Engaging Boys for Active Citizenship through Education

Boys’ education in the Commonwealth

The 19th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (19th CCEM) identified foundational early years and gender as key priority areas for policy-level development, recognising the importance of educational achievement and learning outcomes in the overall development and well-being of children and adolescents. Furthermore, the 19th CCEM highlighted the need to address the issue of equitable access to all learners and the growing concern about underachievement within the educational system of member states. In particular, this conference focused on the role early childhood education plays in the formative years of young people and on the impacts that such formative education can have on broader issues of socio-economic development. However, investment in education often does not take immediate priority in national policy agendas despite the increasing body of analysis which demonstrates that small improvements in the skills and attitudes of a nation’s labour force can have significant impacts.

Indeed, the issue of poor learning outcomes and high dropout rates at primary or post-primary levels, particularly among boys, has been a major challenge for Caribbean educators and policy-makers, as well as for other Commonwealth countries. The phenomenon of ‘boys’ underachievement’ in schools across the Caribbean region cannot be resolved by intervening in the education sector alone. A country’s policy framework must therefore take into account how different sectors contribute to strengthening learning systems (including formal and non-formal education) and ensure that each sector builds on and reinforces the efforts of other sectors. Failure to invest in learning and

Secretariat’s previous work

• 2009–2012: Consultations with Caribbean member states, during which boys’ underachievement was identified as a regional priority. In response, a number of country-based interventions, strategies and activities were put in place. In 2009, the Secretariat collaborated with the World Bank to examine ‘boys at risk’ as a gender issue related to development challenges. During a joint World Bank and Commonwealth Secretariat workshop, 15 Caribbean countries identified thematic areas to address boys at risk including: schooling and education, and skills development for labour market insertion, with some issues of a more general cross-cutting nature.

• 2014–2015: Provided technical assistance and funding to Saint Lucia and Jamaica to support their national efforts to address the issue. Saint Lucia’s focus was on delivering mentoring schemes for boys whereas Jamaica’s emphasis was on developing entrepreneurship skills through same-sex schooling, and improving teaching strategies.

• January–February 2016: Hosted a virtual global discussion forum for policy-makers and stakeholders to freely discuss and share information and experiences on topics relating to specific challenges with regards to boys’ educational achievement.
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Skills development will ultimately lead to a serious shortfall in boys’ attainment of their potential within Caribbean countries and, in the long term, result in a loss in Human Resources and a failure to nurture and develop active citizenship. When boys drop out of school early or are persistent underachievers throughout the educational system, this can have not only a negative impact on Caribbean countries’ social and economic development, but also stymie their achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

According to a World Bank study of youth at risk in Latin America and the Caribbean, feeling disconnected from school represents an ‘explanatory factor for all kinds of risky behaviour’. A lack of connectedness to school has been associated with early school leaving (i.e. dropouts), repetition of school years, risky and early sexual behaviour, juvenile delinquency, violence, gang activity and substance abuse (World Bank 2008). The now widely recognised problems with boys’ non-cognitive competencies in education point to the vulnerabilities of those boys who fail to develop an affinity for education and their local school environment. Recognising the interconnectedness of poor educational outcomes and a host of at-risk behaviours in young men, it is essential that policymakers look to develop an integrated and multi-agency policy response to the so-called ‘boys’ problem’. Integrated and multi-agency best practices related to education must operate alongside at-risk intervention strategies, active citizenship programmes and approaches to regional and international development in order to develop a holistic, multi-sectoral and effective approach to improving boys’ educational achievement.

Some boys succeed in school and learning environments while others struggle, lose interest or drop out. Boys’ dropout from education is linked to multiple, negative and long-lasting outcomes for the individual. Educationalists and policymakers have referred to it as a major gender issue in education (CARICOM, 2010) with social and economic implications that affect all the SDGs. Disengagement from education is associated with loss of confidence, adoption of at-risk behaviours and negative attitudes, violence and substance abuse, and can compromise individual well-being, potential productivity and responsible citizenship. Lack of skills and employment opportunities can encourage idleness, marginal and illegal economic activities and acts of violence against society (World Bank, 2010). Boys’ alienation from education is related to intrinsic and extrinsic factors that include biological, developmental, social, cultural, environmental and educational factors, as indicated by research findings (World Bank, 2008). Addressing these interconnections and their cumulative effect is complex, and requires an informed understanding of the risk and vulnerability factors involved. Frequently reported factors relate to social construction, self-perception, pedagogies, learning environments, parental involvement, lack of role models, peer pressure and socioeconomic conditions.
The Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding’s report Civil Paths to Peace recommends an emphasis on non-sectarian non-parochial education that expands, rather than reduces the reach of understanding, and provides greater support to young people (who represent over half of the Commonwealth’s two billion citizens) (Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, 2008). However, there remains a lack of disaggregated data in terms of multiple and intersecting characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, family income level, region, geographic location and rural/urban divide, which are necessary to identify the boys at risk of underperforming and to provide the basis for policies and interventions to achieve gender equality. Complex socio-political environments with high levels of violent criminality can prove to be particularly challenging where ineffective education systems provide ample ground for opportunistic gang leaders to recruit young people, particularly boys, into a life of crime often leading to violence.

Research shows that system-wide educational structures can act as unintended push factors encouraging boys to leave school, such as legislated years of compulsory education, whether education is provided for free, and the process of academic streaming (UNICEF, 2012). Furthermore, absence of integrated, multi-sectoral approaches to planning that place education as part of a broader development strategy, often fails to address the socio-economic realities of those entering schools, and subsequently the opportunities available as they leave. Limited avenues for employment and an overemphasis on particular skillsets can discourage ambition and encourage boys to alternative, sometimes illegitimate, income sources at an early age.

Boys are often categorised as a single group which risks oversimplifying the complexities involved, whereas a flexible educational system which takes into account diverse learning needs, individual backgrounds, cultures and learning styles may garner better results. Alternative pathways to learning that are responsive and relevant, would allow meaningful participation and development.
Target risk factors for boys’ disengagement in education

Empirical evidence and different theories suggest that boys at risk of dropping out is a complex issue functioning at various levels. This includes parental, community, social and politico-economic levels as well as in schools and learning environments. Gendered debates have also pointed to the social construction of male identity. The socialisation of boys into dominant stereotyped masculinity can lead to an increased need for quick monetary gains, rebellion against authority figures, engagement into antisocial acts and behaviours to gain status among peers and prove one’s gender identity. All these factors interact dynamically, escalating into underachievement and poor performance.

These risk factors can be present at individual, family, and community levels, within one’s social network or environment, and within broader social, cultural, structural, economic and political contexts and influences.

Risk factors framed within Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory relate to the five levels of the environment and the interdependence of a variety of social contexts that can influence human development (see Figure 2).

Inter-sectoral integrated policies and strategies

Early dropout and underperformance in school and boys’ participation as perpetrators and victims of violent crime require a new gender paradigm as boys and girls often engage in different at-risk behaviours and in different ways. This includes potential differences in engagement in the school environment, communities, society and the labour market. Inter-sectoral, integrated policies and strategies are needed to address the below-average outcomes of boys. Evidence-based programmes and policies need to be designed and implemented with different approaches and tools to benefit and effectively reach both girls and boys, promoting positive youth development, healthy lives, well-being and reducing at-risk behaviours.

What is required is a collaborative approach, across sectors and by building partnerships between stakeholders. Where the Millennium Development Goals had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing this approach of development in siloes, the SDGs provide the opportunity for a paradigm shift in development planning, which facilitates integrated approaches to achieving national goals. The SDGs’ inclusion of targets that refer to multiple goals and sectors helps to facilitate integration and policy coherence across sectors. The SDGs with strong connecting targets that address the risk factors associated with boys’ underachievement include SDGs 1 and 10 on poverty and inequality, SDG 3 on health, SDGs 4 and 5 on education and gender, SDG 8 on decent work economic growth, and SDG 16 on peaceful, inclusive societies. In developing an education policy that addresses the specific risk factors that could contribute to boys’ underachievement, it must be cross-sectoral and therefore be based on input from a broad range of stakeholders.

Risk factors

The stark recognition that youth violence is escalating in some countries in the Caribbean demonstrates the need for researchers to develop a better understanding of at-risk factors and behaviours among children and youth which may indicate a propensity for violence and future criminality. While the term ‘youth at risk’ is widely used, its meaning is often unclear. Baker and Fontes (1996) define youth at risk as individuals who are faced with ‘environmental, social, and family conditions that hinder their personal development and their successful integration into society as productive citizens’. Youth at risk have also been associated with the risk of failing to make a successful transition from secondary school to tertiary school or to the labour market and also with the risk of engaging in delinquent or criminal behaviours.

Several factors have been identified internationally as contributing to boys and young men not achieving their full potential at all levels of educational systems. Frequently reported are social construction, self-perception, level of parental involvement, attitude towards schooling, attitude of teachers towards male students, pedagogy, teaching styles, learning environments, the lack of male role models, peer pressure, socio-economic conditions including family composition such as prevalence of single female-headed households.

These factors tend to point to tipping points at various life stages when boys are not sufficiently prepared for key transitional stages.
Individual

- Early parent and child relations
- Child-rearing practices
- Crisis or a traumatic event that influences vulnerability in later life, including to peer pressure and at-risk behaviours
- ‘Emotional vulnerability’ linked to negative schooling experiences (corporal punishment, teaching practices) and/or parenting practices
- Participation in early childhood care and education (ECCE) for child readiness to schooling
- Life challenges such as loss of a relative, lack of positive role model, single household family that can affect the identity-related psychological transitions

Family

- Intra-family conflict with insecure environment that diverts from focus on education
- Adverse childhood experiences related to family settings and poor parenting with high vulnerability that is not supported by adequate social services
- Socio-economic deprivation (low income; unemployed parents; poor housing; single-parent family)
- Lack of family support for education
- Absence of intergenerational exchanges

Community & Society

- Traditions and cultural beliefs concerning adolescence and transition to adulthood
- Feelings of deprivation, isolation and sense of injustice due to socio-economic background or rural/urban divide, leading to reduced social mobility and need for quick monetary gains
- Lack of skills development and employment opportunities
- Gender differentials, norms and expected gender roles
- Teacher expectations, beliefs and behaviour
- Socialisation of boys into dominant stereotyped masculinities and anti-school attitudes
- Constrained learning environments and non-relevant curriculum
- Lack of suitably trained teachers, social workers, psychologists and child advocates
- Underutilised community-based structures and safe spaces for addressing feelings of marginalisation and hopelessness
- Need for expanded definitions of ‘community’ that present meaningful alternatives to gang groups

Political/Economic Policies

- Human rights law not observed and inappropriate legislation, e.g. corporal punishment lawful under Education Act or common law disciplinary power of teachers
- Lack of employment opportunities
- Lack of relevant learning opportunities and different pathways to education
- Policies insufficiently addressing poverty and socio-economic disparities
- Low government investment in education
- Lack of gender equality policies
- Education policies which do not encourage participation in education, e.g. tuition fees, capital costs, opportunity costs
- Lack of integrated national strategy linking education to economic growth and crime prevention
during adolescence, such as transitions from primary to post-primary school, school to college, university or world of work, or transition from childhood to adolescence to manhood. Being emotionally prepared for the transition from primary to post-primary school is as important as being academically prepared, and helps shape their future aspirations including employment ambitions.

The 2007 World Development Report highlighted five significant points in a young person’s life where they make key decisions about the rest of their lives; continuing to learn, starting to work, developing a healthful lifestyle, beginning a family and exercising citizenship (World Bank 2006; UNDP 2014). The report indicates that these choices influence a young person’s later life, and that positive choices can aid young people in leading successful lives whilst poor choices can have the opposite effect (World Bank 2006; UNDP 2014).

**Key interventions across the life course**

There is need for a holistic approach from a life course perspective and to address the relationship between early influences and later outcomes, as well as the vulnerabilities that emerge in the key transitions that children and adolescents experience (i.e., transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, and from school to work). Early life influences are key to building individual resilience and making the right choices in the major areas of life on the path to adulthood: continuing to learn and developing skills, starting to work, developing a healthy lifestyle, starting a family and exercising responsible citizenship. The following sections outline some interventions that promote informed choices for reaching one’s full potential.

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<tr>
<th><strong>Interventions 0-10 years</strong></th>
<th><strong>Health &amp; Other Sectors</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td><strong>Skills training for parents and guardians:</strong> good parenting skills are associated with social-emotional literacy and self-regulation of emotions and low risk of long-term behavioural conduct disorders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• ECCE: prepares for school readiness and found to be effective in reducing longer-term violent behaviour in populations experiencing relative inequalities.</td>
<td>• Behavioural disorders: early detection and management of anxiety, behavioural and conduct disorders, and/or poor learning skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social, emotional and behavioural skills: assessing behavioural, emotional and social difficulties through primary school-based interventions. Development of such skills can be a cost-effective preventative measure to mitigate longer-term development and behavioural issues including violence, and improve educational outcomes.</td>
<td>• Prevention of adverse childhood experiences: including bullying, abuse and corporal punishment.</td>
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<td>• Early critical thinking skills: antibullying programmes in schools along with the development of critical thinking skills can build resilience skills.</td>
<td>• <strong>Address intergenerational transmission of poverty and its disadvantages:</strong> poverty is related to numerous factors including educational and employment opportunities, the availability of role models, and child and parent aspirations, as well as when in the child’s life poverty occurs. Intergenerational poverty and persistent disadvantage impedes individuals’ ability to achieve their potential.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Parents’ and guardians’ education: parental qualifications may impact on children’s educational attainment in a variety of ways, including through the home learning environment and parental behaviours (e.g. drinking, child nutrition, etc.).</td>
<td>• <strong>Community-based awareness and mentorship opportunities:</strong> strengthen the role of communities in supporting children through school and providing safe spaces for nurturing and sharing.</td>
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<td>• Early education and socialisation: in the early years, family, social and cultural expectations for boys’ behaviour and achievement shape their future educational outcomes.</td>
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• Skills training for parents and guardians: good parenting skills are associated with social-emotional literacy and self-regulation of emotions and low risk of long-term behavioural conduct disorders.

• Behavioural disorders: early detection and management of anxiety, behavioural and conduct disorders, and/or poor learning skills.

• Prevention of adverse childhood experiences: including bullying, abuse and corporal punishment.

• Address intergenerational transmission of poverty and its disadvantages: poverty is related to numerous factors including educational and employment opportunities, the availability of role models, and child and parent aspirations, as well as when in the child’s life poverty occurs. Intergenerational poverty and persistent disadvantage impedes individuals’ ability to achieve their potential.

• Community-based awareness and mentorship opportunities: strengthen the role of communities in supporting children through school and providing safe spaces for nurturing and sharing.
### Interventions 11–25 years

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Health &amp; Other Sectors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Critical thinking skills</strong>: to analytically approach concepts and ideas (e.g. philosophical challenges).</td>
<td>• <strong>Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)</strong>: use CBT to give pupils skills to manage their emotions, deal with conflict and negative influences and think critically.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Global citizenship, respect and understanding skills</strong>: provide understanding of rights and duties.</td>
<td>• <strong>Identification and intervention</strong>: early identification, prevention and intervention for behavioural, anxiety and conduct disorders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Civil responsibility</strong>: relates to tolerance for the ideas of others, authority and the law and social and political institutions.</td>
<td>• <strong>Street culture</strong>: tackle street culture and peer pressure that dismiss the relevance of education and equate success with symbols of wealth and ‘gangsta’ lifestyle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Life skills</strong>: provide life skills and HIV/Aids education to mitigate at risk behaviour through various channels including sports, performing arts, non-formal education, etc.</td>
<td>• <strong>Masculinities</strong>: reshape ways in which masculinity is constructed and expressed.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Extracurricular activities including sports</strong>: reduced exposure to risk factors, promote peer support and community engagement.</td>
<td>• <strong>Support services</strong>: provide support services to parents and orientation on ‘parenting’, in particular related to raising boys and managing at-risk youth.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Skills development for labour market and employment</strong>: provides different pathways to learning and skills development.</td>
<td>• <strong>Peer support</strong>: develop youth networks and positive peer support groups.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Relevant curricula and learning</strong>: to address diverse learning needs.</td>
<td>• <strong>Social protection</strong>: address right of access to social services of quality, particularly education and health (e.g. providing crisis intervention counselling and psycho-social services for at-risk boys).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Counselling and guidance</strong>: should be strengthened, first, to assist children in developing positive views of their own gender roles and identity; and second, to contribute towards their continued education.</td>
<td>• <strong>Role models</strong>: address issues of absentee fathers and lack of positive role models.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Mentoring intervention</strong>: to change antisocial behaviour in high-risk youths.</td>
<td>• <strong>Peer support</strong>: encourage peer to peer leadership.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Parental involvement</strong>: increase opportunities for parents/families to engage with schools.</td>
<td>• <strong>Rehabilitation</strong>: provide rehabilitative focus for correctional programme for boys at risk.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Socialisation</strong>: enhancing the positive socialisation aspect of schools and learning environment.</td>
<td>• <strong>Media</strong>: foster positive media policy and messages to influence boys and males.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Create opportunities for children to have a voice</strong>: the Right to be Heard as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Opportunities for inclusion through media awareness and key leaders at community and national levels would encourage a greater sense of belonging among boys who may otherwise seek a sense of community within gangs.</td>
<td>• <strong>Counselling</strong>: provide counselling for boys.</td>
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<td>Policies</td>
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<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Educational system</strong>: changing assessments to support skills development, employment opportunities and psycho-emotional development for more effective workers and citizens.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Productive pedagogies model</strong>: develop frameworks to identify the strengths, talents and potential of those struggling at school.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Citizenship and civic engagement</strong>: governments, parents, teachers, the media, community leaders and youth organisations play important roles in supporting children and adolescents to develop their civic responsibilities and social awareness, and in fostering lifelong civic engagement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Sufficient recruitment policies</strong>: strong recruitment policies for education, child protection, and other relevant practitioners to ensure high-quality individuals.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Education of quality</strong>: teacher professional development programmes to ensure high-quality teaching.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Curriculum for work</strong>: match curriculum to labour market needs and include information and communication technology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>School system monitoring</strong>: systems to identify boys at risk (failing grades, behavioural problems, absenteeism) and provide assistance to avoid dropout.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Acknowledge diversity of learners</strong>: there is no one-size-fits-all academic model of schooling. The educational system needs to be flexible, learner centred and relevant to children’s and adolescents’ diverse learning needs and skills and aptitude.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Relevant and quality education</strong>: provide opportunities for boys not academically inclined to engage in other relevant learning pathways that are not perceived as second-class education. Provide demand-oriented vocational and technical education and training, as well as income-generating activities. Review the system for acknowledgment of prior learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Health &amp; Other Sectors</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Human rights and citizenship</strong>: used to promote respect and understanding and critical thinking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Whole school approach to emotional well-being</strong>: encompassing what goes on within the learning environment, linkages between school and home and linkages between the learning environment and wider network of social services.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Gender relations</strong>: active citizenship includes learning about inequalities and challenging stereotypes.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Gender concept</strong>: promote conceptual understanding of gender at all levels, including at policy planning level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Certification and equivalencies</strong>: provide equivalencies and certification of youth skills and competencies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Entrepreneurship and apprenticeship programmes</strong>: open pathways to skills development as part of youth education while being cautious about alternative pathways and opportunity structures that distract from completing education and attract in terms of financial benefits.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Youth participation</strong>: include youth participation in programme design and ensure programmes for marginalised males.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Community linkages</strong>: improve and increase community involvement in children’s development activities, and develop and use effective community role models.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Social norms</strong>: addressing social norms and subculture of toughness and hyper masculinity.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Gender responsive strategies and policies</strong></td>
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| • **Social protection**: gang membership negatively affects developmental transitions into adulthood, such as completion of schooling and establishment of a career.
Changing Patterns in Boys’ Education

The challenges that many boys face in realising their educational potential is therefore increasingly being recognised as a major gender issue, not only in the education sphere, but also for social and economic development, and for achievement of the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will not be met if dropout rates and low level of educational achievement among boys remain a concern. The Commonwealth Secretariat and the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative partnered to run an online discussion between 25 January 2016 and 19 February 2016 on ‘Changing patterns in boys’ education: What can we do to make things better?’

The four-week discussion brought together practitioners, academics and policymakers to debate how education can better address the interests of boys and male adolescents and allow them to reach their potential, as well as exercise their right to education. The e-discussion looked at related issues and risk factors, as well as strategies to address these and ways of scaling-up and adapting existing and promising practices.

This discussion was broken into four themes:

1. Early influences and later outcomes: addressing risk factors and vulnerabilities from a life course perspective;
2. Gender stereotypes and gender socialisation and their impact on boys’ education;
3. Fostering positive social growth and behaviour among boys; and,
4. Multisector policies, actions and strategies for boys’ education.

The key conclusions and recommendations were the following:

- Contributing factors influencing boys’ education are variable and include socioeconomic factors, as well as gender stereotypes and norms. Complex dynamic interactions influencing changing patterns in dropout rates and achievement should also be taken into account. Both the variable influences and dynamic interactions need to be recognised in addressing changing patterns in boys’ education;
- A focus on gender equality for both boys and girls, analysing and addressing issues involved (including gender stereotypes, and disparities and inequalities stemming from social and economic influences) is required to tackle the issues faced by both males and females;
- Approaches to addressing issues related to changing patterns in boys’ education are similarly applicable to improving girls’ education, demonstrating the need to overcome stereotyping and gender norms;
- Strategies should seek to engage all stakeholders and are needed at different levels (i.e. individual, familial, community, school, policy);
- No one-size-fits all solution exists. Instead, there is necessity for policies and strategies which meet the needs and challenges within a given context; and,
- There is need for a multisector, integrated policy approach to improving boys’ education, as well as that of girls.

Complexities & dynamic influences

The discussion highlighted the complexities involved in both understanding and addressing the issues related to changing patterns in boys’ education. Various potential explanations and contributing factors were discussed, including culture, socialisation, socioeconomic circumstances, violence, education systems, teaching approaches and gender norming.

Differing viewpoints demonstrated sometimes conflicting and contentious opinions, whilst also demonstrating the complexities involved in addressing the issue and the breadth of potential influences. Emerging from the discussion was the dynamic nature of the changing patterns, and the fact that numerous factors are likely interacting and influencing these patterns. Gender was discussed as one of various contributing influences, including socioeconomic disparities and inequalities within and across groups that affect boys’ education outcomes. While it may be possible to find universal themes affecting boys’ education, boys’ should not be addressed as a homogenous group, nor should the dynamics at play be addressed homogeneously. Each child’s experience is individual.
Gender norms & stereotypes

Various gender norms and stereotypes were highlighted as negatively influencing boys’ education, and contributing to changing patterns in boys’ education. Different examples were raised as being perpetuated by peers, parents, the education system, and community under various circumstances. Different attitudes, behaviours, roles, responsibilities and activities that influence expectations of boys and shape notions of masculinity were also discussed.

Amongst others, these include:

- Gender norms and stereotypes as affecting behaviour, motivation, classroom learning, peer interactions and teacher interactions and expectations within the education setting, including lower expectations of boys and violence towards and amongst boys;
- Parenting practices which favour girls over boys, or have lower academic expectations of boys;
- Pressure to conform to gendered norms observed in society and by male role models; and,
- Gender-based association with violence and illegal activities.

Classroom-based experiences were used by multiple contributors to highlight the impact of these views and actions, such as students identifying education or particular subjects as being unmanly or for girls.

There were conflicting views as to whether some of the behavioural stereotypes presented are based on intrinsic differences between boys and girls, or are learned and acquired. Several participants questioned the legitimacy of the intrinsic argument, raising the fact that such beliefs reinforce negative gender stereotypes and obstruct the ability to address these issues.

There was significant debate surrounding gender-segregation in education, with differing views as to whether single-gender classrooms and schools influence boys’ education, as well as arguments and research cited for and against these views. However, some participants pointed out that regardless of whether classes are single sex or mixed, if the education system does not respond to the needs of students and provide high quality education delivered by skilled teachers, there will be significant challenges for the learning outcomes of students.

In addressing gender equality in education, stereotypes and norms associated with girls (e.g. girls as submissive and compliant) and equity issues must also be tackled. The education system should play a role in reshaping gender concepts, and promoting an understanding of boys and girls as equal, with similar abilities and capabilities, working towards the same goals.

A multisector approach to policymaking

The issues discussed and considerations put forth by participants supported a call for the repositioning of education systems to respond to the individual learner’s needs for meaningful education - that is education leading to productive livelihoods and respect for all. There is an urgent need for education, socio-economic and cultural advancement to be more integrated and focused on human development.

Consequently, it is essential to develop education systems which are responsive to the needs of learners and equip learners with relevant skills and knowledge for their futures. Education policies should be holistic, and, as noted by various contributors, need to address the issues related to boys’ education using a multisector policy approach; integrating broader socioeconomic policies and development strategies to this end. The formulation of education policy should not be the sole responsibility of the ministry or relevant authority responsible for education. A collaborative, multisector approach is needed which includes all relevant ministries and authorities to promote coherence across policies, including economic, labour, gender rights and finance policies.
Related Resources


- Video: Changing Education Paradigms, RSA Animate, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDgpL4U

References


