

Schools and gendered identities



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Introduction

This paper presents findings from a study of schools in Botswana and Ghana, which focused on how processes of school life influence gender identities (Dunne et al, 2005). The theoretical analysis of formal and informal institutional rules and practices highlights how gender/sexual identities are formed and enacted in schools. While a dominant gender issue in education and development discourses concerns the access, retention and performance of girls, this analysis also has relevance to boys. Moving beyond the polarised gender categories of statistical approaches (female/male), this paper explores how the experiences and interactions in school construct gender identities that are acted out in cycles of gender affirmation (Butler, 1990). To be a girl/boy is to act in specific feminine/masculine ways to assert that gender identity. These gender performances are a persistent feature of daily life in schools in which the organisational structures frame appropriate gender behaviour; and where these structures are also regulated by teachers and peers (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). The research, briefly reported below, has developed nuanced understandings of the ways in which schools both produce and regulate gender identities; which then have immediate and cumulative effects as individuals learn and perform their gendered place in the world. The emergent understandings of the processes of gender identity-formation have specific implications for the achievement of the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and more generally for development discourse and practices.

As suggested above, the focus here is on the processes of schooling; and the discussion is based on interview (teacher and student) and observation data drawn from ethnographic case studies in 12 junior secondary schools (grades 7–9) in the two country contexts. What follows is an exploration of how everyday student and teacher experiences and practices are significant to gender identity production. Importantly, the analysis of these dynamics recasts teachers and students as active in the production of gender/sexual identities and hierarchies in ways that offer more space and scope for addressing the persistent problems of access and quality that infuse discourses of education and development.

The following discussion refers specifically to data and analysis from the above study but it also has broader theoretical and practical implications. With very limited theoretical groundwork and only a few selected highlights from the larger study possible in such a short paper (please refer to Dunne et al, 2005 and Dunne, 2007 for more detail) I start with a brief reference to

gender in the formal curriculum and then move to a deeper consideration of the informal curriculum. The paper finishes with a short summary in the conclusion.

Formal curriculum

In terms of the formal curriculum the emphasis in research has been upon outcomes, which in this study and more generally show the higher educational performance of boys. Gender stereotyped subject differences were also observed in which boys outperformed girls in the sciences and technical subjects. Girls performed more strongly in languages and other ‘feminine subjects’ (such as Religious Education and Home Economics). In Botswana, where there is parity of access, girls had outperformed boys in these subjects and had equalled them in mathematics. Where subject choices were available these were also gendered along the above stereotyped lines. Unsurprisingly perhaps, teachers were also found to teach in the expected gender stereotyped subjects, for example male teachers were over-represented in the sciences and females in languages. Irrespective of the academic performance of particular girls in the class or the changing national configurations of performance by gender, teachers often tried to motivate boys through the use of negative comparison to the expected low standards of girls’ work – ‘even the girls can do it better than that’.

Pedagogies were predominantly teacher-centred and textbooks were often gender biased. For example, the texts and class discussion in a lesson about ‘Heroes and Heroines’ referred only to males. Gender stereotypes and sexist behaviour presented in the English Language texts in both countries were left unchallenged by teachers, although in a few cases these were reinforced. For example, the text in one lesson introduced a young man with a broad chest who attracted ladies which the male teacher elaborated as a ‘natural’ aspect of human behaviour. In this and other cases the male teachers, often in unusually animated ways, emphasised and (hetero-) sexualised gender differences which they used to ‘tease’ the female students. This usually silenced them as their subordination as represented in the text was further underlined by acting it out in the lesson. Compulsory heterosexuality (heteronormativity), in which gender and sexual identities are superimposed (that is being female, for example, implies hetero-femininity) (Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Jackson, 2003), was assumed through these class texts and also in all peer and teacher–student relations in the school.



Informal curriculum

This section refers to traditions of practice of school life that structure the everyday. These are the taken for granted, or the invisible/hidden aspects of schooling that, although not usually recorded in official documents, are astonishingly uniform and have a deep influence on student identities (Giddens, 1984; Kabeer and Subramanian 1996; Hall, 2002). Key aspects of the informal curriculum are explored below with respect to their influence on the production of gender/sexual identities.

School space

Gender segregation characterised both the formal and informal spaces within all the schools. Whether in the classroom, in student lines at assembly or in class, or during break times in the school field, the use of space showed strong and persistent gender segregation. In the school field, the girls gathered in small groups mostly on the periphery while the boys took up the larger, central space. Both in lines and the classroom girls were always together at the front with the boys at the back. This pattern was dominant and observed in all subjects, schools and countries. Boys tended to determine how space was organised and teachers rarely intervened in their territorial and spatial domination of the classroom. In addition, all students actively segregated themselves from each other by gender, and if disrupted by a teacher for one lesson, the segregated seating arrangements immediately reformed. Even when forced to share a desk, the students would avoid any interchange, speaking only to the nearest student of the same sex. Reflecting the heteronormative context, all described their fear of being labelled as in a special (i.e. sexual) relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Interestingly, the teachers used this as a discipline strategy in which a misbehaving boy would be made to sit among the girls.

Alongside their command of physical space, boys also dominated the verbal space in the classroom. Usually the most vocal in the class, the boys frequently made aggressive attempts to dominate lessons by shouting answers to the teachers or verbally harassing girls who attempted to participate actively in the lesson. Girls were observed being further intimidated in question-and-answer sessions or through the 'special' attention of male teachers. In either case, the predominant response by the girls was to avoid participation or engagement in the public space of the classroom.

With limited teacher intervention, these conditions constituted the informal, hidden learning in a context of gender-identity formation and affirmation. The gender segregation in schools was a process of gender 'othering', which was enacted through spatial distance and social disengagement. Their identities were performed and accomplished through polarised and antagonistic gender relations. The public performances of masculinity by the boys were evident in their consistent attempts to control the physical and verbal space and to remain distant from both female students and their teachers, especially female teachers. The girls, on the other hand, appeared much more subdued and restricted in the classroom space and their interactions as they also actively accomplished their feminine roles. The use of space was an important marker of gender identity and significant in the processes of being gendered.

School duties

In both countries, general school duties were also gender specific. Girls were usually responsible for cleaning classrooms and offices, and also for fetching water. Boys did weeding, picked up papers, cleaned windows and performed heavier duties like tree cutting. They were rarely observed using brooms or mops and also tended to have a supervisory role, for example inspecting the plots rather than cleaning them. In some duties the girls helped boys, for example by raking and bagging weeds for them to carry to the dump, but the boys did not reciprocate. Usually they reluctantly completed their own duties then sat down. The use of space described above also meant that girls were usually sitting at the front of the class where they were more likely to be selected for miscellaneous jobs. In some cases this included teachers' personal work like cleaning their houses, buying food or running other errands for them.

With very few exceptions, high status public duties were usually performed by boys despite the appointment of equal numbers of male and female prefects each year. Although the prefect system – with its equal ratio of males and females – appeared to be a concession to gender equality, perversely it affirmed masculine dominance. Male prefects had more authority, took the lead in joint activities and were given more public tasks, for example, leading the assembly if a teacher was absent and ringing the bell between lessons. These duties would almost never be performed by female prefects who were usually made responsible for domestic duties, such as overseeing classroom and office cleaning. In line with the gender segregation observed in the previous section, there was a clear tendency for male prefects to be responsible for male students and female prefects for female students. This gender differentiation of school duties was mirrored by the staff: as female teachers tended to fulfil social tasks such as greeting visitors and offering seats; whereas male teachers took responsibility for sports, corporal punishment, school grounds, sanitation and tasks that required physical exertion.

The students colluded with the institutional gender differentiation, which they played out through their engagement in the strictly segregated duties. In their efforts towards normative gender positions, the students also regulated and policed themselves and their peers. For example, boys who swept or did 'female' activities were subjected to ridicule by both boys and girls; and often female class prefects excluded boys when drawing up classroom sweeping rosters. This effective collusion was neither straightforward nor passive. While the female prefects used their power to 'exclude' the boys, they explained this through the normative gendered discourses that claimed either that it was not proper for boys to sweep or that boys would not complete the task adequately. Whatever the rationale, rather than being 'victims' or passive subjects, it is clear that they were active in the production of their own gendered identities and in sustaining the gender order.

In summary, across all schools, the teachers' and students' performances of highly gendered duties were a key structure of the gender regime (Kessler et al, 1985). Heteronormative gender identities were asserted by girls (and female teachers) in their performance of domestic type labour, which implicitly colluded with public performances of masculinity by boys (and male



teachers), who acted in positions of authority and occasionally did 'heavy' physical work/activities. There was very limited recognition of, or apparent resistance to, the arbitrary gendering of these school duties.

Gender violence

Within schools, control and coercion was normalised and exercised through acts of both physical and symbolic violence. The use of violence represented the more severe manifestations of the gendered institution, with differentiated gender experiences and outcomes (Leach et al, 2002; Human Rights Watch 2001; Leach, 2003; Dunne et al, 2006).

Official policies left the head teacher responsible for proportionate corporal punishment on reasonable grounds. Caning, however, was a key disciplinary sanction and an everyday feature of school life. It was widely threatened and used by teachers at their whim, often in unauthorised and random ways. Beatings were sometimes extremely violent, and in all cases boys received more corporal punishment than girls. All students considered beatings for poor performance as unfair. Male teachers tended to deal with issues of discipline, especially corporal punishment, and this was intrinsic to their power positioning within the school hierarchies. Female teachers often compounded this by asking their male colleagues to beat male students for them. Acts of physical exertion (including school duties) or physical violence around the school were in effect defined as 'masculine' (Shilling, 1991; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997). Female teachers asserted their authority in disciplinary strategies that often included less demonstrative forms of physical violence, for example by pinching rather than caning, as well as through the symbolic violence of verbal abuse. These alternative disciplinary forms enabled them to enact age and authority relations while affirming their 'femininity'. Interestingly, despite the often severe corporal punishment, students described verbal abuse, commonly used by female teachers, as more damaging and violating.

Boys claimed that all teachers showed preferential treatment of the girls. They directly connected this to male teachers' approaches for sexual favours and cited teacher-student love affairs in their school. Although against national policies and even the law, few examples of disciplinary or legal action against a teacher on this basis were provided. Observations did provide examples of the heteronormative ways male teachers positioned girls. Within the school and classroom, some male teachers engaged with the female students in more personally loaded, sexist and even sexually suggestive interactions and in a range of explicit and more subtle ways. Repeated questioning, for example, was used sometimes to harangue a girl or as an indication of favour from the male teacher. Associated with this, using personal names to address a student within and outside the lesson were significant indicators to the levels of familiarity. This contrasted with the usual somewhat distant teacher-student interaction, which tended towards the impersonal and authoritarian (Tabulawa, 1997). In one case, while a lesson was in process a passing male teacher loudly greeted a girl as his 'wife'. The explicit attention paid to girls by male teachers elicited different responses, from those in which girls visibly shrunk in their seats to avoid further public attention, to those who 'glowed' from the attention and later boasted to their female friends.

Outside of lesson time, boys also engaged in routine intimidation of girls in all schools, with widespread bullying reported. In accordance with the gender hierarchy, the older boys in particular snatched money or other property from girls or from younger boys. It was commonplace for boys to sexually harass girls by touching or pinching them on their breasts and buttocks, which some boasted about to the researchers. They wrote 'love' notes and claimed ownership of girls and would verbally, physically and sexually abuse those who even indicated a refusal of their advances. In both countries, serious cases of sexual abuse of girls were revealed and there were cases of sexual assault, pregnancy and rape reported.

In the classroom, boys dominated both physical and verbal space by shouting out answers and distracting or intimidating the girls. They consistently attempted to control and discipline the girls, subjecting those who resisted to further ridicule and demoralisation. Poorly performing girls and returned schoolgirl mothers were subjected more intensely to forms of gender violence perpetrated by the boys. In general, the girls' strategy to deal with this classroom context was to divert attention away from themselves, whether it came from teachers or male students, by being 'studious' and 'serious' in their studies, yet passive and well behaved in class. Male teachers and students attributed girls' minimal classroom participation to shyness, but the girls themselves attributed it to the oppressive gender regime and hostile classroom contexts (Seke, 2001; Humphreys, 2005). The dominant versions of a subordinate femininity in schools left the girls with limited strategies to respond in the public arena. By contrast, for boys the affirmation of their masculinity and position in the gender hierarchy was through the previously described catalogue of public performances even to the point of contesting female teachers. This resistance to female authority was also evident with respect to teacher (male and female) relations with female head teachers. Although unregulated gendered peer-interaction in the class and school produced poor conditions for, and performances by, girls, on the whole teachers did not intervene. In the more extreme cases these conditions were also detrimental to the boys in terms of attendance, drop-out and examination performance. In summary, the processes of schooling were played out through forms of physical and symbolic violence, which produced polarised and antagonistic gender identities with gender-differentiated experiences and outcomes of schooling.

Institutional responses

Given the highly gendered processes and structures in schools, it was remarkable that gender issues were not seen as a matter of concern in any school. The official gender blindness was universal in this research. The dominant heteronormativity, asymmetrical gender relations and very obvious gendered behaviour by students and teachers was taken for granted as 'natural'; and attributed to biology and the consequent socialisation process. Effectively this rendered the gendered school environment unproblematic, such that complaints from girls about sexual harassment and verbal abuse by boys were trivialised as 'teasing' or 'playfulness' and 'a necessary part of growing up'. The notion of an active process of social and institutional construction of gender/sexual identities found no accommodation and in these terms, the school was seen as a neutral institution without gender bias.



Conclusions

This research has provided a textured sociological analysis of the ways in which schools are deeply implicated in the processes of becoming gendered. By so doing, it indicates some potentially productive possibilities for addressing inequitable gender processes and outcomes of education. It has shown that, in terms of both the formal and informal curriculum, schools play a significant part in the production of gender/sexual identities. Normative organisational structures and social practices in schools construct gender boundaries that regulate appropriate heteronormative gender interactions. In everyday life in schools, students and teachers act out their gender/sexual identities and at the same time reconstruct the very gender/sexual boundaries through which their identities have been framed (Butler, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Hall, 2002). In specific terms, dominant descriptions of schools include antagonistic and asymmetrical gender relations within highly gender-segregated contexts. Forms of physical and symbolic violence are commonly used to express authority and power within the age and gender hierarchies of schools. This has been associated particularly with teachers, especially males and boys. The non-intervention of teachers in the normative gendered organisation sustains the masculinist gender hierarchy that is the ubiquitous context of schooling. It is in the limits and possibilities of these contexts that gender identities are formed and performed. While gender/sexual identities are clearly important to the immediate experiences and outcomes of schooling, they are also highly significant in the longer term to educational and workplace opportunities, material rewards and, more insidiously, to the psyche. Interventions in schools then offer significant potential in the efforts towards gender equity.

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Biographical notes

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