The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

GENDER AND THE YOUNG CHILD: A JAMAICAN COMMUNITY EXPLORATION

Coordinators' Notebook No. 20, 1997

Janet Brown and Dr. Gayle McGarrity

Southfield, St. Elizabeth, Jamaica. An eager group of primary school children sat with one of the researchers under a tree during lunch recess to discuss what boys and girls do. The tree bore a sign which read "Do Not Climb Tree". The six-year-olds were asked to sit closest, and for most of the discussion there were at least 10 girls and 8 boys who said they were six and in grade one. More than a dozen other boys and girls ranging from seven to fourteen years old sat and listened, chiming in at points to confirm or contest statements of the younger ones.

All the children said that they had attended basic school (a government/community preschool system for children from 3+ through age 6) before coming to the all-age school (grades 1B9); most attended the basic schools within Southfield. Could they remember being at basic school? Could they remember being four years old? Or did they have someone in their family or nearby who was four? The six-year-old boys were asked to list all the things that boys who are four can do; then the girls were asked the same question about four-year-old girls. The lists came out like this:

FOUR-YEAR-OLD BOYS

What can four-year-old boys do?

Write [What can you write?]
 ...foolishness
 ...O, C, A, numbers
Walk
Go to Basic School
Run
Talk
Fling stone
Eat
Shoot bird [at four?]...Some can, my brother can and he's four
Ride bike, a three-wheel one
Climb tree
Jump
Fight, tease
Bite
Curse bad word
Play kick ball, soccer
Run tyre

At this point the researcher asked, What did boys at age four do at home? Their replies follow.

Kill the flowers
Kill lizards
Climb the building
Jump on the bed
Kill cockroach
Kill rat
Steal sugar
Give trouble
Play football
Sweep yard
Sweep house
Go on errands to the store
Carry things
Make bed

FOUR-YEAR-OLD GIRLS

First, what do four-year-old girls do at school?

Curse bad words
Sweep the classroom
Thump [hitting someone]
Kick
Climb tree
Swing
Jump
Play on benches
Play on board [write, knock it]
Give trouble
Bite [sister and friends]
ABCs
Write own name

What about at home?

Sweep house
Bite
Help their mothers clean house
Wash plate
Wipe house
Wash bathroom

By the time the girls were making their list, all the children were beginning to get restless, so the six-year-olds were asked to now speak for themselves: What can they now do at this age? Their answers as they spoke for themselves were quite revealing. The girls gave their list, first speaking quickly, sometimes proudly, talking on top of each other in making their list. The boys were more hesitant when it came their turn, taking more time, and appearing more shy about their answers.

SIX-YEAR-OLD GIRLS

Clean house
Wipe out house
Read books
Sweep and mop
Wash school bag
Wash plate
Wash panties [*from age 4,5 they asserted*]
Wash socks
Wash school uniforms
Clean the toilet
Clean church and school shoes
Cook [*What do they cook?*]
...johnnycake [*a fried flour dumpling*]
...fry banana chips
...fry egg
...frankfurters
...cook chicken [*How?*] Put oil in the pot, then the chicken
...cook rice
Share the plates, glasses
Comb hair (my own, my mom's)
Wash van and car
Swing
Clean up pig mess
Play dolly house
Empty chimmy [*chamber pot*], wash it
Water goat
Water plants

SIX-YEAR-OLD BOYS

Wash donkey
Wash horse
Feed pig
Wash cat
Water goat
Feed calf
Water garden
Help plant roses, care the roses
Roast corn (build the trash fire, put on the corn, roast it)
Sweep yard
Eat grapes, mangoes, apples
Stone mangoes
Shoot bird (roast it and then feed it to the puppy)
Feed the puppy scraps

[*Anything inside the house?*]

Wash and dry plate
Carry things to the table
Play
Play ball
Play dolly house with the girls
Cricket
Basketball
Ride two-wheel bike

As the boys began talking about the sports they played, the girls chimed in, "Girls, too, Miss!" When both boys and girls were asked about the games they played at this age, they agreed that girls and boys play all the same games. One girl said that the only game that girls played that boys didn't was "Dandy Shandy", a game of toss-and-dodge played with a ball or juice box. Ball sports, tug-o-war, swimming, tennis, riding bicycle, were all seen as activities for both boys and girls.

When one girl said that boys didn't usually shop, one boy said, "Yes, I shop. I go to the shop and play games in the shop."

When these lists were finished, group pictures were taken of all the children, and of the six-year-old "informant" groups. While standing under the tree, younger and older children (up to age fourteen, average age 8 to 9) told the researcher what they wanted to be when they became adults. The boys' list started with "D.J." [*disc jockey who sings and spins records*]; three said they wanted to be soldiers, while three said firemen. Two wanted to be boxers, one a policeman, one a pilot. When the same group was asked if any of them wanted to be farmers, at least four said yes. One aspiring boxer said he also wanted to be an artist. One girl, age 7, started off the girls' list with her desire to be a ballet dancer. At least three wanted to be teachers(they were again all talking at once), four policewomen, several wanted to be "modellers", one an artist, one a farmer, one a lawyer, one a dressmaker, and one a doctor (who also wanted to be a singer and modeller). Several wanted to be more than one thing, as did the boys.

In the background one boy was overheard stating that his friend wanted to be a "gal man". The boy (age 10) then explained for himself that this meant he wanted to "have plenty gal". [*Why?*] "So they can cook, clean and wash!" When asked what he would do if he didn't "have plenty gal", he said that he would "have to help myselfYand maybe make a garden".

Despite the statements of many parents, old and young, that they raise their young sons and daughters similarly, it was very clear in these conversations with Southfield children that by the age of six—and even by the age of four—clear distinctions were already being drawn about what were girl activities and boy activities, especially within the domestic sphere. As suggested in other Caribbean research on gender socialization and on family roles (Brown and Chevannes 1995, Anderson, Brown and Chevannes 1993, and others), traditional division of labour modeled by adults is passed on early to young children. When the researcher was shown the basic school by a group of the Southfield schoolgirls who volunteered for this, she asked them why only girls volunteered. "Girls are more helpful". [*Why?*] "The boys say that most work is girls' work". "They say that sweeping house is girls' work, yard is boys' work". [*How do they know this? Who teaches them this?*] The girls had no ready answer for this, except to suggest that the boys just make it up. [*So how about the adults at home? What do the men do and the women do? The mothers and fathers?*] "My father cooks...when my mother is sick". "When my mother is working, my father cooks sometimes."

It was clear in the children's listmaking that there were few stigmas attached to girls doing what boys do. In fact the girls, in following the boys' first list for four-year-olds, seemed quite "competitive" in listing similar activities, particularly mischievous ones. But when the boys followed the girls in stating what they do at age six, there was no similar competition. "Girls' work" was not listed at all, until a prompting question about what they do in the home elicited two such tasks (wash and dry plate, carry things to the table).

In a section of the Southfield report which engaged adults in describing some of their child-rearing practices, a group of men interviewed in a bar one evening discussed the different ways one should raise boys vs. girls:

> Girls need to be treated in a more gentle fashion. You have to give them more attention and explain more things to them. They need to be protected from the boys. You can take chances with boys, but not with girls. Girls are more interested in education than boys are. Whereas a little girl will cry if you prevent her from attending school, the boy will be relievedY. Boys are more suitable for outside chores, like caring for animals, searching for wood. Some girls have full responsibility for the house when their parents are not in. A boy should learn to do household chores as well, like taking out the chimmy (chamberpot), cleaning the house, etc. One man interjected that if he were a boy, he would be ashamed to do those chores, but another insisted that if you live on your own, you have to do these things for yourself anyway, so you might as well get used to it from youth. Another said that a boy will be called "chamber bud" if he does such things.

As in other Jamaican communities studied, girls' responsibilities are generally heavier than boys', though farming chores mitigate this difference somewhat in Southfield. Girls' homebound duties are part of a traditional Caribbean strategy of protection and supervision (aimed at preventing early pregnancy and thus, thwarted ambitions) as well as skill-building for motherhood and homemaking. The greater freedom enjoyed by boys beyond the "yard" [home space] and their outdoor task assignments are also part of an equally long-standing strategy intended to toughen boys with a range of survival skills seen as required for a hard life, and for their eventual role as primary provider.

As urban, "imported" lifestyles increasingly supplant traditional rural patterns in much of the Caribbean—and even in rural Southfield, as the research findings repeatedly reminded us—adult gender roles are being challenged and changed. Over 40% of households throughout the Caribbean are female-headed, with visiting or absentee fathers, and the vast majority of children are born of unmarried parents. Mothers increasingly work outside the home, relying on a range of caregiving arrangements within and beyond the extended family. The contradictions inherent in socializing children for realities that no longer exist, or that are rapidly changing, have not yet been sufficiently confronted by most parents and caregivers or by other traditional socializing institutions. The expanding roles of women, which are translating into more avenues of possibility for young girls and are generating more self-assertive confidence (as the Mayfield school girls are already demonstrating at age six), are not yet paralleled by the extension of male roles beyond the traditional expectations of breadwinner and provider. More equitable sharing of family roles has become a necessity for many families beset with economic hardships within weakened community networks, but the values of male-female equity and mutual trust remain largely unarticulated in present child-rearing and caretaking behaviours.

Recently, academic and other observers of these contradictions have related them directly to the growing Caribbean phenomenon of females outperforming males throughout the school system. At the upper end of the education system, the University of the West Indies (UWI) now graduates seventy women for every thirty men. At the formal system's beginning, boys entering grade one are testing below girls on all nine indicators of a primarily cognitive assessment instrument administered to all primary school entrants in Jamaica.

In the Southfield Basic Schools observed in this research, the teachers interviewed described mixed patterns of achievement between boys and girls; some felt boys learned faster, others that girls were more curious and attentive to their work. The research team observed somewhat more aggressive behaviour among boys, particularly during outdoor "free" time, and that girls were generally more orderly within and outside the classroom. However, at the Mayfield All-age School, a seventeen-year-old Youth Employment trainee from Southfield, placed as a classroom aide for four months, observed that "in most classes it seems that the girls are more challenged in their work than the boys. Most of the girls take their schoolwork seriously, while the boys are not really serious. What seems hard [*in the work*] to the boys seems easier to the girlsY. Many boys leave school before time, while more girls finish, unless they get pregnant." Her reflections echo research findings in several other recent Caribbean studies of this phenomenon.

In one such reflection on differential academic achievement of boys and girls, UWI economist Mark Figueroa (1996) suggests that it is the very patterns of early socialization which produce the eventual differences in performance between males and females in secondary and tertiary levels of education. Girls are provided structured and repetitive learning experiences within the home, requiring attention to detail, patience, and obedience. Boys, on the other hand, are the beneficiaries of "male privileging", which relieves them of most of these structured duties while supplying less "outside" life-skills training related to realistic adult futures. Thus, girls are better equipped than are boys for the highly structured English-framed system of education prevailing in the Caribbean, applying the lessons of their early home training to the exigencies of primary and later school achievement.

Southfield, St. Elizabeth, represented for the research team a community that still preserves many of the traditional Jamaican values within a context of a proud and relatively prosperous rural economy. In this community, male school dropouts can still inherit family land, can still anticipate making a reasonable living from farming and, according to the local research team leader, will likely still earn more money than their usually better-educated girlfriends or wives. As one young drop-out told her, "My father has a big van, runs a big farm, makes a lot of money, and he can't even readYso why do I have to go to school?" A few miles from this community, on Jamaica's South Coast, young boys leave school and often make a good living from fishing for the local trade as well as the tourist industry. But the women of Southfield are challenging and breaking these traditions. They are migrating to other parishes or abroad to earn their living, and then returning with newfound independence. Many are opting to remain single once they have gained economic independence, regardless of whether they have children. The men of Southfield are mistrustful to varying degrees of these "new women", and increasingly unsure of their roles in relation to them and to their children. As reported in the Southfield study,

> [A] young man in his early twenties has a traditional Jamaican visiting relationship with his 'babymother' and daughter. He stated that he loved them both, and spent a lot of time with them, but that sometimes he just 'needed a break'; that is why he maintained a separate residence with a couple of male friends. He did not like to spend too much time in his in-laws house [where his child and babymother lived with her parents] perhaps [we thought] because he felt that he should have his own home for his young family.

In this regard, Southfield provided for the rest of Jamaica an almost nostalgic look back at how things used to be, but are no more, for most communities and most families. The contradictions inherent in the conversations of the six-year-olds of the Mayfield All-age School have become more urgent in more urbanized communities where commentators in the press, from the pulpit, and on the street corner are asking, "What is happening to our men?" The long list of skills recited with confidence by the six-year-old Southfield girls interviewed enjoyed no similar parallel among the Southfield boys. The implications of these differences within this relatively stable and prosperous rural community remain unclear and call for further study. They also strengthen the call for similar examinations within communities where poverty, family disintegration, weakened or non-existent support institutions, and the penetration of foreign values have resulted in the rapid erosion of traditional values, understandings, and practices.

References

Brown, Janet, and B. Chevannes. (1995). Gender socialization progres report. UNICEF.

Brown, Janet, P. Anderson, and B. Chevannes. (1993). The contribution of Caribbean men to the family: A pilot study. Kingston, Jamaica: Caribbean Child Development Center, University of the West Indies.

Figueroa, Mark. (1996). Male privileging and male academic performance in Jamaica. Paper presented at Symposium on the Construction of Caribbean Masculinity. St. Augustine: Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of West Indies.

Copyright © 1997 Janet Brown and Dr. Gayle McGarrity

Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C. : World Bank, 1999.