Literacy in a Multicultural Indonesian Society:  
A Feminist Perspective\textsuperscript{1}

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Abstrak


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Introduction

Discrimination based on gender in the current education debate suggests that girls and boys, especially in a country like Indonesia, have unequal opportunity in education. A large body of research indicates that in Southern Asia, the average hours spent by girls at schools are about one half of the hours spent by boys, while the number of girls registered to middle schools is just two third of the number of boys. According to the research whose result was published by the World Bank Publications (www.worldbank.org/publications), gender inequality in the number of girls and boys who attend schools is considerably

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higher among poor people than among the rich. Another finding in the report shows that although girls and boys enter school roughly equal in measured ability, twelve years later, girls have fallen behind their male classmates in higher-level mathematics and measures of self-esteem. Despite the inequality which exists in education, girls have often been left out of the educational goals.

Many researches found that gender inequality in education has yielded negative impacts in the well being of men, women, as well as children in promoting their standard of living. It has lowered the quality of life. Although how far the quality decreases might be difficult to measure, World Bank report reveals that poverty, malnutrition and other diseases have strong correlation with gender inequality. Illiteracy among women for instance, shows that the lower the education of mothers, the poorer the care that mothers give on their children, and the higher the rate of new born death and children’s malnutrition. Meanwhile the higher the education of mothers, the healthier life of the family is maintained. Educated mothers can also increase family income. The side income earned by women also tends to give positive result than the side income earned by men.

Education for women has also affected positively on people’s economic growth and productivity. It was found by Asian Development Bank survey (2001) that small and medium enterprises led by women are more successful than those led by men. “Female entrepreneurs are apparently more realistic and cautious,” the report said. Female entrepreneurs also report fewer problems with business licenses, tax officials or illegal levies than their male counterparts, which suggests they have better social and communication skills. However, it said that the main constraints preventing female-led enterprises is the cultural bias toward career women. The ADB also explained that women’s business were mostly established to “contribute to the husband’s earnings,” a view that imposes a negative effect on women’s ambitions. Social norms have often discriminate working opportunities based on gender by paying lower wages to women and limited work that women can do.

Realizing the importance of education for women as the key for the promotion of qualified human resources and that education has been the important factor for the forming of productive and innovative humans, UNESCO in Dakar, Senegal, has suggested its education policy in ‘Education for All’ program. One component of the policy is gender equality in education. Among others it states that by the year 2015 all children, especially girls will have access to qualified primary education that is free and compulsory. Education for all is also targeted in eliminating gender disparity and achieving gender equality in education. While this policy can be considered as very encouraging for women in particular, to achieve this, some strategies should be conducted to realize the goal. In the multicultural society like Indonesia, literacy education should also pay attention to women’s diverse cultural backgrounds and empower them through literacy.

What is literacy?

Traditionally people talk about literacy as the condition of being literate, i.e. able to read and write. This condition is usually carried out through formal learning, a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching. Along with learning, Krashen and Terrell (1983) also talk about ‘acquisition’ which is a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error, without a process of formal teaching. Acquisition usually happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functional in the sense that the acquirer knows he/she
needs to acquire the thing in order to function. According to Gee (1992), acquisition and learning are differential sources of power: acquirers usually beat learners at performance, learners usually beat acquirers at talking, explaining, analyzing and criticizing about it.

In Gee’s (1992) view, literacy that is gained by learning is very problematic. Learning to read for instance, has often stresses the production of poor performers. Tuman (1987) refers such learning as literacy that equates only with simple skills of decoding or encoding written language—a model he finds dominating the schools and literacy education. However, one can read and write and still fail to engage in metaphorical meaning making, which is the genuine literate enterprise. Hence, to be literate does not simply mean to be able to read and write or develop aural skills, but also to recognize that the identities of ‘others’ matter as part of a broader set of politics and practices aimed at reconstruction of democratic public life. Literacy cannot be viewed as merely an epistemological or procedural issue, but must be defined primarily in political and ethical terms (Mitchell and Weiler 1991). Freire’s provocative explanation of literacy states that ‘the act of learning to read and write has to start from a very comprehensive understanding of the act of reading the world, something which human beings do before reading the words’ (Freire and Macedo 1987:xiii). This can be seen from how children comprehend language in terms of its pragmatic function. Thus, ability to read and write is far from simply decoding and encoding words.

The discourse of literacy has close correlation with the issues of how education enables students to make judgments about how society is constructed, how existing social practices are implicated in relations of equality and justice, as well as how students view inequalities around racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Educating for equality, democracy, justice and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. Literacy should offer students to be border crossers. Mitchell and Weiler (1991:xiv) maintain that:

As border crossers, students not only refigure the boundaries of academic subjects in order to engage in new forms of critical inquiry, but they are also offered the opportunities to engage the multiple references that contract different cultural codes, experiences, and histories. In this context, a pedagogy of difference provides the basis for students to cross over into diverse cultural zones that offer a critical resource for re-thinking how the relations between dominant and subordinate groups are organized, how they are implicated and often structured in dominance, and how such relations might be transformed in order to promote a democratic and just society.

Hence, literacy in this sense should not only promote ability to read and write, equality and justice, but it should also be an act of empowering students to speak. It is to empower students with the ability to the self-affirming expression of experiences mediated by one’s history, language and traditions. It is to empower those who have been marginalized economically and culturally to claim in both respects a status as full participating members of a community.

Women and literacy

In many cultures in the world, women have often been placed in the subordinate level. This subordinate position of women has manifested in many aspects of life including in literacy. Luttrell (1993) maintains that school divides students against each other and against themselves along the fault lines of gender, race, and class in the struggle for schoolwise knowledge. What we think and feel about ourselves is at large formed by the role models, readings, skills we learn and friends we have at schools. Aside the formal curriculum, schools are places where ideas, values, and beliefs that can be consid-
ered as ‘hidden curriculum’ are transferred.

The feminist critique of academic literacy found that school curriculum often reflects strong cultural and gender biases. Early reading texts show that the world these texts portray is sexist. Girls are illustrated in many school textbooks in their stereotypical roles such as being the care giver at home, an elementary school teacher, a secretary or a nurse, while boys are doctors, soldiers, businessmen with their activities outside their home. Gender imbalance in texts has often reinforced the opposition between males as ‘active’ and females as ‘passive’. Girls’ portrayal in the stories is restricted to stereotype ‘girl’ activities like skipping, hopping, and cooking, while boys are portrayed in a range of active roles and competitive games. However, many studies do confirm that teachers are often unaware of the fact that they treat boys differently from girls, and even disbelieve the evidence when confronted with it (Corson 1998). Hence, even when girls have had the same opportunity to attend schools together with boys, they are still framed in the traditional roles of who they are and what they ought to do as girls and as women.

How teachers teach in the class also shows different treatment they give to boys and girls. Researches show that girls receive significantly less attention from teachers than do boys. Teachers direct more open-ended questions at boys in the early years of schooling and more yes/no questions at girls. Girls are demanded to obey, to be quiet in class and to be cooperative, while boys are expected to be active, aggressive, adventurous and independent. Girls are encouraged to take courses such as language, home management, nursing, while boys are advised to enroll in engineering, physics, mathematics (Ollenburger and Moore, 1996). Because of their identification with the domestic sphere, women tend to be excluded from science and technology, which are considered as men’s domain. A report from AAUW (1992) shows that boys come to science classes with more out-of-school familiarity and experience with the subject matter. One study of science classrooms found that 79 percent of all student-assisted science demonstrations were carried out by boys.

Such condition in schooling has perpetuated many issues concerning women and literacy in relation to the questions of justice, knowledge production and democracy. In a patriarchal society men gain power by birthright and privilege by way of their domination of subordinated women. As women are often under-represented in formal education, their abilities are often devalued. Such a patriarchal context induces some women, especially working class women, to devalue their own knowledge and abilities as ‘just common sense’. Lutrell (1993) maintains that when women view their knowledge as affective not cognitive and as feeling not thoughts, their subservient role is perpetuated and their power is diminished. It also perpetuates a false dichotomy patriarchy construct between feminine emotionalism and masculine rationality. Eventually the false dichotomy perpetuates an unjust system that exempts men from nurturing, service types of work while holding women responsible for unpaid forms of domestic toil. It is therefore essential for educators to understand these patriarchal dynamics, for it is these forces that work to hide young women’s abilities from their teachers and from themselves.

The reality that boys do better in science and technology has triggered many researchers to probe on the ways males and females gain knowledge. Many studies show that women acquire knowledge and produce it by following different ways than men’s. According to Giligan (1982:19, 172), women’s mode of thinking is “contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract,” and women “make a dif-
different sense of experience, based on their knowledge of human relationships.” Giligan’s research supports feminist compositionists who maintain that literate discourse valued by the school is formal, abstract, individualistic, and therefore, masculine. Men most often write about cognitive blocks that they experienced in analyzing issues, while women write about the affective blocks that they experienced, either while trying to ‘connect’ with their intended audiences and/or peer writing groups, or while trying to find ‘authentic voices’ in discourse acceptable to the academy. Women who are socialized to think narratively and to value attachment rather than competition, individualism and abstract thinking will find themselves voiceless in a school which values only the language of masculine interests.

Belenky and her colleagues (1997) who interviewed 135 women also suggest that women’s intellectual development differs from that of men. They posit five (not necessarily sequential) categories to describe different ways that women construct truth and reality. They describe these epistemological positions as positions of silence, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; received knowledge, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authority but not capable of creating knowledge of their own; subjective knowledge, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; procedural knowledge, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge; and constructed knowledge, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (p.15). They further show that the ‘authoritarian banking model’ of education, described by Paulo Freire, is not suitable for women as it leads to alienation, repression, and division, therefore retarding, arresting, or even reversing women’s growth. What women need is a “connected model of education”. “Education conducted on the connected model would help women toward community, power, and integrity. Such an education could facilitate the development of women’s minds and spirits (p.228).”

**Women and literacy in Indonesian context**

In general, women’s access to education in Indonesia has been increasing. The ratio indicates that proportionally the increase of girls going to schools is higher than that of boys. Based on the central bureau of statistics, it shows that the rate of female students attending schools up to senior high is higher than the rate of boys. The following numbers are taken from the National Socioeconomic Survey (Susenas) concerning the net enrollment rates of boys and girls ages 7 to 24 attending schools up to the tertiary level around Indonesia:

The table shows that up to senior high school the rate of girls attending schools are increasing and in the more recent years the rates were even higher than those of boys. This happened not only in the urban but also in the rural areas. Although the evidence seems to be a promising news for girls, in the tertiary level the rate of girls’ enrollment is lower than boys’. This could mean that while many Indonesian girls have had access to schools as boys have and the numbers are competing, many girls did not seem to continue their studies to the tertiary level. In fact both males and females show a decrease in rating in the tertiary level, how-
ever females have greater decrease than males in the enrollment.

In terms of majors chosen by vocational school students, Suleeman (1995) noted that most girls would choose SKKP or SMKK which teach and prepare girls how to become good housewives and mothers. Meanwhile boys would enroll in ST and STM where they study engineering. In high schools with three majors, i.e. IPA, IPS and Culture, most girls usually choose either IPS (social studies) or Cultural studies, while most boys choose IPA (physics/natural sciences). Although the division of majors was meant to let students choose the subjects they would like to study so they would not feel compelled to learn the subjects they do not like, in reality the grades the students receive will decide in what major each student will have to enter. Those who had better grades are encouraged to choose IPA, while others who get lower grades are advised to choose IPS since they could not take IPA. It is shown that the number of girls taking IPA is usually fewer than that of boys, and boys taking IPS are fewer than girls (p. 242). This evidence has in fact yielded more serious consequences, i.e. people assume that IPA is a more prestigious major that only bright students (usually males) could take. Meanwhile social studies are regarded as a ‘not so difficult’ major that could be followed by female students who are not as ‘smart’ as the (most male) students who enter IPA. Such assumption seem to be carried on in the tertiary level. Majors like engineering, mathematics, physics usually have more males and they are considered as more prestigious majors and enrolled by ‘smart’ students only, while social studies and language or literature majors are considered secondary and usually have more females than males. Male students who happen to choose language or literature major have often been regarded as soft and weak or feminine, while females who choose engineering as their major are considered more masculine. It is not surprising to find many females as well as males students and their parents who are quite apprehensive to choose majors that are assumed to be inappropriate for women or for men.

Besides the discrepancy in the choice of major for boys and girls, Kuntjara (2004) in her recent study on two state elementary schools in Surabaya found that when the sixth graders were asked to state their job preference in their future careers, the careers chosen by the boys but not by the girls were: surgeon, motor racer, architect, banker, pilot, soccer player, and engineer; while the careers chosen by the girls and not by the boys were: pediatrician, nurse, teacher, stewardess, singer, dancer, and police officer. It is interesting to note here that gender stereotyping is still prevalent in young students’ choice of their future roles. Even when many boys and girls did choose to be a doctor, the boys thought of specializing in surgery while the girls in pediatrician. Hence, showing that women are still considered by the students as more appropriate to treat children and being a surgeon is considered a more difficult task, therefore it is more suitable for men. However, the fact that only girl students chose police officer as their future career but none of the boys chose it could be interesting for further investigation.

The curriculum set for schools has often been gender bias. Readings in many school textbooks in Indonesia represent women and men in an imbalanced proportion. Lie (2001) found that from 823 English reading texts written by Indonesian writers and published in Indonesia, only 31.56% readings have female gender representations, while male representations constitute 68.44%. Thus the representation of the male gender is twice as much as that of the female counterpart. Lie also found that 38.5% of the frequencies of gender bias
favor the female gender, while the rest (61.5%) shows biases that favor the male gender. The female gender bias includes the use of proper names which are associated with attention to detail, neatness, patience, care and service; personal/possessive pronouns for shoppers, dancers, family planning participants; personification of flower, beauty and gentleness, while the male gender bias includes proper names associated with a job requiring strength, courage, leadership and reasoning; personal/possessive pronouns in the area of sports, politics, for smokers, drivers, philosophers, farmers, entrepreneur, criminals, witch and hermit. Hence, these findings show that the textbooks do not provide equal inclusion, in terms of both gender representation and bias. Although the textbooks used in Lie’s research are English as a foreign language textbooks, they were written by Indonesian authors and published in Indonesia and used mainly by Indonesian students who study English as a foreign language. Many of them have even been recommended by the Department of Education. Kuntjara (2004) also got similar finding in the reading textbooks of Bahasa Indonesia for elementary students, i.e. males are pictured as mechanic, carpenter, weight lifter, blacksmith, doing fishing, biking, playing football, kites and marbles, and painting, while females are pictured as a cook, handicraft maker, dancer, doing laundry, sewing, sweeping the floor, shopping, and baking. Therefore, we can conclude the unequal gender representations and gender bias could have been the reflection of how literacy is conducted in conjunction with the place of Indonesian women.

Another research on gender and literacy was conducted by Kuntjara and Lie (1999) in their protocol analysis of reading and writing in gender perspective. The research aims at finding out male and female students’ process of thinking while they did their reading and writing activities. There are some striking differences in how males and females process their reading comprehension and composing activities. The activities were all conducted in their native language, i.e. Indonesian, Javanese or their regional dialect. So students are free to express themselves using the language they felt most comfortable of using. In reading, female students showed some prediction right after reading the title. They also questioned the reading topic by using their prior knowledge before starting their reading, while male students kept on reading without prolonged predicting or questioning. In writing, female students also showed frequent hesitancy while questioning the appropriateness of the topic they wanted to write about. This seems to show female students’ apprehension of making mistakes or their lack of confidence. Another finding reveals that female students in both activities made significant digression during the activities. Meanwhile male students did not seem to digress a lot and they would usually decide the meaning and the topic of their composition much faster.

The findings seem to suggest different processes of reading and writing between males and females. Although whether such processes could indeed reveal females’ tendency to digress and feel anxious about making mistakes still needs further in-depth research, their findings seem to confirm the idea that women do process their literacy learning in a slower pace and stronger hesitancy.

**Literacy in multicultural settings**

In multicultural settings, one especially important thing in literacy education for students of diverse backgrounds is the social context. The social contexts of the home and community often prepare students of diverse backgrounds to learn in ways quite different from those expected by the school. Teachers need to be aware
that in such situation literacy may take many forms. While teachers will want to acquaint all students with mainstream forms of literacy, they will also have to be aware that other forms of literacy may also be significant in the lives of students of diverse background (Au 1993).

For instance, Heath’s (1983) study of literacy in two communities, Trackton and Roadville, only a few miles from one another, shows that each community has its own literate tradition. Different cultures or subcultures, such as those of Trackton and Roadville, incorporate different beliefs about literacy and have different customary uses of literacy. Consequently when students from diverse backgrounds participate in school literacy activities, they are in fact being socialized into the literacy practice of a different culture, i.e. the culture of the school. Meanwhile the culture of the school often tends to be primarily a reflection of mainstream culture. Thus, there could be many possibilities of mismatches between the culture of the school and the culture of the home. It is these mismatches that often perpetuate problems of justice and democracy.

One of the problems is the mismatch that occurs between the mainstream ways of gaining knowledge which is often shaped by patriarchal culture and the women’s ways of knowing. Gilligan (1982) found that female cognitive development proceeds along a different path. Girls’ moral reasoning often involves the consideration of personal experience, caring and connectedness, negotiation over absolute judgments, responsibilities over rights and contextual and narrative-based thinking over cognitive that is formal and abstract. However, in school curriculum women’s interpersonal and connected qualities are sometimes viewed as inferior. Men are the measure of human normality. Women find it risky to go with their intuitions in school, in that such cognitive styles are so seldom recognized as valuable (Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Gessom III 1997). Many female students lose confidence and feel that their failure is a result of their own inadequacy to meet the mainstream ways.

The mainstream culture which is often dominated by patriarchal culture often shows that many schools have been shaped by what patriarchy has viewed as acceptable behavior and appropriate ways of being (Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Gessom III 1997). Schools and educational policies are often managed and made by the school authority who are mostly males. Sophisticated thinking is often equated with maleness. In this male centered nature of schooling, rationality and positivistic measurements are used. The superior set the school agenda and formulate policies that are primarily of interest to them. Hence, they have become the producer and consumer of the knowledge. Students (especially female students) are the passive objects that are acted upon. Some critical multiculturalists gain insight from the feminist critique of rational man and patriarchal science the subtlety of oppression toward females in literacy education. In this case, literacy should be an emancipatory practice that recognizes differences.

Scientific objectivity often separates thought and feeling. Feeling is designated as an inferior form of human consciousness, so those who rely on thought and logic can justify their repression of those associated with emotion or feeling. Feminist theorists noted that the thought feeling hierarchy is historically used by men to oppress women. A rational viewpoint is the voice worth hearing and has often won over an emotional perspective in an argument. Science which emphasizes the rational production of generalizations move us away from the domain of specific human beings with their passions, feelings and intuitions.

Women in multicultural Indonesian society may experience such situation in their literacy
education. While many Indonesian women of diverse backgrounds could have suffered from their inability to meet the mainstream culture in their literacy education, women of different ethnicity and community might have encountered different ways in their process of literacy as well. By understanding the ways education operates and how women from the diverse backgrounds experience their literacy education, educators need to develop creative means of empowering and transforming those who are vulnerable to patriarchal power.

**Literacy which empowers women in multicultural settings**

In multicultural settings, teachers are dealing with students who have individual interests, stories, memories, narratives, and readings of the world. Females students come to class with not only their own stories, memories, interests, narratives, and readings of the world, but also their own ways of knowing that are often different from the mainstream ways. Developing literacy education that takes the notion of student experience seriously means developing a critical language that “works both with and on the experiences that students bring to the classroom” (Giroux 1992:17). Such kind of classroom is both empowering and transformative.

Empowering women in literacy education set in the multicultural settings need to pay attention to several factors. First, teachers must be able to develop conditions in the classroom where different student voices have to be heard and legitimated. Women from different culture have their own experience and may follow different ways in acquiring literacy. Allowing them to voice their experience will empower women as they find their existence acknowledged. Second, materials given in their literacy education need to provide them with different discourses so they can understand their own histories, analyze them, and question the dominant forms of history presented in school curriculum. Third, teachers must familiarize women students with the articulation of a morality. Hence, they will be able to decide what forms of life and conduct are most appropriate morally amidst the world of diverse ideologies. Fourth, women students need to learn to believe that they can also make a difference in the world with their knowledge. Finally, stereotyping men and women could hinder us from seeing each person as a unique human being who is different from each other and from seeing other possibilities, which human can do. This is also to see that human life is very complex.

**Conclusion**

Literacy has been defined as more than just being able to read and write or develop aural skills. In Gee’s analysis, literacy has become pluralized as it is embedded in the social context. Consequently all forms of literacy are not the same and they can be characterized in terms of their dominance and power, as well as in terms of their relationship to home-based and community-based of using language.

Women whose status in the society is often in the subordinate level have been found in the disadvantage position in literacy education. Girls are often treated differently than boys at schools. The courses many girls take are considered not as important as the courses taken by boys. Women are also found to follow different ways of knowing (Belenky et.al. 1997). However, their ways are often considered trivial and are not following the logical scientific way most scientists acknowledge. Hence, even when the number of females students who attend schools under tertiary level is increasing, such as the number shown in Susenas, it is not yet balanced with the quality of education in which females students can have equal opportunity where their voice is heard and experience acknowledged.
Literacy education for women in the multicultural society like Indonesia shows that female (as well as male) students are still bound in their gender roles stereotyping that in many ways may show women’s incompetence in education and daily life activities compared to what men do in education and in their lives. This can be seen in their choice of major in schools, their future career choices, and their textbooks used in class. Such condition could be worse as female students may lose their self confidence and look at themselves as indeed incapable of meeting the mainstream (men’s) ways. Furthermore, the conception of rights is often strange to women who have been told all their lives that they must obey and care for others. In such condition to frame literacy in terms of equality of opportunity, rights, or empowerment, may be absurd. Therefore, to act upon the principles of literacy or learning as a right for women, it is necessary to reconceptualize how education is constituted.

Educators need to make significant changes so that women from diverse backgrounds can be empowered and transformed. Certain changes in the curriculum, textbooks, as well as teaching methods should reinforce students’ cultural identities and give them an appreciation for other cultures. Schools have to be able to recognize and build on strengths in students’ own home language and women’s ways of knowing. Hence, students will be able to construct their own understanding while going further with their need for growth in literacy.

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