The Paradox of Distance Education in Girls' Education

TUĞBA ÖZTÜRK

ANKARA ÜNİ.

SUZAN KÖSEOĞLU

GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

HASAN UÇAR

BİLECİK ŞEYH EDEBALİ ÜNİ

ARAS BOZKURT

ANADOLU ÜNİ

ENGİN KARAHAN

ESKİŞEHİR OSMANGAZİ ÜNİ.

ABSTRACT

Distance education has a vital role in creating and providing access to education for all. However, the role of distance education can be paradoxical in girls' education. On one hand, socio-economic conditions, health issues, and geographical distance are noted as some major barriers to girls' educational attainment. One of the most disadvantaged groups is out-of-school children who cannot continue their formal education for different reasons including armed conflict and war, poverty, and social discrimination. In that sense, distance education plays a significant role in creating access to education as a human right. On the other hand, from the perspective of feminism and social reproduction theory, distance education may reproduce and perpetuate existing inequalities. For example, if education is confined to homes with distance education, this may reinforce or even legitimize the idea of females living in isolation, away from public spheres. Taking these issues into account, we highlight some ethical issues in the provision of distance education for girls' education through a qualitative analysis of reports and peer-reviewed articles.

Keywords: Ethics, feminism, gender inequality, K-12, open and distance learning, social reproduction

Introduction

Distance education (DE) has a vital role in creating access to education for all, including children of school age. In Australia, for example, as early as in preschool, DE programs are available for students who are unable to attend compulsory education due to geographical isolation or other special circumstances ("Distance education," 2019). In the US, DE emerged as an increasingly recognized method for the provision of K-12 education within the past 10 years or so (Halverson, Spring, Huyett, Henrie, & Graham, 2017). In the Global South, there is also growing interest in DE, coupled with an enthusiasm to use it as a method to reach disadvantaged students and promote gender equity (see for example, Kwapong, 2007; Mapolisa & Chirimuuta, 2012; Situma, 2015).

Indeed, a detailed report (Barbour, et al., 2011) on online and blended learning in K-12 schools shows that although there are regional differences based on factors such as "economics, government support, infrastructure, population, and local district innovation," as well as the culture of teaching, K-12 distance education is on the rise on a global scale. In the report, existing problems are noted, and calls are made for addressing issues with governmental involvement and funding, cost, professional development and training for teachers, quality, and availability of digital resources. Yet, our research shows that the literature is limited in terms of analysing the ethics of online provision for children, in particular, for marginalized girls. This is the central issue we explore in this paper.

Background

The affordances of DE (i.e., learning anytime, anywhere) creates a paradox in girls' life that needs to be examined more closely. On one hand, factors such as geographic isolation, health issues, armed conflict and war, gender division of labour, poor economy, etc. may become significant barriers to girls' education. For example, in the context of Nigeria, Nkechinyere Amadi (2011) notes that those who are out-of-school are "primarily girls, the poor and other marginalized groups" (p. 987). According to Nkechinyere Amadi, "girl-child education is elusive," and therefore, "access simply means the right to education" (p. 988-989). von Prümmer (2000) notes that especially girls from a working-class background are among the most disadvantaged groups for access to secondary and tertiary education in Germany. In the presence of such barriers to traditional education, non-conventional methods such as DE can play a significant role in creating access to education for girls.

On the other hand, in the absence of social and financial support, funding, and well-designed student-centered curricula, DE may also reproduce and even perpetuate social norms, traditions, and gender belief systems which marginalize females. Feminism and social reproduction theory (Doob 2016, also see Sayılan, 2012) are helpful lenses to examine how this may occur. Based on Karl Marx's critical theories (1918-1988), Doob (2016) uses social reproduction theory to refer to structures in the society that reinforce social stratification and social inequality across generations. An example would be the treatment of people differently based on gender, race, ethnicity, and/or class, and how that leads to limited social mobility across generations. This is a complex process that is embedded in "the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerational" (Laslett &

Brenner, 1989, p. 382). Social injustice can also be embedded in institutions and organizations, including the system of education.

One adverse example for social reproduction via DE is that DE can reinforce the idea of females living in isolation, away from public spheres. In patriarchal societies and communities, boys typically have more privileges to attend and successfully complete compulsory education compared to girls (Akomolafe, 2006). Bhushan (2008), for example, quotes a male learner living in India:

> "I can pick up my bike or go to a friend's house anytime. Cyber cafes are open till 11 o'clock in the night. My sister, however, cannot do that. I have to escort her to the place and sit with her. She cannot go out until 11 o'clock at night even with an escort" (p. 134).

Unfortunately, this is the case in many places around the world. While male students enjoy the social and public life surrounding education and are supported by their families and communities, with DE female students may become housebound (Nkechinyere Amadi, 2011). Thus, the much celebrated affordances of DE (as we noted above, in particular the notion of learning anytime, anywhere) can legitimize the practices and assumptions of patriarchal and andro-centric communities. Another example is the enculturation of girls into social sciences and boys into STEM careers in formal education (von Prümmer, 2000). To put it simply, to promote gender equity through DE, either the broader education system should be just or there needs to be an explicit agenda to achieve equity socially, economically and politically.

In this context, the research questions are as follows:

- What are the reasons for girls to enroll in DE rather than traditional (face-to-face) education?
- What is the current state of the art with regards to distance education in girls' education?

Method

A qualitative research method is adopted in this research. Governmental and intergovernmental reports (includes reports by the World Bank, UNESCO and the UN) as well as peer-reviewed articles relevant to the research questions are identified via Scopus, WoS and ERIC indexes, as well as the journal *International Women Online Journal of Distance Education*. The following keywords are used in title, abstract and keywords: girls AND open AND distance AND education OR learning. We used the constant comparative method to identify themes emerging from the data. The final sample constitute 18 studies that clearly meet the sampling criteria and research goals. Two coders analyzed a section of the sample individually and noted their findings on a shared spreadsheet. Interpretive rigour was maintained by the triangulation of sources, team discussions, and the use of theoretical frameworks.

Findings and Discussion

We present countrywide distribution of the sample, years of publication and Gender Inequality Index values (Table 1) to help readers understand the composition of the sample and contextualize findings and discussions. Gender Inequality Index (GII) was first released by the United Nations Development Programme in 2018. The index measures:

> "...gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development —reproductive health, measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates; empowerment, measured by proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females and males aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education; and economic status, expressed as labour market participation and measured by labour force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years and older" ("Gender Inequality Index," 2018).

Table 1

Countrywide Distribution, Publication Years and GII Values*

Country	Frequency	Publication Year(s)	Gender Inequality Index (Value-Rank)
Afghanistan	1	2017	0.653 (153)
Bangladesh	2	2016, 2017	0.542 (134)
Ethiopia	1	2015	0.502 (121)

Honduras	1	2015	0.461 (109)
Kenya	1	2015	0.549 (137)
India	2	2017	0.524 (127)
Malaysia	1	2018	0.287 (62)
Malawi	1	2015	0.619 (148)
Nepal	2	2001, 2015	0.480 (118)
Nigeria	3	2009, 2011, 2016	N/A
Pakistan	1	2017	0.541 (133)
Papua New Guinea	1	1997	0.741 (159)
Paraguay	1	2015	0.467 (113)
Saudi Arabia	1	2015	0.234 (50)
Syria (refugees)	1	2016	N/A
Tanzania	1	2015	0.537 (130)
USA	3	1996, 2006, 2008	0.189 (41)

*Reports of international organisations (e.g. World Bank) may involve information on more than one country.

Higher GII values indicate higher inequalities and thus "higher loss to human development," "due to disparity between female and male achievements in three dimensions, reproductive health, empowerment and economic status" ("Gender Inequality Index," 2018). It is revealing, yet not surprising, that many of the countries in our sample have a high Gender Inequality Index, pointing to important issues with gender equality. All countries noted in Table 1, except the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia, rank below 100. One of the main reasons why the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia have lower GII values than the rest in our sample was the high percentage of female population aged 25 and older with at least some secondary education, which is an important indicator for the empowerment dimension of the GII.

Not surprisingly, issues with girls' education vary in different countries and regions due to socio-economic and cultural differences. While girls in some Global South countries are unable to study because of gendered division of labour, safety concerns, and societal expectations/assumptions (Ferreira, Cruz, & Smith, 2017; Nkechinyere Amadi, 2016; Ofoegbu, 2009), issues with media literacy, equal access to STEM careers and the form and structure of existing DE provision surface in the Global North (see Campbell & Storo, 1996; Hobbs & Rowe, 2008).

In general, studies show that in countries with low GII values there is a tendency to view DE as a solution for "balancing inequalities between age groups and extending geographical access to education" (Nkechinyere Amadi, 2011, p. 986). A small number of studies also show deep structural issues, to the extent that inequality results in violence and abuse. For example, Nkechinyere Amadi (2016) notes "female genital mutilation, son preference, early marriage, violence against women, sexual exploitation" as examples of gender discrimination. Child labour is also noted (Ofoegbu, 2009; Nkechinyere Amadi, 2016). This involves "both economic activities (paid or unpaid work for someone who is not a member of the household, work for a family farm or business) and domestic work (household chores such as cooking, cleaning or caring for children)" (UNICEF, 2017).

As expected, main reasons for girls to enrol in DE are to *gain an opportunity to study* and *gain academic knowledge* (Table 2). We also observed that in countries with low GII values, DE is offered as a practical way for girls to enter formal education because they may not be able to study traditionally (face-to-face education). Geographical isolation, distance to school,

limited infrastructure and resources, and safety are noted as some reasons for the preference of DE as an alternative to formal education. *Domestic and/or paid labor* and *under-age marriage* are also reported as barriers to traditional education in Saudi Arabia and in some Asian and African countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nigeria (see for example, Ferreira et al., 2017; Yamin, 2015). In response to these complex societal issues, DE is commonly viewed as a path for *empowerment* and *eradicating poverty* in families and the larger society. DE is also used to teach refugee girls important skills such as "conflict resilience" and "basic literacy, numeracy, English language, and entrepreneurial skills" for individual empowerment and for "paving the way for new economic activity to flourish after war" (Lewis & Thacker, 2016, p. 1).

Table 2

Reasons for girls to enrol in Distance Education

Themes	Exemplar references from the sample
gain the opportunity to study	Akhter (2014); Campbell & Storo (1996); Frey et al. (2017)
gain academic knowledge	Baker & Karp (2006); Geissinger (1997); Nik Farid et. al., (2018)
a safe and secure place to study	Bosch (2001); Ruffino (2005); Lewis & Thacker, 2016
overcome geographical obstacles (distance)	Geissinger (1997); Ferreira et al. (2017); Ruffino (2005); Lewis & Thacker, 2016
eradicate poverty	Ferreira et al. (2017); Frey et al. (2017)
empowerment	Nkechinyere Amadi (2011); Ofoegbu (2009); Situma (2015); Lewis & Thacker, 2016;
poor physical conditions of schools	Nkechinyere Amadi (2011); Bosch (2001)
develop literacy skills	Hobbs & Rowe (2008); Ofoegbu (2009); Lewis & Thacker, 2016
study in addition to domestic and/or paid labour	Nkechinyere Amadi (2016); Ofoegbu (2009), Sabri, Abdulrahimzai, Witteveen, Lie, & Van Der Meulen (2017); Yamin (2015)

We would like to highlight four studies in our sample that provide important recommendations for girls' education via DE. Campbell and Storo (1996) draw attention to "who is taught, what is taught and how the teaching is done" in DE. They call for more research into racial bias in DE, stereotypes that might discourage girls from studying STEM subjects and androcentric views in content and instruction. Bosch (2001) calls for good role-models for girls, active teaching, affirmative action, and reduced cost. Situma (2015) notes "e-learning curriculum, development of digital content, establishment of infrastructure and development and sharing of e-learning resources," hardware and teacher education with ICT as some primary areas of concern for effective DE provision. One notable study is the collaborative *The Reaching the Unreached* (RtU) project (Ferreira et al., 2017), which examined barriers to women's and girls' education in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the report, "the importance of community-based initiatives to support women's and girls' empowerment and sustainable livelihoods" was highlighted (p. 19).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Some important implications can be drawn from this research:

- The literature predominantly focuses on the implications of technology mediated education and DE in girls' education and related policies and strategies; however, in general, it *falls short* on exploring and analysing the ethical aspects of DE in girls' education.

- Further examinations into "who is taught, what is taught and how the teaching is done" (Campbell & Storo, 1996) is very important, as well as an examination of the cultural, economic and political tensions that give rise to and

shape the provision of DE. The "gender bias in content, teaching and learning process" (Ofoegbu, 2009) is also an underexplored issue.

Although there are cultural differences in the way children and their rights are understood, they are a vulnerable group whose rights need to be protected universally. One such effort is the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which "recognis[es] that all children have the right to be treated with dignity and fairness, to be protected, to develop to their full potential and to participate" (UNICEF, n.d., p. 1). DE, or any educational program for that matter, should be evaluated ethically and legally in terms of the rights of the child. In addition to Article 28, the right to education, we would like to highlight two other articles in this convention:

> *Article 3 (best interests of the child): The best interests of the child must be a top priority in all.*

> *Article 4 (implementation of the Convention): Governments must do all they can to make sure every child can enjoy their rights by creating systems and passing laws that promote and protect children's rights.*

Thus, technological determinism, the perspective that technology alone is a primary change agent in society, should be questioned, in particular with reference to the two articles we stated above. Is DE the answer to girls' problems in education? What is best for their happiness and well-being? Our starting point is that each and every child is precious and deserves the best possible care and education. However, if DE means girls do not enjoy public services and spaces as much as other children of their age, if it means they do not see the benefits of DE directly, (eradicating poverty and empowerment may take a long time and the ones who benefit from education and paid labour may not necessarily be the females in the family), what actions should educators, families, and policy makers take to ensure their well-being? In relation to this, we would like to highlight the collaborative project, *The Reaching the Unreached* (Ferreira et al., 2017) — one partner in this project was the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child. Such carefully designed collaborative projects are key to develop local strategies for sustainable and *ethical* educational programs that benefit both girls and the society as a whole:

> "initiatives for women's and girls' empowerment require a holistic approach that addresses taking responsibility for one's own health, *developing support structures to circumvent physical and emotional isolation*, and capacity and confidence building for long-term, sustainable change in women's and girls' lives" (Ferreira et al., 2017, p. 20, emphasis added).

We also would like to note that we agree with Noddings (2015) who said, "we should move beyond the traditional tendency to defend one best way of approaching the problems of education. When we reject the stubborn either/or attitude, we may create a richer, broader, picture of genuine education" (p. 232). We recognize that parents and caregivers might choose DE as an efficient system for education for many reasons, some which are poverty, conflict of war, or concerns with safety. It is also possible that DE could be delivered in such a way that girls might enjoy a very good education, perhaps even better than face-to-face educational opportunities. However, either way, there need to be protective mechanisms in place to make sure children are treated with "dignity and fairness," and that their "happiness" (Noddings, 2017) is a central educational aim. It is equally important to critically explore how girls might be marginalized in DE in intersectional ways, based on class, ethnicity, abilities, etc. Otherwise, DE, to everyone's dismay, might reproduce and perpetuate gender inequality in the society and may not lead to a fulfilling education.

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