

'Of course we must be equal, but ...': imagining gendered futures in two rural southern African secondary schools

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Abstract

Based on focus group discussions held with students at rural secondary schools in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, this paper argues that secondary schools provide important spaces for the (re)construction of gendered identities among rural girls in southern Africa. Central to processes of identity formation in rural secondary schools are normative discourses centring on notions of 'culture' and 'equal rights'. These discourses are (re)produced in secondary schools and are appropriated by students in making sense of their lives. Both are ambiguously related to dominant gender ideologies and are mobilised by students in ways which do not simply conform to an accommodation/resistance dichotomy. Also highlighted is the complex articulation of identity production and materiality. Identities are constructed in the context of the school in relation to expected material performance in contexts removed in time and space. The 'culture' and 'equal rights' discourses are understood and negotiated in relation to expectations of future lives beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the school: lives imagined in relation to particular (generally urban) geographical contexts.

Keywords: School; Gender identities; Young people's geographies; Critical pedagogy; Focus groups; Southern Africa

1. Introduction

Matseliso¹ gets up at 5.30am every week day morning, and as the sun begins to rise at 6.30am, she begins her daily walk to school, arriving as assembly begins at 7.30am. Classes begin at 7.45am, and conclude at 3.00pm, followed by an hour-long study period. Matseliso then begins the long walk home. Apart from a variety of domestic duties, she usually has homework to attend to in the evening. In this way, although in some respects a place apart from the spaces of daily life for most rural southern Africans, schooling transgresses the geographical boundaries of the institution. If she completes the five-year course, Matseliso

¹ Pseudonyms are used for schools, places and individuals to preserve anonymity.



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will have spent at least 7,000 hours in secondary school. Educating her at the local secondary school costs her family US\$110 a year, a substantial sum in rural Lesotho, where average per capita GNP is only US\$670 nationally (World Bank 1999). Nonetheless, Matseliso is far from unique: as many as 50% of her contemporaries in Lesotho and 70% of those in Zimbabwe begin secondary education.

Given the amount of time, money and hope invested in secondary education in many southern African communities, it is perhaps surprising that the school has not attracted greater attention from geographers. The limited work by geographers relating to schools in Third World contexts has focused mainly on spatial patterns of provision (e.g. Gould 1993; Lemon 1995) and quantitative measures of output.² Outside geography, considerable attention has been given to issues of gender in relation to education in the Third World, but concern has been primarily with access, attendance and drop-out (e.g. Adams and Kruppenbach 1987; King and Hill 1993), particularly with regard to the instrumental value of education to 'development' (e.g. Browne and Barrett 1991), and to a lesser extent girls' achievement in school, relative to boys (e.g. Gordon 1995b).

Largely absent from these accounts are the students who construct their identities in part through attending school. The need to investigate young people's acquisition of 'culture' through institutions (including schools) has been noted by geographers of youth and childhood for some years (e.g. Aitken 1994). Recently several geographers have explored schools as sites where gendered identities are (re)produced. Nairn (1997), for instance, analyses the spatiality of student voice and silence in geography classrooms, Lee (1996) examines the gendered discourse of the Australian secondary geography curriculum, Holloway et al (2000) investigate the use of the internet in constructing gendered identities in British classrooms, Hyams (2000) explores gendered identity construction among Latina girls in Los Angeles. To date, however, this research has taken place exclusively in schools of the 'developed world'.

In common with such research in young people's geographies in the 'North', this paper investigates southern African schools as spaces distinct from, but embedded within the contexts of everyday life; as settings in which social relations of gender take on distinct forms, with recursive effects on gender relations beyond their

² An interesting exception is a monograph by Anders Narman (1995) which analyses Kenyan schooling from a variety of theoretical perspectives.



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spatio-temporal boundaries (see Hyams 2000). Case studies of secondary schools in Lesotho and Zimbabwe illuminate the interrelationships between the activity spaces of school and those of daily life in the formation of young people's understandings of themselves and their place in the world – understandings which impinge on ways young people relate to the material world, both in youth and in their future lives.

Like much research on young people's geographies, this paper draws upon theoretical work by feminist geographers. Feminist geography has examined the construction of identity through social processes (Bondi 1993), discourse (Rose 1993) and more specifically, women as agents in constructing their own identities (Radcliffe 1993). Although relatively neglected in the past, schools, like the workplace or political sphere, can be understood as '... spaces in which gender identities are negotiated, resisted and changed; where new and old, dominant and resistant, forms of femininity may be formed alongside one another' (WGSG 1997:126).

In examining processes of knowledge production and transfer in the classroom, it is useful also to refer to 'critical pedagogy', a body of theory based originally around the ideas of Paulo Freire (especially 1972), and subsequently developed by such scholars as Henry Giroux (1997; 1981; 1983) and Peter McLaren (1993; 1994; 1995).³ Feminist educationalists, notably Weiler (1988; 1991) and Fine (1992a) have elaborated a feminist critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy⁴ views education as a form of cultural politics, focusing in particular on the construction of student subjectivities (McLaren 1995).

The case studies presented below illuminate two areas of theoretical interest in relation to critical pedagogy and feminist geography. First, they highlight the complexity of the processing of knowledge and power in schools. A tendency for schooling to reinforce dominant ideologies through the reproduction of dominant forms of knowledge has long been noted (Apple 1982; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). In southern Africa, however, it is not always apparent what constitutes dominant knowledge, and what forms of knowledge might be considered oppositional. Nor do students always become what schools would have them become. Education in southern Africa frequently resembles the 'banking' conception of schooling, criticised by Freire

³ Within geography this area of scholarship has thus far been applied only in relation to university geography teaching (e.g. Cook 1998; McDowell 1994).

⁴ Neither 'critical pedagogy' nor 'feminist geography' are unified bodies of ideas, but are themselves contested and fractured.

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(1972), students being treated as empty receptacles for knowledge. Students, however, are never simply passive consumers of knowledge, but are actively involved in transforming knowledges (Mohanty 1997).

There is a 'need to take into account agency and the production of meaning on the part of girls and women in schools' (Weiler 1988:39). Furthermore, it is not simply through interaction with the curriculum, but through many other discursive and ritualised aspects of school life, that students' (gendered) identities are recursively shaped (McLaren 1993).

In attributing agency to students, critical pedagogy, like feminist geography (WGSG 1997), sees transformative potential in challenging the weaknesses and contradictions of dominant knowledge. There is potential for the creation of new identities/subjectivities in school, which challenge those supportive of dominant (masculinist) culture. There is, however, a tendency in the critical pedagogy literature to portray students as, either complicit in the reproduction of hegemonic power, or engaged in active resistance. McLaren (1995:47) writes, for example, 'Schools serve as sites for locating students in subject positions that do not contest the discursive assumptions, dispositions, and dimensions of the dominant culture. Yet the classroom can also become a site of resistance.'

The southern African case studies reveal the inadequacy of this reproduction/resistance dualism in describing the appropriation and transformation of knowledge by girls in school. The need for a more complex reading of processes of knowledge transformation is also evident in case studies from British schools. McRobbie (1978), describes how working class girls resist the norms of the school by emphasising their feminine sexuality, thereby embedding themselves deeper in relations of gender dominance. Conversely, Fuller (1983, cited in Weiler 1988) describes the resistance of black British girls who oppose their constructions through sexist and racist discourses by working to obtain academic qualifications: a conformity with social norms that might be read as accommodation. Accommodation and resistance are clearly not binary opposites: rather, the same discourses can be drawn upon by young people to construct themselves in ways that are both/either hegemonic and/or oppositional.

Mohanty's (1997:559) assertion that: 'Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces', while

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useful, requires qualification. Apart from debates surrounding the possibility of self-conscious engagement (see Nelson 1999; Rose 1997), 'dominant normative discourses' can conflict internally and with one another. Spaces that are oppositional at one level may support hegemonic power at another. Resistance stands not outside discourse, but in relation to discourse (Pile and Keith 1997), and students constructing oppositional identities do so by drawing on a range of discourses that are available in schools. Furthermore, while schools are doubtless sites where dominant discourses are resisted, as well as remade, 'it is important not merely to replace conceptualisations of women as victims with one of women as 'resisters'' (Laurie *et al* 1999).

The second theoretical issue addressed through the case studies is the complex relationship between identity construction and context: not simply the immediate educational setting, but contexts removed in time and space. Context is commonly considered fundamental to the construction of identity. Bondi (1993:96), for example, sees identity as necessarily located '... in the realm of context-dependent creativity'. Women reinscribe their identities differently in different arenas, as has been demonstrated in the cases of 19th century colonial women (Blunt 1994), young British Asians (Dwyer 1998) and Argentina's 'Madres' (Radcliffe 1993).

In view of the importance of context to identity, Bondi (1993:97) advises the adoption of a 'notion of identity as process, as performance, and as provisional'. However, the identities constructed by young people in school are (to be) performed, not only within the site of production, but in places and at times removed from the school itself. Identity is not only produced in a specific context (and thus fluidly related to changing context), but is also produced in relation to particular places, environments or landscapes (Rose 1993; WGSG 1997). These may be other than the place, environment or landscape of production. It is a characteristic of schools, perhaps more than other spaces in which knowledge is created, that that knowledge is produced in relation to places which exist only in the imagination at the time of inception. School may be the place of production, but discourses produced there relate to imagined future positionings in the home, office, field or factory.

The case studies point to the need to consider not only the relational production of identity but also its material embeddedness. The students identify themselves as actors in a material world. The space of material performance they identify is, however, spatially and temporally removed from the space of production. Many feminist geographers (e.g. Gibson-Graham 1994; Laurie *et al* 1999; Nast and Pile 1998) have expressed a

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concern to move beyond issues of textual analysis and representation to consider the material embeddedness of discourse, both in relation to its production and performance. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider, not only the contextual production of identity, but also the ways identity is constructed in relation to spaces of material performance.

Knowledge produced in school cannot be applied directly by young people to material contexts beyond the gates of the school: the articulation of discourse and performance is not straightforward. Discourse is both constitutive and prefiguring of identity. Thus, although students' imaginations might not find direct material expression in their future lives, expectations play an important role, limiting and shaping the ways young people act after leaving school, as well as how they come to interpret their lives.

This paper examines the ways in which young people appropriate two discourses arising in school in discussing three (highly gendered) aspects of their future lives. The two discourses (labelled 'equal rights' and 'culture') are both ambiguously related to 'dominant' ideology, and are mobilised by students in ways which cannot be classified simplistically as either accommodation or resistance. Furthermore, the mobilisation of these discourses in the context of the school does not translate straightforwardly into the performance of gendered identities in the material post-school world.

2. The research

This paper is based upon empirical research conducted in two schools in southern Africa and their surrounding rural communities⁵ in 1996 and 1997. The first, Ruchera Secondary School, is a district council-run day school in a Communal Area (an area of customary land tenure) in rural Zimbabwe, about three hours from the capital, Harare, by bus. It has about 500 students, drawn from a densely settled catchment extending up to 10km from the school. In Zimbabwe secondary education is not selective and is relatively inexpensive; hence the proportion of rural children attending secondary school is quite high. Most students remain in secondary school for four years, completing the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate after two years and O Level after four years. However, only about 5% of students obtain the five O Levels most employers demand, and few

⁵ The intention is not to essentialise either 'rural' or 'community'. Both are highly fluid, and women relate to 'the rural' in many different ways. Relations extending beyond the immediate community also shape women's



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are able to obtain formal sector employment upon leaving school.⁶ Furthermore, as is commonly the case in southern Africa, both attendance and attainment are lower among girls than boys.⁷

Ruchera Secondary School is located about 2km from a rural business centre, with several shops, a post office, market, agricultural extension agents and grain warehouse. Most students' families depend for survival on subsistence agriculture, sometimes supplemented by remittances from household members engaged in labour migration.

The second case study school, Mahloko High School, is a rural boarding school in the mountains of Lesotho. The school has about 240 students, all of whom passed the Primary School Leaving Examination in order to obtain a secondary school place. Students study for the Junior Certificate (taken after three years at the school) and a minority stay a further two years to prepare for the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC). Fees are more expensive than in Zimbabwe, drop-out rates are high, and very few young people achieve a sufficiently high class of pass at COSC to obtain formal sector employment. Lesotho is unusual in sub-Saharan Africa in that there are significantly more girls in school than boys, making the case study an interesting contrast to that in Zimbabwe. At Mahloko High School, the ratio is about two girls to every boy.⁸

Mahloko High School is located on the edge of the sprawling village of Mahloko, about three hours by bus from the capital, Maseru. Mahloko is home to several thousand people, with amenities including a clinic, police post, post office, supermarket and agriculture department. However, the area is more sparsely populated than that surrounding Ruchera Secondary School and too poor to supply a full quota of students. Only a minority of students at Mahloko High School are drawn from the immediate vicinity. Most are from remote villages, and stay in self-catering hostels at the nearby Roman Catholic mission.

lives. Nonetheless, most of the young women leaving both case study schools will spend most of their lives resident in areas which they characterise as rural.

⁶ Only 15-30,000 new jobs are created each year in Zimbabwe, while over 300,000 leave school (Chavunduka 1991). In 1996 30,148 obtained five or more O Levels (ZIMSEC 1996).

⁷ In Zimbabwe, typically 48% of girls enrol in Form 4 and 8% obtain five or more O Levels; comparable figures for boys are 63% and 14% (calculated from CSO 1994; CSO 1997; ZIMSEC 1996). Enrolment and pass rates are lower in rural areas.

⁸ Fewer boys attend school because many are required to work as full time herdboys. Nationally 60% of girls and 39% of boys enrol in Form A; 13% of girls and 10% of boys enter (the most senior) Form E (calculated from BOS 1997; Ministry of Education 1993).

The research made use of a variety of qualitative methods. The material presented in this paper derives from focus groups held with senior students (aged 15-24). These were supplemented by participant observation within the schools, and textual analysis of books, syllabuses and examination papers, as well as interviews with parents, teachers and governors. Members of both rural communities were also interviewed.

At Mahloko High School, focus group sessions were held with three groups: girls from Forms D and E (the two upper forms) separately (10-14 girls in each), and the boys from both upper forms combined (16 in total).⁹ At Ruchera Secondary School there were two focus groups (one of boys, and one of girls), each of which comprised a self-selected group of six students from each of the two streams in Form 4. The groups met between three and seven times, for between 40 minutes and 2-3 hours. At Ruchera Secondary School a final session brought girls and boys together.

In the focus group sessions the students talked about their expectations concerning their future lives. Identities exist through social relations (Bondi 1993), and although the social relations of the focus group do not map directly onto those of wider society, they do provide a partial lens onto the construction of subjectivities. Focus groups empower young people to influence the subjects of discussion and to choose what to say (Dwyer 1996; Goss and Leinbach 1996). Often the students at Mahloko and Ruchera Schools chose to experiment with different stances and to provoke their peers by expressing extreme views. The opinions expressed should not, therefore, be interpreted as firmly held beliefs. The students were also influenced by the course of the discussions, during which 'meanings emerge, develop, are shaped by and in turn shape the discourse' (Mishler 1986:138). Part of the value of using focus groups was the way the fluidity and inner contradictions of view points became apparent, both shaping and revealing the fractured and partial identities of the young people. It should not be forgotten that the research process itself provides a space in which identities are shaped (Gibson-Graham 1994).

The focus group discussions do not necessarily anticipate the actual behaviour of students upon leaving school. The students themselves recognised that what they believed should happen in their lives probably

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would not. Frequently they returned their discussions of hypothetical futures back to 'reality' (that 'reality', itself, a product of their imaginations). Subjectivities are produced in relation to situations, and the students performed particular identities in the context of the focus groups. The focus groups did reveal ways in which students appropriated normative discourses that were encountered and shaped in school, in discussing imaginary future lives. Although these discussions do not translate directly to performance, they do reflect a shaping of subjectivities which will have some form of material expression in lived experience.

In order to explore the discursive production of gendered identities among young people, extracts are presented from focus group sessions in which students talk about their expectations for the future. These discussions relate to three highly gendered areas of life in rural southern Africa: employment prospects and paid work; reproductive household work; and decision-making within the household. Each area is briefly introduced then focus group extracts are presented which are selected for their representativeness and clarity.

3. Secondary schooling and gendered employment expectations

In rural Lesotho and Zimbabwe little paid employment is available. The majority of rural formal sector posts in both case study communities are filled by outsiders, appointed centrally, rather than by local residents.¹⁰ While many men from the two communities engage in labour migration in order to secure paid work, this option is less readily available to women. This is partly because migrant men prefer to retain a rural base, and often expect their wives to remain in the rural community, caring for the rural household (Ferguson 1990; Malahleha 1984). Few married women belonging to households in either rural area were in formal employment at the time of the research.¹¹ Paid employment is, nonetheless, of great significance to rural people. It is the only way to guarantee a regular income and can vastly improve the material welfare of a household. Almost every woman interviewed in either community claimed they would like formal sector employment were it available,¹² although many complained their husbands would not permit them to work if it meant staying away from the rural home.

⁹ Seldom were all students present.

¹⁰ Only seven of 49 formal sector posts in the vicinity of Ruchera Secondary School, and 14 of 52 in Mahloko were occupied by local people.

¹¹ In Zimbabwe, only 8% of rural women were in paid employment at the 1992 census (CSO 1994). This includes those in commercial farming areas where more employment is available than in the Communal Areas.

¹² In interviews with women in Mahloko lack of jobs was the most frequently mentioned difficulty of rural life.

The prospect of paid employment is the primary motivation for sending young people to secondary school. When questioned in focus group discussions, most students of both sexes asserted that failure to find formal sector work in the future would render their schooling worthless. This common purpose to their education, in combination with a common curriculum, was seized upon by young people, not simply in relation to future employment, but also in producing a discursive construction of equality between the genders. Such gender symmetry does not exist in 'traditional' society beyond the school gates. In both schools, girls and boys follow identical curricula and compete on the same basis for prizes; both girls and boys perform the roles of prefects; and head girls and boys have (in theory) equal standing. Such 'equal treatment' has been noted by LeVine (1993) to influence the ways Mexican schoolgirls see themselves in relation to boys. Regardless of the form and content of education, which is vulnerable to criticism from the perspective of critical pedagogy, students mobilised their experiences of education to produce a seemingly transformative discourse. Students at the two southern African schools referred repeatedly to the fact that girls and boys both attend school in the same way to justify their equal entitlement to participation in paid employment. Their argument was circular – equality in relation to the need for employment justifies equality in education. Equality of education justifies equal entitlement to work.

This discourse of equality was labelled by the students 'equal rights' and was one of two particularly influential discourses through which young people constructed their gendered identities. It was mobilised, not only in relation to employment entitlement, but also in relation to the gendering of employment types (Extract 1).

Extract 1: Girls' focus group, RSS¹³

Francisca: Women are now driving, like those commuters [public minibuses], they are now because, there was those equal rights: they were introduced. That's why women are now driving, like cars, like buses. You know, they are now driving like, for long distances, like for careers. They are now driving because of the equal rights that is introduced.

In this extract, Francisca describes what she perceives as a change that has taken place in society. The theme of change recurred frequently in the focus groups. The alleged reason for the acceptability of driving as

¹³ Transcripts are presented verbatim, regardless of grammar, hesitancy and unconventional uses of words. English is the young people's second language, and that in which they have received most of their formal education. Not only does retaining their language preserve the immediacy of the research encounter, but it reveals hesitancy, equivocation and uncertainty which are a real part of the process of negotiating knowledge.

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a career is the introduction of 'equal rights'.¹⁴ This, Francisca suggests, happened at a point in the past, from which time women were permitted to drive buses.¹⁵ There is an element of truth in this. Zimbabwe's government, shortly after independence, introduced legislation to raise the status of women, notably the Legal Age of Majority Act, 1982, which granted women over 18 certain significant rights in common with men. The legislation was highly publicised, in large part through schools' Education For Living syllabuses. Most Zimbabweans are now conscious of the notion that women have 'equal rights', although knowledge of what this means in practice is more restricted (Vukasin 1992). Furthermore, the legislation neglected areas of importance to rural women, particularly in relation to land and inheritance rights, which continue to favour men (Batezat and Mwalo 1989; Gwaunza 1995; UNICEF 1994; Zimbabwe 1996). Thus mobilisation of this 'equal rights' discourse is not unequivocally an act of resistance against dominant gender ideology.

Nor is it **not** necessarily because of 'equal rights' legislation that 'women are now driving'. Women had previously been permitted to drive, and it is debatable to what extent legislation has itself diminished the capacity of employers to discriminate against women (Gwaunza 1995). Furthermore, the extremely limited number of women who have taken up this career would suggest that barriers – social, if not legal – continue to stand in their way. Nonetheless, students at Ruchera Secondary School have constructed a discourse of 'equal rights' from the perceived equality of education received by boys and girls in school, and the explicit references to 'equal rights' in the curriculum. Students mobilise this discourse, which they relate to a process of change, in order to negotiate a broadening choice of careers for women.

The young people do not, however, impute an agency for themselves in this discourse. Francisca's reference to 'equal rights that is introduced' constructs the government as agent. Many young people attribute a yet more distant origin to 'equal rights'. Ntsone, at Mahloko High School, comments: 'Beijing! ... They are already saying that they [women] will have to share equal rights'. In Lesotho, there has been less of a national concern with gender issues (Mamashela 1993), and, although the 1992 Labour Code accords women some

¹⁴ Gordon (1995a) found many Zimbabwean boys believed women already had 'equal rights', and that gender was therefore a 'problem solved'.

¹⁵ The choice of employment type is interesting. Students of both sexes at both schools independently raised bus driving as an example for discussion. In Lesotho there was widespread consensus that bus driving was not suited to women, who were deemed insufficiently 'brave', while in Zimbabwe there was a perception that this was something that was already happening and therefore incontrovertible and uncontroversial.

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employment rights (Lesotho 1994), married women remain legal minors (Seeiso *et al* 1990). Nonetheless, as in Zimbabwe, 'equal rights' makes an appearance in the curriculum, this time in Development Studies.

Students at both schools expressed an opinion that 'equal rights' were introduced from the West – an idea prevalent in textbooks. None saw the roots of the concept in their own society: ownership of the discourse was not claimed by the students. This geographical element to the discourse supports an understanding of 'equal rights' as an imposition more than a moral imperative. Once again, the discourse is not unambiguously oppositional in character.

Regardless of young people's unconsciousness of their agency in (re)constructing the discourse of 'equal rights', the way in which the discourse is constructed among the students facilitates contestation over its application and limits. This contestation is apparent in Extract 2.

Extract 2: Boys' focus group, RSS

Thomas:¹⁶ Nowadays they ... they are now working in each and every job. They used to say girls are not supposed to drive buses, but now we are seeing women driving buses, and also we are seeing women being soldiers and policemen, but that was used to be said it's employment for men only, so now they are working in each and every job.

[...]

Nicola: How about, are there jobs that should ... I mean, none of you said you want to be nurses. Are there some jobs that men shouldn't do?

Thomas: Um. There are a lot of jobs which men shouldn't do, because you can't see men cooking: I don't see that's suitable for a man! I think those are the jobs for women!

[...]

Mugowe: I would say that it is good to cook, [laughter] because there is no work which is meant for girls, so we are all equal: we can cook.

In his first comment, Thomas, like Fransisca, describes a scenario of change, and again focuses on careers in which women remain an almost invisible minority. Like Fransisca, he presents a situation which now has happened and must be accepted, rather than one in which opinions are to be formed, or decisions made. In fact, he declares that change has happened despite what 'they used to say'.

In his response to my question, however, Thomas enters a space of opinion and debate. He disputes the appropriateness for men to work 'in each and every job'. 'Equal rights', here, is value-laden, and is not accepted as universally applicable. Mugowe argues against Thomas' defence of a gender division of labour on the grounds that 'we are all equal'. Thomas does not dispute this equality. Earlier he had defended the

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rights of women to be pilots or miners and in most discussions he subscribed to the discourse of 'equal rights'. For Thomas, however, equality can be bounded: it is more applicable to women than to men. The boundedness of the construction of the 'equal rights' discourse was apparent among students at both schools. In negotiating limits to the discourse, students again drew upon their experiences in school. Although students attend the same lessons, extra-curricular activities such as sports are segregated.

How, then, did students incorporate the notion of 'equal rights' into their identities and the ways in which they understood their own lives beyond the confines of the school? Although able, to some extent, to imagine alternative ways of life, few students envisaged themselves in careers that confounded gender stereotypes. The majority of girls at both schools had ambitions to become teachers or nurses, regardless of whether they argued their entitlement to occupy unconventional careers.

The mismatch between students' sense of entitlement and the 'real world' futures they imagine for themselves remain a step removed from the material production of gendered identities post-school. Irrespective of the futures they imagine, as has already been noted, the majority of students from rural schools are unlikely to obtain formal sector work. Of students leaving Form E at Mahloko High School in 1996, nearly a year later only one girl, but most of the boys were reported to be in paid employment. Of the Ruchera Secondary School 1997 Form 4 leavers, two boys, but no girls, proceeded to Sixth Form. Most girls, having made unsuccessful job applications, remained without paid employment at their parental or marital rural homes.

Some students do obtain sufficient qualifications to make a search for formal sector employment worthwhile. Yvonne, at Ruchera Secondary School, passed seven subjects at O Level which was adequate for a Sixth Form place, but not for the scholarship she would have needed.¹⁷ In focus groups, in contrast to her peers, she had consistently expressed a desire to become an electrician or an engineer. In late 1998, however, she had applied for temporary teaching posts (in the hope of earning her Sixth Form fees) and also made a number of applications for nursing training, though with no positive responses. Despite being the one consistently feminist voice among the Ruchera students, faced with the reality of the employment market,

¹⁶ Boys' names are italicised in all extracts to clarify each speaker's gender.

¹⁷ Sixth Forms are found only in towns and at expensive boarding schools.

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Yvonne had resorted to gender-stereotyped career choices. This might suggest that the identity she performed in the focus groups was one which did not fit the situation she found outside the confines of the school: the options she had learned to anticipate were simply not available. Her performance outside school was limited, not so much by her own previous performances (Butler 1990), as by the material conditions and performances of others.

In general, then, the field of paid employment is imagined by young people to be an area to which all should have access, on the basis of a normative assumption of 'equal rights' – a legalistic notion of equal entitlement to a career. Potentially, this is an oppositional/transformational discourse, but it is not inevitably so. Significantly, 'equal rights' is used in relation to entitlement, rather than to practice. The limited number of female bus drivers was not raised as a relevant issue for discussion. Like liberal feminism, the students' discourse is concerned with equality of opportunity more than equality of outcome. An ideology of equal opportunity and access can obscure the unequal distribution of outcomes (Fine 1992b).

Girls who appropriate and shape the 'equal rights' discourse are not simply resisting or accommodating dominant ideology. Girls actively define themselves as subjects of 'equal rights' – a discourse they see as bringing about changes in society which, while not driven by young women themselves, facilitate their access to formal employment. There is greater conflict, however, over the extent to which such a notion should apply to particular careers, some young people interpreting 'equal rights' in very restricted terms. Imposing such restrictions actively limits the transformative power of the discourse. Identity is produced in relation to a particular future and its material enactment is contingent upon that future. Furthermore, even where students believe themselves entitled to undertake any form of paid work, this may simply represent the construction of a particular and partial identity which applies only within the protective confines of the school (or only within the focus group). The application of 'equal rights', as well as its production, is contextually restricted. Whatever career choice they imagine themselves entitled to make, in practice it seems that most rural girls will have few, if any, paid employment options available. Hence, in this area of their lives, 'equal rights' will not find material expression.

4. Secondary schooling and reproductive work

The majority of young people, especially girls, in rural southern Africa, then, will participate relatively little in paid work, even though secondary schools' explicit function is to prepare young people for this role.

Secondary schools were seen much less, by students, or the teachers, parents and policy makers who were interviewed, as places where young people learned to perform better the tasks required in the reproduction of rural households. This is, nonetheless, a very important part of rural life, and occupies much time, especially for women (Gill 1992; Sibanda and Maboreke 1993; Vukasin 1992). It is an area in which work has long been, and remains, organised on a highly gendered basis. Despite the lack of concern for such activities in school, students were very willing to talk about reproductive work and the ways in which they expected to organise it in their future lives, revealing the importance it has in their imagined futures. In their discussions it was possible to detect the ways in which the practices and discourse of the schools were used by students in order to understand, justify and explain their perspectives. As in regard to paid employment, the young people frequently referred in discussions of reproductive work to 'equal rights'. A typical exchange is presented in Extract 3.

Extract 3: Girls' focus group, RSS

Sarudzai: So, in crying for equal rights, why can't your family use your surname instead?

Susan: No. Our rights are not there in the house.

[...]

Chido: Women are crying for their educational rights, not, er, domestical rights.

Constance: In some cases, some people are claiming for domestic rights, of which we are claiming both men and women to help each other in washing the dishes and cooking.

Sarudzai here pushes the idea of equal rights to its limits, hoping it will break. She applies 'equal rights' to an aspect of life which generally goes unchallenged: the surname used by a family. In Zimbabwe, as in Lesotho, there is a long-standing perception that a household 'belongs' to a man – or at least to his lineage (Murray 1980; Schmidt 1991). To apply 'equal rights' here would be to undermine the historical patrilineal order. Susan resolves this questioning of 'tradition' by placing another limit on the application of 'equal rights': this time a spatial boundary, restricting it to the public sphere.

Interestingly, none of the girls in this extract was willing to embrace the notion of 'equal rights' to the extent of applying it unequivocally to themselves. Even Constance distances herself in the first instance, referring to

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'some women', before including herself through the collective 'we'. Her use of the word 'help' suggests a voluntarism in household arrangements, which is not always apparent in talk about rights.

In negotiating the spatial applicability of 'equal rights', students again mobilise school practices. Equality in school applies within the classroom, to the academic curriculum and to employment, the focus of secondary schools; not to reproductive work, which is absent from the formal curriculum and which students interpret as belonging to the household. Where reproductive work takes place in school, gender divisions of labour exist: it is girls who sweep the classroom floors every day while the boys wait outside; girls who collect water for the teachers at lunch time; but boys who are sent occasionally to collect firewood. The existence of gender divisions in the performance of reproductive labour in school allows students to (re)construct an 'equal rights' discourse that need not be applied to this field.

This raises the question of why some girls reject the construction of an 'equal rights' discourse with application to an area of life in which they perceive themselves to be overworked. Extract 4 points towards an answer.

The girls in discussion here were expressing their frustration at the status quo. This status quo they attributed to 'culture'. 'Culture', like 'equal rights', was a discourse that arose with great frequency and was subject to contestation in the focus groups.

Extract 4: Girls' focus group, MHS

Pulane: You know that the girls are always in the house, for doing the housework. So, the male people are always out, going up and down doing nothing.

[...]

Puseletso: We are the people who are always busy.

Nicola: But why?

Pulane: Why are we busy?

Malineo: It is our culture.

'Culture' can be used, as in Extract 4, to explain why things are the way they are. This contrasts with 'equal rights', which is used to explain why things have changed. 'Culture' is used as an explanatory discourse, particularly in relation to reproductive work. This association of reproductive work with 'culture' is constructed partly through the curriculum. Firstly, because it is not explicitly taught in school, reproductive work is assumed by students to be learned through 'culture' and 'tradition'. Pulane, in Extract 5, describes it as 'informal learning', but, clearly, when learnt 'informally' it will generally be learnt by girls and not boys.

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Reproductive work is not only learned through 'tradition'; it is 'traditionally' learned and practised by women. If governed by rules of 'culture', there is no justification for challenging traditional practice. Pulane also uses the term 'internal'. This suggests 'natural'. 'Nature' is another discourse popular among students in explaining gender differences. If reproductive work is learned 'naturally', by implication, it is women's work.

Extract 5: Girls' focus group, MHS

Nicola: But would you like [school] also to prepare you for work in the household? For sort of childcare? For that sort of thing?

[...]

Pulane: There is no need of preparing for that one.

Nicola: Why not?

Pulane: I can teach it myself. It is ... it is internal. It is informal learning.

When reproductive work is referred to in school, it is most often in relation to customary practice. Extract 6 is from a unit of a Lesotho Development Studies textbook which considers various traditions relating to 'the family'. The format might allow for questioning. However, the book does not directly prompt questioning of why things are organised as they are, what would happen were things arranged differently, or even suggest alternative arrangements. Nor did the teacher raise these possibilities when using this exercise in class. Some students *do* challenge conventional ascriptions, but many defend the status quo by reference to 'culture'. While 'equal rights' are associated by students with situations of change, 'culture' is constructed as stasis.

Extract 6: Development studies textbook, MHS

Roles

People in families have different duties. Who looks after cattle? Who cooks food? Who decides when ploughing should be done? Does the same person do all these things?

It is clear when we look at a family that certain people have special tasks to do. We call someone's place in the family, and the special tasks they do, their role.

[...]

1. [table to be completed by students]

Person

Role or Tasks

Grandmother Provides medicine for babies, advises women, instructs young girls.

Grandfather

Father

Mother

Me

(Monaheng n.d.:17-18).

Students construct identities through a discourse of 'culture' which arises and is shaped in particular ways in both schools. 'African culture' is presented to students through the curriculum and in textbooks in ways which derive largely from colonial portrayals of African culture – portrayals designed to support patriarchal authority,

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through which the stability of the colonised could be assured (Cobham n.d.; Mandaza 1980). 'Culture' in school textbooks is thus a narrowly defined body of knowledge, encompassing only certain aspects of life. 'Culture' is not referred to in relation to paid employment, and students did not mention 'culture' in their discussions of paid work. Rather, 'culture' is closely tied to the private sphere and to practices through which women tend to be subordinated. 'Culture' is also perceived in relation to a specific geography, be this 'Africa', 'Lesotho' or the more specific rural settings in which the two schools are *located*, but to whose social environments they do not directly relate.

Extract 7: Development studies textbook, MHS

The Sesotho culture

The Sesotho culture has a number of beliefs and customs handed down by our forefathers to the succeeding generations.

[...]

We must learn to respect our culture. It is not inferior to the Western culture. (Monaheng n.d.:84-85).

'Culture', then, is problematic. As stasis it cannot be transformational, yet as 'African' it is defined in opposition to dominant Western practices. Depictions of African life in modern textbooks differ little from the writings of early European anthropologists. However, whereas colonial schooling was condescending towards African traditions (Chung and Ngora 1985; Mokhosi 1982; Zvobgo 1994), students today are exhorted to take pride in their culture (Extract 7). Post-independence governments in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe have eagerly reclaimed 'African culture' that was vilified in colonial times, in part through school curricula (Mandaza 1980; Ministry of Education 1983). Teachers frequently talked about 'our African culture' in lessons observed in both schools, and tried to promote positive images.

The view presented through the curriculum is as objectifying of 'culture' as was the colonial view, in part due to the prevalence of didactic pedagogies in the schools. The 'culture' with which students are encouraged to identify tends to be presented as static and synonymous with 'tradition' (Extract 7). It is at times unclear whether books are describing cultural practices in relation to the past or the present. Such ambiguities affect the ways young people perceive their culture. For many, it is merely an historical artefact: a body of knowledge describing the ways of their forebears (students talk repeatedly about 'past ways of life'). However, the absence of internal dynamism from the conception of 'culture' renders changes in lifestyle as intrusions

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from a foreign culture – to adapt is to capitulate. Historical artefact though it may be, 'culture' and its preservation are seen as important, and 'culture' entered most focus group discussions concerning the place of women, particularly in the private sphere.

Identity is relational – we define ourselves as similar to or different from others (Rose 1993). Young people in both schools mobilised the discourse of 'African culture' as oppositional – they sought to distance themselves from incursive 'Western culture'. The concern to differentiate 'African' from 'Western' culture implies that cultures are bounded and homogeneous, and neglects processes internal to local culture. This resonates with the words of Mama (1997:72): 'African cultural theory has concentrated on challenging imperialist cultural domination. This outwardly directed posture has meant that the attention to the internal dynamics of cultural struggle and change has been minimal.' It is also significant to students' constructions of gendered identities. Young people suggest that rejection of the specific ways of life defined as their 'culture', would be denial of their 'African', 'Basotho' or 'Shona' identities, and would alienate them from validating histories.

The discourse of 'African culture' has a relatively high profile in schools, and students engage with it self-consciously. Arguably, it is used to justify and make sense of opinions rooted in much more deep-seated, but less directly articulated, notions of masculinity and femininity (see Extract 8). School does not offer students the language with which to articulate these ideas, hence they tend to remain below the surface of discussions (even in the unconscious) and may be disguised by 'logical' arguments drawing on messages about 'culture' which are validated in school. Focus group discussions centring on what it was to be 'a man' or 'a real woman' invariably hinged on justifications rooted in the discourse of 'culture'. The reluctance of young people to apply 'equal rights' to childcare, above all areas of reproductive work, is apparent in Extracts 8 and 9.

Extract 8: Boys' focus group, MHS

Fusi: I can tell you why they say that it is impossible for men to look after the children, because, if they can do that, the woman will not feel as ... as her husband is her husband.

Extract 9: Mixed focus group, RSS

Rudo: Er, let's take a situation whereby a wife is working and a husband is not working.

[...]

Chido: Yourself, you are at home and I'm - I wake up early in the morning, I go to work.

Rudo: And you stay at home, and wait for me so that I can come and do everything else for you.

Chido: I've got a kid.

Josiah: Yes, with a kid. Myself, I cannot feed the baby. Isn't it? Even, let's say, the equal rights of you talking. A man, he's ... are not able to look after the baby. That's natural. Isn't it? That's when you look for - a housemaid, who looks after the baby.

Chido: Why should I get the housemaid, whilst you are seated at home?

Thomas: Ah, that will never be, let's - let's say you are working, you are working.

Chido: Yes.

Josiah: You are working?

Chido: Yes.

Josiah: And I'm just seated at home?

Chido: Yes.

Josiah: I will never sit from 6 o'clock to 6 o'clock at home, but I will look some - something to do. Even, I, even I will come late to home, rather than you, because I'm a man.

Yvonne: Because you are a man you can just go out! [contemptuous].

In Extract 9, from a mixed sex focus group, Josiah defends a Shona notion of manhood in which the male bread-winner role is the only acceptable one. Boys assume that women do not want husbands who are not 'masculine' according to socially ascribed (hetero)sexual identities. Although, in this instance, the girls scorn Josiah's assertions, and Yvonne is clearly not content that men 'just go out', girls, too, are often willing to use 'culture' to defend male/female behaviour patterns which accord with prevailing notions of masculinity/femininity, while rejecting it when discussing issues which do not challenge their sexual identity. When oppositional discourses conflict with entrenched sexual identities, this can make women very uncomfortable, and lead them to construct their own identities in reaction to them (Lather 1991).

In contemplating the performance of gendered identities in reproductive work, Extract 9 also reveals the importance of employment status. Only where the woman alone (Extract 9) or both parents (Extract 10) were working might it be argued that both should be involved in the direct provision of childcare. Where only the husband of a couple had employment, it was understood, as Lerato suggests in Extract 11, that the woman should perform any necessary domestic labour. This was true also in imagined situations where neither had employment. Girls in Extracts 9 and 10 envisage themselves in paid employment. Only in such situations do they consider 'equal rights' to apply. Of the five girls who speak in the three extracts, only Lerato had found paid work a year after leaving school.

Extract 10: Girls' focus group, MHS

Pulane: If both of us are working, and we don't have somebody to help us in the family, we must wake up early, both of us, and the other one must wash the child and the other one must prepare food. When I'm going to wash myself, I ... he must treat the child.

Extract 11: Girls' focus group, MHS

Lerato: You see, why I am saying both [parents should look after the children], I mean that if I am not working and my husband is, he will give me the money, so, in that case I should have the money and then sometimes see that I take the child to the hospital so in that case we are helping each other. He will give me the money and I will take the child to the hospital. It's sharing.

While there is a general perception among students at both schools that, in situations where a woman is in paid employment, application of 'equal rights' to the domestic sphere might be countenanced, this is of little value to the majority of *rural* girls who are unlikely to find themselves in such a situation in the future. In school, girls construct identities in relation to situations that are likely to remain imaginary. Despite their own rural context, they relate the 'equal rights' discourse, primarily, to non-rural ways of living. Furthermore, the discourse is vulnerable to rejection where it does not correspond to deeply entrenched notions of femininity/masculinity. A patriarchal and very restricted discourse of 'culture' offers a convenient way of articulating and justifying discomfort with the implications of the 'equal rights' discourse, allowing young people to construct themselves in opposition to a polluting 'Western other'. Like 'equal rights', 'culture' is ambiguously placed in relation to a dualism of dominance/subordination. Neither do young women simply reproduce/resist it. The majority of students incorporate into their fragmented gender identities, both the historical divisions of labour in reproductive work prevalent in rural areas (divisions which generally operate to women's disadvantage, including the restriction of participation in the labour market), and also a conviction that, in their imagined futures as employed urban women, they will be justified in renegotiating these divisions of labour on the basis of a presumed monetary income.

5. Secondary schooling and household decision-making

Historically, in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe, decision-making on behalf of junior members of a household, including all adult women, was recognised to be the role of a male lineage (or latterly household) head (Eldredge 1993; Kesby 1999). This simplistic picture was codified into 'customary law' in both countries when under colonial rule: law codes which persist in the post-independence era (Gwaunza 1995; Seeiso *et al* 1990). It was further enforced by male labour migration which placed economic power in almost exclusively male hands (Eldredge 1993; Gwaunza 1995). At the same time, labour migration left many households in the *de facto* control of women while men were absent. Not only were (and are) *de facto* female headed households commonplace; about a third of rural households in both countries lack even an absent senior male in the

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immediate household. In a village surveyed by the author in the vicinity of Ruchera Secondary School, only 32% of households were headed by resident men; in a village near Mahloko High School the proportion was 52%. Thus, household decision-making is a complex issue in which women and men play a variety of roles.

While secondary schools give little overt attention to questions of reproductive work, matters of household decision-making are almost entirely neglected. Once again, however, students are very ready to discuss such issues and bring to bear discourses, including those of 'equal rights' and 'culture', which are shaped in school. 'Equal rights', in the sense in which it is practised in school, has even less obvious relation to the sphere of private decision-making than to reproductive work. It nonetheless retains normative value, and few students are prepared to reject the concept outright. Nor do students wish to reject their 'culture', which is understood to apply to the household more than to any other area of life. As Extract 12 illustrates, students have difficulty reconciling these apparently contradictory, yet value-laden discourses.

Extract 12: Girls' focus group, RSS

Nicola: I know that some of you have talked about this before, but who should be head of the family?

Constance: Father must be the head of the family.

Nicola: Not equal?

Constance: Ah, of course, it's like we must be equal, we must be equal, but ... it's like, um, but it's like it's part of our culture. The father must be the head of the family.

In order to attempt to reconcile 'culture' and 'equality', young people look to the diverse arrangements practised in actual households. On this basis, the meanings of 'equality' and 'headship' (and the relation of this to 'culture') are contested, as are their relationships to decision-making (Extract 13).

Extract 13: Girls' focus group, RSS

Nicola: You were talking yesterday - you were saying a man should be head of the family 'because of our culture,' yeah? Do you not think that *that* part of your culture is oppressive?

[...]

Constance: Yes, it's oppressive, because men take it to be an advantage to oppress women.

Shylate: I would disagree with that, because to be the head of the house, it doesn't mean that the husband is going to, to make the decisions. He is going to be the head of that house after we have decided - you have made decisions after planning your, your things together, not that your husband is going to plan everything for you.

[...]

Yeukai: For example, in this school, the headmaster is the one who is responsible to make the decision as the head of school. He has to come to an agreement with other teachers.¹⁸ So when you say the head of the house, that means that the decisions are going to be made by the husband and you have to come to an agreement, whether you like what he has been decided or not.

Chido: The decision is made by the husband. Then, after making that decision, he will come for you to agree or disagree.

Netsai: So, you will control what he has decided.

In this extract, the girls draw upon the analogy of the school again. Although they have difficulty in expressing the extent to which women are able to influence or veto their husbands' decisions, it is clear that they do not see 'head of household' as implying executive and unquestionable decision-maker. In general, students saw decision-making in marriage as a process of negotiation. While some girls were willing to accept a subordinate role for women in this process, seeing a need for a final arbiter (drawing, for justification, on the head teacher's exercise of authority in school), others thought this 'oppressive' and demanded equality. Some were undecided and occupied multiple and contradictory positions (note the inconsistency of Constance's remarks between the focus group sessions cited in Extracts 12 and 13). Most acknowledged that if a man were defined as head of household he was likely to have greater influence in the household than his wife. This would not, however, preclude resistance. Lerato, in Extract 14, accords agency to women – it is up to the woman to restrict the power and freedom of her husband.

Extract 14: Girls' focus group, MHS

Lerato: [...] if you 'used to'¹⁹ go after him always, when he is going somewhere, you say you want to go with him, he won't be head. He will play different. But when you don't, if you let him go ... then he will be head.

Nonetheless, in Extract 15, Josiah demonstrates that it is possible nominally to accept the normative discourse of 'equal rights' but to manipulate it so as to deny women equal participation with men in household

¹⁸ There had been considerable discontent among the teachers at the school concerning a decision the (male) head had made. The head's inability to control the teachers, or to run the school without their compliance, was very apparent to the students.

¹⁹ 'Used to' is often used in Lesotho to mean 'usually'.

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decision-making. Most students wanted to take on board a notion of equality as a defining attribute of their personal relationships, but only insofar as they could reconcile this with other beliefs/desires. The boys' definitions of 'equal rights', exemplified by that of Josiah, differed considerably from those most prevalent among the girls. Although the way in which 'equal rights' is made available to students in school is restricted, it remains subject to renegotiation and permits considerable flexibility in its application.

Extract 15: Boys' focus group, RSS

Josiah: [...] These equal rights which we are talking today and afterwards, most women think that equal rights are the benefit to the women, for them to be free. But that's not it. Even in a discussion, in a discussion of ten or five people, there is someone who brings the final solution, and there's someone who brings the statute, even if we can discuss properly with one another, so that's the same, likewise, within two people, a man and a woman in a house. In their discussion there is someone who brings the final solution, and there's someone who gives the final statute, but this person should be the man. But the discussion should be held by the two.

One way students limited the power of 'equal rights' to define household relationships was by relating it to financial contribution to the household. In Extract 16, Constance considers women in employment to have a legitimate right to participate in decision-making. Through the application of economic rationalism, those contributions women make to households for which they receive no external monetary reward are devalued, with the result that the discourse of 'equal rights' can be used to undermine the legitimacy of women's participation in household decision-making in the majority of rural households in which women do not perform waged work. Young people could imagine futures in relation to urban lifestyles, which, in practice, would probably be unavailable to them, but when the logic of their discourse was extended to rural situations, the effect was to reinforce orthodox gendered identities.

Extract 16: Girls' focus group, RSS

Constance: [...] if man is only one who is working, he have the right to control what he want the house to be like, but if we are both, we have to share idea - what type of house which you want to construct, and who is going to pay the money.

Although, in discussions, girls may construct for themselves powerful subject positions, they themselves ultimately return in their discussions to a 'reality' in which they cannot imagine themselves breaking with conventions. The contextuality of knowledge is apparent to the students: while they subscribe to 'equal rights' within a discussion among peers, this is much less easy when imagining themselves outside school. Pulane, a girl at MHS, comments: 'I'd say that we must be equal, but it's impossible. - They are too wild.'²⁰ Faced with the boys' comments on women who resist their husbands' control, Rudo equivocates: 'Ah, but to figure out the

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whole truth, men must be under - women must be under men. Ah, it's just that we were, just, er, this was only a discussion.'²¹ Having at various points insisted she would never marry, as she wished 'never to be under a man's rulership', Rudo married within months of leaving school, and remained living, without employment, in the rural community. While girls can imagine alternative ways of life, these do not become entrenched as a singular identity to be enacted unchanged in their lives beyond school.

Most young people in both schools believed men's power within the household should not be absolute, and many justified this with reference to 'equal rights'. However, few girls could realistically imagine a situation in which they had equal influence with their husbands over the household, other than in a situation in which they had paid employment. Such a situation for most rural girls is unlikely to materialise, given the current availability of paid employment in Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

6. Conclusions

It has been demonstrated that experience of school plays a crucial role in identity production by young people in southern Africa. As Giroux (1997:123) suggests, 'Education must be understood as the production of identities in relation to the ordering, representation, and legitimation of specific forms of knowledge and power'. This paper has demonstrated how two particular discourses – 'equal rights' and 'culture' – are produced through a combination of curricular and other elements of school life, and are appropriated by young people in constructing their fractured gendered identities. Although students also used discursive constructs of 'the Bible', 'modernity' and 'nature' in discussing their future lives, 'equal rights' and 'culture' were the discourses most frequently applied in negotiations of gender within the focus groups. These two areas of discourse, while they enter the schools from wider national and international arenas, are not simply reproduced through the institution of the school. Instead, the meanings of 'equal rights' and 'culture' are transformed within the school and in relation to the materiality of the outside world.

These discourses also serve to highlight areas of theoretical interest. First, while both are promoted in school in various ways, their relationships to dominant ideology are ambiguous: indeed the discourses are used by the students as almost binary opposites. Second, they serve to highlight tensions and complexities in the

²⁰ Girls' focus group, MHS.

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relationships between global and local, urban and rural, and the ways in which these are conceived in relation to gendered identities.

In practice, 'equal rights' and 'culture' are not binary opposites, although they are, to some extent, dialectically produced within the school. 'Equal rights' is understood as radical in relation to local, rural lifestyles; but simultaneously recognised as metropolitan, part of a dominant Western paradigm that denies the legitimacy of subordinate cultural aesthetics. It is understood in school as a universal construct, but discursively constructed at the level of the school in particular, local, ways (although this local construction differs little between the two contexts studied). Thus, the 'universality' of 'equal rights' can be limited, in the particular context, to those areas of life which conform to the application of 'equal rights' within the institution of the school – notably to entitlements to education and to participation in paid work, and in relation to notions of economic rationalism (the acceptance that power within the household should directly relate to economic contribution). This circumscription of the discourse limits its transformative capabilities, and inhibits its use by students in constructing new identities for themselves which transgress dominant patriarchal practices.

'Culture', conversely, is seen as a local discourse. However, it is not the pure authentic product of a subordinated people. The 'culture' (re)presented in schools is rooted, not simply in the particularity of the rural context, but in European colonial constructions of 'African culture' – constructions imbued with the power of Western patriarchy.

Students subscribe to and help to shape both discourses within the time-space of the school. Rather than engaging in straightforward resistance, it is through appropriating both discourses that girls construct themselves as *both* the universal human subjects of 'equal rights' *and* 'rural women', in relation to imagined futures beyond the temporal and spatial setting of the school. These elements of their fractured identities are played out differently in relation to the different material realities in which they live their lives.

In school, students construct their identities in relation to a material context. However, a spatial and temporal distance divides verbal articulation from the site of material performance. Identities are constructed in relation

²¹ Mixed focus group, RSS.

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to imagined future lives in which formal sector paid employment plays a significant part. Such a life is unlikely to become a reality for many rural girls. While boys may migrate to towns to find employment, most girls remain in rural areas without paid work. In school, girls construct identities that are contingent on urban futures, futures that are unlikely to find material expression in their lives. The discourse of the school is contextually produced (in relation to the knowledge and practices of the school) and has contextual application (in relation to anticipated urban lifestyles). Without living the lives they expect, it cannot be anticipated that girls will be able to negotiate from within a discourse of 'equal rights', however frequently they subscribe to these in focus groups, as 'equal rights' are not understood by young people to apply to those who, as in the case of most rural women, earn no wage. Instead, girls are likely to remain confined to a rural sphere, which in school they have constructed as dominated by a backward-looking and static 'culture', and in relation to which they perform the identity of 'rural woman', in accordance with their understanding of that 'culture'.

This complex relationship between identity and material performance is an area of growing theoretical interest to geographers. Butler's (1990) concept of 'performativity', conceptualised as production of identity through repetitive performance, has been used in this regard. Butler acknowledges that while performances are productive of, not contingent on identity, they are historically embedded: material performance is shaped by previous utterances. However, Butler's performativity fails to offer the means to theorise the temporal and spatial separation of imagination, enunciation and action. (The absence of satisfactory theorisation of time and space in Butler's performativity has been highlighted, though not resolved, by Nelson (1999).) The empirical material presented here highlights the need for performative conceptions of identity production to incorporate a time dimension.

Given that a relationship exists between the production of identities in school, and the ways young people live and interpret their lives in the world beyond school, the school and its practices have wider importance for geographers of both youth and gender. Critical pedagogy offers, not only a basis for analysing this impact, but also advocates a different, more transformative education. This must begin by taking on board locally produced knowledges. 'Critical education concerns the production of subjectivities in relation to discourses of knowledge and power' (Mohanty 1997:564). McLaren (1994:213) advocates 'a 'border pedagogy' which

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enables educators to affirm and legitimate local meanings and constellations of meanings that grow out of particular discursive communities but at the same time interrogate the interests, ideologies, and social practices that such knowledges serve when viewed from the perspective of more global economies of power and privilege.' Clearly, 'equal rights' and 'culture' could both be (re)presented and transformed in schools in different ways: 'equality' could be sought in relation to the rural and the private as well as the urban and public; 'culture' could be recognised as a hybrid outcome of particular power relations, which has within it the dynamism to allow for transformation of those power relations. As Giroux (1997:124) suggests, there exists 'the possibility for students to creatively appropriate the past as part of a living dialogue ...' The deconstruction of the discourses of 'equal rights' and 'culture' is one key to a more transformative secondary education.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork discussed here was funded by a Wingate Scholarship and funds from the Dudley Stamp Memorial Fund, the Newby Trust, a DARG Postgraduate Award and the Department of Geography, Keele University. I am grateful also to the Department of Geography, University of Zimbabwe, and the Institute of Southern African Studies, National University of Lesotho for their support, and to Elsbeth Robson and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

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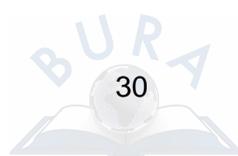
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