

Gender differentials and sustainable learning environments

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The centrality of quality education provisioning for all towards a better and socially just life is acknowledged globally. To date, however, there are still skewed gender differentials unfavourable to girls, thus impeding gender equality. In this paper I report on the reasons for leaving school early cited by out-of-school girls in North-West Province, South Africa. These reasons are juxtaposed against those cited by out-of-school boys to show how powerful gender as 'positioning in discourses' appears to be. Structured focus group interviews using the adapted version of 'Masitsa's inventory' were conducted. Qualitative data were coded and analysed based on frequency tables. The findings reveal that more girls than boys say they leave school early owing to: repeated failure; long distance to and from school; pregnancy; poverty; ill-health; attraction of odd jobs; looking after siblings; lack of motivation; early marriage, and criminal activity. The conclusion, therefore, is that if schools in the context of the community can become sustainable learning environments privileging girls' concerns, they can assist in resolving these problems of skewed gender differentials. This could lead towards achievement of a socially just life for all.

Keywords: early school leavers; gender differentials; social justice; sustainable learning environments

Introduction

The United Nation's Millennium Development Goal (MDG 3) specifically advocates the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment (2005; 2010). However, it has to be noted that this third MDG is inextricably interwoven with the other seven MDGs which also address the plight of women. The first of these identifies the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as the top priority in the world. For this to be achieved, women who are in the majority and are the primary life and health givers, have to be empowered accordingly so that they can play their roles effectively. Linked to this goal is the achievement of universal primary education (MDG 2) which firmly places women and girls at the centre of any effort towards growth, improvement and development. Women are the ones whose health is directly linked to that of the unborn and born children. This observation does not remove responsibility from males but focuses specifically on the plight of females. Thus, if the world intends to reduce infant mortality (see MDG 4), then it means that women have to know more about how to take care of their health (MDG 5). In very specific ways MDG 6 refers to combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Females are thus better positioned to ensure environmental sustainability (MDG 7), as well as establishing global partnerships for development (MDG 8). All facets of life from conception onwards seem to hinge on how well they conduct themselves, are cared for and are empowered. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) report summarises the above very aptly in these words:

Increased female school enrolment is associated with better health and nutritional intake

of families. Enhancing reproductive and maternal health contributes across the MDG goals. Equitable provision of land and agricultural inputs significantly increases output and ensures food security. Constitutional and legal reforms enhance women's empowerment and increase their political participation. Providing infrastructure to households with energy sources and water reduces the burden of domestic activities and frees girls to attend school, engage in self employment or participate in labour markets. MDGs continue to provide the road map for reducing poverty and hunger, saving children and mothers from premature death, providing sustainable and decent livelihoods, and preserving the environment for future generations. Meeting that commitment is not only a moral imperative, but reflects a mutual interest to live in a stable and prosperous world (UNDP, 2010:v).

In South Africa the above-named MDGs find particular resonance in almost all legislative and policy imperatives starting with the Constitution. They all emphasise equity, social justice, freedom, peace and hope. The plight of women is placed at the centre of social transformation envisaged in these imperatives (Mahlomaholo, 2010). Fairly recently, the Department of Women, Children and Persons with Disability (DWCPD, 2011) was established in order to ensure that women and girls as vulnerable sectors of the population find protection and support.

In spite of the above, studies (Mugaga & Akumu, 2010; Obure, Obongo & Waka, 2009) show how girls and women continue to be excluded from participating fully in the economy through lack of access to quality education. This exclusion starts with underperformance then escalates into early school-leaving among girls (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Emwamu & Osujo, 2010; Fry, 2003; Makuwa, 2004; Mugaga & Akumu, 2010; Obure, Obongo & Waka, 2009; The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2009). In most instances, the exclusion is no longer overt but is maintained covertly through negative stereotypical discourses about girls' potential to do well at school. For example a culture devaluing girls' abilities to do well has been in place for centuries in almost all contexts (Alcoff, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 2003). Girls continue to be seen as the weaker sex, who are unable to cope with the intricacies and gruelling demands of learning, especially of mathematics and the sciences (Nosek, Smyth, Sriram, Lindner, Devos, Ayala, Bar-Anan, Bergh, Cai, Gonsalkorale, Kesebir, Maliszewski, Neto, Olli, Park, Schnabel, Shiomura, Tulbure, Wiers, Somogyi, Akrami, Ekehammar, Vianello, Banaji & Greenwald, 2009). This stereotype becomes self-fulfilling prophecies where ultimately in tests and examinations girls do not perform as well as their male counterparts due to the low expectations teachers have of them. High levels of academic failure are recorded among girls in the research conducted in the West (Roríguez, 2008), the East (Sarkorova & Manzarshoeva, 2007) and Africa (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Emwamu & Osujo 2010; Fry, 2003; Makuwa, 2004; Wikan, 2004). In the same studies girls are shown to leave school early as a result thereof, especially when they get to the senior high school grades. One of the reasons cited by most girls is their diminished self confidence due to repeated failure (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Many of them see themselves as incompetent and incapable of meeting the challenges of studying. The negative stereotypes that existed initially in their environment ultimately become internalised into their repertoire of meaning making, to the extent that they behave and perform as expected. Thus, some research has even claimed that cognitive abilities of girls are genetically and inherently inferior (Faustos-Sterling, 2000; 2003).

A thorough investigation is therefore necessary to explain how girls across different contexts tend to consistently under-perform and ultimately leave school early if the 'biological

inferiority' thesis referred to above is inadequate. An alternative explanation for the under-performance of girls emanates from research that blames schooling for this phenomenon. From this perspective the school, intentionally and sometimes out of ignorance or omission, marginalises girls and their performance (Emwamu & Osujo, 2010; Mikkola, 2006). The argument is that teachers tend to create self doubt and sustain it among girls regarding their performance by not providing enough attention and support to them in classrooms (Diamond, 1994; Fausto-Sterling, 2003; Stone, 2004). Sometimes through non-verbal cues and negative signals emitted by teachers in response to their learning, girls tend to develop a sense of neglect, resulting in a lack of motivation to learn (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007; Haslanger, 1995, Jerald, 2006).

Other studies have revealed that girls under-perform and ultimately leave school early because of social structural factors such as poverty and a lack of holding environments in the family setting (Hammond *et al.*, 2007; Mugaga & Akumo, 2010). In fact, poverty seems to be the single most important factor that affects girls more because of their socialisation patterns. The paradigm of upbringing that does not expect girls to withstand (social) hardships and to be resilient in the face of adversity seems to leave them vulnerable to issues such as poverty (Emwamu & Osujo, 2010; Haslanger, 1995). An example from this perspective is that in instances where the family cannot afford tuition fees, decent clothing and/or school uniforms, girls seem to be less likely to seek alternative means to generate income to maintain themselves at school (Fry, 2003; Hammond *et al.*, 2007; Haslanger, 1995). If they happen to find a job, they leave school and never to go back in most instances. Sometimes due to poverty girls resort to activities such as prostitution where they find themselves abused, devalued as human beings and have health problems as a result of sexually transmitted diseases (Grant & Hallman, 2006). The problem of early and unplanned pregnancy also affects them almost exclusively because of the cultural practices which expect girls or mothers, instead of boys or fathers, to care for the unwanted/unplanned child (Grant & Hallman, 2006).

A closer look at the above seems to point to a systemic exclusion of girls which has, over the years and across contexts, become 'normalised' to the extent that it is taken for granted that girls will always underperform and ultimately leave school early and more readily than boys do, never returning to take 'a second chance' (Mutorwa, 2004; Nosek *et al.*, 2009; Obure, Obongo & Waka, 2009). My argument therefore is that a closer scrutiny of this process is required at the level of the province and the local municipality, so that it can be demonstrated how inequalities between the genders continue and are entrenched through education at the micro- and meso-system levels.

Methodology

About 10,829 youth who left school early before completing their Grade 12, mainly between the years 1998 and 2009 in North-West Province participated in this study. Among them were 6,636 girls and 4,193 boys. The girls who left school early and managed to get menial jobs were 1,392 compared to 240 boys. The group that remained unemployed after leaving school early consisted of 5,606 boys and 3,715 girls. There were also 179 girls and 241 boys who, in reality, were not out-of-school or had left school early, but were actually taking 'the second chance' towards their education as students at the Adult Basic Education Centres in the province. They were, however, included in the study because owing to their advanced age (over 18 years) they had left 'normal school' which was the focus of the study.

All the above youth were identified for inclusion in the study from the admission registers

of all the schools in the North-West Education Department. The list of names of all early school-leavers (ESLs), including their identity numbers and contact details, was compiled. This list was later used to invite them for interviews and to record their coded responses. Interviews were conducted in community halls in their neighbourhoods on appointed days. Structured focus group discussions were conducted, where possible. Telephonic interviews were also conducted on one-to-one basis with those youth who were not able to come to community halls. Another mode of collecting data was to work closely with the Community Development Workers (CDWs) in all the 21 local municipalities of the province. These are people appointed by the Department of Local Government and Development to document and to report to local municipalities on the needs of the communities in their respective wards on a daily basis. They thus became an invaluable resource as they knew who had left school early in their community because of their very intimate knowledge of their respective neighbourhoods.

Together with the CDWs we met with the youth in their respective focus groups. We initiated the discussions by asking them to reflect on the reasons that had caused them to leave school early. They were provided with forms where they could record the reasons for their early departure from school without having to divulge the information to the other members of the focus groups. Participation was voluntary and anonymity, as well as confidentiality, was assured as the information obtained would not be traceable to any respective learner as we were interested in broad patterns only. Informed consent was obtained from the participating youth and their respective former principals and teachers. The North-West Education Department sanctioned the study, as we had assured officials that no harm whatsoever would befall the youth as a result of the study. Finally, the participants were assured that they could refuse to answer questions or even to participate at anytime before and during the focus group sessions without any adverse consequences to themselves or anyone else.

The reasons cited by the youth on their respective interview forms were coded and recorded against their identity numbers in the list referred to earlier. Furthermore we reviewed the relevant literature to find out what ESLs in other countries throughout the world mentioned as their reasons for early departure from school. Masitsa's (2006) article based on a similar study in the Free State, described what we considered to be the most meaningful, comprehensive and all-inclusive inventory for organising the mass of data we had gathered. We thus integrated items from this inventory with the reasons most cited by the participating youth into categories for the coding of all subsequent information. Those categories were the following: repeated failure; long distance to and from school; pregnancy; poverty; ill-health; attraction of odd jobs; looking after siblings; lack of motivation; early marriage and criminal activity (Mahlomaholo, Mamiala, Hongwane, Ngcongwane, Itlhopheng, Fosu-Amoah, Mahlomaholo, Kies & Mokgotsi, 2010).

Results

It is estimated that the population of North-West Province is made up of 1,635,500 females and 1,565,400 males (STATS SA, 2010). This is more or less in line with the South African national gender distribution of around 52% females and 48% males (STATS SA, 2010). Given this observation, it would thus be expected that girls would constitute between 51% and 52% of the participants in this study, but they actually totalled 61% of all the ESLs identified randomly herein. While there may be many confounding variables explaining this over-representation of girls, it seems that this is an indication that there were more girls than boys who did not complete their Grade 12 qualification in North-West Province. This is in line with trends as revealed in the literature discussed above.

Table 1 Summary and total of all early school leavers (ESL) by gender and age versus employment status in North-West Province as a whole (Reproduced from Mahlomaholo *et al.*, 2010:94)

	At home unemployed						Employed elsewhere						ABET or prison						Totals		
	Female			Male			Female			Male			Female			Male					
	<17	17	>17	<17	17	>17	<17	17	>17	<17	17	>17	<17	17	>17	<17	17	>17	F	M	all
Reasons LSE																					
1. Failure	58	135	1251	67	109	1064	65	23	96	19	5	37	42	12	23	80	17	35	1705	1433	3138
2. Long distances	13	36	226	25	19	113	15	11	26	0	0	4	6	7	13	0	0	0	353	161	514
3. Pregnancy	22	43	641	0	0	0	111	4	128	0	0	0	6	0	6	0	0	0	961	0	961
4. Poverty	80	88	1039	92	76	799	197	122	313	15	1	27	7	6	13	0	0	1	1865	1011	2876
5. Ill health	7	11	118	8	7	71	24	2	25	0	0	3	2	2	4	0	0	1	195	90	285
6. Attraction of odd jobs	14	22	128	4	13	157	9	6	46	3	7	38	0	0	7	8	1	9	232	240	472
7. Looking after siblings	1	5	15	0	2	14	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	27	16	43
8. Lack of motivation	133	90	786	116	95	696	35	37	79	13	11	47	4	3	11	59	7	12	1178	1056	2234
9. Early marriage	1	3	23	2	90	3	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	10	31	106	137
10. Criminal activity	0	0	2	5	4	10	0	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	7	12	26	38
11. Removal/resettlement	21	6	48	12	2	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	75	29	104
12. Abuse at school/home	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Totals	350	439	4279	331	417	2967	461	209	722	50	24	166	67	30	79	147	26	75	6636	4193	10829

Age group: <17 = participants younger than 17; 17 = participants 17 years old; >17 = participants older than 17.

From Table 1 it is also worth noting that in all the 12 categories of reasons cited by the unemployed ESLs, girls continued to be preponderant in nine of them. It should be noted that these gender differentials applied even in the case of girls and boys who were at and under the school-going age of 17 years, but were unemployed. For example, more girls (1,444) than boys (1,240) said that they left school early because they could not cope with the demands of learning; thus, ultimately failing their grades. In many instances they had to discontinue with their education because they had gone beyond the school-going age limit of 18 years. About 275 of these girls, compared to 157 boys, said they left school early because they did not have the energy and the will to walk long distances to school. Many of these learners came from rural areas where there were no high schools. More girls (21) than boys (16) also left school early because they had to look after their siblings who were ill. At other times, they had to look after them because of the death and/or the employment engagements of their parents at far-off industrial areas. Again, more girls (1,009) than boys (907) also left school early due to lack of motivation and not finding any reason(s) and meaning in continuing with education. Poverty also tended to affect girls (1,207) negatively more than it affected boys (967). However, more boys (174) than girls (164) said they were attracted to menial jobs, (for example, casual farm labour), that ultimately resulted in their leaving school. The same altered pattern is observed where more boys (19) than girls (2) cited criminal activity as a factor causing early departure from school. There were also more boys (95) than girls (2) who attributed their early departure from school to their early marriages.

On the other hand, for those ESLs who were engaged in some kind of menial job, ranging from being a farm labourer to being a domestic worker, the girls were predominant in all the 12 categories of reasons cited. The situation was reversed regarding those who had taken up the second chance to continue with their education at the Adult Basic Education Centres. More boys (248) than girls (176) who had left 'normal' school because of any of the 12 categories of reasons referred to earlier, took advantage of this opportunity, thus improving their chances of making up for their earlier losses.

Discussion

The results presented show that more girls than boys, irrespective of age, tend to leave school early and that this confirms what the literature reveals with regard to these negative gender differentials (Wikan, 2004). However, with reference to positive developments, for example where ESLs take up the second chance to improve their situation, more boys than girls feature (Greene & Winters, 2006; Wils, 2004).

Alcoff (2006) and many of the feminist researchers (Chabaya *et al.*, 2009; Fausto-Sterling, 2003; Mikkola, 2006; Zak, 2005) provide us with a useful lens and terminology to understand this anomalous phenomenon. They describe woman as a non-essentialist category assigned to people 'marked' by a particular biological make-up. The main purpose of this marking is to exclude and to deny them certain privileges and rights because they are constructed as the weaker and the fairer sex (Alcoff, 2006). What this means is that to talk about a 'woman or a girl' is to talk more about a social role and not as much about a fixed and inherent biological characteristic. In other words, girls can perform as well as anybody else academically and otherwise. The apparent under-performance that ultimately results in early school leaving as shown above is a reflection of the underclass status and role that society assigns to that section of humanity designated as female (Balfanz & Legter, 2004; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). As a society we have generated discourses that undermine girls and females and which are con-

sequently entrenched in families and schools. What this study attempts to demonstrate is that schools deliberately and, perhaps through ignorance, become powerful sites for socialising girls into these inferior roles through exclusion (Alcoff, 2006). What is required is a paradigm shift in terms of how schools function. There seems to be a greater need for schools to privilege the concerns of girls so that proper support and holding environments can be created for them. For example, teachers should be more assertive regarding encouraging girls to participate and develop an interest in learning. Extra efforts should be embarked upon in order to bring them to the centre of academic conversations through focused girl-learner centred approaches that affirm them and validate their presence, their experiences and their aspirations. Their interests and the knowledge they value have to be valorised in the curriculum offered. The vicious cycle of negative discourses that undermine them needs to be broken through positive role modelling and focused workshops by successful women. Girls have to be given opportunities to learn and to work so that they can experience success that will cumulatively inspire more action and learning.

The above is informed by how girls in this study understood repeated failure and a lack of motivation to learn as factors causing their ultimate departure from school (Stone, 2004). Because of what they described as neglect on the part of the school, they found themselves being held back from proceeding to the next class(es) until they were too old to be allowed to remain at school. This implies that girls, for example, have to be given responsibilities to lead and to organise school activities so as to inculcate in them a sense of belonging. Moreover, girls need to be exposed to more positive messages and symbols that show women as hard workers and achievers.

The failure that girls sustain is also created from the experiences in their homes where they are expected to do daily household chores which take up much of their study time. The girls in this study pointed out that their brothers were not expected to carry as great a workload at home as they were. For example, they had to fetch water from far away and to cook for the family, especially in rural communities. Studies from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Thailand and Mexico, for example, attest to similar conditions (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Emwamu & Osujo, 2010; Fry, 2003; Makuwa, 2004; Nosek *et al.*, 2009; Roríguez, 2008; Sarkorova & Manzarshoeva, 2007; Wikan, 2004). In some of the many rural villages in North-West Province, secondary and high schools are located long distances from the homes of the girls who participated in the study. This situation exists because low learner numbers do not justify the establishment of schools in every village and/or local municipality ward. Girls found it hard and sometimes unsafe to travel long distances to attend school; therefore more has to be done to facilitate access to schooling for as many girl learners as possible. This could include, where practicable: erecting boarding and catering facilities exclusively for girls so that attention can be focused on their well-being and empowerment.

The biggest social problem disadvantaging girls more than boys is related to the issue of sexuality (Department of Women, Children and Persons with Disability, 2011; Department of Gender & Women's Health, 2003). Many girls, owing to a number of reasons, fall pregnant too early before they are able to provide care for their children. In the focus group discussion some girls ascribed high levels of pregnancy to the support grants given by the government to mothers to enable them to feed and clothe their babies. Programmes geared toward educating girls about issues of sexuality, child birth, and childrearing, as well as the costs involved, could help to ameliorate and perhaps solve this problem (Department of Women, Children and Persons with Disability, 2011; Department of Gender & Women's Health, 2003).

Conclusion

The preceding discussion points to the need for designing afresh how learning, especially for girls, is organised so that the negative discourses that keep women and girls repressed are confronted on the level of the school, the home and the community (Randel, Moore & Blair, 2008). There has to be recognition that these three levels are so inextricably interwoven, that what happens at one level is bound to affect what happens at other levels. The implication of this is that there has to be closer working relationships between and among all instances of civil society and the state.

One approach towards making this partnership effective is the one enshrined in the sustainable learning environments concept (Mahlomaholo, 2010; Schargel, 2007). According to this approach, schools need to develop programmes that are pro-girls where, as vulnerable groups, girls are targeted for optimum support. The curriculum needs to validate girls' and women's achievements. There has to be extra effort made to ensure that teaching takes into consideration their different styles of learning and that their interests, fears and aspirations are taken care of (Schargel, 2007). Good teaching has to be in place in order to identify the possible problems of early school leaving before they occur, together with adequate pre-emptive measures which could involve counselling these girls on a one-to-one basis and in groups. The aim is to create spaces where girls are free to express themselves, to make mistakes without being threatened and to find a shoulder to lean on, as well as finding encouragement to face the future (Smink & Schargel, 2004). There have to be attempts to literally take them by the hand on a journey of self-discovery (Smink & Reiner, 2005). The learning environment will have to be structured in such a way that they can gradually experience success, so that their self-confidence can be built afresh. This means that teachers have to be adequately trained (Schargel, 2007) to face this new challenge with confidence and expertise as prescribed in the Department of Basic Education's policies. There has to be closer monitoring of the progress which each girl makes, especially with regard to school attendance and their academic performance.

These initiatives will have to be supported by structures in the community (Martin & Halperin, 2006; Shargel & Smink, 2001). For example, the government has to ensure that no child, especially girls are loitering in the streets during school hours (Presson & Bottoms, 1992). The law on free and compulsory education has to be enforced by all government agencies including the police. Most importantly, there have to be concerted efforts to eradicate poverty in the community and in families. Parents who are not employed should also be 'encouraged' to attend classes for the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999) as in the Adult Basic Education and Training programmes. Interventions to improve the education of the girls have to include all the above. Already, there is an enabling legislative and policy context which only has to be implemented.

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