27 Schooled Language: Language and Gender in Educational Settings

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1 Introduction

In referring to "schooled language," I have in mind the spoken and written language that, in various guises, pervades schools and classrooms: the language through which teaching and learning, school and classroom organization, and "discipline" take place; the language that is taught and assessed as part of the formal curriculum; but also the language that escapes adult intervention – that hangs around playgrounds, corridors, the fringes of lessons. Through their participation in diverse educational language events, girls and boys develop certain ways of using language; they also become certain kinds of students, and, more generally, certain kinds of people. Insofar as gender is "done" in educational settings it is done, to a large extent, through language. And insofar as language is gendered in educational settings, this will affect girls' and boys' development as "schooled subjects," their experiences of education, and what they get out of it.

Research carried out in educational settings may (like research in other contexts) contribute to theoretical debate about language and gender. But it is also bound up with distinctly practical concerns, which raise equally important issues for researchers. In this chapter I want to examine three "shifts" that have taken place in recent years, that are relevant to the conduct of research in education and that are, to differing degrees, relevant to research carried out in other contexts. These are shifts in conceptions of "language" and "gender"; in educational policy and practice; and in contexts of communication – principally, the increasing importance of electronic communication. Educational research has become "unsettled" in several respects, and the points I identify below pose certain dilemmas for researchers.

2 Shifting Conceptions of "Language" and "Gender"

A great deal of research on language, gender, and education has been concerned to document differences and inequalities in girls' and boys' language behavior. Girls and boys were observed to have different speaking styles, they made different reading choices, they wrote in different ways and about different topics. But boys' speaking styles allowed them to dominate classroom interaction, so that girls had limited opportunities to contribute; books and other resources used in schools contained many more male than female characters and examples; male characters in stories were more active and had less restricted roles than female characters; information books often neglected women's and girls' experiences and contributions to society; even in literacy, an area associated with high achievement amongst girls, there were arguments that girls' success in school did not help them – and in certain respects hindered them – in doing well outside school, and particularly in gaining high-status careers. "Equal opportunities" initiatives, designed to counteract such imbalances and inequalities, have included encouraging girls to contribute more in class discussions, encouraging more collaborative talk between students, introducing books/resources containing less stereotyped images, and broadening the range of reading and writing carried out by girls and boys. (For a review of these developments, see Swann 1992.)

The picture of difference and (consequent) inequality that I have sketched out above comes from research carried out, in the main, since the 1970s. It is, therefore, an "established" set of research findings that has had an impact on policy and practice in Britain and several other countries. It is, however, challenged by a shift in conceptions of language and gender that has both theoretical and practical implications. I'm referring here to what might be termed the postmodern shift that has affected language and gender research in general, not just in educational settings: a development that may be represented as running from relative fixity to relative fluidity in terms of how "language" and "gender" are conceived and how the two are seen to inter-relate. Recent research on language and gender has tended to focus on diversity (prioritizing differences amongst women/girls and amongst men/boys rather than seeing gender as a "binary" distinction); on context and performativity (seeing gender as something that is "done" in context rather than as a social attribute, and also seeing language as inherently context-dependent); and on uncertainty and ambiguity (in terms of the meanings of what language users say and do). Several collections covering aspects of language and gender both address and exemplify such preoccupations (e.g. Bergvall, Bing, and Freed 1996; Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton 1999; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Johnson and Meinhof 1997; Wodak 1997).

To illustrate the implications of this shift I shall look at three papers that, in various ways, challenge a distinction that has often been made in research on spoken language, between "cooperative" speaking styles (associated with female speakers) and "competitive" speaking styles (associated with male speakers). I have chosen the cooperative/competitive distinction because it is educationally relevant. It has been associated, for instance, with "male dominance" in classroom settings, with female students having less opportunity to participate in class discussion, and with certain inequalities in assessment practices (see e.g. Cheshire and Jenkins 1991; Jenkins and Cheshire 1990; Holmes 1994; and various studies discussed in Swann 1992). There has also been some debate over whether changes to classroom talk to render this more collaborative may be considered a process of "feminization" (see discussion of this in Swann and Graddol 1995). Any challenges to the cooperative/competitive distinction, therefore, have practical as well as theoretical significance.

Roger Hewitt (1997) argues that "cooperation" has functioned more as a moral or political term than as an analytical one, and that insufficient attention has been paid to the different ways in which cooperation may be done, or the different forms this may take. Hewitt distinguishes between "declarative" (individually oriented) and "coordinative" (collectivity oriented) dimensions in talk. Cooperation, he suggests, may be done by asserting the coordinative dimension (emphasizing interconnectedness) or by denying the declarative dimension (downplaying self-interest).[1] Hewitt also notes that the declarative and coordinative dimensions may be carried out simultaneously in an utterance – a smile, or intonation, could be doing the coordinative work while the words have a declarative function. Furthermore, surface forms of expressions may not relate directly to these dimensions – a style that appears highly competitive, for instance, may allow speakers to cooperate effectively on a certain task. This last point of Hewitt's relates to an established distinction between language forms and functions. Cooperation and competition are best regarded as functional categories: something achieved in an interaction. They may be differently realized – cooperation may be realized through a range of linguistic forms, including some that do not immediately "look" cooperative. Hewitt goes rather further than this, however, claiming that a form may simultaneously function as competitive and collaborative.

Hewitt illustrates this framework with an example of a game known as "boxing out and taxing," played by boys in a South London secondary school. The game is played within groups – players have to opt in (and may subsequently opt out). Within the groups, players try to catch one another unawares and box (i.e. knock) something out of another player's hand. They may then claim the object or, more usually, an amount of money due after a few days. Players who don't pay up in time may be "taxed" – that is, charged interest on their debt. In practice, players who have been boxed out try to cancel the debt by boxing out the person to whom they owe money, or another player. A lot of talk takes place around this game – for example, standard performatives, such as calling "box-out" to indicate that a player has knocked something out

of another's hand, and that this counts as a box-out within the game; arguments about box-outs; and appeals to bystanders/other group members to resolve disputes. The game is highly competitive: Hewitt notes that it displays "ferocious levels of competitive individualism" (1997: 40). Nevertheless, Hewitt claims that some cooperation is evident, for example in the simultaneous assertion and denial of the declarative dimension (by using some degree of mitigation, or even in the use of an insult – "you tight arse" – which claims the right to insult but also familiarity).

Hewitt's framework, at least as described in the paper I have referred to, is still rather sketchy, but the main point of relevance here is that Hewitt is attempting to complexify notions of competition and cooperation, drawing attention to some degree of ambiguity in the ways these may be worked out interactionally, and to the difficulty of drawing a categorical distinction between them.

Similarly, Amy Sheldon's concern (1997) is to problematize straightforward conceptions of gendered language use. Sheldon takes issue with a dichotomous model of gender (in which female groups and female conversations are characterized as cooperative and egalitarian, and male groups/conversations as competitive and hierarchical). She argues that girls will do competitive and oppositional talk, but how this is done will vary across cultures and contexts. In relation to her own work with US Midwestern preschool children, she draws a distinction between two types of conflict style: "double-voice discourse" and "single-voice discourse." In double-voice discourse, "the 'voice' of mitigation and social sensitivity is bound up with the 'voice' of self-interest and egocentricity"; in single-voice discourse, "[i]nteractants have the single orientation of pursuing their own self-interest without orienting to the perspective of the partner or tempering their self-interest with mitigation" (1997: 231). Double-voice discourse seems to be consistent with Hewitt's suggestion that, in his terms, declarative and coordinative dimensions may exist simultaneously in interactions. Sheldon suggests that such discourse will be found in solidarity-based groups where harmony and collaboration are important.

Sheldon found that both girls and boys in her study engaged in conflict talk; both girls and boys used double-voice discourse in managing this, but girls used double-voice discourse more frequently, sometimes engaging in highly elaborate negotiations. Like Hewitt, then, Sheldon seeks to question any straightforward distinction between notions such as cooperation and competition in talk. She is also concerned to complexify gender, seeing this as performative ("I will discuss how gender can be 'done' in children's discourse": 1997: 225) and as differentiated. Although she actually finds a fairly clear gender difference in children's interactional strategies – a difference illustrated in transcripts and that she can also express in numerical terms – she tends to downplay this difference, emphasizing the importance of culture, context, and children's social goals. In contrast to earlier research (and to an earlier paper drawing on similar data: Sheldon 1990) she is concerned with "reframing" conceptions of gender and moving away from a "dichotomous" distinction between speakers.

Some of my own work has addressed the notion of cooperation, in this case focusing on different readings of the same spoken texts. One example of this is a (re-)analysis of a discussion between two students, a girl and a boy, who were working together on a writing task they had been set by their teacher. They had to produce a jointly authored story and key this into a computer. The discussion had been video-recorded and previously analyzed by researchers working on a project on Spoken Language and New Technology (SLANT), carried out in the southeast of England.[2] The original analysis was concerned not with gender issues but with collaborative talk and learning. The researchers suggested that the girl was more "spontaneous," and tended to take the lead in the interaction. The boy, on the other hand, was more reserved and unwilling to assert himself (Scrimshaw and Perkins 1997). Two female members of the SLANT team, on seeing the video, disputed this interpretation, arguing that the boy took a dominant role in the interaction, exercising more control over the process of writing, whereas the girl was more cooperative and supportive, seeking agreement from the boy for any suggestions she made. These team members also related their interpretation to gender, seeing the interaction as a classic example of "male dominance." In analyzing the interaction, I tried to identify what features might have given rise to two apparently conflicting interpretations, and whether a "dominance" reading of the interaction was compatible with other readings (Swann 1997).

The girl speaker did seem to encourage the boy to contribute (using questions or phrases that required completion) and she also sought the boy's agreement for her own suggestions (again, using questions and question intonation). The boy did not give this kind of verbal support, nor did he seek any agreement for his suggestions. This strategy favored the boy to the extent that more of his suggestions found their way into the piece of writing produced by the students. This might be consistent with a reading of the interaction that saw the girl as having a more cooperative speaking style that also led to her "giving away power," and that saw the boy as "dominant." However, the two students also expressed different views on how they should be working, or perhaps how they wished to work. The girl was insistent that they had to agree, whereas the boy never mentioned this, and occasionally seemed slightly exasperated by the girl's insistence. In this context there seemed to be an ambiguity in the girl's use of question forms or intonation to solicit agreement: these could be read as supportive/cooperative, but also as part of an overall strategy to impose her own definition on the working relationship, with which she expected the boy to comply – that this had to be a relationship based on mutual agreement. It was difficult, then, to give a definitive reading of the text: the text seemed to be open enough to allow the co-existence of alternative – and to some extent competing – interpretations.

In combination, these studies problematize the notion of language, or more specifically linguistic meaning. In all cases, what it means to be cooperative or competitive is questioned. Rather than being distinct, these categories overlap and shade into one another. Utterances are seen as, at least, multifunctional,

but also as uncertain, ambiguous, and context-dependent. Sheldon's study, in particular, also problematizes the notion of gender, seen in her desire to "reframe" research and break away from a dichotomous model – her insistence on gender as performative and bound up with culture and context. In terms of Sheldon's interpretation of her data, this gives rise to a shift in emphasis. I suggested above that she found gender differences but played these down, whereas earlier research, with similar data, might have played them up. But the model of gender that she espouses would actually go rather further: a differentiated, contextualized, and performative model of gender has more substantial implications for empirical research, calling into question any generalized claims about gender, and about educational inequality. Sally Johnson discusses similar issues in relation to internally differentiated models of masculinity (Johnson 1997: 19–20; the Connell referred to is Bob Connell's work on gender and power; see also Connell (1995) on masculinities):

> Work within pro-feminist approaches to masculinity has explored men in terms of "multiple subjectivities," and this has led writers to abandon the idea of "masculinity" in the singular, in preference for the pluralized "masculinities". The concept of "male power" is then dislodged by the notion of "hegemonic" or "hierarchical" masculinities, perhaps best characterized as those forms of masculinity able to marginalize and dominate not only women, but also other men, on the grounds of, say, class, race and/or sexuality (Connell, 1987).

According to this view of masculinities, where gender identities and power relations are seen as highly contextualized practices, it becomes rather more difficult to make clear and generalizable statements about how men are or what they do.

Within education, Alison Jones has addressed similar problems and possibilities of working with a more fragmented notion of "girl" or "girlhood":

> the language of discourse and subjectivity offers ways of talking about complexities and contradictions in understanding girls' schooling. However, there are problems. A focus on women's/girls' multiple and fragmented experience calls into question any straightforward – and compelling – notion of power, and it also challenges the use of the term "girls" in educational research. (Jones 1993: 157)

Jones distinguishes different forms of femininity – for instance, when, in New Zealand, it is appropriate to talk about "girls" and when about "Maori girls." Johnson, similarly, distinguishes forms of masculinity differentiated by class, race, and sexuality. But these categories still seem rather too fixed. If "girl" is "multiple" and "fragmented" so, presumably, is "Maori girl." Within an interaction, seen as a contextualized practice, several aspects of identity would come into play, not all of them as obvious as gender, class, and race, and not all of them as readily specifiable by a researcher.

There are several implications here for empirical research. For instance, how do researchers assess whether a speaker is "doing gender," or any other aspect of identity? What aspects of identity are relevant at any point in an interaction? How do these relate to any one of a number of other things speakers may be doing as they talk? More contextualized models of language and meaning have similar implications: how do researchers establish the meaning of an utterance? Is one interpretation as good as any other? Given the importance of context, what should count as relevant context, and what sort of warrants or decision procedures do researchers need to draw on to make inferences about this?

I have discussed this issue elsewhere, focusing on the range of warrants evident in research on language and gender – from quantitative/variationist work to highly localized, qualitative studies (see Swann 2002). The point I want to make here is that it is necessary to have some way of relating observations to gender, but that highly contextualized studies are not always best placed to do this. Amy Sheldon's study could be interpreted in terms of gender (though she played this down). In this case, Sheldon was able to draw a direct comparison (expressible in numerical terms) between the speech of girls and boys. My own study, however, focused on a single interaction between two students who differed in several respects, including the fact that one was female and the other male. Each of the students had their own perceptions of the task they were engaged in and their own interactional purposes. The study did not – and could not – demonstrate that the students were "doing gender." The perception of two observers that the interaction was a classic example of "male dominance" is framed by, and reliant on, earlier research, carried out in other contexts. Similarly, Roger Hewitt's study is set against a generalization about male speakers' competitive styles derived from other research. It is of interest because it challenges notions of cooperation/competition, but attributing the boys' speaking styles to gender (or to masculinity, or certain forms of masculinity) would be problematical (Hewitt does not directly make this claim, but the paper is included in an edited collection on language and masculinity).

I have suggested (Swann 2002) that despite the current emphasis on context and performativity, language and gender researchers do not actually dispense with gender as an a priori explanatory category – and probably they cannot. The perception that someone is "doing gender" (or masculinity, or girlhood, or Maori girlhood) seems necessarily to depend upon an observer's prior assumptions about at least the potential salience of gender/masculinity/femininity. The danger is that researchers may make such assumptions without an appropriate warrant to support them. The issue of how local, contextualized observations may plausibly be related back to gender is something that requires further debate. Methodologically, I would favor a form of "pragmatic eclecticism": an appeal to a wider range of warrants and associated research methods drawn on as and when to target specific questions and issues; and a more explicit acknowledgment of the possibilities and limitations of all methodological choices. This would include the currently less fashionable enterprise of making

direct, even quantifiable comparisons across groups and contexts so that we can more clearly establish commonalities and differences between these; and the use of quantitative (e.g. corpus-based) approaches to complement an analysis of more contextualized examples (cf. Holmes 1996).

Although I have used research carried out in educational settings as the basis for discussion in this section, the points I have made are also relevant to research carried out in other contexts. Challenges to gendered patterns of "competitive" and "cooperative" talk, however, have more direct educational relevance. For instance, while not identical, the characteristics that have been attributed to feminine "cooperative" styles are consistent with the kind of "collaborative" talk that has been advocated as an aid to learning in educational settings. As I mentioned earlier, there has been some debate over whether educationally collaborative talk may be considered a process of "feminization" – and, if so, what the implications would be for female and male learners. The terms of any such debate are clearly thrown into question by research that challenges the nature of cooperation/competition as well as the notion of "gendered talk" more generally. The working out of such issues requires a hospitable research climate – more hospitable, I think, than currently obtains within education. I shall look further below at the articulation between contemporary research on language and gender and educational policy contexts.

3 Shifting Research Contexts: Educational Policy and Practice

In this section I want to document a shift in education as a context for research and enquiry that has led some feminists to question the nature of the research that it is possible to carry out. Although I think the points I make will have more general relevance, I shall focus mainly on developments that cover England and Wales, which is the educational context with which I am most familiar. Writing about research and educational policy developments in England and Wales, Miriam David, Gaby Weiner, and Madeleine Arnot (2000) refer to the constraints of operating in a "cold climate" – one in which feminist interests and insights have been marginalized. The climatic change is a gradual one that has taken place from the late 1980s, through the 1990s, and up to the present. It is almost a parallel, then, to the shift in conceptions of language and gender that I referred to above, and I suppose may be regarded as the other side of the coin. Certainly I want to argue that there has been a widening gap between language and gender as a research area and the design of educational policy.

I mentioned earlier that concerns about "male dominance" of talk gave rise to a number of "equal opportunities" initiatives designed to rectify perceived imbalances in classroom interaction. In this respect, there was some degree of

overlap in the interests of researchers and at least some educational policy-makers. Language issues formed part of several equal opportunities initiatives developed during the 1980s – often at local (school and local education authority) levels but also with the support of national institutions such as HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate).[3] Since the late 1980s (with, for instance, the advent of the Education Reform Act in 1988) control of several aspects of education has become more centralized. Developments such as the introduction of a national curriculum have been associated with the marginalization of gender issues, or equal opportunities initiatives in language, as in other aspects of school and classroom life. Within the English curriculum, for instance, initial proposals drawn up by the English working group chaired by Brian Cox (the "Cox Report," DES/WO 1989) contained a chapter on equal opportunities which discussed educational implications of gender differences in language use, and was clearly informed by research in this area. Subsequent non-statutory guidance for English reduced this to a few passing references (e.g. NCC 1989); and there was no mention at all of gender, or equal opportunities, in the later streamlined version of the curriculum (DFE/WO 1995).

Since the early 1990s, there has been an increasing swell of concern about the position of boys in education, and specifically about boys' "underachievement." This has become an issue in several countries – Epstein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw claim it has acquired the status of a "globalized moral panic" (1998: 3) – though it is likely to be articulated differently in different policy contexts. Within England and Wales, David et al. (2000) suggest that concern about "underachievement" dates from around 1994, and they relate it to increasing government (and media) interest in comparing examination performance across schools. Boys' "underachievement" refers to their performance relative to girls in national examinations and other forms of testing. Examinations such as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) reveal increasing levels of performance amongst both girls and boys, but with girls, overall, increasing their levels of performance relative to boys.[4] This disguises a number of important factors – for instance, where pupils choose subjects, their choices are still often gender-stereotyped; there are substantial differences in educational performance between boys, and between girls; and performance in school may not be consistent with post-school achievements: the "glass ceiling" in employment is still in evidence. (For a discussion of factors that may contribute to gender differences in educational performance, see Murphy and Elwood 1998.)

The discourse of "underachievement," however, seems to allow little scope for such qualifications. To give a brief illustration that came up at the time of writing: the A Level examination results that were released in 2000 showed an overall increase in pass rates, but whereas girls increased their performance in the higher (A and B) grades, boys' performance declined very slightly (by 0.2 per cent).[5] This was greeted by the headline "Boys in crisis" in the tabloid *Mirror* newspaper, and by "Boys left scrambling for places after A-level slump" in *The Times* (in both cases, August 17: 1). As an illustration of the "crisis," the *Mirror* ran a feature on triplets (two girls and a boy) who had just received

their results. The girls had each achieved four A grades; the "underachieving" boy, two As and two Bs. Several educationists were called upon to provide explanations – ranging from a "laddish culture" that was hostile to academic achievement, to boys' and girls' different learning styles, differences in maturity, and the effects of "girl-friendly" schooling brought about by earlier equal opportunities initiatives. *The Times* ran a rather more cautious appraisal by Alan Smithers, Director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at Liverpool University, which discussed the relationship between subject choice and grading (subjects chosen by girls tend to give higher grades), the nature of the examination, and girls' improved job opportunities. Within a few days of the release of the results, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, had outlined "a package of measures to narrow the gender gap in educational achievement." These included asking all local education authorities to provide a detailed evaluation of programs they had been asked to set up two years previously to tackle boys' underachievement; getting more male teachers into the classroom ("changing the status of the teaching profession by offering higher salaries and career opportunities"); changing primary school reading lists to "make books more stimulating and engaging for boys"; promoting the importance of literacy to boys; using role models such as professional footballers in after-school study centers at Premiership and Nationwide football clubs; setting up a "Gender and Achievement" web site to provide advice to schools; commissioning research; organizing regional conferences for schools and education authorities to hear the views of experts; and introducing various measures, including a large advertising campaign, to encourage young people to stay on in education. Mr. Blunkett acknowledged that the problem was an international one, but commented: "I am determined that our boys should not miss out" (Department for Education and Employment, August 20, 2000).[6] One might ask where such massive government intervention was when "our girls" were identified as "missing out" during the 1970s and 1980s.

The discourse of "underachievement" is of interest in its own right, but I am referring to it here because it represents a challenge to feminist interests in gender issues, including feminist interests in language and gender. It signals a potential reversal of the kinds of equal opportunities initiatives I mentioned earlier, that were carried out particularly during the 1980s. In reading the literature on underachievement, there is a sense that girls have had their day – it's now the boys' turn. In a report of a survey of equality projects in schools and local education authorities (LEAs), Arnot, Millen, and Maton comment:

> the most significant finding was the current primacy of "improving boys' achievement" projects. Out of 96 named school or LEA projects, 40 were targeted on boys only, 35 projects focused on both sexes, although often boys' underachievement was mentioned as a particular issue to be tackled, and only three projects were specifically targeted at girls. (Arnot et al. 1998: 18)

Specific concerns have often been raised (as in the DfEE press release above) about boys' language use and about their learning of language and literacy. Several publications have been designed to address boys' "underachievement" in English (e.g. Frater 1997; Ofsted 1993; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) 1998; School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) – undated, but around 1997). I shall look briefly at one example, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's *Can Do Better*. *Can Do Better* illustrates, I think, the potential marginalization of girls' interests and the incompatibility with contemporary research on gender that has characterized many policy statements on underachievement.

Can Do Better discusses boys' performance in different aspects of English (speaking and listening, reading and writing); how the implementation of the English curriculum may affect boys' learning; how teachers can investigate boys' achievements in their own schools; and various forms of positive action to help boys. The booklet explicitly prioritizes boys' interests over girls':

> There are still major issues to be addressed relating to girls' achievements and aspirations, and these must not be forgotten. However, more recently public attention has shifted to boys and their relative underachievement up to and including GCSE across wide areas of the curriculum. In some subjects, including English and English literature, the difference in achievements is particularly pronounced. (QCA 1998: 9)

The sop to girls' interests here is a common strategy. For instance, Terry Reynolds, an inspector of English in a London borough, sees "underachievement" as a moral panic and is also cynical about a move to reduce the coursework element in GCSE examinations: "I'm sure I'm not alone in believing that the decision to limit coursework [. . .] was at least in part prompted by a desire to give the boys a better chance in competing against the girls" (1995: 15). Despite this apparent skepticism, Reynolds advocates teaching strategies to deal with "underachievement" that he claims will be more appealing to boys, and relegates girls' interests to parentheses or an afterthought.

Can Do Better attributes boys' "underachievement" to several factors, such as an anti-academic "male culture," but also to certain features of the English curriculum: English is seen as a girls' subject, for instance; English is sedentary, whereas boys prefer more active participation; and boys have limited tolerance of ambiguity: they need more well-defined tasks. English teaching, therefore, needs to appeal to boys' interests as well as extending them. The booklet's characterization of boys' speaking styles is consistent with earlier evidence from language and gender research. Boys are "generally more competitive in discussion," for instance, and "enjoy the verbal cut and thrust of debate" (pp. 12, 16). However, within the discourse of underachievement this is now reframed. Boys' speaking styles mean that they will learn less well from others, and the "cut and thrust" is not always relevant to the task in hand. Attention is thus shifted from girls (whose learning may be inhibited by boys' speaking styles) to boys (whose styles may inhibit their own learning).

Similar points emerge in relation to reading and writing. *Can Do Better* comments on boys' preference for non-fiction, and for action and fantasy. Suggestions for strategies to improve boys' literacy include selecting resources that they would find more appealing. In one case study:

> Reluctant boys showed greater interest when pupils worked collaboratively in groups on structured tasks related to short stories which had been selected to appeal to boys in particular. There was no reduction in interest from girls. (1998: 35)

This suggests a willful return to a situation documented in feminist research studies since the 1970s and 1980s, in which girls' interests could be systematically marginalized on the grounds that disaffected girls made less trouble (see, for instance, Swann 1992). Sue Adler comments also that appealing to boys' interests does little to challenge these:

> Our library fiction stock now consciously caters for reluctant young male readers, trying to entice them with stories featuring sport and computers, and seeking out books with cool covers. The pedagogy of the National Literacy Strategy, which makes reading seem active and breaks activities into short periods of time, may well suit boys. I do not, however, see anything in the courses and lists promoting boys' fictional reading that confronts the resistance to read anything that could be construed as "girls' books". Rather, the spin on reading is that it can be a "laddish" activity. (Adler 2000: 211)

Can Do Better comments on the predominance of narrative in writing tasks set for students. The claim is that this may leave students ill-equipped to cope with later writing demands, such as the need to write to inform and persuade in work contexts. Because boys are more inclined toward non-fiction, a lack of attention to this may disadvantage them more. Boys may also be disadvantaged because teachers value writing that is neatly presented and without spelling errors. Teachers may "undervalue structure and action in boys' stories and appear to give greater emphasis to handwriting and spelling" (p. 20). More evidence is needed to support assumptions such as the link between boys' "non-fiction" writing preferences and workplace persuasive writing. But the main point of interest is that very similar assumptions underpinned a claim twelve years earlier that such educational practices disadvantaged girls – that girls' very success in English limited their success in other subject areas (because they were not given practice in a wider range of genres) and did not prepare them for high-status careers. In a paper that was influential at the time, Janet White argued:

> The English Department which operates with a punctilious view of "good" writing (a matter of prescriptive correctness) and enshrines only a few types of writing as the "best" (fictional narrative, varieties of "creative" description) is ultimately doing as great a disservice to its predominantly female students as are the overtly "unfriendly" male-dominated subject areas. (White 1986: 570)

I have singled out this study because White is also credited as a member of the working party that, in a very different context, contributed to *Can Do Better*. This raises issues about the way feminists operate, and are able to operate in the current educational climate – I shall return to these below.

Can Do Better demonstrates how a concern with "underachievement" represents a shift in focus – toward boys, and away from girls; and how this may involve a certain amount of reframing: activities that were once taken as evidence of girls' educational disadvantage may be re-interpreted as disadvantaging boys. There is a fear amongst feminists that this may lead to a diversion of energy, resources, and general consideration toward boys, and to a consequent marginalization of girls' interests.

Put this way, the issues seem rather polarized, and bound up with fixed and static notions of both language and gender. It is significant that I have related discussion and examples in the booklet back to earlier (1970s and 1980s) feminist research and initiatives. The booklet itself presents a uniform picture of boys/masculinity: there is no consideration of different types of boys or girls; nothing on other social factors such as race or class; nothing on context; no attempt to problematize masculinity – or, for that matter, underachievement; and no concession to uncertainty in the meaning of language or language practices. If the booklet may be critiqued in this way then so, of course, may any feminist concerns (my own included). If the meaning of language practices is relatively open and subject to (re)negotiation, then why should change to these (whatever the motivation) necessarily disadvantage "girls"? Faced with the heavy binarism of the underachievement debate, however, I do not think "every girl for herself" is an appropriate response. If boys are positioned as "boys," who underachieve in relation to "girls" and who require certain "boy-friendly" strategies to help them, there seems to be every reason for concern about the position of girls.

It is possible to engage on different terms with issues of "underachievement." More critical, and more sophisticated responses are found, as might be expected, in academic texts (see e.g. the papers in Epstein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw 1998, and in Epstein, Maw, Elwood, and Hey 1998). They may also be found in "official" publications in certain policy contexts. Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert tackled the issue of boys' underachievement in a package of materials entitled *Boys and Literacy*, published by the Australian Curriculum Corporation. *Boys and Literacy* was produced in a climate in many ways similar to that which inspired *Can Do Better* – as a response to widespread concerns about boys' participation and performance in English and language arts (Alloway and Gilbert 1997a: viii).

While the publication takes such concerns seriously, and focuses on practical suggestions to help teachers tackle boys' performance in literacy, it also adopts a relatively complex model of masculinity. Alloway and Gilbert discuss "the ways that boys take themselves up as masculine subjects," and emphasize differences between boys and between girls:

> [Looking at the interaction between race, class, geographical location and gender] allows for more complex readings of which groups of boys and girls are at risk of under-achieving in school-based literacy, and which groups are most privileged. [. . .] An exploration of the performance and achievement of boys in school literacy learning needs to take this intragroup difference seriously. (1997a: 5)

> The complex relationships between class, ethnicity and masculinity [. . .] may mean that privileged groups of boys are more likely to be encouraged to accept some forms of school regulation in anticipation of career and professional rewards in the post-schooling period. (1997a: 8)

Alloway and Gilbert also acknowledge the dangers of a "competing victim syndrome" (1997a: 12), in which a focus on boys means a reallocation of resources, time, and energy away from girls. They argue that what it means to be literate is under constant renegotiation (e.g. in relation to technological change) and they emphasize the need for critical literacy, which would (amongst other things) engage with the social construction of masculinity. The materials address the issue of boys' achievement in literacy:

> - by questioning school literacy practices
> - by making visible the tensions associated with being positioned as literate within school culture and being identifiably male within boys' culture
> - by developing strategies for contesting these tensions with boys.
>
> [. . .] a critical approach to gender and literacy will give boys the skills to critique and to challenge their own practices. (1997a: 13)

Teaching units (Alloway and Gilbert 1997b) include activities to "deconstruct" video and print texts, to explore tensions between dominant masculinities and school literacy practices, and to explore alternative masculinities.

At issue here is the extent to which this relatively complex and critical approach to gender and literacy is compatible with participation in an initiative to tackle boys' "underachievement." The focus of such initiatives is necessarily on boys, even if masculinities are pluralized and held up to question. I am not sure whether researchers can avoid a binary position if they enter the "underachievement" arena (i.e. if they are complicit in any way with this rather than critiquing from the outside). I shall return below to alternative positions that may be taken up by educational researchers.

4 Shifting Contexts for Communication

Alloway and Gilbert's critical approach to literacy suggests that literacy is in a constant state of flux. The point would apply to language practices in general, which constantly change with the advent of new contexts, communication

technologies, and communicative purposes. Such changing practices would affect not only how girls and boys communicate but also, necessarily, how they do gender.

Electronic communication has given rise to a range of diverse texts and practices. These have sometimes been said to undermine traditional notions of authorship, readership, and text, and to open up opportunities, as well as posing severe challenges for the English curriculum and for education more generally (e.g. Spender 1995; Tweddle 1995). There has been continuing speculation about the extent to which electronic communication might permit, or encourage, new forms of interpersonal relations. Sherry Turkle (1995) looked at the practices adopted by US higher education students, who, at any one time, might engage in different communication activities via different windows on their computer screen. Students could, for instance, travel between several MUDs whilst also engaging in a "real life" activity (e.g. work or study).[7] The MUD characters could be gendered in a variety of ways or their gender could be uncertain. Turkle comments that many users felt they were taking on different identities as they interacted in each window. Furthermore, the distinction between the virtual world of the MUDs and real life sometimes blurred: one student cited by Turkle claimed "RL [real life] is just one more window, and it's not usually my best one" (1995: 13). Mindy McAdams, similarly, speculated on the possibility/desirability of hiding or changing one's gender on-line (McAdams 1996).

According to this view, electronic communication would seem to be an archetypally postmodern medium, allowing contributors a certain flexibility in how they present themselves to others, and in the terms on which they interact with others, and giving rise to a kind of "identity-hopping" that would be difficult to match in face-to-face communication. Feminists have also suggested that electronic communication may have specific advantages for girls/women. Dale Spender draws a favorable comparison between certain uses of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the kinds of talk traditionally associated with female speakers, such as "gossip" or chat:

> Women will be drawn in through an emphasis on the communication potential of the computer. Once women see that it is dead easy to natter on the net – to reach people all around the world, to consult bulletin boards, to "meet" in cafes and houses and art galleries without leaving home – there will be no stopping them.
>
> The only obstacle that they will have to contend with is the men who are already there: the men who have written the rules of the road. (Spender 1995: 192)

In the second part of this quotation, however, Spender is hinting at some of the problems electronic communication may pose for women and girls. Some empirical studies (Herring 1993, this volume; Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto 1995; Wylie 1995) have suggested that men's interactional dominance on the Net may be similar to their dominance in face-to-face interactions.

Within education, there is also well-documented evidence of girls' low take-up of computing, and of boys' dominance of computing resources where these are meant to be available to all in the classroom (e.g. Beynon 1993; Culley 1988; Hoyles and Sutherland 1989). As familiarity with computing has become more essential, considerable concern has been expressed about girls' educational disadvantage in this area. Spender draws an analogy with print, suggesting that new communication practices may reinforce traditional inequalities:

> After five hundred years, women were just beginning to look as though they were drawing even with the men. They have reached the stage in countries like Australia where, for the first time, more women than men have been gaining higher education qualifications. But this success has been achieved in an education system still based on print, where the skills needed to succeed have been reading, writing and memory – all things that women are good at.
>
> And just when it looks as though equity is about to be realized – the rules of the game are changed. The society (and soon, the education system) switches to the electronic medium. And "everyone" knows that girls are not as good as boys – with machines! (1995: 185)

An important and unresolved issue, then, relates to the extent to which CMC offers alternative positions for girls/women and boys/men; and the extent to which it simply returns us to traditional polarized notions of gender difference and disadvantage.

In *Can Do Better* the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority suggested that boys' knowledge of and interest in computing was not always fully used in the English classroom. More recently, Nicholas McGuinn (2000) has suggested that information technology may be a way of motivating boys, and so raising their achievements. Boys' interests in IT may encourage them to read and write more widely; and writing may seem less daunting to boys because "accuracy" is downplayed – texts are often more spontaneous than carefully crafted. The possibilities that exist for relative anonymity and for collaborative writing (relieving the pressure on individual authors) may also be helpful. It is interesting that McGuinn uses Lorraine Culley's (1988) work as support for his suggestion that greater use of IT may benefit boys. Culley, as I mentioned above, demonstrated that boys dominated computing resources – which has, not surprisingly, given rise to concern about girls. McGuinn is, like the QCA in *Can Do Better*, reframing earlier educational research, although in a slightly different way: in this case, boys' dominance of resources is taken as an indicator of their potential advantage in the area of computing (as it was in earlier feminist studies), but the interest of girls is totally neglected.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have pointed to certain changes that have taken place within language and gender as a research area and within education as an important

context for research. I have suggested that the current emphasis on "language" and "gender" as differentiated and contextualized practices, while a useful corrective to earlier relatively "static" models, makes it harder for empirical researchers to relate instances of language use plausibly to gender, or femininity/ies, or masculinity/ies. I have given my own view that, having usefully problematized "language" and "gender," it is time to begin some reconstruction work. I have also pointed to problems and possibilities afforded by the increasing importance attached to electronic communication – this suggests, at least, that researchers need to take on board a wider range of texts and practices. In both cases, these are matters for continuing debate – they affect the conduct of research and have implications for the development of language and gender as a research field.

I have also, however, pointed to a widening gap between language and gender as a research field and the educational policy context in which some language and gender researchers may wish to operate. Whereas earlier approaches to language and gender seemed able to articulate fairly readily with the practices and policy-making of the day, more recent approaches sit uneasily alongside current educational debate and policy-making. Research that takes on board complex and highly contextualized models of language and gender will be wary of over-ready generalizations about boys' "underachievement." On the other hand, in the current educational climate, with its emphasis on the speedy identification of problems such as "underachievement" and the provision of immediate and straightforward solutions, some research interests will appear, at least, rather esoteric.

Faced with a difficult research climate there are a number of strategies that researchers may adopt. Academic researchers have sometimes been able to maintain a critical stance – I referred above to the papers in Epstein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw (1998) and Epstein, Maw, Elwood, and Hey (1998), many of which sought to challenge the notion of boys' "underachievement." Such challenges are academically relevant – that is, they contribute to academic debate within education. But they are unlikely to have an early impact on educational policy or practice in Britain. Alloway and Gilbert's work on boys and literacy is an attempt to engage more directly with educational policy and practice, but on the researchers' own terms (which involves, in this case, reformulating the "underachievement" debate). The effectiveness of such an approach depends on a policy context that is, at least to some extent, open to critical debate. I have also suggested that it may be difficult to engage with policy on boys' "underachievement" without, in effect, bolstering a binary position in relation to gender. In some contexts, educationists may have little choice but to play along with educational policy that they may find uncongenial, perhaps in the hope that they may take the edge off certain developments (in relation to "underachievement," maybe keeping girls' interests within the margins of policy-making).[8] Feminists and others concerned about gender issues have always had to make choices about how to represent themselves and their work to others – this seems to be a matter of particular importance within contemporary educational research.

NOTES

1 This bears more than a passing resemblance to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness system, and to the notions of positive and negative politeness. Hewitt claims that his own categories are more inclusive than Brown and Levinson's, and they do not involve the concept of "face."

2 Spoken Language and New Technology (SLANT) was an ESRC-funded project directed by John Elliott, University of East Anglia, and Neil Mercer, Open University.

3 Language-related initiatives are reviewed in Swann (1992); David et al. (2000) and Myers (2000) provide more general reflections on equal opportunities initiatives during this period.

4 The GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is an examination taken mainly by students at the age of 16 or over.

5 The A Level (General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level) examination is taken mainly by students between the ages of 17 and 19. A Levels are widely used as entrance qualifications for higher education.

6 Department for Education and Employment "News," at http://www.dfee.gov.uk/news/ (August 20, 2000).

7 MUDs are Multi-User Dungeons, or sometimes Multi-User Domains: multi-user computer games in which participants play characters who meet and interact with one another.

8 I have taken the expression "playing along" from Gemma Moss (1989). Moss discusses a number of strategies that girls may make in response to sexism – there are some parallels between this and responses feminist and other researchers may make to an inhospitable research climate.

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