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Impact of gender stereotyping on performance in English at Anderson School

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School context

I am privileged to be a teacher at **Anderson Adventist High School**, which is a co-educational boarding school in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The institution has an enrolment of 370, of which 20 are day scholars. The school is home to 180 boys and 190 girls. The school is a mission centre run by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and is one of the top schools in the country, where it is ranked in the top ten in terms of academics. The school was established in 1950 along the Harare road before it was moved to its current location in 1952. Anderson Adventist High School is an international school enrolling learners across the African continent, mainly the southern part, making it a melting pot of diverse cultures. We have had a few students from Europe and North America who have helped to shape the rich cultural heritage of the learning institution.

About the author



I am a Teacher and my subjects are English and Literature in English. I am a holder of the following qualifications: a Diploma in Education (English), a Bachelor's Degree in Education (English), a Master of Education (English) and a Diploma in Marketing Management. I have a passion for research and enjoy working with young people. I do motivational talks and training of prefects for local schools, and it brings me in touch with the realities of our education system. I have been teaching as a qualified teacher since 1997 and am sure that has given me a wealth of experience in education. My role as a boys' dean has given me the opportunity to understand the psyche of young people, particularly the male child, as I seek to help them navigate the rigours of adolescence. I am also a trained Shona (local language) teacher, though not teaching the subject. I also coach tennis, soccer, volleyball and table tennis, bringing me further contact with students outside the four walls of the class. I also supervise charity clubs like LEO and Toastmasters, which are community driven as they reach out to the needy around our school.

Key findings

- Teachers make covert and overt statements that gender English, and students are affected by statements that teachers and their peers make. Additionally, some classroom material helps to instil gender-stereotyping of English.
- Training helped teachers to be aware of gender-stereotyping actions and remarks; hence there were fewer reports of such incidence from students.
- Teachers began to use more inclusive methods of teaching, hence reducing the reported incidences of gender stereotyping by about 50 per cent.

Research questions

1. What is the teachers' understanding of gender stereotyping and its impact on learners' performance in English?
2. How do learners perceive gender stereotyping in the context of performance in English?
3. What behaviours do teachers exhibit which contribute to or mitigate against gender stereotyping in the teaching and learning scenario?

Action Research rationale

The main reason for the research is to establish if gender stereotyping is the cause behind girls outperforming boys in Anderson Adventist High School and, if so, to seek mitigating measures to stem the anomaly. The research will also seek to expose gender-stereotyping behaviour among staff and learners that may cause differences in performance along gender lines and proffer solutions towards gender balance in the school. It is the researcher's intent to identify training gaps for teachers so as to design in-service training that stems the tide of gender stereotyping of particular learning areas. The research came about after observation over a period of over 20 years that girls always outperform boys in English.

Data collection tools

Methodology

The researcher has been given permission to carry out the research and collect data from participants who have assented.

The following tools will be used:

1. examinations and tests to gauge performance
2. questionnaires
3. interviews
4. surveys.

Data analysis for the exploration stage

Key findings from exploration

- Generally, girls are outperforming boys in English.
- Three out of three teachers in the department have observed a trend where girls outperform boys in the past five years.
- School culture promotes gendering of English.
- 90 per cent of the students believe gender has a telling effect on performance.
- 95 per cent of the students believe English is a girls' domain.
- 70 per cent of the students confirmed that teachers gender stereotype English.
- 80 per cent of the students believe peer pressure reinforces stereotypes.
- One teacher in the department is a countering stereotypical model.
- Stereotype threat reversal with 15 per cent of the boys outperforming girls.
- Three out of three teachers confirm that some activities in the class vary with gender. Boys outperform girls in science-related topics, while girls outdo the boys in Creative Writing.
- There is a bias in teacher expectation whereby teachers unconsciously expect girls to outperform boys, affecting their grading of performance of the two genders.
- Self-fulfilment prophecy occurs, where gender stereotypes are internalised and reinforced.



Action Research

Action plan

Goal: To elicit, address and minimise bias premised on gender in the teaching of English by promoting an inclusive teaching–learning scenario.

- **January 25–31:** Conduct an audit on gender bias at Anderson Adventist High School through anonymous surveys for teachers and students in English lessons.
- Observe classroom goings-on and materials used vis-à-vis gender stereotypes.
- **February 18:** Teacher awareness session on gender stereotyping in the teaching of English with the help of an expert on gender.
- **February 20:** Review materials used in teaching English with gender balance in mind.
- Identify and replace gender-biased sources of teaching and learning material.
- **February 2025:** Implementation and training by conducting training on equitable and inclusive lesson delivery.
- Student engagement activities on gender bias in texts used in the English classroom – debates and discussions.
- Modify teaching to ensure gender inclusivity by encouraging use of gender-neutral language and gender-mixed groups.
- **March 2025:** Evaluation and sustainability – gather qualitative feedback from focus groups and interviews.
- Put in place a reporting structure for students to complain about gender bias.

Expected outcomes

1. Improved teacher awareness on gendering of English.
2. More balanced and gender-neutral teaching.
3. An inclusive English atmosphere.

Action plan evaluation tools

How will you evaluate the impact of your action plan? What tools are you planning to use to evaluate this impact?

- Surveys and questionnaires
- Interviews and focus groups
- Case studies

Data analysis and conclusions

Action plan implementation

The implementation of the action plan was not without its challenges that had to be overcome.

- The timelines of activities had to be married to the school calendar and timetable, which kept changing due to unforeseeable occurrences. Thus the research had to make adjustments and concessions.
- Some colleagues were not as co-operative as the researcher would have liked, so the researcher had to constantly follow up on and persuade workmates who were not keen on being part of the research.
- The weight of responsibilities at the school meant that the researcher had little time on his hands. The researcher has a full teaching load; he is also the dean for boys and the soccer and tennis coach.
- Getting parents to sign consent forms had its challenges too, as the school is a boarding school. Hence, online platforms had to be used. Most parents have less time for social media, hence delays in signing consent forms.
- The worst challenge was the burglary that saw the researcher lose his laptop. This was quite a huge setback, as the researcher was left struggling to cope with the demands of the research.
- The internet services were poor at times and the service providers blamed the inconsistent power situation in the country.
- The research could have stalled had it not been for the kind support from school administration and supervisors.

Key findings

- Teachers make covert and overt statements that gender English.
- Students are affected by statements that teachers and their peers make.
- Some classroom material helps to instil gender stereotyping of English, for example comprehension passages that depict women or men playing traditionally appointed roles, or passages drawn from novels that depict the colonial and the pre-colonial period of Africa.
- Before the implementation of the action plan, teachers made a lot of gender-stereotyping remarks, like 'You boys, why are you being outdone by girls at Maths?' These statements were considered normal and harmless and a way of motivating boys to work harder in subjects like Maths. However, this discouraged girls in the particular subject teachers felt that boys should dominate. Thus, the gender stereotyping of subjects got entrenched.
- Training helped teachers to be aware of gender-stereotyping actions and remarks; hence there were fewer reports of such incidence from students.
- Teachers began to use more inclusive methods of teaching, hence reducing the reported incidences of gender stereotyping by about 50 per cent.

'Most of our teachers express surprise when a girl does better than boys in Maths. It then sinks into our heads that Maths is not our area as girls. Hence we get discouraged and focus on languages – English mainly.'



Conclusions

- Gender stereotyping does affect students' performance along gender lines. Hence there is a need to retrain teachers on the use of gender-neutral language and use of varied methods that ensure an inclusive learning atmosphere.
- Most incidents of gender stereotyping of English happen while the teacher is unaware. Hence there should be a deliberate plan to ensure that teachers are constantly alert to the effect of their language and actions that may harm students by creating gender circles around particular subjects. This can be achieved through a clear gender policy in the school.
- It affects learners' and teachers' perceptions. Thus, the teaching and learning scenario can be badly skewed towards a particular gender. The way students engage with language can affect their level of confidence and academic prowess. Gender stereotyping may see boys inclining towards subjects like Maths and Science, while girls have a propensity towards languages, leading to a performance gap in English along gender lines. Thus, areas of specialisation and, eventually, career choices, at the local level, are shaped by gender stereotyping.
- At the macro level, gender stereotyping perpetuates patriarchal societies where opportunities are dependent on one's gender. While the world is moving towards bridging the gender divide, gender stereotyping of English may help widen the gap between the two genders. Thus, it is imperative for educational institutions to retrain teachers and reconsider their curriculum to ensure that the cycle of gendering subjects is not perpetuated.
- If agenda 2030, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 5, is to be realised, the implementers (teachers) should be deliberately in-serviced on gender issues to bring about inclusive experiences for all learners despite their gender.

Future actions

There is a need to broaden the research from the local school level to the district or provincial or national level so that findings can benefit other schools and influence key decisions at the highest level in the education department. With Agenda 2030 in mind, the research can be used to gauge how far the nation has gone in eradicating gender disparity towards inclusive education as stipulated by Sustainable Development Goal 5.



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