

Education and patriarchy

Reaching out for gender equity

There's a global push to get girls into schools in equal numbers to boys. But **Veerle Dieltiens** argues that we need to achieve gender equity once parity has been reached. Drawing on research she argues that we must evolve an educational response to patriarchy.

The girls get a chance to speak while they're holding a large red rose twisted from wire and fabric. The romantic symbolism is ignored as the rose transforms into a microphone to voice the troubles experienced at school. Someone was spanked for homework not done, another complains of bullying, one girl expresses fear of going to the toilets where boys pounce on them.

For these girls, the willingness to share experiences and receive guidance from an NGO, is testimony to their will to confront oppressive practises and move towards their aspirations. Huddled in a room, they are the targets of gender equity promises made in far off corridors of power. Here around a rose, the battle is against outright sexism and a day-to-day struggle to assert their rights.

The push for gender equity from the global community is narrow. The focus is on gender parity as one of the Millennium Development Goals to eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education.

South Africa is in an enviable position amongst developing countries when it comes to achieving equal numbers of boys and girls in school. It's a feat that

can often lead to complacent education officials when they were asked about gender equity during research conducted by the Gender, Education and Global Poverty Reduction Initiatives project.

The research was done over three years from 2008 to 2010 to assess how commitments to gender equity and poverty were interpreted in five schools in Kenya and South Africa. This article focuses on South Africa.

GOING BEYOND PARITY

An official in the National Department of Basic Education (DoBE) explained: '... at the moment we're so bogged down in getting kids to school, getting quality of teaching, getting kids to read... that they tend to overpower the gender issues. As we get these things sorted out, then we will be able to focus more on the gender things.'

The danger with delaying on 'gender things' is that the gains made in parity may slip into reverse gear. Where schools are not safe from harassment or where the aspirations of girls are undermined, there may be little incentive for girls to stay until the end of school. We may then never realise our commitment to gender

parity in tertiary education.

In interviews it was not always clear what people thought they needed to do beyond parity. They described three main approaches.

The first was to step-up parity beyond just enrolment numbers in schools. If parity means treating girls and boys the same, then we need to ensure that there are equal numbers of girls and boys across all activities. This often meant providing girls with additional support to compete on equal footing with boys in subjects such as maths, science and technology.

As one official said: 'Our job is not to make sure that girls get it, we do it for everybody, but pushing the girls because they need that harder push than the others.'

Rarely were boys persuaded to take up 'feminised' activities.

These affirmative action initiatives were engineered from the top and then girls were encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities. Such efforts were often met with a backlash, a complaint that girls received too much attention. A national DoBE official recalled boys booing in a gender equity workshop. In response to such complaints the scales were balanced back

towards parity where initiatives like take-a-girl-child-to-work were complemented by a similar programme for boys.

Top-down directives for parity also yielded a dithering knee-jerk reaction that merely satisfied compliance requirements. A school official explained: '... government said we must have that thing of a gender [person], so now when we make the committee... er, where's the gender? We must have a gender member. And then there is. But what is he doing? Nothing. He's just there because it's [to comply].'

The second set of gender issues that interviewees felt should be sorted out was blatant sexism including gender-based violence and discrimination as a result of pregnancy. The approach was for national education to devise policing rules and give schools guidelines to prevent and manage intolerant behaviour. There were several difficulties with this approach.

It was, for example, not clear whether the 'guidelines' were directives such as that school-going mothers take a two-year maternity break from school. Also these guidelines were sometimes met with resistance. A school governing body member said: 'We don't want these kids [pregnant learners] in our school.'

Policy also crumbled in the face of stigmatisation. A school official explained that the school was '... helped by these parents whose learners got pregnant because they didn't bring back the kids to our school [to be a] laughing stock.'

And herein lies the third set of issues that people felt held back gender equity – a belief in the natural order of the sexes.

Explaining why girls were cleaning the school's foyer and administration offices, a school official said: 'You know in our culture... the female person used to collect the wood in order to make a fire at home. Same applies here... it happens naturally.'

BOTTOM-DOWN APPROACH

While policies such as rolling back censorship laws, formal recognition of sexual preference and legislated protection against sexual violence create an environment where girls can assert themselves, these opportunities can quickly be closed down in the name of culture.

As Nadelí Pandor, former minister of education, pointed out to the Gender Equity in Education Conference in 2004: 'Gendered assumptions are built into language, culture, and into the structures of knowledge. We have to unravel how gender biases affect what is recognised as 'truth'. We need to understand how beliefs about men and women affect the way men and women are seen and treated.'

Raising awareness, critiquing values and developing autonomy is at the heart of good education and so transforming gender is central to what makes an education system work.

There's no short-cut to correcting gender power imbalances in patriarchy but it is education that promises to be the turnkey.

In a focus group at the school, a mother said the goal of gender equality in education should address women's 'low self-esteem' and the dominance of men. 'It's high time,' she said, 'that the government empower women to know our position, to know that that we can do the things that men can do... empowering our minds'. An older woman backed her up: 'Women have been put aside for the long time so that is why we have to promote them.'

It's not easy when teachers themselves have been moulded in patriarchy.

There's been an effort to erase gender bias in textbooks and represent girls and boys in varied roles, but outcomes-based education still leaves teachers in control of content. Monitoring and assessment tools of educators include questions on how they deal with 'diversity'

in the classroom, but there is no mention of gender. And training of educators on promoting gender equity has not received enough attention.

Staff at one school admitted they did not know how to engage with older learners on gender matters. The frustration at getting young people to listen to and obey the warnings of teachers and experts on sex, pregnancy and gender-based violence was clear. As a school official explained: 'And they don't even talk to us. We preach, we call the police, we call social workers and [they] come to our assembly and talk to the kids'.

A top-down approach is the obvious course to achieve gender parity and prevent blatant sexist practices, changing hearts and minds on patriarchy is not going to respond to these authoritative tactics.

Changing deep-seated cultural beliefs about femininity and masculinity, and men's superiority over women requires a more bottom-up than top-down approach. 'What we need to be doing,' noted a senior official in DoBE is, 'teaching young people about what the gender equitable society looks like, and what role they can play.'

Finding a voice and reflecting on experience is an important impetus to changing unequal gender relations. The ability to convert children's experience into recognising the source of oppression and moving on to a change in attitudes and behaviour is the way to go. That's a complex, long-term project that goes beyond 'once-off' interventions and campaigns that characterise gender equity programmes. But with the right kind of support and resources, a shift towards gender equity is possible. The girls holding the rose-shaped microphone are the seeds of that revolution. **EB**

Veerle Dieltiens is a researcher with the Wits Education Policy Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand.