

BOOK REVIEW

Towards gender equality: South African schools during the HIV and AIDS epidemic

R MORRELL, D EPSTEIN, E UNTERHALTER, D BHANA AND R MOLETSANE

REVIEWED BY PROF VENITHA PILLAY

I have rarely been bombarded almost simultaneously by so many emotions as I was in reading this book. As a gender activist I felt deeply sad to once again face the realisation that violence against girls and women in South Africa remains a daily experience for far too many. I felt my heart torn out as I read the story of the little girl who was raped in grade one and I was filled with frustration towards the her mother who was angry with her for becoming sexually active at so early an age. I could explain the mother's feelings but as a mother myself I could find no fit in such explanation. I wished I could hold this little angel tightly in my arms and love her profusely and take away her hurt. But I could not and I felt helpless. The boys who conflate rape and the sexual act with the emotion of loving, young men who thought it was their right to appropriate sex angered me. I was heartened to hear the stories of some boys who showed respect for the girls in their school. I admired those teachers who worked against all odds to offer care and guidance to their learners. I was happy to know that there were teachers who put their hearts on the line, despite those who sought refuge in distancing. Most of all I felt helpless and heartbroken that so many beautiful young women and men live in daily fear of being raped and violently assaulted by people they know and sometimes love. As the authors themselves suggest the book is about both "hope and despair" (p 168).

That an academic book could evoke so much emotion bears testimony to its value. The book begins with a preamble that sets a poignant picture of the place, the people and the pandemic that the team of researchers was engaged with. As the authors claim, the story they present here gives a sense of the "drama, the pain and the difficulties" of the research project (p 3). The camaraderie of the six authors is evident at the outset. Given the academic parameters of the research project it was a challenge to keep such camaraderie alive throughout the writing. But this was achieved through the obvious eloquence of each of the writers and the commitment of each, through their respective areas of expertise, to the project as a whole.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of writing as a team is the development of a conceptual framework that is carried through the writings of all the authors. The authors are clear that the notion of gender equality is addressed here in the context of education. Using Amartya Sen's (1979 and 1992) work they show that equality cannot be simply a matter of measuring outcomes given that an entire gamut of events, contexts and personalities underpin outcomes. In other words measuring outcomes obscures what has gone on 'behind the scenes'. Instead they use Sen's notion that "gender equality is ... an aspect of building the equality of capabilities" (p 12). In other words evaluations of equality are underpinned by the freedoms and opportunities individuals have to achieve meaningful objectives and the ways in which policy makes it possible for the achievement of such values. Unterhalter's development of the concept of gender equality in the context of social justice adds another valuable dimension to understandings of gender equality in education. Here understandings of the term gender are thoroughly interrogated and the authors offer a plurality of meanings linked to and not exclusive of each other. These include gender as a noun where gender can be numerically measured, gender as a social construct shaped by social, political and economic relations of power and disempowerment, gender as an adverb where gender is exemplified in the ways in which things are done. In bringing together these conceptualisations of gender and Sen's explication of equality, the authors develop a comprehensive and plausible way in which to read the stories of the people in the schools they researched. They suggest that gender equality is "plural, but entails the establishment

of the conditions of justice in which constraints on capabilities can be removed and valued actions can be realised” (p 15). I really liked this as a way forward in thinking about gender equality in education. Most importantly, the chapters integrated this comprehensive conceptual framework into the stories they told. For example, in Chapter 6, ‘Struggling with gender and sexuality in primary schools’, the author shows that despite a context that offers strongly essentialised understandings of gender identities, Mr Xaba sought other identities for himself and his pupils even though he avoided the intimacy of gender relations, sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Put another way in developing different gender identities, Mr Xaba and his pupils were working towards “creating an equality of capabilities”. No doubt they still had a long and painful road to traverse.

The methodology used in this project is inspiring. The actual research covered a period of approximately six years. All the authors spent time at the four research sites where most of the data was collected. In addition two postgraduate research students spent time as ethnographers in the two secondary schools involved in the study. The methodological shape of the project grew as the needs of the project grew. The challenges of developing and sustaining such a large project are included in the writing. What was impressive is the way in which the experience allowed both seasoned researchers and novices to grow along with the project. While the methodology is carefully detailed, not as chronological plan, but as a mosaic of thoughts, events and designs and decisions, I would have liked to have seen further detail on the DramAide project that was used as an HIV/AIDS intervention project in one of the schools. While there was discussion on the positive though limited effects of the project there was little detail about the project itself.

Given that the book assumes some level of a South African cultural and political capital evidenced in the references to historical places and events like for example, Cato Manor, I was left wondering what the purpose was of the details with respect to gender and apartheid education offered in Chapter 3. But perhaps this was meant for international readers, especially our neighbours, who will no doubt find value in this research. That it tells the stories of South African teachers, learners and communities is only a fraction of its value. That it echoes the stories of teachers, learners and communities all over Africa and possibly in many developing nations, makes it an invaluable read.

Everard Weber