



Gender dynamics in the performance of grade 7 certificate of primary education examinations in Gweru Urban District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The Education for All Act in Zimbabwe has endeavoured to provide education to all irrespective of gender. The performance of the girl child has been unsatisfactory nationally. The study investigated gender –based factors which impact on performance in these school leaving examinations. The survey design was employed and 20 randomly selected schools in Gweru Urban Education District were used for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select 240 (120 girls and 120 boys) pupils from grade 7, 20 teachers and 20 school heads. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from the school heads, teachers and pupils. The data gathered was organised and presented in the form of frequency schedules, counts and percentages where descriptive and inferential statistics were used for analysis. The findings revealed a significant difference in performance between boys and girls in examinations. School, community, individual and school factors affect girls more than boys. The study recommends the need for society to change bias towards female education. The stakeholders must ensure that girls are protected from retrogressive practices that impede their performance in examinations.

Key words: *performance, gender dynamics, grade 7, examinations.*

Introduction

The universality of education has become evident in all countries after the world conference on basic education for all held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1995 (UNESCO, 1996). Extending basic education to girls, bridging the gender gap and promoting gender parity were identified as critical priorities at both Jomtien and Islamabad conferences but progress toward these goals over the past decade is slow for reasons ranging from entrenched discrimination against women to retrogressive cultural practices (UNESCO, 1996). UNESCO (2000) recognises that, “child friendly school environment is decisive and important for achieving universal primary education, educational quality, equity and inclusiveness as well as achieving gender equity in education”. For these goals to be realised a gender responsive physical environment within the school must be aimed at, that is physical facilities in a good state, adequate space, furniture, lighting and sanitation and proximity to pupils’ homes. Schools may also provide counselling services, health and nutrition and extra- curricular activities.

A conducive environment provided by the community is also important to help reduce gender disparities in education. Research has suggested that, apart from having a direct association with children’s academic achievement, parents level of education is part of the larger picture of psychological and sociological variables influencing children’s outcomes. Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) contend that influence of parents’ level of education on student outcomes might best be represented as a relationship mediated by interactions among status and process variables. Parental level of education influences children’s knowledge, beliefs, values and goals about child rearing so that a variety of parental behaviours are indirectly related to children’s school performance.

Furthermore, where stereotyped gender roles are embedded in social systems or practices, attainment of gender – equal society may be an illusion and may impact negatively towards formulation and implementation of gender sensitive policies. Pscharopoulos and Woodhall (1985) posit that in many developing countries, girls are expected to contribute to child care or home production at a much earlier age than boys and this why they are less likely to be enrolled in educational institutions. Girls are expected to undertake domestic chores and responsibilities which may affect their performance. Beijing conference in 1995 brought to the fore that educational institutions remain largely gender biased and insensitive to the specific needs of girls and women as evidenced through the curricular and teaching materials. The lack of gender sensitivity by educators tends to aggravate existing inequities between girls and boys discriminatory tendencies are reinforced with girls self – esteem undermined further.

FAWE (2004:5) defines physical environment as referring to “... infrastructure of schools which include things such as school buildings compound of the school, fence, water, toilets, power supply, boarding facilities, first aid, medical facilities, sports amenities, laboratories and libraries”. Furthermore, FAWE (2004:5) contends that “writers of textbooks create a human world in which people do things that learners recognise and easily identify with to the extent that they see themselves in the text book work”. Gilbert & Tyler in Dekker & Lemmer (1993) say, “Textbooks present limited portrayals of women and girls and although attempts have been made to reverse this trend more recently published school textbooks are still narrow in their representation of gender roles”.

Teacher expectations of pupils’ performance and abilities can also operate as a self fulfilling prophecy within the classroom, as there is a tendency for the performance of pupils to conform to the expectations of the teacher. Stanworth (1983:49) says “pupils who do not measure up to teachers’ gender expectations are considered deviant. Teachers expect girls to enter subordinate occupations and to have careers disturbed by marriage and they communicate these expectations to pupils”. Longwe, in Sweetman (1998:2) argued that “schools are patriarchal establishments which are grounded in the values and rules of patriarchal society”. Herward and Bunware (1999:146) noted that, “...teachers have hardly any gender training and continue to socialise girls towards things feminine”. This leads to gender stereotyping.

Sweetman (1998) noted while state level politics encouraged schools to give boys and girls the same opportunities in subject allocation and resource distribution, the problem lies in that this responsibility has been largely left to the discretion of school heads.

Siann and Ugbwuegbu (1980:23) argued that social background is a determinant factor as “parental attitudes influence school performance. For instance, if parents think that school is very important, they may as parents do in the larger cities of Nigeria and Kenya, arrange for their children to have extra coaching for important exams”. In Zimbabwe the practice of extra tuition or coaching is prevalent and especially examination classes. Ezewu (1983) in a study in Kenya noted that children can be provided with books before attending school thus adequately prepped to start school.

The Zimbabwe Education Act (1981, 1996, chapter 25:04) and its subsequent revised versions are gender blind (Circular minute 14 of 2004). The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into education and training suggests that: “it is during this period that the learner should be exposed to all experiences and afforded an opportunity to discover him/herself in terms of his /her intellectual ability, aptitudes and interest ...”. There is silence on the discourse on gender sensitivity but the same documents provide clear guide lines on language, health in schools and philosophy of unhu/ ubuntu.

Methodology

The study was conducted using descriptive survey. This enabled the researchers to work with a limited number of cases and draw conclusions that cover the generality of the whole population. Questionnaires were developed for students, teachers and school heads. A descriptive study design was chosen to provide descriptions of phenomena or characteristics associated with the research population and give an estimate of the population that has certain defined characteristics (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). This method enabled the researchers to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from respondents. Twenty five schools formed the study population. Purposive sampling was done to select 20 schools from the 4 zones. Purposive sampling makes use of the research participants who possess desirable characteristics (Seale, 2006). The sample for the study consisted of 20 teachers, 20 school heads and 120 boys and 120 girls. The researchers focused on the perceptions of teachers, pupils and school heads at one go for the purpose of validating and triangulating the information from the different respondents on the performance of pupils at grade 7. The research was carried out in Gweru Urban Education District in Zimbabwe.

Data was collected from 20 primary schools where three sets of questionnaires were used to collect data from 20 school heads, 20 teachers and 240 pupils. The researchers focused on the perceptions of teachers, school heads and pupils. The 3 sets of questionnaires were used to capture data on community, individual/ family and school based factors. The questionnaire was divided into four categories. The categories were family related factors which influence gender based performance in grade 7 examinations. Community related factors that influence gender performance as well as school- related factors that affect gender based performance.

The first category aimed at finding out from the respondents the social and school based factors that affect their performance. The second category aimed at finding community based factors. The third category focused on establishing the role of teachers, school heads in the pupils’ performance. The fourth category focused on the pupils’ perceptions on their performance.

The study also employed the interview method which comprised open ended questions that sought for descriptive and narrative responses regarding the phenomena under study (Thomas & Nelson, 2001). Semi- structured in- depth interviews, ranging from one hour to two hours were conducted to access respondents’ subjective experiences and meanings often lost in quantitative research (Banister et al 1994,). All interviewees were audio taped, transcribed and checked for accuracy. After transcription the interviewees were invited to add questions to interview protocol before and during data collection. Once transcribed, interview script was returned to appropriate participants for clarification and final approval. All requested transcript changes were made to protect confidentiality and to preserve the intended original meaning of answers. Document analysis guide was used to collect data from the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) of 2011.

Qualitative data that was gathered was analysed using the manual sort and count, grouped, coded, classified, categories and trends and patterns analysed as they emerged. Thick descriptions were also employed using the information from the interviews and questions.

The purpose of the study and the participants’ right not to participate in the study were explained verbally as well as in print form before the interviews were conducted. To respect privacy and voluntary nature of participation, the instructions emphasised that participants were free to omit any item that they did not feel comfortable. The researchers assured them of confidentiality and anonymity. The participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study after explanation about the study’s objectives, confidentiality and ethical considerations with assurance regarding the voluntary nature of participation.

Results and Discussion

In analysing data for the current study the following themes emerged: individual, family/ community and school-based factors which affect performance of pupils in primary school.

Home and individual based factors

Home and individual based factors have a direct influence on the children’s performance in primary education. For instance where the parents’ educational level is high, investing in a child’s education at whatever level maybe preferred irrespective of gender. The parents’ level of income and occupation have a bearing on the parents’ investment in their children’s education. Parents with a positive outlook of schooling tend to extend this to their children through meeting domestic and school needs. The table 1 below was generated to show disparity in parental level of education using the responses from a sample of 120 girls and 120 boys.

Parental involvement

Table 1: Parents' level of education

Educational level	Mother	%	Father	%	total	%
Primary	111	39.6	83	29.6	194	34.6
Secondary	68	18.6	72	25.7	140	25.0
College	33	11.8	55	19.6	88	15.7
University	25	8.9	32	11.4	57	10.2
Other	43	15.4	38	13.6	81	14.46

The above table 1 shows that the parents' level of education affects the performance of the pupils. Thirty nine percent of the mothers have attained primary education as their highest level of education compared to the fathers who make 29,6%. This may adversely affect upward progression and performance of girls since they role model their same sex parent. Studies have shown that the impact on daughters' schooling is greater if the mother has secondary education (Hyde and Kadzamira, 1994, Dorsey, 1989). More of the fathers went beyond primary school whilst figures of females significantly reduce. However, more fathers have attained post primary education which offer role model for male children than it does for female students.

Table 2 figures show that more boys are assisted with their homework than girls. It appears most parents prefer to educate the boy child than the girl child and may concentrate on boys at the expense of girls' education.

Table 2: Parental Participation in children's homework

frequency	Boys	%	Girls	%	Total	%
Never	34	28.3	44	36.7	78	32.5
Sometimes	53	44.2	58	48.3	111	46.3
Always	33	27.5	18	15	51	21.2

Desirable Level of Education

On being asked what level of education the pupils hoped to attain the following responses were garnered:

Table 3: Pupils' desirable level of education

Level of education	Boys	%	Girls	%	total	%
Primary	-	-	-	-	-	-
Secondary	30	25	47	39	77	32
College	28	23	45	38	73	30
University	62	52	28	23	90	38

The above tabulation shows that a higher number (52%) of boys would want to attain university education compared to 23% girls. The girls seem to prefer attaining a secondary (39%) and college (38%) level of education. This may show that the girls are not as ambitious as the boys and often times they do not acquire the said desired level of education. Gender therefore has a powerful influence on educational ambitions and this may affect the performance of girls in schools. Gordon (1995) established that girls were seen by teachers as having different aptitudes and mental abilities from boys. Studies have shown that girls' aspirations are influenced by a number of factors including beliefs about what activities are appropriate or inappropriate for women and men.

Community Linked Factors

There are gender roles, activities and responsibilities that are performed at home by boys and girls which consume their time for study after school. These include domestic chores, looking after children and the sick, cooking, gardening, selling wares at markets and other chores around the home. The following table 4 shows the stereotyped gender roles that emerged:

Table 4: Tasks carried out at home

Activity	boys	%	Girls	%	total	%
Going to market	76	63	115	96	191	80
Domestic work	96	80	120	100	216	90
Caring for children & the sick	60	50	100	83	160	67
Cooking	90	75	118	98	208	87
Gardening	100	83	100	83	200	83
Vending	83	69	110	91	193	80

The cumulative effects of the gender roles mean that women are bound to suffer diminished outcomes in roles that are given masculine definitions while men become disadvantaged in roles given feminine definitions. From the information above girls are mostly found in roles that are deemed feminine as shown in 83 % caring for children and the sick, 98 % cooking and 100% domestic work whilst almost equal numbers are found in gardening and albeit with slightly more girls engaged in vending. However, these significant differences show that the effect of these defined gender roles affect the girls' performance more as they have little or limited time at home for school related work. These activities, roles and responsibilities that the girls engage in at home which seem to consume most of their time are perceived as natural and expected of the girl child such that a boy child is ideally not expected to cook 75 % or domestic work 80 %. Patriarchal assumptions about male supremacy have been so deeply ingrained in the structure of society that they infuse

its entire functioning and are so much a part of the national subconscious that it is taken for granted and frequently not even recognised. As one writer puts it “the path to school for many girls is only a detour which leads them back to their traditional tasks in the home” (Brock and Cammish, 1997: 215).

School Based Factors

Hertz (1991) says teacher expectations of their pupils, especially reference they make about the pupils on current and future achievement and classroom behaviour have substantial impact on the students' academic performance. On academic achievement, 70% of the school heads interviewed thought that boys perform better than girls in class. The explanations given for this included that the girls lack ambition, motivation and are lazy. This shows that the school staff and school heads often gender stereotype the girls as less achievement oriented, less academically gifted than boys and less intelligent yet the findings from the study also show that a significant proportion of the girls performed well compared to the boys. From the 120 girls' performance 57 of them had passes better than 4 units in English and Shona (ZIMSEC, 2011).

The teachers in the study expected differential performance by boys and girls and tended to reinforce the concept that the girls' aptitudes were lower than those of boys. Teachers continue to stereotype gender roles. One respondent said that girls' capabilities were belittled because of the pressure to conform to societal roles and expectations. However, the study was looking at the general performance in the overall examination and not necessarily particular subjects which can be subject of further study. The instructional materials and the mode of teaching within the primary school had a bearing on the overall performance of the pupils. In most primary schools the pupils rely on rote learning and simple recall and this affects performance if the pupil forgets or fails to recall a point or concept. Therefore, the performance maybe affected. A large number of studies exploring the quality and quantity of interactions with students in North America elementary school classrooms show rather consistently that teachers give more attention of all kinds including instructional emphasis to boys than girls (LaFrance, 1991). When boys called out answers without raising their hands teachers tended to acknowledge the response but when girls did likewise, teachers were more likely to reprimand the behaviour (La France, 1991). Across the educational curriculum females and males are accorded differentiated treatment. In sum, the educational experience for boys and girls is unequal and girls are encouraged to exercise verbal restraint which militates against their academic achievement (Matope, 1999). The educational experience is unequal to girls who are discouraged from talking in the classroom by a number of non-verbal and verbal means.

The reforms in content of the curriculum, syllabuses and materials to increase relevance to local conditions have not included changes in the depiction of gender roles and sex-biased hidden curriculum inherited at independence (Gordon, 1994). Since the school curriculum does not teach girls to counter gender stereotypes and to produce more balanced gender identities, girls do not acquire knowledge to change their societal context (Stromquist, 1997). In other words, access to schooling by itself does not diminish or counter reproduction of gender relations operating in society.

In a study by Dorsey et al (1991), it was found that girls continue to perform poorly than boys in “O” level examinations, particularly in Maths and Science. This seems to be obtained from the current study as the girls' performance was not at par with the boys. Some of the reasons that were cited by the school heads and teachers as explanations for such performance were lack of textbooks (which applied to boys as well), lack of facilities, no tuition payment, hunger, harassment, inadequate furniture, inadequate exercise books and uniform. Studies have also shown that whilst institutionalised racism in education was done away with, institutionalised sexism was never seriously addressed (Gordon, 1994). However, attempts have been made to redress the situation for example, the call for Education for All. But unless people understand how discrimination of one sex by another is so ingrained in the mindset it is rather difficult to make fundamental changes in education. This is seen in the above reasons that seem to continually make reference to how the girl child continues to be disadvantaged and discriminated. Article 5 (a) of CEDAW recognises the influence of culture and tradition restricting women's enjoyment of rights. It provides, therefore, that states are to take appropriate measures to eliminate sex-role stereotyping and practices that stem from concept of the inferiority/superiority of one sex over the other (Stromquist, 1997). In addition, the books pupils are given to read, for example, are full of cultural stereotypes and reading maybe a very influential source of ideas and ideals. The books may present a clear differentiation of male and female roles in play, skills and attitudes. Eighty percent of the teachers were in agreement that the textbooks that they use tend to have a male bias and this is observed to reinforce subconsciously negative attitudes in the education and performance of the girl child.

Parental Involvement in Child's Academic Studies

The study showed that parents rarely consulted the school on the performance of their children. Twenty one percent of the 20 school heads interviewed said parents often consult the school on pupils' academic achievement; 23 % of the school heads said sometimes the parents consult while 45 % said they rarely consult and 11 % not at all. These figures show how some parents remain uninvolved in their children's academic pursuits. Studies have shown that parental involvement and encouragement enhance pupils' expectations and achievement in school leaving examinations. A survey of examination performance in Kenya showed that social and economic status is strongly related with terminal examination performance (Swainson, 1996). The current study shows that the performance of children in examinations maybe influenced by social and cultural norms. The parents' level of education significantly affects their children's education (Matope, 1999). However, irrespective of social class, parents seek different social benefits from schooling for their sons and daughters. Studies have shown that the higher the income of the family, the greater the desire of parents for their daughters' education (Desta, 1979). Several studies have shown a strong association between female secondary school enrolment and having a semi-professional or professional parent (Assie-Lumumba, 1987 in Stromquist, 1989). In the current study the children whose parents are actively involved in their academic pursuits indicated that their parents had a strong desire for them to go beyond a basic secondary education. There was also a correlation with the pupils' aspirations in education as the pupils with parents with high expectations in education had similar aspirations in their future academic pursuits.

Conclusion

Teacher- based dynamics such as teacher attitude and expectations and their interactions with students in the classroom evince different patterns towards boys and girls, generally to the disadvantage to the girls. Abagi (1997) noted that heavier load of household chores mean that girls do not have as much time to concentrate on their work as boys. Data on teachers' attitudes show that boys perform better than girls. This concurs with studies by Gordon (1995) and Kasente, (1999). The teachers gave reasons for girls' lower performance as due to absenteeism, a lot of domestic chores, lack of parental support and low self esteem. The school heads attribute the girls' lower performance to laxity, passivity, a belief in own inferiority and superiority of boys. The pupils believe that inadequate facilities at school and at home and harassment by teachers are among the major factors which contribute to pupils' lower performance.

Recommendations

In a bid to achieve parity in gender performance in the final primary school leaving examinations, there is need for society to change in its thrust towards girls and women's education. The primary school learning environment should be made gender responsive physically, academically and socially to ensure that the children benefit. Gender disparities in education must be eliminated through encouraging parents and guardians to treat the boys and girls equally and to ensure shared responsibilities in household chores.

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