Popular Girls Aren't into Reading: Reading as a Site for Working-Class Girls' Gender and Class Identity Work

Overview

Feminist scholarship recognises reading as a site for gender and class identity work (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1991), as texts and associated literate practices reflect how one sees oneself and is seen by others (Moje & Luke, 2009; Vares & Jackson, 2015). Working-class girls' struggles as they engage in school curriculum subjects such as reading and negotiate the formation of gender identities at school are complex, influenced by discourses of femininity often influenced by class (Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2010; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; McRobbie, 2013; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Raby, & Pomerantiz, 2015; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 1999)). Adding to the complexity, girls play a role in constructing their reading identities influenced by their desire to be, and indeed the social necessity of being seen as normal within their particular context (Neilson & Davies, 2016).

Internationally there is the portrayal of an idealised feminine reader that is not supported by the narratives of the working-class girls in this study. Attention is needed internationally to understand how working-class girls' position reading, as they define and re-define their identities, subject to the social environment of their schooling context and influences of the popular peer group culture including broader contextual influences.

The objective of this paper is to understand how working-class girls' reading identities are influenced by their peers and broader experiences as their narratives illustrate how their identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read and talk about (Moje & Luke, 2009). The paper addresses the following general ***research question:***

> How do Year 5 and Year 6 (9-11 years) girls attending elementary schools in high poverty locales describe their reading practices at school.

Theoretical framework. Recognizing literacy practices as social suggests that people's identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about (Moje & Luke, 2009). In turn, the positioning of reading as a schoolgirl plays a significant role in girls' identity work (Nielsen & Davies, 2016). As such, academic reading identities do not come easily, naturally, and without struggle for girls (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015), as being socially successful can entail performing femininity in a way that is at odds with academic success (Renold & Allan, 2006; Skelton, Francis, & Read, 2010). This struggle is particularly evident in lower socioeconomic school communities. There are foreseeable problems for girls who are perceived as too academic (Renold & Allan 2006) and so there is a need for a delicate balance between "doing girl" and "managing achievement" (Skelton et al., 2010). Working class girls who place value on their academic success and the importance of such

cultural capital often play down such academic performances as they consciously navigate their social context at school (Francis et al., 2010; Raby & Pomerantiz, 2015; Renold & Allan 2006). In this way some girls hide, downplay, or deny their successes and feel pressure to conform to normative cultural representations of what it means to be a girl in their particular school community (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015).

The research reported is part of large scale study that explored 615 boys' and girls' attitudes and beliefs about reading. It focuses on the narratives of a group of 9-11-year-old girls attending school in disadvantaged communities. As the paper shows, positioning reading positively within ones' feminine identity can be challenging if reading is not a sanctioned endeavour within the dominant peer group. From this perspective, the paper considers reading to be a social practice taken up by students in educational contexts in ways that are influenced by gender, class and location.

Methodology

The paper draws on data from a broader Australian project that included surveys with 615 boys and girls when they were in Year 3, 4 and 5 and 80 follow up interviews one year later. The focus is on follow up interviews with eight girls aged 9-11 (Year 5 and Year 6) who were attending three schools in lower socioeconomic locations. This group was selected first, as they represented girls attending school in the most disadvantaged locations and, second, they were the oldest of the female cohort and attitudes towards reading typically decline through the elementary school years (McKenna et al., 2012). It was anticipated that peer group influences would be increasingly more salient for these girls at this age. While the sample is small, the eight interviews represent narratives of girls in disadvantaged communities that are largely invisible in international educational policy discussions.

During the interviews students were asked to expand on their survey responses concerning their enjoyment of reading and frequency of reading, on the one hand, and to reflect on their experiences as readers at school, on the other hand. Specifically, students were asked about their: 1) attitudes towards reading and experiences as readers at school; 2) perceptions of their peer groups' attitudes towards reading: and (3) popularity at school. Additional information was also collected concerning the reading level of the students and socioeconomic status of the school community. Interviews were conducted individually with students in a quiet space close to their classrooms and participants were reminded of the confidentiality of their responses, their right to withdraw from the interview at any time, and the use of pseudonyms. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and was audio recorded for later transcription.

Data was first analysed to confirm students' survey responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) then an additional layer involved thematic analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Categories were used to assign meaning to descriptive information or topics. Categories were then subdivided into subcategories (Miles et al., 2013). This approach led to the establishment of a coding template that was applied to the remaining interviews. Three transcripts were then coded by the key researcher and crosschecked by two external researchers. The key researcher completed the remaining interviews with any discrepancies that arose discussed with an external arbitrator. These crosschecks ensured dialogic reliability of the analysis and agreement through discussions and negotiations (Åkerlind, 2005).

Findings

The image of the idealised feminine reader portrayed in the Australian policy space was not supported by the narratives of the girls in this study. Rather, they recounted stories where girls positioned reading as undesirable and uncool. Girls also talked of hegemony between their peer, stratified social orders with dominance associated with popularity, and being marginalised and treated like "pieces of dirt" for girls who did not live up to the specified feminine ideal. The feminine ideal however, for these girls, along with being pretty and hanging out with the boys, included performances associated with the masculine, such as doing "bad" things, "having a mean side", "fighting" and not being "into reading".

Findings highlight problematics for working class girls attending schools as they experience narrow boundaries around feminine discourses as readers at school. The risks associated with the dominant discourse around idealised femininity associated with being pretty and popular with the boys (Jackson, 2006) that are highlighted by the interplay of class (Paechter & Clark, 2016; Walkerdine et al., 2001) is incompatible with a positive reading identity. To succeed socially at school, these girls were compelled to invest in a set of productions that compromised their positive reading identities. However, at the same time, the girls were very aware of the social capital associated with reading and described the link between reading and academic success.

Disrupting the focus on performativity on benchmark testing that narrowly assesses reading as a skill and reports binary comparative data sets on boys' and girls' outcomes is needed. Educators need to broaden reading as a social practice in schools to encourage enquiry-based, learner-centred, critically-oriented models that develop relationships with literacy education that are culturally appropriate, reflect different "situated perspectives" and support but also expand working class girls' cultural value systems, attitudes and personal investments.

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