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\*Corresponding author: W. Marc Jackman, Centre for Education Programmes, The University of Trinidad & Tobago, Valsayn, Trinidad and Tobago  
E-mail: [wmarcj5@gmail.com](mailto:wmarcj5@gmail.com)

Reviewing editor:  
Carol Fuller, Institute of Education,  
University of Reading, UK

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## STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exploring gender differences in achievement through student voice: Critical insights and analyses

W. Marc Jackman<sup>1\*</sup> and Judith Morrain-Webb<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The superior performance of females over males at high school and other levels appears to be a growing international phenomenon. This is notwithstanding the fact that a recent and significant comprehensive global meta-analysis that examined male–female performance at all levels revealed that girls have *always* outperformed boys in school. This meta-analysis included 502 effect sizes from 369 independent samples from articles published over a 100-year period beginning in 1914 with participants totaling 538,710 males and 595,332 females. Since the success of females is usually juxtaposed with the underperformance or failure of males, it is of critical importance in education today. Many reasons and rationales have been identified by professionals in education, psychology, sociology, counseling, history and culture. However, researchers have given little attention to this issue from the perspective of the students themselves. This exploratory qualitative study addresses this gap in the literature. This perspective is critical because it interrogates the beliefs of the students themselves and has the potential to unearth



W. Marc Jackman

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. W. Marc Jackman is an Assistant Professor in the School for Cognition, Learning and Education, Centre for Education Programmes at the University of Trinidad & Tobago where he leads the Social Studies teacher education preparation programme for prospective secondary school teachers. Dr. Jackman also teaches adolescent, developmental and educational psychology. His research interests include motivation, achievement, critical thinking and male achievement and performance across the curriculum. Related research projects include “Male re-entry into Tertiary level education in Trinidad & Tobago.”

Judith Morrain-Webb is a Research Associate with the University of Trinidad and Tobago with specialized training in Leadership and Organizational Development and Entrepreneurship. Ms. Morrain-Webb also has considerable experience in the teaching and preparation of teachers in Vocational education with particular emphasis in Business education. She has always favoured working with young people; training them in acquisition of business and entrepreneurship competencies and critical thinking skills.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research explored the issue of the gender differences in achievement at secondary level from the perspective of the student. Seventy-seven secondary school students participated in the study. The majority of participants were male and there was also a focus group of male-underachieving students. The data revealed that participants felt that male students were falling behind because they lacked the motivation, focus and determination shown by their female counterparts. They also felt that parents and teachers accommodated girls more and made extra efforts for them to achieve while boys were left to their own devices. Participants believed that schools could play a better role in encouraging male achievement by providing more supportive mechanisms through motivation seminars and academic skills training. They also argued that the boys themselves need to find intrinsic motivation to achieve and that school administrators need to look carefully at the discipline and sanctioning of boys behavior.

the actual motivational and amotivational forces at work. Male and female students from schools in Trinidad and Tobago were asked to give two reasons why they felt that girls were outperforming boys in high school and any recommendation to help boys improve. Their responses revealed some similarities with extant literature as well as valuable insights and perspectives. The findings of this study might be beneficial in addressing the issue of male–female achievement differences at secondary school level in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Subjects:** Educational Research; Secondary Education; Educational Psychology

**Key works:** Gender differences; student perspectives; academic achievement; secondary school

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. A global perspective

Educational statistics and worldwide media have reported a clear gender gap in academic achievement between males and females with boys lagging behind girls in terms of subject grades, secondary school graduation, and tertiary level enrollment and completion (Clark, Lee, Goodman, & Yacco, 2008; Parker, Van Zanden, & Parker, 2018). Researchers Majzub and Rais (2010) argue that male underachievement is a topic of critical importance both in Malaysia and around the world. In their research, they found that girls were outperforming boys in almost all subject domains whether they were science or non-science majors. Majzub and Rais also pointed out that the situation worsened as students progressed through the different levels of education with eventual tertiary level matriculation reflecting a 65–35% enrollment of females relative to males.

Hartley and Sutton (2013) examined the issue of stereotype threat as it related to male underachievement and found that children as young as 4 years old thought that adults believed that males were academically inferior to girls. Additionally, this study also revealed that young children were also vulnerable to stereotype threat manipulation where boys performed worse in writing, reading and arithmetic when they were told that they usually performed worse than females. Conversely, Harley and Sutton also found that young male students showed improvement when they were told that they performed just as well as girls academically.

### 1.2. A regional perspective

With reference to the Caribbean region, Caribbean Examination Council examination results reveal a very clear picture of male underachievement. The 2010 academic performance report for Caribbean Secondary Examination certificate (CSEC), which marks the end of compulsory education schooling, revealed that 64% of candidates were female. Further, Cobbett and Younger (2012) posit that the results themselves revealed significant gender differentials with 44% of females recording the highest grades of 1 or 2 compared with 33% of males. Grades 1 and 2 are awarded to those candidates who demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of the main concepts, content knowledge and relevant competencies of any particular subject domain.

And while these researchers argued that boys barely out-performed girls in math by a percentage point or two and that science grades reflected the semblance of gender parity, the overall picture reflected a very different story. Across all subject areas in the Caribbean region, Cobbett and Younger found that approximately 135,000 girls attained grades 1 and 2 compared with about 75,000 boys; a considerable disparity if one considers that the numbers at the beginning of secondary school were near equal.

Further, Common Entrance Examination (CEE) results from the Eastern Caribbean states reveal that 79% of girls compared to 66% of boys achieved the pass level at the end of primary school.

Then, at CSEC English A (English Language) examinations, girls in the Eastern Caribbean achieved a 69% pass rate compared to 63% for boys (De Lisle, 2015).

### **1.3. A local perspective**

In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, Cobbett and Younger (2012) cite De Lisle, Smith, and Jules' (2010) report that Trinidad and Tobago's student participation in the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS) which revealed that the country ranked third in the magnitude of the gender gap disparity. In fact, the report found that there was a significant reading gap of 31 points between males and females with females outperforming males. This difference was also much larger than the international mean of about 17 points (Cobbett & Younger, 2012). De Lisle (2015) advanced that male students were almost a whole grade and a half behind females in terms of reading ability as reported in the findings of the 2009 PISA test. Additionally, Jackman (2015) argued that Trinidad and Tobago's CSEC results for the period 2005–2010 also reflected the same achievement gap favoring females over males in several subject areas. These subjects included English A (English Language) as well as traditionally male-dominated areas such as Building Technology and Technical Drawing. Jackman also revealed that the 2014 male-female scholarship achievements in the area of science at the Caribbean Advance Level Proficiency Examinations (CAPE) reflected the same gender disparity in achievement.

More specifically, according to the Ministry of Education records of the award of scholarships reported in the local press, females achieved 66% of the premier *open scholarships* (tenable at any international university) and 62% of additional scholarships (tenable at local and regional institutions). These findings reveal that in each circumstance females gained twice as many scholarships as their male counterparts - a continuation of the pattern of performance from CSEC examinations at least two years earlier (Jackman, 2015). Regarding the underachievement of males, many researchers have advanced reasons that are well-established in the literature; these reasons are explored below. For the purpose of this study, the reasons for male underachievement have been categorized as personal, school-related and teaching-learning factors.

### **1.4. Personal factors related to male underachievement**

In terms of personal factors, Figueroa (1996, 2000) posits that due to socialization processes boys develop a disadvantageous mindset that is antithetical to school. He argues that compared to girls, boys are allowed much freedom to choose what they wish to do and when and how, the total opposite of that which is expected in the classroom (Figueroa, 1996, 2000; Parry, 1996, 1997, 2000). In this vein, Mazjub and Rais (2010) report that some boys are not able to “mug” well or concentrate on learning content for extended periods of time and struggle to sit still in the classroom - behaviours needed to internalize subject-related content. These authors also suggest that some boys have a preference for sports and outdoor games which often competes with their attention for academics.

Cobbett and Younger (2012) suggest that mindsets which feature masculine dominance promote academic disengagement among boys and risk behaviors that lead to school discipline like suspension. In fact, Monceaux and Jewell (2007) advise that there is a belief among boys that maleness means toughness, rebellion and sportiness but not intellectual prowess so much so that anti-academic peer pressure and harassment are regular occurrences.

Other researchers advance a maturational hypothesis as a reason for the gender differences in achievement where boys develop more slowly than girls and, therefore, lag behind in terms of literacy and other basic competencies for academic success (Majzub & Rais, 2010). Husband (2012) argues that recent neuroscience research gives credence to biological bases for the neurological differences in the ways that girls and boys learn or for gendered learning styles (Hodgetts, 2010).

Research also identified low educational utility beliefs combined with low value for religious experiences as positively related to a higher risk of low grades among boys of African American

heritage as well as young males in the Caribbean region (Butler-Barnes, Williams, & Chavous, 2012; Plummer, 2013).

### **1.5. School factors related to male underachievement**

Related to the earlier point about male socialization processes, schools are not seen as accommodating to the male psyche since their structures are organized, closed, controlled and regimented (Cobbett & Younger, 2012; Figueroa, 1996, 2000). This means that, generally speaking, schools are not structured or organized to facilitate the peculiarities of male attitudes and tendencies which are sometimes rebellious and non-conforming. Additionally, the disciplinary policies of many schools affect males and those of minority groups disproportionately in terms of suspensions and expulsions (Husband, 2012). Due to these disciplinary policies, males are frequently removed from the classroom and consequently, fall behind in literacy, numeracy, and other fundamentals for academic success (Husband, 2012; Kutnick, Jules & Layne, 1997).

Schools also determine the set path that most students should take and many boys who are struggling academically prefer vocational subjects that are more hands-on and practical rather than those subjects with exclusively theoretical orientations. Therefore, in school systems that do not cater to these particular needs, students either disengage or drop out of school for work opportunities (Mazjub & Rais, 2010). School climate affects all students so there must be consideration given to the needs of boys in terms of school affiliation and acceptance. The physical environment must also be conducive to learning and developing a sense of belonging and support (Cleveland & Ascd, 2011; Majzub & Rais, 2010). Research has shown that these factors are predictors of positive academic outcomes for both male and female students (Allen, Vella-Brodrick, & Waters, 2016; Reynolds, Lee, Turner & Subasic, 2017; Tomek, Bolland, Hooper, Hitchcock & Bolland, 2017).

### **1.6. Teaching–learning factors related to male underachievement**

In terms of pedagogy, some researchers have advanced the feminization of school and curricula is inimical to the academic advancement of males (Joseph, Ramsook, & Simonette, 2016). Some researchers also recommend the need for a re-articulation of curricula to reflect boy-friendly relevance and pedagogy or a recuperative masculinity agenda (Bailey, 2004; Cobbett & Younger, 2012). Others have emphasized the absence of male role models in the school system as a critical factor leading to male underachievement (Joseph, 2016; Mazjub & Rais 2010). While these arguments seem plausible, recent research data from the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) on teacher–student gender matching across 15 OECD countries do not support gender-matching as a means of improving male underachievement (Cho, 2012).

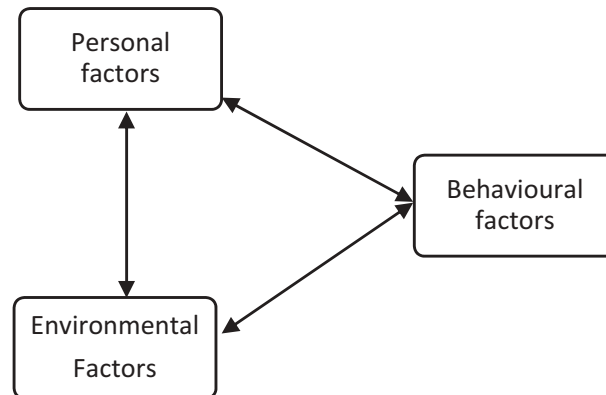
Assessment is a critical part of the teaching–learning process, and some researchers believe that the exam orientation of schools disadvantage boys who dislike mugging facts (Mazjub & Rais, 2010).

### **1.7. Theoretical framework for the study**

Triadic reciprocal determinism provided the theoretical framework for this study. It holds that three factors mutually interact with one another to determine what individuals do in different circumstances (Bandura, 1986). In the context of this study, these factors include students' personal or cognitive factors, their behavioural factors and factors of the environment that influence them. In effect, this study is based on the notion that a student's cognition and affect may interact with the environmental influences they experience and determine their academic behaviors which in turn produce achievement-related outcomes across the curriculum.

Among these three factors, there is not a predetermined linear progression from one factor to another but a mutual interplay among these factors which determine behavioral outcomes, cognitive effects or environmental changes as shown in Figure 1 (Bandura, 1986). In the context of this study, student experiences and perceptions in teaching–learning and related areas stimulate specific cognitions or affect which in turn mediate academic engagement or disengagement.

**Figure 1. Interacting factors in reciprocal determinism.**



### **1.8. Argument for inclusion of student voice in male underachievement research**

Researchers argue, and rightly so, that more insight into the problem of male underachievement must come from the students themselves. The voices of students must be heard to bring their experiences to the center of the problem as they are the ones in the eye of the storm. In fact, it is only logical to assume that solutions that match their perceived problems might be more effective than those coming from perspectives outside of their own. After all, they are the ones who are experiencing school in a particular way that is unfavourable to their academic achievement. Notwithstanding its common sense logic, the call for the inclusion of the student voice has meaningful support in the literature.

Cobbett and Younger (2012) advise that qualitative work that goes beyond the disadvantages that boys experience due to hegemonic conceptualizations is needed to add *localized detail* to quantitative research on masculinities. They argue that given the problems of male underachievement, there is a need, through active macro-accounts, to comprehend the psychological and social processes that boys adopt in order to achieve and the factors that prevent others from doing the same (Cobbett & Younger, 2012). These researchers state that there should be “greater attention to pupils’ and teachers’ views, voices and experiences which will give us more insights and enable more specific understandings of the diversity of experiences that boys and girls have at school” (Cobbett & Younger, 2012, p. 624).

Stahl and Dale (2013) emphasize that researchers need to know the needs of boys in terms of achievement and how their engagement or disengagement facilitates or shapes their behaviors in schools. They also assert that we know very little about where boys achieve and what those achievements mean to them. Therefore, very little is understood in terms of how boys prioritize in the school and classroom environment that impacts achievement outcomes (Stahl & Dale, 2013). Similarly, Cleveland and Ascd (2011) posit that “instead of looking for a one-size-fits-all-boys solution, we should explore ways to identify and respond to specific reasons for underachievement among boys who fall behind and stay behind, boys who drop out too soon, and boys you just never seem to reach.”

### **1.9. Research questions**

In light of the existing literature and the inquiry in this study, the following research questions emerge:

- (1) What reasons do students give for the differences in academic achievement between males and females?
- (2) What factors do actual male underachievers determine to be the reasons for their poor academic performances?
- (3) What strategies do students believe would be the most adaptive in helping male students achieve academically?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants & measures

There were 77 students from 12 secondary schools in the East West corridor, Central, and Port of Spain and Tobago. Seventy-four percent ( $n = 57$ ) of the sample were male. The participants were students in forms 3 to 6 (grades 8 to 12). The average age of participants was 16.7 years. This group constituted a convenience sample as they were chosen from a group of students attending a critical thinking and youth development workshop at the national university. They were given details of the nature of the study and invited to participate voluntarily.

Fifty-three students answered a structured questionnaire filling in demographic data as well as giving two reasons (a primary and a secondary) as to why they believed that males were performing poorly in relation to females at secondary school level. The participants were also asked to give 1 (one) recommendation that could be employed in assisting males in improving their academic performance. Questionnaires were filled out anonymously to protect participant confidentiality and minimize socially desirable responses. The responses from these questionnaires were collated and analyzed for emergent themes. These themes were then subjected to frequency analyses in SPSS 22.0.

Subsequent to the structured questionnaire, 24 male students participated in a focus group that discussed the reasons for poor academic performance among the males at their school and recommendations to change the same. The focus group interview was recorded, and the questions and responses were also analyzed for emergent themes. These themes were then classified according to the major tenets of the study.

### 2.2. Data analysis

Approximately 175 statements were analyzed to identify themes on the related issues. The themes which emerged were subject to basic frequency analyses using SPSS 22 software. Subsequently, content analysis was conducted on participant responses in order to determine emergent themes from the data from both open-ended questions and focus group participants (Creswell, 2012). As a result, each of the statements from the recorded focus group interview was located under a particular theme identified in the analysis. There was an inter-rater reliability of approximately 90% on the substantial statements supporting the emergent themes identified in the data.

### 2.3. Limitations

The main limitation was the fact that a convenience sample was used. As such, there is limited generalizability of the findings. However, given the exploratory nature of the study, this approach represents a step in the right direction and has the potential to encourage further studies with similar methodologies.

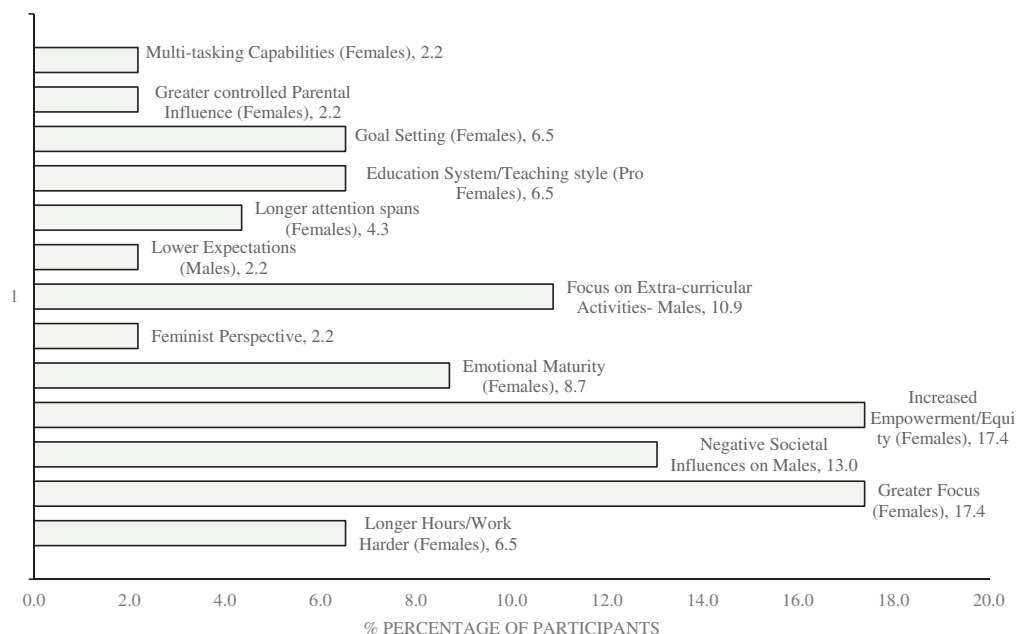
## 3. Results and discussion

The main purpose of the study was to explore the reasons for the differences in male and female achievement from the perspectives of students as expressed through their own perception, analysis and insight.

### 3.1. Primary reasons students gave for gender differences in achievement

The majority of students felt that the thrust towards female empowerment and gender equity or the greater focus of females on academic achievement was responsible for their higher level of performance in secondary school (see percentages in Figure 2). It is interesting and instructive to note that students generally believe that female success over their male counterparts is related to the current societal movement that drives female motivation and the quest for gender parity. In fact, Figure 2 reveals that together these two factors account for a third of the participants' primary beliefs about male-female achievement differences. This suggests that while female empowerment drives are aiding girls in academic achievement they might also be perceived as

**Figure 2. Students' primary reasons for male–female disparity in achievement.**



*immobilizing* boys. Next, participants believed that certain negative influences in society impacted males and undermined their academic achievement (see Figure 2). This factor that speaks to the permeability of negative societal forces on the psyche of males in the classroom. The negative societal forces referred to were gang violence, delinquency, criminal activity and illicit drug use and abuse. Participants also stated that some male students focus on “extracurricular activity” rather than on school work. They see this focus on extracurricular activity as another primary factor that weakens their academic achievement. The latter finding is similar to that of Majzub and Rais (2010) who argued that some boys demonstrated a preference to shine in sports rather than academics. In a similar vein, Monceaux and Jewell (2007) posit that males are expected to be sporty, rugged and rebellious but not intellectually minded.

Other participants felt that the key factors of the gender differential related to male–female differences in work ethic and maturation. They believed that females were more goal focused, emotionally mature and had a better work ethic than males, especially during the time that they prepared for and wrote the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examinations at the end of secondary school between 16 and 18 years of age. This is not unlike the viewpoint of Majzub and Rais (2010) who stated that some boys do not “mug” well compared to some girls who can sit and concentrate for lengthy periods of time. Similar but smaller numbers of participants felt that the education system favored females which is linked to the *feminization of schooling* hypothesis (Figuroa, 2000; Joseph, 2016). In contrast, Hattie (2012) found that teachers and teaching–learning factors were the second most potent factor in predicting student achievement outcomes. Notwithstanding such low identification among participants who completed questionnaires, focus group participants had much to say about the role of teachers and teaching–learning factors in male underachievement (see Table 2). To a lesser extent, participants endorsed lower expectations of males and a lack of parental direction of boys and other personal qualities as responsible for the gender differences in academic achievement (as shown in Figure 2).

Overall, in terms of primary reasons, it appeared that participants felt that societal factors and certain female characteristics and behaviors favored females in the male–female achievement differential. In view of this, it appeared that these students believed that the problem was either larger than the individuals themselves or enwrapped in fundamental male–female cognitive



differences that were beyond the boundaries of the classroom but significantly impacting performance therein.

### 3.2. Secondary reasons students gave for gender differences in achievement

Concerning the secondary reasons (all shown in Figure 3), participants felt that the negative influence of society and the greater focus of females were the two most critical factors explaining male–female achievement differences. Figure 3 shows that these two factors accounted for almost half of all the secondary perspectives put forward. Increased female empowerment or their drive for equity was the next important secondary factor endorsed. The ability of females to concentrate for longer hours, a better attention span and the focus of males on extracurricular activities were the next key areas identified but by fewer participants.

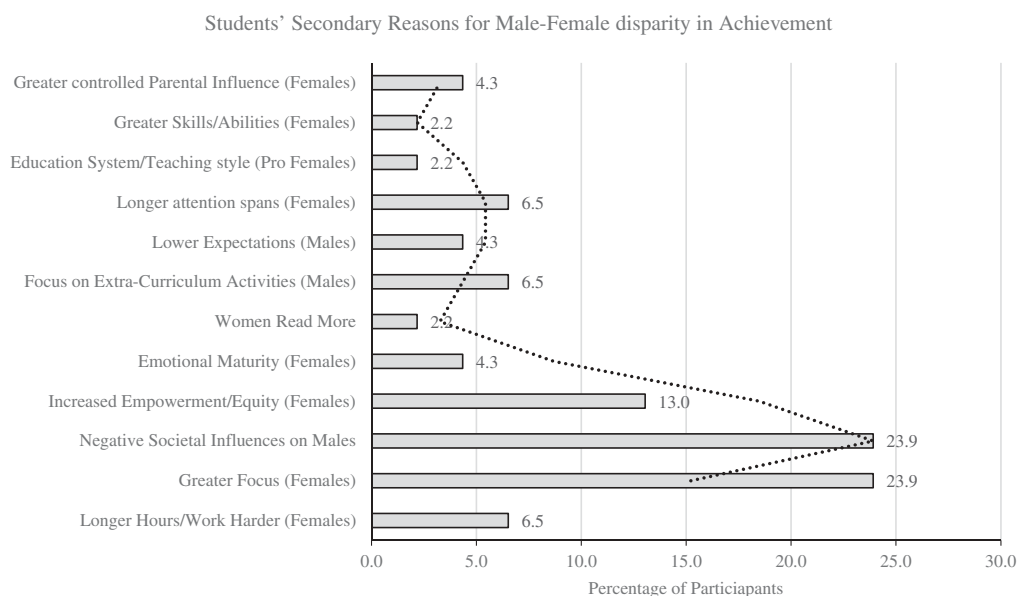
Compared with the primary reasons, the secondary categories had fewer factors but the key ones were more strongly endorsed. Again, these key factors seem to highlight societal and innate or cultivated female characteristics rather than mainly school or teaching–learning factors. These findings can be considered instructive because the tendency to identify direct education-related factors (re: pedagogy; systemic issues, etc.) seem to be most prominent in the literature.

### 3.3. Personal factors for male underachievement

The focus group which was made up of young men who were actually underachieving provided further reasons for male underachievement. Samples of their responses were categorized as either personal—Table 1, (further subdivided into motivational, cognitive or affective), teaching–learning—Table 2, or school-related factors—Table 3. In terms of the personal factors (as shown in Table 1), focus group participants felt that the violence in the society had impacted their thinking and behaviour and was influencing their academic achievement since bullying and revenge were undermining their focus and actual classroom engagement (see Table 1 for actual statements). Another factor was drug use and abuse as some aired and supported the view that marijuana and alcohol addictions were prevalent as some students even came to school already “high” (see comments in Table 1).

A lack of academic task-value and achievement motivation was also featured as a major cause since some participants believed that it was either difficult to sustain motivation or to find a nexus between the academic content taught at school with real-world application or gaining employment post-school. These findings are similar to those of Cobbett and Younger (2012) and Bailey

**Figure 3. Students’ secondary reasons for male–female disparity in achievement.**



**Table 1. Personal motivation, cognitive and affective factors**

Classifications of comments	Participants' actual statements
The impact of violence undermining a desire to be academically inclined- external-internal factor	"Sir dem only studying gun, if somebody do yuh something. yuh jus studying to do dem back."
Unable to sustain motivation	"Sometimes ah does come to school and start work good, then ah doh know what happen, ah jus does, kinda lose focus and interest jus so."
Students using drugs	"sir some of them does come to school high, they smoke weed. Then they cah study no work. They high."
Lack of task value (especially instrumental value) for abstract content—simultaneous equations	"Sir, wah I really have to learn about simultaneous equations for, and what x added y have to do with me making money? I will never really use that for anything. It doh make no sense."
The physical environment not conducive to sitting to learn form 8–2:30 5–6 hours- hot, no fan, dilapidated conditions- external factors- affecting concentration.	"Sir, it is very hot in the classroom every day. No ACs, No proper windows. We does be sweating, not even a fan, then it hard for we to concentrate on work." "And yuh know how long they ent paint this school, the place and walls dirty, nothing here working good, everything break up and mash-up."
Five years of education too long	"Sir how long yuh ha to stay in school? Five years, so long. Dah is too much time to spend in school, two or three years will be good."
Lack of parental support	"Sir parents are a waste of time, dey do study we, dey do study boys, they does only push girls. Girls does get challenges is they do this or if they do that. We have to work for what we want. Parents do even say that if your improve in yuh work yuh go get something."

Colloquial expressions: cah = can't; dah/t = that; dem = them; dey = they; doh = don't; ent = haven't; ha = have; yuh = you.

**Table 2. Teaching-learning related factors**

Classifications of comments	Participants' actual statements
Subjects not being made interesting	"Teachers do make learning fun. Sometimes yuh do feel to do the work. Make it more exciting."
Angry grumpy female-old teachers	"Sir when they come in class they always vex, vex, vex, like they bringing dey home problems in school to take out on we."
Lack of individual assistance	"We need more special attention; the teachers could come ah round and help we with the work on one and one."
Focus mainly on the girls- encouragement, guidance	"Teachers does push girls more, girls does get better treatment from parents as well."
Lack of explanations for difficult work	"When boys ask a question they saying yuh disrespectful."
Lack of hands on work and trades- mechanics, welding, etc.	"I reach the point where I fed up of school. I prefer to work with meh hands, only writing day to day. I want to do mechanics but dey doh have dat"
Lack of hands on work and practical activities- lab taken over by rats-	"We could do drama sometimes, yuh know act out the subject. And that would also be helpful- take we to the lab, beauty salon, barber shop. Lack of PE."

Colloquial expressions: dah/t = that; dey = they; doh = don't; yuh = you.

(2004). Sadly, many aired or echoed the view that a lack of parental support left them either unwilling or unmotivated to strive for anything worthwhile at school. In essence, many under-achieving males reported that they lacked the basic motivation set or the ability to self-regulate

**Table 3. School-level related factors—discipline, school climate, affiliation, and belonging**

Classifications of comments	Participants' actual statements
The feelings of being a constant target—teacher-student interactions	“Sir dem teachers does pick on we jus so. They always on we.”
Treated like dogs and criminals	“Sir we does get treated like dogs, like real criminals, so this s a penitentiary in here yuh know. Like yuh cah lime dey, yuh cah stop her by yuh own class.”
Abusive language from teachers	...
Frequent suspensions: loss of teaching—then it is difficult or seems futile to catch up	“The next thing is for everything is ah suspension, everything is ah ten days, ah two days, ah five days; Imagine I get send home from sports, suspension, suspension, and when yuh come back yuh do know what going on in class. Yuh lost.”
Emphasis on tightness of pants and small points regarding uniform	“Imagine yuh getting send home if yuh pants a little tight. Dey doh know who does have to borrow clothes from they cousin to wear to school.”
The arbitrary and extreme punishment and sanctions for small or minor infractions— school-based mechanisms	“Sometimes yuh do real small-thing and is a ten days or take a month off.”
Lack of interesting extracurricular activities—outings and field trips	“We do even have field trips and things, everything is school, school, we could go on trips and outings and things.”
Lack of opportunity to show off other skills in school-dress-up day	“Imagine for dress-up day we have to come in school clothes, yuh can even wear a little nice clothes.”

Colloquial expressions: cah = can't; dah/t = that; dem = them; dey = they; doh = don't; jus = just; yuh = you.

above and beyond the perceived barriers to academic engagement and achievement. At best they felt encumbered by a weakened mindset and at worst powerless by their perceived inadequacies.

### 3.4. Teaching-learning factors for male underachievement

With regard to teaching-learning factors, focus group participants' responses argued that pedagogy, a lack of scaffolding and direct assistance, negative teacher attitudes and behaviors, a lack of practical work and vocational training opportunities had negative effects on their learning (as captured in Table 2). It was also noted that underachieving males felt that everyone—teachers, parents, and society - focus on, and push girls harder to achieve while ignoring the boys. These thoughts in many ways mirrored those of the other participants who answered the structured questionnaire as reported earlier. Additionally, the focus group participants felt that teachers were not only harder on them but also made no attempt to assist them in difficulties or make the subject matter interesting enough to capture their attention (see comments and categories identified in Table 2).

### 3.5. School-related factors for male underachievement

Focus group participants also identified *school-related* factors (see Table 3) that they felt contributed to their underachievement. In most cases, these factors were centered on the discipline procedures and policies of the school. These students felt that they were always on the receiving end of either unfair, extreme or insensitive sanctions. The research of Husband (2012) and Kutnick, Jules and Layne (1997) reveal similar claims. Further, they identified general and specific cases of maltreatment that shot their desires for school affiliation and they also felt that the physical plant did not inspire a desire to learn. Additionally, a lack of uplifting extracurricular and showcasing activities was also registered as impeding their chances of academic achievement. The school-related factor categories and participants' matching comments are outlined in Table 3.

### 3.6. Students' recommendations for male underachievement

Participants in the study made recommendations for improving male achievement levels (as identified in Table 4). These recommendations ran the gamut from self-motivating seminars to same-sex schools. However, the most popular strategy advocated was using male-oriented

**Table 4. Student recommendations for improving male achievement**

General classification	Specific category	Percentage of participants
Guidance and self-management strategies	Self-motivating seminars	11
	Strategies to balance academic and extracurricular activities	11
	Greater parental involvement	8
	Education emphasis	8
	Advocacy/empowerment groups	8
Teaching-learning factors/ strategies	Different teaching strategies (male vs female learning)	23
	Goal-setting strategies	19
	Male teacher role models	4
	Same-sex schools	4
Other	Conduct more research	4

pedagogy (23% of responses) and the least recommended was either further research, having more male teachers as role models or establishing more same-sex schools. Interestingly, students seem to favor suggestions that were either self-empowering or esteem building such as goal setting, balancing academics and extracurricular or motivation seminars. These recommendations were noticeably in line with the problems that they identified in terms of personal inadequacies of poor self-efficacy, low task-value, engagement and motivation.

Following these recommendations, there were suggestions favoring male empowerment through adaptive parenting, male empowerment advocacy groups and strategies highlighting the value of education (see Table 4). These “other-focused” submissions reveal that students were not only insightful regarding possible solutions for male underachievement but that they were also pragmatic in suggesting ideas for treatment of the problem. These recommendations also showed their understanding of factors in the sociocultural ecosystem that had the potential to impact male achievement and self-fulfillment in meaningful and positive ways. These recommendations were not at all far-fetched and may in fact actually yield surprising results - a matter for future intervention research on this issue.

#### 4. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the fact that underachieving males may be beset with many challenges that impact their ability or competence to achieve at a standard relative to their female counterparts, it is instructive that their voices, individual or collective, have been largely left out of the arguments, debates and diagnoses of the male-female achievement differential. And while most established hypotheses have merit, the value of students’ self-examination and assessment cannot be discounted. Consequently, the perspectives and diagnoses put forward in this study were very insightful and critical because they were gathered from persons in the midst of the dilemma. Additionally, the recommendations are even better placed because they come from affected students and their peers and appear logical and salubrious. The focus group participants’ views were particularly valuable because they resisted the temptation to blame everything and everyone outside of themselves but gave insightful responses related to the underlying causes including personal deficiencies. This finding is intriguing because international education researcher John Hattie argues that a *mega meta-analysis* of the findings related to achievement outcomes reveals that *the student* is a most critical predictor variable, accounting for as much as 40% of the variance across studies (Hattie, 2012). In sum, this study has not only brought additional light to bear on a growing education problem but also highlights the need to give more credence to the voices of those in the midst this particular challenge in the field of education.

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### Author details

W. Marc Jackman<sup>1</sup>  
E-mail: [wmarcj5@gmail.com](mailto:wmarcj5@gmail.com)  
Judith Morrain-Webb<sup>1</sup>  
E-mail: [marc.jackman@utt.edu.tt](mailto:marc.jackman@utt.edu.tt)

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Education Programmes, Valsayn Campus, University of Trinidad & Tobago, Valsayn, Trinidad and Tobago.

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