

Title: Working towards gender parity in education in developing countries : issues and challenges

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Abstract:

This study was based on the present writer's perception that inequality in education is a result of people's negative traditional cultural attitudes to girls and women and that, to provide equal opportunities for both girls and boys, there is a need for changes in the primary and secondary school curricula that will alter peoples' attitudes. The thesis of this dissertation is that equal opportunities policies are often based on developed countries' models, recommended for implementation in developing countries' education systems by funding and research bodies. These policies do not take into account the perceptions of the key players in the implementation process and how their perceptions might influence the success or failure of intended measures to provide equal opportunities in education for boys and girls. It is hypothesised that in Uganda, the government has chosen affirmative action policies to reduce gender inequality in education but, from the perceptions of the key players, they have had unexpected consequences which reinforce past patterns of advantage and disadvantage for the targeted group. The advantages and disadvantages are grounded in the contradictory and paradoxical outcomes of internationally and nationally recommended educational policies. This is because policies deal with only one aspect of educational inequality, which is perceived in terms of girls' non-participation in education (access, enrolment and retention). They ignore the attitudinal problem, which is an outcome of the socio-economic, socio-cultural, and school related factors which not only further disadvantage girls but boys as well, thus creating more inequalities. The study focuses upon a cross-section of those who inform and implement policies in the Ministry of Education, those who implement policies at the district and school level and those whom policies target in the classroom. The data, which is selectively quoted in the study, was derived from standardised open-ended elite and group interviews. Key players' perceptions, which impact on the provision of equal opportunities in education, are discussed in relation to international and national policies in education. Particular attention is paid in the study to understanding key players' perceptions of the meaning of equal opportunities in education. This was considered as central to the successful implementation of equal opportunities measures in a way that will not disadvantage any group. It soon became clear from the perceptions on equal opportunities held by key policy makers and implementers in the Ministry of Education and at the district levels, that the problem was not changing attitudes, but increasing access, enrolment and retention for girls within the system of education. At the school level, the problem involved increasing: enrolment; retention; academic competition between boys and girls; participation of girls in school leadership; interaction; and strategies to reduce discrimination practices between boys and girls by their teachers. These perceptions were reflected in individual schools. Implications for theory and practice of equal opportunities in education are drawn from findings from the study.