Positioning Diversity in Kenyan Schools

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During the initial coding and memo-writing process, various diversity categories (e.g. gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.) emerged from the data and became the structuring order for the personal and professional diversity experiences and interpretations of the interview participants. A substantial portion of the information on the properties and dimensions of the different categories of diversity emerged in the participants’ narrative accounts about their own lived experiences. Consequently, these narratives also offer insights to the symbolic and social borders of the categories, the regimes of difference as well as the speakers’ positions and perspectives. Furthermore, they open a way to an embedded understanding of relevant social concepts, normative schemes and narratives that reflect the power relations in the society in which they grew up. Looking at the individuals and their experiences growing up as Kalenjins, Luyhas or Gikuyus, girls or boys, in rural or urban settings, wealthy or poor, aims to explain specific circumstances and diversity categories that have unfolded a meaning for the individuals, particularly regarding their own education.
However, while looking at one category, other dimensions of diversity appeared as relevant intersecting categories and therefore will be considered in these presentations. For each main category, a graph illustrates the most important aspects that emerged from the data. To account for the intersectional perspective, other lines of difference that refer to factors that seem to impact on the type of experience had are mentioned in the text below each graph.

However, the methodological approach and the sample did not allow for general deductions in terms of intersectional correlations. For example: if you are female and poor in Kenya, you are more likely to encounter gender discrimination than if you are female and rich. The limitation also refers to non-binary gender constructions or multiple discrimination experiences that the LGBTIQ community experiences in present-day Kenya (cf. Mwachiro 2013). While individual research participants stated that there was something like ‘total discrimination’ regarding sexual identities and orientations that do not fit the dominant binary, cisgender and heteronormativity categorisations, these experiences were not part of my research participants’ own identities.

The main and subcategories that emerged from the data provide the structure for this chapter. Three diversity categories emerged as the main ones, each of them holding several subcategories: (i) ethnicity, (ii) gender and (iii) socio-economic status.

In terms of developing grounded theory on diversity in Kenyan school contexts, this step interprets and systematises data that were fractured into separate pieces in the initial coding process by linking subcategories to categories and finding relationships between them. Axial coding and its organising scheme served as guideline for this and the next chapter.

All names of ethnic communities were replaced randomly by African girls’ names, to protect the identity of the research participants and their affiliation to a particular group.
Ethnicity: ‘People live as and appreciate one another as tribes’

The first category that emerged from the interviews refers to various aspects of ethnicity (see Figure 12). As a recurrent theme in most of the interviews, the participants’ experiences as members of a certain ethnic community or their interaction and experiences with members of other ethnic communities appeared as a meaningful category of difference for most interview participants through various stages of their biography. It also became obvious that other intersecting categories like gender, geography and wealth influenced the ways in which ethnicity unfolded its meanings for the teachers. However, my role as an outsider researcher certainly provoked some detailed explanations concerning ethnic categorisation in Kenya – which would probably not have happened had I been part of the ethnic categorisation system myself. The terms that the participants used to refer to this category included ‘ethnic communities’, ‘ethnic groups’, ‘tribes’ or simply ‘communities’. When presenting the different types of experiences that emerged from the data, I will adhere to the terms the interview participants used. ‘Community’ in this sense always refers to something that is connected to ethnicity – unlike in other contexts, where it could simply refer to the village, neighbourhood or district. In the analysed data, community is the most common term used to address questions of ethnic groups and differences, especially when referring to one’s own group (‘my community’).

The first subcategory – community, identity and belonging – that emerged encompasses those aspects of experiences regarding ethnicity that essentially serve as pillars for individual (ethnic) identities and refer to membership, home(land), the sharing of social activities and language.

The second subcategory (mixing) relates to what the research participants described as being together with members of different ethnic groups and experiencing their own ethnic identity in
contrast or comparison with other ethnic identities. Growing up, these experiences emerged as mostly positive and advantageous interactions in the interpretation of the research participants. These included the opportunity to learn seeing things from different perspectives, to overcome narrow traditional role models and the awareness of different lifestyles.

The third and fourth subcategories (tribalism and stereotyping) refer to those experiences where affiliation to a certain ethnic community was a reason for stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination. These were partly identified in the context of ethnic group-related rivalries in the sphere of political power constellations and were mainly experienced in mixed secondary schools and at university, particularly during times where the political situation was tense.

The fifth and last subcategory (language diversity) refers to the cultural aspect of the main category, ethnicity. Although the different local languages (often called ‘vernaculars’) spoken in Kenya don’t necessarily match ethnic categories (one ethnic group = one common local language), home languages and dialects emerged as a relevant dividing or uniting force in some instances. These include experiences where language was used as a tool or strategy for bonding between group members who shared the same local language and feelings of exclusion – and mistrust in mixed language groups.

Further background factors that emerged from the empirical material concerning experiences related to ethnicity include whether the setting was a rural or urban one, and participants’ socio-economic background.

Figure 6 visualises the first main category (ethnicity) with its subcategories and characteristics belonging to each of the subcategories.

Community, identity and belonging

In the introductory section of the interviews, participants generally included geographical information of the household in
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Identity, community and belonging

- Positive experiences in a mixed school as foundation for good relationships across ethnic and language borders later in life
- Being home in a specific region
- Sharing land, language and social activities
- One community having the upper hand in school
- Teasing and exclusion, tribalism in secondary schools
- Being looked down at, insulted and stereotyped

Mixing

- Breaking free from rural/cultural traditions and role expectations disadvantaging girls/women
- Inter-marriages
- Learning to see things from different perspectives
- A way of bringing cohesion
- Learning to accept and adjust to different mannerisms/behaviour/cultural habits
- "You cannot fight your old neighbour" – conflict prevention

Tribalism

- You cannot choose, society defines for you
- Membership
- Awareness of different lifestyles
- Accommodating people with mixed ethnic heritage and no clear community affiliation (or several)

Language diversity

- Language barriers and power relations
- Language as bonding strategy: commonality/familiarity
- Feelings of exclusion, offence, mistrust
- Hierarchy of usefulness of different languages
- Vernacular as a matter of pride

Stereotypes

- You cannot choose, society defines for you
- Membership
- Awareness of different lifestyles
- Accommodating people with mixed ethnic heritage and no clear community affiliation (or several)
which they grew up and explanations about their families, and also a statement regarding the ethnic community to which they belonged. This was commonly referred to as ‘my community’ or ‘I come from the X community’. In the course of the interviews it became apparent that community was a significant self-identification marker for most but not all of the interviewed teachers. For some, identification with one of the ethnic groups in Kenya seemed a straightforward matter, like Elsa, who stated:

> Mysel, I come from a community in the central part of Kenya that is N county and the community that is found there is the Bahati community (5:6).

The self-identification does not only include the specific ethnic community but also the geographical location, the particular region within Kenya, where her community is.

Distinguishing between rural and urban settings to explain her situation, Ana said:

> I come from the Chipo community … where I was brought up is not within town. You know, town is … cosmopolitan where you find people of various tribes. But I come from a rural area within the county, where the region is really homogeneous and actually, who lives there are Chupos. (1:25)

Hence, Ana and Elsa identify with their community (including the specific region within Kenya that they come from) rather strongly. On a more general note, Ana explained:

> People live as, appreciate one another as tribes. We come from the Kalenjin, Luhya, the Gikuyu, you know, that is in matters to do with social activities … Of course there is towns which are cosmopolitan; … you can still see the alignment to your community members. (1:44)

In contrast to these two teachers, for whom ethnic identity seems
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a rather clear matter, some of the explanations of other interview participants pointed to a more complicated situation and system of ethnic grouping:

I come from the Arjana community. In Arjana we have so many sub-groups. I am from a smaller sub-group called the Chibuzo, eh? Related to the Adede, almost, but then we are Arjana. (7:27)

In Gerald’s case above, ethnic community does not seem to offer a clear and straightforward identification because the place of his sub-group seems ambiguous – as if not fitting exactly into the existing system. Chris also pointed to this in-between feeling:

I come from the minority group among the Bamidele and we live in an area that we can say it is to the border of other communities so we are more of adjacent to other cultures. (3:8)

Chris’s statement refers to the fact that he identifies with a sub-group of his ethnic community, which is a minority and also that, in his experience, living close to different communities meant interaction with other cultures as well. In another statement, Chris explained the experience of his sub-group more closely:

There are nine major communities [as sub-groups of his ethnic group], then ours is always rated as other … Typically, our experience amongst the Esi is that we are always viewed as not Esi. (3:35)

This ambivalent experience – on one hand being categorised as a member of one community but, within that community, not being accepted as a full-fledged member – confronted Chris with the question of his own ethnic identity in relation to others. It also refers to questions of belonging and exclusion. In his experience, he does not belong to the Esi ethnic community as such – only to the specific sub-group. According to stories told about his sub-group:
they are the offspring of an Esi with a Dayo woman. So the Esi would see them as belonging to the Dayo and the Dayo would see them as belonging to the Esi … so we find ourselves in between. (3:35)

His ambiguous position with regards to ethnic identity illustrates the influence exerted by large group constructions: it was decided that Chris’ ethnic group belongs to the Esi community while it could have been a group of its own or belong to the Dayo group instead. His example also points to the fact that he cannot choose or decide which ethnic identity he himself would prefer; it is the other ethnic groups that he interacts with who ascribe an ethnic identity to him or deny him one.

The sense of belonging to a certain community and its region within Kenya was distinct in the case of some interview participants, but it was rather hidden with others. In a general sense, Ana explained about ethnic communities in Kenya:

I can say that people live as communities – of course there’s the towns which are cosmopolitan – so those are the areas where people have land to survive with one another though you can still see the alignment to your community members. So that people live as, appreciate one another as tribes. We come from the Kagiso, Bohlale, the Chiemeka [community], you know, that is in matters to do with social activities. (1:44)

She centralises the positive aspects of membership and belonging – common activities, sharing and appreciation. She also pointed out that it is not only in a rural setting where community members live together and share land ‘to survive with one another’, but also in urban areas where the population is composed of various communities (‘you can still see the alignment’).

It became obvious that in various instances, belonging to a certain ethnic community had an influence on what people experienced and on their specific positions and relations to other communities in Kenya.
Mixing

While ethnic identity emerged as a relevant category in most of the personal experiences of the interview participants, Gerald and Harald represent a type expressing a distanced relationship to their ethnic group. Explaining that, for him, ethnic identity never played a big role, Gerald said:

I’ve grown up not knowing I am an Rudo, no, I have always grown up knowing that I am a Kenyan because we have, there are a lot of intermarriages in that place even in my own family there is a lot of intermarriages. (7:16)

He further explained:

In Kenya it’s called, we call it ‘skim’, meaning many people come from their ancestral homes to come and buy land to settle in that place. So what happened because there are many people coming from other ancestral homes, other places, where they were originally born, coming to settle in this area so you find almost, literally all the tribes were there … That is the good thing, we learned to embrace each other. (7:16)

The reasons Gerald provided to explain why, in his personal experience, ethnic group identity was less important than the national identity related to the environment of his neighbourhood or community, and the many intermarriages and mingling of people with different ethnic backgrounds where he grew up. He emphasised that this place was not the ancestral home of any of the people living there – they had all moved from various places within Kenya to live there. Bringing his own experience into a wider picture and adding a general sociopolitical angle, he pointed out that, while in other places not far from his home, violent attacks took place between members of different ethnic groups after the 2007 elections:
L. was not affected. It was not affected because this one area carries almost all the tribes of Kenya. So you'll find literally you cannot fight your old neighbour, you have been together for so many years. (7:18)

He concluded that the immediate social relationships with members of different ethnic communities in his region prevented an outbreak of conflict at a time when the politically motivated ethnic tension along ethnic lines was very high. He framed this mixed living situation as ‘learning to embrace each other’.

Another example of equivocal ethnic belonging and a rather distanced relationship from his own ethnic identity is Harald, who originated from a place where ‘the Kenyan communities just live there’ (8:10). He added:

my parents, my mother comes from a different community called the Shani. My father comes from a different community called the Mirembe. They came together [laughing] and here am I, yes. So there they came from those different backgrounds. (8:8)

Belonging and identity in this case cannot be regarded as closely linked to an ethnic community but, rather, to a region and family with its own – cosmopolitan – identity and history as well as a town that is made up of various backgrounds and ethnic communities.

Another kind of ethnic mixing experience refers to the environment of learners and teachers in school. Dora pointed to the learning experience in her primary school where learners came from all over Kenya because their parents worked on the same tea estate:

So, actually they came from different communities in Kenya and that was my first experience of interacting with different people from different communities. So actually I learnt that, OK, people vary, yes, people vary depending on actually the community that they come from, their culture. People have different things depending on their communities. Also in my high school level,
I went to a – it’s now called a county school. The people there also came from different communities, people had different behavioural, OK, different mannerisms. So actually it also shaped me to realise that, OK, we have to adjust to different mannerisms, how people interact. (4:13)

The learning Dora described focuses on adjustment to the different behaviour or habits and ways of interaction that she found with people from different communities. She emphasised that her overall experience in the mixed primary and secondary school she went to was a positive one.

In contrast to the ethnically mixed neighbourhood and primary school experiences above, the case for those who grew up in a rural setting looked different. For instance, Ana described her rural home as homogeneous, including the primary school she attended. She stressed that she is very appreciative of her experience in secondary school where she met learners and teachers from varying backgrounds. She spoke about her eye-opening experience when changing from primary school to a mixed national secondary school:

It made me realise that it’s not all about a tribe because when I was in primary school, I was from the village where all of us were from the same tribe but when I went to the national school … I saw things in a different perspective. (1:98)

She underlined her positive attitude towards the interaction with different ethnic identities by saying:

If I was to think along that cocoon of the Chipo woman who is just supposed to cook for a man and stay, I would have not gone to school. I was the first girl to go to secondary school in my family. (1:74)

Ana’s ethnic identity dictated that, as a girl/woman, she would not go to secondary school. Nevertheless, she aimed for a different
path and carried on with her schooling, which opened up the opportunity for her to meet and interact with people from different ethnic backgrounds who shared her view that girls and women should have choices concerning their education and gender roles. Ana drew a very positive summary of her experience in an ethnically mixed secondary school, which influenced her life in various ways:

All along, I have appreciated interaction, yeah, and in secondary school my friends were from different languages and when I went to university I still have friends up to date from various other communities. (1:74)

It seems that her interaction with members of other ethnic groups in school helped her make friends across ethnic communities and across language barriers later in life at university, too. Ana pointed to the impact this interaction had on her life and substantiated her conviction that schools should consist of a mix of different ethnic groups by concluding: ‘I saw things in a different perspective so I believe it is one of the advantages, it is a way of bringing cohesion’ (1:98).

As illustrated by the different cases above, the region and the environment of the places where interview participants grew up and received their schooling determined the way they experienced their own identity as members of a particular ethnic community, and in relation to other groups. The positive experiences from an ethnically mixed environment included learning about diversity – namely that things can be seen from various perspectives and done in different ways, that gender roles are not the same everywhere, that people speak different languages and that there are people with varying habits and manners. The participants also described their learning to adapt to and deal with these differences, to learn to see things from other perspectives and to build emotional relationships.

In contrast to these cases in which positive experiences and learning are highlighted, another group described their mainly negative experiences with mixing when growing up.
Tribalism

The research participants highlighted tribalism as one of the negative experiences prevalent in ethnically mixed school environments. For Elsa, the change from primary to secondary school meant that she, being an excellent student, was admitted to a national school where students from various backgrounds mixed. Elsa was critical of the tribalism she experienced in that school (and, more generally, in society) that stems from the strong focus on different ethnic communities:

Another thing you find that still in those (national) high schools – we have tribes. And you find that tribalism in Kenya is a major issue … You find that for that case I had the upper hand because I am from the Kagiso community and you find that that national school is located within the Kagiso community so we had some other students who were not of the same tribe, so those ones, they had a hard time … For example, I remember we had a girl by the name of Joyce she was a Rudo and she was the only one in that class because the others were the Kagiso and she had a hard time because they backbit her in Kagiso [language] and so on. So you find that if at all you come from a community or you school in a community whereby the people there, they are of different tribe, you are going to have a hard time. (5:6)

In the situation she described, it was not she herself who was a victim of tribalism – in this case, she belonged to the majority who ‘had the upper hand’. However, she observed how one student, who did not belong to the same community as the majority in the class, was teased and excluded by her classmates. The problem, which she identified as tribalism, emerged when the learners picked on the topic of ethnic communities in a situation where there was an imbalance between members of two different ethnic communities in the class. While the incident happened when she went to school herself, she identified tribalism in schools as still being a problem in national schools.
The phenomenon that Elsa referred to as tribalism, where students are socially excluded on the basis of their ethnic affiliation, might relate to the specific social and political position of the ethnic groups involved.

Like Ana and Dora, Elsa belongs to an ethnic group that is strong in numbers and powerful in political terms in Kenya. The experiences Elsa described refer particularly to strong ethnic groups that have a history of rivalries and political power struggle, which seems to impact on the students in school. It also points to the fact that it could make a difference whether your ethnic affiliation seems to be straightforward (as opposed to mixed) and thus easy to view in an essentialist way.

In Dora’s interpretation, opportunities for specific ethnic groups in Kenya are directly linked to the people in power on the national level:

It is all a matter of where you come from because at the moment it is all about the Bohlale community, even in the previous regime, because … the president came from the same community but back then, when we had a Chipo president, most of the Chipos benefited, they had the top positions in government. (4:41)

But now like, the Rudos are a little bit side-lined because they do not vote in the president. So we have such differences. (4:42)

While she did not underline her statement with concrete examples, her interpretation directly connects to common public narratives.

Ethnicity being used as a political tool to create awareness about and divisions between ethnic communities is also in the focus of Chris’ interpretation, based on his experience at university.

Ethnicity is something that has been cultivated into Kenyans by the politicians for their own benefit. Kenyans were more of the united community and then the separation has been political. And it’s known! Bad luck now that it is infiltrating into the university system. (3:61)
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From his experience, university politics are strongly influenced by tribalism such that student representatives are voted for along ethnic lines and, while there is a leader from one ethnic community in a position of power, the other ethnic communities would not expect that leader to do anything for them or their group.

When I was in college, when we used to vote for a chairman that is what happened to me because I was an Udo (sub-group of Mirembe). The Mirembe community could not accept that I could be voted in so while in first year, I was the class representative. I worked very well among everyone and the fact that I came from an area whereby we are at the border of the Kagiso, the Rudo and the Mirembe, I had known how they were. (3:61)

He described how he was able to make friends and get (political) support from members of other ethnic communities while, at the same time, being not accepted by members of the ethnic community of which he is considered part of a sub-group. What is interesting is that he referred to his experience of being raised in an area neighbouring other ethnic communities where he gained knowledge about their ways of doing things and evidently acquired social skills to get along well with members of other ethnic communities. He emphasised that he regards this kind of tribalism in matters to do with university politics as very negative.

Other university experiences also suggest that tribalism plays a role in various ways. Gerald pointed out that you only have a chance to get benefits like scholarships or promotions at university, if you belong to the ‘right’ ethnic community. From his experience, benefits were not given based on merit, but on ethnic lines and within your ethnic community or clan. Elsa’s experience at university supported this point:

So you find that even at university level tribalism is still, it is there, it is. You know, you expect that these people are educated, so if I told you, it is matters to do with tribe you don’t expect in
higher education levels. But you find that in Kenya tribalism is so deep rooted, yeah it doesn’t matter whether it is the primary school level, wherever. So you find that people, yeah, everything in Kenya is just based on matters to do with tribe even the job opportunities … When we had the student elections, there is a candidate who is a Chiemeka and another candidate who is a Bohlale, all the Chiemekas will vote for their, for the person from their community and the Bohlales will vote for the person from their community. (5:6)

Elsa also experienced tribalism at university as a member of a minority group while doing her degree in the heated environment of the 2007 elections:

Again you find that the Chiemeka community and the Bohlale community by then they were rivals so you find that … they had said that all the Bohlales who are in university, we could not get out alive … I remember there was a time students were being killed in the university. (5:6)

These personal experiences of violence based on tribalism show that ethnicity used in political power struggles in national politics also affects education institutions where students and staff from various ethnic communities teach and learn. It is interesting to note that Elsa pointed out that ‘you would not expect’ tribalism among educated people. We can conclude that, in her perception, education should be a tool to prevent tribalism.

From these varied accounts, it seems that a number of factors play a role in determining how schools and universities experience the diversity of ethnically mixed populations, and whether and where tribalism occurs. Chris was very clear that, in his opinion, tribalism only comes up in the context of opportunities and political power. When asked about a situation where tribalism did not play a role, he remembered former US President Barrack Obama’s visit to Kenya:
Let me tell you, all Kenyans were united for him … Nobody ever thought about like: I am an Kagiso. You will find everyone talking about the same issue. But when it comes to other issues, especially when it comes to jobs, then you’ll find now that diversity working in it. Then people would start considering people from their community, all that, it is an issue when it comes to opportunities, actually. (3:44)

In this statement, tribalism or, more generally, diversity is contrasted with what Chris understands the opposite to be: being united, everyone talking about the same issue, no thoughts about which ethnic group one belongs to but, instead, an awareness that all are Kenyans. From what he experienced in that situation, ethnic identity was replaced by national identity – and unity among Kenyans replaced the focus on divisions based on ethnic grouping.

Stereotypes

Stereotyping emerged as another relevant subcategory. In the peri-urban setting Florence grew up in, she felt stereotyped by other learners and the teachers in her school, based on a mix of ethnic group affiliation and her socio-economic status. As a local community member, she went to a school that consisted of a mix of learners and teachers from different communities. Most had moved there to work in the college as lecturers but her social status was low, being a local girl raised by a single mother who worked as a secretary in the college.

So you really feel: OK, now, in life we are not the same … I come from the Rudo community and you realise that the majority of the tutors around there were from different backgrounds so, at the end of the day, they could see you as people who are not hard working. We really came from the catchment area where people still own at least farms … So they can look at you – like
in my community people like eating Ugali and Mursiki; Mursiki is fermented sour milk, you know, milk that has to stay in a cup for some days for it to ferment, so in some other words the milk has gone bad – so they could look at you and tell you: ‘Continue staying like the milk fermented in the cup’. You see, that is life and you see that kind there. (6:82)

The stereotyping she described, and being assigned a certain low-ranked position in her school, was not only conveyed by the learners but also by some of the teachers who treated her differently and embarrassed her in class.

Stereotyping based on ethnicity can be regarded as a very common phenomenon, according to Dora. In her discussion, public discourse on stereotypes of different ethnic groups is drawn on, and her own stereotyping becomes apparent:

The ones who have the best chances in Central Kenya are the Chiemekes, because apparently our president comes from that community … Like, I also realised that back in E [town] the stalls in the market, OK, the Chiemekes own most of the stalls in town, yet it is our town, you see. And because the president is actually giving them the access to that. So it’s like … these are the ones who are coming to overtake them [Kagiso] in their own land. (4:41)

The rhetoric she used to describe the Kagiso people as successful merchants and business people who take over the markets and businesses of other local communities seems to connect directly to public discourse and stereotypes promoted in past decades for that specific powerful ethnic group. The way she argued and explained reveals her thinking in categories of ‘we’ and ‘they’ (‘their land’, ‘our own land’, ‘our town’) and the feeling that one ethnic group has become too powerful – through the help of political leaders. Explaining some common stereotypes regarding specific ethnic groups she reiterated what seems to be general knowledge:
We always perceive the Kagisos as having so much pride and it is actually something that it has made them be segregated. Because even people are like: OK, if we give them a chance to have a president from their community, actually they will step on us. So, you see, we'll not have space, so they have been — actually based on that category that actually these people cannot go places. Actually, they are so much proud and there is nothing to produce to show that should be proud of that, you see. (4:48)

The segregated or side-lined position of the Kagisos in Kenyan society is explained by their pride — which is considered unjustified — and the fear by other ethnic groups that they would not treat them fairly if in power. Dora continued and explained (to me as an outsider):

We have another community called the Udos, they always feel they are blamed and they always fight. It is like they are venting out so they fight a lot. They are still engaging in cattle wrestling, because it’s like they are venting out their strike with the government is not listening to them. So they just feel, they have always been low and as much as the government tries to re-settle them but they are a little bit rigid. They don’t want to be helped and at the same time, they are violent. Because you see, they fight most of the time. They are so hostile, because you cannot even go to their community anyhow. They live in a place called S. Because even people in that place are still living in grass thatched houses. There is a challenge so much people are not educated really and the few who access educated are so bright by the way, so I think it is actually lack of exposure and actually that feel of intimidation. (4:48)

The group she described is constructed as homogeneous, living in one specific area in old-fashioned houses, having certain characteristics and being in a low position because they do not accept the help the government wants to provide and they fight
frequently. In other accounts, the research participants spoke about marginalised areas of Kenya and the people living there who have been neglected by central government; the stereotypes emerging from Dora’s account build on the pictures of homelands and the construction of homogenised and essentialised separate groups.

Chris remembered a situation where he was confronted with prejudice based on certain ethnic stereotypes:

‘You are a Kagiso?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘You are the people who voted for him!’ [the president, you are to be blamed]. So it was like: you are put in one basket. So it’s something that has to do with psychology, the understanding of people and I think it’s within the minds of people that it was there long so it is still there. (3:45)

The incident he recalled – which, again, happened in the context of national politics – points to the consequences of ethnic stereotyping and homogenising social groups as in Dora’s account.

Language diversity

In various accounts, the different languages spoken in Kenya emerged as an important aspect to create a sense of belonging and commonality among members of the same community or subgroup – or rifts between members of different communities. The term mostly used to describe the language spoken at home and, usually, also identify the ethnic community, is ‘mother tongue’. In a multilingual society like Kenya, where people normally speak various languages fluently, mother tongue is used to describe the language that is closest to the heart and mainly spoken at home.

The first type of experience referred to feelings of exclusion, offence or being othered on the basis of a different mother tongue. Not only were different mother tongues mentioned in the accounts, but also dialects as variations of a language. The dialect that Chris speaks, for instance, sounds funny to most members of the ethnic community that he is supposed to belong to, so he feels marginalised within his own community:
As much as we almost speak the same words but how we speak it is quite different. So each time they put us aside. (3:35)

Even when I was in college, it’s rarely I used to talk in my language because if you are talking then the other people will laugh at you and say: you don’t know how to speak. They don’t see that that is your language they feel like you are learning to speak Kagiso [language] which is quite difficult. (3:37)

To avoid stereotyping or being laughed at, he confines his mother tongue to his family and people at home, and uses English or Kiswahili outside that realm. While Chris’ example refers mainly to a conflict that underlines the position of his sub-group in the larger community, Florence’s account refers to the more general issue of language being a uniting and dividing force:

Now the problem that we will have, even me, I am not an exception. You will find that we could be having an Udo, a Rudo and a Chiemeka. Since we are many, we end up talking in mother tongue, you see, it just happens. And the others really feel offended … Maybe I want to say something about you, you see. I now switch and talk in Swahili or say it in my mother tongue, you see, so that you don’t … sometimes we, you see, we just find ourselves we have been discussing and discussing until I even, we switch to mother tongue you see. At the end of the day, this person would feel, would … now say okay, they must be saying something bad about me because if it were good they could have talked something that I can hear, so that is a great, a great thing. And in most occasions, really, when you want to switch, you really want to say something bad, in most occasions, because what is it that has made you to switch? (6:38)

Florence identified this switching to mother tongue when in a group where not all people speak the same mother tongue as a common ‘bad habit’ that happens frequently. The problem that she saw, and which she has often experienced herself, is that people
who do not understand that mother tongue feel offended and excluded, and suspect the users of the mother tongue of saying something bad about them. She pointed out that there is no other good reason to switch to the mother tongue than wanting to say something that only the members of your own community can understand and, in most instances, it would be something negative.

In a similar way, Elsa pointed out:

That is the trend in Kenya. If at all you meet with people from your community, you use vernacular it doesn’t matter whether there are still others who don’t understand. (5:6)

She added:

Even someone who is very good in English or Kiswahili but because of the trend that is there, it has been there in Kenya that we are fond of using our vernacular language every time we meet two people of the same community. (5:48)

Besides wanting to say something that others should not understand, using the common language seems to be an expression of closeness and unity or familiarity and does not necessarily intend to exclude other people who do not speak that language.

These experiences indicate that, generally, people enjoy speaking their local language with members of their own ethnic-language community, which creates feelings of commonality and familiarity. People changing to the mother tongue when meeting members of the same language group even if the group is linguistically mixed, was a common experience among the interview participants and some admitted to being insensitive in that respect. Despite being aware that it creates feelings of exclusion and mistrust in those who do not understand that language, they still practise language switching.

Elsa’s experience at university adds the aspect of power relations and status to the use of the mother tongue in a context
of language diversity. Being at a university that predominantly speaks a different mother tongue to hers, she said:

They are proud of that, even the lecturers when you are coming sometimes they speak in their vernacular. Yeah, so they are used to that, sometimes you just have to understand. (5:42)

Elsa’s way of interpreting and dealing with the situation is to try to understand that it is also a matter of pride to speak the mother tongue. However, for her there were few options other than trying to accept that this language is the dominant one and that there was nothing she could do if the lecturers spoke in their mother tongue and were proud about it. Since she was in the minority, she felt she had to accept the situation.

Another type of experience refers to schools and the problem of multilingual settings in teaching and learning institutions. Remembering her own school days, Beth said:

In primary school, during our time, there used to be a subject for mother tongue. Yes, during our time … We learned it, the local language, but now, you see it was a challenge, because maybe you come from another language, and then maybe you come to learn another local language and Swahili, which is a national language and English, which is an official language. So you have to learn so many languages. Others are not even useful. (2:58)

In this interpretation, mother tongue as a subject field in school is useful as long as the learners have a homogenous language background, meaning that there is no diversity of mother tongues spoken. Beth pointed out that it has become a challenge to accommodate all the different languages spoken in schools due to the language diversity in many schools. Furthermore, her judgement: ‘Others are not even useful’, indicates that she considered learning mother tongues other than her own as not beneficial; this judgement seems to refer to formal education. The hierarchy of usefulness of different languages and the diversity
of languages spoken as mother tongues in the schools seemed to compel her to conclude that mother tongue teaching may not have a place in the schools.

Another type of experience concerning languages spoken and taught in school arose from the situation that some of the interview participants went to primary schools that were linguistically homogeneous. Chris reported, for instance, that his mother tongue was accommodated even when the official language of instruction was English. Because all learners and teachers spoke the same mother tongue, teachers were able to explain concepts, switching between the two languages. However, after primary school, the situation changed for him and he barely used his mother tongue anymore:

The primary schools around were mainly our communities and they used to work with our kids but outside that, college and all that at the university, rarely would I speak my language at all. I’d either do it with somebody who comes from there or just speak English. (3:41)

Hence, it can be summarised that up to Grade 8, Chris’ mother tongue was accommodated in school even though the language of instruction was English. Since teachers and learners shared the same mother tongue, and English was a foreign language, to them all, code-switching between the languages was common practice.

Some of the teachers’ experiences concerning language diversity in Kenya as a visible manifestation of ethnic diversity offer a glimpse into the challenges that educational institutions are faced with in a multilingual society like Kenya. However, when looking at the overall significance of language diversity for the interview participants, it became obvious that it is merely one of the diversity factors within the broader topic of different (ethnic) communities with a potential role in creating rifts between or unity among members of different groups. At the same time, language diversity resulting from Kenya’s ethnic diversity was identified as the most obvious challenge for schools.
Gender: ‘But to invest in a girl – really?’

The second category that emerged from the interviews refers to issues of gender. To a certain extent, these gender issues need to be seen as intertwined with cultural and socio-economic aspects that, again, refer to specific ethnic communities and their economic activities. The focus of this study, however, is not to study gender in specific ethnic and cultural or economic constellations. Rather, I will look at the experiences individuals had growing up and going to school in Kenya to see in what ways they experienced their sex/gender as a matter of privilege or discrimination or of difference in terms of being othered. These experiences were coded into the following categories illustrated in Figure 7.

Further background factors emerging from the empirical material concerning experiences related to gender were socio-economic background, whether it was an urban or rural setting, and body size.

Traditional role expectations and limited choices for girls and women

The first group of experiences with regard to gender referred to traditional role expectations that assign girls and boys different places in society and at home. The examples below illustrate how role expectations have affected the interview participants. Yet, they all emphasised that, in many parts of Kenyan society, the situation has changed over the last 25 years towards less specified role expectations for girls and boys – with more opportunities for girls. Harald summarised this trend:

Initially, some time back when I was young in the 1990s, what I would just observe in the community was that mostly the boys were taken to school and the girls were not. But as of now, I think the trend has changed, the trend has changed by my own experience by what I see. That at least the boys and girls all of them are taken to school, to primary school all of them are taken to secondary school. (8:54)
Figure 7: Visualising gender: Types of biographical experiences
Interview participants also pointed out that the dynamics of past years have resulted in equal access to education for girls but that, traditionally, formal education was valued higher for boys than for girls. This correlates with changing role expectations and traditional ways of dividing responsibilities and labour between the sexes. The most highlighted change in terms of gender and education, was that it has brought new opportunities for girls and women.

However, as much as things have changed recently, Ana’s experience stands exemplary for several interview participants when she explained how girls and boys were treated differently when she was young (early 1990s):

> When I was supposed to go to the secondary school and I had passed, and my parents were like: ‘There’s no school fees’ and yet, when my brother was going to Form 1, a cow was sold. And during my time, there were cows, there was land to be sold, I felt I was not treated equally as boys. (1:35)

Ana went to school in the 8-4-4 system and, after passing her Kenya Certificate of Primary Education in Grade 8, she was admitted to secondary school. But since her parents had difficulty raising funds for her school fees, she had to repeat the grade and the expectation was that she would marry and not continue her education. But, after completing Grade 8 a second time,

> I passed and I really passed excellently that, I mean, my parents could not hold me back not to go to Form 1 because my marks were so high even the chief would ask: where has that child gone to? And I was the first girl to go to secondary school in my family in a family of eight girls and three boys, so being the seventh born there was only one boy that is the first born, the rest are girls and I was the first girl to go to secondary school. That is because maybe, the rest of the family, the girls they were being told to repeat and repeat and they give up and get married. (1:13)
Unlike her sisters, Ana insisted on going to secondary school and somehow found a way to carry on with her education – showing a high level of motivation and initiative. After Form 1 (the first year of secondary school), her father said he was unable to pay the fees for her to continue. Ana did not give up, but looked for support elsewhere:

So when I was told that, I don’t remember who gave me the advice but I walked to the District Commissioners (DC) Office. I booked an appointment and told the DC that ‘my father is telling me I need to get married, he wants to marry me off. And I want to be in the school’. I think he [my father] was summoned and he was given a letter to go and prove to the DC’s place, to prove the wealth that he had. Somehow, I think something touched his mind and he said he’ll sell the land now. But, God gave me grace, the DC just did one, two, three, called the school and I got the bursary to finish my secondary school. (1:33)

Ana’s account touches on various factors relating to her sex/gender and her family’s role expectations for her. Their initial position was that education – especially secondary education – was only available at a high cost. Her parents had a farm to live on but not enough money to send all their 11 children to school. The money they had was for the education of the three sons who would be responsible for the family’s future well-being. Living in a rural environment and being largely dependent on farming, her parents were not convinced that an investment in a daughter’s formal education would pay off. Ana described her parents’ lack of encouragement and support for her education; they did not take her schooling seriously at all. This was largely because she was a girl who – traditionally – would be married off to another family and the return on investment would go to that family instead of her birth family. However, Ana emphasised that this type of gendered role definition and expectation for girls and boys had begun to change at that time in her rural area:
When I look at the seriousness that most of the parents were putting on the girl child, was somehow reluctant, as compared to the efforts which were put to the boy child by the majority of those people who live there. Simply because the notion of – I mean, a girl is an asset to be married off, you know, and you just get wealth, you don't struggle with the liability of educating and then you lose to another family – was slowly dying, but it affected us. So at that particular time when I was in school around until 1998, that was the time people were still wondering: but, to invest in a girl, really? (1:26)

Ana said that favouring boys with regard to education ended in her rural community by the time of our interview. She attributed this mainly to economic reasons: farms became too small for all family members to live on, and divide and pass land from one generation to another. Hence, education was a way for the next generation to become independent of the land.

In a more general sense regarding traditional role expectations, the interviewed female teachers were expected to get married after school, support their husband with however he tried to earn an income, and have children; young men were expected to earn money and fend for themselves. For example, the context of poverty that both Gerald and Beth lived in had severe consequences for their dreams to become teachers. Beth had several children and supported her husband to earn money with brick making, postponing her wish to study further; Gerald moved around the country searching for odd jobs that would barely earn a living. Both had to overcome steep hurdles before continuing their education and becoming teachers.

**Gender stereotypes at school and university**

The traditional role expectations described above manifested as gender stereotypes at school and university, and were described by the female teachers as discouraging. Ana, a mathematics and
geography teacher, reflected on her experiences as a learner in school and at university with respect to subject fields:

I remember instances in classrooms where we were at primary school, there was a notion that mathematics as a subject is for boys, you know, it is a tough subject and meant for men, the engineering courses are for boys. I felt like somebody has a notion that girls’ abilities are below [those of men]; the mental abilities. And I remember when … I went to second year [at university] there was a course that we were being introduced to and one of the lecturers came in and said: ‘Now, this is a course for men’. And I was like: ‘What do men have in terms of cognitive that women don't have?’ And eventually we did the course. In fact, we shouted at the lecturer and said: ‘No, that is unfair and we will prove you wrong’. And when we even did the exam at the end of it all, we realised it was just a course like any other. (1:37)

Such openly discriminatory and exclusionary remarks from teachers and lecturers, based on gendered notions of abilities in certain subject fields, are remarkable. Surprisingly, this sort of attempted intimidation, which appears as a recurrent theme in Ana’s education, had a counter effect on her. She felt challenged to prove there was no difference between the cognitive abilities and capabilities of girls and boys – of this she was convinced. She succeeded at school and also at university with her critical, independent thinking and proved those (male) teachers and lecturers wrong. Ana’s questioning attitude, criticism of discrimination against girls in the classroom and lecture hall and her fight for equal treatment were provoked by the strong gender stereotypes that she as a girl was confronted with throughout her education.

**Status and power**

Another type of experience concerning gender focuses on discrimination, unequal power relations, status and gender-based violence. Even if some of these are not directly connected
to education, they are valuable in understanding the context and social constructions of differences between the sexes.

Ana and Harald both saw changes in general attitudes towards equal value being placed on girls and boys, however, Elsa, who also grew up in a community that in many ways favoured boys over girls, noticed these patterns even today:

When you get a male child, the men are so proud, the community, your mom, the in-laws, they are so happy … but if you get a daughter they are happy but even those gemi [“ariririiiiiiii”—shouts to announce that a baby is born]: you get five for a male child and three for a female child. So it means a lot. If you are born male it means a lot, there is a lot of difference, yeah, whereby a male child is considered better than a female child. (5:22)

When Elsa was small, their father became violent and abused his wife and five daughters because his wife had only given birth to girls, which resulted in his social status being very low:

So my dad used to insult us, there is a very vulgar word that is used against women … and it’s like he was accusing my mom of not being able to give birth to a male child. (5:24)

Elsa described traumatic experiences of her father’s abuse because they were ‘only’ five girls and no boy in the family. This strongly discriminatory attitude is still to be found. Chris confirmed this attitude in his community and social environment:

Even the educated ones, you still find – even the ladies themselves when she has not had a boy, they will never be happy. (3:10)

He also mentioned some of the negative consequences of giving birth to a girl in many communities:

In some communities, dowry will be paid to parents only when you have given birth to a boy and to some extent it still exists,
not majorly but still it exists. And there is that preferences and I can say very few Kenyans would feel happy if they only have girls. Very few, very very few, even the educated ones. So when … especially when it comes to maybe political leaders: when he doesn’t have a boy it is a problem. (3:55)

The economic and social consequences and, specifically, the low social status that Chris and Elsa described for couples who don’t give birth to a boy are severe and put a lot of pressure on the relationships. As Chris pointed out, this phenomenon can be observed even among educated people. It is evident that he expects education to be a tool to get rid of the discriminatory and abusive practices and attitudes that he finds still exist in his community and, more generally, in Kenya.

Florence explained from her own experience, why giving birth to a boy is so important:

So we still believe, our men still believe: you have not had a child until you give birth to a boy. Like, for my case now when I had my first child it was a baby boy. My husband was really excited, he was really happy, I now have a man you see? … The reception, how he felt was so good, I was even taken home, they slaughtered a goat and I was really taken care of so well. Now, when I gave birth to this second child it was a bit different, it was not the same as it was. Generally, our men in our community really want to have the boy, at least a boy in the, yeah, give birth to a boy. It reaches to a point where a woman could give birth to a girl, it is the first child, they don’t mind. They try a second time, a girl, the third time a girl. This man can go and experiment outside [marriage] with another woman. It has really happened to a close friend of mine … So the lady kept on looking for the boy, until the children were nine, nine, but it kept on being girls – nine. So that love, that relationship, that togetherness … They look at you [the mother] as if you are the one who decided the child to be a girl, you see, and even, it’s like you are not fully married. And the moment the woman will give birth to a boy, there is a difference
in that home. A man can even go ahead to marry another woman and say I better marry another woman to come and help me get a child who is a boy. (6:24)

Florence’s account reveals that giving birth to a boy changes the social status of the mother and of the father and the relationship between them. It also highlights the power relations between the wife and the husband – the husband can take another woman if his wife, who is blamed for the situation, does not deliver a boy.

These examples illustrate that in some communities in Kenya, gender matters markedly in that boys are valued more than girls – with severe consequences. However, it is likely that other axes of difference such as socio-economic status and milieu also play a role. Both Elsa and Florence come from low-income socio-economic backgrounds, as does Gerald, who saw similar occurrences in his own community in the past:

Now, in this community … if a girl was married then it was like: you give birth, the first child is a girl, you are considered as an outcast. You know, girls were not really, were not really of value. You are supposed to give birth to a boy, you know boys so that you could be considered as a woman. But then, I am glad, with time these things are going out and with us going to school they are literally not being embraced today. (7:27)

Unlike Chris, who observed these attitudes ‘even among educated people’ today, Gerald attributed the trend of increasing equality in valuing girls and boys in his community to rising levels of education and regards school as the place where these attitudes are eradicated.

Pointing out power inequalities between the sexes embedded in institutional positions of power, Beth recalled her experience as a female student at university and gave an example. When she needed her transcript of records to apply for a job, the examination officer refused to issue the transcript unless she slept with him. He also offered to make the transcript look better to
improve her chances of getting the job. When she refused, the examination officer explained that that was a very common practice and that she would be stupid to refuse. At institutional level, this practice of upgrading examination results (termed ‘STG’ – sexually transmitted grades) is obviously not met with efficient countermeasures.

The narrations above indicate that discriminatory attitudes and practices against girls and women, together with gender power imbalances, are part of many girls’ and women’s experiences when growing up and living in Kenya.

*Everyday sexism and unequal opportunities*

Some research participants emphasised the trend towards gender equity, particularly with respect to education; others shared their experiences of commonplace sexism and unequal opportunities for men and women – gender inequality issues they continue to observe in society. Elsa, for instance, narrated various examples of insulting sexist terms that she and other women are called by men, especially in her own community, in everyday life. She condemned the fact that sexism is promoted by local radio stations through popular music songs in the mother tongue, which popularise and normalise sexist terms and violent behaviour against women. As a young woman at university, Elsa found that gender mattered significantly in competition for representative posts:

And then again, you have that sometimes at university, there is still that aspect whereby they view women like lesser beings. So even posts, if it is a club, maybe it is a youth club, an environmental club or society, the post is very hard for you as a lady to be elected or given that chance as a lady at all, if we have men who want that post, it is very hard for you to get that post. (5:6)

She concluded:

You find that there is still that notion that men feel that they have
power over women and as a woman there is nothing much you can say to a man. They feel that they have the dominance. (5:6)

It is remarkable that these experiences emerged not only in the streets, for example, insulting behaviour by motorcycle taxi drivers, but also in education contexts like the university.

*Male dominance in the domestic sphere*

Some narrated experiences exposed similar cases of male dominance in private contexts. Harald emphasised that, in the home, there is still no equality in many communities in Kenya:

The woman remains a woman, that’s what they say and I’m just using their words that: if I marry you, you are my woman and even if you have your job, you still have to do all that I say and work for me … Women are meant to work under men, yes. So that has never changed, nothing at all, nothing so far as such. (8:56)

This statement expresses the strong domestic hierarchy that Harald identified in the communities he lives and works in. In this construct, the wife belongs to her husband and has to obey his demands. Elsa experienced the male dominance of her father who was violent towards his wife and children at home:

He could beat us, he could kick the food so that all of it is spilled down. And sometimes we could be beaten, my mom could be beaten, we could sleep out sometimes … yeah brutally, so we had a hard time. (6:6)

She and her sisters were often denied food and suffered from the domestic violence perpetrated by their father. If their mother had not sacrificed everything to become a teacher and, with her salary, support her daughters’ education, they would not have been able to get their school leaving certificates. Florence also described
male dominance in the domestic sphere by saying that even if the woman is a professional, like a principal, and her husband teaches in a primary school, the moment she leaves the office ‘you are married to this man and now you become a wife’ (6:18). Even if the husband has multiple partners, Florence asserted that, as a wife, you are not allowed to talk about it and you have no right to leave your husband on those grounds:

You undergo oppression, you cry every night until you say enough is enough. Then it’s like you want to accept the state that you are in and now you see I have to forge ahead (6:32).

Peer pressure

Although the interviewed female teachers shared experiences at home, school, university and in social life of being discriminated against and not treated equally with their male counterparts, gender did not play a prominent role for the male interview participants. Referring to his time in primary and secondary school, Chris mentioned that he was badly affected by peer pressure from other male learners, especially because he was very small for his age. Particularly during primary school, he suffered due to being tiny and unable to defend himself against bigger boys, some of whom had repeated several classes and were therefore much older and taller. Chris pointed out that many boys experience peer pressure in school to conform to certain behaviour and participate in dangerous or criminal activities. For him, this resulted in low marks and decreased motivation to complete his primary education after Grade 8:

Then I said no, I have to change school. So I shared it with my mum and I went myself to a new school asked the head teacher if I could join the school. Nobody talked to me there. I just went myself to the head teacher and said we have to do an interview and we did the interview and I passed. (3:10)
With less peer pressure in the new school, Chris was able to produce better marks. But in secondary school and even after school, he experienced peer pressure and had to resist being drawn into gang activities.

**Socio-economic status: ‘We couldn’t be the same’**

Socio-economic status generally encompasses the axis between poverty and wealth. However, social factors that influenced the experiences of the research participants in terms of social positions and status based on their economic condition were also considered. Hence, the third important category of difference in the experiences of the research participants’ childhood and adolescence is summarised as ‘socio-economic situation’. In the sections above, some experiences that connect ethnicity or gender with a certain socio-economic background surfaced. Based on the research of participants’ experiences with discrimination, exclusion or being othered due to their socio-economic background, I will try to form poverty and wealth as an axis of difference, privilege and under-privilege experienced in educational contexts in Kenya.

Not all interview participants mentioned experiences of being othered, excluded or discriminated against because of their socio-economic situation. It became obvious during the interviews that some teachers grew up in families that were relatively well-off economically, with professionally successful parents; yet they never mentioned their economic situation as an influential factor or that it put them in an advantaged position during their schooling. It did not play any role during the interviews. However, for one participant it evidenced as an undercurrent when she expressed fear of losing her social status and explained her need to upgrade her qualifications.

Again, other factors like gender or ethnicity also play a role in questions around poverty and wealth. However, I have tried to look at those experiences where the axis of economic difference and the resulting social status is central. This suggests that the experiences described could be similar even if the gender or the
ethnicity were different – with other factors channelling the experience in a certain direction as well. Figure 8 highlights the main outcomes for the axis of difference called ‘socio-economic background’ and surrounding it are the different axes of difference that appeared in the data as additionally relevant.

Further background factors that emerged from the material concerning experiences related to the socio-economic background include the location (urban or rural), gender, ethnic community and the immediate family background, for example, whether the participant grew up with their parents or was orphaned, and whether parents or guardians valued education.

**Poverty threatening access to education**

Socio-economic background emerged as an important factor of difference for those who came from poor families. Poverty not only threatened their school attendance but, in some cases, was also the basis for discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion.

The first type of experiences relating to poverty can be summarised as the constant threat of being denied access to formal education. Although Ana was highly motivated to go to school and learn, she was frequently sent home from secondary school because her parents had difficulty in raising the money for her school fees:

> So when I went to secondary school I found challenges because of the school fees that were not paid and at times I could be sent home several times to fetch the school fees. I come, there are no fees again. (1:32)

Despite these disheartening experiences, she did not capitulate but kept on pursuing her wish to go to school. Gerald also missed school regularly after primary school because there was no money to pay school or examination fees:
Figure 8: Visualising socio-economic background: Types of experiences

- Excluded from school at times
- Dependent on well-wishers
- Losing a parent / being orphaned
- Working at school to earn the fees

- High levels of perseverance, not giving up
- Losing a parent, being orphaned

- Self-worth affected negatively

- Discrimination and exclusion of learners from low-income families

- Constant comparison

- Voiceless, powerless

- People looking down at you

- Heterogeneous: high levels of disparities

- Teachers and principals privileging the rich

- Stigmatisation and isolation of learners from low-income families

- Homogeneous: all learners from low-income backgrounds

- Social classes manifested in school

- Low education levels, lack of support from home

- Working at school to earn the fees

- Excluded from school at times

- Dependent on well-wishers

- Threatening access to education: not able to pay school fees

- Self-worth affected negatively

- Heterogeneous: high levels of disparities

- Homogeneous: all learners from low-income backgrounds
I lost my dad when I was in Form 2, and I come from a kind of a complicated situation because my real mom was not there; so life was not easy. I was in and out of school most of the time, managing to sit for the exams just from a well-wisher who was paying my examination fee. (7:4)

He was lucky that somebody helped him complete his secondary school when his parents could not support him financially.

Having to fight for access to formal education is an experience that Beth shares with Gerald and Ana. Due to her family’s economic poverty, she had to struggle to go to school:

The way I understand Africa: community is actually, life is hard. So, okay, I am the fifth born out of twelve. Twelve kids, one mother, one dad. And you see now, the dad was just a peasant farmer, so life was not that easy. When I sat for my Kenya Certificate of Primary Education, for Class 8 – OK, I was the first girl in our district. And you see, I was the fifth born and those who were in front of me, only one had gone to the secondary school, others – there was no school fees. (2:4)

When her father wanted to take her out of school like the others because he did not know how to pay the fees, Beth rebelled:

I told my dad: ‘I’ll kill myself! I’ll go and throw myself in the river’. So, he sacrificed. What he did, he took me to secondary school and he paid the first school fees and left me there. He never again paid any other amount. So, what I did, I went to the principal and told my principal: ‘Just give me work, so that I work for this school and you pay for my school fees.’ (2:4)

Beth found a way to earn her own school fees at the boarding school, which allowed her to complete her secondary education.

The determination and perseverance to complete secondary education against all odds, and in seemingly desperate economic
situations, emerged as a common theme in the narratives of Ana, Beth and Gerald. However, closely linked to the economic situation, family background emerged as a relevant factor influencing socio-economic status. While Ana and Beth pointed out that they lived with their mother and father in stable relationships, which seemed to strengthen their position in their communities, Gerald was less lucky in this regard.

**Stigmatisation and isolation on the basis of family situation**

Gerald’s narrative speaks of his difficult and dependent situation while in school, due to poverty. He also stresses that – particularly after his father died – he suffered low social status because his parents were absent.

Life wasn’t easy. Both at home and at school because sometimes you could play with the other, you are playing with the other children and it is like, they are calling you names like ‘somebody who doesn’t have a mother – what are you going to tell us?’ So I was growing up, you are being told ‘aah, someone who doesn’t have a dad. You don’t – you have no business to play with us!’ Sometimes I could be isolated. (7:14)

The stigmatisation Gerald described refers to his family situation and the fact that he was practically orphaned when he was attending secondary school. During our interview, he often repeated that his life had not been easy then, and that he suffered a lot due to his low socio-economic status in school and at home. It is interesting to note that he did not mention the poverty of his family as a reason for peers or teachers to stigmatise him, but that stigmatisation and feelings of isolation resulted from his unstable family situation and having no parents to support him all the way through school. Similarly, Elsa suffered from the low social status of her family due to her parents having no son and her father not seeing any sense in paying for the education of his daughters.
Low levels of education

Linking socio-economic background to the education levels of parents, Chris observed that when he went to school, learners from poor backgrounds generally had parents with little or no formal education, which often led to poor academic performances by those learners:

If you came from a family where none of your parents went to school then probably [it was] not going well. In fact, that is what happened to most of my peers … Yeah, and I remember guys who were good, clever, they were OK but then because they just couldn't get somebody to tell them do this, do that, here is where I want you to go and then maybe control them a little bit … [they were] not making it or moving to the next level. (3:11)

He saw that his classmates did not get enough orientation, guidance and support from the school to succeed in school – even though they had the potential to do so. However, lack of support from home could not be compensated for by a school with large numbers of learners in the classes, and no capacity for guidance and counselling sessions.

Bagged in social classes: Discrimination and exclusion at school

Poverty obviously was a very common phenomenon, affecting many other children around Ana, Beth and Gerald, although none of them mentioned their economic poverty as a reason for being discriminated against or excluded by other learners or teachers at school. However, the situation was different for Elsa and Florence. For both of them, poverty and low socio-economic status served as basis for their stigmatisation, exclusion and discrimination in school, as Florence explained:

My mother was a secretary and we were staying with children whose parents were lecturers, you see? So we couldn’t be the same
… They could have good uniforms, good shoes, good what, and you, now that you come from where you come from, now you couldn't get, you couldn't be in the same [social] class, yes. Maybe even in terms of, at school, back at school the teachers could look at you as that one who comes from that background that do not have anything so at times you could feel really demoralised. (6:13)

Florence learned from a young age that she was different from the other learners in her class, and that she did not have the same status as her well-placed classmates whose parents were lecturers at a college. She remembered the stigmatisation and that even the teachers looked down on her and treated her as unimportant. But she did not conceptualise her situation as emerging from poverty:

You cannot know that when you are young. The little you have been provided food – it is really, you have to conceptualise: oh, we are the poor. It doesn't come at that time, so you still have that fear because even the houses they lived in were built by whites, yeah, that place, the houses they built. Now, we could wonder, look at them: they have houses that have toilets inside. Now we are like: Look, they are having showers inside, big rooms, dining – but with us, we could only fix everything in a single room, you see that kind. (6:13)

The school environment, in which she felt stigmatised and discriminated against, was largely because she went to the same school as children who lived in big houses, had well-educated parents and did not have to worry about money, food, clothes or school fees – as she did. Although she did not fully understand her situation at the time, she described her memories of being discriminated against by teachers and learners and her feelings of anxiety, strangeness and finding herself an outsider to the life-worlds of her classmates very clearly.

A similar case of poverty as the reason for experiences of discrimination and exclusion is Elsa's time in secondary school.
Due to her good marks in primary school, she was admitted to a national school where the majority of the other learners came from well-off families and stable backgrounds with parents who could afford good education for their children.

If you go to a national school, you find that in Kenya we have those social classes in high schools and they exist up to date whereby you find people of the same level. Most of the people in national schools you find they come from Nairobi and those places that are meant for the rich. So when these people come to high school, they form their own social classes. They have the money, they have everything and for us, who come from a poor background or from within the country remote areas, you find that you are isolated, you are discriminated they don’t want to associate with you. You don’t have a voice because they are there, they say everything, when they are discussing the movies you don’t know anything because you don’t have a TV and for them they have the DSTV they have the ZUKUs [digital high-speed internet] at home, yeah. So about the movies, the soap operas, the latest fashion, the dress code and everything you don’t know, so you don’t have anything to say. (5:6)

Various aspects of Elsa’s experiences as someone from a poor background, at school with learners mostly from well-off families, are touched on in her account above. She experienced the national school she attended as a school for the upper class and meant for the rich. She conceptualised the difference she saw between herself and the other learners as a social class difference, which resulted in feelings of isolation, exclusion and not belonging. She felt that she did not have a voice in those circumstances. She felt voiceless because she did not share the same expensive lifestyle and was not exposed to the things the other learners talked about; she also felt that, coming from a low social class meant she did not count. In her analysis of her experiences, the process of social categorisation and discrimination is an active forming of social classes executed by rich people – in this case the learners in secondary school.
Learners in that social class did not want to associate with her and conveyed to her that she had less worth, was not important and had nothing to say. In Elsa’s experience, the teachers were complicit in this process:

So the major experience, negative experience [in secondary school] was pertaining to those social classes whereby you are discriminated by these people because they have everything and for you, you just come from a poor background. And still, you find the teachers, there is that tendency whereby the teachers tend to favour these students who ... know how to make their hairs, they have the money to put on, we call it the chemicals to the hair so they look smart, the shoes, the socks. So you find that, sometimes most of the teachers, for example our principal, she loved those students from the same social status as herself so you find that she could call them maybe after parade, talk to them, give them sausage or other things in the office. So you find that as part of, I just told you I come from a poor background and you find that still you can’t afford those high-class things or items, you find there is no one who cares about you. The teachers are favouring these students who come from those social classes. You don’t have money, you don’t have good shoes and everything, you don’t even have a high self esteem, so you are just there. (5:6)

According to Elsa, the teachers openly preferred learners with high socio-economic status, rather than mediating the situation and fighting against discrimination based on poverty. Her self-esteem suffered through being different from the high-society learners and being excluded from their group. She was treated differently than her richer classmates on a daily basis. She also recalled days when the parents came to visit their children in the boarding school:

We had visiting days, there were those parents who used to come with posh cars and you are there, your mom has come from the village. (5:6)
This constant confrontation with socio-economic disparities, and feeling the different treatment based on status difference, was also expressed by Florence:

So at times even the teachers can really look at you depending on your, on your background. This one that comes from a poor family; hers, she is a teacher who is able to do something. Now those children who came from a well-off family they didn’t have so much problems because their parents were learned. They were tutors or lecturers at the college, so most of occasions, the teachers could fear them. But these others like now, the likes of me now we really felt we are not there. You couldn’t express yourself you couldn’t do things the way you want because of, you feel you are not the standard, you see that kind of thing. (6:13)

Again, the discrimination and exclusion did not emanate only from the learners; it was also conveyed by the teachers. When Florence was invited to stay with a classmate who was the only daughter of rich parents living in a big house and driving government cars, she again felt the difference:

But still, you cannot feel comfortable because you know you don’t belong there. Yeah, that is not where you are supposed to be. So this lady kind-of was good to me, but it also could reach a time that you could look at yourself from another angle, you know, like where you come from. Then the vehicles they drive us even up to today we have never driven, we have never driven a car, you see. But yeah, so they could help me pay the fees so while at secondary level, at least they could sometimes say, ‘we are taking you to school’. They have the government car … so reaching there now people will discriminate you mostly when they see that you don’t have a voice. You just come from … Whether we do anything to you, who will come up and speak up? (6:13)

Living a comfortable life in a big house with another family did not feel right for Florence. She saw how people in that new home
looked at her and where she came from – and this made her uncomfortable; she felt she did not belong in that new place. As for her experience in school, she mentioned that she felt threatened and unprotected because of her low status; others presumed she would not be heard if reporting what bad things others did to her.

The divisions based on economic situation cut across other categories like ethnic community: ‘So you find this kind of discrimination even with our own people when they know that you are, you are living that, you are in a low social class’ (6:14). As much as the ethnic community would offer a projection screen for identification and belonging, (‘our own people’), division into social classes created rifts in these communities, according to Florence.

Despite these attacks on the self-worth of the two research participants, and the constant discrimination and social exclusion, Elsa and Florence performed very well in school, academically. However, their experiences suggest that little if anything was done by the teachers or principal to counteract the discriminatory behaviour.

**Conclusion**

This first set of experiences relating to the biography of the research participants provides insights about the regimes of difference and power relations that operated in the teachers’ personal lives. Ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background were the main categories that emerged from the data and hence, were specified above.

The experiences and interpretations concerning ethnicity suggest that various factors influence whether and how the axis of difference based on ethnic lines plays itself out in various situations in schools or universities. Learning and teaching in an ethnically mixed environment in the Kenyan context can provide positive and negative experiences and learning opportunities, as illustrated in the examples above. They also indicate that general political environments of tribalised national politics can have an impact on
educational institutions, the distribution of institutional political power and the social relations among students and staff.

Without looking into the details of what it means to be born into a certain ethnic or cultural setting – and which traditions, role expectations or cultural norms these generally entail – the above examples indicate that the matter of ethnic diversity did not emerge as equally relevant for all interview participants. Although they all positioned themselves in the course of the interviews in terms of their own (ethnic) community, various factors influenced how strongly the interview participants identified themselves as (or were confronted with being) a member of a particular community. And, belonging to a certain ethnic community emerged as a relevant category in social arenas like school or university. A common mother tongue often manifested existing power relations and created feelings of unity on one hand, and exclusion and mistrust on the other. Hence, in terms of diversity experiences, the interviewed teachers regarded ‘(ethnic) community’ as a relevant axis of difference in their own schooling and/or during their university studies.

Neighbourhoods and schools with learners from different ethnic communities provided positive learning experiences as illustrated in the examples above. These included social skills like adjusting and adapting to different behaviours, ways of interaction, acceptance of cultural differences and awareness that there is a variety of different lifestyles – which can help one in making one’s own choices instead of thinking only in traditional (gendered) role expectations.

In summary, the insights provided by the teachers’ experiences in school and at university show that ethnic diversity, especially when it is connected to large group constructions such as a community or tribe, is a relevant category to consider when thinking about diversity and education in Kenya.

What can be concluded from the research participants’ biographical experiences concerning gender relations is that inequalities and discrimination against women appear in various forms and structures, and have affected the lives of the interview
participants in several ways. Some of the narrations tell a story of change that connects the past (with gender inequality that privileged boys and men over girls and women) and the present (with equality and power sharing); other experiences reveal high levels of inequality between the sexes, and male domination even today. These manifest themselves in concrete competitive situations like running for election or in the job market, and also in symbolic actions when a baby boy or a baby girl is born. From the various accounts, it appears that other aspects (like socio-economic, cultural, regional and educational factors) play a major role in enabling and shaping very different contexts and structures of gender relations and inequality within Kenya.

Participants’ narrations often referred to the socio-economic situation of their families, particularly in cases where they struggled to provide for basic and educational needs – which emerged as a strong factor impacting on their daily life experiences at school. The differences were mainly felt by those whose families struggled to cater for their basic needs. Depending on the general socio-economic surrounding, a disparity between those who grew up and went to school in economically homogenous, poor environments and those who went to school with children from rich families with higher education levels became evident. Even though the former group struggled to pay school fees and experienced exclusion from school due to their parents not being able to provide money for the fees, they did not report discriminatory behaviour by their classmates based on their families’ poverty, itself. While the obstacles that had to be overcome in order to access education dominate the former group’s experiences, the latter suffered mainly from discrimination, othering and exclusion experienced in school from their classmates and even teachers and principals. Hence, the focus of this group’s narrative is not on the struggle to buy school books and uniforms, but on the consequences of not being in the position to afford similar provisions to the others around them – and of not having the backing of powerful parents from a certain social class and who had completed school themselves. The intersection of gender and
poverty became obvious in both groups with some girls having to fight for their secondary education and, in some cases, having to find or earn money for school fees themselves.

The biographical narratives about diversity experiences and their interpretations are the subjective experiences of the research participants, which are closely linked to their own ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. If they had been physically impaired, homosexual, not a Kenyan citizen or otherwise not fitted well into hegemonic and normalised categories, one would expect the narratives to include even more severe experiences of exclusion, physical punishment and discrimination. The description and grouping of various experiences and interpretations of difference and diversity constitute the first step in the contextualised theory-building process. They highlight the conditions that enable or disable certain positionalities, discrimination, marginalisation or privilege.