Art. #602, 18 pages, http://www.sajournalofeducation.co.za

Rural teachers' views: What are gender-based challenges facing Free Primary Education in Lesotho?

Pholoho Morojele
School of Education; University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
Morojele@ukzn.ac.za

This paper gives prominence to rural teachers' accounts of gender-based challenges facing Free Primary Education in Lesotho. It draws on feminist interpretations of social constructionism to discuss factors within the Basotho communities that affect gender equality in the schools. The inductive analysis offered makes use of the data generated from semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers in three primary schools. Basotho culture, superstitious symbolism, and family dynamics are found to be some of the factors that reinforce inequitable gender relations. The findings indicate how teachers exploited these factors to promote the polarisation of gender qualities, and to exalt masculinities at the expense of femininities. The paper argues for the promotion of counter-hegemonic discourses of gender, with an emphasis on conceptions of gender as multiple and fluid human qualities. It explains how paying attention to the cultural architecture of gender formations in localised contexts could become an effective strategy in promoting gender equality in schools.

Keywords: Basotho culture; family dynamics; Free Primary Education; gender equality; schools; superstitious symbolism; teachers

Introduction

The impetus for implementing Free Primary Education, with one of its main objectives being to improve gender inequalities (Ministry of Education and Training, Lesotho, 2001), arose from the contextual realities of pervasive patriarchal ideologies in Lesotho schools and communities. These ideologies continue to place concrete constraints on girls' and women's participation within society. The factors of poverty, HIV (Human Immunosuppresive Virus) and AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) conjoin to exacerbate the difficulties facing girls and women (Molapo, 2005), and in ways that maintain inequitable gender relations. Free Primary Education, which was introduced into most Lesotho primary schools in 2000, opened the doors for girls and boys to have access to basic education without the requirement to pay school fees. This was meant to bolster both girls' and boys' capability to play critical roles in the development of Lesotho society, particularly in response to the problems related to poverty in the context of capitalism, and to do so equitably. Indeed, the monetisation of labour and commoditisation of subsistence into formal or informal employment as a result of capitalism has had a negative impact on gender expectations and roles in Basotho communities (Epprecht, 2000).

There is a need to affirm constructions of femininities in ways that recognise and support the active and assertive roles that the modern Lesotho society requires women

(and girls) to play. For instance, today, women (and girls) are equally expected to financially support their families (Morojele, 2011a), owing to the South African migrant labour system which took young men out of the education system, and later rendered most of them jobless through retrenchment (Epprecht, 2000). These realities require a paradigm shift in how we make meaning of gender in order to promote equitable gender relations, and thus to support the effective implementation of Free Primary Education. The critical roles that women (and girls) need to play in the development of Lesotho will remain constrained without successful attempts to shatter the myths and stereotypes that are infused in Basotho culture, language and its discourse, and that continue to depict females in menial and subservient terms.

The implementation of Free Primary Education was in line with the international conventions which Lesotho, as a member state of the United Nations, has ratified (Ministry of Education and Training, Lesotho, 2001). The World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, sparked off a new impetus towards basic education through its vision and renewed commitment. The Amman Mid-Decade review of Education for All in 1996 reaffirmed the commitment to the Jomtien resolutions. May 1999 saw the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which, among other things, aimed to enhance access to formal education (Mundy, 2006). The MDGs set targets to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, would be able to complete a full course of primary schooling (Bruns, Mingat & Rakotomalala, 2003). In particular, MDG Three specifically refers to the empowerment and promotion of equality between males and females (African Union, African Development Bank & Economic Commission for Africa, 2008).

Improvement of gender equality also features significantly in Lesotho's education sector strategic plan 2005–2015 (Ministry of Education and Training, Lesotho, 2005), even though this is expressed in terms of gender parity rather than equality. The focus on gender parity places priority on the number of girls proportionate to boys who attend school, and fails to address the equitable quality of schooling experiences for girls and boys. The problem is that in Lesotho's schooling system, this approach to gender parity fails girls. There are already more girls than boys who attend school (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), n.d.); the approach does not address the understandings brought by feminist discourse on what it means to improve educational opportunities for girls and women.

This article questions the extent to which increasing the number of girls and boys who attend school, by abolishing payment of school fees, has in fact addressed gender inequalities. It identifies other factors in Lesotho communities that affect Free Primary Education, and asks: What are the gender-based factors that affect Free Primary Education in the schools? What lessons could be learnt from these factors in order to support Free Primary Education in promoting equitable gender relations? To address these questions, the article draws on a qualitative study to discuss some gender-based

challenges facing Free Primary Education. It utilises the data generated from semi-structured interviews with teachers of children in three co-educational primary schools in Lesotho.

Context of the study participants

The study was conducted in Lesotho. Lesotho is a country whose population stands at 2,130,819, of whom 34% are children between ages 0–14 years (Index Mundi, 2010). Lesotho's terrain is characterised by very mountainous areas where travel is difficult, infrastructure is poor, and the climate is harsh. Collectively known as the Basotho, the population is dispersed, and as a result schools in mountain (locally referred to as rural) areas are generally smaller than schools in urban areas (World Bank, 2008). About 70% of the people live in rural areas. More than half of rural people are poor, and more than one quarter of them are extremely poor. More than half of all households in Lesotho are headed by women. Unemployment has worsened in the last decade due to the decline in the number of Basotho men working as miners in South Africa. This has put increasing pressure on women who, despite their relatively subservient social status in Basotho communities, have become the sole breadwinners in most family households.

The South African migrant labour system which guaranteed that Basotho men with barely any form of formal education could work in the South African mines has partly ensured that women benefited from formal education comparative to their male counterparts. The proportion of girls who attend school is higher than boys, and indeed, generally females are more literate than males (UNICEF, n.d.). This might explain why comparatively more women work as professional teachers in the primary schools. Yet the minority social status that women occupy in Basotho communities has resulted in high levels of poverty amongst women, particularly in rural areas. Women bear a perpetual minority social status, first under the headship of their fathers and later under their husbands when they get married and under their male relatives in the event that their husbands die (Molapo, 2005). HIV and AIDS has taken its toll on women, who are generally the primary care providers (Morojele, 2011a), increasing pressure on them as their scarce resources are often consumed in caring for the sick, covering funeral expenses and supporting their relatives' orphaned children (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), n.d.).

Researcher's positionality

As the saying goes, "if epistemology is the nature of knowledge, then ontology is the nature of the knower" (Vithal & Jansen, 2004). My identity in this study was mainly that of an 'insider'. I am a Lesotho citizen = a man who was born, grew up and schooled in Lesotho rural primary schools – studying gender in Lesotho rural primary schools. This perspective of examining one's own society has currency in post-modern ethnography where the familiar is made strange (Marcus, 2001). My political inclination towards gender equality was partly born out of my family situation where the

first wife of my father had only six daughters. This entailed my father's property to being inherited by extended Morojele family members upon his death. At the age of sixty, my father married a second wife – my mother – with whom they were blessed with a boy heir child (myself). I was named Pholoho – which means salvation/ redemption, to signal that my birth was meant to rescue my father's property from being inherited by extended family members with boy heirs, who by law, were entitled to inherit property.

> From a very early age I was socialised to be protective of my sisters against the social ills to which the patriarchal Basotho society relegated girls and women. I was also pressured to grow up quickly so I could take on my father's responsibilities as he grew older and became unable to carry out some of the (physically demanding) male duties. To grow up quickly so I could protect my sisters (girls and women) was part of my earliest consciousness of being (Morojele, 2011a: 690-691).

As the proverbial Basotho saying goes, '*bitso lebe ke seromo*' – literally meaning, 'a bad name is celestial ordinance', I believe that the impetus for me (as a man) to design my PhD research (on which this article draws) to focus on producing knowledge for gender equality in the schools, was part of trying to live up to my name.

As a boy heir child, I was constantly pressured to attain hegemonic masculinities in order to display readiness to assume my aging fathers' responsibilities. Yet I felt that I needed an older brother or a father who was not too old, to protect me against some of the hardships of growing up as a boy in my community. Somewhat atypically, this infused a negative conception in my mind regarding patriarchy and gender inequality. Especially given the stigma and embarrassment that was associated with my inability to perform some of these masculinities (Field, 2001). At a very early age, I had to endure the unbearable pressure of having to uphold the mostly idealised (and impossible) hegemonic masculinities (i.e. using oxen to plough huge hectors of land, harvesting horse and cattle fodder, mending sheep and cattle in distant places, poorly clad, in cold, snowy or rainy weather, etc.) that went with being a privileged boy heir.

The equation of simultaneously being a benefactor of patriarchy and a protector of my sisters and family against the ills of patriarchy brought a huge sense of confusion and insecurity in my life (Morojele, 2012). This was contrary to the belief that men (and boys) are unproblematically privileged by the status quo of patriarchy and gender inequalities. Instead, my life was relegated to untold physical and psychological pain and emotional anxieties. These signify how the lives of boys and men too are compromised by gender inequalities in society.

However, how men and boys are compromised by gender inequalities should be understood in context, and on a case-by-case basis. Social constructionism (Gergen, 2009) – the theoretical positioning of this study (see later) – advocates that gender theorisation should both deconstruct or 'look awry' at the contextual and phenomenological dynamics of gender, and at the same time integrate the analysis into larger

affirmative projects (Quayson, 1999). We need awareness of the broader structural relationships if we are to do justice to the issue of gender inequality. This would enable us to give due regard both to the subordination of women and girls and to the ways in which men and boys are also compromised through gender inequality. We also need to integrate analysis of the local architectural formations of gender into larger advocacy projects aimed at addressing gender inequalities. My experiences highlighted the locatedness of gender dynamics in this context, and the ways in which women (including my sisters) bore the brunt of gender inequalities. It is this understanding of my ontology that in turn has informed the epistemology that is drawn on in foregrounding rural female teachers' views and understanding their relation to the gender-based challenges facing Free Primary Education in Lesotho schools.

Understanding gender in educational contexts: a theoretical positioning

The study uses feminist interpretations of the sociological theory of social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2009, 2001; Bourdieu, 2001) as its theoretical framework for understanding the contextual factors in Lesotho communities that affect the objectives of Free Primary Education in the area of gender inequalities. At the heart of social constructionism is the notion that teachers' understandings of gender draw on the dominant gender discourse in any given context. According to this paradigm, gender relations in educational contexts could be understood through analysis of the social relations and values that teachers, parents and children ascribe to gender (their understanding of being male or female). It brings into focus discourse, or the historically constituted repertoires, systems of social relationships, belief or 'knowledges', which we normally take for granted as if they were fact. A social constructionist theorist, Vivien Burr, illustrates this point:

> Our [gender] identity therefore originates not from inside the person, but from the social realm, where people swim in a sea of language and other signs, a sea that is invisible to us because it is the very medium of our existence as social beings. In this sense the realm of language, signs and discourse is to the person as water is to the fish (Burr, 1995:53).

Discourses are contrived and predicated through cultural systems of beliefs and social relationships. For instance, some dominant discourses in Lesotho draw on superstitious symbolism as a means to regulate gender behaviour and performances in tandem with what is perceived to be the Basotho culture. Understanding the cultural artefacts of gender in context becomes a productive basis for troubling the taken-for-granted discourses and practices of gender (Burr, 1995) which are often regarded as normal, but play such a vital role in the production of gender inequalities in schools. The taken-for-grantedness of discourses that promote inequitable gendered relations is testimony to what Foucault refers to as the seductive operations of power, which attempt to efface its presence under the pretext of normalcy (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011). Yet Field (2001:224) has found that the unattainability of most dominant gender

values indicates that they are nothing more than "masculine myths". A related notion of the power of masculine fantasies in gendered relations propelled Moore (1994) to theorise gender inequalities (and their resultant gender-based violence, rape, sexual assault, and so forth), as stemming from the thwarting that occurs when men and women, girls and boys are unable to take up the subject positions generated in the fantasies of masculinity.

Drawing on dominant discourses in their communities, this study illustrates the tendency for teachers to socialise and pressure girls and boys to perform gender in conformity to what is contrived to be a normal status of affairs – in other words, a 'normal' way of being a boy or girl – thereby increasing the likelihood for the existing gendered power inequalities to continue unabated. In explaining the power of dominant (gender) discourses in informing our daily perceptions of the world, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2001) wrote:

> Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as a fish in water', it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:127).

The 'fish-in-water' metaphor reflects the embeddedness of humans in their social world. This notion reflects how teachers are intricately entangled in the gender discourses and practices within their environments to a point where they might become uncritical of the prevalent inequitable gender relations. So teachers' understanding of gender tend to become dependent upon the available repertoire of gender values and discourses in their particular contexts (i.e. schools and society) just as surely as babies "come bathed in the concepts their community holds about babies, as they come bathed in amniotic fluid" (Cole, 1996:184). The historically constituted gendered social relations in which teachers are so intricately entangled play a role in ensuring that teachers' critical awareness of gender inequalities in the schools becomes diminished or at least compromised. This could partly be the reason for teachers, even unwittingly, to continue to socialise boys and girls into unequal gendered expectations and performances which reinforced the existing gender inequalities.

Teachers' constructions of masculinities and femininities as innately tied to being a boy and a girl (respectively) are deeply implicated in forms of gendering that reinforce gender inequality. Such constructions view femininity and masculinity as unitary and static gender qualities which are predetermined by children's genitalia (Gibson & Hardon, 2005). Critical men's studies have challenged these essentialist accounts of gender, and instead promote constructions of femininities and masculinities as plural and fluid human qualities (Kimmel, 2006). Gender inequalities in the primary schools have been traced to the polarisation of feminine and masculine attributes as static and unitary gender attributes (Lindegger & Maxwell, 2007). This study shows how teachers privileged what Connell (1995) refers to as 'hegemonic masculinities' over other

types of masculinities (including femininities). Hegemonic masculinities are the dominant forms of masculinity, those which were idealised and exalted. They include competitiveness, being rough, tough, and uncaring, proposing love to females, and subordinating males who are regarded as weak (Swain, 2006; Morojele, 2009). In contrast, femininities are associated with values such as politeness, being tidy, being pro-school, respecting males and adults, and heterosexual attraction towards boys who display hegemonic masculinities (Anderson, 2005). The study shows how teachers' affirmation of these dominant constructions of gender was limiting to girls and boys, and how they reinforced unequal gender relations.

Debates on free primary education and gender equality in schooling contexts

The question of Free Primary Education and Education for All has sparked considerable debate among some researchers. For instance, Ocheng (1999) identified a tendency for governments to place a higher priority on ensuring that boys and girls enrol in the primary schools over ensuring that, after enrolment, boys and girls receive quality education throughout, and that they complete a primary schooling of high quality. This tendency has been partly due to the confusion in how people conceptualise Free Primary Education and Education for All. Researchers like Buchert (2002) argue that Free Primary Education is not the same thing as Education for All:

> Ensuring that all children have access to a primary education cycle of a specified number of years (like providing Free Primary Education), is not the same as ensuring that all children have learning outcomes which permit them to participate fully in development – which is the expanded concept of Education for All launched in Jomtein in 1990. In Dakar, the goal of primary education for all by 2015 … has been set in context of provision of quality education throughout the education system … [and] makes specific reference to education, learning and life-skills, … (with) Education for All understood as a lifelong learning process for which basic education (supported by Free Primary Education) is the foundation (Buchert, 2002:7-8).

Ahmed & Chowdhury (2005) claim that both the Dakar Goals and the MDGs related to gender identified the removal of disparities in primary education as a target to be achieved by 2005. In addition, the Education for All goals include aspects of quality education and learning outcomes. These authors contend that "the parity target does not require that all children have access to education, but only that girls have access in the proportion as boys". In this sense, parity could "presumably be achieved even if the majority of the girls in a country did not participate in education" (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2005:3).

These debates point to the need for implementers of Free Primary Education to look beyond the numbers and concentrate on the quality of the educational experience and learning outcomes for girls and boys. This was also noted in the World Conference on Education for All, which concluded that, as a result of focusing on numbers rather

than the quality of education children receive once they enrol in schools, performance in the primary schools fell below desired levels in countries where Free Primary Education was implemented (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2001). In addition, Bruns et al. (2003) note that focusing on numbers rather than quality of education and schooling experiences that boys and girls receive is one major deficit in many countries which have implemented Free Primary Education, particularly in Africa. Indeed, there is a need to pay more attention to the inequitable cultural dynamics in localised contexts that might continue to affect the quality of schooling experiences and learning outcomes for boys and girls.

For example, recent studies have identified primary schooling as an arena for construction of gender meanings and positioning (Bhana, 2008,2009; Anderson, 2008). The ways in which teachers and children construct and position themselves in relation to gender have effects on gender in/equality in the schools. For instance, in South Africa, Gultig and Hart (1990) and Unterhalter (2000) have demonstrated that schools both reproduce the inequitable social order and generate change. In this regard, Bhana (2003:41-42) has found teachers' discourses such as "children are children: gender doesn't matter", which imply that primary schooling is viewed a gender-free zone. Asserting the centrality of primary schooling in shaping gender relations, Morojele (2010) has argued that teachers' conception of primary schooling as a gender-free zone is a means to normalise the status quo of gender inequalities, in ways that underplay teachers' role in reinforcing unequal gender relations.

As indicated, in Lesotho the broader obstacles of poverty, HIV and AIDS and livelihood constraints continue to keep girls and boys in varied labour environments in order to help their families to subsist (Mphale, Rwambali & Makoae, 2002). Young and Ansell (2003) and Morojele (2009) found that young boys in Lesotho drop out of school to go and work in the mines or to tend family cattle. Kimane (2005) found that in Lesotho most girls get involved in household fragmentation (having to leave their families and labour for subsistence) because of their role as care-givers, or to make a living as a result of the sickness or death of parents, owing to HIV/AIDS.

This paper illustrates how Sesotho language and its discourse play a vital role in instituting and maintaining inequitable gender relations through the exaltation of hegemonic masculinities over femininities and over other types of masculinities. It adds to these debates by capturing a glimpse of the socio-cultural dynamics within Basotho communities, and the effects of these on gender equality in the schools.

Research methodology

The article draws on a qualitative study (part of a doctoral dissertation) of teachers' constructions of gender in three rural primary schools in the context of Free Primary Education in Lesotho. The purpose of the study was to investigate these stakeholders' constructions and experiences of gender and the implications of these on gender in/equality in the schools. The study employed qualitative methodologies (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) to provide data on the gender-based challenges facing Free Primary

Education in three co-educational schools in Lesotho. It applied the concept of purposive sampling (Gorard, 2003) in the processes of selecting the schools. The researcher targeted three schools under the proprietorship of the three main religious denominations in Lesotho, namely, the Lesotho Evangelical Church, Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican Church of Lesotho, with the intention of exploring if and how religious denominations have a bearing on gender-based challenges facing Free Primary Education. Twelve teachers, four from each schooling site (female = 11, male = 1) participated in the study. There was only one male teacher across the three schools, and thus only one man participated in the study. The study was conducted over a period of nine months (three months on each schooling site).

This paper draws from the data that were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. The interviews took the form of individual informal conversations with teachers after the sessions, during the break, lunch, and leisure time. They were designed to prompt teachers to discuss aspects of Free Primary Education (whether at school or at home) related to gender, and the related matters of femininities and masculinities. Informed consent was obtained from the Department of Education, the school management and the participants in the study. The participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical clearance was obtained to conduct this study through the University Research Office, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used to represent both the schools and teachers involved throughout this paper. This paper was conceptualised with the sole purpose of deepening insight into gender-based challenges facing Free Primary Education and the strategies that could be employed to address these challenges in specific school locales; not with the purpose of generalising (Blignaut, 2007).

Data analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Firstly, the data were analysed through an inductive process whereby research findings were allowed to emerge from frequent, dominant, and significant events in the raw data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Thereafter analysis involved identifying broad categories of constructs across the data related to gender-based challenges facing Free Primary Education, and this necessitated a line by line reading of the different data sets. The second phase of data analysis involved identifying theoretically and conceptually informed themes across these categories (Creswell, 2009). This allowed for explicit themes to emerge. These include the centrality of Basotho culture as an intricate hindrance to gender equality, superstitious symbolism, and family dynamics. The discussion focuses on the effects of these on gender relations in the schools.

Findings and discussion

Basotho culture: a complex impediment to gender equality

The tendency to view femininity and masculinity as unitary and static gender qualities

which are predetermined by children's genitalia (Gibson & Hardon, 2005), was a major challenge facing Free Primary Education and its objective to improve gender equality in the schools. This relegated girls and boys to different yet inequitable gender roles, expectations and responsibilities, with very little opportunities afforded to cross the (constraining) gender boundaries. The pressure on boys and girls to conform to mainly polarised gender roles was practised at home and reinforced in schools. Certain cultural beliefs and practices were used to uphold a hierarchical gender order. Basotho cultural values and knowledge systems were held in high esteem in these rural communities, and this provided limited opportunities for the construction of alternative versions of gender.

When asked what the issues were that they thought would affect the objectives of Free Primary Education to address gender inequalities in their schools, teachers gave the following responses:

> Mrs Mapula (Tsuoe-Tsuoe Primary School): Here, according to our culture a number of customs and practice give men more decision-making powers and the position of the heads of households, so girls grow up observing this issue, (when at school, and) in class they are afraid of boys, they think boys should dominate them like they have seen fathers dominate mothers at home. Boys get a lot of (positive) attention from teachers but girls are neglected or only get (negative) attention when they have done wrong things.
>
> Mrs Mathabo (Molalana Primary School): Yeah, you see the way the kids are treated at their respective homes is common in these places. You see families force their daughters to look up to their brothers for protection against all sorts of harm, and they are taught to look forward to getting married when they get older, so girls think boys are all very important and must be respected…and this makes boys to believe that they have the right to rebuke even their older sisters, and think down about girls, so they will always not treat them well, with little reprimand, as they say, 'oh, boys are always like that' and girls even accept it, you see, that is the problem. I think this is (inherited) from forefathers so the boys treat girls with the sense that they have to boss them, and show that they are men (and physically stronger).

The above excerpts show how Basotho culture, which is infused with dominant discourses of what it means to be a girl or a boy, tends to devalue girls and femininities in ways that reinforce gender inequalities. The founding belief here is that dominant values of femininities and masculinities are constructed as innately tied to being a girl and boy (respectively), and thus boys and girls are socialised and sometimes coerced to perform gender in ways that conform and affirm dominant values. As such, these cultural discourses give ascendancy to hegemonic masculinities over femininities. Connell (1995) refers to dominant forms of masculinities as being 'hegemonic' – that which is 'culturally exalted' or 'idealised'. The exaltation of forms of masculinities above femininities is a cultural foundation that is inculcated in children's minds to shape and reinforce inequitable gender relations.

The data also point to a critical school/home interface, in which the schools became an arena where family (husband and wife) relationships at home are performed and reflected in boys' and girls' relationships. This shows that attention to gender relations at home (both in terms of husband and wife relationships and what boys and girls are socialised to perform, for instance, family chores, expectations and responsibilities) needs to be drawn on in formulating strategies aimed at improving gender equality in schools.

These accounts are particularly relevant within the context where gender is understood as a process of social construction, which involves the learning of values and systems of relationships that work to reinforce the cycle of gender inequalities. It is clear that the dynamics within Basotho communities, which include the encouragement for girls to look up to their male brothers for protection, give ascendency to masculinities over femininities in ways that relegate girls' lives to the mercy of males (boys) willing to protect or to marry them later in life. This is a bleak cultural practice which directly links to some popular Basotho proverbs such as *Tsoho la Monna ke mokolla* (Sekese, 2002:65) (a man's hand is the marrow), which means that, without a man's assistance, women (girls) and society would be completely helpless. As the teachers claimed, the disrespect of boys for even their older sisters is a direct consequence of these discourses that inculcate and reinforce male superiority while denigrating females.

The data below further illustrate the dynamics of Basotho culture in the form of rituals in promoting gender inequalities:

> Mrs Makou (Molalana Primary School): For me, I think that some rituals like during the funerals make girls and women to feel inferior. You see, in our communities it is accepted that a Mosotho man (man of Lesotho) is the head of the family, whether (he is) capable or not; customs and norms of our nation affirm men (and boys as future men) as superior. For example, men and boys are the ones who, *ba tšela mobu pele mabitleng, ba kuta pele* (pour the soil first in the grave and cut their hair before women and girls during funeral rituals). You see this separation coming to the school, and it becomes difficult for both sexes to understand that they must do things together. Boys do not like to sit together with girls i.e. they dislike sharing desks with girls…you see what our culture does to make a barrier because there are norms and values, which raise expectations on what boys and girls cannot or can do.
>
> Miss Mpho (Maloaleng Primary School): Though it is out of point to talk about wearing of mourning cloth, I will give it as an example because it is still practised in most families here. You see usually, men wear a mourning cloth for one month since the death of their wives, while women have to wear it for six months. Remember when you are wearing the mourning cloth you cannot sleep away from home, and the sun must not set before you arrive home. So, us as female teachers we cannot participate in sport trips and (Free Primary Education) workshops which require us to sleep over or come home after sun set.

The above data illustrate the critical role that Sesotho customs and traditions, for example, funeral rituals, play in reinforcing male superiority, by ensuring that males (also in order of birth seniority – not necessarily based on age) are the first ones to pour the soil, and by requiring an inequitably extended period for widowed women to wear a mourning cloth. Seniority within Basotho families is also regulated by the standing of each extended family unit in the entire clan. This is normally determined by the order of birth of the great grandfathers who originated the clan, and by whether a person was born as a first, second, etc, child, and from which wife (in the case of polygamous marriages), with the boys born from the first wife given the most seniority in the clan. The solemnity and high respect accorded to the burial proceedings in Basotho culture guaranteed the likelihood of absolute conformity to such male superiority affirming rituals at the expense of gender equality.

Superstitious symbolism and family dynamics

Superstitious symbolism was also used in these communities to regulate gender relations and to exhort conformity to (constraining) dominant discourses of gender. Superstition is an ancient cultural Basotho practice, which generally attempts to induce children's behaviour, in particular, using fear instead of understanding. For example, in traditional Basotho villages it is commonly said that 'a child who sits facing away from the fire, would turn into a monkey' or 'girls who enter inside a cattle kraal or walk in the middle of a herd of cattle would not get married' and so forth. It could be argued that the superstitious symbolism related to sitting facing away from the fire, was meant to encourage young children to sit facing the fire to avoid the danger of getting burnt. Yet in other instances, gender inequalities are implicated in superstitious symbolism which induces fear by creating causality between idealised variables that are not easy to corroborate.

In part, this denotes the reluctance of the adult parents to engage in reasoned deliberations and relationships with children because of children's presumed immaturity or incapacity to engage meaningfully with issues that affect their lives (Skelton, 2007; Arnott, 2008). Such is the manner in which the adult world normally regulates and reinforces inequitable relations between adults and children. As illustrated below, superstition was also used to reinforce inequitable gender relations between girls and boys.

> Miss Lebuso (Tsuoe-Tsuoe Primary School): Some clans especially the Ndebele groups think it's bad luck for boys to sweep or get closer to chores that are for females, so you cannot tell them to accept doing these chores as they fear bad luck would strike their lives or families, you can see how this brings a challenge when you have to convince children to behave differently (in a way that is gender equality friendly).
>
> Mrs Mathibe (Molalana Primary School): Boys are taught to despise many things that relate to girls' chores. Like a girl cannot pass with a bucket of water behind the boy, as there is a belief that this makes the boy to be watery (womanish), so

> you see the boys running away and not associating with girls or even calling them (girls) names when they try to get closer to boys, especially when doing stuff like cooking and washing dishes. The girls are also cautioned to avoid this, lest they risk not getting married when they grow up (culturally it is shameful for women (or girls) to remain unmarried, and this is thought to be caused by bad luck – locally referred to as *senyama*).

Some research conducted in these contexts has found another gender-based superstition of a traditional Basotho muti called *Phehla* – which is believed to make men (boys) calm, soft and understanding (Morojele, 2011b). In traditional Basotho villages, the wives of men who were cooperative and loving, and who spent time with their families, were ridiculed and alleged to be wicked witches who had given their husbands *phehla-mok'hobolo*, food thought to subdue men. Therefore for men, being cruel, not cooperating, and sometimes abusing (in particular not walking side-by-side with) their wives was seen as proof that they (men) had not eaten *phehla*.

> Mrs Malerato (Maloaleng Primary School): You will find that in many families the fathers have no (loving or caring) relationships with their wives, and children, especially the boys like to imitate that at school, by being rough and uncaring to girls, or by having no (or limited) friendships with girls…with boys mostly bossing and bullying girls. They (boys) see most mothers and fathers not walking together (side-by-side), with mothers usually left behind and this make children think that, indeed, females are weak, they cannot be leaders which is untrue according to gender equality.

Similar dynamics have been identified in Zulu traditional religion, where women were seen as potentially dangerous because of their link to the underworld (Ngubane, 1977). For instance, women's ability to give birth, and the nurturing and giving abilities of their bodies, in many African cultures is regarded as a celestial miracle that denotes women's special connection to nature and creation. In Zimbabwe, Goebel (2002) has identified an analogous form of husband-taming herb among the Shona women. Such superstitious symbolism denotes the role of African women's metaphysical powers, whose fear is implicated in the way androcentric dominant discourses in these communities depict women (and femininities) in negative and denigrating terms. The pervasive nature of these discourses and symbolism increases the potential to induce conformity to gender performances that uphold male supremacy at the expense of females.

Consequently, teachers also socialised boys and girls into separate and rigid categories, in which boys' attributes were cast in antithesis to girls' abilities – but in ways that afforded ascendancy and power to boys. Thus the dominant gender socialisation within these schools fails to uphold the gender equality agenda enshrined in the Free Primary Education policy. This was exacerbated by domestic violence and the disintegration of the marriage system in Basotho communities, which has seen the proliferation of single parents (mostly single mothers, not fathers). Single parenthood has

resulted largely from unwanted or unplanned pregnancies, and linked with gender inequality of these communities has placed the burden primarily on girls and women.

> Mrs Mathuto (Molalana Primary School): The issue of single parents contribute to gender inequality (in the school) because in families where children are raised by one parent those children have negative attitude towards a certain parent, (especially the one) who is not available at their home. Or when both parents stay together, you find that they spend most of their time fighting each other and therefore this make the children raised in that family to hate and have hostility towards the opposite sex as they see this happens in their presence, and think it is normal to be hostile to people of different gender.
>
> Mrs Mapalesa (Maloaleng Primary School): I also think that fighting within families sometimes because of heavy drinking of parents affect gender equality in the school, as the boys fight the girls as if they are bosses. Boys insult girls with their private parts (the most derogatory form of insult in Basotho communities) as they hear from their fathers.
>
> Miss Mateboho (Tsuoe-Tsuoe Primary School): … we as teachers also call children names, if ever they show unexpected behaviour such as 'you are always with girls or boys, why?' If boys cry when they are beaten, .we say 'hey you, you are crying like ladies, what's wrong with you'. We use expressions such as *monna ke nku ha a lle* (a man is a sheep and doesn't cry), to encourage boys to be strong and different from girls.

The symbolism (a man is a sheep and doesn't cry) comes from the observations made when a sheep or a goat is being slaughtered in Basotho communities. Normally when a goat is slaughtered it cries loudly and then the boys and men laugh at this and say, 'you see the goat is crying like women (or girls) do', and the fact of crying is ridiculed as fearful, weak and feminine. Yet a sheep does not cry even when the knife cuts its throat, and in traditional Basotho villages, boys are called to observe when the sheep is praised for its bravery to face death without crying. This symbolism is used to provide a practical example of the difference between femininities and masculinities, and to encourage boys to be strong and face adversity without fear. Legendary Basotho proverbs, such as *Monna ke tšepe e ntšo* (Machobane, 1996:35), which literally means that 'a man is a black iron', physically strong, and able to endure suffering without breaking or complaining, are also used to reinforce the polarity between masculinities and femininities. The power of these cultural symbolisms is indicated in that, while it appears like female teachers' comments are often critical about the nature of gender inequality, female teachers' own responses often are generally consistent with that inequality.

Conclusion

By and large, the findings point to a pervasive tendency instituted through a myriad of systems within the communities around the schools, which included Basotho cul-

ture, funeral rituals, superstitious symbolism and family dynamics. These factors appeared to conjoin in complex and intricate ways to compromise gender equality within the schools. A common denominator that these dynamics pivoted on was the tendency to polarise masculinities and femininities and to give ascendancy to masculinities over femininities, with the presumption that dominant gender values are inherently tied to boys and girls (Morrell, 2001). Such a construction is antithetical to critical men's studies (Kimmel, 2006), which support notions of masculinities and femininities as socially constructed and thus plural and fluid human qualities. Understanding gender in this way could provide an opportunity to encourage and affirm divergent performances of gender (Butler, 2000). Many scholars (Bhana, 2009; McNay, 2000) believe that encouraging alternative and divergent forms of gender performances could serve as a springboard for challenging gender inequalities in schools.

The challenge for Free Primary Education is how to draw on the local cultural architecture of gender formation (which is supported by institutions of family, funeral rituals, and superstitious symbolism) without reproducing it. There is a need to develop and diffuse counter-hegemonic discourses of gender, which regard gender as multiple and fluid human qualities that are not inherently tied to girls' and boys' genitalia (Gibson & Hardon, 2005). This would help establish primary schooling in Lesotho under Free Primary Education as a vehicle for the promotion of equitable gender relations – by affirming and supporting girls and boys to develop to their best human potential, beyond preconceived (and constraining) gender roles, attributes and expectations.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (United Kingdom), National Manpower Development Secretariat (Lesotho), and the Spencer Fellowship Grant (University of KwaZulu-Natal) for financially supporting the PhD study on which this article is based.

References

African Union, African Development Bank & Economic Commission for Africa 2008. *Achieving Gender equality and women's empowerment in Africa*. The Sixth African Development Forum (ADF-VI), 19-21 November. Addis Ababa: United Nations Conference Centre. Available at: http://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/3667/bib.%2029080_I.pdf?sequence=1. Accessed 4 June 2013.

Ahmed M & Chowdhury R 2005. *Beyond Access: Partnership for Quality with Equity*. London: Oxfam.

Anderson E 2005. Orthodox and inclusive masculinity: Competing masculinities among heterosexual men in a feminized terrain. *Sociological Perspectives*, 48:337-355.

Anderson E 2008. Inclusive masculinity in a fraternal setting. *Men and Masculinities*, 10:604-620. doi: 10.1177/1097184X06291907

Arnott MA 2008. Public Policy, Governance and Participation in the UK: A Space for Children? *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 16:355-367.

Bhana D 2003. Children are children: Gender doesn't matter. *Agenda*, 56:37-45.
Bhana D 2008. "Six packs and big muscles, and stuff like that." Primary-aged South African boys, black and white, on Sport. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29:3-15.
Bhana D 2009. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
Blignaut S 2007. The policy-practice dichotomy: Can we straddle the divide? *Perspectives in Education*, 25(4):49-61. Available at http://reference.sabinet.co.za/webx/access/electronic_journals/persed/persed_v25_n4_a5.pdf. Accessed 17 May 2013.
Bourdieu P 2001. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Bourdieu P & Wacquant LJD 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Bruns B, Mingat A & Rakotomalala R 2003. *Achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015: A Chance for Every Child*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1089739404514/achieving_efa_full.pdf. Accessed 17 May 2013.
Buchert L 2002. Education For All: An Attainable Dream? *Prospects*, XXXII(1):5-17.
Available at http://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1023%2FA%3A1019788224527.pdf. Accessed 12 February 2010.
Burr V 1995. *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.
Butler J 2000. Critically Queer. In A Tripp (ed). *Gender*. New York: Palgrave.
Cohen L, Manion L & Morrison K 2007. *Research Methods in Education* (6th ed). London: Routledge.
Cole M 1996. *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Connell RW 1995. *Masculinities*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
Creswell JW 2009. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
Epprecht M 2000. *This matter of women is getting very bad: gender, development and politics in colonial Lesotho, 1870-1965*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
Field S 2001. Disappointed Men: Masculine Myths and Hybrid Identities in Windermere. In R Morrell (ed). *Changing Men in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
Gergen KJ 2001. *Social Construction in Context*. London: Sage.
Gergen KJ 2009. *An Invitation to Social Constructionism* (2nd ed). London: Sage
Gibson D & Hardon A 2005. *Rethinking masculinities, violence and AIDS*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
Goebel A 2002. Men these days, they are a problem: husband-taming herbs and gender wars in rural Zimbabwe. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 36:460-489. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/4107333.pdf?acceptTC=true. Accessed 20 May 2013.
Gorard S 2003. Quanitative Methods in Social Science. London: Continuum.
Gultig J & Hart M 1990. The World is Full of Blood: Youth, Schooling and Conflict in Pietermaritzburg, 1987-1989. *Perspectives in Education*, 11(2):1-9
Index Mundi 2010. *Lesotho demographics profile 2010*. Available at http://www.indexmundi.com/lesotho/demographics_profile.html. Accessed 10 June 2010.

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) n.d. *Rural poverty in Lesotho*. Available at http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guest/country/home/tags/lesotho. Accessed 10 November 2010.

Kimane I 2005. *Protecting orphaned children through legislation: The case of Lesotho*. Paper presented at the 4th World Congress on Family Law and Children's Rights 20–23 March, Cape Town.

Kimmel MS 2006. *The history of men: Essays on the history of American and British masculinities*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lindegger G & Maxwell J 2007. Teenage masculinity: the double bind of conformity to hegemonic standards. In T Shefer, K Ratele, A Strebel, N Shabalala & R Buikema (eds). *From boys to men: Social constructions of masculinity in contemporary society*. Cape Town: UCT Press.

Machobane MM 1996. Gender Stereotypes in Sesotho Proverbs. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 7:34-41.

Marcus GF 2001. *The algebraic mind: Integrating connectionism and cognitive science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McNay L 2000. *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ministry of Education and Training, Lesotho 2001. *Free Primary Education Programme*. Pretoria: Watermark.

Ministry of Education and Training, Lesotho 2005. *Education Sector Strategic Plan 2005-2015*. Maseru: Bee Gee Printers.

Molapo ELM 2005. Women and Patriarchy in Lesotho: A Deconstructive Study. PhD thesis. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

Moore HL 1994. *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Morojele P 2009. Gender violence: Narratives and experiences of girls in three rural primary schools in Lesotho. *Agenda*, 23:80-87. doi: 10.1080/10130950.2009.9676243

Morojele P 2010. Feminism matters in the primary school: A case from Lesotho. *Agenda*, 24:82-87. doi: 10.1080/10130950.2010.9676294

Morojele P 2011a. What does it mean to be a boy? Implications for boys' and girls' schooling experiences in Lesotho rural school. *Gender and Education*, 23:677-693.

Morojele P 2011b. What does it mean to be a girl? Implications of girls' and boys' experiences of gender roles in rural Lesotho primary schools. *Education as Change*, 15:133-147. doi: 10.1080/16823206.2011.565286

Morojele P 2012. Childhood Memories that Matter: A reflexive analysis of a gender study in Lesotho. *Journal of Education*, 55:37-53.

Morrell R (ed.) 2001. *Changing men in Southern Africa*. New York: Zed Books.

Mphale MM, Rwambali EG & Makoae MG 2002. HIV/AIDS and Its Impacts on Land Tenure and Livelihood in Lesotho. Unpublished report prepared for the Southern African Regional Office of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations. Maseru: National University of Lesotho.

Mundy K 2006. Education for All and the New Development Compact. *Review of Education*, 52:23-48. doi: 10.1007/s11159-005-5610-6

Ngubane H 1977. *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine: An Ethnography of Health and Disease in Nyuswa-Zulu Thought and Practice*. London: Academic Press.

Nieuwenhuis J 2007. Qualitative research designs and data gathering techniques. In K Maree (ed). *First Steps in research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Ocheng M 1999. *Meeting International Development Targets in Uganda: Follow-up Study on Trends towards Achievement of Universal Primary Education and Efforts towards Attainment of Gender Balance*. Kampala: MFPED.

Quayson A 1999. *Postcolonialism: theory, practice and process?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Schwan A & Shapiro S 2011. *Foucault's Discipline and Punish*. London: Pluto Press.

Sekese A 2002. *Mekhoa le Maele a Basotho*. Morija: Sesotho Book Depot.

Skelton C 2007. Gender, Policy and Initial Teacher Education. *Gender and Education*, 19:677-690. doi: 10.1080/09540250701650599

Strauss A & Corbin J 1996. *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed). London: Sage Publications.

Swain J 2006. Reflections on patterns of masculinity in school settings. *Men and Masculinities*, 8:331-349. doi: 10.1177/1097184X05282203

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2001. *Monitoring Report on Education for All*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at http://www.unesco. org/education/efa/monitoring/pdf/monitoring_report_en.pdf. Accessed 4 June 2013.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) n.d. *Primary School Participation*. Available at http://www.childinfo.org/education_primary.php. Accessed 7 November 2009.

Unterhalter E 2000. The work of the nation: Heroic masculinity in South African autobiographical writing of the anti?apartheid struggle. *European Journal of Development Research*, 12:157-178. doi: 10.1080/09578810008426770

Vithal R & Jansen J 2004. *Designing your first research proposal: a manual for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Lansdowne: Juta.

World Bank 2008. *Lesotho: Country brief*. Available at http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lesotho. Accessed 5 June 2013.

Young L & Ansell N 2003. *Fluid Households, Complex Families: The Impacts of Children's Migration as a Response to HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa*. Uxbridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing.