Policy and the search for explanations for the gender gap in literacy attainment.

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Abstract
This paper considers how policy-led processes of education reform have reshaped the space in which to think about gender and literacy, both in England and elsewhere. In many jurisdictions the discourse on quality in education now focuses almost exclusively on numerical outcomes, whether they derive from the school, and/or at local or national level (OECD, 2000; 2004). A heightened focus on performance data has brought new attention to the contrasts in the relative patterns of girls' and boys' attainment in literacy, whilst also changing expectations about what should be done about them (OECD, 2009). This paper highlights the politics that ensue as these data enter public discourse using examples of policy texts published in different parts of the UK and Canada. It examines how these documents mobilise different explanations for the gender gap in the performance data which are then used to guide future action. What kinds of explanations for gender differences in literacy attainment have most purchase in different policy contexts? Which are most useful from a feminist perspective? These issues are considered in relation to the changing policy context in England, which is rapidly moving from a highly centralised system of directed support for school improvement to much more fragmented provision. This creates new conditions in which to act.

Introduction
Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the UK in 1988 much of the process of educational reform in the English context has been driven by the collection and monitoring of performance data. This is not untypical of other jurisdictions (Ozga and Grek, 2008). The performance data are used to define policy problems which need most attention. Boys' underachievement in literacy emerges as a potential focus for policy intervention because if you monitor children's performance in standardised tests in reading and writing a discrepancy between boys' and girls' scores is part of what appears. This pattern has held for some considerable period of time and is not specific to English-speaking countries (OECD, 2009 2004). Yet how that discrepancy is explained and the significance it is accorded have varied considerably over time. My own research has directly contributed to discussion on these issues (Moss, 2000; 2007).

Just over a decade ago, at a point when researchers first began to actively explore the gender gap in literacy attainment (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993), I conducted a multi-site ethnographic study of boys' development as readers in the 7-9 age group[i]. Completed just before the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, the study focused on the relationship between reading preferences and progress in reading. The quantitative data had suggested a correlation between enjoyment of reading, reading attainment and boys' apparent preference for non-fiction, but whether this implied a causal connection and if so what the causal mechanism might be seemed to me to be insufficiently explored. To re-consider these relationships, the project used a mix of methods including a range of qualitative techniques (extensive participant observation; audits of texts in use; interviews with pupils, teachers and parents) and survey data. The primary units of analysis were the literacy events and practices in which the children participated in school and at home. This study challenged many of the existing explanations for boys' underperformance and instead established a new focus on the intersection of gender and the designation of reading ability in class. In the process it suggested new means of creating a more inclusive literacy curriculum in schools (See Moss, 2007 for a full account of this work and the sequence of studies which followed[ii]).

An article on the project's findings published in this journal (Moss, 2000) explored what happens as children engage with the reading practices of the primary school, and argued that

"boys and girls react differently to the judgements made about their proficiency as readers, judgements which are often rendered highly visible in the classroom. This in turn has far more impact on their respective progress in reading than the inclusion of their preferred reading materials on the school curriculum; or the presence or absence of gender-specific role models provided by adult readers." (Moss, 2000).

In setting out principles for addressing gender differences in reading attainment the article focused on three distinct groups of readers, identified both through the opportunities they were afforded in the classroom to direct their own reading, and the uses they made of them. In practice the opportunities to read that teachers accorded different children largely depended upon the judgements they made about their proficiency at reading. Until such time as they were deemed fully competent children were expected to match their reading material to their level of reading proficiency. Steering by the teachers' judgements *and* the children's actions, classroom observation revealed three different groups of readers who varied in their orientation to the reading curriculum: those whom the teacher designated free or independent readers and who used the opportunities they were afforded to read in a self-directed and self-motivated way (can/ do); those whom the teacher designated free or independent readers but who seldom exercised that skill except at others' direction (can but don't); and those whom the teacher considered not yet fully competent and whose opportunities to read were consequently constrained (can't yet/don't). These categories highlight the ways in which the designation of proficiency (can/ can't) interacts with children's engagement in reading freely (do/don't). To actively involve each of these groups more fully in the literacy curriculum I suggested some key priorities in practice which could help build a committed reading culture in the classroom without resorting to gender-stereotyping or neglecting basic skills[iii].

In the decade since that article was published a good deal has happened in terms of literacy policy and classroom practice. In many jurisdictions besides England policy-makers increasingly drive what teachers do and how they think about their primary role and responsibilities through an intense focus on performance data. In some settings, but by no means everywhere, the issue of gender and literacy has emerged as a major policy theme (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; Alloway et al, 2006; Basic Skills Cymru, 2008; Martino, 2008; OECD, 2009) This suggests a need to review how understandings of the relationship between gender, literacy and attainment have developed over the last decade in England and elsewhere as policymakers continue to articulate an urgent need to fix discrepancies in the performance data.

Literacy by numbers: what the data say

In the UK the most recent and comprehensive review of gender differences in pupil performance was conducted by the Department of Education towards the end of New Labour's period in office (DfES, 2007). Like many other such reports in recent times, the impetus for conducting the analysis is presented in terms of the change in girls' performance in education. This has seen them match or overtake boys' performance in areas where boys had previously done better (Arnot et al, 1999). By and large, policymakers have not so much treated this state of affairs as a good news story for girls as considered this as a potential set-back for boys which needs addressing (Ofsted, 1993). Many feminists have analysed this switch in emphasis as compelling evidence of sexist attitudes which continue to place less value on girls' achievements than boys', and have reacted accordingly (Epstein et al, 1998). Read very much as evidence for a feminist backlash the quest has been on to contest the need for the education system to re-direct attention or resources towards boys, and insist on a continued need for a feminist analysis that can unpick and undermine any reinstatement of patriarchal values (Hammett and Sanford, 2008). These are important goals. Nevertheless, in the case of the DfES (2007) document, *Gender and Education: the evidence on pupils in England,* the way in which gender and performance are interwoven in the text suggest the need for a more nuanced analysis. A good deal of this is to do with the way in which the discussion is precisely focused on the performance data themselves, with equality of

measurable outcomes treated as the ultimate goal. If gender is in the equation it has been overwritten by managerialism and a technocratic approach to education which in itself redraws political debate.

In the case of the 2007 report (DfES, 2007), the distance between the terms in which the discussion is voiced and a straight-forwardly anti-feminist discourse is apparent from the summary analysis of the gender gap in education performance data which appears in the opening pages. The authors set out their intentions for the report with some care:

> An important objective of this paper is to put the gender debate in context by examining the extent of the gender gap and discussing the role of gender in education alongside the role of other pupil characteristics, particularly social class and ethnicity. In addition, the focus is not solely on the concepts of the "gender gap" and "boys' underachievement" but also acknowledges that, on the one hand, many boys are high attainers and, on the other, that many girls face significant challenges. (DfES, 2007. p 1)

In this way they signal right from the start that they do not assume that boys self-evidently deserve more attention than girls, but rather how much attention is due to whom will be open to review. Throughout the report the authors are very careful about how they generalise from the data, aiming for a level of precision in terms of where gender gaps are most apparent, and what their significance might be, particularly when viewed historically, or in relation to other factors like social class and ethnicity. Thus whilst highlighting the narrowing gap in many areas of performance at GCSE, they also record the extent to which subject choice remains sharply gender-differentiated with particularly low participation by girls in subjects such as physics. In the opening summary the authors identify three "main caveats" about how the data need to be interpreted:

> "Three main caveats must be made about the gender gap:
> - The gender gap arises mainly because of differences between boys and girls in language and literacy skills reflected in differences in performance in English and other subjects which are literacy based. …. These general trends are very strong both from historical data going back 60 years and from international data.
> - While gender does independently predict attainment, the social class gap has greater explanatory power.
> - A focus on boys' underachievement loses sight of the fact that large numbers of girls are also low attainers. Tackling the scale of these numbers is arguably of greater priority and importance to policy makers than the proportionate difference between boys' and girls' attainment." (DfES, 2007, p5)

The text partly recontextualises feminist arguments. By emphasising that not all boys fail just as not all girls succeed, that the gap in attainment by social class is of greater significance and that in the case of language and literacy, where the attainment gap is greatest, this is of longstanding and not a product of recent changes in pedagogy or approach, the document re-iterates findings from feminist research (Francis and Skelton, 2005; Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993; Millard, 1997; Epstein et al, 1998). In essence the opening statement refutes the kind of moral panic over boys' low attainment that has been voiced elsewhere (See Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998 and Rowan et al, 2002 for an account of how this happened in the Australian context) Elsewhere in the document the values the DfES espouses again borrow from feminist thinking. Thus in a section summarising the available research literature on Raising Attainment the document highlights feminist work on masculinities first:

- "Combating images of laddish masculinity and establishing a strong school ethos were seen as central to raising the attainment of boys." (DfES, 2007, p7)

The final point in the same section states uncompromisingly:

- There is not a case for boy-friendly pedagogies (DfES, 2007,p7)

Yet the DfES review has its limitations. Whilst it certainly invokes feminist research from time to time it is driven less by a clear sense of the gender politics involved in making sense of the data than by the data themselves. At its simplest, any "deviation from the mean" is regarded with suspicion, and as signs of an underlying problem that ought to be addressed. Girls' comparative performance is analysed in this way. The references to historic patterns, to the international comparative data and to social class enable this particular set of attainment differentials to be weighed and assessed in comparison to others. In a data driven system of monitoring and review, the document in effect demonstrates that other policy priorities matter more. The rhetorical function of the document is in part to show that all potential problems in the performance data have been covered. They have been brought into view. The numbers both contain and constrain the discourse. Whilst many calculations have been made the data are not used to build a coherent story about what may have changed for girls in education, and why this might matter for boys too. The document thus both mirrors but fails to express the force of the arguments pursued in *Closing the Gender Gap* (Arnot et al, 1999) about why such changes have come about and what their social significance could be.

Addressing gender and attainment: when performance data count

Despite the longstanding discrepancy in boys' and girls' literacy attainment, in England gender has generally been regarded as a less salient issue in addressing uneven literacy performance than issues of teaching quality or teaching method. Literacy policy has been driven accordingly. Thus the National Literacy Strategy was designed primarily to iron out differences in performance at the level of the school, bringing all schools up to the standard of the best (Stannard and Huxford, 2007). In policy terms, this is a double move which both recognises the strong relationship in the performance data between social class and educational outcomes, yet at the same time takes this larger social reality out of the discourse and replaces it with talk of performance outcomes and quality indicators.

By contrast, the next policy text to be considered, *Me Read? No Way! A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004), takes up the issue of boys' literacy attainment in a very different way. Embedded in a programme of teacher support materials entitled Boys' Literacy (See http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/boysliteracy.html) it sits on the official website alongside a range of other programmes mainly targeted at pupils identified as English language learners (EAL or ESOL pupils in UK terms) (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/publications.html). This range of publications suggest a much more broad brush use of numerical data to define policy problems. The data define the populations whose performance is judged to deviate from the mean with no more detailed exploration of the differences in attainment within this target group, or how they might intersect with ethnicity or social class.

Me Read? No Way! was subsequently borrowed, amended and re-published in Wales (Basic Skills Cymru, 2008), an educational jurisdiction which has departed from the English policy model by giving far less prominence to performance data in its oversight of education and education reform. In this policy context it appears on a website dedicated to improving boys' literacy (http://www.betterreading.co.uk/register.aspx) and also appears on another webpage alongside a cluster of basic skills and family literacy programmes also sponsored by Basic Skills Cymru (http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/allsectorpolicies/basicskillscymru/schoolsandproviders/boysliteracy/?skip=1&lang=en). In both Canadian and Welsh versions, the document

takes boys' underperformance in literacy as a given and after establishing some "Quick Facts" moves swiftly on to its thirteen "Strategies for Success".

The Canadian version has attracted considerable criticism from within the feminist research community (Martino and Kehler, 2007; Martino, 2008; Hammett and Sanford, 2008) on grounds that it gives too much emphasis to gender differences, simply reinforces gender stereotypes, and in the process impacts on students' constructions of masculinities and femininities in unhelpful ways. The charge is difficult to escape. In both versions the publication embraces the notion that boys require a special kind of regard from teachers if they are to successfully engage with schooling, and that that special regard involves recognising and responding to them as gendered subjects. Thus amongst the thirteen strategies put forward, *Me Read? No Way!* urges teachers to "understand boys' learning styles" - and "be in boys' corner". The latter section invokes as its key insight, the Australian author Steve Biddulph's belief that "boys learn teachers and not subjects. Girls are able to connect directly with subjects, but a boy can only connect with a subject via the teacher." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p 46).

This is a curious choice of proposition by which to steer professional practice and one which it would be difficult to ground in a credible research literature. It is hard to see how such a proposition could be substantiated, to which school subjects it might be expected to apply, or indeed under what circumstances girls could connect directly with a subject without the teacher acting as mediator. Even though there is little research evidence which would support such a view, and rather a lot that directly contradicts this point (Martino and Kehler, 2007; Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008; Lahelma, 2000; Lingard et al, 2002) the statement is not held up for critical reflection. As Martino comments: "The document relies on many unreflective and unproblematized claims about boys' orientations to learning and engagement with literacy that are underscored by "taken for granted" and "common-sense" assumptions about the nature of boys' masculinity." (Martino, 2008, p 99). The document binds its readers to a set of assumptions it does not open to question. Martino argues this approach is characteristic of an essentialist mind set which treats gender differences as innate rather than learned and from that starting point then constructs the differences it purports to describe. Through quoting Francis and Skelton's (2005) challenge to this mode of thinking, he and co-author Kehler also highlight the ineffectiveness of stereotyping girls' and boys' responses to schooling and thus to all intents and purposes reinforcing them:

> The feminine/female continues to constitute a point of scorn. Yet, what many underachieving boys need to raise their achievement is to read more, listen and attend more to teachers and other pupils, work harder (greater diligence), be more conscientious and take more pride in their work, work collaboratively, and articulate themselves better in all aspects of communication. Evidently, these are all aspects of learning/working which are constructed as feminine, and which are stereotyped as adopted by girls. (p. 129) (Francis and Skelton, 2005, quoted in Martino and Kehler, 2007)

The charge against, *Me Read? No Way!* is that it circumscribes thinking about differences in the literacy performance data by over-generalising about boys; stereotyping their supposed interests; and then assuming that meeting those interests will answer the policy problem. The research base it invokes to support its basic premise is not opened up for interrogation. Instead this kind of policy text is able to gain a hearing because it chimes with certain commonsense beliefs. Interestingly, Martino and Kehler's article (2007) associates the re-emergence of this kind of essentialist thinking about gender with the rush to find easy-to-implement policy solutions in systems that are under pressure from data-driven processes of reform (Martino and Kehler, 2007) Their analysis acts as a timely reminder of the risks of

adopting processes of education reform that short cut debates about what the data really signify and marginalise more complex understandings of the root causes of inequalities in outcomes.

A reminder of how else it is possible to treat these issues comes from the final policy text considered here, *Can do better: Raising boys' achievement in English* (QCA, 1998). Published just ahead of the move to a centrally-driven system of school improvement in England, at a point when there was still time and space available within the system to encourage teachers' professional reflection, this publication acts as a useful reminder of the very different conditions in which issues of professional practice were once raised and addressed. The text consists of a series of teacher-led case studies which set out to explore gender differences in literacy attainment in different areas of the curriculum. The descriptions of each case outline the thinking which led to the inquiry, the approach adopted to explore the issues, and any findings which could be useful to others. This provides a very different model of professional enquiry designed to address issues in attainment.

In the particular example I discuss below, five nursery teachers decided to explore the relationship between gender and children's learning by documenting children's make-believe play. They chose this topic because they considered that gender differences in forms of play might impact on boys' linguistic development and wondered, if that was the case, whether they should intervene. Their initial thoughts were that:

> "boys were less likely to develop stories through play; boys' play involved more action, with characters falling, jumping, knocking and banging. The actions were often repetitive and … dangerous..; boys used fewer words in their play and rarely described what was happening ..; their understanding of the characters appeared to be limited" (QCA, 1998 pp49-50)

Against this backdrop of concerns, they started their study by closely observing boys' and girls' play in both single-sex and mixed groups, in different settings and with a variety of resources available. By documenting in more detail the range of play in which these children were involved they were able to test their initial hypotheses against the data they collected.

In fact what they observed suggested that the boys orientated far more deeply to the stories which underpinned their actions than their teachers had thought. The teachers came to see that action as well as words had a key part in developing stories in make-believe play; and that different combinations of the individuals and resources involved enabled stories to develop in different ways. This led the teachers to revise what they had thought the problem was in boys' play, and reconsider how they might intervene. They tried out different strategies to support and sustain children's play in different ways and then were able to generalize from this process to inform their practice. In effect they had built new knowledge through testing their initial conceptions by observing actual practice.

"When they talked about their work later, the teachers felt that they needed to:

- Allow time for children to develop stories and return to familiar activities over several days….
- Develop their interventions by providing appropriate resources, introducing children to a wide range of resources and recognizing and valuing the story in a variety of situations….
- Think about when and how they intervened in children's imaginative play." (QCA, 1998, p52)

The case study concludes: "The initial questions these teachers asked led them to try out a variety of interventions. They learned that it was necessary to incorporate this new repertoire

into their normal teaching activities and to change some of their assumptions about boys' play." (QCA, 1998, p52)

The way in which the case study is written up models for readers the problem-solving process that lies at the heart of this form of professional inquiry as well as recording the practical suggestions that emerged. From their original starting point these teachers went on to devise new principles which could better support both boys' and girls' play. This kind of professional understanding of what it takes to question existing beliefs and transform practice is very different from the logic underpinning *Read Me? No way!*. Yet it also fits less easily with current policy processes and the urgent calls they make on teachers to fix problems in the attainment data fast. Now the emphasis falls on finding immediate "system patches" that can be rapidly deployed to make up for whatever has gone wrong. Teachers are encouraged to match problems to ready-made solutions which can be bought in at speed, or alternatively pick up "good ideas" that have common currency and can easily be borrowed and applied (Ball and Exley, 2010). These very real pressures in the system leave out of the picture precisely the kinds of sustained professional reflection that used to be regarded as essential in achieving lasting change.

New contexts, old problems: understanding the pressures in performance

Each of the policy documents I have discussed arises in a different policy context and draws on different kinds of values and beliefs both about gender and literacy and the shaping of professional practice. Whilst each ground their case on the gender differential in literacy attainment, they also signal different kinds of allegiances to the use of performance data to drive change. The comparison between more recent and older policy documents demonstrates how far current thinking is constricted by the narrow timeframes in which solutions are now sought. Much has changed in terms of the professional contexts for action each document imagines and invokes.

In many respects, the English system remains unique in the amount of attention it accords the performance data and how much of it the system holds. This has been a key element in government policy since the inception of the National Literacy Strategy (Moss, 2009). Whilst the Strategies themselves have now ceased to exist as a form of central direction, support and oversight of the curriculum, many of the tools to manage performance remain in place. In some respects this kind of close attention to monitoring performance data does protect against the more broad-brush generalisations about gender and attainment that *Me Read? No Way!* represents. Advice still made available to teachers on the National Strategies website, for instance, cautions teachers to check, via close analysis of their data, whether gender really is the most pressing problem in their school:

> Before trying to identify the significance of gender issues within an individual school or LA, it may be helpful to first look at the national picture. What are the national trends for boys' and girls' achievements at each key stage? You can then use the national pupil performance information in RAISEonline … (Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation) …..This information will help you answer the questions 'how well are we doing?', 'how do we compare to similar schools?' and 'what more should we aim to achieve?'
> http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/46129

In comparison with the Canadian example, this is quite measured. There is no assumption that boys' underperformance in literacy is a primary cause of concern everywhere, or for every boy. Everything rests on the points of comparison. Yet the kind of disinterested inquiry such advice imagines is also quite far from the high-pressured contexts in which many schools work. Even as central government increasingly steps back from shouldering direct responsibility for achieving system reform, the assumption that a particular kind of

performance management can successfully address issues in attainment at school level remains intact. The duty of the teacher is still to hunt for and find in the quantitative data the primary focus for improvement. It may not be gender, but if not it should be something else.

Whilst in the English context there has been a recent sharp change in the central direction of literacy policy, the architecture of accountability and the pressures it places on individual schools to improve their performance remains. The election of the Coalition government and Michael Gove's period of office as Secretary of State for Education have seen a considerable reduction in the forms of external support offered to schools to address issues in their performance alongside a weakening of the mechanisms which previously redistributed most resources to those facing the highest challenges. This only intensifies the pressure on those who may be least well equipped to stand back and fully reflect on what they should do next.

In this context it is all too easy to accept solutions that seem right, are easy to apply and quickly come to hand, with little time to consider the empirical evidence that might justify the choice. Considered processes of professional knowledge-making are replaced by the quick fix of knowledge transfer, as recipes for success pass the rounds. The publication, *Me, Read? No Way!* falls into this category where *Can do Better* (QCA, 1998) precisely eschews it. Real dangers lurk here as unconsidered stereotypes find room to flourish. Take for instance a local private primary school which under the claim of matching their teaching to boys' preferred learning styles introduced single-sex classes where boys were taught in short bursts to match their supposed attention spans. I cannot think of a better way of producing the object this initiative was meant to address[iv]. Where is the evidence base that supports this practice or shows it does no harm? What check is there on the particular "solution" individual schools choose? In the English policy context the problem is not so much that teachers are being pushed by policy-makers to reinstate gender stereotypes, but rather that conditions have been created in which resorting to gender stereotypes fixes the problem teachers face of knowing what to do.

Understanding gender and literacy attainment: when one explanation really is better than another

Single sex teaching groups; matching boys' learning styles; de-feminizing the literacy curriculum; re-making the literacy curriculum to meet boys' interests – all of these ideas for solving the problem of boys' underachievement can easily be found out there on the net. Some of them are now promoted by policy entrepreneurs who fill the space left as the centralised state retreats. This particular list of solutions shares an underlying explanation for educational failure: that it rests with a mismatch between what schools offer and who their pupils really are. Masculinity is re-constructed in terms of what is judged to be absent from the literacy curriculum, and imagined to be present amongst boys themselves. The capacity to stereotype and over-generalise about schooling and about gender is enormous under these conditions (Rowan et al, 2002). To make headway here against such strong commonplace assumptions, two principles are fundamental: first, that potential explanations for discrepancies in the data need to be interrogated and held up for critical review. Second, that teachers, researchers and those who seek to support the development of professional practice need to establish better forms of dialogue in which they reflect on the evidence together as well as act on practice. This kind of constructive dialogue needs to be less subject to short term pressures to fix outcomes now (Batho, 2009).

Take the explanation above that boys' understanding of themselves as masculine subjects and their (gendered) interests are systematically excluded from the literacy curriculum. How useful an explanation is this for the gender differential in literacy attainment? Not all boys do badly in schooling as it is, just as not all girls do well. Are those pupils who succeed, whether boys or girls, really "well-matched" in gender terms to the curriculum they experience? According to what criteria? In fact there is no evidence that schools where boys and girls both do well at reading and writing teach to specifically gendered interests. On the contrary,

research consistently shows that this is not the case (Ofsted, 2003; Younger et al, 2005). Indeed what these two substantial reports identify as characteristics of institutions where both boys and girls do well are: teaching and learning environments which continue to employ an extended and inclusive version of what constitutes good practice; and a commitment to forms of explicit pedagogy which give pupils access to a broad range of opportunities that engage them in meaningful ways and encourage them to step beyond narrowly defined gendered interests. From a policymaker's perspective, this re-establishes a central focus on the quality of the literacy curriculum, with gender kept to one side.

What else might tie the nature of the literacy curriculum to the gendered outcomes in performance? Rather than work from the assumption that educational success follows from an essential similarity between the content of the school curriculum and the (already gendered) interests of the child, I want to suggest an alternative point of view: that educational success depends upon recognising and then navigating the principles of difference that schools put in place. These principles of difference are overt in relation to the reading curriculum, which from the earliest point of entry discriminates between children according to their reading competence. Distinctions between readers are spelt out in classrooms both materially and spatially, in terms of where children are asked to sit and the kinds of reading material they are allowed to read, under what conditions. I have argued that the marked differences between pupils that this creates causes more difficulties for those boys who are placed at the bottom of the learning hierarchy than for those girls who find themselves in a similar position (For a detailed discussion of the fuller argument, see Moss, 2007). This happens in part because of the terms in which boys' and girls' friendship networks orientate towards claims of expertise and requests for help. Creating more equitable outcomes from the literacy curriculum depends upon teachers helping children manage the conflicting elements within the literacy curriculum and their own positioning within it. For the literacy curriculum makes highly visible others' judgements of their proficiency and on that basis lays down what they can and cannot do whilst simultaneously positioning pupils as willing and enthusiastic readers and writers, able to follow their own interests. The literacy curriculum writes large a profound contradiction at the heart of the social ordering of schooling in which pupils are simultaneously invited to act autonomously and submit to others' control (Moss, 2010).

The argument I have developed here and elsewhere is that gendered identities are partly produced in response to schooling, rather than exist fully formed a-priori, with interests that schools can choose to either meet or ignore. Such an argument can and should be tested. It predicts that boys and girls placed at different points in the hierarchy of literacy learners adopt strategies which may variously reinforce, consolidate, mitigate or undermine their position as winners or losers (Moss, 2007). The distinctions at play within the literacy curriculum and their interaction over time lead to the gendered patterns in the distribution of literacy attainment. Remedies lie in creating clearer ground upon which all children can engage meaningfully with the process of acquiring literacy skills, whatever their current level of competence, whilst shaping contexts and environments which encourage all children to read and write in a self-sustaining way. In this respect, a continuing emphasis on high quality literacy teaching matters. The difficulty lies in reclaiming what this means in a context which has placed such a strong emphasis on outcomes and performance indicators, used as narrow measures of quality.

Current dilemmas and solutions: The research community and the Gender Agenda

The use of performance data as the single and most powerful measure available to policy-makers to judge children's progress and challenge teachers' practice, holding them to account for what they do, has had a number of distorting effects. At this particular point in the policy cycle, as responsibility for defining performance problems and identifying potential solutions passes away from centralised structures of support and back to individual schools (Moss, 2009), a new element enters this dynamic. There are fewer checks and balances on the choices individual heads and schools now make, provided they are seen to be doing

something. Relationships with LAs have been systematically weakened, whilst the opportunities for policy entrepreneurs grow, bringing with them short term and serial policy fixes. Investment over the long-term in either understanding what is wrong or learning what leads to deep and sustainable change seems ever further off.

At this point the relationship between the research community, schools and policymakers becomes more crucial. An enlightened example of what can be done comes from *The Gender Agenda*, a year-long seminar series which the DCSF funded between 2008-9 (See Batho, 2009 for a full account of its activities). *The Gender Agenda* created a new opportunity for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to hear from and respond to each others' concerns. Whilst not all points of view may have been represented on the platform, the full use of cross-table discussion enabled the research evidence to be tested in debate against a range of experience and expertise. Positions changed, new questions opened up. But also and in important respects, a consensus emerged on what counts as gender equitable policy interventions and what needs to be put to one side. At the end of the seminar cycle, two documents were produced by the working party that steered the seminar series. The first, called *Gender and Education – Mythbusters. Addressing Gender and Achievement: Myths and Realities* (DCSF, 2009a), set out to counter a number of commonplace assumptions about the causes and solutions for gender differences in attainment by drawing on the existing and well attested research evidence. The second, called *Gender issues in school – what works to improve achievement for boys and girls* (DCSF, 2009b), used a similar review of the literature to highlight courses of action that show most promise in delivering gender equitable outcomes from teaching and learning. Taken together, these two publications have put forward a clear set of principles for action which can help schools plan progressive policies for tackling gender inequalities, in line with and informed by the available research evidence. They do not provide glib answers or instant solutions in and of themselves, but they do set out ground rules for a new and constructive conversation amongst staff about what and how their school can intervene on gender. In the coming years creating space for slow-time reflection on the causes and potential answers to complex problems remains crucial if teachers are to continue to enable all pupils to fully engage in the curriculum. These two publications are good places to begin.

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[i] The initial study, the Fact and Fiction Project, was funded by the ESRC between 1996-98, and the research team were Dena Attar and Gemma Moss. The project conducted ethnographic case

studies in four schools and six classrooms, documenting literacy events and practices in school and at home.

[ii] Subsequent studies, also funded by the ESRC, have included a follow up ethnography, Building a New Literacy Practice (2002-3), which considered the impact of the National Literacy Strategy on primary classroom practice (Moss, 2004); and Mixed Methods in the Study of Pattern and Variation in Children's Reading (2001-2), which analysed library borrowing records collected from one of the case study schools. The research team for the latter project were Gemma Moss and J.W. McDonald (Moss and McDonald, 2004). A later study upon which this paper draws, Re-making School Literacy (2004-7), also funded by the ESRC, tracked the development of literacy policy over an eight year period from 1996-2004, using documentary analysis and interviews with key players (See Moss, 2009).

[iii] These principles were subsequently taken up and adapted by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) as part of their Power of Reading Project (See Safford et al, 2004; and O'Sullivan and McGonigle, 2010).

[iv] I was asked to comment on this case by a local radio station in the late 1990s