

Gender and achievement in Botswana's basic education: Exploring boys' underachievement

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights boys' underachievement in Botswana junior secondary schools. The paper argues that there is need to establish the root cause of boys' underachievement and institute possible remedies, while safeguarding the gains made in girls' education. Drawing from findings at school level, the discussion demonstrates a structured gender based performance which mirrors what happens in the final examinations. Findings showed that just as in the final examination, boys underperform in school internal examinations. The study concluded that there is need to mainstream the issues leading to boys' underachievement and mitigate them. Implication for practice is that schools should create child friendly environment where boys (and girls) can learn effectively.

Keywords: Gender, underachievement, learning environment, motivation.

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INTRODUCTION

Botswana's healthy economy since 1980's has enabled the government to invest in education without any major external assistance. For instance, several planning documents such as National Development Plan (NDP) 10 2009-2016 demonstrate governments commitment to ensure access and equality to education. As a result, Botswana has experienced tremendous educational expansion especially in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) since government considers access to basic education a fundamental human right (Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE), 1994). The government has also provided reasonable educational facilities evenly across the country. However, providing schools with uniform resources may be the 'first step' towards the realization of educational equality (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001). Although important, resources are not a guarantee for successful teaching and learning or equal treatment of learners to derive value from the education system.

Botswana's education system is premised on the principle of equality of educational opportunity. The RNPE, and Inclusive Education Policy (MoESD, 2008) mandates quality education for diverse groups of learners including disadvantaged groups such as children with

disabilities. Therefore, the public education system is expected to ensure equality in educational opportunity. While a good legislative framework forms the basis for practice, transforming it to tangible results can be difficult. Therefore, most of the envisaged benefits of equitable quality education have not been forthcoming as reports continue to show that some groups of learners underperform in national examinations (Tabulawa, 2008; Molefe et al., 2010; Botswana Examinations Council (BEC) 2010-2015). Analysis of the 2010 to 2015 Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) results show that groups of failing children include children in rural schools and boys which is the focus of this paper.

Whilst numerous studies have looked at the issue of 'failing boys' not much has been done in Sub-Saharan Africa and Botswana in particular. Therefore, similar studies are crucial in Botswana to understand the failing boys' phenomena from the Botswana context.

Traditionally, the dominant discourse has been the plight of girls in educational participation and achievement. The drive to uplift the girl-child has led to the promulgation of policies, often spearheaded by United Nation bodies such as UNICEF and UNSECO, to address girls' educational needs. Consequently, many

education systems have become sensitive and relevant to girls. Whilst Western countries have achieved gender parity in education, a new trend of boys' underachievement emerged in the 1990s. Therefore, in some countries, there is a reversal of fortunes and policy makers have to go back to the drawing board to spur boys' achievement. Jha and Kelleher (2006) in their cross national study suggest that boys' underachievement is common in countries that have achieved universal access to education. Perhaps this explains the new trend in Botswana; since the country is one of the few in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has almost attained universal basic education.

The discourse of 'failing' boys has gained momentum especially in developed contexts (Cobbett and Younger, 2012). Governments have responded to this crisis with targeted measures to raise boys' achievement. For instance, Ringrose (2007) explains that in the UK, massive resources have been directed at raising boys' attainment, at the expense of girls. Ringrose argues that such reactive measures lead to a vicious cycle where one's group's gains in education is reverted to inequality; creating a cycle of underachievement to achievement and back to underachievement.

Generally, as Zyngier (2009:113) states, gender and achievement debates are "emotionally charged". In gender and achievement discourse, boys and girls are often pitted against each other in opposing lenses of beneficiary vs. victim binary (Zyngier, 2009). Such perceptions lead to contentious debates at policy and implementation levels. The problem is that in such high stakes debates, issues which can generate solutions or add value to the discourse are often blurred. Further, boys' underachievement often disrupts policy debates which have often focused on girls. More fundamentally the discourse disrupts feminists' unassailable assertions which in the past decades have championed for girls education. Therefore, as Ringrose (2007) observes, the 'failing boy' discourse is often perceived as 'anti-feminist'.

As earlier mentioned, the phenomena of boys' underachievement is less debated and researched in Sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps this is because the trend is new; and more fundamentally, most African countries are still struggling with the initial problem; of girl's underachievement. However, the results of the Southern and Eastern Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality II (SACMEQ) show that in some countries such as South Africa, Mauritius and Seychelles, girls are performing better than boys. However, it should be noted that there are still many countries in Africa, such as Kenya (Warrington and Kiragu, 2012), Ghana (Dunne and Leach, 2005) and Malawi (Kamwenda, 2010) where girls' underachievement is still an issue of concern, and require concerted effort to address it. However, recently, the trend of 'failing boys' is also emerging in Kenya where girls are outperforming boys in the final secondary examination overall grades (Kenya National

Examinations Council, 2016) although boys did better in Sciences and Mathematics that are considered key for the development of the country.

In the first part of the paper, the author provided educational developments in Botswana, which will be followed by a literature review. Next, the findings on the causes of boys' underachievement were outlined. However, the discussion moved away from the polarised debate of boy's underachievement vs. girls' overachievement. The argument is that there is need for a more balanced and sober discourse which promotes the interests of both boys and girls.

Background

In Botswana, the government has made access and equality of opportunity for education an explicit policy (Republic of Botswana, 1977; RNPE, 1994). The first Commission on Education popularly known as Education for *Kagisano* (education for social justice) mandated equitable education for all children irrespective of their abilities and social backgrounds. The adoption of the RNPE 1994 marked the turning point in the provision of education in Botswana as a right to all children (Republic of Botswana, 2008).

The basic education system in Botswana consists of seven years of primary education and three at junior secondary level. The public education system comprises of co-educational schools and admission to Form one is 'automatic'; not based on grades attained in the Primary School Leaving Certificate (PSLE). The policy is that JSSs admit children from the neighbouring primary schools.

While Botswana has almost attained universal access to basic education, the challenge is the quality of education as shown by falling Junior Certificate Examinations (JCE) results. However, a closer look at the achievement grades reveals that majority of students at the bottom are boys. While in Africa the boy child is often perceived as a beneficiary of education systems, this is not the case in Botswana JSSs. Form three marks the final year of the basic education cycle which is followed by a high stakes examination. Often, JCE grades mark the beginning or the end of a bright future. While gender achievement gaps are fairly narrowed at senior school, poor grades at Junior Certificate (JC) level deny a child a place in senior secondary school, the gateway to higher learning. Even in cases where students with poor JCE grades are admitted to senior schools, they lack concrete academic foundation, which can curtail their future educational success.

Although most countries in Africa lag behind in achieving gender parity in educational participation, Botswana is ahead in this regard (UNESCO 2010). However, whilst some studies in Africa show that boys outperform girls at all levels of education (Dunne and

Leach, 2005), or in some subjects (Kamwenda 2010), in Botswana, girls outperform boys in all major subjects at primary and junior secondary level (Republic of Botswana, 2005/2006; BEC 2009-2015). The implication here is that boys' underachievement in Botswana is pervasive since they register poor grades in all major subjects which makes their situation vulnerable. Such disparities should be an issue of concern to educational planners since they have implications on boys' future life prospects. However, as noted earlier, boys' underachievement in Botswana has not received a lot of attention in public policy debate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have shown that girls tend to have a positive attitude towards school and conform to school expectations compared to boys (Darling and Glendenning, 1996; Dunne and Leach, 2005). Furthermore, some studies have shown differential treatment of learners in the classroom, based on gender. For instance, Foster et al. (1996) and Woolfolk (2004) state that boys' misbehaviour result in teachers giving them more attention compared to girls. The unequal treatment affects student's motivation and self-esteem with boys dominating in class discussions whilst girls underestimate their academic ability. Generally, most studies have shown that girls are disadvantaged as they are asked less questions and teachers have lower expectation of them compared to boys. Girls also suffer from sexual harassment from boys and teachers (UNICEF, 2000, Kamwendo, 2010).

Ringrose (2007) suggests that the feminist debate has led to promulgation of narrowly conceived and divisive educational policies. Ringrose (2007, 474) blames some brands of feminism especially liberal feminism "vicious rhetorical cycle" of 'girls' victimization vs. 'boys' victimization (Jackson, 1998, as referenced in Ringrose, 2007). It is against such backdrop that currently, some scholars have suggested that perhaps girls' education discourse and achievement has been done at the expense of boys' education. However, Ringrose (2007:475) cautions against 'the panic over 'failing boys' and over exaggeration of 'girls' overachievement' especially in Western media which lead to reactive measures which disfranchise girls.

Ringrose suggests that girls or boys achievement should not be framed in opposition of the other which set off a 'reactionary debate' (p. 481). The cause of boys' and girls' underachievement are unique, contextual and thus to attain gender parity, their unique challenges must be addressed concurrently. More fundamentally the gender and achievement discourse should not be perceived as wider societal gender wars, where one gender is supposed to triumph over the other. What children need at this age is a good education to improve their life prospects. And each one of them has a right to

be provided with the same especially in the basic education cycle which is a human right. Therefore, there is need for more balanced gender and achievement discourse where each child's agenda is promoted. While it may be unfeasible to attain gender parity in achievement, it is argued that where one gender underperformance is glaring and persistent it should be interrogated and concrete measures taken to spur their educational success.

As noted, the phenomenon of boys' underachievement is generally new in the developing context. For instance in Botswana there is little public debate on boys' underachievement except the annual examination reports that show that 'girls beat boys in all subjects' at primary and junior secondary level. There is also little research which has highlighted boys' underachievement in basic education. However, research in other parts of Africa show girls continued under participation and underachievement (Dunne and Leach, 2005; Kamwendo, 2010; Warrington and Kiragu, 2012). In Africa where strong cultural practices and beliefs constraint girls educational success; girls remain vulnerable to underachieve. However, the new trend in Botswana deserves attention since if unchecked such gaps can continue to widen.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed multiple methods in data collection. The study was contacted in eight (8) JSSs; of which four are in Gaborone and the other four in Kweneng region. Gaborone is the capital city of Botswana whereas Kweneng District is one of the ten districts in Botswana. Thus, Gaborone offered an urban setting whereas Kweneng provided a rural and peri-urban setting. The schools were labelled from A to H.

Data collection commenced with individual interviews where a high and low achieving student in each school was interviewed. The selection of the students was based on students' results in the End of Year Examination which is a major internal assessment in JSSs. Based on this, the top student and the last student in each school was selected hence a total of 16 in the eight schools. The students were labelled low achievers (LA) 1-8 and high achiever (HA) 1-8. Individual interviews were important since the assumption was that participants would provide honest account of their experiences without the influence of peers.

The individual interviews were followed by focus groups. The researcher liaised with class teachers to identify suitable students for focus group interviews. In total eight focus groups were sampled based on gender and academic ability to validate and expand data collected from individual interviews. The groups were identified as focus group (FG) 1-8. Focus groups were useful to understand how groups of students perceive and interpret their learning experiences as well as that of others. The interviews provided insights on shared gender school experiences.

FINDINGS

The term boy and low achiever were used interchangeably in the eight schools. During the selection of students for group interviews, teachers often

commented that it was difficult to get a boy in the top achieving categories whereas they seemed to have no difficulty in identifying boys at the bottom. Document review showed a structured gender based performance. It seemed that what is happening in JSSs is a precursor of what happens in the final JCE exam. Hence at school level, achievement was highly gendered which we now look at.

Differential gender achievement

Firstly, while the selection of students for individual interviews was based on the End of Year examination which is a major internal examination, in the eight schools, seven of the top students were girls, whilst the last student in each school was a boy. Therefore, during the individual interviews, low achievers were persistently boys and high achievers girls. When asked which gender performs better, both boys and girls responded that girls outperform boys. Girls' attributed boys' underperformance to indiscipline and lack of interest in their school work. Conversely, boys indicated that girls were hardworking and focused on their education which made them to do well.

As mentioned earlier, annually, girls outperform boys in the basic education cycle of primary and Junior Secondary school levels. For instance, in 2011 JCE, the proportion of females who attained Grades A-C was 79.5% compared to 69.5% males. In the D grade, the male candidates take up 30.5% compared to 20.5% for girls. Thus 10% more girls in the quality pass category and 10% more boys in the failure category as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

The pattern is evident in the last five years. For instance in the 2015 JCE results, the percentage of boys in the quality pass of A-C continued to dwindle while they are overrepresented in the poor grades D-U as the BEC report acknowledges in Figure 2 caption.

Figures 1 and 2 show that although girls outperform boys in the key quality grades of A-C, what is worrying is boys' dominance in the D, E and U grades which are considered a 'failure' and therefore, a massive (more than 10%) more male candidates failing in the JCE. Whereas the number of female candidates is slightly higher at JCE level, such disparities need to be addressed.

A review of the End of Year Examination results showed similar patterns where girls took up at least seven of the top 10 positions in each school whereas boys did the same for the bottom 10 positions. Thus out of the eight high achieving students selected for interviews, only two were boys who had topped in the end of year examination in their schools. From the findings, it seems that differential gender achievement is replicated in schools long before the final examinations. Thus, unless something is done to arrest the current

situation, this pattern is likely to continue for a long time.

However, not all girls were overachieving and had positive learning experiences. Zyngier (2009) and Ringrose (2007) caution against generalising that all boys are failing and all girls are passing. In fact in this study girls who were underachieving reported that teachers were more hostile to them and faced more severe challenges as one girl explained:

It is worse if you are a girl. The teachers insult you, they tell you, you are failing you don't read, because of your boyfriend, even when you don't have one.

Therefore, although findings showed that most boys were underachieving, generalising boys' underachievement or girls' overachievement is flawed.

Causes of boys' underachievement

From the findings, while there was no doubt that boys were underachieving at school level, the question was why? Based on lesson observations, document review and student interviews, the findings revealed that indiscipline, and lack of motivation is the major factors contributing to boys' poor learning experiences and underachievement. The following is a discussion on the factors which lead to boys' underperformance.

Indiscipline

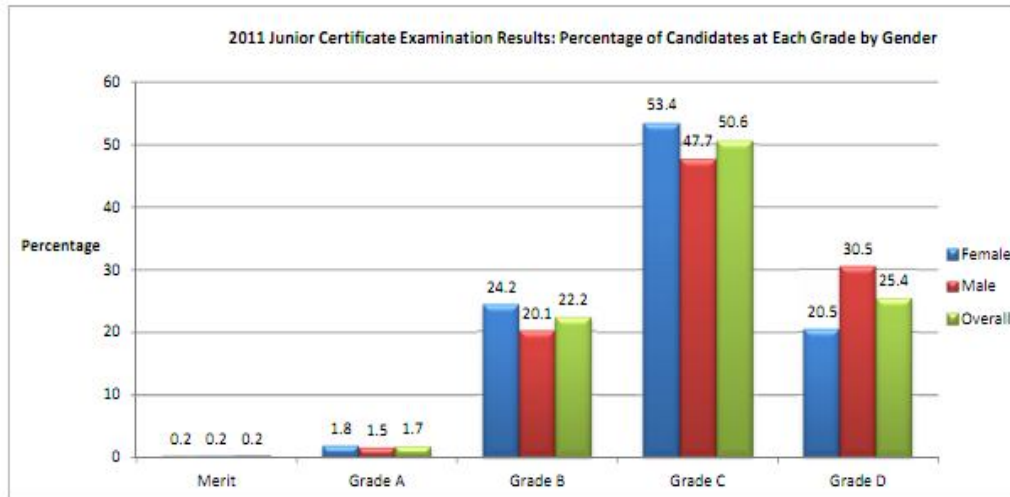
During the interviews, when asked why boys were underachieving, the students blamed boys' misbehaviour such as missing lessons and drug and alcohol abuse. A common phrase during the interviews was that "boys are a problem" or "the problem is with the boys". The following extracts echo students' sentiments on boys' misbehaviour.

They [teachers] always have some issues with the boys because boys always disrupt lessons; they always sit at the back, so they are always being beaten all the time (HA-5-girl).

In one focus group when asked about boys' school experiences one student had this to say:

Eish, as a matter of fact, boys in this school, they are terrible". In that perspective teachers in turn they don't take them for much like girls, they just ignore them since they know they are trouble, so they just ignore them. Teachers prefer dealing with girls. (FG 5-boy).

Students also reported that teachers had different attitudes towards learners based on gender with the majority suggesting that teachers treat girls fairly. For



◆ The proportion of girls awarded Grade A – C is 79.6% compared to 79.7% in 2010; and the proportion of boys awarded A - C is 69.5% compared to 71% in 2010.

Figure 1. 2011 Junior certificate examination results: Percentage of candidates at each grade by gender.

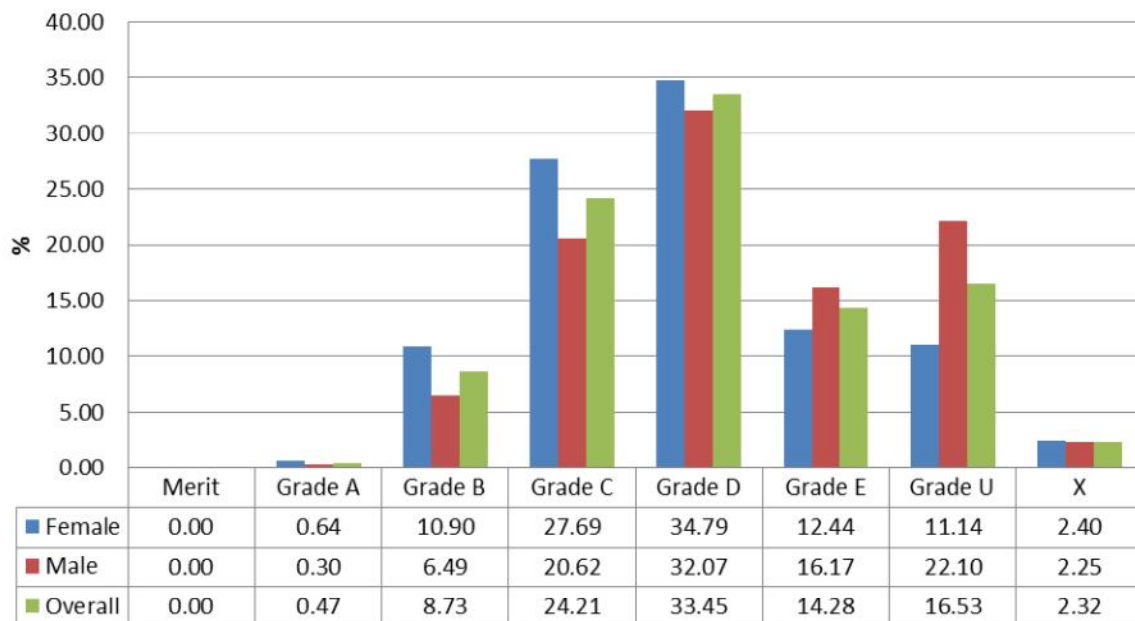


Figure 2. Gender differential in overall pass grade is more evident at grades B and C, where females are outperforming their male counterparts. It is also evident at lower grade E and U where males outperform females.

instance, in school D, when asked about teachers attitudes towards girls, the student quipped “Most girls do well in class and teachers seem to like them (HA 4).

In school A, another student explained:

Boys are treated differently because they act differently. They commit offences over and over

again and they are punished. Girls fear punishment but boys don't care (HA -1).

However in school C, E and G, interviews reported there were some girls who also misbehaved and teachers do not like them. Moreover, in school C, interviews revealed that boys' misbehaviour had spilled over to some girls who were now not interested in learning and were in

trouble in school.

Boys' misbehaviour not only affected their learning negatively but also that of others as teachers took time to reprimand them at the expense of teaching and learning time. Incidences of confrontation between boys and teachers, especially boys sitting at the back of the class were common. Teachers stopped to reprimand and sometimes punish such boys.

Peer pressure was cited as the main reason for boys' misbehaviour. Students cited examples of boys' who came with good PSLE grades but were now failing:

They [boy] do not read due to peer pressure. Most of the boys whom we joined with in Form 1 now they have changed due to negative peer pressure and stuff. Some of them have started smoking and other bad behaviour and now they are failing (HA 6).

In school G the HA had this to say:

Some boys came here with straight A's, [in PSLE] but when they got here they started hanging out with the wrong crowd and then they started failing. They want to get accepted by their friends and they will start doing drugs, smoking and drinking alcohol and then they start failing everything and they will be constantly fighting in school (HA 7).

Another one explained:

Boys perform lower than girls because boys are very playful and they don't take their school work seriously because there is a lot of peer pressure. There is a lot of negative peer pressure on the boys' side. For example you find that if a boy is not attending a lesson, he is going to influence other boys not attend that lesson. Maybe you find two boys attending a lesson other boys are sitting outside the toilet just because one boy didn't feel like attending the lesson (HA 1).

However, while girls portrayed boys as villains, boys portrayed a picture of victims. In one focus group one boy commented *"being a boy in this school is a problem. We are always picked on as noise makers even when we didn't"* (FG 1, boy).

Findings showed that boys were beaten more severely for the same offences with girls. The finding is similar to Dunne and Leach's in 2005 study in Botswana. Interestingly, whereas boys' misbehaviour was cited as the main cause of their poor performance, in the classes observed, only in two lessons (N = 40) where boys displayed disruptive behaviour or other misconduct. In most lessons, boys were disengaged from the lesson and docile. Thus, at least at classroom level, boys'

misbehaviour did not seem to be a major issue although teachers were harsh with the slightest misconduct. Teachers may be punitive to certain students based on past behaviour which may be counterproductive resulting in more confrontation to the detriment of the students' learning.

Lack of motivation

Evidence suggests that lack of motivation contributed to boys' underachievement. A gender differential level of motivation was evident during interviews. Girls depicted a picture of students who were motivated and confident with comments such as *"I know where I am going in life, I am going somewhere"* to describe their feelings whereas boys were less confident about themselves. In focus groups, boys were less confident leaving most of the talking to girls. However, in school C and H, the boys in the focus groups who were prefects were vocal and the discussion was balanced. During the interviews girls were described as 'intelligent', 'hardworking' and 'focused on their school work' compared to boys, which led to better attainment.

Girls are doing better than boys because boys are not interested in their school work so when tests come, they fail because they didn't read, so some questions, they can't answer (LA5).

Moreover, classroom observation revealed that classes dominated by boys were quiet and lifeless. For instance in one class with 30 boys against 18 girls, the class was extremely quiet. The girls in the boy dominated classes were equally quiet. In another class comprising of 36 girls and 14 boys, the class was lively with a lot of student participation. The boys in this class were also active.

During the interviews, whereas boys talked about girls being favoured by teachers, lesson observations showed that boys were more visible as teachers called upon them to perform various activities. Such attention came from both male and female teachers. Girls had to make an effort to be called upon by teachers. However, boys' lack of motivation was shown by their unwillingness to volunteer to take part in learning activities. Classroom observations revealed that whereas during lessons teachers gave more attention to boys, when teachers asked for volunteers to answer questions or demonstrate to others an activity, girls were quick to volunteer and went ahead to demonstrate the same cheerfully which could be a sign of intrinsic motivation for learning.

For instance, in nine of the 40 lessons observed where teachers requested for volunteers to demonstrate something on the board, of these only in two (5%) occasions did a boy volunteer to do the same. On several occasions, teachers had to demand boys' participation with comments like *'I want a boy this time'* or *"where are*

the boys”? Thus, to avoid the lopsided nature of class participation, some teachers insisted on boys’ participation with comments like “it is now turn for a boy”, which forced boys to participate. Therefore, a key reason for boys’ underachievement is teachers viewing students in terms of boys and girls. This leads to stereotypes, differentiated treatment and consequently gendered learning outcomes.

Lastly, most male students sat at the back of the class typically occupying the last three rows in each column. Boys who sat at the back of the class were mainly disengaged from the lesson, oblivious of what was going on and occasionally disruptive. Incidences of boys’ disengagement from the lesson were common such as reading magazines in their desks, chatting with each other or just sitting idle. When teachers asked such students questions on what they were teaching they were often blank which made teachers angry resulting in confrontation. In such cases the boys were threatened with punishment (or punished) or given a verbal tirade. However, sometimes the boys were left to their own devices as teachers proceeded with the rest of the class. Interestingly on several occasions in classes where girls were seated at the back, they were actively involved in learning. Therefore, it seemed that the problem was not boys’ sitting position; but using it to disengage from the learning process.

DISCUSSION

Several studies including this one have shown that during lessons, boys receive most of the attention from teachers. Whereas other studies have shown teachers’ attention advantages boys learning, in this study, such interaction did not seem to benefit boys. Based on classroom observations and students interviews, there could be two explanations to this. First, since as mentioned earlier boys are not self-motivated, perhaps after lessons, they go back to their comfort zone and do not put effort in their school work. Secondly and more fundamentally, most interaction between boys and teachers was negative, such as being reprimanded and threatened with beating which can create a negative learning environment. Moreover, boys bear the brunt of corporal punishment and verbal abuse. Therefore, it seemed that the quality of teacher-pupil interactions influences boys’ learning and engagement with the school negatively which we now look at.

School practice and boys underachievement

I used inductive analysis to arrive at three broad reasons to explain boys’ underachievement in the JSSs namely indiscipline, punishment and low motivation. This cyclic nature of events led to boys’ eventual underachievement

at school level and perhaps at JCE. The assertions were supported by student interviews and classroom observations. The three factors are interlinked but can also act singly to lead to boys’ underachievement as illustrated in Figure 3.

Hostile learning environments and indiscipline

Figure 3 shows that boys’ indiscipline led to aggressive teacher behaviour characterised by punishment. However, students’ interviews also revealed that teachers were hostile towards boys and targeted them for corporal punishment. When asked about boys’ experiences, it was common to hear comments like *‘boys are beaten all the time’*. Frequent beating made boys resistant and bitter towards teachers. The students then talked of a process where boys were beaten and went back to commit the same offences creating a cycle of offence-punishment. From the interviews, most boys were defiant towards teachers whom they perceived to be hostile to them. Boys felt unloved.

Moreover, frequent punishment led to demotivation, with some boys resorting to mischief attracting the wrath of teachers. Lesson observation revealed that teacher girl relationship was cordial whereas most teacher-boy interactions were confrontational. Confrontation with teachers led to poor learning experiences for boys; the likely end product being underachievement. Boys’ underachievement could also trigger demotivation. For instance, student participants reported that some boys had ‘given up’ and were now trouble makers. It can be assumed that a demotivated student is likely to resort to misbehaviour with serious consequences in JSSs. The evidence seems to suggest that class room climate affected boys’ schooling negatively.

Yet, findings seemed to suggest that corporal punishment was not meeting the intended purpose of deterring or correcting misbehaviour. In one boys’ group, one student commented *“They (teachers) should talk to us instead of using the stick. Using the stick is not helpful. If they talked to us we can be doing better”* (BG, 1). The sentiments were corroborated in the focus group in the same school, where one girl had this to say about corporal punishment *“It (corporal punishment) makes boys more angry and disrespectful of teachers even more (FG 1-girl)”. A disturbing finding was that in some of the schools, boys reported that they refused to participate in class to hit back at teachers who punished them. The tragedy is that boys lack of participation does not augur well for their learning and this could be one of the reasons why in most schools, boys were underachieving. This is interesting since interviews also revealed that students’, who failed in internal exams such as end of month tests, were punished. Hence, underperformance could lead to the student being beaten which further leads to demotivation and further misbehaviour.*

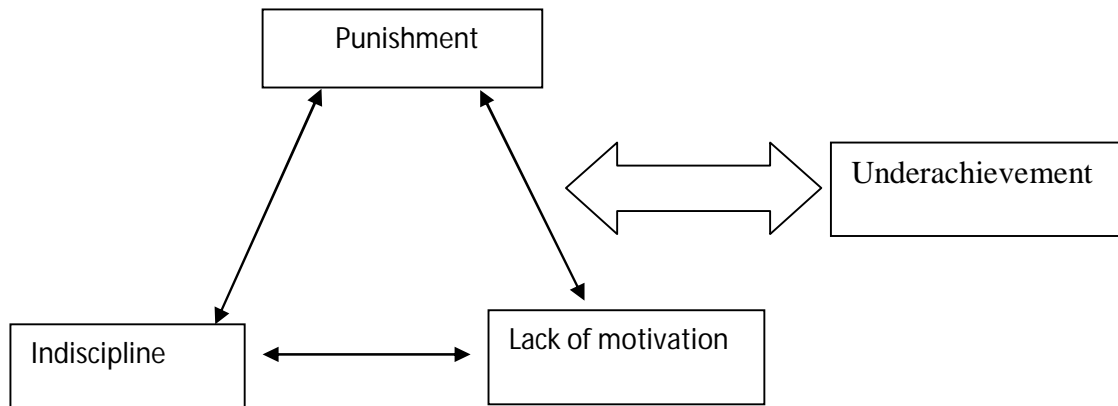


Figure 3. The cyclic nature of boys' underachievement.

From the interviews, it seemed that most teachers had labelled boys as a 'problem' and treated them as such. Yet, Darling and Glendenning (1996) large scale study in Scotland showed that it is not all boys who are a problem but certain groups of boys. This is interesting since teachers tend to generalize students' behaviour based on gender with some labelled good and others bad. Such attitudes often lead to teacher differential treatment of learners. UNECSO (2005b) identifies a form of educational exclusion at school level as when teachers have narrow attitudes towards learners, such as based on gender. For instance, Ozga (2000) attributes boys' underachievement in the UK to exclusion and suggests that unequal treatment of students reproduces groups of disaffected and failing students. In the same vein, an earlier study by Knox (1990) attributed boy's school phobia to a negative school climate. Therefore, it seems that boys' underachievement and lack of interest in school can be attributed to hostile school environments.

Clearly, teachers' strategy of addressing boys' misbehaviour is not working. Perhaps, teachers should move beyond reactive measures to proactive interventions such as peer counselling and motivating boys. The current reactive measures are counterproductive. They not only impact negatively on boys' learning but also create a negative learning environment for other students as teachers spend time reprimanding or beating boys during lessons. In fact in all schools where corporal punishment was rampant, students reported that it only made boys' misbehaviour worse, with comments like "they are used", or "they do not care". There is need to develop other non-invasive methods of dealing with indiscipline which does not leave boys bitter with teachers leading to a cycle of misbehaviour and punishment and under-achievement.

Lack of motivation

The other cause of boys' poor performance is their lack of

motivation. In boys dominated classes, lessons were lifeless while in girl dominated classes, lessons were lively with a lot of student participation. Moreover, from the sitting arrangement in most classrooms, it seemed that boys wanted to be as far away from teachers and learning activities as possible. Perhaps boys wanted to sit far from teachers because they were afraid of possible confrontation or because they were not motivated to engage in learning activities.

However, an interesting observation was that in Form one, boys and girls are mixed up in the sitting arrangement but in Form two, the trend of boys occupying the back seats start to take shape and in Form three, the pattern is well established. The pattern seemed to suggest that when boys join Form one, they are eager to learn but as time goes the interest decreases. The question then is what leads to such a drastic change? There is possibility that the school environment plays a key role in boys disinterest in learning. Further, by Form 3, boys continued cycle of underachievement, demotivation, indiscipline which leads to confrontation with teachers is well established hence some boys may give up trying to improve their school grades.

Whereas to some extent boys' lack of motivation and misbehaviour is to blame for their academic fortunes, clearly at their age, boys cannot be left to their own devices nor can teachers give up on them. Perhaps strategies such as life skills education for boys should be of urgent concern to enable boys make informed decisions for their future. Also, strategies such as raising boys' morale and creating child friendly schools can go a long way in raising their attainment. More significantly, small steps such as altering the sitting arrangement in classrooms can promote boys' learning since in a few classes where boys and girls were mixed up or where very few boys sat the back, boys were active in learning.

From the findings, boys should be guided and supported to make the right choices. An option would clear mechanisms to mitigate some of the pitfalls such as drugs and alcohol abuse. Lastly, high quality education

requires a physically and psychologically safe learning environment, thus, as UNESCO (2005a) observes, for quality education to be realised, all forms of violence, physical and social insecurity in schools should be eliminated. This may require educating teachers on how to deal with boys (mis)behaviour using less invasive means to avoid resentment and lack of interest in their school work.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the plight of boys' underachievement in Botswana junior secondary schools. The discussion has shown that while boys' underachievement is depicted in the final achievement statistics; what happens in the classrooms and the quality of boys' schooling is often a predictor of their final grades in JCE. The findings showed that boys poor results can be attributed to poor learning environments, indiscipline and lack of motivation all of which either work singly or collectively leading to poor academic results. Thus, it is suggested that issues leading to boys' underachievement should be addressed at school level to spur their achievement.

Notwithstanding, this paper argues that the process of uplifting boys should not be done at the expense of girls. It is important to consolidate the gains made so far in girls' education. Therefore interventions must address both boys and girls to ensure that none is left behind. Cobbett and Younger (2012), states that schools can focus on processes that promote both boys' and girls' quality of schooling and change processes which undermine boys' quality of schooling. For instance, it is important to note that in this study, interviews revealed that girls experienced poor learning environments due to sexual harassment from boys. However, unlike boys who seemed highly affected by corporal punishment and other challenges, girls seemed less bothered about it which may explain why they managed to maintain good grades.

To deviate from the polarised gender and achievement debate, Cobbett and Younger (2012) suggests a discourse which moves away from boys (or girls) underachievement to a broader debate on gender and education. The authors state that:

In the light of this, boys' underachievement is best addressed not by approaches which seek to make schools more 'boy friendly' and reify gender differences, but by those which seek to make schools places of greater gender freedom, where all children are encouraged and enabled to achieve (p. 13).

Perhaps, this should be the way forward to avoid the lopsided and cyclic nature of the gender and achievement discourse where if one wins, the other loses. Botswana must safeguard the gains made so far in

girls' education but at the same time address boys' plight. From the lessons learnt so far, what is prudent at this stage is to institute a balanced approach characterised by targeted interventions which address boys and girl unique educational needs. This will require school based interventions such as making schools friendly to boys (and girls) and providing boys (and girls) with life skills to avoid some negative behaviours which emanate from peer pressure discussed earlier. Central to this endeavour is the need for differentiated data on which boys (and girls) are failing to inform such interventions.

In Botswana, after decades of focusing on the girl-child's education, there is need to give boys' underachievement at basic education level attention. Public education offers several private and public benefits (Jacobsen, 2009); therefore, boys' underachievement denies the country potential human resource. At individual level, the boys' life prospects and that of their families is curtailed. Boys' underachievement also has serious social implications as young boys become unemployed youth, which can exacerbate crime rates and other social ills. Therefore, the education system and schools in particular have an obligation to society to intervene and change the trend of 'failing boys' in the basic education cycle. Basic Education is a human right, thus in gender and achievement discourse, boys' and girls' best interests must be safeguarded.

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