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**Gender Concerns in Schools: Strategies and Initiatives Used to Support Gender Parity among High School Students in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract**

The aim of the study was to investigate strategies and school initiatives in bringing equity among high school students in Masvingo urban. A qualitative research approach was used. The research made use of the phenomenological research design. Ten participants who were largely school heads and teachers were purposively selected to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants. The results revealed that schools and teachers were involved in a number of classroom management techniques in promoting gender equity in schools. Teaching approaches such as drama, poems and music were very popular in different schools. Schools were buying new books to replace the ones that promoted gender discrimination. Schools came up with strategies to help students from poor families so as to avoid dropping out. The study recommended that teachers should put equal effort to the boy child as signs of trailing behind the girl child were overwhelming.

**Key Words:** Zimbabwe, Masvingo urban, Strategies, approaches, gender, equality, equity

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By Jeofrey Mtemeri & Nhamo Mashavira

### **Introduction**

There have been concerted efforts by all stake holders in education such as governments, civil societies and development agencies to eliminate gender disparities in education. The Millennium Developmental Goal set in 2000 is one international intervention strategy that sought to bring parity in the education system between boys and girls. It called for the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and at all levels of education no later than 2015. Despite all the efforts, not much attention was put on how schools augment international and government efforts to eliminate gender disparities in education.

Girls face particular obstacles in gaining access to schooling and being able to learn in safe environments (Shahidul & Karim, 2015; Shayan, 2015; Jayachandran, 2014; Afzal, Butt, Akbar & Roshi, 2013). A range of interventions have been used to promote girls' education at international and national levels by addressing the barriers that prevent girls from attaining and completing school or cause them to perform badly in school. These interventions were meant to make schools safe and welcoming places for girls. For example, training more female teachers as role models for girls, reducing the burden of household chores on girls, providing learning materials for schools to function effectively, advocating for parents and caregivers and for communities at large to give priority to educating their girls as well as boys (UNICEF, 2005). These types of interventions have served to increase participation of girls in education as well as to make local communities more sensitive to the importance of education for all children (UNICEF, 2005).

There have been interventions through policies and strategies that were aimed at changing the education system to improve participation of girls and eliminate gender disparities. These systemic interventions include making changes in the investment pattern to compensate for discrimination against girls. Many programmes such as Progres/Oportunidades in Mexico gave a larger financial incentive to educate girls than boys in response to the higher dropout rate of girls (Schultz, 2004). In England the Athena Swan agenda, established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to combat underrepresentation and promote the career progression of women in science in UK universities, has changed the way gender equality is being addressed (Maddrell, Strauss, Thomas & Wyse, 2016). In Zimbabwe the President offers scholarships for underprivileged bright students to study in South African Universities. Very few interventions have been documented regarding school interventions. Hence the need for the current study which sought to investigate on school interventions and initiatives on gender equality.

Another area of concern in schools is poverty. Poverty is one of the factors that was raised as affecting equality between boys and girls in schools (Dakwa, Chiome, & Chabaya, 2014; Sabates, Akyeampong, Westbrook & Hunt, 2010). The donor world has come up with different intervention programmes to help learners and reduce dropouts. School feeding programs for

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example, the distribution of food through schools in Afghanistan was widely supported as a way of addressing barriers related to poverty which hinders the progress in attaining gender equity (High Stakes, 2011). According to the Department of International Development (DFID) (2005), there is much difference between the number of girls attending primary and secondary school. In Africa there is low enrolment of girls as compared to boys because of the relatively high costs of secondary education which are acting as a major disincentive for poorer parents. For instance, in Niger, Tanzania and Chad girls enrolment is critically low (DFID, 2005). In countries like Malawi, Uganda, Cameroon and Kenya the elimination of school tuition through the World Bank and UNICEF support has been seen as promoting the increase in school enrolment (Dennis & Evans, 2012). Not much attention was put in schools themselves on what they are doing to help students from poor families. It is one of the aims of the current study to find out what the schools are doing in that regard.

Furthermore, some countries have eliminated school fees completely especially in primary schools for instance, Uganda (Worldbank, 2009), Kenya (Bentaouet-Kattan, 2006; DFID, 2005), Gambia (Blimpo, Gajigo & Pugatch, 2016) and Tanzania (Bjorkdahl, & Lundqvist, 2006) and the enrolment in the respective countries especially for girls increased. Although education in Zimbabwe is compulsory and heavily subsidised, many parents are likely to find it difficult to raise school fees for their children. The scourge of HIV/AIDS in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, is likely to make the situation quite dire in terms of raising fees as many families are headed by children.

Textbooks are important sources of knowledge and should embrace issues of equity and equality, as children both boys and girls from all segments of society access them. However, textbooks in schools have been accused of gender insensitivity and promoting gender prejudice and discrimination (Mirza, 2004; Blumberg, 2015). According to Gudhlanga, Chirimuuta and Bhukuvhani (2012), there are numerous examples of gender stereotyping in the textbooks such as doctors and engineers always being depicted as men and nurses as women. Gudhlanga et al (2012) further assert that active and productive roles are always associated with masculinity and supportive and passive roles being depicted as women's roles. One of the areas in the curriculum that need attention is elimination of gender biasness from text books and learning material (UNICEF, 2005). It is the purpose of this study to find out what schools are doing to make textbooks user friendly for all learners.

Donors in Afghanistan have contributed approximately USD 1.9 billion to rebuilding the education system since 2001, including building schools, hiring teachers and developing curricula which resulted in the availability of education for all. The Back to School campaign in Afghanistan was another strategy that was initiated by the Afghan government in collaboration with the UN in 2002 which has made enormous gains in increasing the enrolment of both boys and girls in schools in Afghanistan (High Stakes, 2011). Positive strides have also been witnessed in many countries. For example, Bangladesh, equal numbers of girls and boys now enter secondary school which in 1990, there were only half as many girls as boys in secondary education and Nepal has nearly nine girls for every ten boys enrolled in primary school,

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compared with seven girls for every ten boys in 1990. All the above interventions were done at national level and not at school level.

Classroom strategies were raised as critical in bringing equality among students. UNICEF (2005) suggested a number of classroom interventions such as making the classroom more child centred and gender sensitive, promoting sports in schools and teaching in local languages. The current study sought to investigate the strategies that are used in Masvingo urban schools to eliminate gender disparities.

### **Objectives**

The study sought to:

1. Identify initiatives taken by schools to enhance gender equality in schools.
2. Establish classroom approaches teachers use to achieve equity and equality between boys and girls.
3. Identify the challenges that hinder the progress of achieving gender parity in schools.

### **Research Methodology**

This research is informed by the Phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research can be defined as a way of trying to understand the essence of a phenomenon by examining the views of people who have experienced it (Boyd, 2015). The basic assumption of phenomenology is that life experiences are subjective and unique to an individual. This means that there are several ways of interpreting the same experience and this is what constitutes reality (Harwell, 2011). The design was suitable for the current study as it promotes the contribution of school teachers and heads in learning and teaching.

Six high school teachers and four school heads were purposively selected to participate in the study. This sampling method enabled the researchers to get rich information from targeted participants. Structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants. The researchers made use of an interview guide to ensure they control the flow of the interview. Thematic Analysis was used to draw themes and patterns of meaning from the interview scripts. The researchers familiarized with data in the analysis where the interviewer had to read the data collected so as to be familiar with every detail which will help in the creation of themes and taking note of the patterns. After that the researchers developed a detailed analysis of each theme, making sure that the themes have informative names which explain the research findings in detail. The researchers then joined together the analytic narratives, data extracts and contextualized the analysis in relation to the existing literature leading to the final presentation of the results.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Schools Initiatives**

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Schools have a great impact on gender equity in society because the school structure, curricula, textbooks and teaching materials, teacher attitudes, the overall atmosphere of the school, and leadership structures all influence the students (Menon, 2015). Schools make a number of initiatives in trying to bring parity among students. Participants especially school heads were in agreement that they try to be neutral in the way they deal with both boys and girls and also try to uplift the girl child who has been disadvantaged for a long time. This is in tandem with Blaise (2005) and Davies (2003) who purported that it's more appropriate that schools adopt a gender neutral perspective concentrating on differences between individuals instead of between boys and girls. The study revealed that schools have tried to be neutral in enrolling students into schools, allocating students in clubs where they try to mix boys and girls in different clubs such as HIV/AIDS advocacy, drama, and debate. The result is in tandem with Blaise (2005) who revealed that it is more appropriate to adopt a gender-neutral perspective and look at differences between individuals instead of between boys and girls. However, the finding is in contrast with Braddock, Sokol-Katz, Greene, and Basinger- Fleischman, (2005) who purport that the gap between boys and girls especially in sports participation still persists. However, teachers raised particular attention to other clubs such as basketball, girl guides, drum majorettes and boys' brigade that were still gender biased by nature.

School heads and teachers expressed willingness of school to foster gender sensitive literature in schools. School heads alluded that schools have embarked on sourcing gender sensitive literature in schools where text books are purchased to replace old and out dated literature where men and boys were seen as superior to women and girls. The text books also were seen as bridging the gap between the rich and the poor as each child was given books despite the background. The gesture helped the girl child from dropping out of school as parents mostly preferred the boy child over the girl child.

Participants revealed that poverty had an effect especially to the girl child as she is the one who is likely to be sacrificed. School heads who participated revealed that schools were the ones that recommended the children who needed help to the government and donor organisations. The study also revealed that school heads make follow ups of students who would have dropped out of school and work with particular parents to forge a way forward or refer them to organisations that may assist. They also recommended such students to get funds from BEAM (a government fund for the poor children).

### **Classroom approaches**

The classroom was identified by quite a number of participants as critical in conscientising students about gender issues. Shumba (2002) argue that students need a caring, nurturing and supportive environment in order to learn better. This was in line with Manon (2015) who assert that teachers can give students greater opportunities by balancing content, activities and teaching approaches to prevent gender bias and encourage individuality. Teachers who participated in the current study used a number of teaching approaches in their endeavour to achieve parity. Among the approaches that were raised by the participants were an all-inclusive approach where the girl child is centred in all learning activities, staff development workshops were held where gender

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issues were discussed and updated, inviting parents during speech and prize giving ceremonies where students teach through drama, role models, poems and group work. Similar approaches were also used in India where teachers use role models, group work and play to enhance gender parity among learners (Manon, 2015). However, conflicting results were highlighted by Sadker and Sadker (1994) who revealed that the interaction between the teacher and students favoured boys than girls. In Korea male students were given more interaction opportunities with the teachers than female (Jung & Chung, 2006).

Classroom management was seen as important in sensitising both boys and girls the importance of equality and equity. Many schools were fairly complaint in terms of role modification where students (both girls and boys) were given equal opportunities in terms of subject selection and career guidance. However, the finding is inconsistent with the study in Uganda where teachers were found to favour boys than girls (Mirembe & Davis, 2001). The study also revealed that participation in sports and other co-curricular activities of late was not gender biased. All students were encouraged to participate in sports of their choice and other interesting school activities. Seating arrangement in the classroom supports equal participation of both boys and girls. Mrs Gwenzi alluded that she makes sure that no child is disadvantaged by the classroom seating arrangement and that participation of students is not compromised by the way students seat in the classroom. Whilst it is critical for both boys and girls to be treated equally, in terms of space, an educational space designed for girls or women would differ from that designed for boys or men, and space would therefore be utilised differently (Land, 2010). In other words whilst teachers in the current study try to treat girls and boys as equals, girls may be disadvantaged as their requirement of space is different from that of boys.

Teacher student interaction was also cited as critical in communicating gender issues. It includes questioning and feedback that the teachers use in their day to day teaching. Most of the participants in the current study indicated that administering of discipline among students was a cause of concern as boys were normally given physical punishment as compared to girls. The finding was consistent with a study in Korea by Jung and Chung (2006) who raised the gender differentiated discipline where boys and girls were given different punishment. In other words whilst it is imperative to be impartial when treating boys and girls there was a dilemma in whether to give the same or different punishment between boys and girls.

Participants of the current study revealed that curricular materials were sources of gender inequality in schools. However most participants revealed that they were gender sensitive in their use of teaching materials and instructional language. Non-discriminatory language and non-sexist teaching were core in most participants' teaching in the current study. The findings are in contrast with Jung and Chung (2006) who purport that in their observation in practical lessons in Korea, boys were more active than girls and that curricular materials were gender biased in most cases. In the same study by Jung and Chung boys were found to enjoy Physical education as compared to girls. The results of the current study revealed that boys and girls were getting equal opportunities in subject selection and career choices.

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### **Challenges and counter challenges**

Although schools are trying by all means to be gender sensitive, the boy child is slowly becoming the victim of circumstances. As more effort is put to help the girl child, the boy child is beginning to feel neglected. Participants raised that strategies and school initiatives should take on board the boy child so that he does not lag behind. The study revealed that whilst teachers try their best to support the government and other stakeholders in bringing parity among students, they were not well trained to articulate gender issues. The same problem was raised in Turkey by Uluc (2017) when he argue that most teachers have had no training in gender issues in education. However, the teacher training in India, which was called Gender Responsive Pedagogy approach makes teachers more gender aware. The above approach in India trained teachers to be gender sensitive which result in equal participation of boys and girls in the classroom as well as in the community (Manon, 2017). The programme touched on lesson planning, teaching and learning materials, language use in the classroom, classroom set-up, classroom interaction and the role of school management in supporting gender-responsive pedagogical approaches in the school (Manon, 2017). Teachers and teacher trainers need to understand gender issues, get rid of their prejudices and realize why they should not transmit these to their students. The participants in the current study argued that the two ministries in Zimbabwe (Primary and Secondary Education and Women affairs, Gender and Community Development) should work hand in hand when coming up with national policies as some of the policies were just on paper especially those from the Ministry of Women affairs, Gender and Community development which were not directly linked to the learners.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Gender equality and equity can be achieved in schools if the curriculum is gender sensitive. Students from all walks of life should be given similar opportunities. Schools should come up with strategies that help students from poor families to attend lessons and avoid dropping out. Teachers should be very sensitive regarding gender issues by using proper and appropriate language that does not discriminate learners. They should come up with teaching approaches that encourage all learners to participate in learning. Teachers have a role to reinforce students' talents without gender bias. Textbooks should promote equity therefore teachers should identify aspects in the textbooks that are not gender sensitive and make students aware of such biasness. Sporting activities should be open to all students for instance, if girls are interested in soccer or darts, let them participate and if boys are interested in netball and drum majorettes support them. The study recommends that in trying to promote the girl child the boy child should not be left behind. The ministries of Primary and Secondary Education and the Ministry of Women affairs and Gender and Community Development should work together so that their endeavours are fulfilled.

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