

Gender values, Schooling, and Transition to Adulthood: A Study of Female and Male Pupils from Two Urban Schools in Kenya

Chege, Fatuma Nyaguthii

Abstract

Studies on gender and education in Kenya have portrayed girls and women as passive victims of the patriarchal structures of family and school that reflect gender relations within a macro-system that defines femininity and masculinity as exclusive of each other. Analyses of the Kenyan educational scene reveal gender gaps characterized by relatively low rates of female enrolment, participation, transition, and achievement. Though gender equality has become a major focus in Kenyan education policy, the practice and outcomes of schooling have yet to reflect such intentions. Kenyan studies have tended to describe and explain the persistent educational inequalities. However, little attention is given to the way young people actively respond to social positioning in the family, school, and community while constructing their own definitions of femininity and masculinity. This thesis addresses this knowledge gap by focusing on primary school pupils aged between 13 and 14 years and the ways in which they navigate the 'journey' to adult status. These Kenyan pupils often have to cope, not just with the physical, psychological and emotion-related stress and tensions related to the biological transition from childhood, but also with the academic pressure and uncertainty associated with the transition from primary school to secondary level, or leaving the educational system altogether. This research was conducted in two state primary schools in the city of Nairobi that are distinguished by geographical locations, pupil catchments, parental socio-economic status, as well as different histories and ethnic composition. The aim is to investigate the role of gender in the family and school and the consequences for the schooling of young people as they negotiate gender values and identities in the context of both their rural extended and urban families, and their communities. The research questions focus on young girls' and boys' perceptions, interpretations, and constructions of girlhood and womanhood as well as boyhood and manhood vis-a-vis the dominant socio-cultural definitions and expectations of education and adulthood. Post-structuralism guides this study theoretically and methodologically, helping to underscore the active relationship between agency, subjectivity, and social structures, and challenging the presupposed structural determinisms in society, while at the same time acknowledging the perspective of fluid and shifting positioning of young people in the various social processes that either empower or disempower them. The case study approach, which facilitates the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in the solicitation, triangulation, and analyses of data from multiple sources, allows the participants to share in various decision-making processes during the exploration of their own experiences of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts.

Keywords: Gender values, Pupils, Urban schools, Kenya

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