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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the elaboration of a sociocultural perspective on literacy by considering the role of gender in shaping students' participation in literacy activities in school. The project aims to illuminate the way in which gender expresses itself in and helps to shape the nature of children's literacy acquisition across different activity settings in two bilingual, elementary classrooms, as well as to examine the contexts in which gender is not salient as an organizing schema. Open-ended research questions were designed to address the following: (1) How does gender express itself through literacy, and literacy through gender, across diverse contexts for literacy learning in school? (2) In what ways is gender most salient in relation to literacy in these classrooms? How is gender expressed? (3) In what ways, and in what settings, is gender not salient? (4) What factors appear to contribute to these spaces of gender blindness? and (5) In what ways are within-gender differences evident in relation to the questions outlined above? The study was conducted in two Spanish-English bilingual classrooms, led by a Spanish speaking teacher, within a predominantly Latino working class neighborhood. Observations of classroom and interviews with teachers and students were used to gather data. (EH)

Literacy as a gendered social practice in two bilingual classrooms

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Introduction

The dominant mode of literacy instruction in operation in schools today has been built from reductionistic models of knowledge acquisition and involves breaking the complex processes of reading and writing down into small parts, in order to instruct and drill on each piece, while ignoring the multiple layers of context present in any activity in which human beings interact with the printed word. More recently, however, a growing number of researchers from different disciplines have begun to forge a view of cognition as profoundly social in nature, with all learning "situated" within specific social and cultural contexts (Lave, 1988; Brown, Collins, & DuGuid, 1989; Greeno, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1992; Gee, 1992), and with language inseparable from the forces that construct and maintain those settings. Contributions to this perspective have been made from the Vygotskian socio-historical school (Vygotsky, 1978), from anthropologists, linguists, and cross-cultural psychologists who have examined human activity in diverse societies (Price-Williams, 1975; Scribner and Cole, 1973; Scribner, 1977), and from post-modern/post-structuralist semioticians, literacy critics, and discourse theorists, who focus on the nature of knowledge and the construction of subjectivity through discourse within specific social practices (Holloway, 1984; Urwin, 1984; Rockhill, 1987; Gee, 1990; Walkerdine, 1992). Researchers have explored the ways in which novices are apprenticed into assorted communities of practice (Lave, 1978, in Cole, 1985; Jordan, 1989), and the ways in which identities are formed through this participation (Jordan, 1989; Eckert, 1989). Here, Lave (1992) is worth citing at length:

> Learning is an aspect of all activity, [and so] the question of interest for researchers becomes what, not whether, people learn. Long years as school attenders and school researchers have left school alumni (all of us) strongly disposed to compare individuals supposedly being asked to learn the same thing, with the question who is learning and who is not learning? It may be only in the context of teaching that such a question can be generated and generated in such a way that there is a simple assumption built in that some do not or cannot or will not learn. Instead we ask, for instance, how all participants in a classroom are participating in the ongoing practices of the classroom -- and what are participants learning day by day, for they are surely changing in differently engaged ways in their changing communities of practice...
>
> Learning, viewed as a socially situated activity, must be grounded in a social ontology that conceives of the person as an acting being, engaged in activity in the world. Learning is, in this purview, is more basically a process of coming to be, of forging identities in activity in the world. (pp. 2-3).

Within this perspective on learning, literacy can be seen as a process of enculturation into communities of practice that use the printed word for specific purposes and in particular ways. To become literate is to become a member of a particular discourse community, using language in ways that conform to that community's practices; people acquire literacy in ways that parallel their acquisition of spoken language (Krashen, 1982; 1985; Smith, 1982; Goodman, 1986). This perspective on learning and literacy has been called "sociocultural," a term which places social and cultural forces central to all learning, and which stands in marked contrast to the dominant strands of educational practice in the United States today.

While sociocultural models of learning and literacy have paid express attention to ethnic, cultural, and language differences in classroom settings, and the relationship of these forces to learning (Phillips, 1982, Heath, 1983; Michael, 1986; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987; Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Benson, & Goldenberg, 1991; Moll, 1992), very

little work has focused on gender or its impact on literacy acquisition, and even less on the interaction between gender and other social forces. The body of work on gender and language that exists within gender studies and sociolinguistics (see for example Gabriel and Smithson, 1990; Phillips, Steele, and Tanz, 1987; Thorne, Kramarae and Henley, 1983), has not been integrated into sociocultural theory, nor has much work been done that addresses the impact of gender on children's development as literate persons in school. This paper attempts to address this void by first exploring ways in which gender may be theorized within a sociocultural perspective on literacy, and then examining the gendered nature of literacy within two elementary school classrooms.

Theorizing gender

An important distinction must be made between gender and sex (a difference, which, while basic, continues to be obscured in much popular and professional literature). While sex assumes a biological referent, gender refers to the ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed, shaped, and expressed in society. The contribution of feminist work on gender has been to emphasize the socially constructed nature of gender as well as to give a primacy to gender not afforded by other approaches, exploring the gendered nature not just of people but of assorted practices, materials, and social relations. Much of the literature that addresses gender, however - even within some feminist traditions, and especially within educational research - continues simply to dichotomize gender differences and to approach those differences as categorical.

An alternative way of examining gender's impact on learning - one which is compatible with a sociocultural emphasis on contextual forces - is to examine differences in the ways in which gender is expressed across diverse contexts, and the ways in which the contexts themselves (or the practices engaged therein) [illegible]. Such an approach moves beyond a conceptualization of gender-as-dichotomized-difference or the treatment of gender as a static, definitive variable that operates equally across all settings, and which may in fact serve to reify supposed gender differences, especially insofar as the differences are interpreted within culturally acceptable norms.

Thorne (1993) contributes in substantial ways to a contextual model of gender and schooling by examining the places in which gender is most and least salient in the lives of elementary school children, and by considering the meanings that gender takes on in these children's lives; she also works against the tendency for researchers to focus only on teachers as the agents of gender bias, instead examining children as actively engaged in constructing, reproducing, and resisting gender differences in school. While Thorne does not address the ways in which children's *learning* is shaped by gender, focusing instead on the "play" of gender in children's social interactions, she does explore the relationship between various physical and social arrangements and the salience of gender in the classrooms. Thorne details how gender emerges as a more critical sorting variable in some situations than in others; her work exerts a profound influence on the ways in which gender will be examined in the study that follows. (For a more detailed description of the theoretical framework that informs this work, see Orellana, in progress).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the elaboration of a sociocultural perspective on literacy by considering the role of gender in shaping students' participation in literacy activities in school. The project aims to illuminate the ways in which gender expresses itself in and helps to shape the nature of children's literacy acquisition across different activity settings in two bilingual, elementary school classrooms, as well as to examine the contexts in which gender is not salient as an organizing schema.

Research questions

The following research questions were posed as an initial framework this qualitative study. The questions were designed to be open-ended in order to allow for an inductive,

interpretive, ethnographic approach to the research. The principle, guiding question for this work was:

How does gender express itself through literacy, and literacy through gender, across diverse contexts for literacy learning in school?

Specifically, the following questions were framed:

In what ways is gender most salient in relation to literacy in these classrooms? How is gender expressed? (In the degree of students' participation? In the nature of that participation? In the themes, values, and perspectives expressed in students' written work? In the ways in which the teachers in each room interact with or respond to boys and girls in relation to these literacy practices? In the cultural values, purposes, and motives that boys and girls bring to and/or extract from these literacy events?)

Feminist scholarship (Thorne, 1993) has delineated the limitations of research which dichotomizes gender differences, ignoring within-gender differences as well as cross-gender similarities. This study attempts to avoid this by keeping the following questions present during data analysis, even while differences are examined:

3. In what ways, and in what settings, is gender *not* salient? What factors appear to contribute to these spaces of gender blindness?

4. In what ways are within-gender differences evident in relation to the questions outlined above?

Data collection and analysis

Two classrooms were selected for this project. Each classroom was a Spanish-English bilingual classroom within a predominantly Latino working class neighborhood, led by a Spanish speaking teacher. The classes were selected for contrast in their approaches to literacy instruction, based on teacher interviews and classroom observations conducted during a separate research project (Rueda & Garcia, 1992). One classroom was led by a teacher whose approach to literacy learning is philosophically consistent with a sociocultural framework for learning; the classroom might be characterized as "holistic" (Poplin, 1988), "interactive/experiential" (Cummins, 1989), "socio-cognitive" (Langer, 1987), or as a "Whole Language" classroom, according to Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores' (1991) guidelines. The second classroom was led by a bilingual teacher who follows a traditional, structured, "reductionistic," (Poplin, 1988), or "transmission-oriented" (Cummins, 1989) approach to literacy instruction, implementing a curriculum that focuses on teacher-directed lessons on isolated skills, and independent practice of those skills by students. The traditional classroom was a regular second grade classroom, and the holistic one was an "ungraded primary," with an even number of students from grades one, two, and three. Classrooms that diverged in their approach to literacy (as well as in their organization of the literacy environment) were selected in order to have points of contrast for a detailed analysis of contextual effects on learning and gender expression.

Each classroom was observed for 1-3 hours on at least one morning each week for 15 weeks during literacy instruction. Field notes were taken, using Spradley's (1980) guidelines. Initial observations were used to describe the most typical activity settings in each classroom for literacy learning. Focused observations were then conducted on the most common settings, with attention to the nature and kind of participation by students in each setting. Finally, selected observations were done in order to highlight and corroborate patterns of engagement (by gender and across contexts) that emerged from the data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher. These interviews focused on the teachers' beliefs and attitudes about literacy and literacy instruction; as well as the teachers' beliefs about the effects of gender on learning, literacy, and student performance. These interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a sample of twelve students from each class, selected at random. Six from each class were boys, and six were girls. These interviews focused on the students' beliefs and attitudes about reading and writing,

and their feelings about the reading and writing activities they engage in at school. These interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

In addition, informal ethnographic interviews were conducted with the teachers and students, both individually and in small groups, as questions arose during the field work.

Samples of students' written literacy work were collected and photocopied for analysis; detailed notes were taken on 142 student-authored books that were produced in the holistically-oriented classroom. Notes were taken on other samples of students' work in the classroom environment.

The general approach to the analysis of the data was an inductive one, in which categories emerged from coding of the data rather than being imposed upon them. The various measures served as triangulation of the data as well as a means of developing a more highly textured, nuanced picture of the gendered nature of literacy in these rooms. The approaches to analysis were also informed by a feminist vision of methodology as described by Harding (1987).

The construction of literacy values

The two classrooms that are the focus of this study were selected for contrast in their approach to literacy, and so this analysis will not proceed as a mere description of obviously different learning environments. Instead, I will focus on two axes of values: the degree of emphasis that each teacher gave to control or to choice, and to form or to content. These two dimensions formed a constellation of values that helped to shape children's literacy acquisition, and the construction of their identities as literate persons, in the two rooms. These values also largely shaped the ways in which gender entered into and expressed itself through the children's literacy acquisition. I will examine each of these axes in turn, first looking at the general ways in which the values expressed themselves, and then at the ways in which these values shaped the nature of gender expression in relation to the literacy tasks.

Control vs. "choice"

In the more traditionally structured classroom, led by Ms. Artiga, considerable classroom time and energy was spent on structuring and ordering the learning process. Ms. Artiga treated literacy as something to be acquired through conscious control - of the printed word, and of the individual's physical or *bodily* interactions with text. Ms. Artiga gave the students minimal freedom of movement in order to focus their attention on text (or on the teacher as the spokesperson for that text); students were frequently reminded to sit still, to look at the teacher, to work quietly, and to stay in their seats.

The ways in which students engaged in literacy activities were also highly controlled by the teacher. Sometimes this meant that the children were led step by step through an exercise; other times students were allowed to reproduce work individually that had previously been modeled by the teacher; and at other times students worked on their own, but under the strict guidance of Ms. Artiga, who told them when to start and when to stop, based on a whole-class standard rather than the pace that individual children or groups might desire.

The tasks themselves were highly structured. Most of the activities were designed by the teacher to elicit very specific literacy skills, in which whole tasks were broken down into their components. When more open-ended activities were conducted (such as letter or story writing), these were usually modeled by the teacher, and a framework was provided for children to follow. These expressions of written literacy paralleled the forms of oral literacy that were encouraged in class, in which students supplied short answers in response to teacher-directed questions.

In Ms. Lyons' room, on the other hand, a high premium was placed on students' individual choices. Students could choose where and with whom to sit, whether to participate publicly or not, what books to read, what kind of literacy activities to engage in,

what topics to explore, etc. Students had considerable freedom of movement as well as freedom to participate or not in many activities.

However, even while Ms. Lyons resisted the idea of imposing any one standard on the class, she was not necessarily comfortable with all of the choices her students made, and while the dominant, public message to students in this classroom was that they should acquire literacy by exploring their own interests, there were a number of ways in which mixed messages were conveyed that would suggest that the curriculum was not as free as it might appear. She described her own struggle with the tensions inherent in a choice-based curriculum, and her awareness that her own view might not be shared with the students:

> That's a tension for the teacher. For the kids - that's not a tension for them. Because they *know* that we're an authority figure. We're the ones that act like we don't want to be. But they *know*. They know that, well, 'my teacher's not interested in this, or she thinks it's wrong, so we can't do it.' They know the limits of the choices more than we do... Let's say we have six books for the kids to choose from, to work in their book groups and study. But ultimately who chose those books? They were chosen by me. So the choices are very limited...

Ms. Lyons also was aware of the additional tensions that emerge when combining a choice-centered curriculum with a pedagogy that seeks to foster critical analyses of social conditions. As she explained:

> There's a fine line between giving kids choices and encouraging them to stand up for what they believe in...I mean, I want kids to stick up for what's right, and if something's not fair, I want them to speak up. And I tell the parents this. That's something we really talk about. I don't want the kids growing up accepting racism, and accepting classism, and accepting all this unfairness in life! I want them to change it! And the parents all say 'yes, yes, yes' - but the kids are going to see things at home that they don't like, and that goes against their families. And that's a real fine line that's scary for me, and it's scary for parents. We don't want to raise kids that don't respect. I mean, we need to do things with compassion and respect.

It would seem, then, that Ms. Lyons' class was weighted toward an emphasis on individual choice rather than teacher-determined activities, and that students at least shared control with the teacher (or that each had control over different aspects of the learning process), but that in this room there was a sort of dialectical tension between control (as guidance rather than authoritarianism) and choice, and that the teacher, if not the students, understood some of the contradictions inherent in a choice-based curriculum.

The gendering of control and choice

In Ms. Artiga's controlled literacy learning environment, gender was a key factor for organizing students around any given task. Two approaches to this organization were used: the segregation of girls from boys (as for example when Ms. Artiga had all the girls read from a text, and then all the boys, and compared the performance of the two groups), and the calculated integration of girls with boys (as in partner readings, in which Ms. Artiga *always* formed mixed-sex pairs, and in the small group readings, which Ms. Artiga set up with two girls and two boys in each group). (On two occasions, Ms. Artiga had students count off to form groups - a process that would have been arbitrary except for the fact that the children were alternated by gender when they began the counting, and since there was an even number in each group, the resultant groups were perfectly divided by

gender. On these two occasions, however, gender was not the principle by which the groups were formed.)

Both gender segregation and orchestrated integration made gender salient, and given that no other means of grouping students was used in this classroom (the children were not grouped by ability or language as might be true in other rooms), gender emerged as the *only* means of categorizing students in relation to their literacy learning, and it pervaded most interactions with both oral and written literacy: Ms. Artiga alternated boys and girls in all seating arrangements (as a means of limiting student-student interactions and thus achieving greater teacher-centered control); she emphasized "niños and niñas" when she called on each group, and whenever she called on students she began by alternating by gender. (By the end of each round of questions, however, she invariably called on an extended sequence of boys, as more boys volunteered to participate.)

The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the ways in which gender was used in efforts to control or shape students' interactions with text:

> Ms. Artiga directed the children to open their books to the story they had been reading for the last week. She told them, "A ver quién me va a leer en voz alta. Primero voy a leer una página, y luego los niños una página, y luego las niñas otra." (*"Let's see who can read out loud for me. First I'll read one page, and then the boys will read a page, and then the girls another."*)
>
> The boys read, and Ms. Artiga responded by saying, "Muy bien." (*"Very good."*) Next the girls read, and she responded by saying, "Niñas, me gusta como lean los niños - juntos. No es una carrera como lo hicieron Ustedes." (*"Girls, I like the way the boys read - together. It's not a race, like you made it."*)
>
> The boys read again, and Ms. Artiga said, "Muy bien. Niñas, ¿oyeron como lo leyeron? A ver si las niñas pueden hacerlo como los niños." (*"Very good. Girls, did you hear how they read? Let's see if the girls can do it like the boys."*) This time she read with the girls; they slowed down their reading and read much more quietly. Ms. Artiga's response was: "Me gusta como lo hicieron Eva, Aracely, Magda, y Carla. Pero había 6 o 7 que ni tenía el libro abierto." (*"I like the way Eva, Aracely, Magda, and Carla did it. But there were 6 or 7 who didn't even have the book open."*)
>
> The boys read again; Ms. Artiga responded with a hearty "¡Muy bien!" (*"Very good!"*) She then called on the girls, saying "O.K., niñas, ¿listos? ¡O, perdon! ¿Listas? Con el libro abierto." (*"O.K., girls, ready? I'm sorry, ready? With the book open."*) (Here, Ms. Artiga's apology was in reference to her error in using the masculine ending for the adjective "ready." While the rule in Spanish is to generalize to the masculine for mixed gender groups, making the masculine forms predominate in most references to groups, the feminine ending was the appropriate form for the gender segregated group that Ms. Artiga had created.)
>
> The girls read, and this time Ms. Artiga responded with a firm "Muy bien."

In Ms. Lyons' classroom, gender was virtually never used as a grouping factor; instead, individual choice was the basis for most group formations. The students chose their own partners or groups for collaborative work, and they selected their own book groups for reading, based on their interest in a particular book or topic. A few times Ms. Lyons exerted some influence over the group formations; she set up the teams or "families" that they used for some structured team activities, and on one day she had students count

off to form groups for a writing project. In both cases, gender was not salient as an organizing factor (while the families all consisted of both girls and boys, they varied in the number of each, much as families do in the world outside school). On one other occasion, Ms. Lyons had the students continually group and regroup themselves by different categories (long hair, height, interests, etc.), thus demonstrating different means by which group likenesses might be formed.

Yet while gender was not used as an organizing schema by Ms. Lyons, students were often quick to *interpret* the teacher's actions along gendered lines. In one group discussion several students - girls - were huddled together, talking, and not paying attention to the proceedings. Ms. Lyons went over and moved the students physically to other positions. The other students saw this and said, "Oh, yeah, teacher: boy-girl-boy-girl!" Ms. Lyons responded, "No, not really," but admitted to me later that - like it or not - in effect that was what she had done, as it was only in same-gender groupings that students interacted to a degree that provoked her to break up seating patterns.

The students themselves often offered both gender segregation and forced gender integration as their own solutions for classroom issues. In one classroom meeting, the fact that the boys were dominating the computers for writing was raised for discussion. The solution that the group voted on for this problem was to designate one day as "boys' day" and the next as the girls'. In other words, the students used gender for controlling their own behavior (for controlling their interactions with text, in this case), and perhaps as a way of *punishing* themselves. This incident is noteworthy because it highlights some of the complex issues that emerge when considering gender; on the one hand, the fact that a student (a boy, no less) noticed that the boys were dominating the computers shows an awareness of gender inequities that is laudable. On the other hand, the class' focus on gender segregation for their solutions resulted in the *reinforcement* of gender differences. Ultimately, the class' solution proved to be ineffective in eradicating the gender inequality, as the girls tended not to use the computer on their days, and over time the boys (or really, a few of the boys) began to take over the empty spaces and ultimately to dominate the computer usage on all days.

In many ways, then, gender was both more and less salient in Ms. Lyons' room than in the highly structured environment set up by Ms. Artiga. Gender itself was given minimal attention as an organizing schema, and by so de-emphasizing gender differences, the basis of group formations was shifted to other factors, most notably to "personal interest." However, in making this shift, gendered differences that students brought to those interests were given free rein for expression; and the influence of gender on students' choices (as for example, in their choices of partners) was obscured.

Form vs. content

In Ms. Artiga's room, the form in which literacy was performed or displayed was emphasized more than the content of that performance. This was evidenced by the amount of time spent in instruction in grammar and spelling. It was also evidenced by the ways in which literacy was *practiced*, such as alternate-word readings of extended text (which resulted in such an unnatural flow of words that it was impossible for me as a listener to follow the content of the story), and partner-readings of text in which students were instructed to keep reading until the allotted time was up. The students spent much of their time in these groups negotiating turns, counting pages they had read, and racing to finish.

This focus on form was also evident in the ways in which students viewed their literacy learning; more than half of the students I interviewed mentioned the "red book" or the "blue book" when I asked them about what they read in school, and had difficulty describing the content of these or other stories even when I probed with questions. One explained that in the red book they wrote the same thing every day except "los días cambian" (*"the days change"*).

The focus on form was especially reinforced by the way in which work was evaluated. I virtually *never* witnessed Ms. Artiga responding to the content of students'

stories or their thoughts in class, but instead regularly scanning work for missing punctuation points or other grammatical errors, and then directing students to re-copy the papers in their best handwriting. Occasionally, work shown to the teacher elicited from her a bright smile and a comment, such as "Great job! You only have one error!"

When I asked the children how the teacher helped them to write better, all of the children, except for one student who said, "Me pone a escribir" (*"She sets me to write"*) and a few who said they didn't know, mentioned the ways in which Ms. Artiga corrects their work: "Me ayuda que esta letra tiene que ser mayúscula" (*"She helps me that this letter has to be capitalized"*), "Me dice si falta punto final" (*"She tells me if a period is missing"*), "Ella marca para decir si está bien o está mal" (*"She marks if it's right or wrong"*), "Si está mal me lo enseña y luego lo tengo que escribir bien" (*If it's wrong she shows me and then I have to write it right"*). Ms. Artiga noted this emphasis herself: "I've tried more this year than last year to sit with them and say 'Let's look at your story. Let's correct it together. What are these mistakes? Did you notice?' And they'll say, 'Oh, I forgot this,' or something like that." She also noted that the class had "really really gotten better. The last story they wrote was about a week ago, and about five students maybe had one mistake in the whole story, where it was just like an accent, or they forgot a period, or something. I've never had that before. And I was really pleased."

On the other hand, when Ms. Artiga interacted with students informally, as for example in short interchanges with them at the beginning of the day, and occasionally within more formal settings (as in one ESL discussion about what students did yesterday when Ms. Artiga really did want to know what students had done, because she had been absent that day!). On these occasions Ms. Artiga seemed to respond naturally to students' ideas.

In Ms. Lyons' room, very *little* attention was given to the form in which ideas were conveyed. Spelling, grammar, and penmanship were virtually never attended to in the first six months of observation. Students could write in different color pens, on different kinds of paper, with the final versions always typed by the teacher for production in books. (At that stage, Ms. Lyons attended to form *for* her students, editing students' punctuation and spelling, but never calling their attention to her corrections.)

After students wrote a story that they wished to publish as a class book, they were expected to conference with the teacher and other students. These conferences always addressed the ideas in the story, with peers giving "suggestions" that the author could incorporate or not, as (s)he liked; whenever a suggestion was given, Ms. Lyons would note, with a slight shrug of her shoulders as if to detract from the power of the suggestion, that "Es una idea." (*"It's an idea."*). She reminded the students frequently that they were the owners of their stories, and that they could decide if they wanted to accept the suggestions for changes or not. After a book was completed, the author read it to the class, who responded with things they liked about the story and things they did not understand. While occasionally mention was made of "nice pictures," for the most part all students concentrated on the story lines, often following the logic of the stories more closely than I was able to do. On no occasion did I hear students correcting other students' surface errors; but even in published classroom books students would at times make content changes on the typewritten manuscript, with little apparent concern for the aesthetics of the printed page.

A high premium was placed on students' expressions of their own opinions about stories. "Critical" readings of text were particularly valued; students modeled themselves on the teacher by pointing out things that didn't seem fair in a story, or that betrayed some bias on the author's part. Students were encouraged to express their ideas, with oppositional opinions given extra attention.

While students in this room clearly focused on content, taking great interest in each others' stories, considerable attention was also directed to mere production for production's sake, as students raced with each other to write more and more books. This focus on quantity at times seemed to limit the quality and could be considered one example of a focus

on form rather than content; however the general thrust of the literacy environment was to attend to content rather than form.

Gendered form and gendered content

In Ms. Artiga's room there was little room for gender differences to express themselves, but there was also very little room for students to consider gender as a social construct or to analyze the gendered content of their own or others' work. The few opportunities that presented themselves for a critical examination of gender were not seized, due to the focus on the form rather than the content of literacy. Two examples illustrate this:

The class read the book "Rosa Caramelo" - a core literature selection available at the school in classroom sets. This book focuses specifically on gender in its story line; it is about a herd of elephants in which all the girl elephants are made to stay within one small enclosed space and eat anemones each day (which taste unpleasant but which make their skin smooth, soft, and pink). The girls also are made to wear flowery collars, bows, and shoes. They are not allowed out of their fenced yard to play. The boy elephants, on the other hand, play outside in the mud, and eat anything they choose; their skin is gray. Margarita, however, is one elephant who gives up on the idea of achieving the norms of femininity of her elephant herd, and decides to leave the fenced yard to play in the mud. The other girl elephants watch on disapprovingly but eventually join her, leaving their collars and bows behind. The final sentence of the book reads (in translation): "And from that day on, it's very difficult to say...which are the boy elephants and which are the girl elephants. They look so much alike!"

After reading this story, Ms. Artiga directed her class in a number of activities that lasted a two-week period. On one day, students were given comprehension questions to answer. Six of the nine questions were recall questions, requiring students to describe what happened in the text. The remaining four questions called for some (minimal) level of interpretation of the text, but did not engage the most critical aspects of the text's treatment of gender as a social issue. These questions were: "¿Qué era el problema de Margarita?" (*"What was Margarita's problem?"*), "¿Cómo se sentían las otras elefantitas?" (*"How did the other little girl elephants feel?"*), and "¿Por qué no quisieron regresar las elefantas al jardín vallado?" (*Why didn't the girl elephants want to go back to their fenced garden?*). Most of the students wrote virtually identical answers to these questions.

The next day, Ms. Artiga gave the class a page with a elephant drawn on it and a sentence to complete: "Yo quisiera ser un elefante color _____ porque _____." (*"I would like to be a _____ elephant because _____."*) This page required students to make a decision about the substantive issues addressed in the book; however, it was done with very little discussion of the text or of students' interpretations of the text. Students' responses are worth noting: of the girls who completed their papers and turned them in to the teacher, eight preferred to be gray elephants, and four preferred to be pink. Most gave as their reason for choosing gray the fact that the gray (boy) elephants had more fun, but one emphasized that she *liked* the color gray. The girls who chose pink said they did so because the elephants in the book looked so pretty in pink and with their flowery shoes and necklaces. All but one of the eleven boys who turned in their papers chose to be gray; the one boy who chose pink had copied his paper word for word from the girl who sits beside him.

On a third day, Ms. Artiga announced to the class that they would write letters to the "elefantita" (*"the little girl elephant"*) in the story. She introduced the assignment by reviewing the format of letters. She made a few brief suggestions for the content of these letters: "Quizás quieres decir 'Hola, cómo estás?' Quizás quieres decirle 'He oído de tus problemas.' Quizás quieres decir 'Me gustó tu libro.'" (*"Perhaps you'd like to say, 'Hello, how are you?' Perhaps you'd like to say, 'I've heard about your problems.' Perhaps you'd like to say, 'I liked your book.'"*); none focused on the substantive issues

of the story nor did they help the children to relate the issues to gender struggles in their own lives.

The suggestions made by the teacher were adopted by the majority of the students. Five of the letters began with a distinct greeting, such as "Hola, ¿cómo estás?" (*"Hello, how are you?"*). Six of the letters made a vague reference to "your problem." Nine of the letters expressed a positive reaction to the book. In moving beyond the teacher's suggestions, two tendencies are clear: one group of students applauded Margarita for her efforts, while at the same time assuring her that she was pretty as a gray elephant; and another group (two boys and two girls) told Margarita that she *should* be pink, as when Susana wrote, "Tu cuento es bonito. Nosotros sabemos que tienes un problema porque no puedes cambiar a color rosa. Tú eres bonita pero tienes que esforzarte mucho para cambiar a color rosa. Para que tus papás estén contentos." (*"Your story is pretty. We know that you have a problem because you can't turn pink. You are pretty, but you must make the effort to turn pink. So that your parents will be happy."*)

Analyses of children's interpretations of feminist fairy tales suggests that Susana's interpretation of the text is more the norm than the exception; children tend to interpret these tales along traditional gender lines, and seemingly miss the feminist points (Davies, 1989). It would seem that this was true for most of the students in the reading of *Rosa Caramelo*. But very little was done to critically analyze the text, or to problematize the students' interpretations of it; how students might respond to a guided, probing discussion of the issues is unclear.

In addition to these activities, Ms. Artiga used the story as a basis for the spelling words she gave to class that week. The sentences that she gave that related to this text were: "Las elefantes grises eran bonitas" and "Unas elefantas valientes salieron del jardín." In creating these sentences, Ms. Artiga emphasizes non-traditional gender choices, and applauds the efforts of the elephants who broke the mold, but even in so doing she reinforces the basic nature of the girl elephants as "pretty." When reading the text, Ms. Artiga again reinforced this notion by commenting on a picture: "Me encanta eso - todas con sus zapatitos y sus cuellos y sus lazos" (*"I love that - all of them with their little shoes and necklaces and bows"*).

While in Ms. Lyons' room gender differences were given more room for expression, the focus on content in literacy, and particularly on critical analyses of that content, meant that those differences (and students' opinions about the differences) were open for discussion and analysis. This is exemplified in the incidents·

Ms. Lyons had selected a book to read to the class that treated the issue of women's rights to take control of their own lives within a fairy tale framework. The story, in Spanish, was called *Sir Gawain y la Abominable Dama* (Sir Gawain and the Abominable Woman). In the story, Sir Arthur must answer the question "Cuál es el mejor deseo de las mujeres?" (*"What is women's greatest wish?"*). Ms. Lyons stopped at this point and asked the class what they thought the answer would be. These are the responses that were offered:

Marco: A handsome guy.
Olivia: Juguetes. (*Toys.*)
Tomás: Un hombre rico. (*A rich man.*)
Carolina: Un castillo. (*A castle.*)
Rosa (*hesitating when called on, but then looking pleased with her idea*): Un hombre honesto and bueno. (*An honest and good man.*)
Flor (*calling out again*): Casarse. (*To get married.*) *Then, laughing*): ¡Yo no! (*Not me!*) (*Expanding on her idea*): Salir por la iglesia. (*To go down the aisle.*)
Carlos: De blanco. (*In white.*)
Luís: Cariño. (*Affection.*)
Johnny: Comprensión. (*Understanding.*)
Marco: Un hombre que no abusa. (*A man who doesn't mistreat her.*)

Flor: Un hombre que la trata bien. (*A man who treats her well.)*
Luís: Amor. (*Love.)*
Flor: Un hombre como Romeo. (*A man like Romeo.)*
Lizette: Tener hijos. (*To have children.)*
Marta: Tener cuidado. (*To be careful.)*

In the story, Sir Arthur does not know how to answer the question, but he gets help from a monstrous-looking woman ("la criatura más horrible que jamás había visto") (*"the most horrible looking creature he had ever seen"*), whose ugliness is described in great detail. The woman offers to answer the question for him if he grants her one wish. He agrees; she tells him that the correct answer is: "salirse con la suya" (*"to make up her own mind"),* and she tells him that now her wish is to be married with one of his most handsome knights. Sir Arthur reluctantly agrees.

A this point in the story, Ms. Lyons stopped reading and emphasized the meaning of "salirse con la suya" by saying, "Si yo quiero casarme con un hombre guapo, está bien. Si yo quiero nunca casarme, está bien. Si yo quiero conseguir mi doctorado, o yo quiero ser bombera, está bien." (*"If I want to marry a handsome guy, that's O.K.. If I don't ever want to get married, that's O.K. If I want to get my doctorate, or be a firefighter, that's O.K.")*

Ms. Lyons also directed the class' attention to the page in which the "bad guy" is described as dark, in a picture that is black and shadowy. She asked, "¿Cómo se sentiría un niño negro al leer esto?" ("How would a black child feel reading this?") The students supplied the answer she seemed to expect, but with little elaboration: "Mal." ("Bad."). Ms. Lyons then used this as an opportunity to note that cartoons and books often have black, dark, bad men. Carlos, who was ever one to take an oppositional stance, described a cartoon in which the reverse was true. Ms. Lyons accepted this, but then noted how heroes are usually portrayed as white, handsome men. Another student offered the Ninja Turtles as a counter example. "But," Ms. Lyons responded. "Look at them. What are they? Male turtles. Where are the women?" She turned to Marta, the girl sitting nearest to her, and said, "Everything in the world is against us women!"

The book continues with a description of the couple marrying, then going to their wedding chambers, with the knight struggling valiantly to be a good gentleman while feeling sick at the thought of being left alone with such an ugly woman. The woman calls to him, ¿No vas a venir a la cama, mi señor?" (*"Aren't you going to come to bed, my husband?");* he does so reluctantly - and sees the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. (In the book she is depicted as fair, petite, with a delicate, thin waist, and long, blonde hair.) Not surprisingly, it turns out that the woman is under a magic spell, by which she must spend half of each day as "ugly" and half as her normal self. She asks Sir Gawain what he prefers - should she be beautiful by day, and ugly by night, or ugly by day, and beautiful by night?

Ms. Lyons stopped reading once again to ask the class' opinions. Here the class was clearly divided, with some saying she should be beautiful by night ("so they can like, make love and stuff," and "so it could be a secret for Sir Gawain"), and others wanting her beautiful by day, when she will be seen in public. Girls and boys were equally divided in their opinions, but all took on the position of voyeur, looking at this woman from either her husband's or the public's viewpoint.

In the book, Sir Gawain first tells the woman she should be beautiful by night; the woman questions his response. He then says she should be beautiful by day; she questions this again. Then she leads him to say (providing him with some major hints): "Salirse con la suya," which he in fact does, thus breaking the woman's spell, and leaving her delighted to be with him as his beautiful wife for 24 hours every day. They go out into the court (where everyone has been wondering why they would stay together in bed so long, given the woman's ugliness!); the people stand in awe at the woman's beauty, and the two live happily ever after.

I have described this book and the reading of it at length because it brings together a number of issues related to the research questions. The story itself deals with complex issues in a provocative way; yet even so it remains locked within a traditional form which focuses on stereotypical - racist - beauty and requires that the woman end up beautiful, living happily in marriage to a handsome, white man. The teachers' approach to engaging students with the text illustrates the possibilities that are allowed when literacy instruction focuses on content rather than form, and particularly on critical examinations of that content. Yet the students' responses to the story suggest the difficulties in approaching such texts critically; both girls and boys seemed to be operate with the "discourse of desire" (Walkerdine,) such that their interpretations of a feminist text remained locked within traditional views of women, men, beauty and happiness. In my discussions with students afterward, it was clear that most did not capture the complexities of the issue; they focused on how ugly the woman was, and delighted in her beauty at the end.

At a deeper level this story, and students' reactions to it, illustrates some of the problems that arise with setting up situations of "free choice" in relation to the issue of gender. The point of the story was to emphasize women's rights to decide for themselves. Yet ultimately the woman in the story chose what has *always* been dictated as proper women's desires: to be beautiful (as judged by men and by society), to marry a handsome and brave man, and to live happily ever after in this marriage. The only adjustment to the standard format is that the woman freely chooses this for herself, and her man is a "good" man who allows her to choose (even if he needs considerable help in remembering to allow her to do so).

In relating this to the classroom dynamics of "choice," the question arises as to whether offering girls (and boys) the chance to choose for themselves is not just an easy way of "blaming the victims" for selecting choices that may ultimately prove limiting, dismissing inequalities by noting that people were "free" to choose. The social forces that work to shape or delimit individual choices are rarely examined. As Walkerdine (19) argues, a progressive pedagogy of "choice" shifts authoritarian forms of control to an internalized, psychologized dimension, obscures the nature of that control, and helps to construct the "bourgeois, autonomous individual" who does his or her own controlling, which, except in rare cases, occurs along the lines that society would demand.

On the other hand, Ms. Lyons' approach to pedagogy is not one which *only* emphasizes "free choice." Ms. Lyons continually pushes for a critical examination of the choices that individuals make. This critical element, that emerges through the focus on content rather than form in literacy, is an element that is not present in all forms of progressive pedagogy, and may be a key factor in beginning to provide truly "free" choices to individuals, or to position individuals in such a way that they can make their choices a bit more freely.

A second example of the critical examination of content in literacy emerged in a conference between the teacher and several students in relation to a story two boys (Carlos and Carlos Ivan) had written. The story was about some "bad guys" who had kidnapped two girls, who were given the names of two girls in the classroom, Erika and Dianna - and raped them. The story made two references to the rape. Two Super Ninjas then came and saved the girls from these bad guys.

Ms. Lyons called me over to participate in the conference, in part, as she told me later, because she wanted to make sure I heard the conversation, and in part because she wanted me to help her think about how to approach the conference. I struggled with the tension between taking an "objective"/ passive observers' stance and responding as a real human being in this situation. Opting for a middle ground, I merely asked the boys how they thought Erika and Dianna would feel to be in this story. Carlos and Carlos clarified that the girls had given them permission to use their names (as was required by rules established at a classroom meeting). Ms. Lyons asked if the girls knew that the story was about a rape. She then called over Erika and Dianna, read them the story, and asked how they felt about their names being used. The two girls stood hesitantly (apparently not sure

what they were expected to say), but finally said that no, they didn't like it. Ms. Lyons asked the boys if they understood why, that for women rape is a very serious thing. I spoke out and said that I felt that rapes are very serious, and not to be treated lightly. I tried to explain that there was nothing wrong with writing about rapes (several other factual reports that had been written in class about a rapist who was at large in their town) but that it was a serious subject, and to think carefully about using specific girls' names.

Interestingly, neither I nor Ms. Lyons brought to this discussion an important aspect of the gendering of subjects in this story - the fact that the girls were positioned as powerless victims to be attacked but then saved by male heroes. Yet in the suggestions that were made for improving the story, the children tapped into this aspect of the story on their own accord. When Ms. Lyons asked for "ideas," one boy suggested that the girls could turn into Super Ninjas themselves and thus defend themselves; someone else suggested that the girls could really be from outer space and so they could start fighting with the Ninjas. Both of these responses gave the girl characters more power and went far beyond the idea of simply eliminating the rape scene.

In the middle of the conference, Carlos began erasing the story. Ms. Lyons asked him what he was doing and he said he was changing it to say "las molestaban" (*"they bothered them"*) instead of "las violaron" (*"they raped them."*) Later they added a new section to the story in which the boy Ninjas taught the girl Ninjas how to do karate. Later still, they wrote a sequel to this story, in which there were seven Ninjas (4 boys plus Erika and Dianna and Lupe), who worked together, without gender segregation, and who all had karate power. Thus, the boys effectively worked through these issues to arrive at a position of greater gender equality (and a more naturalized gender integration) (albeit an equality that the boys "gave" to the girls); these changes were only made because of the focus on critically examining the content of writing within the activity setting of peer conferences. They also undoubtedly were only made because of some active intervention by the teacher and the expression of her own opinions.

The gendered content of student work

In Ms. Artiga's class there was very little room for gender to be expressed in the content of student work. Those spaces that did exist, however, were often appropriated by students for highly gendered forms of self-expression. For example, when the class made paper-plate elephants after reading the story of *Rosa Caramelo*, and were given step by step instructions on precisely how to cut each piece and put them together, a few girls individualized their elephants by drawing on eyelashes, hearts, and flowers. One boy individualized his by drawing Band-Aids and a belly button. Gender emerged as the prime means of individualized self-expression.

A class norm, while minimizing the expression of gender differences, often assumes a male norm as a "gender-neutral" universal. This was true in relation to language uses in the classroom; Ms. Artiga referred to the class using the masculine plural in Spanish, and vocally exaggerated the feminine ending when she referred specifically to the girls (on several occasions correcting herself for her misuse of the masculine form for the girls). When the class wrote a letter to a museum director after a field trip, Ms. Artiga wrote the generic (masculine) form of the salutation ("Estimado") (*"Dear"*) on the board for the class to copy. The students, however, had met the director, who was a woman named Laura; a number of them wrote "Estimado Laura" and then went back to change the "o" ending to an "a." Others did not make the correction, and Ms. Artiga did not appear to be aware of the confusion. And when students were asked to write a story about "un elefante" ("an elephant") (after reading *Rosa Caramelo*, in which a careful distinction was made between male "elefantes" and female "elefantitas") only one of the children gave their elephant a girl's name.

In Ms. Lyons' room, individual expression was valued, and so children had ample opportunity to express all aspects of their personalities, including gender, in their literacy development. Students seemed quite aware of the gender biases in Spanish language

generalizations; this was evident on those few occasions when girls and boys wrote their stories together; in these stories the children carefully distinguished between the genders of the protagonists, as for example in the story "Dos vampiros y una vampira," ("*Two vampires and a female vampire*") and Ofelia's transformation of "Los 3 cochinitos" ("*The 3 little pigs*") to "Dos cochinitas y un cochino" ("Two girl pigs and a pig").

A major focus of Ms. Lyons' holistic approach to literacy acquisition centered around the production of student-authored books. Students wrote drafts for these stories during the period devoted to "contracts," in which they could choose from a variety of literacy-oriented activities. After drafts were prepared the students met with both peers and the teacher to offer ideas for developing or revising the text.

Students were completely free to write alone or with partners, and more than half of the books were written in partnership (87 of 151), yet very few students chose to work with partners of the opposite sex. Of a total of 87 partnerships or multiple-authorships, only 3 of these involved girls working together with boys. Thus, an analysis of the book topics by the sex of the authors seems justified (a preliminary analysis follows here); the writing of these books was gendered from the moment that the partnerships were formed.

Topic	Boys	Co-Ed	Girls	Total
Superheroes	13			13
Boys/Adventures	5			5
Races	6	1		7
Getting Rich/Money	3		1	4
Sports/Games	9	1		10
Cars, Boats, Planes	6			6
War and Peace	6			6
Flags	2			2
Farmworkers	4			4
Animals	6	1	6	13
Horror	3		1	4
Good Guys, Bad Guys	2			2
Disney	1		3	4
Holidays	5	1		6
School			3	3
Family			6	6
Friends	6		2	8
Home			6	6
Butterflies, Rainbows, Hearts, Flowers			12	2
Love			2	2
Circus, Clowns			2	2
Women				0
Celebrities				0
Misc.	8		3	11

Table 2. Summary of topics selected for student-authored books, by gender of authors, during the first phase of the research.

Table 2 illustrates the gendered nature of the students' selections of topics for these books. The most popular topics selected by boys represent stereotypically masculine topics (Superheroes, Sports, Races, Cars/Boats/Planes, War and Peace, Friends, Holidays, and Boys/Adventures), while the topics most commonly selected by girls similarly represent

stereotypically feminine ones (Holidays, Butterflies/Rainbows/Hearts/Flowers, Families, Home, and Animals). Of these topics, the only ones that overlapped were Animals (with 6 written by boys, and 6 by girls). Thus, in this space where students had free rein to express themselves, they chose to do so in highly gendered ways. Their choices lend insight into the ways in which they are constructing themselves as authors of particular kinds of texts; however, a thorough analysis of this process is beyond the scope of this paper.

There was little evidence to suggest that particular themes were dominated by certain individuals, with one exception. Seven boys dominated the stories about superheroes, and those seven boys were some of the most vocal and popular boys in the room. It could be argued that these boys established the "hegemonic" forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987) that were expressed in this room, although more work would be required to examine the relationship between these boys' popularity and the forms of masculinity that they express and endorse in their writing.

Summary and conclusions

The two classrooms that were the focus of this study differ profoundly in the ways in which literacy is constructed and enacted, and in turn in the ways in which gender is shaped through literacy. The teachers' general approaches to literacy instruction play an important role in configuring the ways in which gender is expressed in the students' literacy acquisition. Yet the children also bring gender into the settings, or fit the expression of gender into the spaces that appear in each room. In *both* rooms, gender emerges as an important organizing force for literacy acquisition, although the nature of its expression varies.

Ms. Artiga, in attempting to equalize the participation of girls and boys, takes actions that make gender highly salient; in fact, gender emerges as the principal organizing force for literacy learning in the classroom. On the other hand, by expecting all students to do the same work, Ms. Artiga suppresses the expression of gender - or any other individual differences; in this way there is a false sense of the non-salience of gender, with its falseness revealed by those students who break the mold and use gendered forms of self-expression to individualize their work. Finally, by focusing on the form of literacy rather than its content, Ms. Artiga misses an critical space where gender differences might be both expressed and *problematized*, rather than ignored or assumed unproblematic.[2]

In Ms. Lyons' room, where students have considerable "freedom" over the content of their work, gender often emerges as a highly salient variable, with the students engaging in gendered forms of self-expression through literacy and using gender as an organizing force for themselves. This is especially true in their writing; literacy in this sense becomes a form for their gendered self-expression and at the same time a vehicle for the

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[2] Ms. Artiga is, of course, far from the only teacher who attends to form over content, and as a teacher I myself have experienced the strange tug that language asserts - only in classroom settings - toward a focus on surface features that in any other setting would be ignored. As Cazden (199) writes, "...teachers, over the decades if not the centuries, have somehow gotten into the habit of hearing with different ears once they go through the classroom doors. Language forms assume an opaque quality. We cannot hear through them; we hear only the errors to be corrected." (p. 27). Teachers have internalized a view of themselves as guardians of "correctness" to such an extent that it influences the way they perceive events in the classroom.

The impact of social class on this emphasis on form must be considered. Ms. Artiga lives and works in a working class neighborhood, and is herself of working class origins, as most teachers in this country are. The children, too, are from working class families, and ethnic "minorities" as well. Ms. Artiga undoubtedly knows (albeit unconsciously) that these students will be judged by the way they present themselves to the world, and that they will not have the luxury that more mainstream or elite groups may have not to care about their appearance. (This is true in terms of physical or bodily presentation and environment as well as literacy - Ms. Artiga's focus on form in literacy directly parallels her concern for a neat, clean, and well-ordered environment as well as the well-kept presentation of her students themselves.)

reinforcement of those gendered norms. Thus, Ms. Lyons' attempt to ignore gender as an organizing force in relation to literacy learning in her classroom - like Ms. Artiga's attempts to be "gender blind" in relation to the assignments she gave students - underestimates the degree to which the children themselves see their worlds in highly gendered ways, and see literacy as a tool for the description - and construction - of those worlds.

Yet while the students in Ms. Lyons' room produced a visible display of gender in the content of their written work, the very fact that this is visible, means that it is open for analysis; and in fact both the teacher and the students themselves brought gender issues out for discussion on numerous occasions. A classroom that merely allows for "free choice" *without* probing or critically analyzing the forces that shape those choices might only serve to reinforce differences and inequalities that are shaped by the larger society. Yet a classroom, like Ms. Lyons', that values the critical examination of the content of literacy - and includes gender in its analysis - allows for the possibility of both expressing and *contesting* the nature of those choices.

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