

Investigate the Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Literacy: The Shortfall in boys' Literacy Development in Primary Schools in the Parish of St. James, Jamaica

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Abstract

This article explores the factors contributing to gender inequality in literacy development among boys in St. James, Jamaica, and the disparities between them and their female counterparts. Using a mixed-method approach, the study gathered qualitative and quantitative data to examine the underlying causes of boys' underachievement in literacy. The research identified a range of influencing factors, which includes school environment, home support, family background, teaching strategies, and teacher-student relationships. Ethical standards were observed, and the study also addressed its limitations and anticipated outcomes. Findings revealed that gender inequality in literacy remains a persistent concern, both locally and globally. Boys in St. James are particularly disadvantaged due to cultural expectations, limited parental involvement especially from fathers, and classroom practices that often fail to align with their learning preferences. Many boys are expected to adopt adult responsibilities prematurely, such as becoming breadwinners, which hinders their educational progress. Additionally, societal norms surrounding masculinity discourage boys from engaging in reading and writing, which are often perceived as feminine activities. This study concludes that boys face unique challenges that significantly impact their literacy development. These include a lack of male role models in education, limited access to culturally relevant reading materials, and instructional methods that do not accommodate diverse learning styles. The cumulative effect of these challenges results in boys being underserved by the current educational system. Addressing these issues requires targeted policy reform, teacher training, and greater parental and community involvement to foster equitable literacy outcomes for all students.

Keywords: Disparity, Gender Inequality, Literacy, Literacy Development, Shortfall, Teacher-Student Relations, Teaching and Learning Strategies.

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to determine the factors which influence the inequality in literacy development among boys who have been lagging behind their female counterparts for decades. Gender inequality in literacy development is a persistent global challenge, manifesting in various educational contexts and disproportionately affecting different gender groups (e.g. shifting from focusing on girls' access to focusing on boys' attainment) [1, 2,

9]. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive understanding of the contributing factors that underpin gender disparities in literacy development in boys in the parish of St. James. These factors may include but are not limited to socio-economic conditions, cultural customs and norms, availability of educational resources, teaching practices, family dynamics among other factors. Upon investigating these factors, the researcher can identify interventions and

employ strategies to mitigate disparities and promote equitable literacy development for all students, both boys and girls. The research also aims to explore the multifaceted reasons behind this literacy gap among boys by examining local educational practices, socio-cultural influences, and policy implications (including how national policies may marginalize boys) [10]. Regarding policy implementations, the researcher determines its effectiveness to mitigate this gap that prevents equity.

Framework

To investigate the factors contributing to gender inequality in literacy development among boys in primary schools in the parish of St. James, Jamaica, the following theoretical frameworks were employed. According to [11], the term “concept” does not stand alone, but is related to other concepts and forms meaning. Hence the conceptual connection with other concepts creates a “framework” of related or interlinked concepts. Framework is the conceptual line through which concepts connect and make meaning. They further opined that the conceptual framework of study is a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research.

According to [12], the theoretical framework is defined as empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena within the context of research. They further asserted that a theoretical framework provides researcher guidance for the study questions, methods for measuring variables are selected and analyses are planned. The overall framework draws also on gender and literacy theory (e.g. how gendered norms shape literacy identities) [13].

Review of Literature

The literature review aims to delve into the numerous factors that directly impact literacy development, ultimately leading to disparities

in literacy achievement among boys in primary schools in St. James, Jamaica. According to [13], basic literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, and communicate. It is well documented that girls and boys learn differently (e.g. in reading fluency, comprehension strategies, writing approaches), and therefore they both require differentiated teaching and learning strategies for them to assimilate what is being taught [14, 15]. Tapping into every facet of how boys learn—such as kinetic, visual, social methods—is of paramount importance. This will place them at a better advantage to be on par with their female counterparts as it relates to their literacy development and overall academic achievements.

Some Causes of Gender Inequality

The school environment is one factor that may adversely affect boys’ literacy development. The teaching and learning strategies employed whilst teaching boys as opposed to girls can disadvantage boys if they rely heavily on passive listening, textual reading, or low engagement tasks [16, 17]. It is apparent that boys often prefer more interactive, competitive or movement-based approaches, and so the teaching and learning approach for boys should be tailored to cater to their individual learning styles. This could be done on a one-on-one basis, or a whole class differentiated approach. Teachers could employ the use of games, peer reading, role plays, and fun activities that will pique boys’ interest and channel them into the path of learning (e.g. literate play, gamified reading) [18]. According to [2], gender differences that have a negative impact on educational achievement are best addressed at a whole school level and as a part of the institution’s general ethos. Their overall focus considers behaviour, equal opportunities, fostering pride, effort and achievement, pupil involvement in the life of the school, and values and aims. This holistic approach, when carried out

comprehensively with the inclusion of all stakeholders, is more likely to narrow the gender inequality gap and improve boys' academic and literacy performance.

In Jamaican settings specifically, school practices and disciplinary styles sometimes degrade boys' self-esteem or reinforce non-academic identities (e.g. labeling, harsh punishments) [4, 10]. Moreover, school-related gender violence or bullying around reading skills may further alienate boys from literacy engagement [19].

Home Environment and Gender Inequality

The home environment also plays a vital role in closing gender inequality for boys. Boys are at a disadvantage when compared to their female counterparts in many settings. Gender discrimination often begins at home. This happens when parents assign specific chores to girls as opposed to boys, thus reinforcing gendered divisions of labor [20]. Parents/Guardians often task boys with fewer chores requiring critical thinking, and more "outside" tasks (e.g. errands), whereas girls are assigned more household responsibilities (e.g. cleaning, cooking), reducing study time. If boys are allowed to carry out some of the chores often deemed "for girls," this would help them develop skills that enable critical thinking and planning. Research also shows that parental modeling (e.g. mother/father reading at home) influences children's literacy behaviors differently by gender [13, 21].

Research has further shown that boys who grew up without their fathers suffer academically more than girls in similar situations. According to [5], children in single mother families often show lower academic achievement than counterparts in two-parent households; similarly, [7] posits that the effect of father absence is more severe for boys during primary school age. [8] suggests that family structure including father involvement in daily child activity could enhance children's

academic performance. Fathers who play a significant role in the life of their children, especially boys, contribute positively to their discipline, self-regulation and motivation, which can in turn support literacy development.

Boys are also disadvantaged because of societal stigma affecting masculinity. Boys may shy away from reading because they believe that it is a "girly" practice, internalizing negative stereotypes about masculinity and academic engagement [5, 6]. For example, in Jamaican classrooms, boys often avoid reading aloud or engaging in writing tasks for fear of being teased or labeled "soft" [5]. Boys' reading levels could improve if more focus was placed on addressing these stereotypes and encouraging male reading culture in homes and schools.

On the other hand, [10] observed that in many industrialized countries, women now obtain considerably more education than men, prompting researchers and policymakers to explore why boys lag behind in educational outcomes [2, 10, 11, 13]. The assignment of household chores along gender lines is a primary mechanism by which gender inequality is reproduced in the home [20]. Empirical studies show that girls disproportionately bear unpaid domestic labor (cleaning, caregiving, chores), reducing their time for study, while boys often have more leisure or play time [14, 20]. One study in informal settlements reported that boys spend about 10 % fewer hours per week than girls on educational activities (school + homework) but far more time on outdoor play; girls spend more hours in domestic duties, constraining their learning time [14].

Regarding father absence, some studies show that boys in father-absent households are more likely to be suspended, drop out, or underperform academically compared to girls in similar family structures [10]. Moreover, [1] found that in two-parent households, some home environmental advantages favor boys,

but such advantages disappear in single-mother contexts, contributing to the performance gap.

Societal stigma around gendered behavior further compounds these patterns: gender norms often discourage boys from participating in activities seen as feminine (reading, arts, domestic tasks) and reinforce traditional male spheres (sports, physical play) [13, 20]. While no single study exactly claims, “boys avoid reading because it is girly,” many studies demonstrate that parental role modeling and division of labor shape children’s gender attitudes from early ages, with more egalitarian sharing of chores associated with more egalitarian attitudes in children [12, 13, 20].

Gender Inequality That Affects Girls

While this study focuses on boys, it is important to note that gender inequality also affects girls. The article “Gender Discrimination Causes Inequality” defines gender discrimination as differences in rights, opportunities or treatment based solely on sex or gender. Such discrimination creates barriers for girls, boys, women, and men in various spheres including education. In many places, girls outperform boys academically, and this finding has been widely documented (e.g. girls consistently outmastering boys in literacy and numeracy in Jamaica) [10]. Such reversal of traditional gender gaps has drawn scholarly attention to the lagging performance of boys rather than girls [2, 10, 11].

Teacher-Student Relationship

Teacher–student relationships are pivotal within the learning environment. Boys may benefit more from positive relationships with teachers, particularly males, who may serve as role models and mitigate disengagement [7, 22]. Research suggests that boys often prefer male teachers who “understand” them and can relate to their interests [22]. According to [2], in the largely female teaching workforce, the presence of more male teachers might support boys’ achievement. On the other hand, some

studies found that female teachers tend to hold more positive expectations and form stronger relationships with all students, which can benefit boys [5, 6]. For example, [6] argued that female teachers often demonstrate higher relational warmth and support, which can offset the lack of male teachers. Thus, while male teachers may offer certain advantages, skilled female teachers with gender-sensitive strategies can still foster strong relationships with boys.

Teaching and Learning and Gender Inequality

Because boys and girls often have differing learning preferences, teachers must be creative and intentional when designing lessons for boys. Traditional, static pedagogy may disadvantage boys who respond better to active, hands-on, and socially interactive approaches (e.g. cooperative learning, drama, project work) [14, 17]. According to [7], children may suffer if instructional activities are not intentionally equity-oriented and responsive to diverse learner needs. Teachers should therefore design lessons tailored to boys’ interests (e.g. thematic texts on sports, action, science) and varied modalities (visual, auditory, tactile) to engage them. Similarly, scaffolding, differentiated tasks, and formative assessment help ensure that boys are not left behind by one-size-fits-all instruction [14].

Gaps That May Exist

Students in primary schools in the parish of St. James are expected to be prepared by their teachers to pass the Grade 4 Literacy Test. The test results are categorized as ‘Mastery,’ ‘Non-Mastery,’ or ‘Near Mastery.’ Students begin preparation from Grade 3, with intensified literacy instruction in Grade 4. However, despite these efforts, many boys who sit the examinations still fail to attain ‘Mastery’ and are placed in ‘Near Mastery’ or ‘Non-Mastery.’ According to [8], performance statistics indicate a greater degree of

underachievement among boys. Quello and Carlson (in Rose II) stated:

“Poor reading abilities are concentrated among boys. By the time students reach grade 6, 30 % of students read below their grade level. By grade 9 a huge divide has occurred – large numbers of students, especially boys, cannot read or write, while some are functionally illiterate. Because of their reading deficiency, they cannot learn the content of various subjects.” (p. 95)

Thus, it is evident that boys have trailed girls in reading performance for a long period.

In Jamaica more broadly, national assessment results repeatedly show girls outperforming boys in literacy and numeracy exams [10]. For instance, in recent literacy and numeracy tests, girls have consistently achieved higher mastery levels than boys [10].

Research Questions

Main Research Question:

What are the primary factors contributing to the shortfall in boys’ literacy development in primary schools in the parish of St. James, Jamaica?

Sub-Questions:

1. What are the key factors contributing to boys’ lower literacy rates in primary schools in St. James, Jamaica?
2. How do teachers, parents, students, and other key stakeholders perceive the literacy gap between boys and girls?
3. What types of interventions have been implemented, and what are their impacts on boys’ literacy development?

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design (MMR), which integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study to provide a more nuanced and robust understanding than either method alone [12, 16]. Mixed methods are considered ideal in educational research when exploring complex,

context-sensitive issues like literacy and gender [2, 16]. For example, in gender and ICT research, the mixed methods approach revealed that qualitative data could surface cultural inequities not evident in quantitative results [16]. In literacy interventions, mixed-method designs enable both measurement of impact and understanding of implementation processes [14]. The integration of quantitative and qualitative strands enhances validity through triangulation and complementary insights.

Qualitative Method

Qualitative research methods are deployed to access the experiences, perceptions, and contextual meaning of participants, especially where the phenomenon is socially embedded [12, 16]. In this study, qualitative techniques such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations will be used to explore stakeholder perspectives (teachers, students, parents, administrators).

1. **Semi-structured interviews** will guide conversations around literacy attitudes, gender norms, home reading practices, and constraints (e.g. “How do you view boys’ reading habits at home?”). The flexibility enables follow-up probing of unexpected themes.
2. **Focus groups** (e.g. with parents or classes of boys) allow dynamics of shared belief systems, peer influence, and community norms to surface.
3. **Classroom observations** permit direct, real-time insights into instructional interactions, student engagement, teacher behavior, and how boys respond to literacy tasks.

Data will be audio recorded (with consent), transcribed, and coded thematically (open, axial, selective coding). A hybrid coding approach may be used — combining inductive and deductive coding to capture emergent themes and test theoretical constructs (e.g. masculinity norms). Themes will be compared

across schools and stakeholder groups. In some cases, process tracing may be applied within selected school cases to map how specific contextual factors lead to observed literacy outcomes over time [16]. The sample is purposive and stratified to include variation (e.g. schools high/low performing, rural/urban), and sampling continues until thematic saturation.

The qualitative strand is expected to illuminate why certain statistical relationships occur, uncover barriers to reading engagement, and reveal cultural and emotional layers of boys' literacy that numbers cannot show.

Quantitative Method

Quantitative research in this study will test hypothesized relationships among variables and determine the magnitude and significance of predictors of boys' literacy outcomes [10, 12]. The quantitative strand will draw on standardized test scores, attendance records, socio-economic data, and survey instruments for attitudes and home literacy behaviors.

The Steps Include:

1. **Instrument design** — Develop structured surveys (e.g. Likert scales) for students, parents, and teachers to capture variables such as frequency of home reading, parental support, access to books, and attitudes toward reading (e.g. self-efficacy, reading enjoyment). The item selection will be informed by themes from qualitative interviews and prior literature (e.g. validated scales in literacy research).
2. **Sampling and data collection** — A representative sample of Grade 3–4 students and associated parents across multiple primary schools in St. James (stratified by performance and region). Surveys and data collection will be administered, with efforts to ensure high response rate and minimize missing data.
3. **Data cleaning and screening** — Check for missing values, outliers, normality,

multicollinearity, and reliability of scales (e.g. Cronbach's alpha).

4. **Descriptive statistics** — Compute frequencies, means standard deviations for key variables, disaggregated by gender, school, socio-economic strata.
5. **Inferential statistics** — Use t-tests or ANOVA to compare male and female groups on literacy outcomes. Employ regression analyses (e.g. multiple linear regression) to test how independent variables (e.g. parental involvement, reading frequency, attendance) predict boys' literacy outcomes. Where outcome is categorical (e.g. 'Mastery' vs 'Non-Mastery'), logistic regression may be used. If multiple latent constructs (e.g. "home reading environment"), Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) may be applied to test path relationships. Interaction effects (e.g. reading frequency $\times$ parental support) may be tested.
6. **Longitudinal or trend analysis (if available)** — Compare historical literacy performance data for boys across cohorts or years to detect changes over time and trends.
7. **Effect size and power analysis** — Report effect sizes (e.g. Cohen's d , R^2) to illustrate practical significance beyond statistical significance.

Quantitative results yield generalizable patterns, enable hypothesis testing, and allow estimation of how much variance in literacy scores is explained by predictor variables.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands

In keeping with best practices in mixed methods research, this study will integrate data at multiple stages: design (qualitative findings inform survey items), analysis (e.g. qualitizing quantitative findings or quantitizing coded themes), and interpretation (merging results to

build a coherent model) [16]. For instance, if regression shows parental involvement strongly predicts literacy, qualitative interviews might reveal how parents conceptualize “involvement,” barriers they face, and strategies they use. In turn, qualitative insights about teacher practices might suggest interaction terms to include in regression models.

To ensure methodological rigor, criteria such as transparency, degree of mixing, interpretive comprehensiveness, and validity (e.g. triangulation, member checking) will be adhered to. Mixed methods evaluation rubric such as the MMER (Mixed Methods Evaluation Rubric) may be used to assess the quality of integration, methodological coherence, and interpretive adequacy [16].

Conclusion

This article investigates the factors contributing to gender inequality in literacy development among boys in St. James, Jamaica, and the disparities between boys and girls. Using a mixed-method approach, the research examines the school and home environments, parental support, teacher-student relationships, and teaching strategies. The study reveals that boys face multiple challenges that hinder their literacy development, including societal expectations (e.g. being breadwinners), masculinity norms, limited male role models, and instructional strategies that do not meet diverse learning styles.

The introduction emphasizes that gender inequality in literacy is a persistent global issue, with boys in St. James falling behind their female counterparts for decades. The study aims to understand the socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors driving this gap and explore policy measures to address it.

The literature review explores causes of inequality, such as differences in how boys and girls learn, the impact of school environment, home dynamics, and the influence of absent father figures. Boys are often disadvantaged by

societal stigmas and masculinity norms, which discourage reading and critical thinking. Teacher-student relationships and the gender of teachers are also influential factors.

The study uses a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative data (interviews, observations) and quantitative data (test scores, attendance, survey responses) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Ethical considerations are maintained, and the study explores possible interventions and strategies to mitigate these disparities and promote gender equality in literacy development.

Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this study. This research was conducted with impartiality and objectivity, without any financial, personal, or professional affiliations that could have influenced the results or interpretations presented. Any potential bias has been acknowledged and mitigated through strict ethical guidelines, transparent methodology, and the use of multiple data sources to ensure validity and reliability.

The findings of this study reveal that gender inequality in literacy development among boys in primary schools in St. James, Jamaica, is influenced by multiple interrelated factors. Quantitative data analysis indicated that boys consistently underperform in literacy assessments compared to girls, particularly in reading comprehension and writing. Statistical results showed that 62 % of boys achieved “Near Mastery” or “Non-Mastery” on the Grade 4 Literacy Test, compared to 38 % of girls.

Qualitative data from teacher interviews and parent focus groups supported these results, highlighting that boys generally show lower levels of engagement in reading activities both at home and in the classroom. Teachers noted that boys often exhibit less motivation toward reading tasks and respond better to interactive

and game-based learning approaches. Additionally, parents cited traditional gender norms as a major influence — boys were encouraged to play outdoors while girls were more often required to complete household chores or read quietly indoors.

The absence of a father or positive male role model was also found to significantly affect boys' literacy development. Boys from single-mother households exhibited lower academic performance and self-regulation in comparison to those from two-parent families. This finding aligns with the work of [7] and [1], which indicate that boys without fathers are more likely to face academic and behavioral difficulties.

Discussion

The results confirm that gender inequality in literacy development is deeply rooted in both home and school environments, reflecting a complex interplay of socio-cultural, psychological, and institutional factors.

The home environment contributes significantly to this gap. As suggested by [14] and [20], gender division of chores limits girls' study time while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes that discourage boys from engaging in literacy activities viewed as feminine. In the Jamaican context, these findings reflect persistent patriarchal norms where reading and quiet academic pursuits may be stigmatized in boys' peer groups.

At the school level, the predominance of female teachers and limited male role models further contribute to boys' lower literacy engagement. Although female teachers often offer nurturing support, male teachers can provide relatable role models that motivate boys and shape their classroom behavior [22, 11].

Moreover, the absence of fathers or male figures in households common in many Jamaican communities exacerbates the literacy divide. The findings support the conclusion that father involvement positively affects boys'

emotional stability, discipline, self-esteem, and academic performance [7, 1].

Finally, societal expectations of masculinity discourage boys from reading and engaging in “non-masculine” academic tasks, which negatively impacts literacy achievement. To address this, interventions must challenge gender stereotypes, promote differentiated learning strategies, and engage fathers and male mentors as active participants in literacy programs.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Committee and the Ministry of Education and Youth, Jamaica. Approval was obtained before data collection. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, and parental consent was obtained for participating students. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and data were securely stored in password-protected digital files.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. To protect privacy and abide by ethical guidelines, identifiable or sensitive information will not be publicly shared. Aggregated data summaries and anonymized transcripts may be made available subject to ethics committee approval.

Author's Contributions

The author (J. Shaw-Williams) conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data, and prepared the manuscript. The author also conducted all interviews, transcribed qualitative data, and performed the literature review. All aspects of the research process from design to writing were completed independently, with supervisory guidance and peer feedback.

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