

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON BOYS' UNDERPERFORMANCE IN EDUCATION IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA, PAKISTAN

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Abstract/Izvleček This article is an attempt to explore possible causes of boys' underperformance in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) Annual examinations of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. The aim of the study is to explore the issue of boys' underperformance from the perspectives of school and college teachers. Thus, the data for the study come from qualitative interviews with 30 school and college teachers (15 male and 15 female). We employed purposive sampling technique for including teachers. The findings of the study recommend that evidence-based strategies need to be adopted to improve boys' academic performance and attitudes to learning.

Pogledi učiteljev na manjšo učno uspešnost dečkov v provinci Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Članek poskuša raziskati možne vzroke za nižjo uspešnost dečkov na izpitih, ki jih urad za šolstvo (Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education) letno izvaja v nižji (Secondary School Certificate – SSC) in višji srednji šoli (Higher Secondary School Certificate – HSSC). Cilj študije je proučiti vprašanje manjše uspešnosti dečkov z vidika učiteljev v srednji in višji šoli. Podatki za raziskavo izvirajo iz kvalitativnih intervjujev s 30 (15 moških in 15 žensk) učitelji v srednjih in višjih šolah. Da bi izboljšali učno uspešnost dečkov in njihov odnos do učenja, je treba sprejeti strategije, ki temeljijo na podatkih, pridobljenih s študijo.

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Background

A number of studies have shown that female students outperform their male counterparts in arts and humanities, while boy students are better in STEM subjects (Natta, Desai, & Vanneman, 2017). Nevertheless, several studies have concluded that female students perform better than their male counterparts in almost all subjects (Driessen & Van Langen, 2013; Ullah, Ullah, & Allender, 2020; Ullah & Ullah, 2019). This is a vivid gender reverse trend in educational performance. Studies in the past highlighted and reported female students' underperformance (Nyalusi, 2013; Ullah, Ullah, & Allender, 2020). These studies show that female students were less competitive in education in the recent past (Driessen & Van Langen, 2013). This gender reverse trend in educational performance has received serious academic attention across the world. For example, in the 1970s and 80s, the issue of female students' underperformance in education was a key focus of debate and research in the developed and developing nations (Ullah & Ullah, 2019). From the mid-1990s, feminist struggles and movements have reduced gender discrepancies in education (Ullah, Ullah, & Bilal, 2020). These feminist struggles resulted in the creation of learning environments friendly towards females in the West. The favourable learning environment improved girls' academic performance in many parts of the developed world, including the United State of America and the United Kingdom. In the USA and UK, a favourable learning environment led to a gender reverse change in educational performance; female students achieved good results and surpassed boys in humanities subjects (O'Donnell & Sharpe, 2002).

Since then, boys' underperformance in education has become a key topic of debate and research in the sociology of education. Policy makers and academics have focused on boys' underachievement in education in both developed and developing countries (Drudy, 2008; Marks, 2008; Mullis et al., 2000; Stromquist, 2007). As in other parts of the world, the issue of boys' underperformance in education has recently received due academic attention in Pakistan (Ullah, Ullah and Allender, 2020). This means that the issue of boys' underperformance is not limited to some developing countries but prevails across the developed and developing world, including Pakistan. Unlike the developed world and some developing countries, Pakistan has a dearth of empirical studies on the issue of boys' underperformance.

Only a few small-scale studies have been carried out on boys' underperformance in education in Pakistan (Aslam, 2009; Ullah, Ullah and Allender, 2020; Ullah & Ullah, 2019). This shows that the issue of boys' underperformance is a neglected area in the context of Pakistani society in general and in KP in particular.

This study thus attempted to explore the issue of boys' underperformance from the perspective of school and college teachers. We do believe that the current study has identified and explored some of the important reasons behind boys' underperformance from the perspective of teachers.

Review of Literature

Boys' academic underperformance has been an issue of great academic interest for the last three-and-a-half decades across the globe (Smith, 2011; Titus, 2004). It is now an established fact that boys are underperforming in education. Boys' academic underperformance is equally visible in developing countries. People who believe that boys are more intelligent than girls also acknowledge the current trend towards boys' underperformance (see Baru, 2012; Ullah & Ullah, 2019). Findings from early and recent studies suggest that boys are underperforming in education at the school, college and university levels (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Ullah & Ullah, 2019). Thomson et al., (2012) assert that boys are underperforming in education at all levels. Fergusson and Horwood (1997), in their study "Gender differences in educational achievement in a New Zealand birth cohort," argued that boys are underperforming in terms of grades and results at school and college levels.

It is pertinent to mention here that boys' academic underperformance is primarily reported in Arts and Humanities subjects. Card and Lemieux (2001) have highlighted boys' poor performance in English, History, Economics and Cultural Studies. Several studies from around the world have reported similar findings (Bailur, 2006; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Charles & Luoh, 2003). These studies have found that the academic performance of boys is influenced by anxiety, student attitudes, culture and norms, the type of school, the teacher's role, school location, self-esteem and family background. Most of these studies have been carried out in developed countries. (Baru, 2012; R. Ullah & Ullah, 2019). We have identified a considerable number of studies in countries of the developing world (Agbalajobi, 2010; Alam, 2017). The phenomenon (boys' underperformance), however, has not revived due academic attention in many developing countries, including Pakistan.

Skimming the literature, we could not find any academic research that focuses on the reasons and causes of boys' underperformance in education in Pakistan.

In a country like Pakistan where men distinctly dominate almost all aspects of social life, this gender reverse change in education has not received public and academic attention.

We also stress here that this gender reverse change in academic performance is taking place despite notable gender inequality in education: female students have more limited access to educational resources than their male counterparts (Ullah & Ali, 2018). This study, we believe, is very important because it explores the reasons behind boys' lack of performance in education in the context of Pakistan from the perspective of teachers.

Material and Methods

The results of content analysis of the schools' and colleges' annual examination of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) Peshawar Khyber Pakhtunkhwa show boys underperforming in education (Ullah, Ullah, & Allender, 2020). Based on the findings from the content analysis, this article aims to explore teachers' perspectives on boys' underperformance on the Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary School Certificate Annual examinations of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) Peshawar, KP. The study is qualitative in nature.

Data for the study come from in-depth qualitative interviews with school and college teachers. We used purposive sampling technique for including respondents in the study. The sample comprises 15 male teachers and 15 female teachers from different schools and colleges in KP. The rationale for including male and female teachers from different schools and colleges was to gain deeper insight into the reasons behind boys' underachievement in education. Similarly, we included respondents (male and female teachers) who had more than 20 years of teaching experience and were aware of the trend towards *boys'* underperformance in education. An interview guide, consisting of open-ended questions, was used to explore the teachers' perspectives on this educational issue. The reasons for boys' underperformance, especially in Arts and Humanities subjects, were discussed in all interviews with teachers.

Our data was qualitative and was processed and analysed in line with qualitative research techniques (thematic analysis). While doing qualitative thematic analysis, we followed all the procedures and phases (familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up). We first familiarised ourselves with our field data; we then transcribed and coded the data. The codes were analysed through careful reading to remove overlapping codes. After careful reading of our data, we generated broader themes.

With a comprehensive analysis of the broader themes, we generated more precise themes. We also labelled each theme to indicate its topic. We rigorously reviewed the themes and labelled them before presenting our findings under relevant themes. Our analysis enabled us to present our field data under the following key meaningful themes.

Findings and Discussion

In the urban centres of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan, as in many other parts of the world, boys are underachieving in secondary and higher secondary education (Aslam 2009; Agrawal and Nehajul, 2017). As in other urban centres of Pakistan, boys are underperforming in secondary and higher secondary education in Peshawar, KP (Ullah, Ullah and Allender, 2020). The article, focusing on this gender reverse trend in academic performance, has explored some important reasons behind boys' underperformance in education. The study's findings, with sensitivity to the social and cultural context of KP, are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Parents' unconditional love and affection for sons is toxic to boys' studies

Expressing affection and love for children has proven to be highly significant for balanced growth of children (Alanen & Mayall, 2001). Nevertheless, showing love and affection to children without knowing how to discipline them can be toxic for children (Becker, 1964). This study's findings reveal that unconditional parental love and freedom are the core reasons behind boys' underperformance in education. The study's findings reveal that unconditional love and affection spoil boys, and this subsequently has a negative influence on their studies. The following excerpts from teacher interviews support this claim. One of the respondents argued as follows: Parents give more love and affection to sons than daughters. Sons enjoy high status and freedom within and outside home.

This freedom and high status often spoil them. They get involved in various activities which badly influence their performance in education.

An almost identical response was given by another respondent who asserted that excessive love and affection make boys careless. Their careless behaviour later continues in school. A senior schoolteacher opined that “boys are given more importance in the family. This distracts them from studies”. One respondent stated the following:

Boys’ underperformance in education is linked with their personal freedom and higher status in the family. The unconditional love and affection boys receive from parents entice boys into many negative habits which adversely affect their engagement with studies and performance on examinations.

These responses show that unconditional love and affection socialize boys to be irresponsible and less interested in studies, which negatively affects their performance in education. In addition to love and affection, boys enjoy unbridled mobility and freedom to engage in activities that adversely affect their studies. This is in line with Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2010), who argue that boys’ poor performance in education is due to their personal freedom and higher status in the family. The nub of the discussion here is that unconditional parental love and affection for their sons could be a key reason behind boys’ underperformance in education.

Paternal absence and boys’ underperformance in education

Research studies in different socio-cultural contexts have established a link between the absence of fathers and boys’ underachievement in education (Ogbu, 2003). The findings of this study are similar to those reported by Ogbu (2003). The findings of our study reveal that having a father living abroad or away from home is one of the key factors in boys’ underachievement in education in KP. Our findings also indicate that sons, in the absence of their fathers, indulge in various types of undesirable activity that can distract them from their studies. The following excerpt from the respondent interviews is among several excerpts that support this assertion:

In our society, mostly fathers live away from home for work/labour within the country or abroad. Their absence leads to loss of or no checks and balances on children, especially on boys. Boys, in the absence of their fathers, mostly fall in undesirable activities that negatively affect their academic performance.

An almost identical response was expressed by a college lecturer who argued: "Mostly, fathers living outside the country. Sons in most cases, do not face any hurdle to go out. They spend their time with friends in outdoor activities". This means that sons, in the absence of fathers, have no restrictions on their mobility and activities. Another respondent argued that "unfortunately, our students come from the middle class, where parents are working either abroad or elsewhere within the country. In their absence, their sons indulge in unproductive activities that spoil them and their studies".

The above responses refer to the importance of paternal presence and involvement in the educational achievement of their children. Parents, particularly fathers, construct checks and balances for their children that significantly affect the educational performance of the children (Spera, Wentzel & Matto, 2009). This is reinforced by Ogbu (2003), who asserted that, when a father lives abroad, his sons do not take their studies seriously. They spend less time on their studies, which results in their underperformance in education.

The findings of past and present studies suggest that the absence of paternal surveillance of sons allows them to spend time in bad company and engage in undesirable activities. The findings of this study support these earlier studies and extend the argument that bad company exerts detrimental effects on boys' academic performance. One of the respondents said, "Boys spend most of their time with friends outside the home. They [boys] indulge in smoking, celebration of weekend parties and excursions. These habits badly affect their educational performance". An almost identical response was given by another respondent, who stated: "Boys are spending most of their time with friends, watching movies and playing games. They have little time for their studies".

Excessive use of social media and boys' academic performance

Paternal absence and bad company push boys towards various negative activities, including excessive use of social media. Research studies (see Burns & Bracey, 2001; Furrer & Skinner, 2003) have concluded that excessive use of social media negatively affects educational performance. Uncensored and unlimited use of social media is usually a gendered phenomenon in Pakistan (Ullah & Ali, 2018). Boys have more freedom in our society than girls, and they have more and easier access to social media. The link between excessive use of social media and boys' poor academic performance was pointed out by the majority of our respondents.

They unanimously argued that excessive use of social media by boys has caused serious damage to boys' studies and their educational performance. Several of our respondents said that "boys' underperformance in education is caused by their excessive use of mobile and social media. The excessive and uncensored use of social media adversely affects their studies". They also reported that "due to excessive use of social media, they are not getting maximum time for their studies." The Chairman of BISE Peshawar, KP offered this firm argument:

Uncensored and unlimited use of mobile phone and internet is not only dangerous for teenagers' studies but also motivates them to indulge in various immoral activities. They spend much time in using Facebook and playing games. They play games on mobile for hours, which leaves them with no quality time for their studies. A senior teacher argued that "boys are underperforming in education, owing to unlimited and uncontrolled access to cell phone and internet use, which pushes them in the wrong direction". These responses suggest that excessive use of social media negatively affects the performance of boys in education. The study's findings show great similarity with the findings of other research studies in many different socio-cultural contexts (Jha & Kelleher, 2006; Titus, 2004). Furrer and Skinner (2003) claimed a strong link between excessive use of social media and boys' underachievement in education. Our findings extend the existing body of scholarship on the link between excessive use of social media and its negative effects on boys' studies and educational performance.

Boys' free mobility and unrestrained outdoor activity

The study findings reveal that participation by boys in outdoor activities: sports, driving, going to market, and *hujra* (a drawing room/common community guesthouse in Pashtun culture where hosts and guests routinely congregate) result in boys' underperformance in school. They waste much of their time in extra-curricular activities and do not have enough time for their studies. The following extract is one of several from our respondents' interviews:

Boys, as compared to girls, have more opportunities to engage in outdoor activities (sports, driving, going to market), which distract them from their studies. They are wasting much of their time in playing various games, driving cars and spending time with friends in *hujras*. These activities badly affect their studies.

Another respondent said that "boys don't have access to these activities during their early schooling (primary level). Therefore, they perform well in their studies.

As soon as they enter the middle level, they get exposure to these activities, which then affect their academic performance". This suggests boys gain freedom as soon as they reach their teenage years and become involved in a multiplicity of activities that negatively affect their schooling.

An almost identical response was given by another respondent who associated boys' academic underperformance with their unlimited engagement with sports.

He opined that "boys' underperformance in education is due to their unlimited engagement on the playground". A third respondent stated: "Boys go outside the home, spend most of their time in *bujrah* with friends, having no plan for their studies". The link between boys' excessive involvement in extra-curricular activities and their poor academic performance is reinforced by another respondent. He argued that "Boys have other channels for themselves which keep them away from studies. For example, they go out, spend time with friends and may easily engage in bad activities". Another respondent claimed that "Boys have extra activities which cause their underperformance in education".

In brief, it can be argued that boys' access to outdoor activities negatively affects their studies. Boys' excessive engagement in outdoor activities results in their underachievement in school. These findings confirm those by Burns and Bracey (2001), who found that boys spent too much time outside the home. They also asserted that boys, apart from their excessive engagement in sports, also engage in activities that are detrimental for their studies. The findings of this study thus add to the existing scholarship on boys' underperformance in education by highlighting the negative consequences of boys' uncontrolled and unlimited engagement in outdoor activities.

Boys' engagement in work other than studies

Some of the respondents attributed boys' underperformance in school to their sharing of the family workload. Boys, alongside their schooling, perform labour to assist their parents in fulfilling the needs of their families, and this can adversely affect their educational performance. Boys' underperformance is linked to their participation in socio-economic activity (Hodgetts, 2008). This, however, cannot be generalized and needs to be understood with reference to a child's socio-economic background and their social situation in society (see Ullah and Ali, 2018). A summary of remarks from a few respondents is given below in support of this claim:

Family socio-economic situation and financial position have a significant role in boys' underperformance in education. We have mostly working- and middle- class students. They, along with their studies, are engaged in labour, do part time jobs or assist their parents in their work. This negatively influences their academic performance.

Another respondent said that "boys are facing too great a burden in assisting their parents in business and other activities. Boys' engagement in these activities diverts their attention from studies".

A similar response was given by another respondent who stated: "We have students from very poor backgrounds, who help and assist their parents. This affects their studies and leads to their falling behind."

These responses demonstrate that, alongside their studies, boys also assist their parents to meet their families' needs. The participation of boys in socio-economic activities adversely affects their academic outcome.

The study's findings are similar to those identified by Reimer (2012). For example, his findings claimed that when boys engage in various types of labour, this can badly affect their educational achievement. Similarly, the findings of the study conducted by Jha and Kelleher (2006) support the study's findings by emphasizing that in many developing countries, the issue of boys' underperformance in school has largely been associated with the socio-economic status of the family. The study's findings thus strengthen the argument that the work burden of boys, in addition to their studies, seriously affects their educational performance.

Conclusion

We, in this paper, have explored the plight of boys who fail to achieve their potential in education at school and college levels in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The paper has explored the reasons behind boys' underperformance from the school and college teachers' perspective in SSC and HSSC examinations of BISE Peshawar, KP. The findings of the paper revealed that parental unconditional and unlimited love for sons, paternal absence (living away from home), excessive use of social media by boys, free mobility and unrestrained outdoor activities and boys' engagement in work other than studies are among the leading factors in boys' underperformance for teachers on examinations in Pakistan.

Thus, the findings provide new insight into the understanding of boys' underachievement and extend the existing concern about and debate on boys' and girls' educational performance. These findings provide convincing insight for creating strategies to improve boys' engagement with their studies and improve their academic performance. Based on the study findings, it can be stressed and suggested that parents need to supervise their male children's activities. Parents/guardians could restrict boys' excessive use of social media and excessive participation in outdoor activities. In this study, we have focused narrowly on the issue of boys' underperformance in education from the perspective of teachers.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, it is suggested that the perspectives of parents and students themselves need to be explored in future research.

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