generally. 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 neoliberal discourse. For boys, becoming an appropriate/d gendered literate
subject is a necessary component of becoming an economic subject, a point that is apparent to even young boys, as noted by Gilbert and Gilbert (1998: 135-136). In interviews with primary school age boys, they found that most boys: “were quite accepting of and even committed to the notion that school meant doing work and that that was important. When asked about this they invariably pointed out that you needed to do the work for pragmatic reasons—the need to prepare for high school and careers”.

Despite the widely documented tensions around masculine performativities in relation to literacy learning, then, even boys who are resistant to literacy practices are not unaware of the discursive associations of education and economy. Boys may (and indeed, often do) choose not to conform to the discursive and relational demands placed on them in the processes of becoming and performing themselves as ‘scriptural subjects’. In contrast to the obedient feminine subject we saw in the "A is for Actil sheets" story, boys may resist working to produce themselves as obedient literate subjects. Instead, they may invest considerable effort in maintaining dominant positions in the social order of classrooms and playgrounds, which in turn maps onto the masculine primacy at work in the broader social and economic order (see Martino, 1995).

As the story about the boy and the pirates illustrated, a boy who might not perform well on standardised literacy tests and who might even be regarded as illiterate, can nevertheless exercise scriptural power in maintaining the gender order and his ascendant place in it. Standardised testing may occlude relations of power and actual access to power within the gender order and within the economic order. It may also fail to reveal literary competencies that students actually have, particularly as these relate to power and to the economic order. The enormous emphasis placed on standardisation and testing by neoliberal governments is perhaps more to do with the control of teachers following the undermining of trust in professional knowledge than it is to do with actual literacy and numeracy.

For educators concerned with gender equity, the imperative to cultivate students as economic, as well as literate subjects presents a number of complexities of which gender is a crucial dimension. Improvements in girls’ achievement and participation, for example, have drawn criticism from the ‘what about the boys?’ campaign. Educators are faced with the
paradox of calls for greater attention to the educational, emotional and social needs of boys in schools and classrooms, despite ample evidence that the intersection of gender with factors such as social class, ethnicity, and geographical location are central in determining schooling success or failure for individual students (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). Paradoxically, educators have been faced with the acknowledged need to find ways of engaging boys in the critical/deconstructive work of recognising and reconfiguring the dominant versions of masculinity that limit and constrain their educational choices, social relations and learning outcomes (Mac An Ghaill, M., 1994; Davies, 1997; Mills, 2001).

The recent “what about the boys?” campaign notwithstanding, a central concern of studies of gender and literacy is the extent to which girls’ educational experiences and engagement with literate practices differ from the educational experiences of boys. Elaine Millard (1997) argues that boys and girls are discursively produced as ‘differently literate’ through gendered differences in interactions between teachers and students, through social relations between peers and the social organization of classrooms, through the texts available to and taken up by students, as well as differences in writing practices, subject preferences, and academic achievements. Yet differences in the ways in which children gain access to and are located within gender discourses begin long before children enter formal schooling. Studies of gender and literacy in early childhood highlight the ways in which children are constructed, and construct themselves and others as gendered and literate social subjects from very early ages (Davies, 1989/2003; Davies and Kasama, 2004). In the contexts of home and family, of popular culture, and of formalised early childhood settings, young children’s literate practices are ‘read’ through discourses of gender.

Regardless of the context in which literacy instruction and literacy practices occur, it is important to bear in mind the constitutive function of the texts through which literacy learners are constructed as particular types of social subjects. For example, research from the 1970s onward (see, for example, Baker & Freebody, 1989; Baker & Davies, 1993; Jackson & Gee, 2005) has been concerned with the ways in which the texts used in literacy instruction, and early childhood texts, construct the reading subject through gendered language, storylines and visual images. This research documents an important means by which the construction of gendered subject positions and power relations occurs.
Recent debates around the use of popular cultural texts in literacy instruction provide additional territory for exploring the gendered nature of texts produced for children. Some researchers (see, for instance, Marsh, 2000, 2003) argue that popular cultural texts can be usefully deployed in the aid of literacy learning. Incorporating popular cultural texts into literacy teaching and literacy activities is seen, in this instance, as a means of acknowledging and engaging with the texts and interests with which children are already familiar and from which they derive pleasure and produce meaning. Rather than reliance on canonical ‘high culture’ texts traditionally favoured in curricula, and which fail to draw on children’s cultural knowledge in favour of inculcating children with hegemonic texts and social knowledges, the argument advanced by Dyson, Marsh, and numerous others (for an excellent overview, see Marsh, 2003) is that the popular texts enjoyed by children provide a rich resource for teaching and learning. In terms of the principle of drawing on children’s cultural capital in order to teach them in relation to what they already know, this is a popular and convincing claim (see for example Arthur, 2001, 2005; Marsh, 2005).

While it is acknowledged in this literature that popular culture texts pose some problems, for instance, through the ways in which they construct gender stereotypes in unproblematic terms, there is a growing tendency to view popular texts as potential sites for teachers to provide a space in which dominant narratives can be disrupted and alternative subject positions and gender identities explored (see, for example, Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Marsh 2005). Notwithstanding the potential of such texts to engage teachers and students in meaningful re/negotiations of their place in the gender order, it is important not to be naïve about the huge and successful investment in those popular culture sites by those whose material interests are served by successfully generating gendered desires in their potential consumers. While proponents of the use of popular culture in literacy teaching note that the appeal of superhero and other popular figures is part of the “consumerist universe” (Marsh, 2000:10) inhabited by children, they argue strongly for their incorporation into reading activities along with a critically literate approach. In this paper, however, we want to offer a counterpoint by highlighting the constitutive function of popular texts in producing not only gendered subjects, but also gendered/economic subjects. The pervasiveness of popular texts in the lives of children—including the desires they invoke and the subjective promises they offer through multiple sites of advertising, toys, interactive games, websites, television, film, clothing, accessories, sporting goods, food products and home furnishings—raises important questions about how and in what ways popular texts are implicated in constituting the
gendered/economic subjects that teachers encounter in the classroom. While the critical literacy project is an important means by which students may be invited to interrogate their own construction within the terms of capitalist economies, such an undertaking requires that both teachers and students develop sophisticated skills for inspecting those aspects of their subjectivities that have been acquired in ways that may lie outside their conscious analytic gaze.

While we are not suggesting wholesale exclusion of popular texts in literacy lessons and in other aspects of classroom instruction, it is important to recognise and interrogate the work such texts do to produce neoliberal subjectivities and social relations, which serve the economy in both implicit and explicit ways. In particular, weight may be added to their legitimacy when they are deployed as classroom texts, thus potentially undermining the work that is undertaken as part of a critical literacy exercise. Teachers may work to enable boys to constitute themselves as aligned rather than opposed to the goals of teachers, and to enable girls to become active agents who are more than consumers of multiple versions of exaggerated femininity, but the texts themselves are at work across multiple sites of desire and recognition beyond the bounds of classroom experience (for teachers and students alike), offering terms of recognisability within an economic framework that emphasises gender difference in the ways we outline here.

In Certeau’s terms, the pedagogic move toward the popular can be understood within the terms of the scriptural enterprise. Already cast as a capitalist endeavour, the scriptural enterprise is reliant on a remaking/reconfiguring of commercial texts into pedagogical texts, and on the commercial nature and appeal of those texts to adults and children alike. Their appeal is used as the very justification for their pedagogical deployment, and literacy instruction becomes itself a transactional/commercial enterprise, which is inexorably tied to industries and economies—those same industries and economies that education is obliged, through neoliberal policies, to serve. In this way the insidious discourses of the market, which depend, in numerous ways, on maintaining gender binaries and hierarchies, have already become part of the fabric of what it means to be gendered and literate.

We will conclude a paper with a brief look at some of the recent research on gender and literacy (for a fuller discussion, see Davies & Saltmarsh, forthcoming).
In an Australian study of the discourses upon which parents draw to explain their children’s literacy development, Sue Nichols (2002) analyses interviews with parents of young children. She finds that parents constitute their children through discourses of individualism, child-centredness, and developmentalism. Of particular salience in her study is the subtlety with which notions of choice become naturalised as qualities or characteristics of particular categories of social subject. Woven into the parents’ understandings around girls’ ‘natural’ qualities and orientations toward literate practices, and the agency afforded to boys in deciding when/whether to participate in literate practices, are notions of choosing and its place as a naturalised indicator of intelligibility within the gender order. The act of choosing is thus reconfigured as signalling a way of being—choosing to do literacy related (or non-literate related) activities is to be a particular kind of gendered social subject.

Paradoxically, in light of Certeau’s assertion of the ‘scriptural enterprise’ as ‘capitalist and conquering’, girls’ veritable immersion in literacy activities by comparison to boys is naturalised and normalised—not so much as a choice through which they act upon the world, but rather as a disposition. Their literate practices are read as activities through which their gender appropriateness (hence their subordinate place in the economic order) is refined and expressed. Boys, on the other hand, are discursively validated as choosers and doers—so that their choosing and doing, rather than attending to the minutiae of literate skills and practices, is given discursive relevance, thus reflecting their dominant status in the broader economic order. Nichols further points out that parents position boys and girls differentially with respect to notions of creativity and imitation, such that boys’ literacies and ‘ways of learning’ are understood in terms of creative ‘production’, whereas girls’ literacies are constructed in terms of their roles as consumers or imitators of texts, and their ‘ways of learning’ as ‘ways of working’. To this we would add that it is the creative entrepreneurial subject who is competitive and who wins in the neoliberal economy.

The differences accomplished through parents’ understandings of gender differences, and through popular culture are vividly reflected in children’s writing. Kanaris (1999), for example, analysed Australian primary school children’s narrative accounts of a school excursion, in which girls’ patterns of language use, narrative styles and construction of agency differ considerably from that of boys’. Kanaris argues that while girls generally write longer, more complex texts than boys, there is also a strong tendency in their writing to
position themselves as passive observers or recipients, rather than as the active, autonomous ‘doers’ at the centre of events and experiences.

When read in terms of Certeau’s claim that writing functions as a space through which writers act upon the world, what is readily apparent in Kanaris’s findings is that the textual and metaphoric spaces available to and taken up by girls are marked by observation and elaboration, whereas the spaces available to and taken up by boys are marked by boys’ recognition of themselves in terms of their capacity for and entitlement to autonomous, productive action on the world. Thus the productive work of girls’ writing can be understood in terms of their recognition of their function in providing descriptive backdrops and elaborated spaces upon which masculine production is enacted. Indeed, Kanaris notes that despite girls’ development of more sophisticated literacy skills in comparison to boys, in the world beyond the classroom greater value is placed on the kinds of literacies developed by boys.

Kanaris specifically links her argument to the world of work, arguing that the skills girls acquire in school of perfecting narrative writing and other traditional forms of literacy are insufficiently valued in workplaces in comparison to the higher value placed on the kinds of literacy skills (with relation to technology use, for example) developed by boys, through which masculinities are secured, rather than threatened. While gender differences in post-schooling outcomes have been widely documented (see, for instance, Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000a, 2000b), what is of particular interest to this discussion is the extent to which children incorporate their readings of the gender order through which they are positioned as particular types of economic subjects into the day-to-day routinised reading, writing and speaking practices through which they come to accomplish themselves as gendered literate subjects.

Throughout this paper, we have endeavoured to show how the discourses of gender and of literacy both shape, and are shaped by, broader discourses of economic participation. The pervasive operation of market discourses in literacy education, we would argue, functions as a legitimating force by which even very young students are being shaped to recognise themselves as social subjects whose accomplishment of appropriate gendered literate
identities is contingent on their subjection to and alignment with the demands of consumerist societies. The interweaving of economic discourses into literacy teaching and learning, and into the gendered social relations through which literate selves are achieved, is an insidious means by which both literacy and gender reform—as two of the key means by which more equitable educational access, opportunities and outcomes might be achieved—are conscripted into the neoliberal project of reconfiguring education according to market models.
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