

An Assessment of the Implementation of Gender Equity Policies in Schools in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The South African Constitution outlaws all forms of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, cultural origin, age, religion and so forth. The post-Apartheid government of South Africa has put in place policies and programmes to enhance gender equality. In education different policies have been put in place to ensure gender equality at all levels and these are currently being implemented. This study examined the implementation of gender equality policies in schools in South Africa. Data was collected through observation and face to face interviews with twenty-five primary and high school teachers and two district education officials. The study revealed that boys and girls have equal access to the school system. Consequently, the new curriculum and most of learning materials in schools visited are gender sensitive. However, girls continue to be disadvantaged by the fact that classroom practice continue to favour boys and marginalize girls. The school environment does not promote favourable conditions for learning for girls as they are most affected by sexual violence.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a signatory and party to instruments which have been adopted by international and regional bodies to enhance gender equality (Chisholm and September 2005). They stipulate the obligations to be undertaken by state parties in order to address gender inequality in all sectors. Section 9 of the South African Constitution outlaws all forms of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, cultural origin, age, religion and so forth. The post-Apartheid government of South Africa has also put in place policies and programmes to enhance gender equality (Chisholm and September 2005).

In the education sector, different policies have been formulated to ensure gender equality at all levels. The process began with the establishment of the Gender Equality Task Team (GETT) by the National Department of Education in 1996 to advise on the establishment of a permanent Gender Equity in the Department of Education and how to achieve gender equity in the sector. GETT came up with the following recommendations regarding the enhancement of gender equity in education (Redpath et al. 2008: 37):

- Report on imbalances in enrolments, dropouts, subject choice, career paths and performance;
- Identify means of correcting gender imbalances;
- Advise on educational and social desira-

bility and legal implications for single sex schools;

- Propose guidelines to address sexism in curricula, textbooks, teaching and guidance;
- Propose affirmative action strategies for increasing the representation of women in professional leadership and management positions;
- Propose a strategy to counter and eliminate sexism, sexual harassment and gender violence throughout the educational system.

As a result of the GETT report and the requirements of the Constitution, the Department of Education adopted the following measures to enhance gender equity at the school level (Pandor 2004; Chisholm and September 2005):

- Formulation of a core curriculum which is gender sensitive. It also emphasized that the curriculum should provide a comprehensive framework for teachers, parents and learners to understand the full meaning of gender equality issues in the curriculum;
- 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;
- Outlawing gender and sex-based harassment in educational settings by: establishing a system of crime reporting in schools;

introduction of national regulations for safety measures at public schools; introduction of a school based module on managing sexual harassment and gender violence for teachers and learners:

The Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 obliges provincial Departments of Education to dismiss educators found guilty of having a sexual relationship with a learner of a school where he/she is employed. The Department of Education has also developed Policy Guidelines for Schools and Colleges to assist School Management Teams (SMTs) in managing sexual harassment.

This study assesses the implementation of above measures in schools and their outcome in enhancing gender equity as stated in the GETT recommendations and in line with the requirements of the South African Constitution.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A convenience sample of twenty-five teachers from primary and high schools from Fort Beaufort district were selected for this study. It included twelve male and thirteen female teachers from urban and rural based schools. Ten of them have completed Bachelor of Education Honours programme where they studied a module on Gender and Education. The sample also included two officials from the district education office.

Data Collection Instruments

Data for the study was collected through face-to-face interviews with the twenty-five teachers. The teachers chose where they felt comfortable to have the interviews. Most of them preferred to be interviewed at schools while others chose their homes. Face-to-face interviews were also held with two district education officials. Observations were made on ten teachers teaching different learning areas. The teachers who included both male and female gave their consent to be observed.

RESULTS

In 2001, the Department of Education Gender Parity Index (GPI) was 1.00 which is an indication that school going boys and girls have

equal access to the school system. However, their experiences differ in terms of how the curriculum is delivered and other aspects pertaining to the school environment. They continue to enhance inequality between boys and girls at school level (Unterhalter 2005).

Assigning Tasks to Boys and Girls

Most schools visited, whether primary or secondary had few support staff to perform non-teaching tasks. Therefore, some of the tasks, like general cleaning of classrooms and compounds, gardening and related work are done by the learners. Participants were asked how they assign those tasks to girl and boy learners. The objective was to find out whether teachers continue to maintain male and female traditional roles. Information obtained from participants revealed the following:

- (i) In all primary and secondary schools visited, both male and female teachers assign girl learners duties of cleaning classrooms that is, sweeping, scrubbing, polishing floors and cleaning windows.
- (ii) Boy learners do not participate in cleaning classrooms but are asked to move desks around to enable girl learners to clean easily. They are also assigned the tasks of cleaning blackboards and ploughing the gardens in the school compound and mowing school lawns especially in the beginning of the year. Teachers referred to the duties assigned to boy learners as the "heavy duties".

A participant teacher stated: *"We have to follow our culture and tradition in allocating tasks. Girls do different tasks from boys. Boys are assigned physically challenging tasks such as gardening, cleaning the board, watering plants, and digging and cleaning the yard. Girls clean the classrooms and offices and make tea for teachers during break time"*.

Information was also obtained on participation in different sports by boys and girls in the schools that were visited. It was revealed that in most schools, girl learners are not supposed to take part in sports that is regarded as male sports such as rugby, soccer, cricket etc. They are discouraged particularly by the female teachers. Girl learners who insist on participating in the traditionally so-called male sports are given names like "tom boys" etc. Boys who participate in sports considered female sports like net-

ball etc. are referred to as “sissy”. Consequently, despite the fact that all sports in schools are open to both girl and boy learners, the majority of schools visited have sports traditionally meant for girls and boys and discourage either of them from taking part in those which are meant for the opposite sex.

The above findings reveal that schools emphasize on the fact that men should not enter into women’s roles and women should not enter into men’s roles. One participant teacher commented: *“Teachers either intentionally or unintentionally contribute to the way in which children perceive themselves in terms of gender. Boys and girls come to school and are met by teachers with a strong, perceived view of what constitute girls’ or boys’ roles and how each one should behave. I must admit that we maintain what is practised in our communities where gender roles and stereotype continue to give women inferior status. I feel that as teachers we disadvantage girl learners in this case”*.

Whether Curriculum is Gender Sensitive

Among the aspects of enhancing gender equity in education identified by the GETT and the Department of Education is formulation of a core curriculum which is gender sensitive (Chisholm 2003; Redpath et al. 2008). There was also emphasis on the fact that the curriculum should provide a comprehensive framework for teachers, parents and learners to understand the full meaning of gender equality issues in the curriculum.

The introduction of Curriculum 2005 and the Revised National Curriculum Statement state clearly the need of eliminating gender stereotypes in teaching materials, classroom practice and school experience (Redpath et al. 2008: 39). According to the Department of Education (2005):

The Revised National Curriculum Statement has tried to ensure that all Learning Area statements reflect the principles and practices of social justice, respect for the environment and human rights as defined in the Constitution. In particular, the curriculum attempts to be sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality, race, gender, age, disability and such challenges as HIV/AIDS (p.10).

Consequently, Redpath et al. (2008) state:

The current National Curriculum Statement Policy Guidelines (Life Orientation) (Grades

10 – 12), lists under learning outcome: personal well-being (Grade 10), describing the concepts ‘power’ and ‘power’ relations and their effect on relationships between and among genders, including power, power relations, masculinity, femininity and gender, stereotypical views of gender roles and responsibilities, influence of gender inequality on relationships and general well being (for example, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS). The current National Curriculum Statement Policy Guidelines (Life Orientation) (Grades 10 – 12) has similar requirements (p.39).

All the participating teachers in the schools visited are aware and agreed that the new curriculum (Curriculum 2005, the Revised National Curriculum Statement and the National Curriculum Statement) is gender sensitive as it takes into consideration issues of social justice and human rights which includes gender. Most of them referred to Life Orientation where learners are taught life skills which include issues related to power and power relations and issues of gender. Others felt that although the Curriculum is gender sensitive, there are challenges in implementation as teachers attitudes remain gender biased and teaching methods disadvantaging girls most of the time.

Introduction of Gender Awareness Issues in Pre-service and In-service Teacher Training Programmes and Gender Awareness Issues

All the teachers interviewed acknowledged that in their pre-service programmes in teachers’ colleges and at university level, they were not trained to incorporate gender issues in classroom practice. However, thirty-nine of them acknowledged that gender issues were covered as a section in one module on Perspectives in Education in their Honours Programme. Many of them felt that they were able to understand gender issues and the need to take them into consideration in the classroom. However, observations made in some of their classes showed that they were not taking into consideration gender aspects in their teaching methodologies. All the participant teachers conceded that gender issues are not incorporated in their in-service or continuous teacher development programmes which are ongoing in the districts.

The fact that teachers come from a society that is characterised by deeply entrenched pa-

triarchal attitudes, it might not be possible for them to teach gender equity in the classroom without interventions that will enable them to change their attitudes (Redpath et al. 2008). The GETT and the Department of Education proposed the introduction of gender awareness in teacher training programmes to enable teachers incorporate gender issues in their teaching methods and to ensure that teachers' attitudes are not gender biased (Chisholm and September 2005).

Tertiary institutions in South Africa offer courses for life orientation to student teachers in pre-service and also in-service programmes. Their appropriateness and impact in raising awareness and changing teachers' attitudes is not clear because Redpath et al. (2008: 40) observe that in terms of the South African Qualifications Act 55 of 1995 accredited tertiary institutions design their own approved courses for teacher training for life orientation so the Department of Education has little control over the content of the programmes. Consequently, the extent in (to) which tertiary institutions have been including or integrating issues of gender in different courses offered to student teachers is not clear as this depends on individual institutions and the capacity of the academic staff teaching in the programme. For example, the Educational Studies Department at the University of Witwatersrand has been integrating gender issues in the first and second year sociology of education even before the GETT recommendations. They have also introduced third year electives titled Gender and Education and Safer Schools in their pre-service teacher training programmes (Baker and Richardson 2004). Many of the tertiary institutions especially universities are offering gender related aspects in their modules or sections of the modules. The extent in which what is taught in the modules or section have effect on raising awareness and changing the attitudes of teachers is not clear (Redpath et al. 2008; Baker and Richardson 2004).

The Department of Education is conducting continuous teacher development programmes to enable teachers deliver the new curriculum, improve their practice and upgrade their qualifications (Department of Education 2002; Maistry 2008). The training is offered by the Department, institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It has been observed that there is no focus on gender issues in the training

programmes to enable teachers integrate the same aspects in their practice (Maistry 2008; Ram-parsad 2001).

Integration of Gender Issues in Classroom Practice

Participant teachers were asked whether they take into consideration issues of gender in their teaching methods and choice of teaching materials. The majority of participant teachers in the primary and high schools visited acknowledged that they pay more attention to boy learners than girl learners in the classroom. Most of them stated that boy learners do not learn as fast as girl learners, hence they feel obliged to pay more attention to boy learners to ensure that they catch up with the girl learners and understand properly what has been taught. This is done by asking boy learners questions even if they do not raise their hands and making sure that they provide correct answers by giving them more time to reflect over questions and by repeating the questions. The following are statements from participant teachers:

"I pay more attention to boys because they do not grasp things quickly. They do not learn as fast as girls. That means I have to treat my learners differently with more time given to boys."

"Girls are quiet and obedient in class. They also learn very fast. However, boys are not the same. I spend close to two-thirds of the time in class on boys making sure that they catch up with the work."

"I find out that I have to concentrate and explain more to boys because they are weaker than girls."

Another issue which emerged from the interviews is that in two schools where the study was conducted girl learners are not allowed to go to male teachers' offices for consultation when they had problems with class work. However, boy learners were allowed to consult male teachers in their offices when they had problems with their work. The reason provided by participant teachers from the two schools was that the practice was intended to protect girl learners.

Observations made in different classes in both primary and secondary schools revealed that in many cases teachers treated boys and girls differently. Boys would call answers and if they were right ones they would be praised. If they were

wrong answers teachers would give clues until they got them right. Girls who did the same were often reprimanded and told to raise their hands. Words like “*you should behave like a lady and raise your hand*” were often used by both male and female teachers in many of the classes that were observed. Most of the girls who were warned by teachers remained quiet throughout the lesson period. The picture does not reflect what was stated in the interviews. It seems that girl learners are denied the opportunity to participate in class despite the fact they are more hard working and faster than boys.

In most classes learners were given tasks to perform in groups. Most teachers mixed girl and boy learners in groups. However, group leaders who were chosen by teachers in many classes were all boy learners. There was a unique case in one class in a primary school where groups consisted of girl and boy learners separately. The teacher who was male said that he arranged the groups according to ability and that was the reason for having them separately. It enabled him to concentrate or work closer with boy learner groups as they were slower than girl learners. While having boy learners only as group leaders and also grouping learners according to ability might not seem to be something serious, it is evident that teachers are not being gender sensitive.

It was also evident from the observations that there were other aspects in the teaching methods which indicated that teachers were not being gender sensitive. Although the introduction of the new curriculum has led to provision of gender sensitive learner support materials, many teachers in both primary and secondary schools visited gave examples in class that portrayed and encouraged girls and boys traditional roles. It was evident that many of them were doing it unconsciously which indicates the fact that there is an urgent need of gender sensitisation and awareness programmes in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. It was also evident from the interviews that most teachers felt that since Life Orientation deals with teaching learners gender related issues, it was not necessary to take gender into consideration in delivery of other learning areas. The following are comments from participant teachers:

“I do not have to take gender issues into consideration in my learning area because we have Life Orientation in our Curriculum. The teacher responsible for Life Orientation handles those issues”.

“Life Orientation was introduced in schools to deal with gender issues. I do not concern myself with such issues in my learning area”.

Interviews were held with subject advisors from the district education office to find the type of support provided to teachers to ensure that they include or integrate gender issues in teaching. Subject advisors stated that when they visit schools they only ensure that teaching is in line with the new curriculum and that teachers are using the required teaching methods. They focus on the overall delivery of the new curriculum and do not deal with gender issues. Gender issues are handled by the section which is responsible for Inclusion. Officials from the district office which deals with Inclusion acknowledged that they have not dealt with issues related to integration of gender aspects in teaching. They have a District Support Team which has paid more attention to addressing issues related to sexual abuse in schools than inclusion of gender issues in the classroom practice.

Combating Sexual Violence

Among the policies put forward by the Department to enhance gender equity is to reduce the incidence of gender based violence and harassment in the education system (Pandor 2004; Chisholm 2003). All participant teachers acknowledged that there were incidences of sexual violence in their schools. The magnitude of the incidences varied from school to school. They include sexual abuse, sexual harassment, intimidation, sexual coercion and sexualised touching. Girl learners were the most affected group although some participants stated that it affects both girl and boy learners. The participants identified teachers, other learners and other school employees as perpetrators of sexual violence in their schools. The participants were requested to explain how their schools handle incidences of sexual violence. There were varied responses which include:

- Complaints are handled by Life Orientation teachers who address the problem;
- The principal handles the complaints and take the necessary measures;
- The school disciplinary committee addresses the problem and the perpetrator is either given a warning or suspended;
- The incidences are reported to the social worker attached to the school who takes necessary measures;

- Teachers talk to the parties involved and re-primand the perpetrator;
- Parents are involved in sorting out the problem.

However, there are incidences identified by some participant teachers which show some flows in the responses. A number of them cited cases where girl learners were sexually abused or raped by male teachers and when the incidences were reported to principals they abdicated responsibility relegating the matter to parents. In other cases male teachers coerced girl learners into having sexual relationships and when learners fell pregnant they dropped out of school. The girls' families are offered financial support by those teachers and because of poverty the matter is covered up. There are other cases identified by participant teachers where male learners are molested by male teachers. Such incidences are covered up by principals, social workers, the police and parents when they are reported by teachers. They acknowledged that due to the humiliation and stigma which is attached to the act, affected boy learners find it difficult to report or talk about the issue it.

Some participant teachers stated that some girl learners seduce male teachers by their own conduct and the way they dress. They felt that in such cases male teachers also fall prey to sexual abuse. This should not be an excuse to abuse girl learners as the responsibility of taking care of learners is entrusted to teachers during school time. Moreover, the code of professional ethics prohibits teachers from having sexual relationship with learners.

DISCUSSION

The above findings show that despite the fact that gender equity policies in the education sector are in place, there are limitations in the implementation of these policies at the school level. As discussed above under the section on enrolments and gender, South Africa girls have equal access to schooling (Redpath et al. 2008). However, their experiences differ in terms of how the curriculum is delivered and the conditions existing in the school environment. The dominant images of masculinity and femininity schools conveyed to learners are those which portray girl learners as having lesser power and status than boy learners (Oxfam 2005). This is clearly reflected in the roles assigned to learners

and their participation in different sports and other extracurricular activities. Oxfam (2005) observes that across the world, schooling has not always fulfilled its potential as a change agent capable of challenging existing gender inequalities but continues to enhance gender stereotypes where girls and boys are given different roles by teachers. Girls are expected to clean classrooms while boys do outdoor jobs.

Although the Curriculum is gender sensitive, the practice in the classrooms remain gender biased with boy learners receiving more attention and encouragement than girl learners. The findings confirm what studies on classroom practice have shown that teachers are more likely to call on male students, even when female students raise their hands or when no one does, wait longer for male than female students to respond to questions, give male students more eye contact following questions (Koch and Irby 2002). While the findings reveal teachers entrenched patriarchal attitudes in their practices, it is also evident that there is a lack of understanding of gender issues and how they should be integrated in teaching. This is evident in the comments made by participant teachers that Life Orientation teachers are responsible for gender issues in schools. However, it has also been observed that many Life Orientation teachers lack capacity to deliver the programme. According to Chisholm (2003), ninety per cent of teachers offering Life Orientation have not received training on the subject.

Moreover, there is lack of proper monitoring and support availed to schools by district officials (Unterhalter 2005). This is attributed partly to lack of adequate funding and capacity among many of the district officials (Chisholm and September 2005). Gender prejudice and stereotype in curriculum, teaching methods and learner support materials maintain unequal power relations between girls and boys and lower self-esteem of girls (Chisholm 2003). It is also likely to affect their performance and increase the risk of dropping out of school (Unterhalter 2005).

The findings reveal also that schools do not take issues of sexual violence seriously. This is evident from the fact that incidences reported to school management are sometimes covered up. School management abdicate their responsibilities and shift the problems to parents. Many participants felt that there has been an increase in sexual violence in schools. This has also been

expressed by the media. All these point to entrenched patriarchal attitudes prevalent at the school level. According to Unterhalter (2005), "sexual violence in school intersects with political and cultural forms of subordination". The effects of sexual violence are low enrolment of girls in schools, poor performance, high drop out rate, teenage pregnancy, early marriage etc. All these factors maintain the inferior status of girl learners and deny them the right to education (Actionaid International 2004).

It is evident that gender equity policies on their own will not address gender inequalities at the school level. Education and gender awareness programmes need to be implemented on a continuous basis at all levels. Teacher education needs to equip teachers to promote an understanding of the profound nature of gender inequity and to overcome the barriers to learning (Oxfam 2005: 5). This can be achieved by making sure that training in gender equality is included in both pre-service and in-service institution based and school based programmes. Gender equity should be a central theme throughout the programme and not one off sessions. It should also be accompanied with follow up support and monitoring. According to Oxfam (2005: 5), building networks of teachers to work together or collaborating through school clusters and teachers' centres are ways of sustaining training and providing ongoing support for teachers and education officials.

It is also necessary to develop the capacity of district education officials, mostly the education development officers and subject advisors in order for them to support gender equality in the classroom. The Department of Education should ensure that school level policies for gender equitable approaches to teaching and learning are developed. Many participant teachers in this study claimed that gender issues are integrated in their school policies. However, it was later found that there are no specific gender issues included in school policies but both boy and girl learners are represented in school committees. Most times they are not able to make their voices heard because they are excluded from participating in certain issues.

It should also be ascertained that measures which have been put in place to address sexual violence and procedures dealing with abuse are

clear and widely communicated. At the same time there should be awareness programmes for the school management teams, police, social workers, members of school governing body and other members of the community to sensitize them on gender equality. This should also include persuading parents to take active interest in their children learning and ensure that the school learning environment is safe.

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