

Invisible gender gap in education: Promoting gender equality among learners in Primary Schools in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

Gender inequality at both macro and micro level has been a subject of debate at both international and national fora. The inequalities between women and men or boys and girls in Africa in terms of access to resources and opportunities have traditionally had a negative impact on women and girls. The aim of this study was to unveil the strides taken to achieve gender equality among primary school learners where both boys and girls are equally treated. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews from 12 primary school teachers in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the research participants. Data was analysed through content analysis. The results of the study revealed that the education system in Zimbabwe has realised tremendous achievements in bringing equality among learners in primary schools, the learning and teaching tools have helped reduce the gap between boys and girls. The methods used in schools to attain equality among learners are very effective as they emphasise the girl child. However, the approaches seem to be creating another challenge as the boy child is left at a disadvantage. In other words, more emphasis is put on the girl child at the expense of the boy child.

Keywords: Girl child, Boy child, education system, equality, Abuse

1. Introduction

Gender inequality has remained a subject of debate in many academic fora and apparently remains the major obstacle in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The whole idea is to close the gaps between women and men or boys and girls in terms of capacities, access to resources and opportunities (Somani, 2017; Mutanana & Bukayila, 2015; Sithole, Manwa & Manwa, 2013; Chabaya Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Chipunza, 2003). It is over fifty years after the universal declaration of Human Rights which advocates that education is a fundamental right for all in spite of gender. It is over twenty years after the Universal Declaration for Education for all 1990 which strived to promote girls and women as an urgent priority in attaining Education for all goals. It is against this background that the Dakar Framework for action drew special attention to women's and girls' education and gender equality and equity in education which also incorporated a gender related goal number V which strives to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary schools by 2005 and achieve gender equality by 2015. Many initiatives regarding gender and education have tended to focus on lifting the girl child from the epoch where girl children have always been discriminated against (Mtemeri & Chikukwa, 2019; Agusiobo, 2018; Mutanana & Bukalia, 2015; Longlands, 2008; Chipunza, 2003).

Although it is true that women/girls were seriously discriminated against as evidenced by previous research (Maddrell, Strauss, Thomas & Wyse, 2016; White, Rither & Kahn, 2016; Quayes & Ramsey, 2015; Makewa, Role & Ngila, 2014; Afzal, Butt, Akbar & Rosh, 2013; Pekkarinen, 2012; Mlyakado, 2012), the strategies used to

achieve the above are equally discriminatory as most boys are subsequently sacrificed. Current studies also reveal that the strategies used to address girls' interests have slowly alienated the boy child (Chang'ach, 2012). Several policies and strategies have been put in place to enhance the achievement of the goals and to some extent advancement of the girl child. For example, Tanzanian government launched two sub-programmes PEDP and SEDP as strategies to achieve the MDGs (Mlyakado, 2012). In South Africa, an attempt to bridge the gap between boys and girls was enhanced by the establishment of the Gender Equality Task Team (GETT) by the National Department of Education in 1996. The GETT was meant to advise on the establishment of a Gender Equity policy in the Department of Education and how to achieve gender equity in the sector (Makewa, Role & Ngila, 2014). The team was established to achieve among other issues the production of learning support materials and textbooks which are gender sensitive, introduction of gender awareness in teacher training programmes to enable teachers to incorporate gender issues in their teaching methods and to ensure that teachers' attitudes are not gender biased (Wadesango, Rembe & Chabaya, 2011). In 1980, the government of Zimbabwe put emphasis on equity in general policy (Gordon, 1994). The above policies and approaches if well-articulated could achieve great results but chances are also high that they could create another similar problem.

Fortin, Oreopoulos, & Phipps (2013) reveal that generally from the 1980s to the 2000s, the mode of girls' high school GPA distribution had shifted from "B" to "A", essentially "leaving boys behind" as the mode of boys' GPA distribution stayed at "B". Apparently, there is a notable paradigm shift where girls have been transformed and are now performing better than boys (Makewa, Role & Ngila, 2014). The World Bank (2005) also noted that the plight of the boy child is far from being achieved. In Kenya, Chang'ach (2012) raised a disparity between girls and boys where the boy child is at a higher risk of dropping from school because more effort is put to protect the girl child. He further noted that the boy child in school seems to lack models to inspire them as most primary school teachers in Kenya are women. According to United Nations Children Educational Fund (UNICEF) (2015) the Ghanaian education system was warned on the neglect of boy-child education by putting too much emphasis on the girl child's education which was seen as leading to neglect of issues contributing to the boy-child's education (Mwango, 2013). Longlands (2008) argued that lack of education in boys can lead to unemployment, poor health and other social problems. In a study in Kenya, Ooko (2012) argues that vulnerabilities in Africa and the world such as being orphaned and poverty have been tackled by concerned parties to save the girl child particularly while exposing the boy child to many vices such as violence and drugs among others. It is crystal clear that whilst it is important to protect the girl child, it is also equally important to protect the boy child.

In Zimbabwe, The Nziramasanga Commission on Education (1999) recommended among many other things the promotion of females in decision-making processes and in leadership. A notable improvement was realised with regards to public examinations as girls are performing better than boys in all the areas that were tested, including mathematics and sciences subjects previously dominated by boys (Chirume et al., 2009). Statistics in Zimbabwe further reflect that female candidates have been performing better than their male counterparts since 2009 (Herald 27 September, 2017). Girls are literally outclassing boys.

Child abuse remains one of the serious problems that affect learners in schools. It is believed that the rates of abuse among African states are very high as compared to other continents due to patriarchal nature of African societies (Martin & Silverstone, 2013). Both boys and girls are prone to abuse and teachers must be sensitive and vigilant in addressing such atrocities as they affect their learning capacities (Lalor, 2004).

Teachers are critical players in enhancing gender equity and equality among learners in schools. According to Sanhi (2018), teachers facilitate individualized care which is central to the empowerment process as they are authority figures and caregivers. Sanhi (2018) further purport that teachers have profound influence on their students' self-confidence, particularly in the formative years of primary and upper-primary education. In other words, teachers if well empowered may positively reinforce the required behaviour among learners through the methods, approaches and skills they use to deliver their lessons.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Approach

The study draws on a qualitative approach based on teachers' perspectives on gendered approaches used in schools. According to Lincoln (2000), qualitative research studies things in their natural settings and is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative approach was suitable for the current study which sought to unravel gender disparities in schools.

2.2 Design

A phenomenological design was appropriate for the current study as it allowed the researchers to interview the participants which were primary school teachers in Masvingo urban. According to Groenewald (2004), the purpose of phenomenology design is to describe particular phenomena, or the appearance of things, as lived experiences. In the current study the researchers tried to describe the disparity between gender issues in schools.

2.3 Population

The population of the present study consisted of primary school teachers in Masvingo urban in Masvingo Province. Twelve teachers (5 males and 7 females) were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is when a researcher selects a specific type of people that are relevant to the study (Harwell, 2011). The selected participants were experienced teachers in Masvingo urban schools.

2.4 Data Gathering Instrument

The study used structured interviews to collect data from participants. Structured interview guide enabled the researchers to be consistent in their endeavour to investigate gender disparities in schools.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed through content analysis. Content analysis entails a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). According to Patton (2002), content analysis is any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings. The researchers of the current study identified consistencies in participants' responses and drew inferences.

3. Results

3.1 Strides taken to mitigate gender inequality in schools

Results from the study revealed that gender issues in schools have received much attention especially from the government and other stakeholders. For instance, Basic Educational Assistance Module (BEAM) which is a government model to assist the marginalised and vulnerable learners has played a pivotal role in preventing learners from dropping out of school.

The following verbal quotes reflect the above assertion:

Learners from poor families get assistance from BEAM which is a government initiative to help the poor from dropping from school. Girls who used to be sacrificed when funds were insufficient for all children, are the biggest beneficiaries of the BEAM initiative.

At this school there are many orphans and children from poor families who solely rely on government (BEAM) to continue with their studies.

It was also established in this study that when purchasing school textbooks, schools buy books which would have been recommended by the government. Such books are gender sensitive unlike previous textbooks which were biased towards the male child.

Of late school textbooks have become gender sensitive. The biasness that was witnessed in some of the textbooks undermined the girl child. For instance, stories where people were prospering had to do with men where as those issues which spelt out poverty had to do with women.

At our school we have a committee that buys books after thorough consideration of various factors including gender issues. Even library books are thoroughly scrutinised before buying. This is a positive move as textbooks which are not gender sensitive are avoided.

The results of the study also brought to light that guidance and counselling was introduced in schools to cater for students with psychosocial and other challenges. Such challenges may lead learners to drop out of school. Issues of abuse and truancy are dealt with by professional counsellors in a friendly environment where students have a listening counsellor.

The introduction of guidance and counselling in schools is a positive move. Students get professional assistance in an open environment where empathy is shown unlike in the past where teachers would use corporal

punishment to deal with deviant behaviour without listening to issues that could have contributed to such behaviour. The counselling component has brought some sanity of some sort in dealing especially with issues such as abuse and other psychosocial challenges.

3.2 Gender gap between boys and girls

Results of the study established that although both boys and girls were dropping out of school as a result of poverty and death of parents more effort was put on girl child to reengage in education than boys. Many organisations were working tirelessly to make sure that girls do not drop out of school with little attention given to boys.

The following verbal responses confirm the above:

Boys and girls are dropping out of school but little effort is put to minimise the anomaly among the boys as the girl child gets more attention.

There are a number of NGOs that are working in collaboration with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education particularly to support girls from dropping out of school but the boy child is not catered for. Such disparities are detrimental to the development of the boy child. Had it not been of government funding such as BEAM more boys would have dropped out of school.

The study also revealed that both boys and girls take part in undermining the potential that the boy child has when trying to communicate the importance of the girl child. While girls are very important, that message may be communicated differently as they would portray girls as more important than boys. The implication to the boy child may not be palatable or received well.

The following verbal quotes were testimony of the above:

Boys are used to denigrate themselves in trying to uplift the girl child. Songs, poems and dramas are composed to promote the girl child sometimes at the expense of the boy child.

Dramas that reveal the ascension of the girl child at the expense of the boy child for example, statements such as 'educate the girl child and you would have educated the nation,' may not be received well by boys if not put into context.

It also came out of the study that child abuse was rampant in schools. Boys have not been spared as they were victims of rape just as girls. Abused girls got more attention than boys because the training that teachers get is more oriented towards the girl child than the boy child.

The following verbal quotes are testimony of the above:

Children are sexually abused both at home and at school (by teachers or by other older students). Both boys and girls are victims of rape. It is the girl child who quickly gets attention and protection sometimes leaving the boy unattended to. Once a boy child is exposed to abuse especially sexual, chances are very high that he starts to behave indifferently.

Both boys and girls of late have become victims of all forms of abuse (physical, emotional and sexual abuse). It's easier to identify a sexually abused girl than boy. Boys take time to report abuse than girls but behaviour change is noticed.

Sexual abuse used to be common among girls but of late, incidents of sexual abuse of boys by either male and female teachers or relatives have been reported in schools and it is quite unfortunate as boys have not been empowered to deal with sexual abuse as their girl counterparts.

Unlike girls, boys' reactions to sexual abuse are more disastrous and detrimental. Boys' response to sexual abuse is apparently quite visible and immediate. Absenteeism and late coming to school are some of the indicators of boys' reaction to abuse.

Bullying was cited by many teachers as a factor that influenced primary school boys to absent themselves or completely withdraw from school. The study further revealed that older pupils have the tendency of bullying younger pupils by heating them, taking their food or threats and this had a bearing in their learning as victims lagged behind in class.

The following verbal quotes confirm the above:

Bullying in schools is rampant. Both girls and boys are victims of bullying. Bullying can be perpetrated by either gender. But if it is perpetrated by a girl child to a boy child, teachers normally don't take it seriously. Such behaviour by girls is not common hence, may be ignored.

Bullying has been manifesting in schools for example, a primary school boy died in Masvingo district as a result of bullying.

Bullying of boys by girls though not very common has been witnessed in schools. Apparently, the punishment given to the boy for bullying is different from the punishment given to the girl child who may get away with a verbal reprimand or a lighter punishment. Teachers and school authorities must be fair in terms of dealing with bullying whether it has been perpetrated by a boy or a girl. Sometimes boys who have been bullied by a girl may be shy to report the bullying hence the need to train both boys and girls to deal with bullying.

Most of the participants in the current study noted that girls were dominating boys in most of the classroom activities and that girls were now dominating in subjects that were previously dominated by boys. The study also revealed that the boy child lacks models as most of the teachers in urban primary schools are female. The male teacher would act as a model for male children.

The following verbal quotes attest the above:

Boys in primary school used to dominate in terms of grades but not anymore. I am failing to locate where the problem is. They use same books and the same teacher but still they are lagging behind which sometimes frustrates the teacher.

I'm not a male chauvinist but the grade 7 pass rate has completely shifted. Girls are dominating in all subjects. I fail to understand the cause of the disparity. Perhaps the teaching approaches are more girl child oriented or the girl child has always been more intelligent than boys but because of gender discrimination which has been affecting the girl child all along, the girl child trailed behind.

3.2. Discussion

Results of the study revealed that gender issues are generally being considered in schools. The introduction of BEAM for example which is a model that pays school fees for children from poor background has to some extent

solved the issue of children dropping out of school. Such strategies were also used in other African countries for instance, the PEDP and SEDP strategies in Tanzania (Mlyakado, 2012) and GETT in South Africa (Makewa, Role & Ngila, 2014), to achieve gender equity and equality in the education sector.

It was also established that textbooks in schools used to be sources of gender inequalities but not anymore as textbooks selection considered gender issues. The awareness of schools in purchasing gender balanced textbooks marked the positive move to alleviate gender disparities among learners in primary schools. The finding is in tandem with Lumadi and Shongwe in Swaziland who concur that curriculum materials that are gender biased in language, content, and/or illustrations reinforce the idea that some fields are gender specific. As reflected in the results of the current study, the introduction of guidance and counselling has slowed down the dropout rate as students get guidance and counselling which help students in taking full responsibilities of their choices. This is in line with Chireshe (2011) in Zimbabwe who state that school guidance and counselling programmes have been introduced to assist students overcome the number of challenges they experience at home and at school.

The study revealed that child abuse is rampant in schools. The finding is in line with Ruto (2009) who revealed that in Kenya 58 of every 100 children have been sexually harassed while 29% boys and 24% girls reported to have been forced into unwanted sex. The study in Kenya revealed that both boys and girls were victims of abuse.

The current study revealed that the abuse of boys in schools was dire as boys were not empowered to deal with abuse especially sexual abuse. The finding is in line with Crosson-Tower (2003) who asserts that boys are as vulnerable to sexual abuse as girls. The finding was also in tandem with Longlands (2008) and Rigby (2003) who reveal that victimized students are likely to show social problems and other negative behaviours. Previous studies (Maddrell *et al*, 2016; White *et al*, 2016; Quayes & Ramsey, 2015; Makewa, Role & Ngila, 2014; Afzal *et al*, 2013; Pekkarinen, 2012; Mlyakado, 2012) revealed that interventions concentrated more on the girl child, leaving the boy child at the mercy of the abusers.

Bullying was cited by many participating teachers as a factor that influenced primary school boys to absent themselves or completely withdraw from school. The finding is consistent with Sarzosa and Urzúa (2015) and Rigby (2003) who revealed that victimized students are likely to report more absenteeism from school than other children. The study further revealed that older pupils have the tendency of bullying young pupils by hitting them, taking their food or threats and this has a bearing on their learning as victims lag behind in class. The finding is in line with Sarzosa (2017); Eriksen, Nielsen and Simonsen (2012) and Antiri (2016) who argued that, being a victim of bullying reduces educational achievement and health outcomes compared to non-involved individuals. Moreover, the study revealed that bullying was rampant among boys than girls. Some of the bullying was perpetrated by girls on boys. The finding that boys are targets of bullying than their female counterparts is consistent with Hazier, Hoover, and Oliver (1992) who revealed that boys tend to be victims of bullying more often than their female peers.

Most of the participants noted that girls were dominating boys in most of the classroom activities and that girls were now dominating in subjects that were previously dominated by boys. The finding is consistent with a

Malaysian study by Jelas et al., (2014) which reflected that gender disparity in basic and higher education is in favor of girls both in terms of participation and performance. The finding is also in tandem with Skelton (2002) who purport that in the Western countries there was a call for masculinity in primary schools as the boy child lacks models as most of the teachers in urban primary schools were females. The above finding is in line with Fortin et al., (2013) who argued that of late the American girl child's pass rate has increased as compared to the boy child.

The participants especially the male teachers revealed that, in trying to take the girl child on board or to be sensitive to girl children in schools, the activities that are done have a negative effect towards boys as sometimes they are made to sing songs that put the boy child at the receiving end or recite poems that try to uplift the girl child and down play the importance of the boy child. This assertion is in line with Brostrom (2000) who purport that such negative experience of transition is often due to problems associated with the school rather than the child.

The study participants agreed that it was high time that schools develop teaching strategies that help particularly the boy child in primary school to face gender disparities head on. This is in line with a call in Ghana that emphasised equal opportunities between boys and girls (Owusu, 2010). Classroom teaching approaches and practices should also be sensitive to the boy child the same way they should with the girl child. Laws and policies must be enacted to protect the boy child as well.

4 Conclusions

Tremendous strides have been realised in bringing equity between girls and boys. Availing fees for the less privileged brought a lot of relief especially on the girl child. Literature used in schools has taken aboard gender issues. The introduction of guidance and counselling in schools has alleviated some of the challenges that contributed in school dropout among learners. However, having taken great strides in addressing gender equality and parity in primary schools, another equally massive problem is being realised as boys are lately on the receiving end in terms of abuse, bullying, dropping from school and poor performance in school. Boys are now trailing behind girls in national examinations and in subjects they used to dominate. There is a disparity between girls and boys where the previous predicament of the girl child has shifted to the boy child. More emphasis should be in terms of policy development and enhancement should be put in place to protect the girl child as well as the boy child. Teaching approaches were biased towards uplifting the girl child from the previous inequalities leaving behind the boy child. There is need to embrace inclusive approaches in teaching to cater for both girls and boys in schools.

5 Recommendations

The study recommended that:

- Policies and teaching instruction to protect both the boy child and the girl child in school be put in place.

- The boy child be protected from all vices in schools the same way the girl child is protected.

6 Implications to the classroom

As more emphasis should be put to the girl child, it is also critically important for teachers to be equally sensitive to the boy child as they could feel neglected. Induction courses should be availed to enable teachers to take both the girl child and the boy child on board when delivering lessons. Teaching methods should be improved to allow both the girl child and the boy child to equally benefit from school activities. Staff development programs should be used to sensitize teachers about the importance of all learners.

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