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Published online: 18 May 2023.

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An answer to everything? Four framings of girls' schooling and gender equality in education

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ABSTRACT

Girls' education has been widely promoted as the answer to a wide range of problems. This article maps four key ideas that have framed this formulation. These are firstly, a techno-rationalist approach linked to narrowly defined interventions, termed here 'what works'. Secondly, a more normative engagement is outlined, termed 'what matters' which explores how girls' education is part of processes to extend and defend rights, support feminism or decoloniality. Thirdly, an approach termed 'what disorganises' looks at the ways in which girls' education has been used deceitfully and hypocritically to mask the perpetuation of unjust power. Lastly, an approach termed 'what connects' maps processes associated with building connections and epistemologies of co-ordination The implications of these four framings are considered for the development of discussions on girls' education and gender equality and methods in comparative education.

Girls' education has, since the 1970s, been promoted by politicians, policy makers, practitioners and researchers as a kind of vaccination against an enormous range of social, economic, environmental and political problems (e.g. Woodhall 1973; Schultz 1973; Subbarao and Raney 1993; King and Hill 1993; Herz and Sperling 2004; Sperling and Winthrop 2015; Patterson et al. 2021). In the words of Boris Johnson in 2021 at the G8 Summit, echoing earlier remarks he made in 2018 when launching the Girls' Education Platform (FCO 2018), girls' education is:

> the silver bullet, this is the magic potion, this is the panacea. This is the universal cure, this is the Swiss Army knife, complete with allen key and screwdriver and everything else that can solve virtually every problem that afflicts humanity (Johnson 2021).

The speech, when the rhetorical flourishes are stripped out, echoes, a classic World Bank publication (King and Hill 1993), with a Foreword by Lawrence Summers, where girls' education was promoted as' 'the highest return investment available in the developing world.' (Summers 1993, v). Nearly 30 years on from Summers' Foreword, as concerns

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about climate change mounted, Project Drawdown noted girls' education as one of 20 effective interventions to cut carbon emissions (Drawdown 2020). Girls' education has thus frequently been presented as the answer to everything.

This Special Issue sets out to analyse this claim and looks at the way policies concerned with girls' education and international development have been framed and circulated. The articles consider the ways themes concerned with gender, education and international development illuminate policy mobilities regarding girls' education, the formation of institutional landscapes connecting and disconnecting at global, national and local scale, and the nature of the perspectives omitted or occluded.

This overview article charts some of the history of the conceptual changes regarding gender, education, international development. The terrain of policy, practice and research associated with girls' education has some clear defining features. In earlier work (Unterhalter 2007a) I identified three overlapping streams of activity, which I characterised as, firstly, interventions to secure girls' access, progression and attainment at school, secondly, institution building to support girls' education as part of the development of policy and practice for gender equality and women's rights in and through education, and, thirdly, interactions around feminist advocacy and activism for a transformatory politics, where girls' education and feminist praxis might be one site of engagement, linked with many others. The analysis made in that overview, and later empirical studies in national and international settings (e.g. Manion 2012; Monkman and Hoffman 2013; Unterhalter et al. 2014; Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016; Unterhalter and North 2017; Khoja-Moolji 2018; Monkman 2021; Durrani and Halai 2020; Iddy 2021) suggested policy or practice on girls' education generally steered towards the form of policy I had termed 'interventions'. Girls' education programmes were seen as turnkeys to secure a range of other objectives with uneven concern for the socio-economic and political relationships that shaped the lives of the girls involved . Institution building initiatives around gender equality in education, sometimes linked with gender mainstreaming, have had diffuse outcomes in transnational and national organisations. This has been partly because of entrenched structural inequalities, difficulties in supporting and sustaining feminist activism for change, covert or overt resistance to and denial of analyses that uncover how forms of privilege and injustice are established and maintained (e.g. Benschop and Verloo 2006; Dieltiens et al. 2009; Eyben 2010; Unterhalter and North 2011; Lombardo and Mergaert 2013; Kunz and Prügl 2019; Parkes, Ross, and Heslop 2020; Goetz 2020). Feminist movements taking up issues around education have ebbed and flowed with as many setbacks as achievements (e.g. Blackmore 2006; Moletsane et al. 2009; Chilisa and Ntseane 2010; Van Eerdewijk and Dubel 2012; David 2016; Henderson and Burford 2020; O'Donnell 2022). Education remains a site of limited or hesitant significance for feminist political intervention, partly because of the co-option of the girls' education 'intervention' approach by forces who have agendas very different to those oriented to women's rights and social justice (Unterhalter 2017; Moeller 2018; Taft 2020).

In the rhetoric around girls' education as the answer to everything, many areas of imprecision abound. Discussion has considered how to define girls, and whether to categorise them by age, stage of physical or emotional development, or social position (Monkman and Hoffman 2013; Unterhalter and North 2017; Durrani and Halai 2020). Debate has taken in whether the focus is only girls, ignoring the needs of other

groups – such as poor boys, children with disabilities and adult women with inadequate schooling, (e.g. Jere, Eck, and Zubairi 2022; Singal and Muthukrishna 2014; Evans, Akmal, and Jakiela 2020). Among the many questions posed some focus on what level of education for which girls, delivered how close to where they live is desirable and why (e.g. Burde and Linden 2013; Kaffenberger and Pritchett 2020; Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021). What should the content of that education be and is it best delivered in schools or in other settings (e.g. Haberland 2015; DeJaeghere 2017)? What relationships with the existing education system, run primarily by the state, is desirable and why, given the many failures of state provision regarding girls' education and gender justice (e.g. Stromquist 1995; Ansell 2002; Fennell 2012; Newman et al. 2021)? Why are some ways of framing the questions, and the perspectives of only certain authors from the global north given prominence on this issue? (e.g. Kwachou 2022; Arur and DeJaeghere 2019; Omwami 2021 Pereira 2022). The idea of the white feminist saviour, solving the problems of development, most notably lack of education is heavily criticised (Zakaria 2021; Beck 2021; Moreton-Robinson 2021) Sexuality, the politics of gender identification, and the problem of heteronormativity have been areas of contention, and sometimes silence (Jolly 2011; Cornwall 2014; Miedema, Le Mat, and Hague 2020; Jolly 2021). This imprecision and lack of agreement on key points, however, appears to have enhanced, rather than hampered the longevity and diffusion of the idea that girls' education is the answer to everything. The flexibility of the notion in relation to the four framings, discussed in this article, show some of the ways in which this discursive shape shifting has happened,

The articles in this Special Issue have been curated to present insights into these debates. They look at: (i) the mutations of girls' education as a global policy goal over time, linked with different historical moments, changing forms of global organisation, the global political economy and the global circulation of ideas. (ii) The changing concepts, research approaches and presentations of data used in developing this policy goal and its associated architecture of policy, organisational forms, associated discourses, and arenas of contestation. (iii) Interpretations of policy and research in a number of local contexts where gender and girls' education are concepts enmeshed in local education politics, selectively in dialogue with global policy discourses.

This introductory overview article considers these themes in order to frame the analysis of the field. The first section draws a conceptual map identifying the four framings that have shaped approaches to policy, practice and research, tracing these through a history of the rise of girls' education as a signature policy idea from the 1970s for governments, UN organisations, and women's rights and feminist campaigners. It describes some of the global and national architecture of policy, organisational forms, and practice that put these ideas into practice, looking at the spaces where these ideas were most welcomed, and those where they were resisted. In the second section some of implications of this history, and the analysis made in the other articles in this Special Issue, are summarised, drawing some areas of thematic discussion that emerge for current thinking in comparative education. The articles were invited to present reflections on aspects of the idea of girls' education in policy or practice. The implications of the analysis they offer for the four framings, distilled in this introduction, are considered in the concluding section.

Four framings

In trying to understand the issue of girls' education and the wide range of policies, sites of policy enactment, discussions and disputes, four contrasting framings are useful in organising the ideas, networks and research methods which shape policy and practice,

Table 1 summarises the four framings I have distilled, building from analyses I have made in earlier work looking at international and national policy in this area over three decades. For each framing the Table sets out some of the hermeneutic links that are shaped by the main orienting idea, the ways in which girls' education, gender, education and international development come to be considered, the preferred research method and some key policy texts.

The subsequent discussion gives more detail on each framing, and its hermeneutic links.

What works

This approach takes its name from the idea, long linked with the understanding of girls' education as a particular kind of intervention that works to address poverty, limit population, support economic growth, political stability or environmental protection (King and Hill 1993; Herz and Sperling 2004; Sperling and Winthrop 2015; Pankhurst 2022). The term' what works' has been used in an influential literature review about girls' education (Sperling and Winthrop 2015), is the main line of analysis in an influential systematic review of interventions rated effective with regard to barriers to girls' schooling (Psaki et al. 2022) and is a key strand in the argument made by researchers in the JPAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab) network, who have promoted the use of randomised control trials and the collection of empirical, primarily statistical data, to deepen what they see as methodologically rigorous claims about what works (Banerjee and Duflo 2011). Writers, (e.g. Kaffenberger and Pritchett 2020; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2021; Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021) who draw on this framework, view interventions, such as the abolition of school fees, scholarships for girls, reducing the distance to school, providing school meals, or improving pedagogy as largely technical solutions to a wide range of social, economic, educational and political problems. This position has long antecedents and began with girls' education being seen as a solution to child labour and child prostitution in the nineteenth century (Khoja-Moolji 2018). In later expressions girls' education was portrayed as a key solution to population growth, a social form of contraception for which women were encouraged to take responsibility (Birdsall 1992; Bashford 2008; Bracke 2022). This association emerged as many demographic studies showed that in societies where girls remained in school until 18, delaying their first pregnancy, there was a demographic transition to smaller families, associated with enhanced participation by women in the work force (Caldwell 1980; Schultz 2002; Mailloux et al. 2021). The link between girls' education and reduced population growth has been studied in many different contexts, leading to a range of controversies which take in whether or not the content of that education matters, the question of women missing from some populations and concerns at zero population growth (Lloyd and Mensch 1999; Sen 2003; Hawkes and Buse 2013; Bongaarts, Mensch, and Blanc 2017; O'Neill et al. 2020). In 2020 girls' education was identified as one of the most effective policy responses to the climate crisis, because smaller

Table 1. Four framings of research and policy on girls' education, gender and international development.

Framing	Associated ideas	Approach to girls' education	Approach to gender	Approach to education and international development	Preferred research methods	Key policy texts
What works?	Women in Development (WID), techno-rationalism, modernisation, improving learning outcomes	Focus on girls, marginalised girls, teenage girls.	Gender as a noun; counting girls and boys	National policy on schooling; aims to meet minimum levels of learning outcomes. Regulated by international development norms on financing and policy.	RCTs; some surveys	MDG 3 (2000); G7 Declaration (2021)
What matters?	Gender and Development (GAD); human rights; articulations of feminism in different settings; Freirean pedagogies	Link girls' education with wider concerns – human rights, feminism, gender equality or gender justice, decoloniality	Gender as an adjective	Education associated with multiple sites. Critical views of organisations and international development	Qualitative or mixed method social research; historical studies; stress on interdisciplinarity	Beijing Platform of Action (1995). Education 2030; Linking SDG 4 and SDG 5 (2015)
What disorganises?	Critiques of neoliberalism identifying features of gendered discourse, or co-option of ideas about gender; white saviourism	Identifies the ways in which supporters advancing girls' education may promote sectional or exploitative interests, disorganise feminist alliances.	Gender as a gerund	Sceptical about educational provision and the politics of international development	Critical discourse analysis; Systems of Provision (Sop) analysis	n/a
What connects?	The capability approach; intersectionality; reflexive comparative education. Epistemologies of co-ordination	Transformative approaches to women's rights and gender mainstreaming in education. Holistic, critical and evaluative practices	Gender as grammar	Linking critical, opposition movements with human development approaches to policy making, practice and research	Mixed methods; critical reflexivity; feminist and decolonial methodologies	DAWN Manifesto (1985); Beijing Platform (1995); UNGEI Declaration (2010), Education, 2030; (2015) Freetown manifesto (2022)

Developed from Unterhalter (2005, 2008, 2009, 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

populations, it was argued, limit greenhouse gas emissions and competition for increasingly scarce resources (Drawdown 2020; Vollset et al. 2020).

Thinking about girls' education as a particular kind of intervention that works persists in large programmes, such as the UK FCDO (Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office) supported Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), initiated in 2012 as a 12-year commitment to provide the most marginalised girls in the world with a quality education (Girls Education Challenge 2022). The thinking behind 'what works' had its clearest policy articulation in the MDGs when the realisation date for the target of MDG3, which focussed on girls' education, was to be achieved much earlier than the other MDGs, emphasising its turnkey guise (Unterhalter 2007a; Sen and Mukherjee 2014). The more recent policy associated with the G7 Girls' Education Declaration of 2021 does not stress girls' enrolment in school, as MDG 3 did, but focuses instead on improving learning outcomes with an aspiration to ensure 40 million more girls are in school by 2026 in low and middle income countries, and that 20 million more girls are reading by the age of 10. (FCDO 2021) This is seen, in the Declaration, as a fitting response to the effects of the school closures associated with COVID. The sub title for the Declaration refers to girls' education as an 'unlocking agenda'. The text notes that 12 years 'safe and quality education for all children, and specifically girls, is one of the most cost-effective and impactful social and economic investments governments and donors can make' (FCDO 2021). The assumption is that enhanced learning outcomes will work to unlock development in societies and economies.

The 'what works' approach often hinges on finding a particular intervention, for example employing more women teachers, separate toilets for girls at schools, or conditional cash transfers, whose efficacy can be established through randomised control trials, which will activate the demand or supply side changes needed to get girls into school, and support their attainment. This approach rests on a notion that 'girls', whether defined by age, physical maturation, or social convention, are a distinct group, and that poor or marginalised girls share particular distinct vulnerabilities, that can be ameliorated. Interventions to secure girls' participation in schooling are useful because many wider goals, are considered to flow from this, including addressing poverty, supporting child health, building women's empowerment and entrepreneurship or surviving disasters (Herz 1991; Herz and Sperling 2004; Duflo 2012; Minniti and Naudé 2010; Andrabi, Daniels, and Das 2021). Interventions associated with girls' education were presented as 'good buys' in an evidence review of cost-effective approaches to improve global learning conducted by a high-level panel of experts for DFID and the World Bank, although none of the RCTs reviewed for the study were designed as girls' education interventions (GEEAP 2020). In 2022 the FCDO set up the *What Works hub*, a £55 million investment which aimed to deliver on the Government's manifesto commitment to:

> stand up for the right of every girl to 12 years of quality education … , and to project the UK as a force for good in the world. It delivers on the UK Government's 2018 Education Policy: Get Children Learning, which commits to "lend our full support to national decision-makers committed to improving learning to make education systems more accountable, effective and inclusive, including through access to UK expertise" (FCDO 2022)

In this vision girls' education works to get all children learning, to leverage the geopolitical position of the UK government, and to encourage the dissemination of UK expertise to national decision makers around the world. Girls' education as an area of policy and

practice, in this articulation, may not be the answer to everything, but it is being asked to do a great deal more than any other development intervention. The evidence to support the claims made for the efficacy of girls' education in this initiative rest largely on authors from within the 'what works' perspective, with none of the critiques being noted or discussed. The problem is defined in terms of a lack of evidence and support for the reforms that are thought to be known to work.

What works, thus, has support from powerful organisations associated with policy, practice and research in education and international development. It is a policy idea that has been promoted for at least half a century, and is associated with a large body of empirical research. Its focus on an imprecisely defined group of girls, from whom a number of symbolic figures can be identified and promoted, gives the discourse particular influence. 'What works' is appealing politically because it appears to demarcate a clear line from problem to solution. Educating girls, it is claimed, will enhance economic growth, deepen democracy, reverse climate change. But these writers do not have a detailed analysis of how this happens.

What matters

The second framing - 'what matters' - could be characterised as the opposite side of 'what works'. Activists, policy makers and researchers who draw on this framing seek to situate policies and practices associated with girls' education in a wider normative landscape linked to advancing human rights, gender equality or feminist advocacy. Many highlight the significance of historical and social context in constraining the realisation of these ideals. 'What matters' is supported by some international organisations, but these tend to have less money, less status and less authority than those associated with 'what works'. The empirical research linked with 'what matters' tends to use different research methods to 'what works', and because there is more deployment of ideas from sociology, arts and humanities, rather than economics, these studies often garner less respect in certain policy circles and more limited research funding. 'What matters' brings together a host of normative and political values. This assemblage may appear to those promoting 'what works', who do not engage with this analysis, as a deficit rather than a strength, as there is no simple signature idea. What matters, as an intellectual or political position, has often been associated with movements or collectives, such as DAWN (Development Alternatives of Women for a New Era) in 1985, and has not been linked with a charismatic spokesperson, as is the case for 'what works'. All these features of the 'what matters' position means that the authority and influence of these ideas is more muted, but not without visibility or influence.

The policy articulations associated with 'what matters' have had a profile in policy. They feature in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Constitutions of many countries. The ways in which human rights matter to gender equality and rights in education has been a key strand in the work of UNESCO, UN Women, and is a major strand in CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) (Wilson 2004; Subrahmanian 2005: Farrior 2009; Peppin Vaughan 2010; Liebowitz and Zwingel, 2014; Ünal 2022) In addition to this presence, the Constitutions of many countries give prominence to gender equality, education and rights (e.g. Goetz 1998; Chopra and Jeffery 2005; Bajaj 2014; Cassola et al. 2014), although all these commentators bring out how difficult

and contested delivery on gender equality and education rights are and the mutable meanings deployed in interpretation. International declarations aimed at mobilising governments, civil society and UN organisations have, since the Beijing Declaration of 1995, kept a concern with gender equality *and* girls' education in their text either with sections on each, or with targets and indicators which note the significance of each although, in implementation, the dual concern has been hard to maintain (Unterhalter, 2007b; Unterhalter and North 2011; Monkman and Hoffman 2013; Rao and Cagna 2018; Unterhalter and North 2017; Sen and Mukherjee 2014). UNGEI (United Nations Girls Education Initiative), the UN agency established to promote girls' education, has, at least since 2010, stressed the importance of gender equality and girls' voice, and has, since 2020, given increasing prominence to feminist agendas (Anderson 2022; Fyles 2022; Unterhalter and North 2011). Thus, while 'what matters' is not associated with the richest or most powerful actors in the architecture of global or national education policy making, it is still a position of authority.

A distinctive body of critical scholarship has commented on the limitations of the' what works' approach in girls' education, drawing on some of the concerns of what matters. Research methods to establish 'what matters' have tended to be qualitative, with some studies drawing on history or philosophy, although sometimes quantitative or mixed methods approaches are used (e.g. Parkes et al. 2022; Wetheridge 2022). Studies which deploy this framing highlight how the primary focus of policy and practice needs to be not simply girls' access to and progression through education, but the contexts and complexities associated with those processes and the gendered social relations in play which bring out inequalities and attempts to transform these as much through curricula, changing pedagogies and learning materials, as through the relationships around education (e.g. Vavrus 2002; Aikman and Unterhalter 2005; Chisamya et al. 2012; Khurshid 2015; Rao et al. 2019). Girls' voice and empowerment are a key strand (Mitchell and Moletsane 2018; Murphy-Graham 2012; Monkman 2011). A number of studies highlight the significance of documenting and assessing restrictions on women's reproductive rights, even when there is an expansion of girls' education, and the importance of affirming women's agency (Klugman et al. 2014) . A number note the continuation of misogyny and violence against women and girls, sometimes because of their education (Parkes 2015; Adra et al. 2020). Many writers discuss the limitations of policy texts and the need for a deepening of understandings of gender equality, inequalities, engagements with equity (e.g. Blackmore 2000; Fennell and Arnot 2007; Durrani and Halai 2020) and appreciation of the historical contexts in which the policies emerged (Monkman and Hoffman 2013; Peppin Vaughan 2010; Durrani and Halai 2020; Khoja-Moolji 2018). Some scholars note the ways in which understanding the expansion of girls' education requires an acute appreciation of particular histories, where some girls had education and others none, and an unlearning of the relationships of racism and colonialism, sexism and patriarchy (Coloma 2012; Kadiwal 2021). The meanings of gender and a questioning of gender binaries, heteronormativity and the politics that entrenches this has also begun to be documented (Lind 2009; Jolly 2022)

Much of my writing has been part of this critique. I have noted in studies with colleagues in India, South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Kenya the complex local and national gender relationships in which any intervention has to work (e.g. Unterhalter and Dutt 2001; Morrell et al. 2009; Unterhalter, Heslop, and Mamedu 2013; Unterhalter and

North 2017; Unterhalter et al. 2018). Most of the scholarship associated with the 'what works' framing engages only piecemeal with these historically formed and multi-layered contexts . I have tried to draw out in work I have done on international, national and local settings how what works can reflect a minimal engagement with gender issues, failing to address the misogyny, violence and long histories of dispossession that are part of the stories of girls out of school or learning little within. I have been concerned at the absence of critical discussion of the theoretical and methodological assumptions in 'what works', and have highlighted how what is often ignored is a concern with equity, gender equality, women's rights, global social justice, intersectionality or sustainability (Unterhalter 2008; Unterhalter 2009; Unterhalter 2017; Unterhalter, Robinson, and Ron Balsera 2020).

In thinking about why, 'what matters' has had less influence on policy and practice than what works I have noted (Unterhalter 2022) that 'what matters' as a framework rests on articulating a number of different kinds of visions and highlights how education for women and girls comprises a central component of multi-faceted aspirations. For example, women's rights encompasses reproductive rights, political, cultural and socio-economic rights, and rights to be free from violence. In securing these institutionally and through practice an element of education is entailed both *about* the components of these rights, *and* to advance and protect the rights. Because these rights encompass many facets of political, economic, social and cultural rights over a lifetime, the associated idea about education for girls and women does not just focus on schools. The outcomes of these initiatives are not evaluated or sustained just through a narrow range of learning assessments. Education, thus, is integral to the practice of women's rights, but it is not the only path to secure this. This multiplicity of pathways is a key difference with the 'what works' framework. Similar points can be made about gender equality or feminism or decoloniality as values that 'matter,' and draw on education for girls as one element in advancing and defending these. Here too education is not positioned as the lead initiative, with other strategies seen as subordinate. The scholarship associated with 'what matters' often reports on small-scale studies, or highlights the difficulties in putting policy into practice. For the large funders associated with 'what works' this may read as flawed interventions which cannot be scaled up or reduced to a key performance indicator. While for many of the scholars associated with 'what matters' the range of disciplines deployed and the engagement with interdisciplinarity is a strength, and this heterodoxy is seen to be very much in keeping with the breadth of view associated with this framing, the precision about policy, practice and research articulated by those linked to 'what works' means that those working with the two different framings of 'what works' and 'what matters' tend to talk past each other.

What disorganises

The disjuncture between those whose approach to gender and girls' education was framed by 'what works' and those whose approach was framed by 'what matters' widened from around 2005, partly linked to changes in the global political economy, the pressures which fuelled the diffusion of neoliberal policies, including the celebration of privatisation in education and the promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs), which became one high profile site for promoting girls' education initiatives. I have

placed the emergence of the third framing, which I have termed what disorganises during this period (Unterhalter 2017), although I think its roots lie further back and require careful documenting.

Scholarship associated with 'what disorganises' documents how girls' education, in its guise as 'the answer to everything' has been a very useful narrative to advance the interests of large corporations and organisations (Moeller 2018; Robinson 2022), defend particular geopolitical strategies (Berry 2003; Novelli 2010), support the promotion of privatisation in education, in the face of analyses of deepening inequality associated with the approach (Gideon and Unterhalter 2020; Unterhalter and Robinson 2020), and to depoliticise or demobilise feminist engagements with education (Scott and Rönnblom 2022; Walters 2022). The most notorious example of 'what disorganises' is Laura Bush's defense of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, claiming the assault was necessary in order to advance girls' education (Bush 2001).

'What disorganises' is associated with a perspective I have called dispersal. I have taken the term from Foucault's concern with the contingency of discourses, as outlined in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucalut 1972, 34–43). Foucault notes how discourses are formed not just by chains of inference, as in the sciences, tables of differences, as in linguistics, or 'small islands' of coherence, but through a process of *dispersion*.

> Whenever one can describe between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience we are dealing with a discursive formation (Foucalut 1972, 41)

Foucault's notion of discursive formation presents an analysis of *how* Ideas about girls' education and gender equality have been widely deployed in discourses associated with what works and what matters. 'What works' looks for some regular causal link between the circumstances that brought knowledge into being, such as girls dropping out of school, the knowledge generated about causes, interventions for amelioration, and the ways in which this comes to be expressed through reports from powerful organisations. The 'what matters' framing paints a more diffuse picture of the nature of the problem, approaches to documentation and engagements for change.In using the term 'dispersal' to describe 'what disorganises' my intention has been to go beyond just documenting particular discursive formations, and to show how discourses themselves have been deployed to detach ideas about girls' education from a broad programme about rights, equality or addressing poverty, and have been diverted from the circumstances of want or discrimination that produced them, coming to be deployed deceitfully and hypocritically in relation to maintaining and masking unjust power. In this guise they purport to talk about gender equality, women's rights and empowerment, but do the opposite, silencing, discrediting or making it impossible for critical advocates of these processes to talk, be heard or work to effect change . 'What disorganises' is about ideas of post truth (Farkas and Schou 2019), the deceitful use of ideas about girls' education to promote policies or practices that undermine equality, justice or decoloniality, Dispersal is primarily a critique of policy, rather than associated with any policy positions.

I have noted dispersal as a feature of neoliberalism, network societies and the highly polarised debate over the privatisation of education (Unterhalter 2017). I have also

considered dispersal in relation to the co-option of ideas about women's empowerment and girls' education, by some theories or everyday practices (Unterhalter 2020). A number of writers highlight links between discourses I have characterised as dispersal, and the operation of hegemonic discourses associated with masculinity, heteronormativity and white saviour feminism (Kanai and Gill 2020; Eckert and Bachmann 2021). The complex history of the #Me too movement, with disputes about origins, authenticity, and strategy would be another instance (McKinney 2019; Loney-Howes et al. 2022). The historical setting for these ideas is the weakening of welfare states, the failures to deliver free quality education to all, the persistence of racism and misogyny, the loosening of ties amongst groups, communities and classes, the promotion of ideas that prioritise choice, competition and appearance over collaboration and solidarity, and the insidious presence of surveillance capitalism. This has coincided with large corporations and individuals, socialised in these organisations, gaining enormous power in education and international development policy making (Sterbenk et al. 2022; Menashy 2019; Menashy and Zakharia 2022).

In writing about 'what disorganises' I have used the metaphor that gender becomes a gerund. (Unterhalter 2014). A gerund in English is a verb form functioning as a noun. I use this image to suggest that gender, a term initially used to signal some form of acknowledgement of and attempt at dismantling injustices, has come, sometimes, to work in a different direction, validating consumer choice, the maintenance of privilege, and the masking of racism or violence. From 2005, it appeared to me, there was much disorganisation among groups working on gender and girls' education, so that some were working to speak up for the powerless, listening, providing platforms and support for change in relation to what girls and women were saying about rights and injustices, and trying to dismantle the institutions which structured this, while others were ventriloquising these demands, providing 'get out free' cards to rich governments or corporations, allowing them not to address poverty, injustice, misogyny or violence, and continue work that set in place relationships that perpetuated this, while still promoting girls' education. The direction of travel in much international development work on girls' education was often, intentionally or unintentionally silent on processes that maintained injustice. For example, one of the projects under the GEC portfolio was co-sponsored by DFID with Coca Cola in Nigeria. Coca Cola reported in 2017 that 6.000 of the 10,000 girls involved in the £17 million programme of training provided in school and through specialist materials went on to employment 'joining the Coca Cola value chain' and enabling them to be linked up with a system of electronic registration (Olcar 2018). Aid money, linked to girls' education, was thus being used to grow the work force for a corporation, dogged by controversy about ground water depletion and the promotion of highly unhealthy sugar drinks (Drew 2021; Moodie et al. 2021). Walters (2022) refers to this as a form of gender washing.

What connects

This framing represents a hope on my part to connect what matters and what works. . My initial thinking about this theme was driven by a concern at the division opening up in this field between writers associated with 'what works' and 'what matters'. The argument I made initially (Unterhalter 2008) was that if something mattered, like human rights,

feminism or gender equality, it was necessary to try to make it work, while if something worked it was important to understand, why, for whom and with what consequences. In conceptual and methodological work on the capability approach and reflexive comparison, I was working through a number of puzzles about connection. In writing about the capability approach I was trying to understand education as both a capability or opportunity and a functioning or outcome, and the differential relationships associated with the contexts that formed and linked these that went beyond lists of what capability approach scholars call conversion factors (Unterhalter 2003; Unterhalter 2007b; Unterhalter 2008). In trying to write about reflexive comparison (Unterhalter 2019b; Unterhalter 2020) I have been trying to think about comparison as connection of a special type. Much work in comparative education is particularly self critical of its own rules of formation (Takayama 2020; Cowen 2021), but an important question is what this critique connects to. In much writing about gender, education, rights and feminism in comparative education there is a need to articulate a wider normative framing. From the inside of comparative education or education and international development there are no pre-given conceptual underpinnings to fill in the ellipsis where that articulation in relation to gender and girls' schooling and its rationale might be placed.

In later work around interconnection, I have been interested in the potential of intersectionality, as suggesting how different locations of global, national and local and settings for social development might overlap (Unterhalter 2012) and offering ways to think beyond the limited ways in which intersectionality was being used in presentations of statistics, intersecting only gender, socio-economic status, and location . In a paper developed for UNESCO on intersectionality, the team I co-ordinated worked to adapt the distinctions around intersectionality McCall (2005) had presented building from Crenshaw's initial discussion in 1991 in the *Stanford Law Review* (Crenshaw 2017) McCall's analysis had been adapted for the health sector (Gkiouleka et al. 2018), and we considered how to infuse the distincitons she drew into some of the debates about education (Unterhalter, Robinson and Ron Balsera 2020). In that paper, we identified three forms of intersectionality which we linked, firstly, with a policy approach that highlights descriptions of overlapping differences with regard to access or participation in education associated with groups defined by gender, race, location, which we termed descriptive intersectionality. Secondly, we noted the need to undertake an analysis of the ways that formations of power and powerlessness operate in and through education, which we termed institutional and normative intersectionality. Thirdly we suggested a need to engage with discursive critiques of the ways ideas of gender and inclusion are formulated in education policy and practice, which we termed discursive intersectionality. Those ideas about intersectionality highlight ways of developing connection between frameworks of analysis and reflections on the power relations in play through those processes.

Thus, all these attempts appear to me as strands towards some kind of theorisation of 'what connects', thinking through how ideas about gender and women's rights may be positioned in what is a broadly humanist framework associated with comparative education (Elfert 2023) and what flows from this methodologically and in terms of policy and practice

Most recently. I have drawn on Kyle Whyte's (2020) delineation of epistemologies of coordination, because, unlike some of the ways in which humanist philosophies like *ubuntu* have sometimes had the scars of historical injustice, associated with race or gender,

occluded, this approach acknowledges the effects of violent histories. In writing critically about colonialism. Whyte highlights how actions, which may be harmful or discriminatory, are defended as responses to crises. One may see the limited interventions associated with girls' education and 'what works' as a kind of response to a crisis of poverty or climate change, and the dishonest presentations associated with 'what disorganises' as attempts to deflect attention from particular relationships of production, exchange or war. Whyte sets epistemologies of co-ordination, noted in indigenous communities, and populations with long histories of dispossession and discrimination, as the antithesis of crisis epistemologies

> Coordination refers to ways of knowing the world that emphasize the importance of moral bonds—or kinship relationships—for generating the (responsible) capacity to respond to constant change. Epistemologies of coordination are conducive to responding to expected and drastic changes without validating harm or violence. (Whyte 2020, 53)

This formulation sees connection not so much as ordering a systemic flow, as suggested by 'what works', but as building a co-ordinated, curated or articulated form of exchange that emphasises the morally responsive connections and forms of kinship bond between communities engaged with policy, practice and research on girls' education, gender equality and women's rights. It suggests an orientation to critical thinking, but not thinking alone, or outside a history of particular structures or actions. It seeks to build bonds of mutual respect and support between differently positioned groups. The process, which, I think can be adapted is concerned with methodologies, projects, and the politics of publication which is highly attentive to forms of harm and violence, both material and symbolic. This requires reflexivity, critique, careful documentation, and attempts to change the systems that enforce hierarchies, exclusions, dispossession, exploitation, discrimination and violence. Thus it talks, for me, to a need to see gender not simply as a description of a particular group, formed by birth or identification, but as a kind of grammar which shapes what it is we can and can't say or mean, but which is itself mutable, responsive to human imagination, changing representation and forms of organisation. Some of the education projects described as responses to the precarities of neoliberalism present examples of this in practice (Monkman, Frkovich, and Proweller 2022).

It is not yet clear whether 'what connects' has traction as a policy idea, or a field of practice. It has featured in some policy positions, such as UNESCO's 2021 report *Reimagining our Futures together (UNESCO 2022)* . At the *Transforming Education Summit (TES)* convened by the UN Secretary General in September 2022, the idea of education as a social contract concerned with equality and equity was supported (UN 2022). In relation to girls' education and gender the vision statement affirmed:

> The pursuit of gender equality and the rights of women and girls remains a crucial goal of the international community and education is also critical to this endeavour. Education systems can put in place essential equity, inclusive and non-discriminatory measures to support girls. They should remove all legal and other barriers, such as the ban on secondary education for girls that is causing untold suffering in Afghanistan. They should also include an age-appropriate and gender sensitive curriculum for all that addresses gender-based prejudice, norms, or stereotypes, empowers and equips learners to combat violence against women, and ensure sexual and reproductive health. (UN 2022)

A special Global Platform on gender equality in and through education was convened in March 2023 in the wake of the TES. The ways in which the initiatives of this platform will connect with other processes remains to be seen. The perceptions from feminist activists attending the Commission on the Status of Women meetings in New York in 2023 remain open, but also mindful of the levels of misogyny and violence women continue to experience in seeking education (UN 2023). However a number of key interlocutors are doubtful of the capacity of global governance structures, so enmeshed with the hierarchies of geopolitics and economies of extraction to transform and deliver on this vision, while local initiatives continue, often disconnected from each other, with limited perspectives on sustainability and leverage . Thus 'what connects', at the present conjuncture, remains an idea waiting for realisation,

Can we co-ordinate and connect?

The articles in this Special Issue present perspective on the four framings and particular analyses of forms of connection. A number highlight the limitations of 'what works'. Parkes et al. (2022), drawing on data from Uganda, show how silence and shame has often been the response to teachers' involvement in sexual violence at schools. They note difficulties in documenting prevalence or establishing an institutional response. Peppin Vaughan and Longlands (2022), highlight how gender parity indicators in education, often used in 'what works' interventions, fail to document many of the relationships that matter both to policy makers and practitioners, whom they interviewed. Mills (2022), drawing on detailed interviews with pregnant and parenting school-aged girls, in Kenya shows the ways in which they are framed by the literature and many education professionals in terms of deficit, with returning to school presented as a discourse of redemption. This fails to take account of the complexities of girls' views, relationships and agency. The ways in which education may or may not work for young women in higher education is also illuminated by Moletsane (2022) drawing on data on the use of photovoice in a range of settings in South Africa and Canada. Khalid (2023) identifies the ways in which mothers living in poverty have been portrayed in very one dimensional ways in policy literature and some academic scholarship framed by what works, failing to take account of the nuance of family situation and relationships. Lagi et al. (2023) illuminate the limitations of curriculum policy on the environment in Fiji to take account of the complexities of gendered lives in the face of extreme climate injustice.

All the articles emphasise some of the normative concerns with gender equality, women's rights and agency, associated with 'what matters'. Lagi et al. (2023) bring out the significance of the relationship of gender justice and climate justice., Kwachou (2022) outlines the ways in which the insights from black and African feminist theorists and activists have been overlooked and the significance of their contribution. She highlights their key contributions on the intersectionality of race and gender in a continued subjugation of black girls and women in and through institutions of education, and the need to reframe education settings to foster 'critical self consciousness and self empowerment' (Kwachou 2022).

The articles present some distinctive lines of analysis with regard to 'what connects'. Mills (2022), Moletsane (2022), Kwachou (2022), Lagi et al. (2023) and Khalid (2023) identify groups who have not been included, or have been silenced or inadequately attended to in the architecture of global, national and local policy making and practice. Across all

these studies it is poor women and girls, subject to discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and class who are overlooked.

Some writers draw out how the process or policy making in dialogue with evaluations of practice has been slanted towards particular methodologies, with Parkes et al. (2022) noting the omissions associated with quantitative studies of school-related gender-based violence, and Peppin Vaughan and Longlands (2022) the authority given to indicators linked to quantitative data, distorting the documentation of forms of gender inequalities. Kwachou (2022) highlights how the politics of academic publishing overlooked significant insights from black and African feminist scholars. The studies call for more mixed method and critical dialogical studies (Parkes et al. 2022), a wider range of indicators in the field of gender and education (Peppin Vaughan and Longlands 2022), methods that document the complexity and nuance of lived experience (Mills 2022; Moletsane 2022; Khalid 2023), and curriculum reform that engages with gender and insights from indigenous knowledge (Lagi et al. 2023). Thus they present paths to a more wide ranging menu of methods than have been used heretofore connecting policy, practice and research with more nuance and accuracy.

With regard to some debates in comparative education regarding the mobilities and transformations of policy and practice between global, national and local scales, and the potential of connection, the analyses highlight two trends. There is a dominant narrative associated with global organisations about, for example, the deficits of poor mothers (Khalid 2023) or pregnant schoolgirls (Mills 2022), which suggests the route forward is fidelity to a given solution. But they also highlight pushback from local activism suggesting there are other routes and networks through which connection may play out. Instances are provided of connections made in challenging gender-based violence,(Moletsane 2022), setting in place, alternative approaches to selecting indicators in education to engage with gender equality and women's rights (Peppin Vaughan and Longlands 2022), developing analysis that can help build empowerment (Kwachou 2022; Khalid 2023; Mills 2022). Thus connection does not just take one form, in one place, but is highly diverse and contested.

The Special Issue as a whole has aimed to document some of the mutations of girls' education as a global policy goal over time, its associated architecture of policy, organisational forms, and research and the ways in which these have been changed and rearticulated in particular contexts. All the articles highlight the tension between a dominant narrative and alternatives. This introductory article has set out four framings to think about girls' education, gender, policy, practice and research. In comparing the four framings the ways in which each is distinctive, historically located and partial emerges. But it also shows the need to articulate them in particular formations. The articles in this Special Issue mark paths to critique and supplement particular framings. In a world of staggering injustice, inequality and danger, neither girls' education nor gender equality can ever be the answer to everything. But both need to be a part of answers provided to questions that come from many directions about how we can try to live together in ways that affirm our humanity and our wishes for profound change in a direction concerned for wellbeing, equality, equity and social justice for all who share our planet.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributor

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