

In Their Own Voices: Youth Talk about Their Experiences with the Garden Open Community School in Zambia

There is perhaps no better “expert” on educational experience than the individual boy or girl student who lives it. Given the opportunity, students will openly share knowledge and insights critical to planning and implementing an education project. Student-centered pedagogies, particularly those that are attuned to the different learning styles and preferences of boys and girls, offer more meaningful educational experiences (O’Gara and Kendall 1996) and are associated with improved learning outcomes (Layne et al. 2008). Yet, students’ perspectives are rarely used by schools, organizations, and national ministries to guide and improve schooling.

Results from an EQUATE* assessment in Zambia highlight the importance of interviewing boys and girls about their educational experiences. Specifically, responses from students at the Garden Open Community School yielded three important insights:

- Boys and girls appreciate their interactions with teachers and are attuned to teaching quality
- Girls are sensitive to the school environment
- Boys’ responses emphasize applying the knowledge they gain to their daily lives

This brief provides valuable insight into how gender considerations influence and shape the educational experiences of students. Conducted as part of an assessment for USAID/Zambia, this study involved thirteen girls and fourteen boys, most in their mid-teens, from a peri-urban area outside of Lusaka. Their responses reiterate how boys and girls notice and value educational quality differently. Moreover, they suggest areas that programmers and educators can improve upon by considering the perspectives and experiences of students.

Quality Teaching Matters for Both Girls and Boys

Overall, students expressed very positive impressions about their school and, in particular, their teachers. Boys and girls mentioned the quality of teaching as one of the primary differences between the Garden school and other schools. One 13-year-old girl observed that “[t]his school has better teaching staff than other schools,” while another observed that “[t]eachers here teach very well.” Another student commented “[w]hen I was at New Day School our teacher she was not teaching so well so my mother she just took me to this school because she knows that this school teaches.”

Besides teaching quality, male and female students talked about other factors that helped them to attend school. For example, boys and girls both cited the lack of school fees as one of the strengths of the Garden Open Community School. Girls, in particular, focused on the opportunity that the community school provided them, as many were unable to attend school previously.

* EQUATE is a task order awarded by the USAID Office of Women in Development to Management Systems International (MSI), Prime Contractor. EQUATE assists USAID staff and partners in strengthening their capacity to institute gender-equitable practices and policies in basic education activities. For more information about EQUATE, contact MSI at info@msi-inc.com or (202) 484-7170.

Another major advantage mentioned by both boys and girls was the school feeding program. One 12-year-old girl observed that “[m]any people like this school because if you are hungry when you are at school you find food that they cook.” Another aspect cited by boys and girls was being able to wear their own clothes. “At this school children put on their own clothes while other schools pupils put on uniforms,” observed one 16-year-old girl.

These shared observations indicate that the school environment is a critical element of students’ satisfaction with their education. While there were commonalities in the responses received from boys and girls, there were also differences in their responses that help illuminate varying areas of emphasis among boys and girls. Girls’ responses centered on aspects related to the school environment and their interactions within the school, while boys’ responses focused primarily on what school allowed them to accomplish, what they learned, and what they could do with their education.

Girls’ Perspectives

Research indicates that female students tend to be affected by education quality and teacher motivation more than their male counterparts (Kane 2004; Honigsfeld and Dunn 2003). Female students at the Garden school placed an emphasis on how their teachers treated them. “Teachers are very kind” observed an 8-year-old, while a 13-year-old noted that “[t]eachers are more respectful than other schools.” In addition to kindness and respect, safety was another primary concern for girls. One 12-year-old remarked “[o]ther schools beat very much,” with a 13-year-old adding “[h]ere they do not beat much.” Girls remarked that the community school provided a safer, more collaborative environment among students. “Children do not fight each other. Children do not insult each other.” “Child-to-child helping each other learn” and “[t]eaching each other as pupils” were differences girls observed between the Garden school and other schools. Collaborative and supportive environments such as these are shown to benefit students’ learning experiences and help them develop into active citizens in society (DeJaeghere 2004).

Extracurricular activities such as debates, games, and culture clubs also contribute to creating a positive educational environment for girls. Girls cited the opportunity to play games and sports and participate in school activities such as debates and anti-AIDS clubs as some of the ways their lives had changed as a result of attending the Garden school. These opportunities help students, especially girls, articulate their own ideas, develop life skills, contribute to positive identity building, and provide a forum to challenge existing social expectations and norms. Girls also commented that they liked the playground activities and physical education opportunities available to them at the Garden Open Community School. One 13-year-old remarked “[h]ere we have sports but other schools do not have sports.” While girls’ responses focused primarily on aspects of the school environment, a variety of other topics were addressed by the girls, including their future aspirations, their mothers’ happiness, and their new friends.

Boys’ Perspectives

Teaching and collaboration also were mentioned as strengths by boys, even though their responses focused less on the educational environment and more on what they learned in school and what they were able to do as a result. The ability to help others by being able to read and

write was the most frequent response provided by boys when asked how their lives had changed as a result of attending the Garden Open Community School. “I can help my parents and teach them how to write,” one boy commented. Another added “I can teach my younger brother and sister to read. When they bring forms, I sign for them. When they bring a letter from the village I read for them.” While the ability to assist their families was the most common response, one boy added “I can read newspapers to my friends who don’t know how to read.”

In addition to the ability to help others, boys also commented on specific things they can do as a result of attending schools. One boy commented “I know how to read signs. There are signs and I can read and follow the sign what it means.” Another added “I know how to read letters and how to write letters.” The boys’ responses highlight the value they placed on literacy, a critical learning outcome that contributes to future career opportunities. One of the differences boys noted between the Garden school and other schools was that the teachers “[t]each about good way[s] of living with others.” One boy listed this as one of the ways his life had changed as a result of attending the school. He stated “I know how to respect people...now. I don’t insult, steal, or fight.”

Implications for Quality Programming

In their own words, the Garden school students identified characteristics of a quality educational experience, including their thoughts on effective teaching and a safe learning environment. Despite this overall positive opinion about the school, male students also saw room for improvement. Boys’ critiques revolved around the conditions of the physical school environment, including facilities and materials. Specifically, boys critiqued the school’s physical conditions, noting the lack of books and sports facilities, inadequate water and sanitation facilities, a shortage of classrooms, and insufficient maintenance of desks and windowpanes. Girls in this study did not discuss the community school’s weaknesses, although this may be related to methodological factors. School officials can use critiques by students to help them make more informed, responsive decisions about school improvements. For example, the United Nations Children’s Fund found that using participatory, gender-sensitive strategies can help to create learning environments that benefit both girls and boys (DeJaeghere 2004).

While this brief indicates that there are similarities in how boys and girls view their education, and what they value in it, there are also differing areas of emphasis. Boys in this group emphasized what they learned and what they could do with their education, while the girls focused more on factors related to how they experienced their education. For education programmers, the results demonstrate the value of actively incorporating students’ perspectives when designing program interventions and monitoring strategies. Students are able to offer feedback that can be used to improve educational quality in a way that meets their needs and goals. For example, the girls’ reaction to athletic and extracurricular activities indicates their responsiveness to programs that extend beyond the traditional classroom. The value boys at the Garden school placed on literacy could help inform the curriculum and spark new ideas on educational relevance as it affects both girls and boys. Eliciting intermittent feedback from boys and girls throughout an education program or project is also useful in tracking progress towards improved access and quality.

Another reason for taking a student-centered and gender-equitable approach is that it helps schools identify underlying causes of students' ability—or inability—to learn. Many schools fail to meet the basic threshold by providing a safe and supportive learning environment. As schools address challenges stemming from HIV/AIDS, school violence, and conflict students should be consulted when assessing the relevance and effectiveness of educational interventions.

While not meant to generalize, this case study demonstrates how gender considerations inform student feedback. Boys' and girls' differing responses can serve as a powerful gauge for ensuring the academic experience is meaningful for all students. Incorporating student feedback into education planning yields an environment that is more conducive to learning and the attainment of knowledge. It also encourages attendance and retention while promoting motivation and achievement (Daniels and Perry 2003; Ma 2007). Listening to students' perspectives empowers them and has the potential to redefine the dynamics of education planning.

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