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## THE MISEDUCATION OF BOYS

*Jerome Teelucksingh*



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### ABSTRACT

*In the Caribbean, young boys are not receiving a wholesome education that is beneficial for their psychological, social and emotional development. Their freedom to choose, to speak and play are restricted. These statements are based on my observations during 2018-2020 in selected preschools and kindergartens in Trinidad & Tobago. Teachers with distorted beliefs and skewed views on masculinity are playing a crucial role in influencing the masculinity of boys.*

**Keywords:** boys, brain development, early childhood, kindergartens, nurseries

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What are little boys made of?  
What are little boys made of?  
Frogs and snails  
And puppy dogs' tails  
That's what little boys are made of

What are little girls made of?  
Sugar and spice  
And all that's nice,  
That's what little girls are made of.

Some readers might remember this children's nursery rhyme. It seems simple and harmless, but it also sends a subliminal message that boys and girls are markedly different. We do not need reminders that good boys are fast becoming an endangered species.

The gender-stereotyping that occurs in childhood is prevalent. I conducted a simple social experiment in five kindergartens, or preschools, in Trinidad and Tobago (in Caribbean). There were certain discrepancies. Not surprisingly, in all these kindergartens there was an absence of male teachers. Probably there was the belief that men did not have patience with children or even worse, that men could not be trusted and would sexually and physically abuse these children. This belief persists despite the reality female preschool teachers have been found guilty of abusing their students (Harris; Xuan). Maybe this field of teaching has gradually become feminized and this proved to be a deterrent for some males who enjoy teaching. Additionally, the relatively low salary or no room for advancement could be factors contributing to the male absence in this crucial learning environment.

There is a paucity of research on brain development and its impact on behaviour among boys in the Caribbean. In 2016, I was surprised to read an article, by a teacher, of a kindergarten class in the United States, who claimed, "Boys' impulsivity and poor self-regulation are directly tied to their immature brain development" ("The Challenge of Boys in Early Childhood Education"). Possibly this was applicable to American boys, but it certainly seemed an unfair assessment and inaccurate generalization.

During the past thirty years there have been studies, outside the Caribbean, on sex differences in brain structure. Some of these studies have provided inconclusive evidence but there are noteworthy findings that could help kindergarten teachers to better understand the educational development of their young male students. [Ai-Min Bao](#) and [Dick F Swaab](#) contend that sex differences in neuropsychizophrenia) and such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder and schizophrenia) and behaviour are influenced by structural and functional sex differences in parts of the brain and fluctuating sex hormone levels (Bao and Swaab). New findings, in 2018, reinforced early findings of the differences between the brains of both sexes ([Wierenga](#), [Sexton](#), [Laake](#), [Giedd](#), Tamnes). These publications made me acutely aware that there was a need for research, statistics and data regarding boys in preschools in Trinidad and Tobago. And even more unfortunate is that Latin American and



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other Caribbean countries have not been collecting this data that would be vital in assisting the early developmental phases of boys.

In 2018, I spent two weeks observing young children in a learning environment. During both days, I observed 8 boys and 8 girls in two private and public kindergartens in Trinidad. Boys and girls (between 3 and 4 years old) were given dolls, pink and blue Play-Doh (putty), toy soldiers and cars. The children neither differentiated among the toys nor attached any colour codes to their toys. Girls were eager to play with the cars and soldiers. Some of the teachers gave dolls and plastic kitchenware to the girls and the boys received cars and soldiers. Five of the boys were willing to share their toys with their female classmates who accepted the cars and soldiers, but this was discouraged by the teachers. Not surprisingly, girls were also willing to play with blue toys and building blocks. And boys had no inhibitions playing with pink building blocks. The teachers at the kindergarten displayed displeasure that the boys were playing with pink toys or pink Play-Doh. At home, the message would have been reinforced as some of these children would have been told that boys should play with toy guns, soldiers and cars whilst girls comfortably played with dolls, kitchen sets or toy cosmetics.

In 2019 and 2020, I spent similar short spells in two preschools. I also noticed that the teachers and assistants in the preschools were females. Additionally, I did not intend to investigate parental attachment but witnessed that 8 of the 11 boys, in one preschool, were reluctant to leave their parents and stay in the nursery. On mornings, when boys were dropped off by a parent or parents there was occasional distress. There were repeated incidents and a daily average of 4 to 5 boys clinging to a parent and crying. The administrators ignored the harmful effects of separation anxiety, and they saw it as being a normal reaction of the boys. The girls who were in similar distress were three times more likely than the boys to be hugged and comforted by the teachers.

Some of the preschools were overcrowded which meant less individual attention to the students. This overcrowding was largely due to these administrators seeking to maximize profits. Most of the schools were overcrowded as children were packed like baby chickens in a cage. It seems that some of those involved in nurseries are more focused on money rather than providing a comfortable environment that would be appealing for boys.

The skewed learning within the classroom also has a gender dimension which should not be overlooked. Maybe some boys might like to read rather than write or prefer to colour rather than read or write. Discipline and order are important in society. However, often the preschools have a strict regimen that restricts the movement and creativity of boys.

One of the experiments I conducted also revealed the hidden distortions that are occurring at these learning centres. I instructed the woman teacher to give the six children (ages 4 to 5) coloured buttons and to allow them 15 to 20 minutes to arrange the buttons in patterns and shapes. I gave her two boxes with fifteen pink buttons and thirty blue buttons. There were 19 children, 11 boys and eight girls. I stood watching as she gave the pink buttons to four girls and the blue buttons to two boys.



I was not interested in the shapes being made by the children. As expected, certain gender roles were reinforced as the girls received the pink buttons. I also wanted to see if the teacher would select an equal number of boys and girls, and if the boys would receive any pink buttons. In this instance, her decision to choose two boys reinforced my view that even at this young age the boys are not treated equally and given that equal chance to participate. After I collected the buttons, I noticed there was a girl with a plastic hammer hitting blocks, but she was scolded by one of the teachers. However, when a boy performed the action, he was not interrupted.

Furthermore, during the exercise the teacher was constantly telling the boys to “be quiet.” This selection and display within that one classroom could be due to a biased or improperly trained teacher and does not necessarily mean it is occurring in all kindergartens. We need to be more aware that there were subtle divisions in this kindergarten classroom that would also be continued at home and the community.

The state of education is only one aspect in a multidimensional world that seems unsuitable for the holistic development of boys. We also need to be aware of other institutions and factors such as the exposure to certain cartoons or children’s shows, ethnicity, culture and religious doctrines also impinge on the boys’ psychological progress.

It seems that sometimes an unhealthy atmosphere, such as an abusive or lonely home, will make boys and girls more willing to be in school which provides that safe zone, that elusive peace space. If parents argue and quarrel at home or abuse a child, it is only natural that a child will feel more inclined to behave similarly at school. Likewise, if the child is being verbally abused or bullied in school, there would be an attachment to home and reluctance to attend school. The urgent question to be addressed would be this: could we ensure both school and home are safe zones and peaceful spaces?

The recipe to create mature, diligent, trustworthy boys in our world is a difficult one. The reason being is that there is considerable inequality, and our boys are not all on the same playing field. The differences in culture, literacy, religion and geographical location have all posed problems for moving boys to a higher educational and developmental level. However, I want to suggest four steps needed to occur which will help boys in the preschools.

1. Identifying accurately the early onset of male-biased disorders as autism
2. Ensuring peaceful and happy surroundings.
3. Creating a safe environment to encourage creativity, questioning and thinking.
4. Developing channels of communication to freely voice concerns.

These four steps could be cornerstones in the preschool curricula and would ultimately result in a better generation of male teenagers and men. It is difficult to disagree when I write that many of our boys are misunderstood, and the result is that the adolescent journey is a nightmare. There is an urgent need to ensure that our boys can envision a society where they are treated equally. It is crucial to work with our boys to let them fulfill their dreams and goals.



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Our society cannot believe that hugging and displaying affection will make our boys soft or effeminate. If we do not embrace our boys, then the wrong persons will embrace them and then it will be too late. Do we want our boys to find role models among criminal gangs? Certainly not. Some researchers such as [Mary Cobbett](#) and [Mike Younger](#) have identified underachievement as a problem among Caribbean boys. But the origin of this crisis can be found in the preschools or kindergartens (Cobbett and Younger).

If there is miseducation in the preschools, then it is difficult to observe progress among boys. Every boy (including slow learners and with disabilities) should be given access to a preschool with an education that is not biased. This could be achieved if practitioners, policymakers and stakeholders involved in early childhood programs in the Caribbean are genuinely interested in addressing the learning challenges facing boys.

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