

Gender inequalities in education in South Africa

Executive summary

The Constitution of South Africa serves as a compass for engendering gender equality in the country. Several policies have been enacted to facilitate gender equality and equity in education. These policies have led to gender parity in enrolment and increased participation of both boys and girls in school. However, while success has been achieved in terms of access, the quality of educational experience for both boys and girls remains extremely poor for most learners (Moletsane et al. 2010). Schools continue to be the context for gender inequalities experienced by both boys and girls; these inequalities are increasingly more subtle, which makes them difficult to deal with.

This policy brief emanates from a qualitative study that examined gender equity and equality in basic education, with the aim of informing the development of a national policy on gender equity in basic education. The study involved interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders in education in three provinces: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. It also undertook a review of literature, as well as an analysis of policies related to gender equality in education. In particular, this brief is informed by an analysis of two broad areas: the marginalisation of girls in education and the gendered culture of educational institutions. It focuses on the nature of

gender inequalities prevalent in schools and their impact on the education of boys and girls.

The brief begins with a general discussion of the current gender inequalities, as identified in the interviews with stakeholders, as well as a review of studies, drawing attention to existing gaps in the provision of quality education. Thereafter, it reviews existing gender policies and outlines the challenges in implementing them. Finally, the brief makes recommendations such as school-specific gender policies; enhanced engagement between schools and communities; educator-teacher development programmes; more effective coordination of key government departments and role-players; and, lastly, consistent monitoring of set targets.

Context and history

Gender impacts differently on girls and boys. The gender socialisation of girls and boys means that they have different life experiences which play out in the education system, both within the school classroom and later in higher education institutions. Gender equality means that girls and women have equal learning opportunities with their male counterparts. However, an equity approach to gender in education suggests that girls may require more in order to reach equality. In other words, 'priority assistance' or identified affirmative action may be necessary

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in order to provide girls with more opportunities and equal learning experiences. In terms of education, this means taking consideration of the specific needs of girls so that their experiences in the schooling system are reflective of these needs. These would include facilities set up for girls' sexual and reproductive health needs (pregnancy and gender and sexual violence) and safe and functional infrastructure and sanitation facilities for menstruation.

Moletsane states that 'the poor quality of girls' educational experiences and the consequent negative impacts on their learning outcomes, including performance in national and international examinations, remain problematic' (2010: iv). So, while gender equality and equity in education can partially be measured by the number of girls in school (in terms of access), another significant measure is the quality of girls' learning experiences.

Negative stereotypical discourses about girls' ability to perform well at school continue to impact on their learning opportunities. This ranges from daily school practices that may discourage girls from pursuing studies in mathematics, science and other technical subjects, and the gendered norms regarding the domestic and physical labour of keeping the classrooms clean. As other analysts have suggested, these gender stereotypes are a central characteristic of exclusionary practices that result in girls underachieving in, as well as leaving, school (Chabaya et al. 2009; Mugaga & Akumu 2010).

In addition, the impact of poverty on girls' schooling experiences cannot be overlooked. Warrington (forthcoming) reports on a longitudinal study in Kenya which clearly illustrates that poverty limits girls' ability to engage with their schooling. She argues that when the direct costs of schooling, such as uniform costs, cost of books and examination fees, continue to be

a drain on household budgets, girls' aspirations for a better life through education will remain unmet. Children from households with few economic and social resources have a smaller chance to enrol in primary school than those from more affluent households (Huisman & Smits 2009). Due to the gendered division of roles in the household and in society at large, which has a considerable bearing on educational access, girls are less likely to enrol in school, and are more likely to drop out and more likely to end up illiterate.

Despite the legal and policy context, the broader social context in which schools are located has a direct impact on the quality of learners' schooling experiences (Moletsane et al. 2010; Unterhalter et al. 2010). Gender inequities in everyday South African life filter into the classroom in multiple and interrelated ways: through teachers' attitudes about gender; the curricula in general and specifically; gender and sexual violence against girls; and learner vulnerability to unplanned parenthood. These factors impact on learners' career aspirations and achievements, as well as their sense of agency. A review of the 2012–2013 Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report shows that although the policy and legal context has made provisions for girls to remain in school, as well as to achieve in examinations, this has not directly translated into more women occupying top positions of leadership and decision-making in the employment sector. The report shows that despite gender parity at the professional and technical levels, males continue to dominate managerial positions. The continuing absence of women from what are considered 'traditionally masculine' fields such as geology, political science, quantitative courses, hard sciences (chemistry and physics), and so forth in higher education institutions (Leathwood & Read 2009) further raises questions about the supposed gender parity at this level.

Policies and effectiveness

Which policies matter?

The gender policy landscape in education has seen a number of policies enacted that address gender issues in education. The 1997 Gender Equity Task Team report (Wolpe et al. 1997), which lays the foundation for these policies, outlined in detail the gender inequalities that were prevalent in the pre-1994 South African education sector and which still persist today. It strongly recommended the formulation of a national policy on gender and education. The absence of such a policy has resulted in what can best be described as a reactive response to gender issues in education. An analysis of existing gender-related policies revealed several significant insights.

Often, policies to deal with gender issues in education have been formulated based on what is perceived to be a prevalent gender issue at the time. For example, learner pregnancy has been identified as a major reason for girls dropping out of school (SAHRC 2012), and therefore the adoption of a 'return to school' policy for girls who fall pregnant while in school is an attempt to ensure the retention and equal participation of girls in schools. The Measures for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy Guidelines (2007) seeks to eradicate the expulsion of and unfair discrimination against girls who fall pregnant while in school. It also allows girls to return to school no later than 24 months after giving birth.

Another policy example is the Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Public Schools (2008), which aims to deal with the pervading gender violence in schools by enhancing both teacher and student knowledge of, and capacity to deal with, gender-based violence in schools.

It is possible that the narrowing in the gender gap in terms of access, participation and performance in school, especially at the primary level (Moletsane 2010), can partly be attributed to the aforementioned policies. However, the fact that both these important policy directions are referred to as guidelines could perhaps account for the problems currently encountered in implementing them. Simply referring to them as guidelines denotes a lack of authority and does not compel their enforcement. Their implementation has therefore not been consistent, as discussed later in this brief.

The overarching South African Schools Act (1996) and the Employment of Educators Act (1998) have also been key contributors to facilitating gender equality in schools. The former, which is premised on the country's Constitution, emphasises the right to education for all and therefore outlaws the perpetuation of gender inequalities in schools. However, one of the major critiques of this Act is that it is applicable to 'public ordinary schools' (p. 4). The Employment of Educators Act (1998), on the other hand, seeks to address the issue of sexual abuse of learners by teachers by making it unlawful to employ a teacher who has been engaged in sexual abuse of a learner.

The adoption of these policies has been accompanied by structural or systemic interventions such as the establishment of the Gender Equity Unit and the Gender Equity Directorate. The former is tasked with the responsibility of overseeing gender issues in education from an advisory perspective, while the latter is tasked with the responsibility of coordinating and monitoring gender issues in education. There are also the Gender Focal Persons located at the provincial level who assist the Directorate with the coordination and monitoring of gender issues within the respective provinces.

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In addition to the preceding issues, the introduction of a life skills programme in primary schools, which deals with gender issues such as gender violence, teenage pregnancy and discrimination, among other concerns, is considered a key contributor to minimising gender inequalities in schools. The programme aims to promote personal development, self-esteem and self-confidence among learners (Macleod & Tracey 2009). However, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of an exclusive and isolationist approach to teaching life skills. It has been argued that an integrated approach that entails the inclusion of life skills across the programme would be more effective (Mncube & Harber 2013; Moletsane et al. 2010). Further, the effective implementation of this programme has been hampered by the conservative attitudes of a number of educators who are uncomfortable dealing with what they regard as a sexually explicit curriculum (Bhana et al. 2005).

Difficulties in implementation of policy provisions

From the aforementioned policies and programmes, it is evident that there have been some steps taken to address gender inequalities in education. However, the persistence of these inequalities indicates some difficulties in implementing the policies. Using what we have gleaned from the interviews conducted during the study, we discuss what we view as the primary challenges to the effective implementation of these policies and programmes.

First, as indicated earlier, the current policies/guidelines that address individual gender issues represent a fragmented approach, as the policies are viewed as exclusive and delinked from each other. Most educators view them not as policies that can be implemented jointly with the ultimate aim of reducing

gender inequalities, but as separate policies dealing with different issues.

Second, the present approach to dealing with gender inequalities in education does not acknowledge other identity markers that often intersect with gender. Consequently, boys and girls are dealt with as homogeneous groups, yet factors such as culture, race, social class, disability, sexual orientation and geographical location often determine their experiences of gender. These markers further interact to produce inequalities between girls themselves. For example, the way a black middle-class female teenager in Johannesburg experiences gender issues is likely to be different from that of a poor black girl in a deep rural area of Limpopo. Likewise, a white middle-class girl's experience of gender is likely to be different from that of a middle-class Indian, coloured or black girl. Culture and race affect how girls view themselves and how they are viewed by their teachers.

Third, in pushing forward policies for implementation, it is often forgotten that implementers have attitudes about the agenda being propagated by the policy. Likewise, part of the difficulty in implementing these policies has been brought about by the conservative and moralistic attitudes held by educators who are uncomfortable discussing issues of sex and sexuality with the youth.

Fourth, the prevalent bureaucratic systems in place within the Department of Education, as well as the financial constraints faced by the department, have constrained the effective implementation of policies and programmes intended to address gender inequalities. Any change towards improvement, especially at school level, is often resource-intensive, and the elimination of gender inequalities through the provision of quality education is no exception.

Finally, while a Gender Equity Directorate and Unit exist, such units generally lack the authority and clout to enforce gender equality, as their mandate is largely advisory. This 'powerlessness' is further exacerbated by an incapacitated Gender Equity Unit that is staffed mainly by people who have no sound knowledge of gender issues and see the implementation of gender systems as an added responsibility.

Recommendations

Research undertaken in schools has included studies aimed at finding out what keeps girls in schools in challenging contexts despite the odds they face; studies of teacher knowledge of gender issues in education; and, more recently, an investigation into gender equity and equality in basic education for the development of a national policy on gender equity in education. Our findings show that educators are positioned to play a key role in ensuring gender equality in schooling processes, but they fail to do so due to their own unconscious biases, as well as a lack of capacity in how to address the inequalities encountered by learners in schools. Premised on our research work, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Develop explicit school-specific gender policy and goals which would enable the trickling down of department/national gender policies.** School systems and structures often pass on potent gender messages through what is described as the 'hidden curriculum' – those things that learners learn without overtly being taught about them – in other words, the lessons learnt from the way things are done in school. Based on how structures are set up and what teachers say/do or do not say/do, students get to 'learn', for example, whether their voices matter, who gets to lead in school or be a leader in future, or who gets to study a particular subject.
- 2. Establish more meaningful and enhanced engagement between schools and local communities in order to jointly and collaboratively address gender issues.** Schools are part and parcel of the communities in which they are located, and most gender issues manifested in schools, such as gender violence, gender stereotyping and bias, are a manifestation of social attitudes and practices within the wider society.
- 3. Identify teacher development programmes that are reflective in nature and deal with gender issues in education.** Research in South Africa and in other countries has pointed out the lack of capacity that teachers have in dealing with gender issues in classrooms and in the wider school environment (Farah et al. 2009; Moletsane 2010). This is further compounded by the teachers' often limited pedagogical repertoire that is often gendered and that inhibits them from teaching learners diverse ways of learning.
- 4. Identify leadership development programmes that cultivate school leaders' capacity to adopt a gender lens to school management.** Such an approach is likely to lead to more inclusive schools for both learners and staff, and to a more system-wide understanding of the notion and concept of gender. Currently, there are differing interpretations which in turn affect approaches to dealing with gender issues.
- 5. Improve coordination between government departments dealing with girls' and women's well-being and development – for example, the departments of education, health, social development and women's affairs.** This would address the current approach that takes

the form of sporadic interventions to deal with gender issues and help facilitate a more strategic understanding of how gendered relations in education can be achieved.

- 6. Monitor set targets at all levels of education consistently and with concerted effort.** Targets should not be limited only to access, enrolment and retention, but should extend to areas related to the quality of learning, such as resources, teachers and teaching, and leadership structure, among others.

With these recommendations in mind, we conclude by stating that the enactment of an all-encompassing national gender policy in education, the development of a revised teacher and leadership development programme, and more authority and corresponding penalties in dealing with gender issues would go a long way in mitigating the current pervasive inequalities that otherwise seem irreversible.

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