
DISCOURSE AS SOCIAL COMMUNICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses the battle for sustainable gender equitable learning environments on discourse as social communication. Based on a critical review of feminist research and critical men's studies, the article foregrounds the centrality of discourse in gendered social relations, and what this implies for sustainable gender equitable learning environments. A sociological theory of social constructionism is used to highlight the role of discourse in communicating and shaping gender values and meanings. The gender-discourse nexus is discussed to illuminate insights into the intimate fellowship between these variables. The article points to complex relationships between gender, discourse and hegemony, and how these function in tandem to perpetuate the status quo of gender inequalities. Power is found to induce submission, which enables the scheme of gender inequalities to operate below the radar (or otherwise appear normal or trivial) and thus unworthy to protest against them. Strategies offered include deconstructing power relations between various gender discourses, and between learning institutions and those whom they serve. This would entail curricula revision in order to walk-the-talk of affirming and supporting girls and boys to have not only the equal rights of liberalism but also an equal right to flourish as human beings, as a principle for sustainable gender equitable learning environments.

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INTRODUCTION

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, sparked a new impetus towards basic education, particularly with its so-called vision and renewed commitment. The Amman Mid-Decade Review of Education for All in 1996 reaffirmed the commitment to the Jomtien resolutions. The year 2000 saw the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals, which, among others, were targeted to enhance access to formal education (UNESCO 2005). The Millennium Development Goals set targets to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, would be able to complete a full course of primary schooling (UNESCO 2000). In particular, Millennium Development Goal number three specifically refers to the empowerment and promotion of equality between males and females (UNESCO 2003), and advocates the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Mahlomaholo (2011: 312) has noted that the third Millennium Development Goal is inextricably interwoven with the other seven Millennium Development Goals which also attempt to address the plight of women. Mahlomaholo (*ibid.*) has linked the goal to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and the critical roles that women play in society as the majority and the primary life and health givers, to the need to empower women and girls through education. As such, the achievement of universal primary education (Millennium Development Goal number two), firmly places women and girls at the centre of any effort towards growth, improvement and development. The emphasis on education as a means to (women) empowerment and development places learning environments as critical arenas for enactment of the Millennium Development Goals.

In South Africa, the Millennium Development Goals “find particular resonance in almost all legislative and policy imperatives starting with the Constitution and education policies, which all place emphasis on equity, social justice, freedom, peace and hope” (Mahlomaholo 2011: 313). However, research in sub-Saharan Africa has found that despite governments' policies to improve gender equality, boys and girls in learning environments continue to be socialised into gender roles and values which reinforce gender inequality (Bhana 2009; Mahlomaholo 2010; Morojele 2010). The dominant discourses of gender continue to give ascendancy to types of masculinities and femininities in ways that uphold inequitable gender relations. The stigma attached to the inability to perform dominant forms of femininities and masculinities has far-reaching adverse consequences for girls and boys in schools, not to mention the concomitant social ills such as rape, HIV/Aids, sexual harassment, etc. bolstered by inequitable gender relations. In many cases, girls and women bear the brunt of these dynamics as they are positioned in the lower tier of the power hierarchy continuum of the gender inequalities scheme. This reality stands at odds not only with the Millennium

Development Goals and most education policies in sub-Saharan Africa, but also with the economic pressures imposed by capitalism in the context of poverty, HIV and Aids, which require girls and women to take more assertive roles in society than ever before. The expectation is now equally on girls as on boys that they provide financial support to families not just in the future, but also in the present in instances where their parents have died due to HIV and Aids (Morojele 2011a).

The realities of the post-colonial world require a paradigm shift in how we construct (make meaning of) gender in order to promote sustainable gender equitable learning environments. Informed by the aspirations of the third Millennium Development Goal, which advocates the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment through education as a critical basis for human development, this article attempts to provide insights into how we could promote gender equality in learning environments. Learning environments have been found to play a vital role in reinforcing (but they are also seen as productive grounds for challenging) gender inequalities (Bhana 2002; Henderson 1999; Unterhalter 2000). It foregrounds the centrality of discourse as social communication in constituting and shaping gendered power hierarchies in social relations.

The following questions inform the premise of this article: In what ways does discourse as social communication function in gendered social relationships? How does this constitute and shape gender meanings and performances? What are the implications of this on gender equality? What lessons can be learnt from these in order to promote sustainable gender equitable learning environments? In an attempt to address these questions, discussions focus on social constructionism as a useful paradigmatic disposition for understanding gender in learning environments, the gender-discourse nexus, hegemony and discourse in gendered social relations as well as possibilities for sustainable gender equitable learning environments.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND GENDER IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

One inevitable question that must be answered is: what is it about social constructionism that makes it appropriate as an intellectual basis for the study of gender in learning environments? This section attempts to address this question. At the core of social constructionism is the view that our ways of seeing the world are generated by relations rather than by external realities (Gergen 1999). This does not mean that there are no external realities, but that what is important in the study of humans is how we perceive and make sense of the world around

us, and that it is our socially and historically constituted relations that determine this. Gergen (2009) notes that social constructionists are not in the business of dismissing reality (or the existence of objects, people, nature), but they do question the objective existence of meaningful reality.

Social constructionism doesn't try to rule on what is or is not fundamentally real. Whatever is, simply is. However, the moment we begin to articulate what there is – what is truly or objectively the case – we enter a world of discourse – and thus a tradition, a way of life and a set of value preferences (Gergen 2009: 161).

Rather than seeking facts and truths, social constructionism is interested in discourse, or those historically constituted repertoires, systems of social relationships, beliefs or “knowledges” which we normally take for granted as if they were fact (Gergen 2001). This means that our ways of seeing, constructing (and making meaning of) gender are generated by culturally and historically constituted relations in any given context rather than by external realities which have no regard to context. In order to understand how gender operates in learning environments, for instance in schools, we need to examine ways in which stakeholders (e.g. teachers, girls and boys) construct or make meaning/sense of the world around them in relation to gender issues.

According to this paradigm, gender relations in learning environments could be understood through analysis of the social relations and values that teachers, parents and children ascribe to gender (being male or female). A social constructionist theorist Vivien Burr illustrates:

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. Understanding the cultural artefacts of gender 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 learning environments. The taken-for-grantedness of discourses that promote inequitable gendered learning environments is, in part, a culmination of what Foucault refers to as seductive operations of power, which attempt to efface its presence under the pretext of normalcy, thus positing to be trivial and not worth protesting (Schwan & Shapiro 2011). On the other hand, Field (2001: 224) reflected on the power of the androcentric discourses within learning environments, and the unattainability

of gender values, and concluded that all gendered social identities are no more than “masculine myths”. This means that gendered social identities are simply a culmination of masculine desires and fantasies of a supposedly stable human identity. The fallacy of a stable human identity is contrived by collapsing and polarising human qualities of masculinities and femininities, and then ascribing them to male and female subjects respectively. 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.

Social constructionism views discourse as a vehicle through which inequitable gender relations are infused, and also recognises its normalising effect, which makes inequitable gender relations appear as if they are a normal part of life, just like water is to fish. The fish-in-water metaphor has also been used by a French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2001) in explaining how the concept of “habitus” operates in social (gendered) relations. Bourdieu introduces the notion of “ontological complicity” in an attempt to undermine the dualistic thinking (the field as an “external object” acting upon “the subject”) by suggesting instead a process akin to insinuation – less a cause-effect relation, and more an imbrication of one in the other (McLeod 2005a). Ontological complicity moves the concept of gender beyond mere discourse, and brings into play the significance of embodiment.

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).

Habitus is not simply a mental schema, meaning that gender is also a way of bodily being in the world whose experience goes beyond discursive constructions of gender in a context. It involves how, for instance, boys and girls occupy and move in space and time, and across as well as within fields (McLeod 2005b; Dunlop & Fabian 2007). Our gendered habitus is thus produced through the embodied accretion and effects of gendered dispositions. A gendered habitus is expressed through durable ways “of being, doing (performing gender, Butler 2005), standing, speaking, walking, clothing; stylisation of the body, and in so doing of feeling and thinking” (Reay 1995).

The fish-in-water metaphor reflects the embeddedness of humans in their social world. With discourse being the primary means by which we construct the historically constituted gendered social relations, the likelihood is that our critical awareness of gender inequalities becomes diminished or at least compromised. This overlaps with Foucault's notion of "docile body" which depicts the social regimes that make human bodies submissive and controllable (docility), and how this is contrived to affect the prospects of gender usefulness or efficiency (utility) which in turn results in gender (discipline) (Schwan & Shapiro 2011). Gender discipline here refers to unquestioning conformity to dominant discourses of gender that reinforce gender inequalities. These notions reflect how people are intricately entangled in the gender discourses and practices within learning environments to a point where they become uncritical of the prevalent inequitable gender relations. So our understanding of gender becomes dependent upon the available repertoire of gender values and discourses in our 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).

Nonetheless, social constructionism also presents a more generative conceptualisation, particularly of children in learning environments as active, creative beings who "do" construct their ways of engaging with the world through social relationships. This conceptualisation draws on the ideas of developmental psychology, which, influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, has shifted in recent years from a view of the child as an active, but isolated agent to an emphasis on the child as an active social being, accepting that "making sense [of gender meanings] is a social process; it is an activity situated within [a] cultural and historical context" (Bruner & Weinreich-Haste 1987: 1).

Bourdieu's ideas and their feminist interpretations, for instance, by Lois McNay (2000) also facilitate an understanding of how gendered social relations can become incorporated within children's beliefs and practices; or habitus. This evokes conceptualisation of gender identities as multiple and fluid; "a lived set of embodied potentialities" (McNay 2000: 25), and this fluidity can be the source of agency with the potential to enhance equitable gender relations in learning environments. There are multiple ways of "doing" womanhood and manhood or girlhood and boyhood, diverse masculinities and femininities; "inflecting or inflected by all the other dimensions of someone's social identity – their age, ethnicity, class, occupation and so forth" (Cameron 2004: 3). Therefore, gender identities are constructed not only in contrast to the opposite gender, but also by contrast with other versions of the same gender (Wilkinson 2004).

The contradictory gender discourses, and the inevitability of being unable to attain some of these mythical subject positions bring about much disappointment

and frustration for both men and women, and girls and boys within learning environments. On the one hand, girls (and women) endure a compromised quality of life, limited opportunities and they are constantly relegated to subservience through forms of gender-based violence, such as sexual assault, sexual harassment and so forth. On the other hand, the cost of unresolved feelings (of the shame associated with their inability to uphold hegemonic values of masculinities), and unacknowledged needs (for instance, to cry and be who they really also are – feminine, as this is antithetical to the dominant values of masculinities) means that for all the success of their social lives, boys (and) men remain disappointed (Field 2001) and dehumanised.

The physical and emotional cost incurred by all (males and females) as a result of the self-sustaining gender discourses may lead to a state of dissonance, which may culminate in resistance and contestation of dominant gender discourses (and practices). For instance, girls and boys may creatively invent new alternative or counter-hegemonic gender discourses (which challenge the existing gender inequalities) and thus affirm equitable gender relations. Counter-hegemonic refers to attempts to critique or dismantle hegemonic power of dominant gender discourses, and may culminate in confrontation and/or opposition to the existing status quo of gender inequality and its legitimacy. In contemporary societies, there is a proliferation of social fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999), partly due to the rapid access to information and increased human mobility due to capitalist demands. The potential for conflict and dissonance in the habitus as a result may also increase potential for change. For instance, based on their rapid access to alternative information, boys and girls “may construct (gender) in unanticipated, (subversive) and innovative ways which may catalyse social change” (McNay 2000: 5) for sustainable gender equitable learning environments.

INTIMATE BEDFELLOWS: THE GENDER-DISDISCOURSE NEXUS

The relationships between gender and discourse, and the implications thereof for gender inequality in learning environments are often neglected, especially in the rural contexts. For instance, in Lesotho, a context mainly characterised by massive unemployment and rural poverty, the daily focus tends to be primarily on the hardships of creating viable livelihood strategies (Molapo 2005). People living in these communities are resigned to an awareness of gender inequalities and gendered power-related conflicts that ensue as a result of dominant gender discourses. Foucault (1986) describes discourse as anything that carries meaning – language, images, stories, cultural products and so forth. Customs and social practices, such as giving away the bride in marriage, as is the case within most African communities, or segregating work according to gender, all carry meaning and thus such practices are discourse. A discourse is not a language or a text, but

a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs (McCann & Kim 2003: 379).

Gee (1990; 2011) sees discourse as a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network or to signal a socially meaningful role. Foucault suggests that elaboration of gender meanings involve conflicts and power, and that these meanings are locally constructed and contested within discursive fields of force. Gendered discursive fields influence and compete with one another, and the dominant (commonly accepted) discourses of gender tend to pose as objective truths in order to gain authority and legitimation (McCann & Kim 2003). Since they are accorded a status of objective knowledge, dominant discourses of gender seem to be beyond dispute, and this serves an authoritative legitimation purpose. This highlights the need to focus on discourse as a critical variable in the processes of social identity formation, including the gendering processes (Burr 2000; Weedon 1999). Because discourse is a means by which we organise our ways of behaving, interacting, valuing and thinking (Bharuthram 2006), interrogating its operations in the processes of gendering is crucial. The critical role of discourse in creating gender meanings, values and performances places discourse squarely in the centre of approaches aimed at promoting equitable gender relations. Feminist research and critical men's studies have indicated that most current dominant gender discourses are hegemonic (Connell 2000) and premised on unjust and inequitable gender relations (Harro 2000). These studies bring in the concept of hegemony as a significant feature in how discourse operates in engineering and contriving gendered social relations. The concept of hegemony is discussed in more detail below.

The work of Michel Foucault (1986) on the relationship between knowledge and power shows how power is exercised through common knowledge and discourses, which function in a disciplinary (constraining) way to produce "docile bodies". Foucault argues that the discovery of the body as an object that can be manipulated and trained works through two registers: the "anatomico-metaphysical, which seeks to detail the body's function", and the "technico-political, which uses calculations and quantifications to make bodies submissive and controllable" (Schwan & Shapiro 2011: 98). These ideas have a particular relevance to gender. First, girls' and boys' bodies must be made submissive and docile before they are subjected, transformed and used in conformity to hegemonic discourses and requirements of gender. For Foucault the notion of gender discipline would involve the process of inducing docility (which includes submissiveness) and utility (Schwan & Shapiro 2011). Within gendered social relations, this takes the form of affirmative and power affording discourses that

give ascendancy to men (boys) or dominant masculinities, for instance; these are maintained through exclusionary and denigrating discourses that relegate women (and girls) or femininities to subservience.

However, critical sociologists (Renold 2005; Mohanty 1992; Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000; McNay 2000) dispute the taken-for-granted forms of power inequalities propagated by dominant discourses of gender, which tend to cast men and women, boys and girls as victims of the structural aspects of gender identity formations. These theorists uphold the notion that gender values are re/produced by social relations, which constrain, but do not fix, individual action and identity. It is important to note that although gender identities are not fixed, this does not mean to say they have been arbitrarily contrived (Burr 1995). The idea of experience as having both “discursive” and “embodied” aspects (McNay 2000:25) evokes the significance of embodiment which means that gender is also a way of bodily being in the world (McLeod 2005b). Individuals have the ability to interpret (and are affected by) experience in fluid and diverse ways. This fluidity might allow for the countering of dominant gender discourses or bodily ways of performing gender, with the potential to challenge inequitable gender relations in learning environments.

Foucault also construed disciplinary power as a network of relations that move from top to bottom but also from bottom to top and laterally (Schwan & Shapiro 2011). Foucault did not articulate this as a possibility for agency to change social inequalities, instead, he used this to explain how, for instance, women (and girls) whose overall power may be limited in gendered relations can simultaneously be complicit in their own subjugation and that of other women (and girls) – evoking what Harro (2000) refers to as horizontal oppression.

It is important to note that critical sociologists do not dispute the centrality of discourse in gender relations, instead they criticise the notions that human beings are helpless victims of gender discourses in their contexts. So even though people are not fixed by gender discourses, gender discourses become a basis for gender interpretations, positioning and performances, and a means by which gender constructions and enactments are created, even if these are subversive or divergent to dominant gender discourses. Indeed, the notion of individual agency in the face of marginalisation cannot be discounted.

THE POWER BEHIND: HEGEMONY AND DISCOURSE IN GENDERED RELATIONS

If those in charge of our society — [patriarchs, male chauvinists, sexists, androcentricists] politicians, corporate executives, and owners of press and television — can dominate our ideas they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves (Zinn 1991: 15).

These words by famous American historian Howard Zinn (1991) serve as an illustration of how hegemony functions in social relations. The term “hegemony” refers to dominance by apparent consent rather than force (Drake & Owen 1998: 17). With regards to gender, this is normally due to a successful diffusion of ideas, values and social rules about what it means to be a girl (woman) or a boy (man), as prescribed by the dominant values of masculinities and femininities in a given context (Swain 2006). Connell (1995) refers to dominant values of gender as being “hegemonic”: that which is “culturally exalted” or “idealised”. Hegemonic discourses of gender are made through opposition (for instance, the word “man” and the meaning behind it make sense because it is assumed to be not “woman” or other ways of being man, like gay, lesbian, etc.), and these discourses of gender tend to construct masculinity as one element of a binary opposition with femininity (Reeser 2010). Connell (1995) also reminds us that hegemony is a question of relations of cultural domination, not numerical domination.

For instance, dominant discourses of masculinities, which are typically sharply in contrast to femininities, include competitiveness, being rough, tough and uncaring, proposing love to girls and subordinating boys who are regarded as weak (Anderson 2005). On the other hand, dominant discourses of femininities include politeness, being tidy, being pro-school, respecting males and adults, and expressions of heterosexual incline towards boys who display hegemonic masculinities (Morojele 2011a). The exaltation of hegemonic gender values is maintained by rendering them normal (and invisible) and by stigmatising alternative and counter-hegemonic constructions and performances (Butler 2000) of gender. Reeser (2010) argues that if hegemonic masculinity is unmarked because it is taken as the norm and not thought about unless in opposition to something else, femininities, alternative and counter-hegemonic masculinities are the marked categories as people tend to think about them more often as either subservient, stigmatised or deviant ways of being. The most intractable social problems in our society today, like the scourge of HIV and Aids, are stigmatised and attributed to as a consequence of perverted acts of homosexuality, for example. Very little cultural stigma is attached to the double effects of promiscuous heterosexual men (and boys) who infect young girls (and women)

with HIV and Aids, and leave them fatherless children – precisely because of the silencing effects of hegemonic masculinities.

Foucault has also revealed hegemonic knowledge, power and subjectivity as a scheme that operates below the radar, since its procedures usually seem normal (thus trivial) and not worth protesting (Schwan & Shapiro 2011). For instance, Bhana (2003: 41-42) refers to teachers' discourses such as "children are children: gender doesn't matter", implying that primary schooling is viewed a gender-free zone. Asserting the centrality of primary schooling in shaping gender relations, Morojele (2010) argued that teachers' conception of primary schooling as a gender-free zone is a ploy to normalise the status quo of gender inequalities in ways that underplay teachers' role in reinforcing unequal gender relations. This only ensures that the scheme of gender inequalities operates below the radar in order to minimise possible protestation against it. Hegemonic discourses of gender obscure our critical consciousness and thus we take for granted in our daily lives many social injustices arising from the oppressive nature of hegemonic forms of gender. It may be only when something goes wrong or when masculinities go into excessive overdrive that we really notice (Robinson 2000). For example, a crying man might seem like an oddity; we cannot help but think about his masculinity (or lack thereof). We all know certain men whom we would not label as "masculine" or whom we might call "effeminate" or something else denoting an absence of masculinity (Reeser 2010: 2).

In contemporary society gender is normally regarded as women studies – something to do with women, females or femininities, while men are considered to be genderless (or at least as having little to do with gender issues/studies). It is precisely this tendency to disassociate men from issues of gender that render masculinities "unmarked", thereby limiting societal consciousness regarding the centrality of hegemonic masculinities in the current inequitable gender order so that the status quo can remain unchanged. Reeser (2010) contends that the unmarked (invisible) gender is a culmination of the normalising consequence of hegemony. It is not simply and purely the absence of meaning, but it is what renowned French theorist Roland Barthes (1967: 77) called "a significant absence"; an absence that has a profound impact as it affects in a negative manner everyday classroom and playground interactions amongst and between boys and girls. The majority of boys render invisible hegemonic masculinities by constructions of misogynistic objectifications of girls and women, homophobic/anti-gay performances towards boys, and sexualised forms of harassment towards girls (Renold 2003; Morojele 2009).

Even though hegemonic discourses of gender could be seen as limiting for women and girls, Morojele (2011b) has argued that men (boys) too are compromised by trying to attain idealised (and often impossible) hegemonic

discourses of masculinities. Bourdieu (2001: 69) talked about how men (and boys) are “dominated by their domination” to denote how hegemonic discourses of masculinities also cause physical and psychological harm to men (and boys). The double effects of gender inequalities on both the oppressors and the oppressed (Field 2001) make alleviating gender inequalities in learning environments a moral issue which the attainment thereof serves the best interests of all humanity.

POSSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE GENDER EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The imperative for learning environments is to create conducive climates that equitably support and affirm girls and boys to develop to their full human potential. Research (Bhana 2002; Morojele 2010; 2011a; Renold 2003; Skelton 2001) draws attention to the powerful role that can be played by learning environments in counteracting the scourge of gender inequalities. Yet in the preceding sections, this article has shown how learning environments can equally reinforce and perpetuate inequitable gender relations. The possibilities for sustainable gender equitable learning environments lie in our critical realisation and appreciation of the ambiguities and baselessness of hegemonic discourses of gender, and how this have been found to not serve any human and social wellness, since they are only self-sustaining (Field 2001). We need to appreciate the diversity and ambiguities in how children actively construct gender. This would entail recognition of a wide range of discourses and performances, through which boys and girls define, negotiate and essentially construct their gendered selves (Renold 2003). The first point of departure would be to consign to history hegemonic discourses, which construct young children to be sexually innocent or incompetent (immature) social beings. We should overcome the fear that contemporary children “grow up too soon” or are “not yet ready”, for instance, for sexual knowledge (Epstein, O’Flynn & Telford 2003).

The creative ways in which girls and boys in learning environments actively engage with issues of gender have been found to dispute conventional understandings that tend to construct children in deficit terms (Renold 2005). Bhana (2002) introduced the notion of “momentary discourses”, what Gee (2011) otherwise refers to as “borderland discourse”, to account for the fleeting moments of power through which girls and boys actively construct identities and position themselves in ways that challenge hegemonic discourses of gender. Morojele (2011b) has noted how girls’ readiness to challenge hegemonic gender discourses generates optimism that, for interventions aimed at addressing gender inequalities in the schools to be effective, they must respect childhood and children’s experiences and build on the existing ways in which children

actively perceive and engage with the world. Yet he has observed the lack of coordinated strategies and structures within learning environments to affirm and support children's inventive constructions and subversive gender performances which attempt to generate change in gender relations. Initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable gender equitable learning environments should take into consideration the centrality of children's roles. Mahlomaholo, Francis and Nkoane (2010: 281) have highlighted the need to "deconstruct the ivory tower power notion[s]" between learning institutions and those whom they serve in tandem with Foucault's notion of power as a network of relations that move also from bottom to top, and laterally (Schwan & Shapiro 2011).

Another important issue is that attempts to understand gender in learning environments should try to strike a balance between varieties of paradigmatic dispositions. We need to avoid paradigmatic idolatry when dealing with gender issues. Gender is such a sensitive issue and so central to human existence that, for example, the current gender inequalities lead to devastating human conditions such as the increase in sexual violence, rape, HIV and Aids, and school drop-outs in Southern Africa (Morojele 2009; Mahlomaholo 2011). The role of an intellectual project should be to embrace a multiplicity of paradigmatic dispositions and to blend them in creative ways that serve nothing but the best interest of supporting gender equitable learning environments, and counteracting the negative social ills women and men, girls and boys face as a result of prevailing gender inequalities. For instance, one of the common critiques of discursive approaches to the study of gender is that they have a tendency to ignore what some consider real (or ontological) aspects of gender, and that gender cannot be reduced to simple games of discourse.

The unfortunate practices of gender inequalities cannot be wiped away by the wave of a "representational or discursive magic wand" (Reeser 2010: 49-50). Instead of constructing gender as a purely discursive or embodied construct, it could be considered as an in-between phenomenon. The key question would be not so much whether gender is discursive or embodied, but what the actual processes of the construction of gender are. How do discourses of femininities and masculinities get built up over time? What are the techniques by which they are constructed? By privileging the gendering processes and how hegemonic versions of gender are made to appear normal (Butler 2004), we can begin to understand how these processes can be interrupted; or, as Harro (2000) has posited, how we can break the cycle of gendering processes that reinforce gender inequalities. Raising critical consciousness (Francis & Le Roux 2011) to all stakeholders (parents, teachers, policy makers, etc.) by means of educative programmes in how gender inequalities are reinforced at various levels (e.g. home, school, church, and broader society) is equally important.

Sustainable gender equitable learning environments require educational programmes that are engineered to enable the stakeholders to walk-the-talk of explicitly affirming all forms of human diversity. Gender inequalities are but a microcosm of broader issues of human diversity intolerance such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and so forth. So the strategy should be to challenge all forms of the “othering” of any social (and individual) diversity in learning environments, and to build what Young (2011: x) calls a “community of communities” in which human beings can equitably enjoy social differentiation without the need for violence, marginalisation and exclusion. Girls and boys should be supported to have not only the equal right of liberalism but also an equal right to flourish as human beings. The urgent need is to revise curricula and pedagogical approaches to allow access to genuine epistemology – one in which girls and boys have access to powerful knowledge as opposed to knowledge of the powerful. Powerful knowledge is one which truly supports and empowers girls and boys to overcome the constraining (and dehumanising) prescriptions of hegemonic discourses of gender in order to attain skills and values that enable them to realise their full human potential.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Discourse as social communication provides useful insights in how gender meanings are constituted in historical and cultural contexts. This means that gender cannot be understood outside the context in which it is constructed and performed. The discursive meanings attached to language and signs have been found to have communicative influence on gender values and expectations in ways that explicate complex and intricate relationships between human existence (consciousness) and discourse. With such power, discourse as social communication is central in strategies for sustainable gender equitable learning environments. The article has highlighted a tendency for society to accord power to certain attributes of gender, for instance, the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinities above femininities and other forms of masculinities. To counteract this, we need to encourage alternative and counter-hegemonic gender discourses and performances with the intention to create a culture of mutual tolerance of human diversity, social justice and gender equality. This would entail turning learning environments into safe spaces in which constructions and performances of alternative femininities and masculinities could be freely acted upon without fear of prejudice. Respecting the creative ways in which people in localised contexts (especially children) engage with issues of gender is pivotal for sustainable gender equitable learning environments. Gender equality initiatives should build on this in ways that affirm human agency and possibilities for everyone to develop to their full human potential.

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