

**LITERACY POWER OPENS ACCESS TO ALL STUDENTS AND  
EMPOWERS FEMALE STUDENTS: A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL  
GEOGRAPHY CASE STUDY**

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**Abstrak**

*Pendidik dan pemerintah perlu menaruh perhatian dan mendorong lebih banyak akses ke literacy dan jenis-jenisnya. Dengan mampu memiliki akses ke berbagai jenis/aliran dalam literacy, para peserta didik akan terbekali dengan kemampuan untuk mendapatkan hasil tes yang lebih baik, yang mana kedepannya, menyebabkan mereka mampu mengambil kontrol atas dunia dan masa depan mereka masing masing. Lebih lanjut, pertimbangan para pembuat kebijakan juga perlu secara berimbang ditujukan baik pada peserta didik wanita dan laki-laki. Masing-masing dari mereka seyogyanya tidak terpinggirkan/terkesampingkan, baik selera maupun minat mereka. Pada kasus di sekolah geografi di Australia Selatan, para siswi dianggap telah terkesampingkan/terpinggirkan baik selera maupun minat mereka. Pada tahun 1991, terdapat banyak sekali siswi yang gagal pada ujian PES geografi yang tidak wajar/janggal, hal ini diyakini dikarenakan terdapat ketidakseimbangan perhatian terhadap peserta didik perempuan dan laki-laki ketika ujian yang mana pertanyaan-pertanyaan telah menjurus pada salah satu gender, yaitu pada kemampuan dan keunggulan para siswa (laki-laki) dan memarginalkan para siswi.*

**Kata kunci:** akses, literacy, pertanyaan tergenderkan, sekolah geografi

**Abstract**

*Educators and governments need to regard and encourage more access to literacy genres. By being able to access to multiple genres of literacy, students are empowered to perform better in tests, which in the long run, enables them to take control of their own world and future. In addition, policy makers' consideration also needs to be equally addressed to both sexes: females and males. They should not get marginalised, either their preference or their interest. In the case of South Australian school geography, the girls are believed to be marginalised in both their preference and interest. In 1991, there was 'an unusually high number of girls' failed PES geography examination, the rationale is believed that there was unbalanced address to female and male students in the examination that the questions are gendered in a way that it is to marginalize feminist and consider masculine as superior.*

**Keywords:** access, literacy, gendered questions, school geography

**Introduction**

Considering that tests at school are important, especially high stakes ones (influential in determining their

future), therefore efforts to prepare the students with enough training and practice are being dealt seriously and

thoroughly both by teachers and governments.

Several facts and factors, that are considered to cause low score achievement in the test, are collected, discussed and formulated not only in local and national level, but also in nation-wide forums. By doing so, educators are able to identify and eventually able to find better approach and solution to the low score achievement. It is the time for education policy makers (the government) to issue supporting policies (curriculum) based on the suggestions and justifications from educators forum.

One of the factors that can cause low achievement in the test is lack of equal and balanced approach to address the interest and preference as well as superiority of both sexes: female and male students. Lee states that female students tend to be marginalised, which can limit them to have access to the genres of the literacy in the tests. This condition is believed to be the rationale of the low score in the test and in his term “an unusually high number of girls” fail the test.

### **The Intersection Of Literacy, Linguistics, And Government (Curriculum)**

Lee (2013) states that “Literacy has in recent years become an explicit object of policy in Australia and elsewhere and linked to a government project of reform in education within a project of economic restructuring and reform”.

Furthermore, Lee (1997:415) points out that the notion discussed in his chapter *Questioning the Critical: Linguistics, Literacy and Curriculum* is the ability of systemic functional linguistics to enlighten the politics and ramifications of literacy pedagogy evolution. Lee postulates that this linguistics: “...lays claim to being a social and contextual linguistic theory, where language is understood as a resource for making meaning and where genres are functional categories for the achievement of social goals...”

Literacy is understood as political is “... to see it as implicated in the distribution of status and resources (“capital,” in Bourdieu’s sense) and in the government of populations” (Lee,1997:410).

### **The Macro-Politics Of Literacy**

Lee (1997:428) advocates that ‘critical theorists’ have two primary ways in approaching the relationships between literacy, education (schooling), and social power: “...The first is the question of access to and participation in the formal discursive practices of a culture; the second concerns the politics of representation.”. In relation with the first way, Lee argues “A politics of access, ... , is at base a liberal politics, specifically a liberal-democratic politics of equality ... access to more of the more valued forms of literacy for more of a nation’s population) “(Lee (1997:411). Pennycook (2001:99) tries to link Lee’s postulation to this

view "...access to literacy, remains a basic sociological issue – women around the world, for example, continue to have lower rates of literacy than men ...".

While, Lee's account for the second way: "...the politics of literacy may be enjoined in terms of the status of the meanings encoded through language and engaged in particular reading-writing practices... curriculum politics of representation..." (Lee,1997:411). Lee believes that such condition is currently known as 'critical literacy' which pay attention to "... social critique of the dominant forms of school knowledge and with a project of cultural rewriting (i.e., of changing the discourses and practices of dominant cultures that generate and sustain material inequality." (Lee,1997:411). Pennycook (2001:99) tries to clarify Lee's idea about 'critical literacy' that it "... focuses so centrally on issues of access remains tied to a liberal democratic politics of equality".

Lee (1997:412) – who has interest in feminist poststructuralist - proposes that "... the politics of literacy and curriculum are crucially concerned with struggles over subjectivity...". Lee's example for such idea is 'school geography' phenomenon.

### **The Politics Of Literacy And Curriculum In Brief**

Lee (1997) postulates that there are two major ways in which the

relations among literacy, education (schooling), and social power are engaged by critical theorists in terms of their politics. The first is access to and participation in the formal discursive practices of a culture. A politics of access is at base a liberal politics, specifically a liberal-democratic politics of equality. The second is the politics of representation. By demonstrating that literacy pedagogy cannot sensibly be studied outside the politics of curriculum; Lee (1997) argues the need for a more complex engagement with the politics of literacy and curriculum across a broad front. Within a feminist poststructuralist framework, what this means is that the politics of literacy and curriculum are crucially concerned with struggles over subjectivity, Lee proposes school geography as the example.

School curricula can be understood in part as interested selections from available versions of disciplines, selections that are exercised in a highly political climate of competition and exchange among different participants, some located within the discipline, others within other institutions such as ministries of education and professional associations.

### **A South Australian Case Study**

In South Australia, there are two types of geography: Publicly Examined System (PES) geography and School Assessed System (SAS)

geography. The former has ‘higher status tertiary entrance qualification’ than the latter. The PES geography’s ‘core topic’ is ‘physical geography’, however, teachers can interchange between discussing ‘physical’ or ‘economic’ geography. In contrast, SAS geography “... is strongly oriented to human and social geographies, has an explicitly speculative, sociopolitical orientation...” (Lee, 1997:422).

In senior geography, the overall numbers of boys enrolled constantly outnumber that of girls. Interestingly, more girls prefer to enroll in SAS geography. In terms of performance, the tendency is that girls get better results in SAS geography, while in PES geography, boys are likely to perform better than girls. (Whitehouse, 1992).

In 1991, there was ‘an unusually high number of girls’ failed PES geography examination. Lee believes the rationalization is that “... the questions were gendered in significant ways ...” (Lee, 1997:422). Due to this unusually high number of girls who had not passed the examination, Whitehouse (1992) initiates research project. Whitehouse’s research project asserts that PES examination has two parts: short-answer questions (worth 60 %) – involving data interpretation and mapping; and two essays (worth 40 %). Girls perform badly in the former part, which has higher value. The justification is that ‘computational aspects’ gained more ‘privilege’ (superior). In PES

geography, mapping and statistics were more highly valued than more discursive textual productions. A very particular kind of student subject is projected through this curriculum, one that appears to sit easily with the predispositions and investments of a particular kind of masculine subjectivity.

Moreover, Whitehouse (1992:37) states that girls are far more likely to see ambiguity, which leads them to see no right answer or to think of several possible responses. The general process of abstracting and focusing down on a right answer reflects a more ‘male’ style of thinking. Boys as a group find it easier to judge a problem in isolation and consider the context of an activity to be idiosyncratic.

In response to this case study, Lee (1997:423) believes that the possible solution is by allocating more time to prepare students to be capable to perform better in ‘short-answer section’. If this kind of solution is really applied, Lee suspects that “... to have the result of further marginalizing girls’ interests and strengths in essay writing and more considered exploration of geographical social issues, and subjecting them further to what can clearly be characterized as a masculinist-technicist regime within the subject discipline...”.

Lee emphasises the importance of teaching the ‘genres of power’ (for example: secret English-“which are used in this way, because specialization involves

apprenticeship and the relevant apprenticeship is made selectively available to specific members of our culture”) to students, this will ‘empower’ them to have ‘access’ to such genres. This kind of teaching is of interest to ‘the politics of the genre-based writing pedagogy’. Lee believes the upshot is that students will ‘master the powerful forms’. By which they are ‘empowered’ to take control of their own world (Christie, 1987). This view about the necessities of genre pedagogy is supported by Pennycook (2001:99) who proposes that: “... communication and the workplace are becoming more complex and we therefore need to ensure that students have access to multiple forms of literacy”.

Lee (1997:420). terms such genre pedagogy as “a pedagogy of deferral”. Pennycook (2001:100)) illuminates its meaning as “...students are not literate until they have mastered key genres...”. He points out that the focus is “...on a notion of voice, the opening up of a space for the marginalized to speak, write, or read ... so that the voicing of their lives may transform both their lives and the social system that excludes them” (Pennycook, 2001: 101).

Moreover, Christie (1987:30) states that “...Mastery of these ways of working, which are necessarily encoded very heavily in linguistic patternings, represents mastery of the capacity to exercise choice: choice, that is to say, in that one is

empowered to make many kinds of meanings, enabled to operate with confidence in one’s world. And, let there be no doubt about this, without capacity to exercise choice in this sense, one cannot change one’s world. Learning the genres of one’s culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it”.

Morris (1992:80) claims that ‘physical geography are bizarre’: “...physical geography based on these two elements is known as environmental determinism: human activity shaped by the environment...”. Lee’s comment about ‘school geography curriculum’ is that the disciplines selections are “... exercised in a highly political climate of competition and exchange among different participants, some located within the discipline, others within other institutions... geography classrooms are sites characterized by a discursive multiplicity, including both dominant and alternative or resisting discourses about spatial relations ... Student subjects are differentially located ... ways that nevertheless work to reproduce relations of dominance and marginality, particularly along the lines of gender and race ... within Australian school curricula is part of a discursive complex privileging technicist, masculinist, ...” (Lee, 1997:418- 419).

Furthermore, Lee (1997) claims that analysis of assessment data in geography reveals some

major gender issues. The complex politics of the literacy-curriculum interface: (a) the gendering of student choice within the geography curriculum, and (b) the gender specificity of outcomes within the written examination.

Lee (1997) elucidates that Girls were considered by examiners to write with “less precision” than boys. Male teachers typically privileged the computational aspects of the subject in PES geography and, while acknowledging that girls often write well, claimed that that was not what was valued in geographical training.

### **Conclusion**

I think Lee would like to propose that the problem that is encountered by the girls - in the South Australian case study above – is a matter of access. They are not facilitated and taught how to access ‘data interpretation, mapping, and computational aspects’ which are considered to be the things that are superior or ‘powerful’ in secondary geography curriculum in South Australia. Moreover, there is lack of addressing the preference and interest of the girls, education policy makers tend to value aspects which are claimed to be the domain of the masculine superiority. By interviewing girls, their reasons can be revealed that is they have strong preference for more socially complex topics and dislike mapping, computational and short-answer questions. Their comment about the first section is that they did not have

enough space to answer the questions to the depth of their understanding. Lee argues that there is unbalanced address to both sexes: females and males, there is tendency to marginalize feminist and consider masculine as superior.

### **Implication To Education In Indonesia**

Considering that Indonesia has similar kind of tests to the ones in South Australia namely Publicly Examined System (PES) and School Assessed System (SAS), which apply nation-wide and for all disciplines. Moreover, the tests are also similar to be high stakes ones. Students who fail Publicly Examined System (PES) will be highly influenced in their future study and career, since similar to South Australia, in Indonesia this PES has ‘higher status tertiary entrance qualification’ than SAS.

Different to South Australia, in Indonesia there is less attention and address of the gendered aspects in the test questions. Such approach and thinking about the so called gendered aspects of literacy needs to start having more attention and consideration both by educators and education policy makers in the nation.

In addition to being fair to both sexes: females and males. The approach to gendered aspects can facilitate exploration and enhancement of the preference and superiority of each: the ones of the females as well as of the males. By

doing so, in their future workplace, they can support each other and fill in each downside. For example, females are better in socially complex topics while males are better in computation and doing short answers.

Relating to females and males downside and superiority, Indonesia educators especially national exam preparation authorities need to include considerations about such matter in their education policy making and national curriculum. For instance, balanced aspects to be valued in the weighing of the national examination score as well as balanced time allocation for examination preparation: girls need more preparation on computational aspects and short answers while boys need more preparation on writing well (based on this South Australian School Geography Case Study).

### **English Education In Indonesia**

English is as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia, therefore different to other countries which consider English as their second language (ESL), Indonesia needs to 'bridge' knowledge gaps upon using the teaching and learning medias (text books and exercise books) which are mostly designed and targetted to ESL countries.

For EFL students like in Indonesia, English is believed to have its own secret which needs to be encoded to the students so that they will gain access to those literacies. As stated by Lee (1997)

that secret English are used in this way-because specialization involves apprenticeship and the relevant apprenticeship is made selectively available to specific members of our culture.

If this postulation of Lee is true to all English students globally, those countries who consider English as ESL will find it easier to have access to this secret code since they have better cultural access, as in India and Malaysia (they are the members of commonwealth countries with Great Britain). Whereas, an EFL country like Indonesia which has less cultural contact and access will for sure need more preparation and treatment.

EFL students in Indonesia can get better English score and proficiency if their access to the so called secret English is opened and facilitated by depiction of cultural and authentic material as well English usage in real condition in English speaking countries. For example, the introduction of Halloween party trick or treat', classroom language, school life in English speaking countries, giving arguments, does and don'ts at campus/library/public places and many more.

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