

Parents' conceptions of Namibian boys' underachievement and under-participation in education

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Abstract

To create awareness on gender disparity in academic achievement between boys and girls, a study on Namibian boys' educational underachievement was conducted (Zimba, et al. 2023). This article is based on data from this study that pertained to parents' conceptions of boys' educational underachievement. Using a pragmatic parallel mixed methods research design, systematic, and criterion sampling techniques, data were collected by administering structured questionnaires to 182 parents and by conducting focus group discussions with 85 parents. More than half (57%) of the parents agreed that boys performed worse than girls at school because they were less motivated to work than girls, girls worked harder than boys and that boys needed more help than girls to achieve their full potential. In focus group discussions, about 60% of the parents indicated that boys were less motivated to work at school than girls because they were NOT responsible, goal directed, aiming to achieve anything in life, interested in education, concerned about education, and they were NOT willing to do their schoolwork without being closely supervised. Boys who educationally underachieved did not want to be told what to do, had negative attitudes towards school, did not challenge themselves, had no will power, were lazy, uncooperative, and did not understand the value of education. To support boys' education, it is recommended that '*parents should act as real parents*' for boys during socialization by treating them as persons who need help and guidance and not as persons who are self-sufficient. They should also monitor and exercise control over their sons' misbehaviour and misdeeds.

Keywords: *Parents, boys, girls, disparity, gender, educational underachievement, Namibia, schools*

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Introduction

Namibia's Vision 2030 envisions an industrialized and knowledge-based economy by the year 2030. Part of the vision is that by the year 2030, "girls remain in school as long as boys, and girls and women are participating equally in the fields of science and technology" (Government of the Republic of Namibia 2004, p.52). Namibian education policies that appeared to cover the needs of all learners equally, targeted the girl child and not the boy child for special support. For instance, whereas the *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children (2000)* singled out the girl child as one of the vulnerable children to be provided with targeted educational support, the *Education Sector policy on Inclusive Education (2013)* also identified the girl child as one of the vulnerable and marginalized children to be provided with targeted educational support. Whereas the *Basic Education Act, 2020 (Act No. 3)* includes the issue of the prevention and management of learner pregnancy, the *5th National Development Plan (NDP5) (2017)* also singled out girls and women for special support under its section on gender equality.

Contrary to the goal of Vision 2030, the picture that emerges from the 2012-2022 Education Management Information System (EMIS) data is that of gender *disparity* and not gender *parity* in education. This disparity is in favour of girls because more Namibian boys than girls under-participate and under-achieve in education (Education Management Information System, [EMIS], Namibia, 2012-2022). This disparity also prevails in Botswana (Mungoo, 2017), in South Africa (Bisseker, 2024; Hofmeyr, 2022; Spaul & Makaluza, 2019; Zuze & Beku, 2019), in several Commonwealth Countries (Jha et. al, 2017), and in other parts of the world (Hamilton, et. al., 2024; OECD, 2015).

The 2017 and 2022 EMIS statistics explained this disparity in schools by indicating that although at the beginning of the educational process there were more male than female learners enrolled in Grade 1, there were progressively more female than male learners enrolled in the educational system from Grades 6 to Grade 12. From Grades 6 to 12, more boys dropped out of school than girls because of failing at school, disciplinary issues, going to work and because of demands from their parents that they leave school (EMIS, 2017; 2022). This situation largely prevailed in 2019 during which year, it was reported that "an extraordinary feature of Namibia's survival rates was that they were consistently higher for females than for males from Grade 6 to Grade 12 for the past five years" (EMIS, 2019, p. 43).

Three concerns emerge out of this situation. Firstly, some boys' educational underachievement might promote disharmony in society through manifestations of gender-based violence, crime, unemployment, poverty, and socio-political instability. Secondly, under-participation in education might not only promote the exclusion of several boys from education but also from informed and competent participation in the economy, civic and political life (Reeves, 2022). Thirdly, the development of healthy relationships between men and women in the Namibian society might be stifled by the presence of men who might feel inferior to women because of their limited educational attainments (UNESCO, 2020, 2022; Welmond & Gregory, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Based on the concerns expressed above, the research problem of the Namibian boys' educational underachievement study was to find out what accounted for the disparity in academic performance between boys and girls (Zimba, et.al; 2023). This article is based on data from this study that pertained to parents' conceptions of boys' educational

underachievement. The research task was to find out from parents their views on work habits and behaviours of their sons in school that might influence underperformance; views on boys' and girls' work habits, and motivation; views on school support for boys' education and; expectations of their sons' achievement in school. In focus group discussions, the research task was to ascertain from parents whether boys were less motivated to work at school than girls; whether girls worked harder than boys; why more boys than girls dropped out of school; how boys could be supported by the community to perform better academically and how culture could be used to support the retention of boys in school.

Literature Review

According to Diprete and Buchmann (2013), parents influence their children's performance due to their Social Economic Status (SES), parenting boys and girls differently and due to the character of children's context involving peers, neighbourhoods, and schools. In general, children's performance in school is largely dependent on social economic resources and the social-cultural capital their parents have access to. According to this premise, the more viably parents make use of these enablers, the better they are at catering for the educational needs of their children. In the Namibian context, we expected the different social economic backgrounds and social-cultural contexts of parents to either enhance or attenuate the educational achievement of boys (Jha et al., 2017).

The gender role socialization perspective stresses the importance of gender-specific role modelling. In this perspective, girls look to their mothers and boys look to their fathers as they develop their educational and occupational aspirations (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013). For instance, when fathers are absent from the family or have low education attainment, boys lose role models and underachieve in education (Hamilton, et. al., 2024). They do this because in the absence of their fathers, boys tend to misbehave more than girls.

Sax (2016, p.251), concurs with Diprete and Buchmann, (2013), when he states: "A boy needs real-life models of healthy masculinity, just as girls need real-life models of healthy femininity". Consistent with this, the ideal of the husband and father "who sacrifices himself for the sake of his wife and children" (Sax, 2016, p. 253) should not be condemned but applauded. Sax (2016, pp.253-254) elaborates on this by stating:

To become a man, a boy must see a man. But that man doesn't have to be his father. In fact, ideally, it shouldn't be only his father. Even if your son has a strong father or father figure in his life, he still needs a community of men who together can provide him with varied models of what productive adult men do.

By implication, Sax (2016) makes the important point that for a boy to have enhanced academic achievement, he does not only need the support of his father but the support of several 'fathers' from the community (Jha et. al., 2017). This position resonates with some focus group discussion data that we obtained from parents.

One mark of unstable families is the absence of fathers from family units. Absent fathers, as indicated by Samuels (2019) and Sax (2016) deny boys of love, encouragement, support, scaffolding opportunities, empathy, and modelling resilience. According to Samuels (2019, p. 221), in the United States of America and other Western countries, "children from dad-less homes are more likely to excel at just about everything you don't want them to, from teenage pregnancy, to being adolescent murderers". What communities could do to avoid all this is to reinstate the African extended family system in which the roles of uncles, cousins and neighbours would be restored. Khan (2024) proposes how all this can be enhanced by using

Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a parents' assistant and tutor. We present data on how sampled parents discussed fatherhood later in this paper.

The point that Samuels (2019) makes is that to be good parents in today's world, parents must *make time* for their children amidst work, school activities, entertaining, and having some time for each other. To support boys' education under these circumstances, parents must be *available* and *present*. Although mothers are expected to provide nurturance and care, fathers are expected to provide stimulation and role modelling; both parents should provide protection, representation, scaffolding, encouragement, and motivation. Khan (2024) has demonstrated how parents can be supported by AI to do all these things more efficiently.

Additionally, Schwab (2016), recommends that parents could deploy principles of contextual, emotional, inspirational and physical intelligences when raising children in supportive ways that could be consistent with the digital world and life styles. In the Namibian context, parents, although constrained by lack of time, poverty and unstable family relationships, should provide not only shelter, health and nutrition but also transport to and from school, school fees, school supplies, etc. What this implies is that both parents must actively participate in childrearing duties, responsibilities, and obligations. This is consistent with Stephinal's (2014) reasoning on parents' involvement in their children's education in South Africa. To further support the education of their sons, parents should enable them to be responsible (Obama, 2004; Samuels, 2019). For instance, boys could be trained to be referees in sport and be volunteers working at animal shelters.

Cox (2018) builds on Obama's (2004) idea by urging parents to note that boys are in the process of change, growth and development. Viewed from a social-cognitive developmental perspective and consistent with Dweck (2017), Cox (2018) indicates that boys and other young people have flexible minds that are geared towards acquiring knowledge and understanding. One meaning of this is that although some boys are bound by rigid thinking, and self-sabotaging behaviour, they can change as well as they are guided and exposed to change-evoking experiences (Camarata, 2014; Cox, 2018, p. 70). Based on this premise, parents are urged not to give up on boys who underachieve but support them in their educational pursuits.

Seagraves and Leavine (2018) have offered suggestions on gender and religion and its relationship to boys' wellbeing and parents' advice and counsel. They advise that in supporting boys' education, parents should note that "it will never be loving to support something that God is against, and it will never be loving to encourage someone to act contrary to how God has designed them" (Seagraves and Leavine, 2018, p. 39). Although this is controversial, parents should be free to support and guide their sons' education according to their faith in God.

Methodology

Research Designs

A pragmatic parallel mixed methods case study research design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were concurrently collected was used.

Sample

A systematic sampling technique to collect data from 53 schools located in 12 of the 14 Educational Regions of Namibia was adopted. Questionnaire data were collected from 182 parents from these regions. They had a minimum age of 26 years and a maximum age of 62 years. Whereas 63.2% of the parents were female, 35.2% of them were male. Using the convenience sampling technique, 85 parents from the 12 Educational Regions were selected to participate in focus group discussions.

Research Instruments

For the quantitative part, structured questionnaires were used. For the qualitative component, a guide for the focus group discussions was used. The research instruments were translated from English into languages preferred by parents, and they were piloted to enhance their reliability and validity.

Procedure

After obtaining permission to access research sites, questionnaires were administered to sampled parents. With the consent of the parents, data recorders were used to record proceedings of focus group discussions.

Research ethics

The study only commenced after receiving institutional ethical clearance from the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee and approval from the national, regional, and local officials of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all sampled parents at the beginning of data collection sessions. Researchers informed sampled parents about their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research exercise once participation had begun. Parents were also informed that their responses were confidential. To ensure this, personal particulars were not sought from them. Sampled parents were assured that participation in the study would not cause them psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical harm because all research activities would be undertaken in a humane and transparent manner.

Data analysis

Frequencies and the chi-square were used to analyse quantitative data. After transcribing and coding focus group discussion data, typological and content analyses were used to analyse qualitative data.

Limitations of the study

Because of time and financial constraints we did not interview parents from two of Namibia's 14 educational regions and we did not hold focus group discussions with as many parents as we wished to. The data could have been further enriched if we included observations of parents' interactions with their sons in their home environments. Further research on the subject should include more parents interacting with their educationally underachieving sons at home.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present and discuss quantitative and qualitative data according to the questions we asked earlier as follows:

With regards to views on their sons' work habits, 67%-86% of sampled parents from the 12 Education Regions *agreed* that their sons worked hard, wanted to do well at school, did their homework regularly, were motivated to do well at school, knew what they wanted to do when they left school, and that their sons always tried to do their best. In contrast to all this, 52% of them *agreed* that their sons had many friends who distracted them from school work, 54%-68% of them *disagreed* that their sons misbehaved at school, were not bothered about doing well at school and that their sons absented themselves from school sometimes (see Table 1). All this implied that quantitatively, parents did not think that their sons were engaged in habits that were inimical to their academic achievement.

Table 1

Parents' Views on Work Habits and Behaviour of Their Sons

My son:	Responses
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	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Works hard at school.	14	7.7	44	24.2	89	48.9	31	17.0	4	2.2	182	100
Does his homework when I keep on checking on him.	13	7.1	34	18.7	103	56.6	27	14.8	5	2.7	182	100
Wants to do well at school.	5	2.7	18	9.9	94	51.6	59	34.4	6	3.3	182	100
Does his homework regularly.	3	1.6	50	27.5	91	50.0	37	20.3	1	0.5	182	100
Misbehaves (messes about) at school.	54	29.7	59	32.4	49	26.9	18	9.9	2	1.1	182	100
Is motivated to do well at school.	5	2.7	20	11.0	96	52.7	58	31.9	3	1.6	182	100
Knows what he wants to do when he leaves school.	20	11.0	42	23.1	67	36.8	50	27.5	3	1.6	182	100
Is not bothered about doing well at school	32	17.6	66	36.3	64	35.2	16	8.8	4	2.2	182	100
Has many friends who distract him from doing his school work.	38	20.9	47	25.8	62	34.1	32	17.6	3	1.6	182	
Always tries his best.	6	3.3	42	23.1	82	45.1	48	26.4	4	2.2	182	
Absents himself from school sometimes.	65	35.7	59	32.4	50	27.5	7	3.8	1	0.5	182	

Parents communicated the overall message that schools largely supported their sons' education. This was because 58%-88% of them agreed that their sons' schools had good facilities, teachers, good discipline, supported their sons to perform well academically, were important for their sons' future, kept them informed of their sons' progress, teachers helped their sons learn and that their communities and their sons' schools worked closely together (see Table 2).

Table 2
Parents' Views on School Support for Their Sons

Parents' views on their sons' school support	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
School has good facilities to help my son.	11	6.1	40	22.0	108	59.3	22	12.1	1	0.5	182	100
School has good teachers	4	2.2	23	12.6	115	63.2	39	21.4	1	0.5	182	100
School has good discipline	11	6.1	35	19.2	86	47.3	47	25.8	3	1.6	182	100
School supports my son to perform well academically	3	1.6	25	13.7	96	52.7	57	31.3	1	0.5	182	100
School is important for my son's future.	1	0.5	2	1.1	65	35.7	113	62.1	1	0.5	182	100
School keeps me informed of my son's progress.	2	1.1	19	10.4	88	48.4	72	39.6	1	0.5	182	100
Teachers help my son learn.	3	1.6	13	7.1	102	56.0	58	31.9	6	3.3	182	100
My community and my school work closely together.	17	9.3	58	31.9	84	46.2	21	11.5	2	1.1	182	100

It is concluded from Table 3 that sampled parents from the 12 Regions held high expectations about their sons' success at school. This was so because 88%-98% of them agreed

that they expected their sons to do well at school, to pass with good grades in their final examinations, to complete school and get jobs, or go for further studies. Moreover, 89% of them disagreed that they expected their sons to leave school early and assist with family responsibilities.

Table 3
Parents' Expectations of Their Sons' Achievement in School

Parents expected their sons:	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
To do well at school.	1	0.5	3	1.6	54	29.7	121	66.5	3	1.6	182	100
To pass with good grades in their final exam.	1	0.5	1	0.5	56	30.8	122	67.0	2	1.1	182	100
To complete school and get jobs.	9	4.9	11	6.0	57	31.3	103	56.6	2	1.1	182	100
To complete school and go for further studies.	1	0.5	2	1.1	44	24.2	134	73.6	1	0.5	182	100
To leave school early (drop out) and assist with family responsibilities.	136	74.7	26	14.3	12	6.6	7	3.8	1	0.5	182	100

In contrast with the above positive messages, 57% - 83% of the parents agreed that boys were less motivated to work at school than girls, girls worked harder at school than boys and that boys needed more help than girls to achieve their full potential (see Table, 4).

Table 4
Parents' Views on Boys' and Girls' Work Habits, Motivation and Support They Received

Parents' views	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Boys are less motivated to work at school than girls.	27	14.8	51	28.0	71	39.0	32	17.6	1	0.5	182	100

Girls work harder than boys.	13	7.1	17	9.3	89	48.9	62	34.1	1	0.5	182	100
Boys need more help than girls to achieve their potential.	9	4.9	23	12.6	76	41.8	73	40.1	1	0.5	182	100

We gleaned two contrasting messages from the quantitative data presented above. Firstly, parents conveyed the message that their sons practiced work habits that were not inimical to their academic achievement, schools largely supported their son's education and that they held high expectations about their sons' success at school. Secondly, in contrast, the majority of the parents agreed that boys were less motivated to work at school than girls, girls worked harder than boys and that boys needed more help than girls to achieve their full potential. The implication here is that to succeed in education, boys needed parental support, encouragement and motivation (Mapani & Mushaandja, 2013; Samuels, 2019; Sax, 2016). The apparent contradiction in the frequency data may be due to social desirability. Parents responded positively when they did not wish to portray their sons in a bad light. This may have masked parents' real understanding of why their sons educationally underachieve. Qualitative data clarified this situation.

When the chi-square was used to analyse parents' quantitative data according to gender, it was noticed that whereas the majority of both male and female parents agreed that boys were less motivated to work at school than girls, the majority of both male and female parents agreed that teachers helped their sons learn (Chi-square = 16.3; df = 8; $p < .04$). In contrast to this, significantly more female than male parents agreed with the statement that the school kept them informed of their sons' progress (Chi-square = 31.3; df = 8; $p < .001$). This could mean that female parents were more in touch with schools than male parents.

To triangulate some of the parents' quantitative data, we conducted focus group discussions with 85 parents from Oshana, Oshikoto, Khomas, Ohangwena, Kavango East, Kavango West, Zambezi, Erongo, Karas and Otjozondjupa Regions. The discussions pertained to six issues that were listed earlier. We present and discuss data on the six issues as follows:

Parents' Views on Whether Boys were Less Motivated to Work at School Than Girls

An overwhelming majority of the parents indicated that boys were, at the *attitudinal level*, less motivated to work at school than girls because they were NOT *responsible, goal directed, aiming to achieve anything in life, interested in education, concerned about education, self-motivated and they were NOT willing to do their school work without being closely supervised*. In addition, when compared to girls, boys who underachieved *did not want to be told what to do, had negative attitudes towards education, did not challenge themselves, lacked self-motivation, had no will power, were lazy, were uncooperative, lacked understanding of the value of education and that they took too long to take education seriously*.

These boys' *internal motivational factors* created personal tendencies and conditions in which boys who underachieved lacked the zeal to apply themselves to educational activities in school. The majority of girls on the other hand were intrinsically motivated and had positive, self-directed, supportive and cooperative attitudes toward education. Unlike in the case of boys who underachieved, these pro-social attitudes enabled the majority of girls to excel in education. The growth mind set perspective as proposed by Dweck (2017) is consistent with this explanation. Lack of motivation was one of the reasons some boys in Botswana (Mungoo,

2014) and in South Africa (Bisseker, 2024; Spoull & Makaluza, 2019; Zuze & Beku, 2019) were thought to perform worse than girls.

In terms of *beliefs*, boys who underachieved thought that they could succeed in life and be rich without education. They based this belief on some of their community role models who were rich but uneducated. In addition, according to sampled parents, boys did not believe in the link between education and the acquisition of good things such as beautiful cars, lived in the present and were led by the desire to have good things “now”. Some of them ended up leaving school and doing jobs that did not depend on much education because of this belief (Jha et al., 2012; Jha et al., 2017).

In terms of their *behaviour*, most parents reported that boys who underachieved were less motivated than girls because they did NOT take initiative, ask for help when they needed to, listen to teachers, cooperate with teachers, and they did NOT accept encouragement from teachers. Instead, they spent most of their time on social media, and abusing drugs and alcohol. These boys had a lot of distractions that kept them away from education. Gevers and Fisher (2012) provided similar findings from South African schools. OECD (2015) provided similar findings which indicated that boys when compared to girls, were less engaged with school, spent more time playing video games and less time doing homework or reading for enjoyment. Girls in contrast, took initiative, asked for help when they needed to, listened to their teachers, cooperated with their teachers from whom they accepted encouragement. Studies conducted in South Africa communicated the message that these socio-emotional skills were the main cause of the pro-girl gender gap in academic achievement (Bisseker, 2024; Hofmeyr, 2022; Spaul & Makaluza, 2019). In addition, girls focused on education and did not engage in alcohol and drug abuse.

These findings communicate the general message that any psychosocial programme to promote boys’ academic achievement motivation should address their dysfunctional *intrinsic* attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that have been delineated here.

Boys who underachieved were also less motivated to work at school than girls because of adverse external motivational factors such as peer pressure and lack of supportive family environments.

Regarding *peer pressure*, boys who educationally underachieved were less motivated to work at school than girls because they easily succumbed to the negative influences of their friends who used ‘intoxicating’ substances such as alcohol and drugs. These data are consistent with those provided by Gevers and Fisher (2012), by Jha et al. (2012) and by Mapani and Mushaandja, (2013). In contrast to this, girls who excelled in education resisted peer group temptations to be distracted from their focus on educational activities.

With respect to the *lack of supportive family environments*, the view was that if boys were negatively motivated at home, they would not be motivated to do well in school. Conversely, supportive family environments would motivate the boys to succeed in school. So, the main cause for underachievement in education might not be inherent in the learner and his or her gender but emanate from unsupportive and unstimulating family conditions (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013; Khan, 2024; Samuels, 2019; Sax, 2016). Many of the parents were not aware of the link between family socialization styles and boys’ educational underachievement.

Whether Boys Performed Worse Than Girls in Education Because Girls Worked Harder Than Them

To understand parents’ responses to this issue, we identified categories of *girls’ work habits*, *girls’ work ethic dispositions*, *support given to girls*, *boys’ work habits*, *boys’ work ethic dispositions*, and *parents’ roles/influence in girls’ and boys’ work habits*.

With respect to *girls’ work habits*, the majority of the parents indicated that girls worked harder at school than boys because the many household chores they were asked to perform at

home gave them the opportunity to manage time wisely and spend it on school work. Unlike boys, girls took responsibility for their studies without being supervised, multi-tasked and found time for school work, were focused, and concentrated on their educational activities. These data are consistent with those provided by Jha et al. (2012) and by Jha et al. (2017). To us, all this meant that girls who excelled in education did not withdraw from learning tasks and used household chores as a skill applicable to learning and development.

According to parents, girls worked harder than boys because they understood the value of education, did not want to be embarrassed by failure, did not want to embarrass their parents but wished to promote good family reputations and recognition. Boys who educationally underachieved did not express these dispositions. In addition, girls were *disposed* to work harder than boys because they were more willing to learn than boys, listened to advice, readily followed teachers' instructions and obeyed teachers, were alert, formed a link between education and success in future, were serious, did not easily give up but persevered, took time to consult teachers when they did not understand, were disciplined and worked hard as well as had good work ethic. To us, girls who excelled in education complied with the educational set up while boys who underachieved either withdrew from it or rebelled against it. According to Cox (2018) and Schwab, (2016), girls were motivated in this way by self-defined senses of purpose, honour, role in life, direction, usefulness and value. It was also reported that girls appeared to work harder than boys because of *support provided to them*. Parents indicated that girls were encouraged and motivated to work hard in support programmes they were offered. No such programmes existed to encourage boys to work hard, and they did not have policies and services that were geared at motivating them to work hard at school.

In contrast, according to parents, girls were provided with more material support than boys by their parents, NGOs, and donors. Several boys who underachieved did not receive such support and as a result they 'went out there to hustle' to meet their needs. In our view, this position might not be sustained in all contexts where girls outperform boys in education as there are situations in which girls from poverty stricken environments outperform boys living in the same environments. This would also be the case because of *boys' work habits* that do not promote academic achievement. For instance, boys were reported to waste time on non-educational activities and were not concerned with and did not care about educational achievement as they bluffed and pretended that they knew what to do and asked parents not to worry about them. Girls who excelled in education did not do this. In contrast, some boys were distracted because they were not patient but, in a hurry to make money, acquire property and get rich.

In terms of *boys' dispositions*, it was pointed out that some traditional cultural socialization beliefs and practices created in a number of boys who educationally underachieved a sense of alienation. In this condition, the boys were not encouraged to learn from and be motivated by their fathers who were unavailable to them. At the same time they were labelled misfits if they closely aligned themselves to their mothers who were available to them. The result of this was that the boys felt neglected, not cared for and not nurtured by both parents. The consequence of this was that the boys concerned became self-absorbed, depressed and unwilling to participate in learning activities. Support programmes to enable boys in this situation deal with absent fathers should be applied (Cox, 2018; Jha & Pouezevara, 2016; McWhirter, et. al., 2013).

Regarding *parents' influence on girls' and boys' work habits*, we interpreted gender bias in which girls were provided with protection while boys were allowed to goof around as a lapse in effective parenting and socialization. This kind of socialization worked against the development of educational qualities of focus, concentration, and seriousness in boys (Jha & Pouezevara, 2016; Samuels, 2019; Sax, 2016). Using AI as a coach, tutor, teaching assistant and as an aid in counselling may mitigate all this (Khan, 2024). Moreover, the cultural

expectation that girls should do domestic work at home while boys goofed around did not encourage boys to work hard but illustrates a misconstrued view and practice of masculinity (Hamilton, et. al., 2024).

Why More Boys than Girls Dropped Out of School

A number of boys under-participated in education because they dropped out of school. They did so due to *discipline problems, the lure of quick success, and unsupportive social factors*.

Discipline problems as a cause of dropping out of school involved boys not following teachers' instructions, disobeying teachers, disobeying parents, disobeying school rules, being arrogant, expressing macho pride, and defying parents' and teachers' authority. With this kind of indiscipline, such boys seemed to operate in a reality characterised by lack of restraint, unruliness, disorder, disrespect, and defiance. In addition to acknowledging that such a reality is un conducive to learning and personal development, we note that it represents a way of being that schools should counter when supporting boys' education (Jha & Pouzevara, 2016; McWhirter, et. al., 2013; Mungoo, 2017; Zuze & Beku, 2019).

According to the sampled parents, alcohol and drug abuse was another discipline problem that caused boys to drop out of school. This included binge drinking, experimenting with drugs, selling drugs, being drug couriers, sniffing intoxicating substances and smoking *dagga* (Marijuana). These findings were consistent with those provided by Gevers and Fisher (2012). Some parents in the focus group discussions decried society's tendency of not shaming boys who abused drugs and alcohol while shaming girls who did so. In this instance, it appears to us that culture promotes more indiscipline in the boy child than in the girl child.

The lure of quick success was also identified as a common cause of school dropout amongst boys who academically underachieved. Several parents informed us that such boys dropped out of school to get jobs and become rich quickly without much education. This did not seem to happen because they dropped out of school to provide cheap labour at construction sites, work as taxi drivers, security guards, farm workers, street marketers and wait at traffic lights to be hired as casual labourers.

According to Khan (2024), AI can provide parents support when they have difficulties supporting their sons who may educationally underachieve.

With regards to boys being given too many responsibilities at home, some parents from remote and rural areas who did not appreciate the value of modern education did not encourage their sons to remain in school but forced them to take up responsibilities such as looking after livestock, helping out in the family business and in farming activities. These responsibilities forced some boys concerned to drop out of school. To us, such parents should be empowered at community-based workshops to value education and see the link between education and family advancement (Jha & Pouzevara, 2016).

How Boys who Underachieve and Under-participate in Education could be Supported by the Community

Responses on this issue were grouped into categories of *transforming boy child and girl child rearing beliefs, values and practices; school and community collaboration on boys' education and creating an UBUNTU community boy child support system*.

The main point of *transforming the boy child and the girl child rearing beliefs, values and practices* was that the foundation for supporting boys' education should first be built in early childhood education (Hofmeyr, 2022). This means that from an early age the family and the community should raise boys to respect the value of education and be motivated to focus and work hard in school.

In the *school/community collaboration on boys' education*, parents suggested that community members should be made aware by schools of educational underachievement problems boys faced in school. Schools should run boy child underachievement in education awareness/outreach programmes. Such programmes could be coordinated by community leaders, be based on empirical achievement data from schools and be facilitated by educational regional officials and staffs from tertiary educational institutions. This reasoning is supported by data collected from several Commonwealth countries (Jha et al., 2017) and from other countries (Camarata, 2014; Khan, 2024).

Zimba (2002) states that consistent with the conception of the indigenous African family, the individual can only exist *corporately* as part of the community. Made, created and produced by the community, the individual becomes conscious of his being, *corporate* duties, responsibilities and privileges through his existence and relationship with others. The Zulu of South Africa succinctly express this view of the individual by noting that “*umuntu umuntu ngabantu*,” literally meaning that “a person is only a person with other people”. In other words, “it is only within a community that a person can be said to truly become a person. Through a person’s contributing to the community, the community in turn adds human qualities to that person” (Higson-Smith & Killian, 2000, p. 206). To support the boy who educationally underachieve, the community should be transformed into a supportive and empowering collective.

How concretely in the *UBUNTU community-based boy child support system* would the community be able develop new norms of raising boys? The parents in the focus group discussions proposed a number of programmes. One of these was that communities could reclaim the UBUNTU social welfare network community support system by operating *a neighbourhood watch for boys' education*. In this network, community members could watch out for boys in trouble and provide prompt support of various kinds. For instance, families and communities could provide opportunities for family counselling and guidance of boys because such boys would “belong” to the whole community and the community would take responsibility for their success or failure.

How Culture could be used to Support the Retention of Boys in School

Parents’ responses here were divided into categories of *cultural values for parenting boys and girls; circles of care, guidance and help around the boy child*

Cultural values for parenting boys and girls.

It was suggested that boys should first learn to respect and obey their parents before they abided by school rules and school constraints. In our understanding, to facilitate this, fathers, and other male figures in the families and communities should assume their cultural roles in the upbringing of boys. They should participate in the education of boys and in advising them on how to behave at home and in school. According to Khan (2024), this reasoning still makes sense in today’s digital age.

Notwithstanding the wish described in the preceding paragraph, it was acknowledged that many boys lived in female-headed households, without fathers. To deal with this situation, communities could support the education of boys by urging fathers to become viable role models and mentors for their sons. They could do this by being available to guide, counsel and mentor their sons. This is what all cultures in Namibia require of fathers and several cultures all over the world still require (Camarata, 2014).

To augment this point, *‘parents should act as real parents’* for boys during socialization. To do this and thereby encourage the retention of their sons in school, parents, should stop treating boys as if they did not need help and guidance, as if they were self-sufficient and that they could look after themselves unaided. Consistent with this, parents

should stop glossing over and ignoring boys' misconduct and wrong doing. They should responsively interact with their children (Camarata, 2014; Stephinal, 2014).

What is implied here is that boys' behaviour and actions are not monitored and controlled by parents while the "girl child is required to abide by the rules of the house; her movements are monitored and if she violates the rules she is beaten - physically punished". From a cultural point of view, this is a wrong practice that should be discontinued.

Another wrong cultural belief that was alluded to was that of using vulnerability to justify the strict control exercised over girls. It was indicated that because boys were as vulnerable as girls, they should also be strictly monitored and controlled. By recognizing that both boys and girls were vulnerable, parents should equally motivate girls and boys to stay in school and excel. The cultural tendency of providing more educational motivation to girls than boys should be discouraged.

Instead, it was proposed that families should enforce specific cultural values that include the observance of, adherence to and obedience; respect for order in life; respect for time/curfew hours in households; communication of information on boys' and girls' whereabouts, activities and friends; insistence on observance of compliance and discipline in households amongst boys and girls, consistent application of sanctions and consequences as useful tools of socialization in households, cooperation; hard work; honesty; trust; truth; trustworthiness and; faithfulness. These values would prevent boys who educationally underachieve from dropping out of schools (Zuze & Beku, 2019).

Circles of Care, Guidance and Help around the Boy Child.

As was the case in the past, the raising of children should be the responsibility of whole communities, villages, neighbourhoods, and families. In these social collections, circles of care, guidance, counselling, and help around the boy child should be created. These would include the nuclear family, the relatives, the peer group, the youth group, the church group, and the community support group circles (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Jha et al., 2017; Samuels, 2019).

In the transformed and collective way of raising children, the goal would be to enable boys to become useful not only to themselves and their families but also to their communities. Moreover, a *prosocial* cultural milieu for the support of boys' education should be created to affect the circles of care idea. In the milieu, adults in communities and society should transmit beliefs, values and practices that promote healthy lifestyles. They should not, for instance, promote promiscuity, alcohol and drug abuse, corruption of morals and tolerance of wrong. When these are conveyed as normal, we should not be surprised to see boys emulating them and engaging in self-destructive behaviours (Sax, 2016, Schwab, 2016). Instead of this, communities should sanction alcohol and drug abuse, corruption of morals, gender-based violence and other vices that are rampant in the society.

The *prosocial* normative cultural milieu should include the reinstating of cultural norms against antisocial behaviour. For instance, the use of shaming against those who smoke and drink at a young age should be used in schools to discourage these behaviours. In addition, the use of ridicule against those who engage in undesirable behaviour and actions should be redeployed in the community and in the school. In the *prosocial* cultural milieu, members of the community should not tolerate goofing, indolence and self-destructive behaviour amongst men and boys.

Moreover, the moral corruption effects of social media should be considered when thinking about positive cultural norms that would promote and support boys' education. For instance, boys and the youth in general should be educated about the negative influences of the social media that are distractions from education such as pornography, cyber-bullying, cyber-crime, plagiarism, cyber-abuse, and cyber-terrorism (Cox, 2018; Khan, 2024; Schwab, 2016).

Recommended Interventions

1. Schools should establish psychosocial programmes to address anti-education and anti-learning attitudes, beliefs and behaviours among boys who underachieve.
2. Parents should use a *responsibility-inducing parenting approach* by giving boys who underachieve tasks to do and chores to perform at home. This would enable such boys to learn to be responsible, develop socioemotional skills of self-control, self-management, and perseverance (Spaull & Makaluza, 2019).
3. The raising of boys should be the responsibility of circles of care involving nuclear and extended families, whole communities, villages, and neighbourhoods. School boards should be involved in this effort to promote school and community partnerships when mitigating boys' educational underachievement.
4. Parents should act as real parents for boys during socialization by requiring the exercise of self-control amongst them and NOT treating them as if they did not need help and guidance and as if they were self-sufficient. Instead, to promote their educational achievement, parents should monitor and exercise control over their sons' misbehaviours.
5. To mitigate toxic peer pressure that promotes antisocial behaviour and the abuse of alcohol and drugs amongst boys who underachieve, schools should support the formation and operation of peer groups that prize learning and academic achievement.
6. According to parents, to promote school/community collaboration on boys' education, community members should be made aware by schools of educational underachievement problems and challenges boys face in schools. To ameliorate such problems, schools should run boy child educational underachievement awareness/outreach programmes.
7. For them to effectively support the education of their sons, parents should beware of the influence of electronics in their lives (Cox, 2018; Khan, 2024; Schwab, 2016). One major adverse effect of electronic gadgets is the promotion of *self-absorption*. In this state, boys waste a lot of time on trivial amusement. To mitigate this, parents should monitor the way their sons use the internet, social media, and electronic gadgets.
8. Parents' faith in God and their conviction to lead Christian lives may give their sons the opportunity to clarify their values, beliefs, and their need to do well in school in order to care for the welfare of themselves, their families, and other people.

Conclusion

In this study, we focused on how sampled parents understood the manifestations of the disparity in academic performance between Namibian boys and girls that is in favour of girls. We provided actionable suggestions from literature and from the sampled parents on how to support the enhancement of education of boys who underachieve. Suggestions such as those of establishing the practice of circles of care, guidance and help around the boy child and the reframing of the position of the boy in society, speak to the transformation of the Namibian communities when supporting boys who educationally underachieve.

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