

Coming to terms with boys at risk in Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean

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A Regional Caribbean Initiative on Keeping Boys Out of Risk, currently supported by the World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat, resulted in two recent conferences. One of them, Boys and Education: A Life Cycle Approach to Keeping Boys out of Risk, was held in June 2010, and focused specifically on Jamaica. During the conference, the following stark questions were posed:

- Is the education system relevant to boys?
- Must boys become more like girls to be successful?
- Is it appropriate to adopt affirmative action and develop institutions that cater to boys or to proceed more generally with segregated options?
- Do factors relating to changes within families and society, as well as increased violence and persistent poverty, affect boys differently?
- Are there any physical/brain differences between males and females that could account for the differential academic achievements?

How to proceed with the evidence so far

Given the dictum of evidence-based policies, we ask: Have we done the research necessary to guide interventions? Gendered educational achievements have been researched using many disciplines, over many years, and in many countries, including Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean. Sorting this material is a challenge, but it is not the only problem to consider. There are issues relating to the conversion of academic research into policy-useful form, as well as the need to ensure that interventions are designed from scratch to facilitate evaluations.

Much of the analysis of boys at risk focuses on static factors and the possible causes within a particular country without delving into the underlying causes. This is unsatisfactory; many of the factors relating to the harsh realities that boys face at home and in school that are identified as casual were much worse in the past, and though they still exist, these factors have different outcomes in different countries. In seeking immediate policy solutions, the underlying importance of gender construction is often overlooked, and issues relating to home and school are treated as if they operated outside the broader socio-economic and cultural framework. For research to effectively guide policy for boys at risk, it needs to raise fundamental questions and utilise a dynamic cross-country comparative approach. The field is also one where ideology is significant; hence we need to examine carefully the starting points for research design and policy formation.

Much of the popular concern regarding boys' academic performance stems from an ideological perspective based on the

premise that men have a natural (or for some, a divine) right to pre-eminence in the public and private spheres. In contrast, I favour equal opportunities, and therefore believe that we should be suspicious of gender stereotyping and of categorising what we see around us as either naturally male or female. Some people still seek an underlying physical or innate cause for the differential gender achievement, but available evidence suggests that socio-economic and cultural factors are the dominant causes. Any physical/brain differences that may exist can be overcome in the educational process, leading to comparable gender performances.

In as far as there are material and other differences, we expect that, on average, males and females would out-perform each other on different tasks, but this is not a basis for an essentialist or reductionist notion of masculinity and femininity. In addition, we need to move beyond the use of averages in comparing men and women, as averages mask the degree to which both sexes overlap. Men and women are not two homogenous groups, although much of the discourse with respect to gender in education and boys at risk proceeds in this fashion. For those who constantly say that men are 'this' and women are 'that', it is well to consider some counter-examples.

Dispelling age-old gender stereotypes

Everyone knows that men run faster than women and can out-perform them on certain tasks such as playing chess, but the truth is not that simple. Considering that there are billions of men in the world, there are relatively very few who can run faster than Jamaica's Shelly-Ann Fraser, (2008/2009 Olympic/World 100m champion). In 2003 Hungary's Judit Polgar was ranked among the worlds' top ten chess players, leaving only a handful of men ahead of her. Being aware of such simple facts facilitates an open mind as to what boys and girls can and should do. Not all boys are the same; many are not performing as well as they might, far too many are at risk, but there is a significant group that is doing well and achieving high levels of success in the education system.

What it means to be male or female cannot be contained within an essentialist perspective; differences are observed over time, between places and within genders. Society is constantly changing the notion of masculinity and femininity, and within each gender there is a struggle involving the assertion of a hegemonic gender identity, even as individuals and groups seek to advance alternatives. Within each gender there are significant differences, and gender performance in education is often mediated by social and educational variables, such as class, parental factors and type of school attended.

What is striking about the gender transformation in education that took place in the 20th century is that women adapted to the



changing notion of what it meant to be female. They grasped the opportunities that became available to them and levelled the playing field in education. In doing so, they demonstrated that the education system, with its demands for passivity, conformity and diligence, was actually more in tune with the hegemonic construction of femininity. The previous underachievement of girls was in large part due to gender stereotyping with regards to what women could or needed to do in the field of education.

The clash between important elements of schooling and the construction of masculinity had in fact been recognised in varying degrees for many years (Mahoney and Smedley, 1998), but as long as boys continued to out-perform girls in subjects such as law and medicine, the issue received little attention in the Caribbean. It is hard to think of a case where women's longstanding out-performance of men in languages, social work and nursing was ever an issue. Even in education, the broad female dominance among classroom teachers was largely ignored, until women appeared to be challenging prestigious fields formerly dominated by men.

Gender privileging

Faced with the loss of what was considered by many a natural male pre-eminence in education and the fields that it supports, there has been a retreat by many Caribbean males into a hyper-masculinity that clashes even more sharply with the ethos of the education system. The growth of informal and criminal opportunities that are more in tune with this idea of masculinity increasingly puts boys at risk with respect to education and their involvement in crime and violence. In this way, certain socio-

economic factors affect some boys more, but this must not be interpreted in an essentialist way. Factors affect these boys more as a result of the construction of masculinity and how it influences their perception of what a boy can and must do. This is reinforced by the feedback that depends on their teachers' and caregivers' gendered expectations and application of gender stereotyping.

Prior to the shift in the provision for females and acceptance that they could and should be fully engaged in the education system up to its highest levels, it was girls who were found to be more at risk with respect to completing a pathway within the education system that was in keeping with their full potential. In the Caribbean, the various biases against women did not result in significant advocacy or explicit affirmative action, since it was expected that women would find their rightful place as they demonstrated their worth within an evolving system based on meritocratic principles.¹ There are, therefore, both parallels and differences between what has taken place in the Caribbean and what has taken place in other countries.

In the Caribbean, the first work that headlined the issue of gendered performance in education was the *Marginalization of the Black Male*, published by Errol Miller in 1986, which framed the differential gender achievement in terms of male victimhood within the education system. In countering this perspective, I have demonstrated that historic male privileging can explain differential gender performance over time (Figueroa, 2004). Gender privileging explains the period of overall male dominance when girls only overachieved in subjects such as home economics and needlework; outcomes that can be understood in terms of the attitudes and expectations regarding the usefulness of educating girls whose careers outside the home were seen as distinctively secondary.

Gender privileging is equally relevant today, when the open access of females to education has brought to light the gender advantage that they have with regards to the education system.

Gender privileging can help to clarify why there is a top tier of males who do well despite the average underachievement levels. This is because leadership and success in any endeavour is consistent with the male gender identity. The gender privileging perspective also unmasks the continued gendered nature of education and the failure of men to move into female-dominated fields, even as women move into many prestigious male-dominated fields.

The boys-at-risk discourse provides an opportunity and a threat. There is the danger that it will be used to shift the gender discourse back in the direction of male victimhood. This would provide an opening for those who wish to restore male pre-eminence in fields where females have made great advances. It could also lead to the implementation of ideologically driven policy alternatives that have not been properly evaluated or are not supported by current research findings, which may have negative consequences. The opportunity relates to the attention that powerful men are now giving to issues affecting children, which in the past was largely left to the women. Having finally caught the attention of significant power brokers, it is possible that a major advance could be made in the quality of education.

Much of what places boys at risk within the education system needs to be changed. Education must be individually customised and curiosity driven. This is a major challenge for the mass education systems. In the Caribbean, our students are required to be far too passive; they are trained to be risk averse and are forced to engage in endless rote learning in a school system that is oriented more towards passing exams than learning and developing life skills. Such characteristics are in conflict with male gender socialisation and an education reform that would benefit boys as well as girls. Educational reform would also produce more effective workers and citizens who would be capable of thinking critically and who would be more inclined towards innovation and entrepreneurship, thus benefiting the society and economy as a whole.

The challenges ahead

Just as women were called upon to adapt to, and in large part were successful in dealing with, the changed notion of what it means to be female, men must be able to do the same. They will have to participate in a redefinition of masculinity, by, for example, getting involved in what have long been regarded as the 'feminine' service industry and caring professions.

Acquiring an education involves discipline and diligence, and the earlier it is acquired the better. In our present world we have to be flexible and open to a range of career options, many of which are in the service sector and require 'soft' skills. Communicating effectively in a competitive world is paramount. These are

attributes in which girls have tended to outdo boys. As such, boys will increasingly be at risk if they allow their notion of masculinity to interfere with their success in areas that can help them take advantage of the full range of opportunities available to them. A major part of the solution for boys at risk must therefore involve challenging the contemporary construction of masculinities in the Caribbean.

Elsewhere (Figueroa, 2000), I have suggested that the problems of gender and education need to be dealt with in a gender sensitive way but that they must be treated as educational problems. I also question whether sex-targeted solutions will be 'separate but equal', or will girls' education be disrupted to bring the schools into conformity with an unchallenged masculinity? For these reasons, I do not support solutions based on gender segregation. The genders are already over-segregated in Jamaican society. Cooperation between the genders is fundamental to social, economic and political issues, as well as for forging successful business, personal and civil relationships. Beyond gender concerns, research has shown that in dealing with youth at risk it is important to avoid stigmatisation and that making the individual connection is important. In looking at boys at risk we need to see the individual boy first, not his sex.

References

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Endnote

- ¹ According to the view of Errol Miller (Professor of Teacher Education at the University of the West Indies) and others, the more rapid growth in available spaces in teacher colleges and subsequently high schools for females is seen as affirmative action, but this is nothing compared to what is currently being proposed for boys.

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Trinidad and Tobago's single sex conversion programme

Trinidad and Tobago is to convert more than a fifth of its state schools to single-sex education in one of the most radical shake-ups of its schooling system in recent years. The single-sex conversion programme, which will see 20 of the country's 90 secondary schools transformed, comes in response to international research showing that boys and girls perform better when kept apart.

Around three-quarters of Trinidad and Tobago's schools are currently mixed-sex – or 'co-educational'. According to the Ministry of Education's plans, from September 2010, the 20 selected schools will be phased to single-sex over a period of five years. All new first-year intakes will be entirely male or female.

For Dr Casmir Chanda, a teaching consultant advising the country's government on the initiative, the programme is a test case for the Commonwealth. It is the largest of its kind being pursued by a Commonwealth country today, and she believes that other countries will look to Trinidad and Tobago to see if the programme succeeds.

Underperformance in the classroom

Yvonne Lewis, Chief Education Officer, is convinced that the initiative will improve education standards for both girls and boys and will address the underperformance of students by ensuring that learning takes centre stage. "In a single-sex educational setting, curriculum and teaching styles are more easily shaped to fit the needs of its students, thus resulting in higher student performance. Also, in this type of setting, children are more comfortable being themselves, without the co-educational peer pressure that can sometimes occur."

Dr Chanda, who is also the author of *Teaching and Learning English in Secondary Schools*, a study published by the Secretariat, says that the programme is designed to address disparities between the performance of girls and boys in the classroom. While grades for girls have drastically improved in

many Commonwealth developed countries in recent decades, including Trinidad and Tobago, boys have fallen behind.

Caroline Narine, a teacher at one of the affected schools – Barataria North Secondary School, in Barataria, east of Port of Spain, backs the project because she feels strongly that something must be done for underachievement of the boys, and to some extent girls who are easily distracted. "I've been in classes where girls read aloud all the time and the boys refuse, rebel or even skip classes so that they can escape the experience of standing in front of a class and being asked to read... It is time to move away and transform the schools to alleviate this problem or we will lose our boys."

Creating equity in the system

The principal of Barataria North Secondary School believes that the single-sex programme will improve the delivery of the teaching curriculum. In his experience, teachers 'find it difficult' to deliver lessons that cater to both boys and girls. "There is no middle of the road strategy," he says. "My hope for the future is that there is equity in the system so that every child – whether male or female – will be able to realise his or her true potential."

In order to ensure that girls and boys are not completely isolated from one another, converted schools will be situated in close proximity. Joint academic, sports and cultural activities will continue to be organised to ensure that the two groups are still able to socialise with one another.

Since the government announced its plans, the single-sex school conversion programme has provoked huge interest across Trinidad and Tobago. The initiative forms one strand of the government's wider strategy to improve the performance levels of students, including the setting up of a monitoring unit to deal with literacy and numeracy, the establishment of a centre for excellence for teacher training, and a new school review process.