

Poverty and gender link

Are schools doing enough?

School nutrition schemes are important for keeping poor children healthy and in schools. But, argues **Jenni Karlsson**, to truly break the cycle of poverty school leaders, teachers and learners need to discuss and think critically about how poverty feeds off gender inequality.

The free school meal is a good idea to attract orphans and children from the poorest families to attend school regularly. But attending school is not the only reason for giving poor children a free school meal.

As part of the Gender, Education and Global Poverty Reduction Initiatives research project I interviewed a senior official from a provincial education department in 2009. She explained other reasons for the National School Nutrition Programme, 'Learners that were coming from rural areas, informal settlements, and those in the farm areas, were walking long distances to schools on empty stomachs and when they got to schools they would then be unable to concentrate in class and sleep most of the time and therefore be unable to pass at the end of the year.'

Although it's good for learners from poor families, especially orphans, to receive one free daily meal at school, it's also important that the meal is nutritious. This is why provincial education departments have guidelines for weekly menus. They say the free school meal should be 'a colourful

plate'! Fresh vegetables are a way to make the meal colourful. So schools are being encouraged to start food gardens that teachers and learners tend together to provide the cooks with fresh vegetables.

The Nutrition Programme is one of the government's most important poverty reduction actions in education. By providing free meals to learners from poor families, government is working to meet the commitment it made to reduce poverty when it signed up for the Millennium Development Goals in 2000. It is significant, though, that government started the free school meals long before the year 2000. It was one of the first plans that Nelson Mandela announced after he was elected as South Africa's president in 1994.

FEEDING SCHEME AND JOBS

The Nutrition Programme is also being used to generate jobs, especially among women. Research conducted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal at a township school and in a rural village school found that at least two women are employed as cooks at each of these schools. School cooks and school

tuck-shop tables are important job opportunities for women because they are often heading single-parent households.

The provincial education official reported that women's cooperatives were being formed to compete against small, medium and micro entrepreneurs as service providers to schools for the provision of goods for their menus. About ten women form the membership of each cooperative and they service schools with an enrolment of about 5 000 learners.

The provincial official outlined the history and process within her province: 'In 2006, that's when they started... there were 42 women cooperatives taken from all wards within circuits... They were women from poor social economic backgrounds with no business acumen. We've had to nurture them, train them, have workshops with them, take them all steps of the way to become business people... They enter into a contract with the school governing bodies, and the school only would order according to the prescribed menu, prescribed by the provincial office. Once they have delivered

the service [the cooperatives] then submit claims to the Department. Then the Department... pays them directly.'

Things are not always easy for the women cooperatives. They face a challenge when schools have low enrolment numbers so each cooperative needs to be contracted to many small schools. They have to coordinate the service to schools which is difficult when the cooperative has only a few members: 'You can imagine delivering from one school to another and these learners must all eat at the same time. It hasn't been easy,' commented the official.

Another challenge that the women cooperatives face is that they are competing against mostly men entrepreneurs. The official said that in order to attract school contracts the women cooperatives 'tend to do more than what is expected of them... which puts these women in a very difficult position especially [when]... they don't have that much money as their male counterparts'.

The education department's way of dealing with this problem is to allocate certain schools to cooperatives and those schools may not be competed for by the entrepreneurs. Despite these challenges, the official reported that most of the women cooperatives were successful in terms of the formal economy. They operate out of offices and warehouses, employ administrative staff, own vehicles and are repaying their bank loans.

GENDER LINK TO POVERTY

All these government initiatives to reduce poverty among school children and women are worthwhile; but when we reflected on them, it began to appear that government and school officials understand poverty as mostly material and physical, about hunger and not having the right clothes, and they do not go much further than that. As a result, official

responses to poverty stop at providing humanitarian aid to poor children and orphans in the form of free meals, uniforms and grants.

Although these material responses from government are vital, they fail to address the deeper social arrangements that entrap children in poverty and they will also fail to break the generational cycle of poverty. By only understanding poverty as a material need and counting the number of mouths to feed, school leaders and teachers cannot understand poverty as being about social systems, which the education scholar, Elaine Unterhalter, has written about as being like traps and toxic poisons.

When we interviewed, in the beginning one school leader said that hunger and poverty had little to do with gender: poverty was the same, regardless of whether it was girl or boy, woman or man. But when we probed, the leader spoke about the school having to tell women much more frequently than men about children's rights, ways to access government services and work through bureaucratic red-tape, how to deal with children, and so on. What we were hearing was that poverty affects women and girls more than men and boys - women and girls bear the greater burden and consequences of poverty compared to men and boys.

One reason was because these days most families in South Africa are single-parent households and it is more common for the single parent to be a woman. Also, education officials spoke about poor school girls being exploited in transactional sex relationships when sex is given in order for the family to receive things such as groceries. They also spoke of *ukuthwala* (bride kidnapping) and that young girls' schooling is interrupted by teen pregnancy in ways that boys don't experience. This means that schools cannot be effective in poverty reduction if they fail to take gender issues seriously.

School teachers have a role to play in their lessons across all subjects, to help learners to question the deep social arrangements like a patriarchal culture in which it is customary for men and boys to dominate and take the lead over women and girls. Teachers also need to think about unequal power relations when one individual or group has greater access to decision-making and resources and uses these powers to sustain their superior position over others. When these social arrangements of culture and power become entrenched they form a poverty trap for those suffering under those arrangements.

In our interviews we found that teachers and school leaders were forgetting to use their classrooms and staffrooms to talk about poverty, human rights, equality and ways to bring justice into social arrangements. The curriculum can be a powerful tool for change in society.

Government officials, governing body members, school leaders and teachers with vision need to deepen their own understandings about poverty and gender equality in education. They need to remind teachers about the curriculum and that poverty and gender should be talked about in lessons and used like a fuel that finds a way to propel through unjust social arrangements as Unterhalter says.

School leaders and governing bodies shouldn't stop counting quantities, employing cooks and feeding free meals to poor learners. But they should go beyond this and push their teachers to use the curriculum and lesson time for learners to think critically about how poverty feeds off gender inequality. ¹⁸

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