
Examining Student Gendered Experiences with Parent Involvement in The Bahamas

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Abstract

Within English-speaking Caribbean K-12 schooling systems, there has been a consistent trend of boys performing at a lower academic standard than girls. Caribbean scholars suggest approaching gendered achievement patterns from multiple perspectives, dimensions, and methodologies to help clarify the inequities that are prevalent in Caribbean schooling. To address this call, I narrow attention onto the Bahamian family context and raise the question as to whether parent involvement with schooling in The Bahamas differs for boys versus girls. Survey data (parents, $n = 377$) came from a comprehensive study on parent involvement with schooling that took place in Grand Bahama during summer of 2018. Multivariate analysis of factor scores using two scales, Basic Needs Involvement (11-item scale) and Academic Involvement (3-item scale), showed that parental involvement was similar for boys and girls. Like previous findings in The Bahamas, there were more girls enrolled in private schools than boys. Findings are discussed in terms of societal perceptions about whose education is valued, mandates for gender parity, the impact global trends have on local trends, and moving towards empirical-based theories for gendered achievement patterns within Caribbean societies.

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Introduction

Within the English-speaking Caribbean K-12 schooling systems, studies have found a consistent trend of boys performing at a lower academic standard than girls (Bailey, 2004; De Lisle, 2006; De Lisle et al., 2005; 2010; 2012; Evans, 1999b; Kutnick, 1999; 2000; Kutnick & Jules, 1988; Worrell, 2006). Likewise, in The Bahamas, fewer boys than girls are sitting national exams and obtaining five or more passes on these exams (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). In addition to achievement trends, there is some evidence that Caribbean boys may have more negative experiences inside schools such as being punished and insulted more often

by teachers (Parry, 1996, Kutnick et al., 1997, Evans, 1999a), and teachers holding more negative perceptions and lower expectations for boys (Parry, 1996; Kutnick et al., 1997; Evans, 1999a). Similarly, in The Bahamas, fewer boys than girls perceive that their teachers had high expectations for them (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Also fewer boys strongly agree that what they learn in school would be beneficial to them in securing a job, life outside school, and their future success (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Likewise, Bennett (2014) also found that marginalized black Bahamian men did not think education led to improved social class in The Bahamas.

Boys' underachievement patterns have led to national and regional concerns for the educational outcomes of boys and their socio-political status in Caribbean societies. Evidence of this concern is seen in media campaigns, in local newspapers, and in the addresses of politicians to local citizens. For example, in Jamaica, the Male Awareness Now (MAN) project was launched in the early 2000s and in Dominica, the From Offending to Achieving (FOTA): A Program for Delinquent Juveniles initiative was launched in 2008 (Orlando & Lundwall, 2010). In The Bahamas, in March 2023 a symposium for men was hosted by University of The Bahamas titled *From Boys to Men: Reengineering Our Bahamian Society: It Is Easier to Build Strong Boys Than Fix Broken Men*. The symposium title reflects the sentiment of something being wrong with Bahamian men and that there is an urgent need to fix them. Notably, the regional concern for Caribbean boys has caught the attention of the World Bank and other monitoring bodies (e.g., UNICEF and the Inter-American Development Bank), resulting in them partnering with the Commonwealth Secretariat to support the Caribbean region's Boys Out of Risk Initiative in 2008 (Figueroa, 2010).

Taken together, it is important to examine factors within schools, homes and society that may contribute to gendered patterns in achievement, perceptions, and school experiences. This study looked specifically at the familial factor of parent involvement and examined whether Bahamian parent involvement differed for boys versus girls. Rather than situating this study in the parent involvement literature, I expand our viewpoint and situate it within the gendered achievement patterns literature as this literature recently put forth a call for Caribbean scholars to begin exploring factors related to communities, neighbourhoods, and families that may help explain gendered achievement patterns. Below, I first summarize frames scholars have

used to explain these patterns. Afterwards, I highlight areas that the current literature calls on researchers to empirically explore that may help explain gendered achievement patterns, with special attention to familial factors.

Towards theory building to explain gendered achievement patterns

Multiple theories have been posited to explain boys' underperformance in K-12 schooling. Predominate frames include shifts in the socio-political, economic, and professional contexts of Caribbean societies that led to shifts in the positionality of women, the socialization of Caribbean boys and men, hegemonic masculinities and gender identities, and male privileging/disadvantage in Caribbean societies (Bennett, 2014; Figueroa, 2000; 2004; Miller, 1994; Parry 1996; Plummer et al., 2008; Reddock, 2003; 2010). Caribbean scholars have urged approaching gendered achievement patterns from multiple perspectives, methodologies, and dimensions to help clarify the inequities that are prevalent in Caribbean schooling (De Lisle, 2018; Reddock, 2010; Cobbett & Younger, 2012).

In De Lisle's (2018) synthesis of the literature on gendered achievement patterns and theories explaining these patterns, De Lisle highlights that another consistent finding is that the boy underachievement does not hold true across all ethnicities, class, location, content/subject area, school type etc. In fact, in certain circumstances, there are similar achievement patterns, or even a reverse trend in which girls underachieve. In The Bahamas, one such countertrend is that girls perform better in Language Arts on secondary national exams, while boys and girls perform similarly in mathematics (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Also, on Bahamian national exams, private school students tend to outperform government school students. De Lisle points out that these countertrends are often ignored yet they speak to the marginalization of boys and girls inside

Caribbean schools, as trends vary based on demographics.

Collectively, findings on gendered achievement patterns demonstrate intersectionality and differences in contexts are critical aspects to consider (De Lisle, 2018; George, 2013; Reddock, 2010; Cobbett & Younger, 2012). For example, scholars have pointed out that class is a salient variable related to achievement, and probably more influential than gender, yet the intersection of class and gender is mostly ignored (Cobbett & Younger, 2012). They advise not focussing solely on boys but consider gender and education within a relational context and consider additional important factors. Examples of these are the intersectionality of identities and how race, ethnicity, class, socio-economic status, location, health and ability amongst other factors shape the human experience (Reddock, 2010). As a side point, Reddock (2010) cautions that the comparison of boys to girls may be problematic because it places gender equity as the goal (and indeed, this is pushed by United Nations Education for All mandates and its millennium goals) rather than the actual overall performance of Caribbean students.

De Lisle (2018; 2023) calls for scholars to frame gendered achievement patterns in terms of the marginalization of students within school systems, because these patterns suggest systemic inequities are at play for both genders, not just boys. He draws attention to the fact that Caribbean school systems are not designed to facilitate the success of all learners and that there are barriers at play that block the successes of certain student groups. De Lisle (2023) further offers the region a comprehensive model which outlines school-based, societal-based, and individual-level factors to explore regarding gendered achievement patterns and gendered experiences within schools and society. He also outlines multiple educational outcomes to

explore thereby offering the monitoring and evaluation field indicators to use to assess education quality, as there is a dearth of these types of indicators for the region (Bowe, 2015). What stands out about De Lisle's model is that it is undergirded by Caribbean literature which supports the relevancy of the model and the translation of findings to practice.

Social Contexts that May Influence Gendered Achievement Patterns

There are three types of societal factors we can explore to further understand gendered achievement patterns, and these are factors related to communities, neighbourhoods, and families (De Lisle, 2023). I have focussed on familial-related factors because my research question centres on parent involvement with schooling. The literature from Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Barbados informs that the type of job parents hold, whether fathers help with homework, and whether the child lives with one or both parents is related to gendered achievement patterns (Kutnick et al., 1997). Barbadian students reported that their fathers helped sons and daughters equally while mothers gave slightly more help to sons than to daughters (Kutnick et al., 1997). Higher achieving children in Barbados were more likely to get more help from their fathers than mid- and lower-achieving children (Kutnick et al., 1997). Other findings from Barbados show that secondary girls reported more involvement than boys in terms of parent instruction, reinforcement, and encouragement (Marshall & Jackman, 2015). Findings from Jamaica show more girls than boys reported that their parents assisted with homework (Evans, 1999a).

Considering the literature on familial factors, this study examined whether parent involvement differs for boys versus girls on Grand Bahama Island. There is some indication that parent involvement may differ for boys and girls. Past findings in The

Bahamas show more girls than boys strongly agreed that their parents wanted them to go to college/university, more girls than boys strongly agreed that their parents expected them to do well in school, and more girls than boys attend private schools (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). In terms of other indicators of parental support for learning though, Bahamian girls and boys held similar perceptions (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Thus, in the Bahamian literature, findings are mixed regarding parent involvement as it seems it matters on the type of involvement.

Research Question

Does sex of the child moderate parent involvement in Bahamian schools?

Methodology

Participants

Data comes from a comprehensive mixed methods study on parent involvement that took place during summer 2018 in Grand Bahama. This study was done in partnership with the Department of Education to support their goals of increasing parent involvement in schools. Data for the comprehensive study came from a convenience sample of participants who completed surveys ($n = 377$ parents, $n = 96$ teachers), took part in a parent forum ($n = 17$ parents), or I interviewed. Participants who I interviewed represented various sectors of the community including parents ($n = 10$); faith leaders ($n = 7$); employers ($n = 8$); health care providers ($n = 5$); and social service workers ($n = 3$). The public was made aware of the study via the local television and radio stations as well as through local PTA meetings and church announcements under the approval of the Grand Bahama Principals and Vice Principals Association and the pastor associated with the church. I administered the surveys in public spaces on Grand Bahama such as school grounds, the public library, a fire station, a

police station, the local hospital, government buildings, and a church. This study was approved by the Internal Review Board of Oakland University satisfying all ethical procedures. I am a Bahamian and attended K-12 schooling in The Bahamas, therefore my cultural ways of knowing and being support my capacity to conduct culturally responsive research in The Bahamas. To address the research question – does sex of the child moderate parent involvement in Bahamian schools, I report on quantitative findings from the parent survey data only (see Table 1 for demographics) as this data informs on the impact sex of child has on parent involvement.

Parent Survey

The parent survey was constructed in consultation with a Bahamian Ministry of education school superintendent, local parents, local teachers, and the Caribbean literature. Caribbean literature points to home-based, school-based, and community-based variables that capture parent involvement (Abdirahman et al., 2012; Alexander, 2012; Anderson et al., 2009; Collie-Patterson, 2008; Graham, 2007; Murphy 2002; Munroe, 2009). Examples of these are parents providing for the child's basic needs (e.g. uniforms and lunch), helping children with homework and teaching them learning strategies, being present at home after school, empathizing with their child when they have personal problems, and praising children when they do well in school. Other examples include parents providing children with a structure and boundaries for completing homework, hiring tutors, not allowing children to work during the school week, attending school conferences and functions, advocating for their children, and taking children to community spaces or events. The survey used in this study was constructed using these variables as well as ones offered by local Bahamians.

Table 1 Basic Demographics of Parent Survey Participants

		Male parent (n = 91)	Female parent (n = 278)
Sex of Child	Boys	47	123
	Girls	43	154
Parent age	18-25	0	7
	26-30	11	30
	31-40	28	120
	41-50	31	84
	51-60	15	24
	60+	5	7
Government School	Preschool/Kindergarten	0	3
	Primary School	26	66
	Junior High	13	43
	Senior High	10	48
Private School	Preschool/Kindergarten	8	19
	Primary School	14	46
	Junior High	14	25
	Senior High	4	19
Info missing on school type		2	9

Note. Total of 37 schools represented. Missing information on parent sex, $n = 8$. Missing information on child sex, $n = 4$.

The parent survey had two sections (see Appendix A for survey instrument). There were 22 closed-ended items (18 ordinal and 4 dichotomous) in the first section and three open-ended items in the second section. Examples of closed-ended survey questions were “I ask my child questions about what happened at school each day” , “I call the teacher when I am confused about my child’s homework” (*hardly ever, sometimes, most of the time, always*) and “This past school year I attended a school event (e.g. sports, special assemblies, family night, field trips, PTA etc.)” (*never, 1 or 2 times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or more times*). An example of an open-ended question

was “What can schools do to be more parent-friendly?” Parents were asked to think about one of their school-aged children when completing the form and indicate which child it was in the demographic section. This study examined the first 16 closed-ended items only to address the research question.

Survey validation

In a previous study, Bowe and Johnson (2022) conducted a cross-validation study (Brown, 2006) using exploratory analysis in SPSS 28 and confirmatory analyses in MPLUS 8.0 on the first 16 ordinal items. I limited the cross-validation study to the first 16 items because

they had the same response options. I dropped items 1 and 2 during the confirmatory process because they were not functioning well as suggested by messages from MPLUS during the confirmatory process. The final structure resulted in two scales, Basic Needs Involvement (11 items) and Academic Involvement (3 items). The fit indices

indicated adequate fit of items to scales as reported in Bowe and Johnson (2022) which was enough evidence to proceed with calculating factor scores for the scales. The reliability of the Basic Needs Involvement scale is Cronbach's $\alpha = .739$ and the Academic Involvement scale is Cronbach's $\alpha = .569$ as reported in Bowe and Johnson (2022, p. 7).

Table 2 Items for the Two-factor Scale for Bahamian Parent Involvement Survey

Basic Needs Involvement (11 items)	Academic Involvement (3 items)
I pack my child's lunch or give them lunch money	I call the teacher when I am confused about my child's homework.
I make sure my child eats breakfast	I check my child's homework
I ask my child questions about what happened at school each day	I volunteer at my child's school
I return the teacher or principal phone calls	
I make sure my child is wearing the correct uniform	
I read the school newsletters my child brings home	
I ask my child questions about their school friends	
I sign my child's homework when asked	
I provide my child with the necessary materials for school	
I teach my child about the importance of learning	
I show my child that I care about their schoolwork	

Limitations

This study represents a convenience sample (rather than random sample), therefore limiting the generalizability of the findings to the Bahamian population resident on Grand Bahama Island. Second, I did not ask the survey respondents to consider their level of involvement for sons versus daughters. Rather, I made inferences based on how they responded to the survey using the variable for the sex of the child they were considering when completing the survey (girls or boys). A direct question may yield more tenable results.

I calculated factor scores in MPLUS 8.0 for both factors. I applied multivariate regression analysis in SPSS 28 to examine the impact sex of child had on these two types of parent

involvement. I controlled for child grade level (continuous variable), parent age (ordinal variable, e.g. ages 18-25, 26-30, etc.), sex of parent (mother, father), and school type (government vs private) for three reasons. First, the Caribbean literature informs that the first two variables are related to involvement (Devonish & Anderson, 2017; Marshall & Jackman, 2015; O'Neil Kerr, 2014), second, the international literature informs that school type plays a role in involvement (Mulligan, 2003), and third, previous findings using this database (Bowe & Johnson, 2022) showed mothers being slightly more involved than fathers.

Results

The results of the multivariate analysis reveal

that Bahamian parent involvement is similar for boys and girls as the estimates for sex for both scales were not significantly different (Table 3). I also tabulated the distribution of boys and girls attending government versus private schools, as a previous study in The Bahamas used this variable as an indicator of involvement and found that there were higher proportions of girls than boys in private schools (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Similarly, these numbers here confirm this trend (Table

4), as of this sample of boys, 38% attended private schools, whereas among the girls 43% attended private schools. Congruent with previous findings from Caribbean literature and this database, child grade level, sex of parent, and parent age were predictors of involvement. In this case though, school type, that is, private versus public, did not matter. Overall, we conclude that there was gender equity towards boys and girls regarding Bahamian parent involvement.

Table 3 *Multivariate Statistics for Parent Involvement Moderated by Sex of Child*

Dependent Variable	Parameter	B	SE	Partial η^2
Basic Needs Involvement	Intercept	-0.394 ^c	0.105	
	Child Grade	-0.019 ^c	0.005	0.04
	GOV_PRIV	0.002	0.001	
	Sex of Parent (mothers)	0.182 ^c	0.042	0.05
	Parent Age	0.054 ^b	0.019	0.02
	Boys (Sex of child)	-0.047	0.036	
	Adjusted $R^2 = .083$			
	Intercept	-0.337	0.18	
	Child Grade	-0.049 ^c	0.009	0.09
	GOV_PRIV	0.003	0.002	
	Sex of Parent (mothers)	0.242 ^c	0.071	0.03
	Parent Age	0.059	0.033	
	Boys (Sex of child)	-0.053	0.061	
	Adjusted $R^2 = .103$			

Note: ^a $p < .05$, ^b $p < .01$, ^c $p < .001$

Table 4 *Percentages of Boys and Girls Enrolled in Government and Private Schools*

School Type	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Government	103	59.5%	108	54.0%	211	56.6%
Private	65	37.6%	85	42.5%	150	40.2%
Missing	5	2.9%	7	3.5%	12	3.2%

Discussion

This study explored whether parent involvement differed for boys and girls within

Bahamian society. This study addressed the call for Caribbean scholars to make concerted efforts to empirically examine societal factors that may contribute to gendered achievement

patterns seen within Caribbean schools. Bahamians reported parent involvement with schooling was similar for boys as girls on indicators used in this study. This contrasts some of the findings in the literature for Barbados and Jamaica (Kutnick et al., 1997; Marshall & Jackman, 2015), but mirrors earlier findings for The Bahamas on similar indicators (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Findings here offer perspectives of parents whereas works cited offer the perspectives of students. Taken together, my findings along with that of Fielding and Gibson (2015), offer a more rounded picture of parent involvement in The Bahamas because they collectively offer parents' and students' perspectives. A second important finding was the disproportionate enrolment of girls than boys in Bahamian private schools. Disproportionality in enrolment may fuel a perception that parents invest more into their girls' education than their boys, thereby sending hidden messages to boys that their education is not of equal priority. Perceptions regarding Bahamian parent gendered investment in education could possibly moderate achievement outcomes in The Bahamas, though future studies are warranted to further examine this perception. Given that there was no significant difference in parent involvement for boys and girls, there are other societal contexts to explore when considering gendered achievement patterns.

In consideration of gendered investment in education, one contextual aspect to consider is the gender equality goal set forth by the United Nations for member states such as The Bahamas. A perusal of the language on the Gender Equality webpage demonstrates that the focus of equality is on advancing the status of women and girls, not boys and men (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>). For education, the United Nations has outlined a number of goals for primary, secondary, and education for both sexes. The most updated information on COVID and school closings from the United

Nations informs that more girls than boys have been disproportionately affected. Whilst this may be a global trend, we do not know if the gendered impact of COVID and school closings holds for The Bahamas or other Caribbean nations. I draw attention to this because global trends can mask local issues. For example, the Global South is still in pursuit of equity in education for girls. However, in the English-speaking Caribbean, on average, girls and women outperform boys and men at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Global trends direct international funding streams; therefore, it may be difficult to attract bilateral and multilateral aid to support regional initiatives for education (such as support for boys), if regional trends are in reverse to global trends. It is important that Caribbean nations make their priorities and challenges visible to the international audience to gain the necessary financial support for their initiatives. The Caribbean initiative Boys Out of Risk is an example of regional concerns successfully capturing the attention of external funding bodies.

In consideration of boys' and girls' perceptions of the utility of education, one area requiring additional research is the alignment of secondary curricula with local labour market needs. A focus here would help build empirically-based theories regarding Caribbean boys' and girls' attitudes towards schooling. In consideration of Caribbean scholars' point about the influence of context on gendered achievement-patterns, we draw brief attention to the possible influence of the Bahamian labour market on students' perceptions of K-12 education. In The Bahamas, fewer boys strongly agree that what they learn in school would be beneficial to them in securing a job, life outside school, and their future success (Fielding & Gibson, 2015). Likewise, Bennett (2014) also contended that marginalized black Bahamian men did not think education led to improved social class in The Bahamas. While these findings are often

discussed in terms of attitudes towards education, statistics from the labour market extend the conversation beyond attitudes to consider the merit of these perceptions.

Bahamian labour market statistics from 2018 inform that more males than females are employed (Jean-Pierre, 2021), even though girls outperform boys on national exams. This suggests then that there is not a direct relationship between secondary attainment and labour market opportunities. Another example lies within the 2010 tertiary education statistics. These statistics show slightly more Bahamian males than females graduating from technical and vocational tertiary education (Jean-Pierre, 2021). In contrast, there is a reverse trend in other forms of tertiary education, as more females than males attain associate and bachelor level degrees in more academic subject areas (Jean-Pierre, 2021). Taken together, future studies exploring the relationship between local labour market needs and the secondary curricula would inform on the availability of jobs, the types of skills necessary, the extent to which the secondary curricula align with labour market needs, and the congruency of secondary boys' perceptions of the utility of education.

Last, I return to Reddock's (2010) point regarding possible problems that may arise if Caribbean countries (and other countries of the Global South) solely focus on equity at the expense of overlooking overall performance. For example, meeting equity standards does not mean high participation in education for both genders is occurring, nor does it speak to the quality of education offered. The Bahamas, like other Caribbean nations, is subjected to monitoring and evaluation criteria by external bodies such as the World Bank and the United Nations. These monitoring and evaluation standards do not necessarily capture the positionality and priorities of education development for Caribbean countries as demonstrated in Bowe (2015). Education systems should consider the impact of adopting external standards at the expense of what is known to be important nationally. This is a conundrum faced when countries are reliant on external financiers to assist national development. External financiers often dictate what countries like The Bahamas can allocate funds to, and at times, these criteria are misaligned with what is considered important. Finding a balance between adopting international standards and advancing national priorities within education is an important goal to continuously pursue.

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