Reframing gender disparities in basic education in the Philippines

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Introduction

Gender disparities in education outcome indicators are among the most confounding issues that have challenged education researchers in the Philippines. Data collected during the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) 2015 monitoring and evaluation activities brought attention to this disparity, leading to the conclusion that boys, in general, were underparticipating and underachieving in basic education. This paper interrogates this conclusion because it has influenced how boys and girls are regarded in the context of education, without adequate explanation for the disparities and, ultimately, there have not been corresponding interventions to address boys' underachievement in school. It is also time to revisit these disparities as the Department of Education (DepEd) institutionalizes the K to 12 reform which mandates gender sensitivity in classrooms and with the larger push for gender equality in and through education through the Education 2030 Framework for Action of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Definitions and indicators

Research literature on boys' underachievement do not provide consensus on "its definition and measurement" (Smith 2003a, 287). Often, underachievement is conflated with low achievement

and there is no agreement whether it pertains to an individual's innate ability or a person's achievement in relation to a larger group (Smith 2003a). Jha (2009) provides clarity by defining underachievement as having two dimensions, namely underparticipation and underperformance. For the purpose of this policy brief, we use Jha and Pouezevara's (2016, 1) definition of boys' underachievement as "boys' lower levels of education participation and educational performance compared with girls." We also adopt the following indicators from the Department of Education (DepEd) (2018):

(1) Education Participation refers to "enrollment and completion at key milestones" (Jha and Pouezevara 2016, 1). The indicators used for participation are:

(a) Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) refers to the total enrollment in a given level of education, regardless of age.

(b) Net Enrollment Rate (NER) is the ratio of the enrollment for the age group corresponding to the official school age in the elementary or secondary level to the population of the same age group in a given year.

(c) Cohort Survival Rate (CSR) is the percentage of enrollees at the beginning grade in a given school

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year who reach the final grade of the elementary or secondary level.

(d) Completion Rate (CR) is the percentage of first grade entrants in a level of education who complete the level in accordance with the required number of years of study.

(2) Educational Performance refers to the "specific level[s] of skills attained or knowledge gained" (ibid.). The indicators used are the scores on the National Achievement Test (NAT), a standardized test for Grade 3 (also called Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Assessment or ELLNA), Grade 6, Grade 10, and Grade 12 (not included in this paper) learners (DepEd 2016). The NAT uses the Mean Percentage Score (MPS). For example, a 50 MPS means that the learner answered 20 items out of 40 items in a test correctly. Furthermore, the NAT Certificate of Rating (COR) makes use of Descriptive Equivalents (Benito 2010) on the obtained percentage scores as a guide for interpreting results. These are:

(a) 0%–4% = Absolutely No Mastery;
(b) 5%–15% = Very Low Mastery;
(c) 16%–34% = Low Mastery;
(d) 35%–65% = Average Mastery;
(e) 66%–85% = Moving Towards Mastery;
(f) 86%–95% = Closely Approximating Mastery; and
(g) 96%–100% = Mastered.

This policy brief presents data for boys and girls in public schools where data are available.

Prevailing interpretations of the gender disparities in basic education

Luz (2007) reports that from 2002 to 2005, boys dropped out approximately 2 to 2.5 times more often than girls from Grade 5 onwards, that more girls than boys graduated from high school (53% versus 47%) and that, in 2005, more girls were inclined to go to college than boys (58% versus 52%). Based on these, the Philippines was described as "becoming a nation of male underachievers" (ibid., 12). At about the same time, Caoli-Rodriguez (2007) examined education outcome indicators including gross

enrolment rate, net enrolment rate, cohort survival rate, and completion rate from 1999 to 2005. While acknowledging slight disadvantages of females in some literacy indicators, she concluded that boys were lagging behind girls and stated that "historical gender performance in almost all key education outcome indicators… registered an advantage of females over males" (ibid., 57). Similarly, David, Albert, and Carreon-Monterola (2009) examined data from school year (SY) 1996–1997 to 2008–2009 and concluded that males in basic education in the Philippines were becoming less educated than females.

In 2011, the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) commissioned researchers in Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Thailand to investigate the educational underperformance of boys in these countries. Torres (2011, as cited in UNGEI n.d., 14) concluded that Filipino "boys' underachievement is driven by parents' and teachers' low academic expectations for boys, the economic viability of boys, passive classroom experience, gender bias, stereotyping, and a lack of learning materials." In 2014, the Philippines' fifth progress report on the MDGs stated that "education indicators continue to lean towards girls as basic education data show that girls nearly surpass boys in formal basic education" (National Economic and Development Authority and United Nations Development Programme 2014, 49). Similar findings were reported in the Philippines' EFA 2015 review report which said that "for SY 2012–2013, girls outperformed boys in all education efficiency indicators… Girls have also been outperforming boys in terms of the National Achievement Test (NAT) scores" (ibid., 44).

Comparative data consistently showing girls doing better than boys on various education indicators led the Philippine Commission on Women (2014) to call on the education sector to address the underperformance of boys in key education indicators as a priority gender issue.

Revisiting historical data on education participation

Figure 1 (on next page) shows the elementary level GER, NER, CSR, and CR data from the year 2000 to 2015, covering the years of the MDGs and EFA 2015. It can be seen on the GER and NER line graphs that

FIGURE 1   Participation indicators for elementary level, SY 2000–2001 to SY 2014–2015
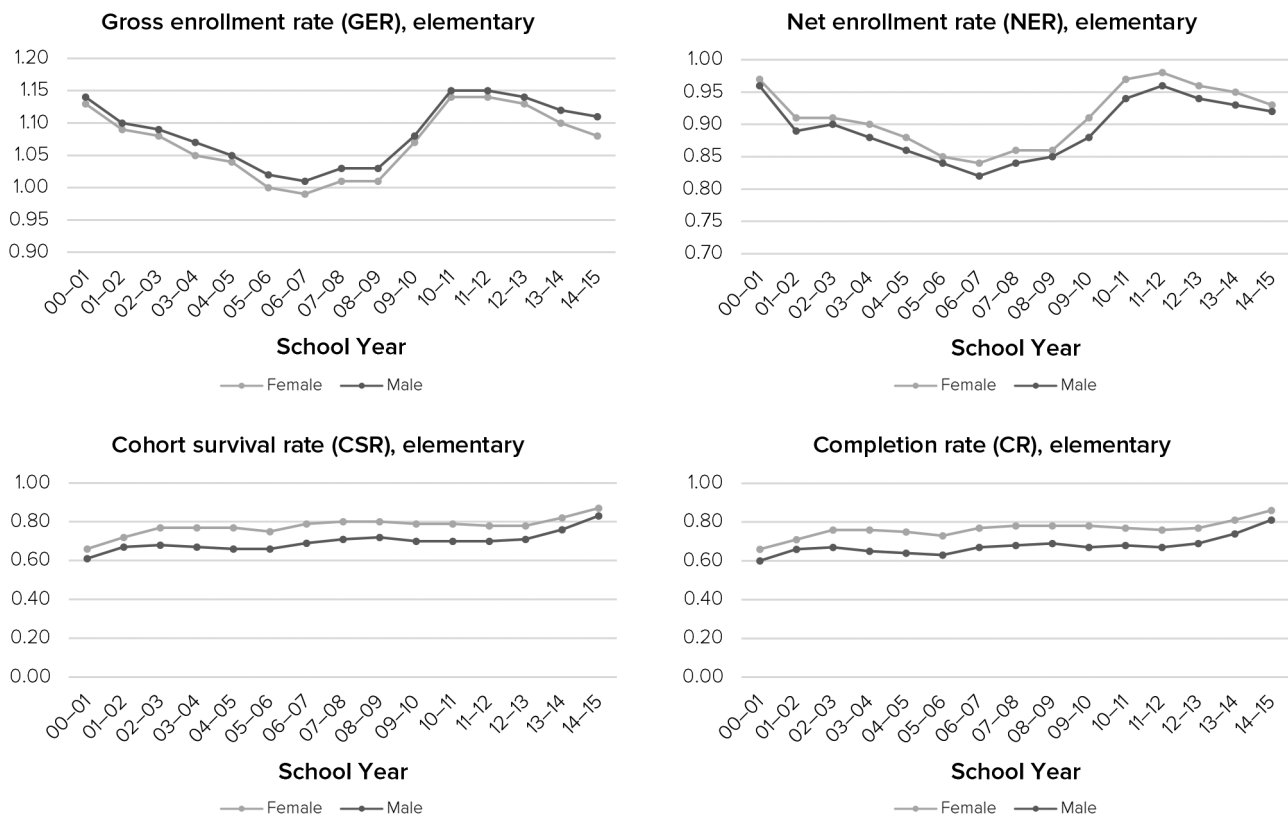
Source: Department of Education (DepEd) Office of Planning Service–Education Management Information System Division (OPS–EMISD)

there is not much difference in the participation rates of boys and girls over the 15-year period. The upward trend in the CSR and CR data indicates that more learners are completing elementary education. However, gender disparity also becomes more visibly observable in these two indicators. Indeed, more girls than boys complete elementary education and do so on time.

Figure 2 (on next page), on the other hand, shows participation data for secondary grades from 2000 to 2015. The graphs show variability and frequent changes over the 15-year period. Clearly, sustaining school participation of boys and girls in secondary education is a challenge that must be addressed with sustained efforts. Like the data in elementary education, the data for male and female students show the same trends though the disparities in gender are more pronounced in secondary education. Again, girls are able to complete secondary education and do so on time more frequently than boys.

Figure 3 (on page 5) shows the performance of boys and girls on the Grade 3 NAT indicating

that in this grade level, girls had higher MPS than boys. With much less difference in scores, the same conclusion is found in the Grade 6 and Grade 10 NAT scores. Based on the NAT mastery level equivalency table, however, the overall average of both boys' and girls' scores in the NAT fell in the same level: Average Mastery. Moreover, at certain time periods, an upward trend in scores was observed for Grade 6 and Grade 10 for both boys and girls. This means that for these time periods, NAT Grade 6 and Grade 10 scores were improving for both boys and girls.

Revisiting historical data on participation and performance affirms that, indeed, gender disparities are observable. Unfortunately, plausible and research-based explanations have not led to viable solutions to address these disparities. While interesting, it can be argued that the more worrisome observation is that data for all boys and girls need to reflect better school participation and learning. The objective, therefore, should be to find ways to improve the education outcomes for all learners and not just for boys.

FIGURE 2 Participation indicators for secondary level, SY 2000–2001 to SY 2014–2015
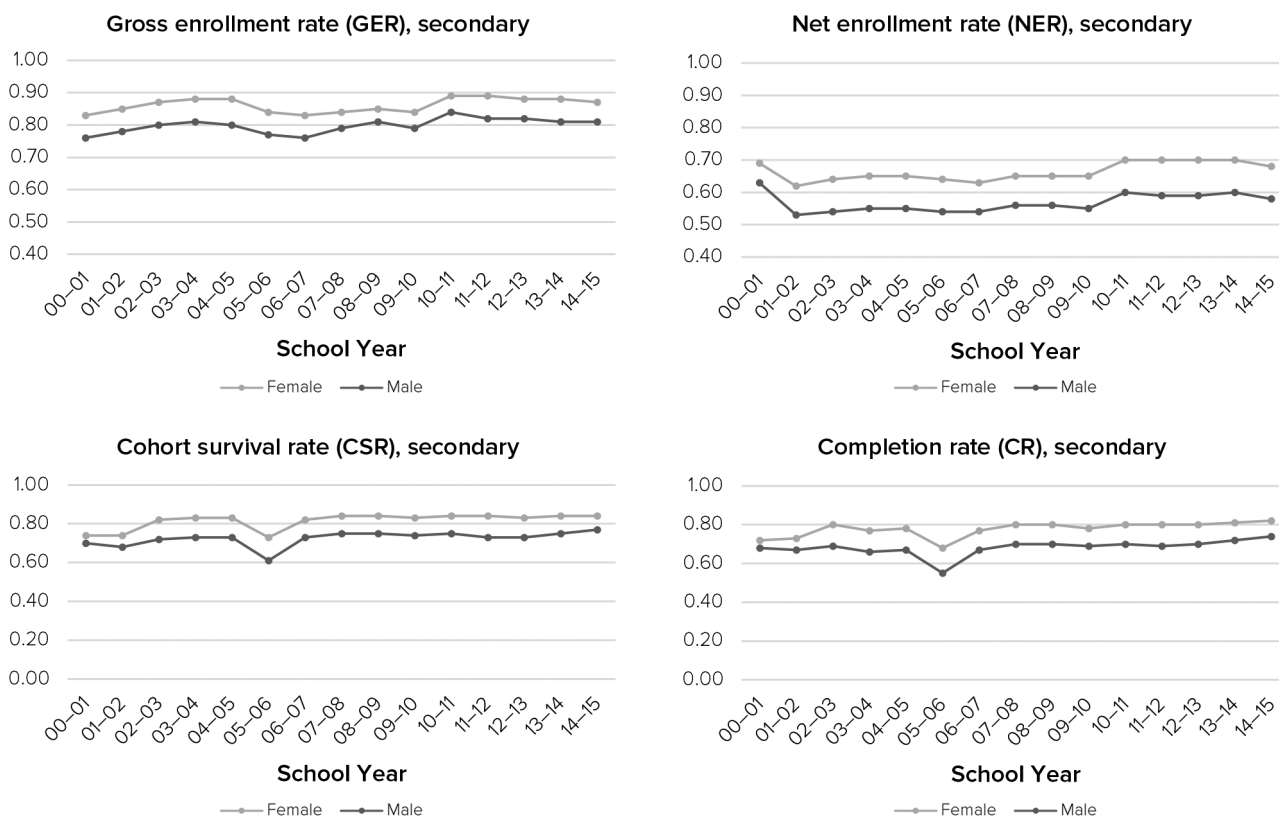
Source: Department of Education (DepEd) Office of Planning Service–Education Management Information System Division (OPS–EMISD)

The succeeding sections discuss issues in relation to the reporting of education indicators, stereotyping in explanations for gender disparities, perpetuating gender regimes in schools, and making comparisons between boys and girls. These hope to provide a different perspective on the interactions between gender and education.

Challenging how education indicators are reported

Whilst ringing alarm bells about the underachievement of boys in basic education, many studies have fallen into an overly simplified way of reporting data, which is by aggregating according to gender. This practice has inadvertently encouraged the notions on homogeneity within the gender classification. Worse, it does not provide any insight on how to understand and address these conflated disparities. False conclusions are also fostered, such as the existence of flaws in the very nature of boys or girls that curricula or learning delivery should be able to address and even fix. It comes as no surprise then that solutions offered to counter boys' underachievement in the Philippines veer towards re-masculinizing schooling such as the provision of school sports or technical-vocational education (Luz 2011) or the preferential hiring of male teachers (David, Albert, and Vizmanos 2018).

To reframe the issue of gender differences in educational outcomes, it is necessary to let go of notions of homogeneity which we bring to the interpretation of large-scale data. Skelton, Francis, and Valkanova (2007, 2) point out that "some boys are succeeding very well, and some girls are underachieving." Therefore, lumping all boys, for example, as underachievers creates stereotypes and false categories. Both boys and girls experience exclusion from school and their reasons for dropping out may have a gender dimension.

Challenging stereotyping in explaining gender disparities

Reporting education data according to gender has somewhat forced the hand of researchers to find gender-specific causes of the disparities observed. However, such assumptions can be debunked by looking back at the findings of the 2001 Survey

FIGURE 3 NAT overall scores for Grades 3, 6, and 10, SY 2007–2008 to 2014–2015

NAT (Grade 3), overall score

NAT (Grade 6), overall score

NAT (Grade 10), overall score
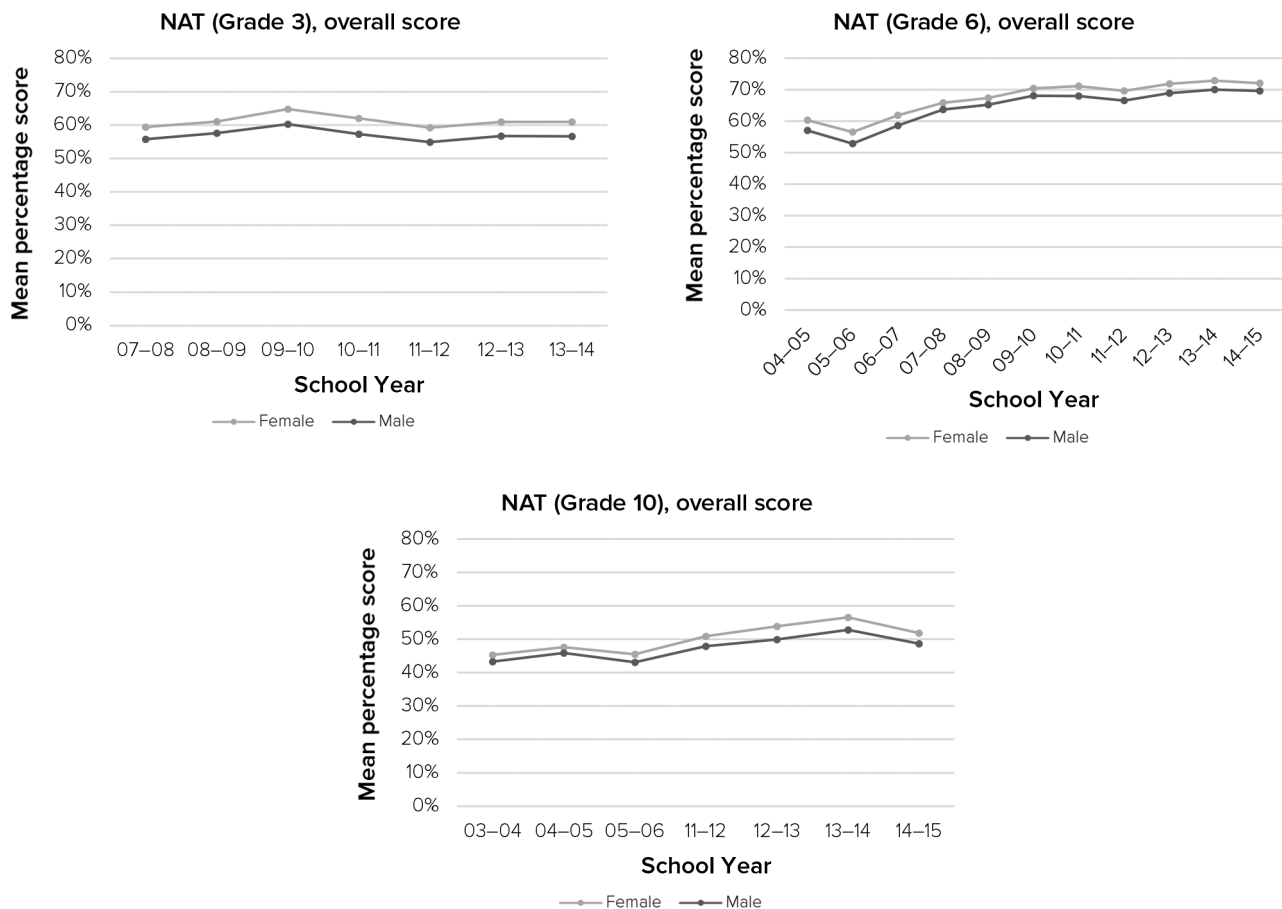
Source: Department of Education (DepEd) Bureau of Education Assessment (BEA)–Education Research Division (ERD)

on Children (SOC) where it was reported that out of the 4 million children found to be economically active, 2.5 million were male while 1.5 million were female. This was affirmed by the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) in 2002. In fact, Luz (2007; 2011) concluded that economic factors were the main reasons that boys and girls drop out of school.

More recent APIS data show that the reasons for not attending school are similar for both boys and girls though the top reason is different for them. The reasons for not attending school were employment or looking for work (31.0% for males and 19.3% for females), high cost of education or financial concerns (23.8% for males and 21.8% for females), lack of personal interest (20.6% for males, 6.9% for females), and marriage/family matters (30.2% for females, 8.5% for males) (PSA 2014).

Based on this data, it can be concluded that male and female learners share similar concerns and challenges in their lives. Gender is not the only determinant of the problems that prevent children and youth from attending school. Jere (2018a; 2018b) points out that poverty and gender norms are key drivers negatively affecting the schooling of boys. In the Philippines, as shown by the discussion above, these also impact on the lives and education of girls. Therefore, it is important for interventions to be multi-sectoral so that all threats to inclusion such as socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, age, disability, gender and sexuality are countered by community/school-based inclusion programs and socio-emotional learning skills development.

Challenging the gender regime in schools

Inclusion programs will create changes in school culture, including its gender regime, which Connell (2009) points out are patterns of gender relations that are observable. Schools are sites where gendered practices are reproduced, reinforced, and maintained. The anxiety over schooling being feminized is evidence of a particular gender regime's notions of

what it means to be feminine or masculine (Jha and Pouzevara 2016). According to Epstein et al. (1998), this is not a new phenomenon as concerns about the effects of female teachers on boys have long been expressed.

Understanding the impact of masculinities on boys' schooling behavior and practices may be necessary in understanding underachievement (Weaver-Hightower 2003; Skelton, Francis, and Valakanova 2007; Jha and Pouezevara 2016). For instance, if schools do not challenge the notion that boys must work to help the family, then boys will grow up thinking that they need to prioritize working over their education. This, in turn, could be a systematic driver for boys' underachievement.

Concretely, DepEd's gender policy (DepEd 2017) can be contextualized in schools to enable a more gender-fair learning environment. By adopting school-based policies, programs, and practices, more gender equitable attitudes and behaviors will be encouraged. These will promote a genuine culture of inclusion in the school where big and small achievements of learners are celebrated frequently.

Challenging the need for gender comparisons

Boys' underachievement is a conclusion made by researchers interpreting different sets of data in different ways. The picture conjured of girls outperforming boys also clearly emanates from comparing their performance in the NAT. What this does is to position boys and girls in opposition to one another. Keeling and Daniel (2009) warn against such an approach as it turns the issue of boys' underachievement into a "war of the sexes," making one sex responsible for the other one falling behind, or worse, measuring one group's success against the other. As well, conceptualizing gender around a male/female binary has not only led to narrow measures of performance by gender (Ringrose 2007) it has also silenced other forms of gender and sexuality "that involves severe oppression for many students and teachers" (Weaver-Hightower 2003, 484).

Moreover, viewing such performance data without the support of equity and gender perspectives does not say which learners are in need of additional support in school and the nature of the support needed (Smith 2003b). As has been contended, "not all boys are underachieving, nor are all girls outperforming boys" (Martino 2008, 1). It is important for educators and policy makers to ask which boys and which girls are at greatest risk for failure (Watson, Kehler, and Martino 2010). It is also important to recognize that for some learners, simply being able to turn up for school is an achievement in itself (Smith 2003a). Indeed, as Francis and Skelton (2005) observe in debates about the gender gap, a narrow conception of achievement usually emerges. This marginalizes and invalidates a broader view of learning which includes "increased understanding, social competence, citizenship, extension and diversification of abilities and so on" (ibid., 2).

In the context of assessing the MDGs and EFA goals, Philippine data fell short of achieving its targets in terms of participation and performance. With this as backdrop, the better performance indicators of the girls' remained inadequate. As a result, there is hardly any celebration of girls' achievement. Instead, the gender gap is portrayed as a problem that needs urgent fixing (Epstein et al. 1998) and this is probably because boys are seen to be at the disadvantage.

Finally, learner achievement is more greatly influenced by other factors beyond gender such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Skelton, Francis, & Valkanova 2007). Maligalig, Caoli-Rodriguez, Martinez, and Cuevas (2010) found that socioeconomic characteristics are stronger determinants of quality of education outcomes. Therefore, if the reports on indicators aggregated learners according to what they have learned and what else they need to learn, then the underachievement of learners would be seen as an issue that can be addressed through education interventions and learning solutions at the level of schools and classrooms. A more viable solution is to make good curricula accessible to all boys and girls by taking into account the voices of boys and girls through the conduct of research in schools about learner dispositions which may feed into a responsive implementation of the K to 12 curriculum in schools.

Conclusion

Indeed, the issue of gender disparity in basic education outcome indicators in the Philippines remains to be a legitimate and unresolved concern.

As such, this policy brief reframed the way it is viewed by using a more gender-fair lens which, in turn, can lead to more inclusive interventions. This paper has shown that education indicators cannot be viewed as a zero-sum game in which the loss of one group results in the gain for another (Weaver-Hightower 2003; Global Partnership for Education and United Nations Girls' Education Initiative 2017). The Global Partnership for Education and United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (2017, xv) remind us of the strong association between girls' and boys' academic achievement by stating that "in countries where girls are participating and achieving, boys often also do well, and vice versa." Additionally, losing sight of more pertinent concerns in education is too big a risk when analyzing data according to gender categories. We must not be distracted from the core objective of education, which is improving participation in programs which ensure student learning. Schools must implement inclusive interventions that enliven the centrality of gender equality. Ultimately, what is needed is the commitment to improve education outcomes for all especially in light of the Education 2030 Framework for Action and the K to 12 Basic Education Program.

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Appendix: Statistical Tables

School year	Gross enrollment rate (GER)			Net enrollment rate (NER)			Cohort survival rate (CSR)			Completion rate (CR)		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
2000–01	1.13	1.14	1.13	0.97	0.96	0.97	0.66	0.61	0.63	0.66	0.60	0.63
2001–02	1.09	1.10	1.10	0.91	0.89	0.90	0.72	0.67	0.69	0.71	0.66	0.68
2002–03	1.08	1.09	1.08	0.91	0.90	0.90	0.77	0.68	0.72	0.76	0.67	0.72
2003–04	1.05	1.07	1.06	0.90	0.88	0.89	0.77	0.67	0.72	0.76	0.65	0.70
2004–05	1.04	1.05	1.04	0.88	0.86	0.87	0.77	0.66	0.71	0.75	0.64	0.69
2005–06	1.00	1.02	1.01	0.85	0.84	0.84	0.75	0.66	0.70	0.73	0.63	0.68
2006–07	0.99	1.01	1.00	0.84	0.82	0.83	0.79	0.69	0.73	0.77	0.67	0.72
2007–08	1.01	1.03	1.02	0.86	0.84	0.85	0.80	0.71	0.75	0.78	0.68	0.73
2008–09	1.01	1.03	1.02	0.86	0.85	0.85	0.80	0.72	0.75	0.78	0.69	0.73
2009–10	1.07	1.08	1.07	0.91	0.88	0.89	0.79	0.70	0.74	0.78	0.67	0.72
2010–11	1.14	1.15	1.15	0.97	0.94	0.96	0.79	0.70	0.74	0.77	0.68	0.72
2011–12	1.14	1.15	1.15	0.98	0.96	0.97	0.78	0.70	0.74	0.76	0.67	0.71
2012–13	1.13	1.14	1.14	0.96	0.94	0.95	0.78	0.71	0.74	0.77	0.69	0.73
2013–14	1.10	1.12	1.11	0.95	0.93	0.94	0.82	0.76	0.79	0.81	0.74	0.78
2014–15	1.08	1.11	1.09	0.93	0.92	0.93	0.87	0.83	0.85	0.86	0.81	0.84

Source: Department of Education (DepEd) Office of Planning Service–Education Management Information System Division (OPS–EMISD)

School year	Gross enrollment rate (GER)			Net enrollment rate (NER)			Cohort survival rate (CSR)			Completion rate (CR)		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
2000–01	0.83	0.76	0.79	0.69	0.63	0.66	0.74	0.70	0.72	0.72	0.68	0.70
2001–02	0.85	0.78	0.81	0.62	0.53	0.58	0.74	0.68	0.71	0.73	0.67	0.70
2002–03	0.87	0.80	0.84	0.64	0.54	0.59	0.82	0.72	0.77	0.80	0.69	0.75
2003–04	0.88	0.81	0.85	0.65	0.55	0.60	0.83	0.73	0.78	0.77	0.66	0.72
2004–05	0.88	0.80	0.84	0.65	0.55	0.60	0.83	0.73	0.78	0.78	0.67	0.72
2005–06	0.84	0.77	0.81	0.64	0.54	0.59	0.73	0.61	0.67	0.68	0.55	0.62
2006–07	0.83	0.76	0.79	0.63	0.54	0.59	0.82	0.73	0.77	0.77	0.67	0.72
2007–08	0.84	0.79	0.81	0.65	0.56	0.60	0.84	0.75	0.80	0.80	0.70	0.75
2008–09	0.85	0.81	0.83	0.65	0.56	0.61	0.84	0.75	0.80	0.80	0.70	0.75
2009–10	0.84	0.79	0.82	0.65	0.55	0.60	0.83	0.74	0.78	0.78	0.69	0.74
2010–11	0.89	0.84	0.86	0.70	0.60	0.65	0.84	0.75	0.79	0.80	0.70	0.75
2011–12	0.89	0.82	0.85	0.70	0.59	0.64	0.84	0.73	0.79	0.80	0.69	0.74
2012–13	0.88	0.82	0.85	0.70	0.59	0.64	0.83	0.73	0.78	0.80	0.70	0.75
2013–14	0.88	0.81	0.84	0.70	0.60	0.65	0.84	0.75	0.79	0.81	0.72	0.76
2014–15	0.87	0.81	0.84	0.68	0.58	0.63	0.84	0.77	0.81	0.82	0.74	0.78

Source: Department of Education (DepEd) Office of Planning Service–Education Management Information System Division (OPS–EMISD)

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CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Established in 1985 by UP President Edgardo Angara, the **UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS)** is a policy research unit of the University that connects disciplines and scholars across the several units of the UP System. It is mandated to encourage collaborative and rigorous research addressing issues of national significance by supporting scholars and securing funding, enabling them to produce outputs and recommendations for public policy.

Through Executive Order 9 issued on September 24, 1985, then UP President Edgardo J. Angara laid out the framework for the realization of his vision for the University to be able to achieve the following objectives:

- Develop, organize, and manage research issues of national significance. Such issues, because of their importance and inherent complexity, require an integrative and collaborative approach and also more sophisticated research methodologies and skills;

- Encourage and support research and study on these issues by various units of the University and individual scholars;

- Secure funding from public and private persons and agencies; and

- Ensure that the research outputs and recommendations of the Center are published and openly disseminated.

Pursuant to the UP Charter of 2008 (RA 9500), UP CIDS anchors its endeavors to aid the University in the fulfillment of its role as a research university in various fields of expertise and specialization. Research and/or policy units whose core themes address current national policy and development needs are designed and implemented.

UP CIDS partakes in the University's leadership in public service. This is carried out through the dissemination of research-based knowledge through fora, symposia, and conferences. These research activities are initiated by the twelve (12) programs and the Local-Regional Studies Network under UP CIDS.