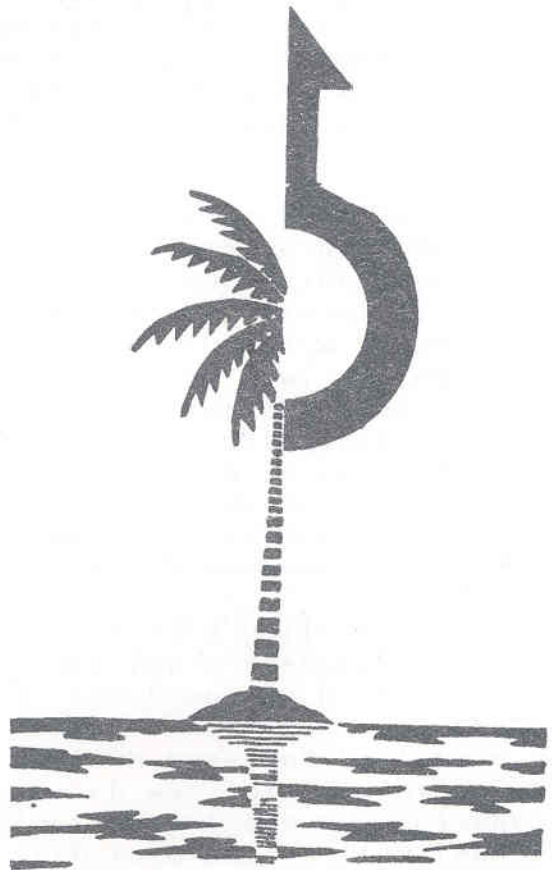


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THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF CARIBBEAN MASCULINITY: TOWARDS A RESEARCH
AGENDA - A SYMPOSIUM**



**BOYS WILL BE BOYS:
Why Caribbean Males Underachieve**
by

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In the Caribbean, and in Jamaica in particular, it has become popular (Miller 1987 1989 1992) to talk about 'the marginalization of Males' and to see educational successes of girls and educational failure of boys as two sides of the same equation. That is, boys fail because girls do well. Hence in some Caribbean territories educational policy attempts to redress the balance by discriminating against girls in order to compensate for the poor performance of boys. I have argued elsewhere (Parry 1995) that this is seen as acceptable because females are perceived as villains and males as victims in the education system.

Here I explore some aspects of the 'female as villain' thesis by focussing upon females as both pupils and teachers in the secondary education systems in Jamaica, Barbados, St Vincent and the Grenadine. The paper sets out to illustrate some of the ways in which females are perceived as problematic and how, as teachers and pupils, they are held responsible for the poor educational performances of boys. In highlighting the crucial role of male gender identity which is central to the 'female villain' thesis, as it relates to both teachers and pupils, the paper offers an alternative perspective on male educational under-achievement.

The account is based on data collected between September 1994 and December 1995 for a research project at the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Jamaica which focuses upon Gender and Education in the English speaking Caribbean. The methodological approach was informed by naturalism and the main data collection methods were classroom observation of fourth form pupils (fourteen year olds) and ethnographic style interviews with head teachers, guidance counsellors and fourth form teachers in selected subjects. The interviews which were unstructured were carried out at the schools, during and after the school day. Fourth form classes in English A (Language), biology and physics provided the main focus of classroom observation.

This analysis is based upon data from the unstructured interviews carried out in eight Jamaican high schools, four high schools in Barbados and three in St Vincent. Data was also collected from two schools in the Grenadines. The participating institutions included rural and urban schools, single sex and coeducational schools. Of the eight Jamaican schools which took part in

the research, two were boys schools, two were girls schools and four were coeducational. In Barbados all four were coeducational schools; three had previously been boys schools and one had previously been a girls school. In St Vincent one boys school, one girls school and one coeducational school participated in the research; both schools in the Grenadines were coeducational.

In total one hundred and ten interviews were carried out. These comprised seventeen heads, thirteen guidance counsellors and eighty two teachers. Of the eighty two teachers, thirty four taught English, twenty one biology and twenty physics. The remainder taught other arts, science and vocational subjects.

Five of the thirty four English teachers were male, six of the twenty one biology teachers were male and fifteen of the twenty physics teachers were male. In Jamaica ten of our total of forty two teachers were male, in Barbados, eleven of the twenty one teachers were male and in St Vincent and the Grenadines ten of our twenty two teachers were male.

Of the eighteen head teachers, ten were male and one of the thirteen guidance counsellors who participated in the research was male.

All teachers interviewed were observed teaching fourth form pupils prior to the interview taking place. Field notes recorded during observation were analysed and used to inform areas which were explored with teachers during interviews. Areas probed in the interviews included background information on teachers (length and type of experience), aspects of classroom behaviour, motivation and performance and pupil/teacher relationships.

Men are under-represented in the teaching profession in the Caribbean and this is particularly apparent in Jamaica (Miller 1989, Leo-Rhynie 1989, Schieflbein & Peruzzi 1991). Our 'sample' attempted to reflect the gender ratio of teachers (less than one to four in some cases) in the schools which we visited. Of the three subjects which we looked at the only subject in which male teachers were more visible than females was physics.

Background To the Research

In the developed world, whilst the domains of academic achievement continue to differ by gender the popular stereotype of the female under-achiever is now largely unfounded (Stockard and Wood 1984 Klein 1995). It appears rather that women are motivated to achieve equally or surpass men in educational attainment (Klein 1985 Stockard 85, Stockard and Wood 1984 Micklelson 1992,

Saltzman 1994) and this is despite unequal opportunities which they face in the occupational structure upon leaving school (Mickleson 1992).

Jamaican girls are largely out performing their male counterparts. Girls do better than boys at both primary and secondary levels of schooling (World Bank 1993). Gender differences in performance are most noticeable at the first level of testing, the common entrance examination (CEE), where girls achieve a higher proportion of high school places even where assessment policies have attempted to redress the gender imbalance by discriminating in favour of boys.

The 1995 Common Entrance Examination passes in Jamaica showed an overall increase of 3% over last years figures. The gender differential however remained the same with 44% of the awards going to males and 56% going to females, despite the fact that girls have to score more points on the exam than boys to get the coveted award. In the previous year results for St. Vincent and the Grenadines showed that of the 313 pupils who passed, 65% were female and 35% were male.

World Bank figures show the majority of Caribbean Examination passes (GCSE Olevel equivalent) are claimed by girls, although results indicate that subject choices follow a traditional pattern with girls highly visible in arts and boys in science (Whitely 1994). In 1993, 54.3% of the entries for all subjects were from girls and 45.7% were boys. Of the total grade one results, 36.4% went to boys and 54.3% went to girls. When we compare English to physics grade results we see 81.4 of the grade one results were taken by girls and 60.7 of the grade one physics went to boys.

Figures available for Barbados and St Vincent show similar trends. In Barbados 59.6% of passes in English A went to females and 63.9% passes in biology. In Physics boys did marginally better than the girls taking 45.5% of the passes. In St Vincent 58.1% of English A passes went to females and 58.7% of passes in biology. In physics gender differences in performance were negligible with boys claiming 50.7% of the passes. Overall in Barbados for all subjects females secured 60.4% of the passes and in St Vincent 61.1%.

Theoretical background

Theoretically the study is informed by symbolic interactionism, favouring a perspective on the social world as emerging through interaction and interpretation. Although the research is located at the level of the school it understands classroom interaction as both

informing and informed by the wider contexts in which it is imbedded (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Whilst based on the premise that schools do not merely reflect the dominant gender ideology of the wider society but actively produce gender divisions, the paper does not site teachers as wholly responsible for these divisions. (Stanworth 1983). What goes on in the classroom must therefore be understood in the context of wider societal issues as they relate to issues of power and social control. (Bernstein 1975)

The paper focuses upon issues arising from the data, which relate to ways in which females, as both pupils and teachers, are held responsible for male under-achievement. The first addresses the perception of heads, teachers and guidance counsellors that girls are sexually reprehensible. The second issue focuses upon the perception that female teachers are over-represented in the school. Both these observations are linked, in respondents' accounts, to the wider issue of male educational underachievement and have been used to justify the position that females, as either teachers or pupils, are at least partially responsible for this under-achievement.

Girls and Sexuality

When discussing aspects of male underachievement teachers talked about the way in which boys rejected education as a viable route through which to realise their objectives. That is boys by-pass the education system in order to obtain material wealth. In this respect teachers felt boys "want to get rich quick", that they reject education as an ineffective route to realising this goal and that in this respect many boys felt "schooling is fooling".

Both male and female respondents felt that at the root of the objective to gain material wealth lay a desire to attract females, and that this was linked to an inability of male pupils to attract females of their own age. In acknowledging this a female teacher from Barbados explained

It is my observation that if a girl gets pregnant it probably won't be by a boy in school. It's usually by someone outside and they are usually older.

Respondents from all three territories talked about the sexual relationships which girls at school formed with older men. Some respondents, like the head teacher from an urban boys school in Jamaica, described the motivation for selecting older men as mercenary;

Girls want men to buy them presents and expensive meals... some girls go out with really old men

A female English teacher at an urban co-educational school in Jamaica describes how girls reject boys of their own age for this reason;

The girls don't want the boys because they don't have the money....

Not all the respondents described the girls' motivations as mercenary. The guidance counsellor at a rural coeducational school in Jamaica explained girls' sexual rejection of their peers in terms of sexual maturation;

The girls do mature faster than the boys and say the boys in school are too immature for them even though they are the same age. They go with older men who aren't in school

Also some of the respondents, like the guidance counsellor at an urban girls school, felt that it was difficult to judge the behaviour of girls by the standards of the school which might run contrary to the expectations of the communities in which they lived;

You see if they aren't getting any attention at home they may feel no one loves them. So when someone, a man, shows an interest in them and tells them they are pretty it is hard to resist. They are under a lot of pressure. It is difficult because although we present a different picture of life in the school, the culture at home is so different and they live it every day.

Other respondents acknowledged how female pupils may be under pressure to assist with the family budget. In this respect, as illustrated in an account provided by the head of a Jamaican urban girls school, respondents were ambivalent about the behaviour of girls;

We do get girls who are sponsored by older men. Maybe they will provide for the girl and all her family. It could be a butcher who will provide the family with fresh meat.. She will be having a relationship with him. Sometimes I see girls on the bus flirting with the drivers and the conductor. I think they are either having a relationship with the driver or they are about to. They stand behind the drivers and vie for attention. Sometimes competing with each other.

Whether the motivation for involvement with older men was described as biological, mercenary, or cultural, respondents clearly condemned girls for the sexual relationships which they formed with men outside of the school. Sexual responsibility was laid squarely at the feet of female pupils. For example, the guidance counsellor cited below locates the responsibility for sexual diseases with girls;

Because the sexual responsibility is not there in the family with the father this can lead to problems and we do have problems with sexually transmitted diseases. The girls don't know any better. Even though they are warned it's not until it happens to them that it gets through.

The guidance counsellor at an urban co-educational school acknowledged how issues of responsibility and blame were reinforced by school policies and practices in that a pregnant girl would be required to leave the school whereas the baby's father could remain at school with no interruption to his education;

Some of the pupils are sexually active and I try to make sure they are using contraceptives. There is no doubt the girls are at a disadvantage. If a girl at school gets pregnant from a boy at school she really has nothing on that boy. The boy has no problem. The girl will have to leave the school, for maybe a year, or maybe she won't come back. But the boy he doesn't have to leave. He can stay at school

In taking responsibility for sexual relationships girls are subjected to a double standard which, as the guidance counsellor at the rural coeducational school explained, means taking the blame;

Girls can't do what boys do. They think they are probably right, that we will be judgemental. In this respect a girl will feel condemnation.

To reiterate girls are condemned by teachers for their sexual relationships with older men. Implicit in this condemnation was the notion that in sexually rejecting their male peers, girls contribute to the educational failure of males. Sexual rejection was felt to affect boys' performance in two ways. The first was that in order to attract girls, teachers felt, boys are pressured into by-passing the education system. The argument in

it's crudest form goes like this. Boys understand that girls of their own age seek out older men for sexual relationships. They see this as a function of the gifts and money which older men can provide for the girls. That is, they interpret the motives of the girls as mercenary. In the words of one respondent;

The boys know this so they want to get money fast,

and another

The boys are under pressure so they see a route to get a nice girl.

The extent to which boys reject orthodox avenues through education and schooling, in order to attract women, girls are blamed for the underachievement of male pupils. This position however ignores the fact that fourth form boys, who were the focus of this research, had access to first, second and third form girls. Indeed some respondents, when talking about relative maturity of boys and girls described how older boys in the school dated younger pupils. Also given that guidance counsellors admit how 'baby fathers' are allowed to remain at school whilst pregnant girls are expelled, suggests that the extent of sexual rejection may less than respondents described.

The second way in which sexual rejection was felt to affect the boys' performance relates to the development of sex/gender identity. It was clear in respondents' accounts how sex/gender identity of girls is forged through the heterosexual relationships which they form with older males. Relationships for which they are condemned. For boys, the development of sex/gender identity is clearly felt to be more problematic. According to teachers, boys are sexually rejected by their female peers which means that development of male sex/gender identity cannot be forged in the same way as the girls; that is through identification with heterosexual relationships. Conversely the sex/gender identity for boys emerged, in teachers' accounts, through the rejection of non-heterosexual relationships. The difference between male and female sex/gender identification is captured below by a an English teacher at an urban girls school;

Girls seem to be more interested in sex at this age whereas I think the boys are more afraid of homosexuality. Jamaican men have to be macho. Homosexuals are run out of the community because of this fear that they have of sexuality.

To our respondents, sex/gender identity was synonymous with heterosexual identity. At the same time issues of homosexuality were repeatedly raised in respect of a concern expressed about male pupils. For example the (male) head teacher at an urban boys school reinforced the fear expressed by the respondent above;

Homosexuality is seen as a sin here (in Jamaica)...And you know it's terrible but a lot of men could fall into their clutches because of poverty...I don't come out and tell the boys straight but I talk to them in small groups and say things like "If you don't keep yourself clean and tidy then no girl is going to want you".

The link between homophobic attitudes such as those expressed above and male underachievement is found in the extremely anti-academic male sex/gender identity which develops as a result. Respondents described the ways in which being masculine or 'macho' affects both behaviour and academic performance in a number of ways. Being masculine or 'macho' was not felt to be compatible with either diligent study or good grades.. A female biology teacher from an urban girls school explained how it is only when examinations approach that boys really begin to apply themselves to their school work to any serious extent;

A boy may enter high school and for the first two years just get by. Then in the last two his attitude seems to change and he begins to put more effort into his school work. They may feel it's the macho way to act

Masculine or macho identity appears to characterise both attitudes to school work and classroom behaviour. The guidance counsellor at an urban boys school describes below how inappropriate gender behaviour could affect peer attitudes to the perpetrator. She felt gender inappropriate behaviour of the part of boys undermines pupil status and authority;

Boys have a real macho image to live up to. If a boy acts in an effeminate way he will be targeted and teased by the other students. Especially if he has a position of authority like a prefect he will have a really hard time and no-one will listen to him. The attitude will be "I don't want him talking to me lest of course I become identified with him.

This respondent expressed a clear attitude to what she felt was inappropriate male behaviour and illustrated her position accordingly;

There is one particular problem with a boy in the first form. He is so effeminate he even gets me annoyed. He gets a really hard time. One boy in the class took a piece of wood and gave him a little spanking.

While giving this account the respondent picked up a substantial piece of wood (part of a school desk) and told us that it was the particular instrument which was used to administer the "little spanking".

Although it seems that macho behaviour is encouraged at school it clearly runs contrary to the academic ethos of education. For example many of our respondents described English, which is a core curriculum subject, as "too effeminate", "not macho enough" "nerdish" and "too girlish" for the boys. The head of a rural coeducational school in Jamaica explained how this was a cultural problem;

Boys don't read because of our culture orientation. reading is not macho or masculine enough for them. It's maybe too girlish

We found similar views to these among our respondents in Barbados, where a female head teacher felt;

Of course where ever you go you hear about 'nerds' who just work and work but here a nerd is a boy who shows academic inclinations. it takes on a special meaning, as sissy and effeminate does.

These views are reiterated below by a female teacher in Barbados:

Boys prefer to be seen not to work. It's not popular to be male and studious. It's not macho. So some work on the sly. when they do work and apply themselves they will perform very well.

Although many of our respondents felt that pupils had equal opportunities to pursue subjects of their choice, at the same time they felt certain skills were inappropriate for boys. The female guidance counsellor at a rural coeducational school argued;

Boys need to be masculine here. They must do certain subjects like technical drawing,

physics and maths. They think these are the subjects which they are best at because that is the information we feed them. If a boy wants to do food nutrition, and not many do, it's not as if we encourage it. If a boy wanted to do textiles it would not be a done thing. It would cause some excitement, yes it would cause a stir.

Similar views are expressed below by an English teacher in St Vincent;

It's like reading is the worst thing you can do. It's sissy and nerdish. they are very short sighted and don't see that failure to read affects their other subjects.

Female Teachers

Head teachers, teachers and guidance counsellors recognised how masculine or 'macho' attitudes and behaviour contributed to educational failure. At the same time however they expressed deep concern, which echoes international concern (Elliot 1995), that the development of male sex/gender identity is threatened by a lack of suitable role models in school.

In this respect both male and female respondents talked about an "over-presence of female teachers" in schools. The invisibility of male teachers, it was argued, fails to redress the absence of a father figure in the home. This was held by the male head of an urban boys school to be particularly salient for the boys from single parent female headed households;

I think it's good for the boys to have exposure to male teachers and I'm happy about their presence in the school. Many of the boys lack a male father figure at home.

Jamaican families are characterized by a large percentage of single parent female headed units. Respondents were concerned about the adverse affects of absentee fathers on attitudes and behaviour of adolescent males and some clearly felt Jamaican women to be responsible;

You know in Jamaica it is the women who are wrecking the men. In this society most households don't have men...

Respondents felt that "schools have too many women teachers", and that "boys are sick of seeing women". This

concern was stressed by head teachers, including the female head of an urban boys school;

Of the 66 teachers I have 9 are men. I try to attract men but I don't discriminate in recruitment. In some ways the male members of staff are easier to handle than the females. They take instructions from the principal easier, despite the fact that it's a female principal. They aren't as touchy as the women are

Discussion

This paper has examined two examples of ways in which females, as pupils and teachers, are linked, in teachers' accounts, to the educational under-achievement of Jamaican Boys. To reiterate, these are through the sexual rejection of male pupils by their female peers and via the over-presence of female teachers in school. These views reflect popular explanations for male educational failure and are reinforced by educational policy which discriminates against girls at the first level of educational testing. However what these explanations fail to make explicit, in both cases, is the crucial role which male sex/gender identity plays in educational failure.

This account suggests an important contributory factor to male educational under-achievement in Jamaican schools is the "hard", "macho", "masculine" attitudes and behaviour which run contrary to the academic ethos of school. Macho attitudes and behaviour were claimed, by heads, teachers and guidance counsellors to affect attitudes to school, behaviour in class and subject choice.

At the same time as condemning these attitudes and behaviours, heads teachers and counsellors admit to encouraging them amongst male pupils. The homophobic fears expressed by staff and the resulting censure of attitudes and behaviour which were felt to be "effeminate", "girlish" "sissy like" and "nerdish" reinforce a masculine gender identity which rejects many aspects of schooling as all of the above.

Furthermore, the importance of masculine gender identity is clearly expressed in teachers' fears about the lack of male role models for boys. Together single parent, female headed households and a predominance of female teachers were felt to compound problems which boys experienced in development of male sex/gender identity.

There are several reasons for challenging this thinking. The first is that research has shown that it is often an

erroneous supposition that female single parent family units do not have access to role models from which children can learn (Epstein 93 Stack 74). Furthermore, research suggests there is no firm basis to assume boys who grow up in fatherless families are more likely as men to suffer from masculine identity as a result of lacking role models (Herzog 1971).

More recent research focuses on the way in which fathers, rather than contributing to traditional masculine identity, may usefully help to break it down via supportive caring roles (Mac an Ghail 1994). The analysis presented here fully supports this position, given that masculine gender identity as it exists in its present construction, appears wholly detrimental to the educational interests of Jamaican males.

Furthermore any link made between fatherless families and poor educational performance of boys should consider home and school research in this area. Just as men and women have radically different experiences of family life (Bernard 1982) So there are two types of parent school relationships; his and hers (Laureau 1992) In terms of schooling and relationships between the school, parents invariably means mothers.

The contention, that it might be more appropriate to break down traditional masculine identity patterns in preference to reinforcing them, relates to my second point and is highlighted by a head teacher in St Vincent in relation to the appropriate role models.

The main problem is that our men are too irresponsible and are not appropriate role models for our children

Concerning teachers, and more specifically the under-representation of male teachers in school, Head teachers felt that male teachers tend to reinforce traditional masculine identities. In doing so they reinforce attitudes and behaviour which contradict the academic ethos of the school. For example the small numbers of male teachers are clustered in the 'traditional male' subjects such as physics and maths and virtually invisible in the arts subjects such as English.

Furthermore male teachers, at the schools in the study, tended towards perpetuating gender stereotypical attitudes to subjects. The female head of our rural girls school for example felt that male teachers, particularly in the sciences, held very rigid views about what constituted men's role in the school;

I have a young graduate science teacher who will not correct English errors of pupils because he says he is a science teacher and it's not his job. He's not the only one who won't pay attention to language skill because it's a woman's subject. They refuse to use English themselves when they set and mark work. We are having some problems with this right now. So many students and particularly men cannot cope with English when they get to university.

This raises an interesting point in regard to 'masculinity' and the teaching role. Connell (1985) writes about the apparent incompatibility between conventional positioning of femininity and the disciplinary role of teacher in that authority is associated with masculinity. Leaving aside the issue that authority may not be seen as compatible with femininity, Connell's point is of relevance here because it highlights the fact that the teaching role is not unambiguously masculine. This is because it involves emotional involvement and caring which is usually defined as women's domain. The classroom, argues Connell, is not designed to cope with emotional ambiguity which may challenge traditional gender roles of men as strong and women as vulnerable and emotional. Equally so the male teacher role may be resilient to the blurring of gender divisions; divisions which perpetuate particular educational interests and skills as women's work.

This point was reinforced by several of the heads that we talked to, who expressed concern that men who were attracted into teaching were not necessarily the most appropriate role models for male pupils, and is captured by the male head of a rural coeducational school in Jamaica;

Where boys are performing well there's usually a father at home. In theory I think male teachers could be role models but really not all of them are qualified to be role models. Role models who are strong get the best results from the boys"

Similarly a male head teacher in Barbados suggested;

We need to be aware of the fact that maybe we are not getting enough male men. That is sometimes they have confusion and problems with their maleness or masculinity. We don't seem to be able to attract enough of that kind of person

Ironically while the absence of male teachers is lamented by heads, our data suggests the teaching role is not compatible with the construction of masculinity to which Jamaican males aspire. Hence male teachers will be unable to supply the role model which teachers feel to be crucial to educational performance of male pupils.

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