

Secondary school learners' understanding of Namibian boys' underachievement and under-participation in education

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Abstract

To understand the manifestations of gender disparity in academic achievement between boys and girls, we conducted the Namibian boys' underachievement in education study. In this article we present data from this study on secondary school learners' understanding of the disparity. Using a pragmatic parallel mixed methods research design, systematic and criterion sampling techniques, we collected data by administering structured questionnaires to 4659 learners. We also conducted focus group discussions with purposefully selected learners. Some boys performed worse than girls and under-participated in education because they withdrew from learning activities, believed they could do without education, they were not interested in education, dropped out of school and did not actively participate in learning activities. Several parents undermined their sons' educational achievement during socialization by giving them too much freedom to roam while strictly controlling the behaviour of their daughters; allowing their sons to abuse alcohol and drugs; not giving their sons responsibilities at home; not being concerned of their sons' education, misconduct, and welfare. We have recommended that schools should establish boys' academic intrinsic achievement motivation programmes by addressing their dysfunctional motivational attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Such programmes should also attend to the boys' adverse external motivational factors such as negative peer pressure and lack of supportive family and community environments.

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Background

Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (UN 1981) stipulates that women should not be discriminated against in education at all levels and in all contexts. Consistent with this, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) urged all state parties to recognize the right of all children to education. However, it was recognized that the girl child was discriminated against in education and in other spheres of her life. She needed targeted support to enable her to access education and remain in school. This goal was clarified in the *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (UN, 1996). In this report, specific strategic objectives were set out to eliminate obstacles to the girl child's education. In 2000, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) was established to facilitate this support at the global and national levels.

Zimba, (2015, noted that at the continental level, African girls were supported in education through the instruments of the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)*, *Forum for African women Educationalists (FAWE)*, *African Union Gender Policy (2009)*, *African Charter on human and people's rights (1981)*, *the Solemn declaration on gender equality in Africa (2004)*, and *Continental Educational Strategy for Africa, 2016-2025 (2016)*. At the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region level, girls' education has been supported through the *SADC Protocol on gender and development (2008)*, and *the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer (2013)*. At the national level, Namibian girls' education has been supported by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, the Forum for African women Educationalists- the Namibian chapter, (FAWENA), and through the Gender Mainstreaming in Education Programme.

One main consequence of this support is that girls' educational attainments in many countries of the world have drastically improved. Now, more boys than girls underperform on national examinations, and more boys than girls drop out school (EAP UNGEI, 2011; UNESCO, 2022a; Welmond and Gregory, 2021).

In the report, *A new generation: 25 years of efforts for gender equality in education*, UNESCO (2020, p.1), elaborates on this in the following findings:

- “Since 1995, the number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary school has risen by 180 million.
- Globally, equal numbers of girls and boys were enrolled in primary and secondary education in 2018, whereas in 1995 around 90 girls were enrolled for every 100 boys; significant increases in Southern Asia, and India in particular, drove this growth.
- Female enrolment *tripled in tertiary education* (emphasis added); at the country level, gender disparity at men’s expense exists in 74% of the countries with data.
- Between 1995 and 2018, the percentage of countries with gender parity in education rose from 56% to 65% in primary, from 45% to 51% in lower secondary and from 13% to 24% in upper secondary education.
- Among the 56 countries with data for 2000-18, primary completion rates improved faster for girls than boys. In one-third of the 86 countries with 2013-18 data, girls were more likely to complete primary school than boys.”

These current global trends (Reeves, 2022) are consistent with what has happened in Namibia where gender disparity in education has been reversed in favour of girls. More Namibian boys under-participate and under-achieve in education than Namibian girls (Education Management Information System, ‘EMIS’, Namibia, 2012-2023).

According to Welmond and Gregory, (2021), educational underachievement can be defined in three ways. Firstly, it can be understood as low levels of participation in education, including low enrolment and low retention. Secondly, it is understood as low student learning outcomes, and underperformance. Thirdly, it is understood as low levels of completion or graduation from educational programmes. According to these senses of educational underachievement, under-participation is characterized by low enrolment and low retention in education due to, for instance, dropping out of school and withdrawing from learning activities.

The 2017 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. During this period, more boys than girls dropped out of school because of failing at school, discipline problems, going to work, and because of demands from their parents that they leave school (EMIS, 2017). The indices of dropping out of school, lower enrolment rates from Grades 6 to 12, lower

promotion rates from grade to grade, lower survival rates and higher early school-leaving rates speak to the situation where several Namibian boys underachieve and under-participate (terms used as defined earlier) in primary and secondary schools. In South Africa, Hofmeyr (2022) reported that boys' lower progression rates from grade to grade accounted for a large variance that explained their educational underachievement.

This situation largely prevailed in 2019 during which year, it was reported as was the case in 2017, that "The lower survival rates of male learners...confirmed that in Namibia, on average, early school-leaving was a greater problem among male learners than among female learners" (EMIS, 2019, p.43).

Statement of the problem

The main purpose of the Namibian boys' underachievement and under-participation in education study was to find out what accounted for the disparity in academic performance between boys and girls and to explore factors which influenced the disparity. In this article, we report on data from this study which pertained to secondary school learners' understanding of the issue. We wished to find out these learners' views on:

- boys' work habits, and behaviour that might affect their achievement in education.
- why boys under-participated in education.
- available learning support that was provided to boys by schools and on
- boys' task behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and hopes that influenced their educational underachievement.

Literature review

Although underachievement could be attributed to lack of targeted learning support for boys' education in Namibia, research evidence on *causes* of this is scanty in the country. Nambala (2002, p.29) stated that "in the majority of the teachers' opinions, the dominant characteristics of girls are . . . that they have the patience, gentleness, zeal and affection necessary to maintain classroom order and to make other classmates' lives easier. On the other hand, boys are troublemakers, aggressive, domineering, and careless". Mapani and Mushaandja (2013) reported that amongst other things, boys dropped out of school in the Khomas Region due to negative peer pressure, lack of family/parental support, personal reasons (e.g. low motivation, perceived low ability, not valuing education, getting involved in sexual relationships early in life) and lack of teacher/school support.

Although research data on the topic on Namibia is scanty, the issue of underachievement and under-participation of boys in education has been a serious concern in many educational systems of the world for more than three decades. For instance, there has existed in countries as diverse as Australia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Mongolia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa the under-achievement of boys in education. In these and other countries, more boys than girls underperform on national examinations, more boys than girls drop out of school, and more boys than girls receive corporal punishment due to misbehaviour (East Asia and Pacific United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, 'EAP UNGEI', 2011; Jackson, Moore & Leon, 2010; UNESCO, 2012).

To illustrate the disparity in academic performance between boys and girls in Namibia, we assessed their comparative academic achievement in English Second Language, Mathematics, History, Biology, Geography, and Physical Science at grades 10 and 12 levels from 2016 to 2018. During the three-year examination period, grade 10 and grade 12 female learners performed better than male learners in English second language, Mathematics and History. In Biology, at grade 10, whereas female learners performed better than male learners, there was no difference in performance between male and female learners at the grade 12 level. In Geography, female learners obtained higher grades than male learners at grade 10 and 12 levels. In Physical Science, whereas female learners obtained higher grades than male learners at the grade 10 level, there appeared to be no significant difference in performance in the subject at the grade 12 level. From all this it appeared to us that gender-related differences in academic performance were school subject sensitive. However, female learners performed better than male learners in the majority of school subjects, including in Mathematics (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2018). This finding is consistent with the UNESCO (2020) finding that globally, girls perform better than boys in Reading and Mathematics. Research data in SADC countries of Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho and South Africa (Mungoo, 2017; UNESCO, 2022b; Bisseker, 2024; Zuze & Beku, 2019; Spaul & Nwabisa, 2019; SADC Gender Protocol Barometer, 2013) revealed that girls constantly performed better than boys in reading and numeracy. Buhl-Wiggers, Jones, & Thornton, (2021) found that in the East African Countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, the systematic female disadvantage in primary and secondary schooling was no longer the norm as girls outperformed boys in literacy and numeracy. This was also the case in Indonesia (Suryadarma, 2015) and in China (Lai, 2010).

Although the finding that Namibian girls outperformed Namibian boys in Mathematics at grades 10 and 12 levels is consistent with findings reported in South Africa by Zuze & Beku, (2019) and by Spaul & Nwabisa, (2019), it is inconsistent with the finding that the reverse was the case in Chile (Bharadwaj, et al., 2016) and in several other African countries (Dickerson, et al., 2015; Ng'ang'a, A., et. al., 2018). Reasons for the inconsistency in the findings are contextual. Zuze & Beku, (2019) reported that in South Africa, although their performance in Mathematics was better than that of boys, girls were not confident that they had the ability to do well in the subject. In Chile, Bharadwaj, et al., (2016) reported that the main reason boys outperformed girls in Mathematics was that girls held negative attitudes against the subject.

In terms of *socialization*, the thinking is that boys 'experience privileging' as they are not given as many domestic responsibilities as are girls (Jha, Bakshi & Faria, 2012). We report some data later in this article which support this assertion in the Namibian context. Girls are socialized and expected to perform multiple domestic chores at home. This experience teaches them to be self-disciplined, to multi-task and to learn how to manage time and take responsibility- ingredients that are essential in academic achievement (Jha, Bakshi and Faria, 2012).

Although this understanding would apply to many boys from many cultural backgrounds in Namibia, it is inadequate because it does not help us understand why some boys in the same socialization regimes excel as well as or even better than some girls. Some of our data indicated that this was the case because academic performance of some boys was largely influenced by the richness and supportive nature of their home environments. Kyei, (2021) has argued that in countries where girls face barriers to education such as sexual harassment and bullying by teachers and male learners, poor school sanitation (e.g. absence of flush toilets for girls), schooling costs, long distances to school, hostile school environments and unsupportive family conditions where girls were given excessive domestic chores to perform, boys on average, academically performed better than girls. According to Kyei (2021), data showed that this prevailed in countries such as Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. This is not the case in Namibia.

Consistent with Kyei, (2021)'s argument, Buhl-Wiggers, Jones, & Thornton, (2021) and UNSCO (2022b), related educational underachievement amongst boys and girls to labour force participation. Buhl-Wiggers, Jones, & Thornton, (2021) reported that the gender-gap in academic achievement in favour of girls was wider where boys' labour participation was

high, and it was narrower where girls' labour force participation was high. In tandem with this, UNESCO, (2022b) reported that in Lesotho where a pastoralist economy was practised, several boys either educationally underachieved or dropped out of school to become herd boys and look after livestock. Our data showed that some boys from pastoralist communities in Namibia were either discouraged from attending school by their parents or dropped out of school to look after livestock. Inconsistent with Kyei, (2021)'s argument, Zuze & Beku (2019) reported that in South Africa, school climate results revealed that boys were more likely to be bullied in every type of school but both boys and girls were at greater risk of being bullied at public schools. One main message that comes out of these varied research findings is that boys' educational underachievement is sensitive to social-cultural and socio-economic conditions. Thus, its manifestations should be contextualized.

The "*complacency*" explanation which stipulates that some boys under-achieve at educational tasks because they believe they can get jobs that do not require much education may apply to some Namibian boys. This would be the case because with a national youth unemployment rate of 39%, there were more unemployed girls than boys amongst the youth aged 15-34 years (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2014). To avoid unemployment, girls would be expected to work harder than boys, outperform them and remain in school. This may also mean that several boys dropped out of school to work and are counted as employed. In support of this, Salim, Ndanu and Achieng (2020) reported that several boys in a County in Kenya dropped out of primary school to sell a locally brewed beer and to transport passengers on motorcycles.

It is held that boys underachieve in education because they are perceived to be lazy and inattentive to their studies, low academic expectations are held for them, they are expected to be aggressive and undisciplined (Jackson, Moore & Leao, 2010; Jha, Menon & Chatterjee, 2017; Nambala, 2002). In addition, boys may under-participate in education because they receive more corporal punishment from teachers than their peers and so drop out of school (Jha, Bakshi and Faria 2012; Nambala 2002; Mapani and Mushaandja 2013; Froschl and Sprung 2012). We judged that these aspects might speak to gender stereotypes that undermine boys' educational achievement (Bisseker, 2024; Welmond and Gregory, 2021). For instance, Jha, Menon & Chatterjee, (2017, p. 25) reported that "when teachers expect boys to underperform, the boys do underperform, although the reverse is also true". It has also been reported in many OECD countries that teachers' and parents' gendered stereotypical expectations either undermined or supported boys' and girls' performance in

reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2015). Jha and Pouezevara (2016) reported that in Seychelles, teachers' expectations that boys perform and behave less well than girls, partially accounted for lack of interest in school among boys. This was due to stereotypes in which boys were perceived to be lazy, irresponsible and lacking in motivation.

Poor quality education might cause boys' under-achievement in education. SACMEQ (2011) reported data which implied that in Namibia, gender equality was promoted in learning achievement contexts where high quality education prevailed. In line with this, Zuze & Reddy (2014) reported that in South Africa, the finding that girls performed better than boys in reading was strongly linked to material and human resources availability in schools. When these resources improved in schools, girls performed better than boys in reading and in other school subjects. Consistent with this, UNESCO, (2022b) provided data showing that in Lesotho, boys' educational underachievement was associated with low quality of education characterized by limited resources for teaching, a shortage of qualified teachers and overcrowded classrooms.

In Namibia, one position is that there is no need to review national educational policies to meet targeted needs of boys who educationally underachieve because most educational policies in operation had been framed to consider the needs of all learners, including boys. For instance, policy documents such as *Towards Education for All: A development brief for education, culture and training (1993)*, *The Namibian Constitution, article 20 (1990)*, *The Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training (1999,2000)*, *Namibia National Plan of Action for EFA, 2001-2015(2000)* and *Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture Strategic Plan, 2017/18-2021/22 (2017)* were designed to cover the needs of all learners in the country. Because of this, they would not promote disparity in achievement between boys and girls. This position is inconsistent with Usui, et. al., (2024)'s finding that more gender-equal countries yield higher educational performance amongst girls.

When we reviewed other Namibian education policies that appeared to cover the needs of all learners equally, we discovered that they 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. Similarly, whereas the *Basic Education Act, 2020 (Act No. 3)* includes the prevention and management of learner

pregnancy, the 5th *National Development Plan (NDP5) (2017)* singled out girls and women for special support under its section on gender equality. Moreover, the *Namibia Vision2030: Policy Framework for Long Term National Development (2004, p.52)* identified the girl child as needing targeted support so that by the year 2030 “girls remain in school as long as boys, and women also participate in science”.

The point is that because the girl child was *specifically* paid attention to in these policy documents, it would not be out of the ordinary to ask that the Namibian boy child, due to his identified concerns, needs and peculiar challenges, could also be made a subject of targeted support in Namibia's educational policy goals and objectives. Such policy support could also focus on ways in which the Namibian government would transform teacher education and use research evidence when mitigating boys' educational underachievement (Jha, Menon & Chatterjee, 2017).

Although most policy programmes on motivation, mentoring and support that were meant to mitigate boys' and men's educational underachievement have been ineffective, vocationally oriented programmes have been effective as they appealed to boys and men. When put into programmes that did not appeal to them, boys and men lacked motivation and persistence, did not take advantage of opportunities given to them, and they did not set goals of achievement (Reeves, 2022). To mitigate all this, educational policy makers should promote programmes that work for boys and men- programmes that focus on their motivation, agency and aspiration.

According to Gevers and Fisher (2012) *Peer pressure* in South African schools influences boys' underachievement when boys find anti-social behaviour such as bullying, gang membership and violence, crime, drug and alcohol abuse more attractive than going to school. So, they drop out of school early or under-participate in education by simply 'goofing' off and 'lazing' around. Although school violence in Namibia is a problem in some schools, its association with boys' under-achievement in education has not yet been empirically ascertained (Burton, Leoschut & Popovac 2011). Other literature on this issue demonstrates how the peer culture can either enhance or undermine boys' education. According to Diprete and Buchmann (2013), the culture of the student body of a school affects students' academic orientation and academic performance. This is the case because when the adolescent culture rewards academic performance, students are motivated to invest in their studies to gain status with their peers and to please significant others such as parents and teachers (Welmond and Gregory, 2021).

The converse of this is that when the adolescent culture values non-academic outcomes more highly (e.g. sport, popularity or opposition to school authority) “and especially when the adolescent culture denigrates academic achievement, it draws energy away from students’ academic achievement. Thus, a highly motivated, achievement-oriented student body creates a learning-oriented peer culture” (Diprete and Buchmann, 2013, p.168). This means that schools can promote the formation of student bodies whose peer cultures are learning-oriented. Such student bodies would enhance academic achievement of all learners, including boys who underachieve in education.

Researchers such as Quenzel and Hurrelmann (2010), as cited in Diprete and Buchmann, 2013, p. 168) “have argued that gender identities perpetuate the belief that girls have to work hard in order to learn, whereas boys are naturally gifted... this belief is reflected in boys’ casual, if not reluctant attitude towards school”. To promote this ill-conceived belief, some boys may reduce effort when undertaking academic tasks to create the façade before their peers that because they were naturally intelligent, they could perform well in school without working hard.

This interpretation is consistent with the view that “disruptive behaviour is often encouraged by male peers insofar as it precipitates status gains in the adolescent peer group, while working for academic achievement is labelled as feminine and thereby stigmatized. Among girls, however, schoolwork is typically viewed as acceptable and sometimes, even encouraged” (Diprete and Buchmann, 2013, p.168). Epstein (1998, p.106); as cited in Diprete and Buchmann, 2013, p.168) concurs with this when she states that “the main demand on boys from within their peer culture ...is to appear to do little or no work” –whereas for girls, “it seems as if working hard at school is not only accepted, but is in fact, wholly desirable”. To use the peer group to support boys’ education, stereotypic myths of this sort would need to be confronted and dismissed as simply wrong. We present data later in this article on how the peer group in Namibia influences some boys’ underachievement in education.

Diprete and Buchmann (2013) have reviewed work by several researchers and have come up with the insights that follow.

Adolescent peer cultures are not uniform but vary in their values. For instance, in schools where academic performance is prized and leads to status raising in the peer group, research has shown that boys compete more for high grades and school performance. However, in schools where this is not the case, some boys underachieve in education.

Moreover, differences in academic performance between boys and girls are considerably reduced in schools with higher average academic performance. One implication of this is that high quality education practised in an education institution leads to a reduction in academic achievement disparity between boys and girls (UNESCO, 2022a; UNESCO, 2022b; Jackson, Moore & Leon, 2010; Welmond and Gregory, (2021).

The social economic status (SES) composition of schools influences boys' academic performance (OECD, 2015). Research has shown that boys' academic achievement is enhanced at schools with high SES and lowered at schools with low SES. For instance, Legewie and DiPrete (2012b) as cited in Diprete and Buchmann, (2013, p. 171), "found that males receive a relatively strong gain from classroom socioeconomic composition when working habits or the strength of the students' learning orientation are the dependent variable. These findings suggest mechanisms by which the local peer environment affects academic achievement for all students while at the same time providing especially strong gains for boys". Moreover, "locally strong academic climates boost both girls' and boys' performance but ...their net effect is to reduce the gender gap in achievement" (Diprete and Buchmann, 2013, p.175).

Welmond and Gregory, (2021) reported that boys and men were vulnerable to underachievement when they were poor, belonged to lower social classes or belonged to communities that were prone to discrimination. Reeves (2022) discussed research evidence which revealed that boys and men from lower social classes in USA did not only underachieve in education but also experienced more 'deaths of despair' (e.g., suicide, deaths from drug overdose, etc.), dysfunctional family relations and loneliness than girls and women did. Citing the work of OECD (2015), Welmond and Gregory (2021) and UNESCO (2022a), Hamilton, et. al. (2024, p.1) deduce that "globally, a general and persistent trend is observed where boys from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are a key demographic most likely to be labelled as *underachievers* based on low attainment in nationally standardised exams and subsequent under-representation in higher education". In the Namibia context, this may imply that we would expect diminished disparity in academic performance between boys and girls in schools with high SES and increased disparity at schools with low SES. We do not have research evidence on this. What may be more meaningful in the Namibian context, though, is to look at the influence of disparate resourcing of schools on the academic performance of boys and girl (Zuze and Reddy, 2014; UNESCO, 2022b; Lefoka, 2007).

Research on the role of communication in ameliorating boys' educational underachievement has shown that boys talk more freely and open up to express their opinions to their friends than to adults (Cox, 2018). To support boys' education, teachers and parents should not discourage this tendency but recruit the peer group as an ally in the process of enhancing their academic achievement. In addition to monitoring the formation and mitigating of negative peer pressure, parents should make use of peer support and positive peer influence (Jha, Menon, & Chatterjee, 2017). They should encourage the peer group to become pro-learning and pro-academic achievement. This should be done especially because in Namibia, both schools and communities advance the unfortunate idea that boys should deal with their problems on their own, thus discouraging them from seeking help from adults. Boys who underachieve should in fact benefit from being members of peer groups that inspire learning, achievement motivation, a sense of belonging and excellence (Camarata, 2014). They should be discouraged from being members of peer groups which undermine academic achievement by promoting misbehaviour, alcohol and drug abuse (Mungoo, 2017). According to Cox (2018), research has also shown that boys use the peer group as a source of their legitimation, status, attention, respect, and standing. It is advised that instead of attempting to obtain the attention of individual boys, teachers and parents should 'capture' the peer group by using performance awards in school as a source of high status and recognition.

Consistent with Cox (2018), Reichert and Hawley (2010) have stated that boys could raise their status and earn good reputations by making tangible contributions when collaborating with peers on group learning tasks. This would especially be the case if learning peer groups compete with each other to attain specified goals and win prizes. To win the prizes, boys collaborate and work hard as individuals and as groups. This means that to positively use the peer group to enhance boys' education, teachers should encourage them to collaborate when tackling academic tasks.

In a unique way, boys and girls in Southern Africa, use the peer group as a source of legitimation, status, attention, respect, and standing when they go through initiation ceremonies, traditional initiation schools and rites of passage. In countries such as Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, initiation ceremonies and rites of passage confer on boys adulthood status and impart to them socio-cultural values of discipline, self-control, a sense of belonging, honesty, hard work, how to live with others and how to consummate sexual relations (NAMPA, 2023; Yamakawa, 2007; UNFPA, 2020;

Zimba, 2002). When appropriately deployed in school by teachers, these values may promote boys' academic achievement. Similarly, pro-social attitudes acquired in initiation ceremonies and rites of passage may be used to enhance Namibian girls' education (Kuoppala, 2021; Muchali, 2021; Yamakawa, 2007).

In Lesotho, however, the adulthood status that boys obtain after attending traditional initiation schools is perceived by several of them as a licence to drop out of school, seek employment, and get married. When in school, several boys perceive themselves as being in the same group of adults as are their teachers. Due to this, several of them have been observed to resist teachers' authority and disrupt classes. In addition to dropping out of school to herd livestock, these beliefs and actions have been used to explain several boys' educational under-participation and underachievement in Lesotho (UNESCO, 2022b).

Methodology

Research Design

We used a pragmatic parallel mixed methods design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were concurrently collected. We used the case study and narrative research designs when answering qualitative research questions.

Sample

We used the systematic sampling technique to collect data from 53 schools located in all 14 Educational Regions and we collected questionnaire data from 4659 learners with a mean age of 17.48 years, the minimum age being 11 years and the maximum age being 32 years. Whereas 54.2% of the learners were female, 45.3% of them were male. 11.8% of the learners were in grade 8, 21.5% were in grade 9, 16.3% were in grade 10, 21.1% were in grade 11 and 29% were in grade 12.

Research Instruments

We used structured questionnaires, assessment documents in the form of EMIS statistics and grades 10 and 12 examination results from the 14 Educational Regions. We also used interview guides and data recorders.

Procedure

After obtaining permission to access research sites, we administered questionnaires to sampled learners and conducted focus group discussions amongst some purposefully selected

learners. With the consent of research participants, we used data recorders to record focus group discussions and interviews.

Research ethics

Field work commenced after receiving institutional ethical clearance and approval from the University of Namibia Ethics Committee and from the national, regional, and local officials of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. Informed consent was obtained from learners at the beginning of data collection sessions after they had signed informed consent forms which certified that they had decided to participate in the study voluntarily.

We informed learners about their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research exercise once participation had begun. They were informed that to maintain confidentiality, their identities would not be divulged at any point during the conduct of the study and during the reporting of the research findings because their names and any other personal information were not collected from them. Access to their responses and voice recordings was confidential and restricted to researchers only. Because all research activities were undertaken in accordance with ethical stipulations, no learner was expected to be harmed in any way from their participation in the study.

Data analysis

In addition to frequencies and cross-tabulations, inferential statistics in the form of the chi-square test were used to analyse quantitative research data obtained through structured questionnaires.

After transcribing and coding focus group discussion data, researchers used typological data analysis, and content analysis to make sense of the data.

Results and their discussion

We present quantitative and qualitative data according to the questions we asked earlier. On the issue of *boys' work habits and behaviours that might contribute to their underachievement in education*, learners provided two points of view. Firstly, according to Table 1, the majority of them agreed that some boys performed academically worse than girls because of not being focused on their schoolwork, they were frequently absent from their classes, they were undisciplined, they believed they could be employed without education and because they found school subject matter boring. All these reasons pertain to some

dysfunctional personal behaviours that are consistent with some of the literature we reviewed (Jha, Menon & Chatterjee, 2017).

Secondly, most learners disagreed that some boys performed worse than girls because they found school subject matter irrelevant, they were given less attention by teachers, and because they were more affected by poverty than girls were. To us this meant that it was not the curriculum content, lack of teacher attention, and poor economic conditions that caused some boys to underachieve in education (see Table 1).

Table 1: Learners' views on boys' work habits and behaviour

In my classroom, girls perform better than boys because boys:	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Are not focused.	501	10.8	1170	25.1	2076	44.6	850	18.2	62	1.3	4659	100
Are absent from classes.	607	13.0	1241	26.6	1675	36.0	1075	23.1	61	1.3	4659	100
Are in-disciplined	444	9.4	1092	23.4	1888	40.5	1099	23.6	136	2.9	4659	100
Believe that they can be employed without education.	857	18.4	1154	24.8	1464	31.4	1101	23.6	83	1.8	4659	100
Find the subject matter boring.	502	10.8	1395	29.9	1946	41.8	753	16.2	63	1.4	4659	100
Find the subject matter irrelevant.	616	13.2	1817	39.0	1592	34.2	500	10.7	134	2.9	4659	100
Are given less attention by teachers than girls.	2214	47.4	1368	29.4	489	10.5	504	10.8	88	1.9	4659	100
Are more affected by family poverty than girls	1974	42.4	1654	35.5	573	12.3	396	8.5	62	1.3	4659	100

When we asked for *learners' views on why some boys under-participated in education*, the majority of them indicated that more boys than girls left school early in their educational progression due to misbehaviour, more girls than boys participated in psychosocial development programmes, and more girls than boys participated in class learning activities (see Table 2).

Table 2: Learners' views on why boys under-participate in education

According to my experience as a learner:	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
More girls drop out of school than boys.	975	20.9	1260	27.0	1259	27.0	1109	23.8	56	1.2	4659	100
More boys leave school because of misbehaviour than girls.	366	7.9	511	11.0	1995	42.8	1738	37.3	49	1.1	4659	100
More girls than boys participate in psychosocial development programs (e.g., Windows of Hope; My Future is My Choice etc.).	256	5.5	694	14.9	1836	39.4	1787	38.4	86	1.8	4659	100
More boys participate in sport activities than girls.	256	5.5	480	10.3	1813	38.9	2048	44.0	62	1.3	4659	100
More girls participate in class learning activities than boys.	227	4.9	415	8.9	1674	35.9	2278	48.9	65	1.4	4659	100
Boys' energy and participation are stifled by the structured nature of classrooms.	310	6.7	865	18.6	1892	40.6	1469	31.5	123	2.6	4659	100

Table 3 responds to the question of whether *some boys underachieve in education because of the type of education support they are provided with* by the school and the family. In response to this, whereas most learners agreed that boys were provided with less counselling support than girls and that there were more girl targeted educational support programmes than for boys, most of them disagreed that boys were given less psycho- social support in school than girls, that boys were more susceptible to engage in toxic entertainment (e.g. alcohol and drug abuse) than girls, that teachers were more willing to support girls than boys in learning activities, and they disagreed that boys got less educational support from their fathers and mothers than girls. We discuss below some qualitative learners' focus group discussion data that is inconsistent with a number of these assertions and imply that schools in general did not grant counselling support to boys that needed it and that when compared to girls, there was a paucity of boys' targeted support programmes in schools.

Table 3: Learners' views on available learning Support for boys

Boys academically perform worse than girls because:	Responses											
	Strongly agree		agree		disagree		Strongly disagree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Boys are given less psycho- social support in school than girls.	475	10.2	1291	27.7	1907	40.9	891	19.1	95	2.0	4659	100
Boys are more susceptible to engage in toxic entertainment (alcohol & drug abuse) than girls.	681	14.6	1033	22.2	1735	37.2	1141	24.5	69	1.5	4659	100
Teachers are more willing to support girls than boys in learning activities.	724	15.5	1127	24.2	1692	36.3	1037	22.3	79	1.7	4659	100
Boys are provided with less counselling support than girls.	752	16.1	1986	42.6	1340	28.8	478	10.3	103	2.2	4659	100
There are more	2325	49.9	1547	33.2	314	6.7	392	8.4	81	1.7	4659	100

educational support girl targeted programmes than boy targeted educational support programmes.												
Boys get less educational support from their fathers than girls.	686	14.7	923	19.8	1686	36.2	1261	27.1	103	2.2	4659	100
Boys get less educational support from their mothers than girls.	851	18.3	1292	27.7	1552	33.3	833	17.9	131	2.8	4659	100

Table 4 presents learners' views on whether boys' *task behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and hopes influenced their academic achievement*. On these, most learners agreed that some boys underachieved in education because they spent less time on academic activities, preferred to work in isolation, were not eager to share academic information, did not care about their academic achievement, and they were less concerned about their future. Notwithstanding these views, most learners disagreed that boys were more disengaged than girls from class activities given by female teachers, and they disagreed that girls were more collaborative on learning tasks than boys. Contrary to this position that girls work less collaboratively on learning tasks than boys, our observations during fieldwork showed that girls were in fact more collaborative in learning tasks than boys. At several schools we visited, more boys than girls were sent to the School Principals' office to face disciplinary sanctions and for not doing their homework.

Table 4: Learners' views on boys' task behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and hopes.

Study habits:	Responses											
	Strongly agree		agree		disagree		Strongly disagree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Boys spend less time on academic	915	19.6	1562	33.5	1461	31.4	612	13.2	109	2.3	4659	100

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activities than girls.												
Boys are more disengaged than girls from class activities given by female teachers.	602	12.9	1022	21.9	1902	40.8	1041	22.3	92	2.0	4659	100
Girls are more collaborative on learning tasks than boys.	545	11.7	978	21.0	1922	41.3	1137	24.4	77	1.7	4659	100
Boys prefer to work in isolation than girls.	1604	34.4	2012	43.2	675	14.5	289	6.2	79	1.7	4659	100
Girls are more eager to share academic information than boys.	876	18.8	1573	33.8	1576	33.8	544	11.7	90	1.9	4659	100
Boys do not care about their academic achievement.	1137	24.4	2223	47.7	910	19.5	275	5.9	114	2.4	4659	100
Socialization stifles the boy-child's ability to express his feelings with regard to the negative consequences of his underachievement.	712	15.3	1879	40.3	1580	33.9	365	7.8	123	2.6	4659	100
Boys are less concerned about the future.	1186	25.4	1854	39.8	1019	21.9	462	9.9	138	3.0	4659	100

When we applied chi-square comparisons on the learners' data according to gender, boys seemed to disown views that seemed to put them in bad light. This tendency was displayed when more female than male learners significantly agreed that boys underachieved because they absented themselves from classes, they were undisciplined, they believed that they could

be employed without education, they found the subject matter boring, they did not care about their academic achievement and that they were less concerned about their future than girls (Chi-square = 58.9; df = 6; $p < .001$).

Also, more female than male learners agreed that whereas more girls than boys participated in psychosocial development programmes, more female than male learners agreed that more girls than boys participated in class learning activities. It appears that boys tended to distance themselves from the reality of their educational underachievement. For instance, more male than female learners disagreed that some boys underperformed in education because they were not focused on academic activities (Chi-square = 104.2; df = 6; $p < .001$). This *distancing* does not mean that the description of these behaviours is without merit.

Looking at the influence of learners' school grade levels on their understanding of boys' underachievement in education, we noticed that there were no significant differences due to grade level (i.e. grades 8 to 12). Some boys' underachievement in education was observed in every secondary school grade.

To triangulate some of the learners' quantitative data discussed above, we conducted focus group discussions with purposefully selected learners. The focus group discussions covered the impact of educational policies, the influence of socialization, the role of teachers, the influence of the community on boys' underachievement in education, and on what fellow learners could do to support boys' education.

On the issue of *the impact of educational policies on boys' underachievement* in education, most learners in the focus group discussions reported that there were more girl targeted educational support programmes in Namibia than for boys. This finding is consistent with the quantitative data discussed above. In addition, learners indicated that whereas girls had received, over the years, targeted educational support from girl child education movements and organizations, boys had not received such targeted educational support. These programmes normally addressed girls' issues and not boys' issues.

In reviewing educational policies to adequately accommodate boys' issues and concerns, educational support movements, organizations and governmental educational structures at all levels should, in partnership and collaboration, implement such programmes in a manner that ensures boys' participation and involvement. This would be more impactful

if such programmes were initiated, implemented, and managed by male teachers and male role models in the community.

On *the influence of socialization on boys' academic performance*, learners indicated that several parents undermined their sons' education by:

- Giving them too much freedom to roam around while strictly controlling the behaviour and movements of their daughters.
- Not dealing with their sons' abuse of alcohol and drugs.
- Not caring about what their sons did and how they spent their time.
- Not giving their sons responsibilities at home to cultivate in them ethics of hard work, discipline, commitment, persistence.
- Providing more financial support to their daughters. It was reported that some boys used this as an excuse to go out and earn money by any means necessary. 'Any means' included stealing, dealing in drugs and dropping out of school.
- Not being concerned of their sons' education, welfare, misconduct, and misdeeds.

In our view, all this would undermine the education of some boys. This deduction is consistent with data reported by Mungoo (2017) in Botswana, Spaul & Nwabisa (2019), and Stephinal (2014) in South Africa, and by Jha, Menon & Chatterjee (2017) in several Commonwealth Countries. In Botswana, Mungoo (2017) has reported that two main causes of some boys' educational underachievement were their unchecked abuse of alcohol and drugs and their indiscipline. Spaul & Nwabisa (2019) reported data which indicated that in South Africa, girls performed better than boys in Mathematics and Science because they were socialized to be self-controlled, to set performance goals, to apply self-management, and to persevere. Boys were not socialized to exhibit these characteristics. Stephinal (2014), reported that several parents in one Province of South Africa did not support the learning of their sons and daughters because they were harsh and impatient with them. After reviewing literature on boys' educational underachievement in several Commonwealth countries, Jha, Menon & Chatterjee (2017) concluded that to succeed in education, boys needed support, protection and encouragement from their parents, peers, teachers, schools and the larger community. Parental support was not usually given to boys who educationally underachieved. Khan (2024) has made proposals of how parents could use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tutors when supporting their sons' and daughters' education instead of undermining it.

On *the role of teachers in boys' education*, learners communicated two messages. Firstly, they indicated that several teachers contributed to some boys' underachievement in education because they were:

- Not kind and fair to boys who they mistreated and easily suspended from school; (This is inconsistent with what was reported in the quantitative part of this article where teachers were reported NOT to treat girls more favourably than they treated boys.)
- Hostile to boys and treated them disparagingly.
- Not supportive of boys' education and they did not motivate boys to learn.
- Not caring enough to find out what boys needed to succeed, and they did not counsel those who experienced learning and emotional problems.
- Not in 'loco parentis' for boys.
- Unapproachable to boys.

We judged that all these teachers' behaviours and attitudes were not supportive of boys' education. According to Jha, Menon & Chatterjee (2017), to be supportive of their learners' education, teachers should use active and engaging classroom activities focusing on diverse skills and involving performing, creative arts, poetry, drama, small group work, paired group work, storytelling, artistic expressions and role playing. To respond to diverse learning needs teachers should also understand their learners' diverse home environments.

Secondly, learners thought that teachers behaved the way they did towards boys because some boys who underachieved tended to bunk (i.e., stay away from) some classes, to be undisciplined, disobedient, disrespectful, and not wishing to learn. In frustration, some teachers gave up on such boys and treated them with disdain. Consistent with this, Jha & Pouzevara (2016) reported that in Seychelles, teachers' expectations that boys perform and behave less well than girls, partially accounted for lack of interest in school among boys. Moreover, Page & Jha (2009) obtained data from seven countries and from three different continents and concluded: "In countries where teachers do not have high expectations of boys, they tend to underachieve".

In our view, teachers should be concerned about boys who underachieve in education and encourage all learners to be disciplined and learn. They should counsel boys with learning and emotional problems and partner with parents in acting as positive role models for them. To augment all this, pre- and in-service teacher education programmes should

sensitize and instil in teachers caring and nurturing attitudes towards boys who underachieve in education, raise awareness of gender disparity in education attainment that is in favour of girls and empower teachers to initiate programmes and attitudinal changes aimed at redressing the disparity (Jha & Pouzevara, 2016; Page & Jha, 2009; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Jha & Kelleher, 2006).

On the question of *community influence on boys' underachievement in education*, learners reported that several communities lacked positive role models to inspire boys who academically underachieved to value education. They also observed that several households in the communities were not headed by fathers but by mothers. According to learners, some teachers serving in the communities negatively influenced some boys who were dealing in drugs by becoming their customers. Some other teachers, learners observed, had sexual relationships with learners who they went 'clubbing' with at night clubs, thus not serving as good role models to the boys.

To us all this created a community environment that was not conducive to boys' education. To change this situation, parents should partner with other community members in preventing boys from having easy access to alcohol, and drugs and by encouraging fathers to become responsive role models for their sons. In addition, communities should establish boy targeted educational support programmes whose main goal would be to create and implement community-based 'affirmative action' initiatives for boys' education. For instance, communities could form academic achievement boys' clubs. In doing all this, communities should use their attitudinal change social cultural resources imbedded in boys' revived and transformed rites of passage and initiation ceremonies (UNFPA, 2020; Yamakawa, 2007; Zimba, 2002).

With respect to *what fellow learners could do to support boys' education*, learners reported that some boys did not seek for assistance when they needed it from their fellow learners. In addition, such boys were reluctant to share their learning problems with close friends.

To change all this, classrooms should be transformed into communities of learners who work and study together to promote quality education for all learners. Acting as families, such learning communities would work in collaboration with teachers and parents (Cox, 2018; Jha, Menon, & Chatterjee, 2017; NAMPA, 2023).

Specific recommended interventions

Based on the results and their discussion, we recommend the following interventions:

1. The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should design and implement a targeted programme for boys who educationally underachieve. This programme should be aimed at encouraging them to participate in learning activities, enabling them to value education and preventing some of them from dropping out of primary and secondary schools. To ensure that such a programme succeeds, it should be facilitated and monitored by male teachers and male role models in communities.
2. Tertiary education teacher preparation institutions in collaboration with Regional Educational Directorates, and the National Institute for Educational Development should organize decentralized in-service online and offline school and classroom management workshops and meetings to empower primary and secondary school teachers on how to reach and teach boys who underachieve in education.
3. A variety of ‘boys only’ initiatives should be put in place at schools to enhance the academic achievement of boys. In such initiatives, issues pertinent to boys’ academic achievement should be highlighted. For instance, alcohol and drug abuse could be highlighted in Life Skills, Guidance and Counselling, English and in Biology with the view of explaining how the abuse interferes with boys’ and girls’ academic achievement.
4. Schools should establish psychosocial programmes to promote boys’ academic intrinsic achievement motivation by addressing their dysfunctional motivational attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Such programmes should consider the nature and learning needs of boys and attend to boys’ adverse external motivational factors in the form of negative peer pressure and lack of supportive family environments.
5. Communities should use ‘affirmative action’ initiatives for boys to form academic achievement boys’ clubs. Fathers and father figures in the communities should be deployed as responsive role models to use these clubs when moulding and transforming the behaviour, attitudes, and practices of their sons during socialization.
6. Schools, parents, and communities should use their attitudinal change social cultural resources imbedded in boys’ revived and transformed initiation ceremonies, traditional initiation schools, and rites of passage when establishing and running boy targeted educational support programmes (UNFPA, 2020; Yamakawa, 2007; Zimba, 2002).

Conclusion

In concluding this article, we highlight the issue that to support boys' education, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should mobilise all educational stake holders to establish strategies for keeping boys who underachieve in school where they would be enabled to focus on education and work cooperatively and collaboratively with teachers and their fellow learners. Doing this would be important because partnerships amongst educational stakeholders such as the government, local and regional governing structures, NGOs, UN agencies, families, and communities would more effectively advance the cause of boys who underachieve and under-participate in education.

Author contribution

The "Secondary school learners' understanding of Namibian boys' underachievement and under-participation in education" article was extracted from a research report on Namibian boys' underachievement in education. In a collaborative way, the co-authors of this article actively participated in the conduct of the Namibian boys' underachievement in education study. Together with the research team leader, Prof. R. F. Zimba, Prof. C. D. Kasanda, Associate Prof. C. K. Haihambo, Dr. M. Kudumo, Associate Prof. H. M. Kapenda, Dr. K. F. Neshila and Dr. M. Sheyapo collaboratively proposed the study, had it ethically cleared by the University of Namibia's Ethics Committee, constructed research instruments which they piloted, collected data from Namibia's 14 Education Regions, analysed quantitative and qualitative data and prepared a more than 350 pages research report. To collect data from the whole of geographically vast Namibia, the research team was divided into three sub-teams. Each sub-team collected data from regions of Namibia assigned to it. When drafted, the article in question was reviewed and commented on by all co-authors before it was submitted for publication.

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