Boys in Belize: Trends of the Caribbean Men

A Look at the Emerging Decline of Boys’ Participation in Secondary Schools

Joanna S. Sanborn
Harvard University Graduate School of Education
Joanna_Sanborn@gse.harvard.edu

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"There are 4th and 6th formers (secondary and tertiary school graduates) in jail- education is not worth much."

The teachers and school officials give "too much rass (meaning harassment)."

"The Ministry only caters to certain people- no free education exists right now."

"There's a strict dress code - need to cut the hair, wear clothes tucked in, etc."

---Young men in Belize expressing skepticism while explaining why they did not attend secondary school, January, 2001

Primary schooling has been free and mandatory for many years, while the government has only recently (since 1993) provided free tuition to secondary school students. Despite this assistance effort, only 42 percent of potential students currently attend secondary school, and 64 percent of those students finish. Boys are less likely than girls to enter secondary school, and those who do attend have higher repetition and drop-out rates. This problem is a growing concern to a country with more than 50 percent of the population reported being under 18 years of age. Coupled with high unemployment rates, a lack of recreational facilities and high teenage pregnancy and HIV infection rates, the future outlook is not good for these young men. This paper attempts to understand the declining male participation in the secondary school system in Belize, paying particular attention to Caribbean trends.

1 Transcript of interview by Andrea Winkler, Dangriga, Belize, January 2001.
This paper will briefly provide background information on Belize, define the problem by highlighting different perspectives, and examine factors contributing to the declining male participation in secondary schools, including trends from other Caribbean nations. Then, this paper will conclude with a discussion of policy implications for the Planning Unit of the Ministry of Education and Sports.

**Background on Belize**

Belize, the only English-speaking country in Central America, is bordered by Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the west and south and the Caribbean Sea on the east. Although located in Central America, Belize more closely resembles and tends to have stronger connections to its Caribbean neighbors. Formally known as British Honduras, Belize gained its independence in 1981 and operates as a stable parliamentary democracy. Belize is a small, developing nation populated by various ethnic groups, including Creole, Mestizo, Garifuna and Maya. Although English is the official language of Belize, it is the second language of most people, their first language being Creole, Spanish, Garifuna or Maya. Its economy, which has grown consistently since Independence, relies on agricultural exports, tourism and foreign aid. There are high unemployment and underemployment levels, as well as severe skill shortages in all areas.

The school system in Belize is modeled after the British primary schools and functions under a church-state system. The first schools in Belize (around 1816) were denominational schools, and initially, the government did not provide financial support. In the mid 1850s, however, the government began to support the schools, and in 1881, the

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church-state education system formally began. The Government established the Education Department to oversee the school system, but the clergymen would serve as managers of the schools, and handle staffing issues. Currently, the churches still manage the primary schools, and the government provides most of the support for building maintenance and teachers’ salaries. The government provides almost complete support and handles staffing for the secondary schools.

**Gender Disparity in Secondary School in Belize**

An equal ratio of males and females enter primary school, but this changes when they enter secondary school. As mentioned previously, a small percentage of age-eligible students enter secondary school and even fewer complete secondary school. Approximately 23 percent of the population aged 11 to 20 was enrolled in secondary school for the 1998-1999 school year. The Ministry of Education reports that since 1993, females have dominated secondary school enrollment. In the 1998-1999 school year, the male to female population distribution was 47 percent to 53 percent. Not only are boys entering high school in lower numbers, they are also repeating grades and dropping out more frequently than girls. The 1996-1997 school year shows 10.4 percent of boys and 8.4 percent of girls repeating, and 12.4 percent of males and 9.3 percent of females dropping out. This high repetition rate also results in a disproportionate number of over-aged males in secondary school. In 1998-1999, 26.6 percent of males were over-

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5 Ibid
7 Ibid, 16.
8 Ibid, 21.
aged, while only 21.6 percent of females were over 17 years of age. Admittedly, the gender bias in Belize has not reached the extreme levels it has in some Caribbean societies, but it is documented as an emerging trend. The Ministry of Education, UNICEF Belize and other outside agencies recognize the growing gender disparity. Although not yet officially acknowledged as a problem, the implications certainly have the potential to affect all of Belizean society. Once they are no longer part of the educational system, this population of young men faces many obstacles living in this small, developing country.

The UNICEF office in Belize reports that the young people are facing a crisis situation with high unemployment, a lack of recreational facilities, high teenage pregnancy and HIV infection rates, as well as the increased incidence of crime and violence. In 1996, the unemployment level was 32 percent for persons aged 14 to 19 years and the government, which admits there exists a lack of recreational opportunities, is involved in efforts to increase programs for young people. A 1993 study by the Belize Family Life Association found that almost one-third of all women aged 19 to 20 had given birth at least once. A correlation may exist between the high teenage pregnancy rate and large number of underachieving boys. Since 1986, HIV/AIDS has become widespread in Belize, making it the country with the highest (per capita) prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Central America. Crime has been steadily on the rise in Belize, with a large proportion of the offenders being young males. A 1991 report by the Belize Crimes Commission cites

9 Although it would be helpful to also examine performance scores, available test scores were not separated by gender.
11 Ibid, 108
12 Ibid, 115.
13 Ibid, 53.
school dropouts and unemployment as underlying causes of the increased crime rate.\textsuperscript{14} The combination of these factors creates a problematic situation for young males who are non-participants in the education system. Clearly, these and other issues facing youth today in Belize exacerbate the problem of declining male participation in secondary schools.

\textbf{Caribbean Trends in Gender Disparity}

This problem is certainly not unique to Belize. In numerous Caribbean countries, girls are surpassing boys in school achievement and participation rates. The 1999 State of the World’s Children report states that in contrast to the rest of the developing world, “boys (in the Caribbean) are doing significantly worse than girls at school: Fewer boys pass the Common Entrance Exam (into secondary school) and they are more likely to drop out of school”.\textsuperscript{15} Educational research and statistics from many Caribbean countries shows that “in secondary schools, females are more likely to sit the Caribbean Examination Council examinations and to achieve higher results on these examinations than males... (in addition) females perform better than males within classes and all subjects in Trinidad”.\textsuperscript{16} In Jamaica, as well, females outnumber and outperform males in almost all types of secondary schooling, including technical and vocational high schools.\textsuperscript{17} This gender disparity in secondary school exists despite males having a higher proportion to female ratio in the population, suggesting that boys also have a higher rate of dropping out

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 117.
than girls.\textsuperscript{18} Looking beyond secondary school, the gender gap widens in enrolment at the University of the West Indies where women constituted 62 percent of the population in 1990-1991.\textsuperscript{19} Clearly, this gender difference extends beyond the secondary school years and actually increases at the highest degree levels. This emerging gender disparity in Belize mirrors existing problems in other Caribbean nations. In order to examine factors contributing to the problem, it is again useful to turn to Caribbean trends and perspectives on gender bias in secondary schools and in society.

Factors Contributing to Declining Male Participation

While there are numerous factors contributing to the problem, this paper will focus on three in particular which seem to be especially applicable to Belize. The problem of declining male participation in the education system can be partially explained by theories involving patterns of early socialization in the Caribbean, including: 1) male marginalization 2) school environment and home background 3) sex role socialization.

The Theory of Male Marginalization

The first of these, male marginalization, is founded upon the idea that society is organized on the “basis of place: the relative positions and relationships of individuals and groups with respect to power, resources, status, belief and culture.”\textsuperscript{20} The place theory, albeit widely debated, accepts the idea that inequality is inherent because all groups of people cannot have the same positions and relationships in a society. Dr. Errol Miller, Professor of Teacher Education at the University of the West Indies, Mona, offers the place theory of male marginalization to explain the underachievement of boys in the

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textsuperscript{18} & ibid, 111. \\
\textsuperscript{19} & ibid, 112. \\
\textsuperscript{20} & ibid, 12. \\
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Caribbean. Dr. Miller, using Jamaica as a case study, argues that changes made in the beginning of the twentieth century, which favored females in the field of primary school teaching, had long-term impacts on the structure of opportunities available to boys and girls in the education system. At the time in Jamaica, teacher training colleges were the only opportunities that blacks had for higher education and upward social mobility, and thus, were extremely important institutions. In 1899, the church-state education system in Jamaica was restructured to allow more women access to the teaching profession. This shift did indeed take place, as evidenced by the change in the proportion of female teachers from 22 percent in 1899 to 88 percent in 1990. Dr. Miller asserts that this restructuring made by the colonial government was a result of policies meant to “neutralize the potential development of a group of educated black men, keep black men as a cheap source of labour in the productive sector and afford the black woman the status of social equal”, as opposed to the black man. The government achieved this by providing more teacher training colleges for women than men, creating incentives for schools to hire female teachers and making female teacher salaries equal with men. Dr. Miller asserts that by reducing boys’ opportunities for upward social mobility, boys’ participation in the education system decreased. In contrast, girls’ participation in the school system increased as they had more opportunities for social advancement. Along with this reduced participation in the education system came a widening literacy gap between men and women. Whereas men used to have slightly higher rates of literacy, figures from 1987 showed that 77 percent of men and 87 percent of women were

21 Ibid, 96.
22 Ibid, 98.
Miller concludes that the "long-term impact of the training and employment policies implemented ... was to shift the patterns of participation and performance among Blacks so that girls participated more and achieved better results in the school system than boys."24

In the case of Jamaica, Dr. Miller's marginalization theory asserts that the colonial rulers structured the system to include institutional biases against black men, resulting in declining male participation in the school system. Using the place theory as an explanation, this occurred because inequality in society is inherent and some groups therefore, must be subordinate to other groups. In the former British colonies, the ruling minority men used institutional racism, as an instrument of marginalization in this case, to give themselves power, wealth and status, which they sought to maintain over the black man.25 Former British colonies in the Caribbean continue to deal with the long-term effects of policies made by the former ruling elite, one of the effects being the decline of male participation in the school system. Arguably, the place theory of marginalization could be applied to explain the emerging gender disparities in some regions of Belize, which was a British colony up until 1981 and may only be beginning to observe the long-term effects.

**Home Background and School Environment**

Some would argue that the theory of male marginalization is not adequate to explain the differences in school achievement. Instead, Dr. Peter Kutnick, Faculty of Education at the University of Brighton, suggests that school-based and home factors

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23 Ibid, 101.
24 Ibid, 102.
25 Ibid, 126.
must be included in the complex explanation of gender-based achievement differences. Dr. Kutnick, using recent research from Trinidad, Barbados and St. Vincent, found that home background and school environment were important predictors of school achievement. The first of these, home background, encompasses several factors which were highly correlated with achievement. Children who attended preschool, lived with both parents in the home, and whose parents were in professional occupations had higher achievement scores, both on classroom tests and national exams. In addition, students who received help from their parents on homework were more likely to have higher achievement scores. Another factor highly correlated with achievement was the presence of a father, as single parent or spouse, in the home. These factors explained more of the achievement differences in the Caribbean than gender alone.

Dr. Kutnick performed case studies in Trinidad in which he observed classroom interactions and children’s behaviors in secondary schools. As a result, he found gender differences in teachers’ and children’s actions in the school environment. Kutnick stated that all teachers used the traditional manner of instruction, which involves a clear set of rules and expectations and teacher-directed instruction. He reports that “teachers did choose girls to participate with greater frequency than boys, they were more likely to give positive and supportive feedback to girls than boys, and teachers were less likely to notice misbehaviour by girls than boys”. He observed that boys adapted their behaviors to become non-participants in classroom interactions, whereas girls were more likely to develop support networks with other girls in the classroom. Boys became non-participants either by being quiet and subsequently ignored, or by outright refusing to

26 Kutnick, 75.
participate and consequently "shamed in front of the class".  

In addition, teachers did not provide opportunities for boys and girls to work together, thus discouraging co-operative learning between students of varying levels. Overall, the traditional methods of instruction seen in the case study did not encourage participation or provide support to boys in the classroom. School environment, coupled with home background, may be important factors contributing to male underachievement. This more comprehensive look at achievement would certainly be helpful in understanding the complex problem of declining male participation in Belize, which shares many school-based and home factors characteristic of the countries in this study.

**Sex Role Socialization**

Some argue that another factor, sex role socialization, partially explains the underachievement of boys in the Caribbean. Males grow up with strict views on gender roles and oftentimes this sex role socialization tells them that school does not fit into the idea of being male in the Caribbean. Boys don't value education the same way that girls do. Although much formal research has not been done to explore this issue, personal accounts and interviews with people in the Caribbean support the idea that boys are socialized to view education differently than girls. A teacher from St. Vincent and the Grenadines said, "the boys don't utilize education in the same way." She went on to say, "much of it has to do with image. They don't want to be seen as a nerd, and a nerd is someone who works hard at school." Another teacher from Barbados explained that boys "also prefer to be seen not working. It's not popular to be male and studious. It's

27 Ibid, 76.
28 Ibid, 77.
not macho".30 A 17-year-old from Dominica explained that he skipped classes because "I never wanted nobody to call me a sissy".31 Some feel that this change in male achievement is due to shifts in the economy and job market. In expressing opinions about secondary education, males commonly do not see the value in attaining higher education, often citing financial factors, and instead place emphasis on becoming part of the labor force. They feel that secondary education would not affect their access to the labor market. Young men who were interviewed in Belize had the following comments about why they did not attend secondary school:

"The diploma ain’t worth nothing."

"The diploma is not the same as a trade. Learn a lee trade and beat your own business."

"You can have an education, but can’t get a job".

"Use the money (that could be used for school) to buy chickens and see profit".

"So much money you di spend in school".32

This problem is aggravated by the overwhelming lack of male teachers in the school system.33 As mentioned previously, Jamaica’s teaching force is predominantly female and in Belize, although the gender distribution of secondary school teachers is almost equal, less than one-third of the primary school teachers are male. This absence of male role models certainly does not lessen the negative message that boys are receiving about the value of school. They do not see the school system as an instrument of change or indicator of upward social mobility in their lives. Boys grow up with strict ideas about gender roles and this includes not placing as much emphasis or value on education as girls

30 Ibid, 58.
31 Ibid, 58.
32 Transcript of interviews by Andrea Winkler, Dangriga, Belize, January 4, 2001.
do. It seems that for the time being, sex role socialization will continue to affect how boys view education in the Caribbean. The idea of gender role socialization does help to explain male underachievement in the Belizean school system and the social problems of being a male in that culture hinders boys' success in school participation and achievement.

These three factors, male marginalization, home background and school environment and sex role socialization, are powerful and meaningful attempts to help explain the declining male participation in secondary schools in Belize. Certainly, there are other factors that are not mentioned in this paper which would provide an even more complete account of males' declining participation and achievement in school. However, these three ideas do present us with a fairly comprehensive view of factors which affect male participation and achievement in schools, and are important considerations in a discussion of policy implications.

**Policy Implications**

Belize has the opportunity to use educational planning and policies to address the emerging gender disparities in the education system. Belize must develop long-term goals which speak to the issue of gender bias throughout the school system. If the current situation is a result of deliberate actions, it will take similar deliberate actions to change the situation. The following policy ideas are only a few that the country should consider:

Seek to achieve a balanced distribution of male and female teachers in the primary school system by providing scholarships or incentives to males.

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34 Miller, 126.
35 Some of these are drawn from Errol Miller's writings
Allocate an equal number of places for males and females in secondary schools in order to eliminate competition between the sexes for school places.

Consider single-sex classrooms or schools to eliminate the bias in classroom interactions.\(^{36}\)

Increase the number of vocational/technical secondary schools to increase access and provide relevant training for labor force participation.

Currently, the Ministry of Education in Belize is working with the World Bank on the Belize Education Sector Reform Program. Goals of this project include increasing access to secondary schools and to make secondary education more relevant to labor market demands.\(^{37}\) A component of this project is to build additional vocational/technical secondary schools in the country. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Education reported that although this project is not meant to specifically target male participation, "certainly the project will address the issue of accessibility, which may increase the number of boys in secondary schools."\(^ {38}\)

Belize now has the advantage of recognizing the emerging gender disparities and looking to other Caribbean nations for help in developing strategies to alleviate the problem. Educational planning and policies can transform the system so that both boys and girls reach high achievement and participation levels in all Belizean secondary schools.

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36 For research on single-sex classrooms, refer to Haag (1998) and Riordan (1990).
Appendix A: Chronology of Relevant Events

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belize</th>
<th>Caribbean (Jamaica)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1836 Teachers’ Colleges</td>
<td>Teachers’ Colleges established</td>
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<tr>
<td>1838 Emancipation</td>
<td>Emancipation</td>
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<tr>
<td>1899 Policies mark beginning of shift from male to female teaching majority</td>
<td>Policies mark beginning of shift from male to female teaching majority</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910-15 Compulsory Primary Education Ordinance passed</td>
<td>Shift in elementary enrolment that favors girls</td>
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<td>1921 Shift in literacy rate to favor females</td>
<td>Shift in literacy rate to favor females</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954-65 Teachers’ Colleges established</td>
<td>Majority of female teachers; slight majority of female students in secondary school</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981 Independence from Britain</td>
<td>Free secondary education provided by government; shift in secondary enrolment that favors females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 Slight shift in literacy rate to favor females</td>
<td>Majority of female teachers; majority of female students in secondary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 Majority of female teachers; slight majority of female students in secondary school</td>
<td>Majority of female teachers; majority of female students in secondary schools</td>
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