

Making Sense of Male Experience

*The Case of
Academic
Underachievement
in the English-
speaking Caribbean*

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1 Introduction

In Latin America the Inter American Development Bank funds efforts to keep girls in school (IDB America, April 1998). In contrast, the Caribbean Development Bank has offered the University of the West Indies (UWI) funding for the study of male underachievement. Women now constitute over 70 per cent of the graduating class at the Mona (Jamaica) campus of UWI, the premier tertiary institution serving the English-speaking Caribbean. This reflects a rapid reversal. In 1948, the first UWI class (at Mona) was 70 per cent male. Female registrations first surpassed 50 per cent in 1982/83 for UWI as a whole. By 1997/98 men constituted less than 30 per cent of new student admissions at Mona. This transformation from relative female to relative male academic underachievement is most striking in Jamaica. Among Jamaican students at UWI, women have constituted more than 50 per cent of the undergraduate body from 1974/75 (UWI various years).

Research on male underachievement in the Caribbean has been foreshadowed by the work of Errol Miller. Miller argues that, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, a policy was pursued to marginalise black men in education. This resulted from 'the intention of the ruling class 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' (1986:73). Class and race power struggles between men put women in a position of relative advantage in education. Affirmative action for men is therefore needed to right the balance.

Miller's approach has been questioned from many points of view (Lindsay 1997). In this article I propose in place of 'marginalisation' the notion of a gender privileging dialectic, which explains the experience of male educational underachievement as an ironic outcome of historic male privileging (see Figueroa 1998). My own primary research in this field has concerned mainly the analysis of data for secondary and tertiary level institutions. I therefore draw heavily on a wide range of research done by others, including those using ethnographic or survey methodologies. This enables me to integrate into my analysis questions of male gender socialisation, expectations, self-image and sexuality.

My premise is that historically the male gender has been privileged in Caribbean society. This is not to suggest that maleness is always an advantage. Simply put, the male gender has occupied a wider social space; controlled more resources; maintained a higher social position and exercised greater power. Yet the existence of privilege implies the existence of underprivilege. Inevitably the under-privileged carve out for themselves spaces which they hegemonise and within which the freedom of the privileged group is restricted. This is the dialectic of privilege: it comes at a price.

I begin by reviewing the evidence of differential gender achievement in education. Second, I highlight the range of explanations derived from Caribbean research, which help to explain these differences within a framework of gender privileging. These I discuss in terms of the dynamic elements that have promoted differential achievement in the Caribbean case. Finally, I present approaches to policy and practice that are informed by a notion of *gender privileging* and contrast them with proposals derived from a *male marginalisation* perspective.

2 Gendered Educational Achievement

In Jamaica, the lower achievement of boys is already evident in scores on readiness for grade 1 (ministry of education data quoted in Evans 1999). By the end of the primary cycle the disparity has widened. Until 1998, Jamaican students sat the Common Entrance Examination for secondary school placement. Girls generally gained more than 55 per cent of the places even though the pass rate for boys may be as little as 90 per cent of that for girls (Buttrick 1995).

The most popular secondary school leaving examination is the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC). Here, the sharpest gender segregation is evident in technical subjects. Girls make up approximately 90 per cent or more of the entrants for clothing and textiles, home economics, food and nutrition and typewriting. Similarly, boys dominate the fields of technology (mechanical, engineering, building), electricity/electronics, woodwork and technical drawing. The business subjects are not as segregated but they show wide gender variations. Total enrolment in technical and commercial

subjects is in the ratio of nearly 3:1 in favour of Jamaican girls.¹

In academic subjects, girls' to boys' total enrolment is approximately 3:2. In the so-called hard sciences and geography, boys' participation is comparable to that of girls or higher. In 1996 in the Caribbean as a whole, boys made up 60 per cent of enrolments in physics. Although girls make up 60 per cent of mathematics enrolments, boys tend to have a significantly higher pass rate. The boys' participation is lowest in the humanities where enrolments in subjects like Spanish and English literature may be 30 per cent or less.

Jamaica usually represents the extreme case. I therefore use the registration of Jamaican students at UWI to illustrate the dynamics of the process. In the first year of parity, 1974/75, women were nearly 80 per cent in the low prestige areas of arts and education and up to about 40 per cent or somewhat less in the high prestige areas of law, medicine and natural sciences. In agriculture and engineering women were less than 20 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. Only in social sciences were women 50 per cent (including an over 86 per cent female social work class). By 1997/98 Jamaican women swamped the mainly arts-based faculties with registrations in the arts, education and law in excess of 80 per cent and social sciences over 70 per cent. There was approximate parity in medical sciences at 55 per cent and natural sciences at 51 per cent. Women still lagged behind in agriculture, at 36 per cent, and engineering, 18 per cent. The gender breakdown followed similar patterns at the post-graduate level as well as in other tertiary institutions. The greatest gender imbalance at UWI was, however, at the level of reader and professor. In 1997/98 only 11 per cent of these were women, despite the fact that women had constituted more than 35 per cent of the student body for over 40 of its 50 years' existence (UWI various years).

This brief review reveals a number of complexities. First, male students generally underachieve with a widening gap at the higher levels. Second, there is a shift from an overall dominance of males in practically all fields to a situation where women first come to dominate in the least prestigious of the humanities-based disciplines, then in practically all the more arts-based disciplines, and ultimately

achieve parity in the natural sciences, though with a greater preponderance of females in the 'softer' sciences. Third, this reversal from general male overachievement to underachievement is particularly exaggerated in the English-speaking Caribbean (especially Jamaica). Fourth, despite all this, men continue to dominate the top of the academic pyramid.

I believe that this pattern is best understood in terms of the interaction between aspects of gender privileging and twentieth century socio-economic and political transformation. In particular, I focus in this article on how conflicts and complementarities between constructions of gender identity and the ethos of the educational system result in differential school achievement for boys and girls.

3 Gender Identities and Academic Performance

The historic privileging of the male gender has constructed maleness as dominant, appropriate to the public sphere, technologically capable, strong and hard. Femaleness has been constructed as submissive, appropriate to the private sphere, sensitive, caring and in need of protection. These values are not only internalized by children themselves, but also structure their worlds of home, school, community and work.

Early childhood socialisation prepares girls much better than boys for the type of schooling common in the Caribbean. Girls are more confined to the house, more under adult supervision, given more responsibility, expected to be disciplined, taught to please others, and involved in doing uninteresting and repetitive tasks. Institutional exclusion and psychological barriers rooted in the construction of female gender identities have historically prevented girls from capitalising on the comparative advantage of this early training. They were held back by the view that women's careers were secondary; that they were incapable of mastering certain (high status) technical and scientific fields (and so proper provision was not made to teach these to them); and that leadership was a male domain. These last two linger on, preventing women from dominating the technological fields and taking over the most senior positions.

At the same time, the dramatic transformation in gender achievement may be related to the fact that gender norms in the Caribbean are in many ways less restrictive than elsewhere. Women have always worked outside the home and even during slavery were involved in market relations. Mating has never been primarily based on life-long marriages. This has provided a certain freedom to women even as it has relieved men of the strict requirement of supporting a family. The Caribbean nationalist movement of the late 1930s to early 1950s, the Second World War, and the transformation of colonial social policy during and just after the war, further contributed to this general context, raising both women's participation in the workforce and their political voice. As females faced progressively more equal opportunities in education, their gender identity was also increasingly in tune with the ethos of the educational system.

In contrast, the mismatch between male gender identities and the educational system has grown. The old male chauvinist values are still inculcated in boys. The loss of rural male chores has not been replaced by a comparable involvement in domesticity for boys through which they would learn the kinds of process skills they need for schooling (Davies and Evans 1997). This situation is further exacerbated by the persisting strong view that men should discipline boys, despite the fact 42 per cent of households in Jamaica are now female-headed (Handa 1996). Compounding this, while outdoors, boys are less subject to the community control they would meet in a village environment. Instead, the skills they acquire on the street and the role models they meet there, and in the media, are inimical to the schooling process.²

Much of child rearing is based on the self-fulfilling prophecy that boys will grow up bad. The rise in crime and violence, especially in inner-city Jamaica, makes this increasingly likely. The negative approaches boys face at home are often reinforced in school. While more care may be exercised in disciplining girls, teachers who assume that boys are going to be bad are much more likely to punish them severely. This involves corporal punishment as well as verbal abuse and public humiliation. This harsh treatment of boys is nothing new; it reflects ideologies of male hardness, which dictate that boys should be able to take tough treatment. What has

changed is the growing consciousness among children of issues such as human rights. Both boys and girls see the treatment of boys as unfair (Evans 1999).

In the past when the priority was given to boys, teachers and carers would have gone the extra mile to overcome the difficulties that boys had with school. This tendency remains strong but it is in decline. Instead, school practice has become increasingly ambivalent. While teachers recognise that the hard male image causes problems in school, they play a part in reinforcing it through confrontational responses. There is also an underlying fear that to curb the tendencies of the hard male image would be to endanger male identity and ultimately male heterosexual orientation (Parry 1996).

Parry (1996) suggests that this hard male gender identity accounts for most of the underachievement of boys, including the lower achievement in Jamaica where the hard image is most developed. Resistance to school, and particularly those aspects seen as 'girlish', is a feature often observed in boys' peer-group culture. As Parry points out, the hard male image is also linked to homophobia. While 30 years ago many teenagers were not sure what homosexuality was, today the DJ Music denouncing homosexuality is on the lips of pre-schoolers. To be too involved in school and particularly its more feminine side is to risk having one's sexual orientation brought into question. As schools become increasingly feminised, boys tend to develop their identity within a far more restrictive masculinity (Branche 1998).

The language associated with this hard male identity further compounds the troubled relationship between boys and schooling in the Caribbean. English is seen as effeminate compared with the more macho national creole languages and their various contemporary slangs (Parry 1996). This is a problem that affects many Caribbean children, the majority of whom are not native speakers of standard English. Boys are more affected as they are far less willing to adopt a multilingual approach. They, more than the girls, have moved away from the tradition of the old colonial scholars for whom the acquisition of perfect Oxford English was the ultimate mark of distinction. This is a major handicap in a context where English is the principal

instructional language, especially for texts and at the upper levels of the system.

Not surprisingly, boys' reading is much weaker than girls'. Girls are required to stay home more. They do more homework and spend less time watching TV in a context where schools give far more homework now than they did in the past. They also get more positive encouragement and help with homework. As boys fall behind they face the additional problem of streaming, which has been shown to have negative effects on students in lower streams (Evans 1999). Boys who do badly in school defend themselves by adopting a negative posture. At the other end of the spectrum high achievement is also consistent with a traditional male image. Boys who do well, especially in the male-oriented subjects, are not as vulnerable. This helps to explain the significant minority of boys who do very well in school. Within this group there is also a class dynamic. Male children still tend to be preferred among the upper strata and receive more positive reinforcement at home (Leo-Rhynie 1997). These boys mainly start their education in the private prep schools where, as we might expect, the gender achievement is far less skewed.

Even at a young age it appears that students acquire definite views as to what types of subjects are appropriate for their gender and what sorts of careers they might pursue. As women come to predominate in new fields, these are increasingly seen as feminized. This makes it difficult for boys to choose a career in that field without endangering their gender identity. Aside from direct gender issues, there are also questions of status tied up in this. While a girl who aspires to a traditionally male job may be praised for showing ambition, a boy who seeks to challenge the gender divide is seen as underachieving. This mix of gender/status issues is further compounded by the fact that many of the formal sector jobs for which education equips young people are poorly paid. By contrast, enterprise in the informal and/or illegal economy may offer boys the chance of substantial dividends, in both gender and financial terms.

Gender segregation within the labour market has been seen as impacting on the schooling outcomes of males and females in other ways. Studies have shown that women need higher qualifications to get

promoted and to earn as much as men do (JEF 1995). This may give women a greater incentive to study more. On the other hand, there is evidence that, for males, schooling is less significant in terms of increasing their earning power. In the case of Jamaica, young men whose highest attainment is a complete high school education are more likely to be unemployed than those who did not complete. In the case of Jamaica it has also been suggested that there are more opportunities for young men to find employment and there may also be more pressure on them at home to find a job (Anderson forthcoming). Male secondary school students in Jamaica are reportedly three times as likely to be doing part-time work than their female counterparts (Evans 1999). This may in part reflect their desire to attract the attention of young women who may be inclined to favour wealthier, older men (Parry 1996).

4 Policy Implications

To address a problem we must first pose it correctly. In the Caribbean the issue has largely been posed as one of male underachievement. In reality the problem is one of highly differentiated gender achievements, which need to be understood in relation to an underlying history of male privileging. The solution therefore lies in challenging the structures of male privileging that foster gender inequalities and result in negative outcomes for men and women, boys and girls. Approaches based on the male marginalisation perspective are likely ultimately to exacerbate the problem. The male dominance, which this outlook seeks to reassert, is in fact part of the problem.

The issue of gender and education is a very complex one that needs to be addressed in all its facets. In gender, one size does not fit all and care must be taken in applying assumptions drawn from the experiences of one society to another. One consequence is that measuring gender progress is not a simple matter. The use of indices that only include global variables, such as total school enrolment, are likely to overstate the progress of women and girls. Global enrolment does not indicate an equal quality of educational achievement and, even if it did, an equal quality of education would not allow both men and women to occupy equivalent socio-economic, political or cultural spaces in most societies.

As societies are transformed, socio-economic changes impact in different ways on each gender. Even in societies where the main issue is that of getting girls to stay in school, there are probably aspects of the education systems that need to be addressed in terms of how they are impacting on boys. Gender equality cannot be achieved simply by girls catching up with boys. Boys need to catch up with girls as well. Just as girls are made to feel that they can move into fields previously dominated by men, so boys must be made to feel that they can move into fields previously dominated by women. This is the only route to genuine gender equality.

In countries like Jamaica and the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean, where the hard male image and identity has been fostered, the problem of equalising gender achievement in education is very difficult to resolve. The male marginalisation approach suggests adoption of special incentives to attract boys into schools. These would, for example, allocate equal gender quotas in educational institutions, regardless of performance levels; reduce entry levels for males higher up in the educational system; return to single sex schools; or develop single sex classrooms (Miller 1986; TTMOE 1998). The evidence shows, however, that it is the readiness of girls and women to be flexible and adjust their identities that has enabled them to benefit from new opportunities. This suggests that measures which further privilege males or segregate the genders to protect males from female competition are unlikely to bring success. The gender issues in education cannot be solved by attacking male underachievement in isolation. Rather, the issue of underachievement as a whole, together with all the factors that contribute to the mismatch between gendered identities, and the educational system need to be explored together.

A multifaceted approach needs to be adopted, which intervenes at the level of the home, community and the media, within the educational process and at the workplace. Within the educational system it is not enough to deal with issues of access. What is required is a cultural change to bring about a learning environment that is both gender sensitive and gender fair. This should extend also to the transformation of informal and co-curricula activities. For example, if boys only play single sex sports then they will be inclined to see only men as part of

their team. Above all there is an urgent need to raise the economic and social status of education. Although the main reasons for this lie outside the scope of this study, it is clear that boys will continue to underachieve so long as the status of education continues to languish.

There is nothing wrong with addressing problems that are being disproportionately felt by boys or girls. What is important is how these problems are addressed. One such case in point is the lower level of reading ability reported for boys. In part, this needs to be addressed as one of the problems faced by Caribbean students who fall behind. Currently students who fall behind tend to be left behind. Promotion is generally by age and remedial work is inadequate. In addition, reading difficulties are connected to the creole language problem that has never been faced squarely in the Caribbean and which affects boys more. It is not possible to provide a complete solution here, but what I am arguing against is any concession to the view that boys should have their work marked at a lower level because they have a lower reading ability.

The problems identified, which are rooted in male privileging, will not go away spontaneously. They will require concrete programmes of action, including the development of national policies, codes and guidelines, which are effectively monitored and implemented. Training, including the development of workshops, manuals and curriculum materials, will all be necessary. All of these need to be founded in solid research, which can help to build on the

very firm foundation that has been established by many of the studies cited here. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that male academic underachievement cannot be overcome unless women are seen as equal partners and capable human persons to be respected for the contribution they are actually making and potentially able to make. Males need to come to value what women do more highly, and get involved in female-dominated activities, just as women have increasingly got involved in activities from which they were formerly excluded. It is only this transition, and with it the transformation of the construction of what it means to be male and female, that can ultimately solve the problem of so-called male educational underachievement.

Notes

- 1 I have not given specific year data due to variations from year to year and because I wish my comments to cover Jamaica as well as the broader Caribbean. Unless specified, references are to both. See B. Bailey (1999) and Figueroa (1997) for a more detailed analysis.
- 2 It would be cumbersome always to make specific reference to each of my sources. On issues of gender socialization and relations I rely on studies reported in W. Bailey (1998) and W. Bailey *et al.* (1998); Brown and Chevannes (1995); and Parry (1996). For issues on gender and schooling I rely on Evans (1999); and Parry (1996). I only document where an author's contribution is distinctive. The discussion of the dynamic aspects is mine. Figueroa (forthcoming) provides greater detail.

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