

Under-achieving Caribbean boys

Marginalisation or gender privileging?



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The education of boys in the English-speaking Caribbean has been a topic for hot debate over the last 20 years. It has attracted writers from a variety of fields including anthropology, economics, child health, education, gender and development, psychology and sociology. Over the last 10 years, interest has grown in a context where at the top of the educational system the gender balance within the graduating class of the University of the West Indies (UWI) moved beyond 70:30 in favour of females. While at the entry level, results relating to children's readiness for grade one tests have provided evidence that there may already be an achievement gap prior to the start of primary school.

In terms of overall educational outputs, the gender balance has changed rapidly. The ratio of males to females for the first set of students who entered the UWI in 1948 was 70:30. By 1974/75, more than 50 per cent of the Jamaican students were female; and by 1982/83 women constituted 50 per cent of the entire student body at UWI. This transformation did not go unnoticed. In 1986, Errol Miller published his controversial book: *The Marginalization of the Black Male: Insights from the development of the teaching profession*. Much of the debate that has followed has been in reaction to this study.

To his credit, Miller looked at the contemporary situation as the result of a dynamic process. This approach is very important, as the main question cannot simply be 'why are boys doing poorly in school?' In as far as boys are now underachieving relative to girls, we must ask what has changed relative to when boys were overachieving? Too often, the static factors that are identified as explaining the current situation actually existed or were more intense in the past when the outcomes were very different. As with many significant works, the title of Miller's book has been taken by some as a slogan; leaving its main line of argument or content undigested. We might therefore wish to distinguish a popular notion of 'marginalisation' that is less nuanced than Miller's.

Miller concluded that, in the case of Jamaica, the current educational outcomes were the result of a policy shift that took place at the end of the nineteenth century. This involved the creation of relatively more spaces for the training of female teachers. 'The intention of the ruling class [was] to release black men ... for agricultural and industrial labour, and stifle the possible emergence of militant black educated men who could overthrow the power structure' (p73). At the policy level, he advocated affirmative action for males in the education system.

This policy was already in practice to some degree, as girls needed to gain a higher score in the common entrance examination in order to enter high school. Despite this, girls still obtained a disproportionate share of spaces and there are those who currently advocate a more active policy in favour of males.

Drawing on a wide range of studies that have been conducted in the Caribbean I, like many others, have concluded that there are three areas which influenced the changing pattern of gender achievement in education. These relate to gender socialisation (primarily in the home and community); the educational system as it is experienced by boys and girls; and the nature of the world of work with its differential demand on men and women regarding paper qualifications. I have sought to show how dynamic processes operating in each of these spheres have tended to reproduce gendered educational outcomes and that, in as far as males are underachieving, this needs to be seen as an ironic outcome of historical male privilege.

Historically males have occupied positions of greater power, social prestige and access to resources. This is tied to certain attitudes about how males are to be raised in the home, treated in schools and remunerated at work. Certain tasks, spheres of activities and attributes have been privileged as male; while others have been privileged as female. One consequence is that we can see the persistence of certain trends of a gendered nature within the educational system. Elsewhere we can see very significant shifts, some of which have been alluded to above. My own contribution has been to argue that both of these features, the shifts and trends, can be explained by applying a dynamic analysis of gender privileging.

In focusing on the changes that have taken place in the educational system, it is often forgotten how much gender segregation remains. This is manifest in the gendered subject choices made by boys and girls doing the Caribbean school leaving examination (Caribbean Secondary Education Certification or CSEC for short). In the technical areas, female-dominated subjects such as typewriting, short hand, food and nutrition, home management, and clothing and textiles record percentages for the female share of entries that vary from the high eighties to the high nineties. A similar situation exists in the areas of male dominance, those relating to mechanical engineering, building technology (woods), building technology (construction), electrical and electronics technology, and technical drawing. Gendered choices are also evident, although less pronounced, in the



academic stream. Boys participate less in the humanities, and more in the sciences; and in the latter, relatively more in physics than biology.

The persistence of well-established patterns of gender segregation signals that the genders remain privileged in different spheres. What we need to understand is that the pattern of change is also connected to gender privileging. This becomes evident when we examine how the position of women in education changed over time. Here I focus on female 'cross over' versus male 'cross over' into fields that were previously privileged for the other gender. For example, we know that women's participation in higher education has increased but we need to dissect this participation to understand how females have moved into the majority.

The earliest available gender-segregated statistics for UWI indicate that women were in the majority in the humanities and education; and had a stronger presence in the 'softer' sciences such as biology. From a position of dominance in the humanities, women began to cross over into the subjects most closely related to the humanities: the social sciences and law. Parallel with this is a growing participation in medicine, followed by a growing participation in the pure and applied sciences; with engineering as the last stronghold of male dominance. When Jamaican women achieved an equal participation at UWI in 1974/75, they made up nearly 80 per cent of the humanities and education students; 40 per cent or somewhat less of those in law, medicine and the pure and applied sciences; and less than 20 and 4 per cent of those studying agriculture and engineering respectively.

In seeking a better life, women are crossing over into fields previously dominated by men because the historic male privilege has assigned these fields greater prestige and made them more lucrative. Men are not crossing over into female-dominated fields because the historic male privilege has assigned these fields less prestige and lower remuneration. This is but one link to gender privileging that helps to explain what has taken place. In this short essay it is not possible to cover the entire story but it is important to understand some of these links if we are to understand the difficulties that boys are having and fashion solutions that have long-term viability.

The quality of being a leader is one that has been firmly privileged as being appropriate to the male gender. Doing well at anything, no matter how female the field may be, is a satisfactory pursuit for a male; hence the leading roles played by males in fashion design and as chefs and chief librarians. This helps to explain the pattern of performance of boys in schools. While many perform poorly there is always a group that do very well at the top. At the university level, males often get a relatively higher proportion of the first class honours degrees and go on to pursue academic careers. They hold a disproportionate number of positions as principals and deputy principals; and they continue to dominate the professoriate long after women achieved high levels of participation in tertiary education.

Doing very well in school does not have to conflict with the male identity. At the same time, males also tend to cluster at the lower ends of performance. For example, they often get relatively more pass degrees at university. To explain this low-end performance by boys throughout the educational system, we need to return to the way in which boys and girls continue to be socialised. We

may also concede to the idea of differential development between the sexes, although I believe that the differences in as far as they exist are secondary to the issue of socialisation. As we know, males are generally taller than females but there are few women who are not taller than at least one man; or men who are not shorter than at least one woman. Gender socialisation tends to exaggerate certain tendencies in boys that it curbs in girls.

Schooling has increasingly clashed with significant elements of male-gender socialisation and identity formation, during a period when female socialisation and identity formation were being positioned to take greater advantage of schooling. In the past, the school was a sphere away from the home, which encouraged curiosity, camaraderie and even adventure. As a place where one went to equip oneself for a role in life, it found a match with the social construction of maleness. For the female who was socialised to stay close to home, ask few questions, do as she was told and accept a secondary role in life based on an essentially inferior mental, moral and emotional make up, school was not as important.

In the second half of the twentieth century girls were increasingly released from this debilitating self-concept; provisioning for the education of girls was increased and eventually the quality of provisioning, including opportunities to study areas such as science, has come to be on a par with that available to the boys. In this context, the female identity and socialisation have increasingly come into conformity with the school system as they were always at an advantage with respect to the 'sit still and listen to what you are told' aspect of the school system. The privileging of certain values as female made girls relatively more suitable for school once it was accepted that they could and should seek to attain the highest levels of academic achievement.

Starting at a disadvantage with respect to the 'sit still and listen' aspect of school things got progressively worse for boys. For example, the under-provisioning of education budgets led to the decline in the prestige of the teaching profession. Males left the classroom to seek more lucrative careers. School increasingly came to be seen as a female sphere. With the acceptance of concepts of greater gender equality, less attention was paid to the boys. Given notions of male toughness they continued to be treated more harshly in schools, being more likely to suffer public humiliation at a time when children were becoming more conscious of their rights. What we have is an accumulation of factors that incline boys to turn off from school as their 'in school' experience clashes with their gender socialisation and concepts of male identity. In recent times, this has also increasingly involved issues of sexuality and the assertion of heterosexual identity in a feminised space.

In considering the changing relationship between gender socialisation and school experience it must be noted that the position that boys find themselves in relates to the historic male gender privilege. In the home, boys are less well prepared for school because of the freedom they have to roam the streets, the lower levels of responsibility and self-control that are required of them. They get fewer chores that give them an opportunity to learn the process skills that are required for schooling. In school, the harsh treatment they receive relates to the notion of males being stronger, in need of less protection and required to fend for themselves.



Beyond the classroom, there are also factors that have a differential impact on boys and girls in schools. Employment careers remain gender segmented. The male-oriented jobs such as the artisan crafts are more flexible, highly paid and remote from the tax net than those that can be attained with a modest educational background. Various studies have shown that educational achievement is far more important for females in as far as it impacts on their ability to increase their earning capacity. The growth of opportunities in the informal sector (legal and illegal) has undermined the notion of education as the most suitable means for social mobility. In summary, the changing environment within which the school operates has had a differential impact on the motivation that boys and girls have in school. What is important to recognise is that this is in large part linked to the longstanding advantages that males have enjoyed in the world of work. In the Caribbean countries it is now generally the case that women are more qualified but earn less.

There is a growing view that to address the problems that boys face in school we need to simply lower the standards expected of boys. Alternatively, we should return to segregated systems of education that give boys whatever special attention they need to perform on a par with girls. I have two objections to this approach. The first is that it continues the historic privileging of males; and the second is that, by further privileging males, it is self-defeating. The ultimate solution is to provide a more balanced gender socialisation of boys and girls that ensures that both genders come to school with similar skills. The school system also needs to be adjusted to meet the differential needs of students. It needs to be reformed away from its current regimented, rote-learning routine. There needs to be more emphasis on curiosity and less on curriculum; and education needs to be stressed instead of examinations. By raising the status of what are female-dominated professions and more generally the value given to what women do, we will encourage men to cross over into female fields and discourage women from abandoning these fields. A more balanced labour market will lead to greater male motivation for education.

In the meantime, we need to address the problems that boys face not as boys' problems but as genuine failures of the educational system. Classes should not be segregated on gender lines because neither all boys nor all girls have the same needs. For example, many boys (and girls) have problems with reading and the use of

language. This is a general problem in the Caribbean, which is exacerbated in many places by the gap between the spoken creole languages and the official language of the educational system. By analysing the particular educational problems that some boys are facing, we can find educational solutions that relate to the needs of all students facing these problems. Some will be boys and some will be girls; and not all boys will be facing these problems.

The educational outcomes of the contemporary Caribbean system present a gendered picture. Some people have concluded that this is a case of male marginalisation that requires affirmative action. Such a position is not defensible in this context, where historic male privilege remains strong and men retain leadership in most spheres and generally earn more than women who are better qualified. Affirmative action, if it is defensible at all has, been designed to redress historic under-privileging. Yet boys do have genuine problems in school, which do have a gender-based element. For the minority this propels them to excel; for the majority it undermines their performance. In both cases we can connect the outcome to historic male privilege. To seek a solution based on further privileging would be counter-productive. Instead, we need to identify the specific issues that are holding back the performance of boys and address them as educational reforms. This will improve the performance of boys as well as girls and enhance the contribution that the educational system can make to the socio-economic transformation of the Caribbean.

Biographical notes

Mark Figueroa is Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, Kingston, Jamaica. An economist by training he has taken a keen interest in the relationship between the economy and its natural and social environment. This has led him into diverse areas of research including managing the natural environment; Jamaica's political system; and gender and socio-economic outcomes, especially as they relate to health and education in the Caribbean.