CHAPTER 3

Sex or Gender Equity: the Organisation of Schooling in Trinidad and Tobago

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Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island state located at the southern end of the chain of islands in the Caribbean Sea known as the Lesser Antilles. Trinidad experienced Spanish and British colonisation, as well as the influence of French settlers. Tobago was controlled by many different European powers for short periods. In 1899, the British joined both islands into one colony. Trinidad has an ethnically diverse population consisting of the descendants of Africans (39.6 per cent), Indians (40.35 per cent), Chinese (0.4 per cent), Europeans (0.6 per cent) and other groups (0.65 per cent), as well as a significant mixed group (18.4 per cent). In addition, there are many immigrants from other Caribbean countries. Tobago is mainly African in ethnic heritage. Religion reflects this diversity – in Trinidad, Roman Catholics predominate among the Christian religions and there are significant numbers of Hindus and Muslims of different sects. In Tobago, Protestant denominations predominate, while on both islands there are small groups who practice Afro-centric religions such as the Orisha. In 2006, the combined population was 1.29 million, comprising almost equal numbers of males and females. The distribution by age is shown in Table 3.1, further demographic statistics in Table 3.2 and some economic indicators in Table 3.3.

Table 3.1. Age distribution in Trinidad and Tobago

Year group	*Percentage of total population*	*Males*	*Females*
0–14 years	19.5%	105,994	100,156
16–64 years	71.6%	397,699	358,755
65 years +	8.9%	51,965	42,039

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook (2007)

Table 3.2. Further demographic statistics for Trinidad and Tobago

Demographic indicators	*Trinidad and Tobago (est. for 2007)*
Population growth rate	–0.883%
Net migration rate	–11.13 migrants/1000 of the population
Life expectancy (at birth)	Males: 65.87 years; Females: 67.87 years
Literacy	98.6%

Source: CIA World Factbook (2007)

Table 3.3. Selected economic indicators for Trinidad and Tobago in 2006

Economic indicators	*Trinidad and Tobago (2006)*
GDP per capita	US$19,700
GDP real growth rate	12.6%
Unemployment rate	7%
Industrial production growth rate	17%

Source: CIA World Factbook (2007)

The country is a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a 15-nation group of independent Caribbean countries (all English speaking) forming a regional bloc – mainly for economic and fiscal co-operation, but the role has extended to collaboration in human and social development, legal and judicial affairs, culture and communications among others. The Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) is the recognised examination body for the CARICOM region at the secondary level.

Trinidad and Tobago is one of the most affluent societies in the Caribbean, with a buoyant economy very much dependent on oil, gas and petrochemicals. It is also one where crime has been on the rise, largely a result of the narcotics trade and gun running. Young men, in particular those who have not been successful at school, are implicated in murders, kidnappings, pedalling and smuggling of drugs and ammunition and robberies. There is widespread acknowledgement in society that young men are not benefitting as they should from their education, especially in terms of social responsibility. That these young men are mainly of African descent is a sensitive issue for an ethnically charged society. However, the problem extends to both males and females who have left school without or with minimal qualifications – chances are that they will be exploited on the labour market, will not be able to maintain an adequate standard of living and will become a potentially destabilising force in society.

Education

From emancipation (1834) there was pressure to provide education for the previously enslaved in a bid to Anglicise the colony. This was called 'elementary' education and was supposed to provide 'the elements' only to enable the populace to take up their place as free men and women. As a result, universal primary education has long been a reality in Trinidad and Tobago. Before and since independence (1962) there was a demand for universal secondary education and since 2000 that goal has been achieved. Tertiary education is now free as well for those who qualify. Although there are almost total participation rates at the primary and secondary levels, there is continued concern about chronic underachievement.

In Tobago, poor performance at the secondary level has been linked to the fact that too many students leave the primary system without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Overall, the administration and management of education, the poor distribution of resources, as well as teacher absenteeism and few professional development opportunities have been identified as the more important reasons impacting on both primary and secondary education on the island (Trinidad and Tobago, 2001).

The education structure in Trinidad and Tobago (Figure 3.1) comprises:

- two years of early childhood care and education (ECCE),
- seven years of universal primary schooling, two at the infant and five at the standard levels, for the 5–11 age group,
- five years of universal secondary education, and
- two further years in sixth form for those who qualify.

For the nation as a whole, in 2004 there were 27,462 pre-schoolers who attended early childhood care and education centres. There are 484 public primary schools (denominational and government) with a total enrolment of 147,328–75,299 males and 72,029 females (CSO, 2005). There were 2,067 male teachers and 5,857 female teachers in the primary system (CSO, 2005). At age 11, primary students sit the exam known as the SEA (Secondary Education Assessment), their performance determining their placement at a secondary school. Using the SEA as a placement device makes it a high stakes examination, and this has been much criticised because it is felt that not all groups have an equal chance of passing. Exam performance seems to favour those of higher-income groups, which also means that certain ethnic groups are privileged.

The traditional grammar secondary schools are in high demand. The 'alternative' sector comprises junior secondary schools, senior comprehensives, composite schools and senior secondaries, which have all been built by the state since 1970 on the comprehensive model. They were meant to increase equity in the system – more school places which could be accessed by those unable to find a place in the traditional grammar schools, with a wide variety of curricula choice providing academic,

technical and vocational subjects. Today the alternative sector has the most children in the secondary system, a large majority of whom belong to lower-income groups. Many of these schools are plagued by a high incidence of indiscipline and lawlessness, as well as by chronic underachievement, particularly of boys.

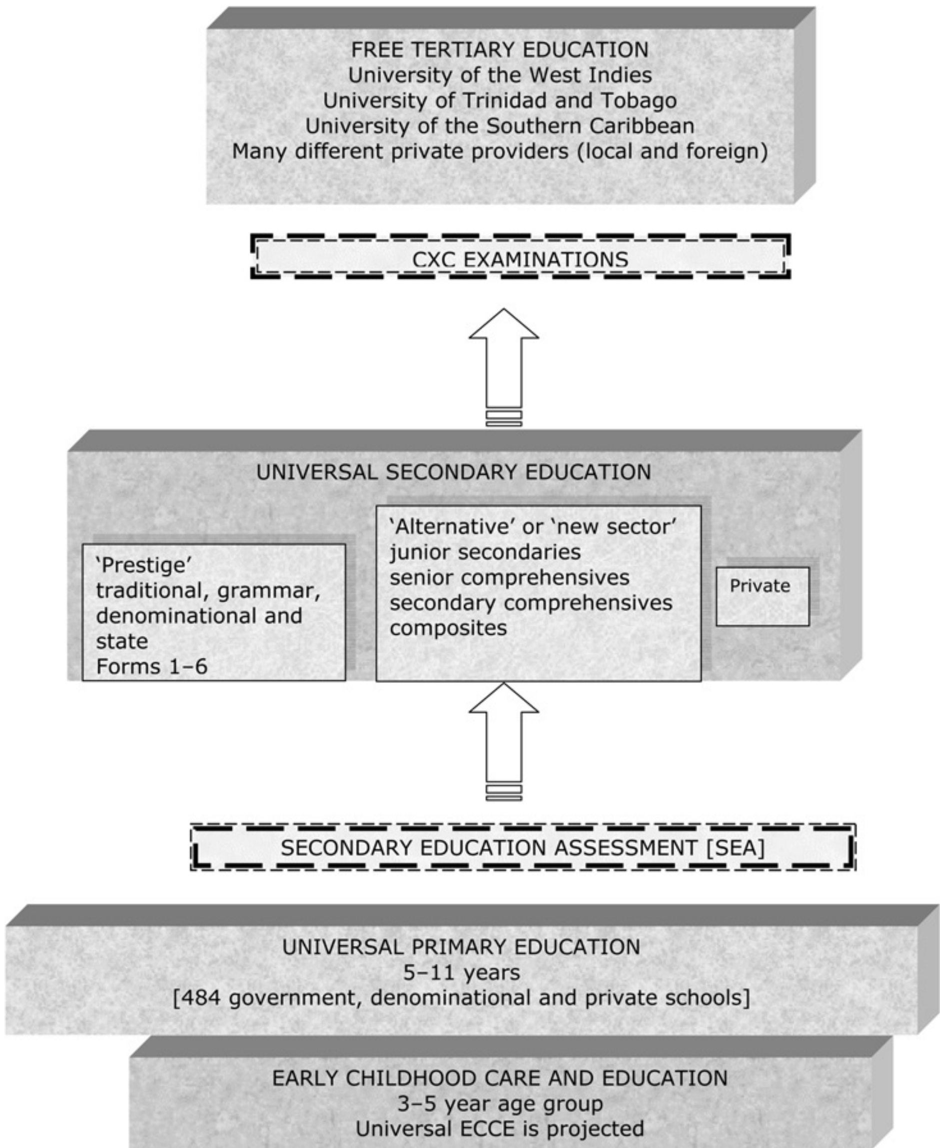

Figure 3.1. The education system in Trinidad and Tobago

Gender differentials in education

The research literature on educational achievement in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean generally pinpoints a case of poorer academic achievement among boys. However, there are complex patterns based on ethnicity, residence, socio-economic status, learning environments, as well as ability levels, which lead one to ask 'Which boys and girls are underperforming?' On the whole, there seems to be more attention focused on the issue of male underachievement, while we still have much to learn about the inequities that girls suffer in the education system. A summary of the most relevant trends and research findings is listed below.

Primary system

- Males more than females tend to be held back a grade in greater numbers at all primary grade levels, except standards 5 and 6 – the years of transition to secondary school (Worrell, 2006).
- From 1993 to 1997, males were dropping out of school more than females (UNDP, 2001) and according to Brown (2006) that trend has continued.
- Among the 7–9 age group (standards 1, 2 and 3) overall girls scored higher in mathematics than boys, and a significantly greater proportion of boys were in the lower tail of the distribution (Brown, 2005).
- While scores seemed to favour females generally in the SEA, more boys were placed in schools of their first choice. Selection practices based on the number of school places for boys in certain geographical areas disadvantaged girls (De Lisle and Smith, 2004).
- Females scored higher than males generally, and larger differentials favouring females were more likely among students below the 50th percentile; these tended to be students of lower ability, in lower achieving urban schools and in rural areas (De Lisle and Smith 2004; De Lisle, Smith and Jules, 2005).
- There is a concern that the design of the SEA does not ensure gender fairness – the composite score is heavily weighted towards linguistic-verbal competence, which seemingly disadvantages boys (De Lisle, 2006).

Secondary

More boys are placed in junior secondary schools than other types of secondary school (Mustapha, 2002; Worrell, 2006). These are, generally speaking, lower achieving schools and from there they go on to the senior secondary schools where the majority choose the technical–vocational area. More males drop out of school than females. A review of 2000, 2001 and 2002 CXC data for Trinidad and Tobago shows girls generally outperforming boys, except in mathematics. In science, technical drawing and information technology more girls received higher grades (De Lisle, 2006).

In 2002, the pass rate for males in English language was 57.3 per cent and for females 69.5 per cent. Both genders had a pass rate of about 50 per cent in mathematics, the girls just a little behind (Niherst, 2003, p.v).

Stereotypical curriculum choices continue (Morris, 2002) and locate females, especially in the 'alternative sector', towards lower paying jobs as office and store clerks or in the food preparation or garment making industries. Qualitative studies suggest that gender is mediated by context, particularly low expectations for student success, and that girls do better than boys in such contexts (Worrell and Morris, 2007). Postmodern studies show a range of masculinities and femininities. A 'hard core' masculinity seeks to subvert the conformist behaviours associated with school success. School is a place where boys learned to be men, while girls have a more instrumental view of schooling – as insurance for life after school (Mohammed and Keller, 2007).

Explanations for gender differentials in achievement in the Caribbean

There has not been as much work done on interrogating the nature of female underperformance, as it has been masked by the generally better academic performance of some girls. Male underperformance in Caribbean education systems has been theorised in the following ways. The male marginalisation thesis states that men in certain low-income groups have been deliberately obstructed in their quest for education and higher-status jobs by men with power in society, while women have not been so disadvantaged (Miller, 1992, 1994).

Family socialisation, particularly gender socialisation in the Caribbean tends to privilege boys relative to girls. They are dealt with more leniently, have fewer chores to do and enjoy more freedom. Consequently, the formal, sedentary nature of most classrooms irks and irritates boys and they are not disposed to exert much energy in highly abstract and theoretical exercises (Figueroa, 1996; Chevannes, 2001). At the same time, images and stereotypes of masculinity emphasise sports, outdoor activities, fun and games, hanging out with friends and even risky behaviours associated with violence and crime – and the processes of schooling tend to emphasise quite the opposite, for example, reading – so schooling seems to be anti-masculine (Parry, 2000; Chevannes, 2001). Caribbean societies tend to be homophobic, so that any suggestion of the feminine in a male's behaviour is to be avoided. The peer group becomes an effective policing mechanism ensuring that boys do as little school work as possible and are engaged in manly pursuits – only certain sports and certain curriculum areas (Plummer, 2005). Nor does the feminisation of the teaching profession provide boys with role models that can rival the attributes of the dominant masculinities that most boys adopt.

More qualitative-type studies are necessary to flesh out the trends and patterns described above. For example, while males are not doing as well as females generally, they are performing creditably well. However, both males and females in the lower

ability levels, in lower performing schools and in rural areas, particularly Tobago, seem to be at risk. The home socialisation experiences of girls tend to work with the ethos of the school to produce competent students, but this also means that girls tend to be compliant and obedient in classrooms. If this is the case, then to a large extent they may not be developing to their full potential. The ideologies associated with a hegemonic type of masculinity seem to be working to boys' disadvantage and this serves to further exacerbate the cumulative disadvantage accruing from poverty, attendance at low performing schools and a rural location.

The role of government

The overarching national policy framework is the Government's Vision 2020, which seeks to attain developed country status for Trinidad and Tobago by 2020. Gender was identified as integral to that process and a subcommittee on gender was established so that gender would be a part of the deliberations on development. The government has shown commitment to gender equality by amply providing resources to all schools from ECCE centres to the secondary level, where curriculum has been expanded to include the visual and performing arts, science, information technology and physical education and, at both primary and secondary levels, the technology available in schools has been upscaled for computers and internet access. In 2005 and 2006, education received a major share of the government's budget in an effort to create a seamless education system from early childhood through to the tertiary level. A seamless education system is one where all people can have access to all levels and stages of education – the emphasis being that no one is excluded.

The Ministry of Education has some specific policy guidelines about gender inclusion, for example –

- Equal numbers of boys and girls are chosen in allocating students to secondary schools for entry into form 1.
- All newly established state schools are co-educational.
- All subject areas, even those that are stereotypically gendered, have places for each gender.
- Young pregnant girls are allowed to continue their education – while pregnant or come back to school after delivery and resume their education.
- In certain secondary schools where there are large numbers of children who did not 'pass' the SEA, students are given a choice of leaving and going off to a skills-oriented programme such as the Adolescent Development Programme or to remain in their school. Both boys and girls are given this choice; formerly it would have been an option only for boys.
- A competency-based qualification, the Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQ), has been created to comply with CARICOM Approved Occupational Standards

in agriculture, business, communication, construction and other areas. It offers an alternative route to higher education, which will allow recognised and portable qualification into countries participating in the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) – an attempt to widen the certification opportunities open to both males and females.

The country has also benefited from two extensive reform movements in education as well. The Fourth Basic Education Project (1995–2002) targeted primary and lower secondary education, seeking to improve provision, access, curricula and professional development capability. The ongoing (1999–2007) Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP) is also engaged in similar areas of school improvement.

However, there is no explicit gender policy guiding efforts towards gender equality and equity. There is a commitment to ensure equality at the policy level, evidenced by the government's ratification of a number of regional and international agreements. Despite these initiatives, a Draft Gender Policy, which was developed based on widespread national consultation, was rejected by the government and is now in the process of reformulation. There were some controversial issues that tested the government's willingness to fully accept the principle of gender equality. Not having a national gender policy is a matter of some concern, because some generalised commitments only operate in the breach.

The Research

Despite attempts at establishing gender equality in schools, gender stereotypes and gender discrimination continue because they are for the most part 'invisible' – that is, the dominant beliefs, perceptions and practices that guide how males and females relate to one another and among themselves are largely taken for granted. The focus of the inquiry, therefore, was on the processes in schools that helped to create, recreate or transform stereotypes related to gender.

Gender equity is focused on fairness or justice. Unequal outcomes, for example the underachievement of boys relative to girls, present a signal that schooling does not treat boys fairly. Equity is a more processual indicator than equality and more difficult to determine by quantitative measures. For example, interactions and relationships might adversely affect only certain categories of males, or girls may be achieving but there are many who are not. In addition, students' own ideas of their gender identities may be conspiring to (re)produce unequal outcomes. Thus, if one wants to understand the outcomes of education it becomes necessary to try to identify and examine the actual processes involved. Equality tends to be related to access and outcomes and does not penetrate the 'black box' of schooling.

The inquiry focused on the following:

- What are the processes in classrooms, schools and the education system that promote or compromise gender equality and gender equity?

- What gender stereotypes exist in school interactions and how do they impact on gender equality and gender equity?
- Are gender stereotypes being maintained or questioned by the processes of schooling?

The Sample

Five secondary schools were selected in Northern Trinidad. The research procedures employed were the same for all the countries involved in this project and are discussed in the early chapters of this book. The schools selected are listed below, followed by brief case studies –

- School A: all-girls, traditional, grammar-type school, denominational, urban (female principal)
- School B: all-boys, traditional, grammar-type school, denominational, urban (male principal)
- School C: co-educational, comprehensive-type state school, urban (female principal)
- School D: co-educational, comprehensive-type state school, rural (male vice-principal)
- School E: co-educational, traditional, grammar-type state school, urban (male principal)

School A

This is an all-girls traditional grammar school controlled by a denominational board (Christian), but as is the practice, the government pays salaries and contributes to the school's upkeep. Established in the early 1950s, the school is a prestigious institution accepting some of the top performers in the SEA (the placement examination that primary students sit at the end of standard 5). It offers secondary education from forms 1 to 6.

At 800 students, this is a medium-sized school in Trinidad and Tobago. Although the grounds are spacious, the buildings tend to be overcrowded, though the whole place is kept clean and attractive. There are fields for hockey, football, volleyball and a netball court. The auditorium doubles as a gymnasium, but there is a general lack of sports equipment. However, the recent addition of physical education as an examinable subject at CXC is prompting the purchase of new equipment.

Other than the principal's room and general office, there are two staff lounges, one washroom (now 'unisex', as the school has begun to take on male teachers), 21 classrooms and the large multi-purpose hall or auditorium. There are also two computer labs, one language lab, one audio-visual room, one music room, one art room,

Table 3.4. Distribution of teachers by sex and subject area at school A

Subject	*Males*	*Females*
Mathematics/IT	1	8
Sciences/IT	2	9
Modern studies	2	5
English		7
Business studies		4
Foreign languages	1	6

one geography lab, seven science labs (one for general science, two each for physics, chemistry and biology) and a library.

The teaching staff numbered 45 (six male and 39 female) at the time of the research. There were two female members who had been contracted through the On-the-Job-Training (OJT) programme for young, untrained, recently qualified people who would like to be teachers. There were no vacancies.

Most students are Christian and are Indian in ethnic origin. There are also smaller numbers of Hindus and Muslims, almost all being Indian as well, so that this school has a relatively large Indian population. Students belong to all socio-economic groups, but many are from the higher-income brackets.

School B

This is also a single-sex (boys only) denominational school of another Christian denomination to that of School A. Established in the 1950s, it is considered a prestigious institution. The school accepts those who scored in the 85th–95th percentile in the SEA and student enrolment is normally about 450 making it a 'small' secondary school. It offers the traditional grammar-type secondary education from forms 1 to 6.

The buildings have not been expanded since it was built, so that while the school is generally well kept, the classrooms tend to be overcrowded. In the grounds of the school, there is a football field and a basketball court. Other than the principal's and the vice-principal's offices, there are two deans' offices and one staffroom equipped with desks and chairs, storage cupboards and a mini-kitchen and dining area. There are 13 classrooms and three separate labs for physics, chemistry and biology, an audio-visual room and a small computer lab. Each classroom is equipped with basic supplies – blackboards, chalk and dusters – and school furniture such as desks and chairs for students are adequate and well kept. While there is no auditorium or hall, the chapel is large enough to have a monthly assembly. Every morning, worship is conducted over the public address (PA) system.

Table 3.5. Distribution of teachers by sex and subject area at school B

Subject	*Males*	*Females*
Mathematics	1	2
Sciences/IT	3	3
Modern studies		3
English	1	3
Business studies		2
Foreign languages		2
Physical education	1	

There were 21 members of the teaching staff – six male and 15 female – at the time of the research. There were no vacancies.

Students are predominantly Christian, with significant numbers of Hindus. All ethnic groups are represented with some whites and Chinese. All socio-economic groups are represented, but most boys belong to middle- and upper-income families.

School C

This is a co-educational school built by the government in the 1970s in a bid to expand provision and access to groups who were previously obstructed from secondary education. From its inception, the school was plagued by low achievement and episodes of lawlessness and violence. As a comprehensive school, it only accommodated forms 4 and 5 and at times the enrolment reached 1,500 students – a very large school. As such, its intake was mainly from the junior secondaries that accommodated students from forms 1 to 3. In the 1990s, it was converted to a seven-form school – with an intake at form 1, the usual but somewhat reduced intake at form 4 and a form 6 intake as well. It is thus a large and complex system to manage because now it has the trappings of a grammar school, and so its appeal has widened, while it also has the usual comprehensive offerings in technical–vocational subjects.

The school is situated on spacious grounds. There are different blocks of classrooms, labs and workshops. The grounds and the outer walls of buildings are kept clean and attractive, but inside classrooms the louvres have been vandalised, as have the electrical sockets and the loudspeakers for the public address system. There is a large playing field for football, and basketball, tennis, netball and badminton courts.

Other than the principal's and vice-principal's offices, there is a large staff room and a staff lounge, one room for deans and another office for security personnel, two washrooms, one each for male and female staff, 42 classrooms and a large multi-purpose hall or auditorium. The school is also equipped with three computer labs, one language lab, one audio-visual room, one music room, one art room, two science labs each for chemistry, physics and biology, and a well-stocked library of reference

materials, fiction and non-fiction items and a West Indian collection. In addition, there are separate workshops for the mechanical, construction and electrical subject areas as well as for home economics, beauty culture and agricultural science. There are separate toilets for boys and girls.

The teaching staff numbered 104 (45 males and 59 females) at the time of the research. There were three males who had been contracted for the remedial math programme, one female for remedial English and two teachers (female) on contract for the teaching of beauty culture and social studies.

Most students are Christian, but there are significant numbers of Hindus and Muslims. Ethnically, there are more students of African origin than those who are Indian or of mixed ethnicity. Some students come from the middle class, but the majority is from lower socio-economic groups.

School D

This is a co-educational, comprehensive school built by the government in the 1970s in a bid to provide access to secondary education in a remote part of the country. It is situated in northern Trinidad, in a rural belt where fishing and farming are the dominant occupations. The school has suffered from low achievement and it has to contend with a high turnover of staff. Its remote location makes it unattractive to teachers because of the long commute: few teachers live in the immediate vicinity. The school accommodates students from forms 1 to 6. Enrolment is just over 600, making it a medium-sized school. Unlike School C, it has mainly a grammar-type curriculum and includes a few technical–vocational subjects such as agricultural science.

Table 3.6. Distribution of teachers by subject area and sex at school C

Subject	*Males*	*Females*
Mathematics	5	8
Sciences	8	8
Modern studies	3	8
English	1	13
Business studies	6	14
Foreign languages		2
Visual and performing arts	2	4
Electrical construction	6	2
Building construction	6	
Mechanical construction	8	
Total	**45**	**59**

The playing fields are extensive, but not properly equipped with sports facilities. There are different blocks of classrooms, labs and workshops, but the buildings have not been renovated since the school was built. Consequently, there are major repairs to be done, such as long cracks in the walls and leaking roofs.

There is one room for the principal's office and one staff room. The classrooms are generally dilapidated, with inadequate desks and chairs that are in poor condition. Teachers find that for a school close to the sea it still suffers poor ventilation. There are science and computer labs and an up-to-date gymnasium that is well equipped. However, sports equipment and supplies are locked away and permission must be granted for use. Science and mathematics kits have been recently acquired and the library is well equipped with over 13,000 titles. There are separate toilets for boys and girls.

The teaching staff numbered 46 (24 males and 22 females) at the time of the research. There were four male teachers on contract and ten lab assistants, also on contract. There were vacancies for principles of business, English and agricultural science teachers. The school's population is overwhelmingly African in origin, with Christianity being the major religion. The enrolment as at September 2006 is given in Table 3.7.

School E

This is a government school built in the 1950s. It is a traditional, grammar-type school unique in that it is not denominational, not single-sex **and** it is generally highly regarded as one of the country's top achieving schools. The total student enrolment is normally about 700, making it a medium-sized secondary school. It offers secondary education from forms 1 to 6.

There has been some expansion over the years, but now it is an oddly arranged set of buildings with little space for further development unless more storeys are added. It is generally well kept, but the classrooms tend to be overcrowded and poorly ventilated. Next door to the school is a very large playground that is used for all sports.

Table 3.7. Distribution of students by sex and class level at school D

Classes	*Males*	*Females*	*Total*
Form 1	45	50	95
Form 2	49	66	115
Form 3	35	32	67
Form 4	75	74	149
Form 5	66	94	160
Form 6	12	21	33
			Total = 619

Other than the principal's office, there is a staffroom and lounge. There are 19 classrooms and separate labs for physics, chemistry and biology, and a well-stocked library. Each classroom is equipped with basic supplies – blackboards, chalk and dusters – and school furniture, such as desks and chairs for students, is generally adequate. There were 45 members of the teaching staff – 14 male and 31 female – at the time of the research. The 2007 enrolment is 313 boys and 347 girls, the total being 660 students. Students come from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

Portraying Gender Processes in Schooling

The following sections report and analyse statements made by school administrators, principals, teachers and students about gender relations in schooling. Also included are observations of students in classrooms, as well as in physical education sessions outdoors and analysis of texts used in classrooms. Attention is paid to how gender is constructed and reconstructed in the normal processes of schooling through the perceptions and stereotypes that different groups have for one another, as well as how they regard one another within the group. At times ways of breaking the stereotypes that threaten gender equality and equity are discussed.

Normalising sex equity as gender equity

In the schools under consideration, there is an apparent misunderstanding about gender and gender relations that shape and influence the typical stereotypes that educational administrators, principals and teachers adopt towards the education of boys and girls. To a great extent, this misunderstanding is also perpetrated in the government's stance on gender, where in the absence of an explicit gender policy there is only a general commitment towards equality. As a result, it is expected that boys and girls will be treated equally (this is not questioned even amidst the much debated educational phenomenon of male underperformance). It is difficult for most people to take the issue seriously, because it appears as if both boys and girls are being treated similarly. They tend to locate the problem away from school – family dynamics, say, or gender socialisation – or see it as an effect of having mainly female teachers.

The fundamental misunderstanding seems to lie in confusing 'sex equity' as being 'gender equity'. When people think they are discussing gender, they are really speaking about sex. 'Sex' refers to the biological differences between boys and girls and differentiates them as a group. 'Gender', on the other hand, emphasises a relationship or relationships based on social constructions of what it means to be male or female. How boys and girls tend to choose subjects based on how they self identify would qualify as a gender issue. When the government allocates funds for schools, when principals and staff deploy and translate these resources into equipment, facilities, curricular arrangements and activities, there is the collective understanding that boys and girls would benefit and participate equally, thus sex equity.

Such a disposition might also mask a deeper intention (either conscious or not) to stay away from controversy. Gender as a social issue presents all kinds of problems and strong feelings for adults who seem to view it negatively. If it can be dealt with in schooling in an 'objective' and removed way, such as in the equitable supply and distribution of resources, then that is the policy most people will endorse. The single-sex schools stated that the issue was irrelevant, since they dealt only with males or females. This represents an even deeper misunderstanding than that which confused sex and gender. This attempts to sanitise the relationships that students may develop or are already developing by steadfastly ignoring those of the opposite gender. The determination to stay away from controversy becomes tantamount to gender prejudice, as stereotypes of the other gender go largely unexamined by the young people. We are beginning to see emerging something about how schools are organised that prohibits the development of healthy relations.

Such a view is really a contradictory position as the teaching staffs are mixed: males are present at the girls' school and females actually outnumber male teachers at the boys' school. Yet at the girls' school the principal was adamant, 'This is a female school' and 'I don't think that we are ready for either male teachers or deans' – even though they have a few. At one co-educational school where they couldn't use the same argument, a male teacher tried to play down the issue and said that if gender awareness must be introduced in schools it had to be done cautiously. One gets the impression that teachers and others feel that to raise the issue of gender is to stir up a hornet's nest. So it may not be just a simple misunderstanding of sex and gender, but a deliberate mindset to ignore the gendered ways that structure school experience – because therein lies controversy. The contexts of schooling – their academic focus, the top-down nature of social relations – do little to question the stereotypes of the wider society.

Just as sex equity is mistaken for gender equity, discussions that raise the issue of gender seem to be reduced by participants into a discussion of boys as separate and distinct from girls (sex). This becomes problematic, as the following excerpt shows. On being asked about gender issues at her school, this principal spoke innocently enough about a perceived problem:

> *'… the children coming from the junior secondary schools, the females tend to choose this school to a large extent. Our school is not noted particularly for any sporting activity and so males tend to choose other schools …'.*

Several consequences stem from this initial premise. It says about the boys who do come to the school that they may not be sports-oriented. Would this then be the reason why a more vibrant sporting programme has not been introduced? Yet what about the girls? Surely sports are for everyone? Gendered ideas that sports are largely for the sports-conscious, the highly talented – mostly males – disadvantage the varieties of femininities and masculinities present in the school. Sports in this view are seen as a male preserve.

Gender surfaces elsewhere as well. In the rural co-educational school, the vice-principal spoke passionately about keeping boys and girls separate – in a co-educational school! They tried an intervention with an intake of 'good boys' (higher-achieving boys than those who would normally have been allocated to this school) and decided to keep them all in one form 1 class and all the girls in another class. For various reasons things went awry, and he now describes them 'as a class of miscreants'. Any policy based on keeping boys and girls separate in a co-educational school where they have both male and female teachers, is creating an unnatural and artificial set of conditions, trying to force boys and girls not to interact too closely.

In all fairness to the participants and perhaps more puzzling yet, as the discourse intensifies a better-developed sense of gender emerges. For example, the principal who spoke of sports earlier in terms of gender stereotypes, is able to see the issue in terms of relationships – and even of getting input from the young men themselves – when asked about the curriculum:

Interviewer: *'Should gender play a part in developing the curriculum?'*

Response: *'Certainly. In developing themes and schemes of work, I would think that one would take gender into consideration. I always say teachers teach how they were taught, so again it would call for some discussion ... and really to be guided by the young men themselves ... [A]s adults we can think of so many things that may benefit boys, but indeed we really have to get a consensus from the boys that these things are beneficial ... so that there must be some input from the students themselves ...'.*

When she speaks of the school as a space or site, for example, to which students choose to come or not, she does not focus on gender, but speaks of boys in stereotypical terms as being different to girls. But, in speaking about the curriculum, she begins to talk about the relationships forged via teaching and learning, between teachers and the boys, recognising varieties and different interests. She also recognises that opportunities and entitlements develop through a better understanding of one another (students and teachers, males and females). This contradictory stance may also be evident in how others approach the issue: when confronted with a problem about the place or site generally (for example, male underachievement at this school), people tend to talk in terms of boys or girls (sex). When pressed about solutions to the problem, there is a change of focus to seeing the people in the place as having to discuss and relate healthily to one another. While this is encouraging, it is apparent that such discussions or insights only happen by chance or because of the particular context of an issue being discussed – in the normal manners in which schools are organised, there is little 'space' for such relations to surface. Nonetheless, it does signal to us that school change may be easier to bring about if the focus is initially on instruction.

Gender equity seems to be an elusive goal, especially if interpreted as sex equity. Stakeholders revealed stereotypical conceptions of gender, all based on a belief that

gender was a topic fraught with controversy. This belief is probably mired in the confusion of 'gender' as 'sex', which pits boys against girls and men against women, fuelling the idea that the whole issue is volatile and controversial. If gender was properly understood as being about the relationships between the sexes, then it is quite likely that gender equity would seem a laudable goal for young people. Thus, the most pernicious stereotype is the one that prejudges gender as a harbinger of discord – by emphasising sex it succeeds in confusing and obfuscating the path towards gender equity.

Male underachievement: who is to blame?

Perhaps more than any other issue, arguments about male underperformance in the education system focus on the notion of 'sex' rather than 'gender'. In this discourse either girls or women are blamed for the underachievement of boys, and this is based on stereotypes of the interactions between male students and female teachers or boys and their mothers. Some further apportion blame to men, fathers or even male teachers. Others blame the boys themselves. Few individuals saw the school as being deeply implicated in the processes associated with male underachievement. All these arguments based on identifying some group that is culpable are sexist arguments: they assign some totalising characteristics to a group because of their sex and most important all ignore relationships with girls or between girls.

One principal felt that since Trinidad and Tobago was dominantly a '... matriarchal society ...', we have a situation where it is '... women who rule and manage homes'. He elaborated that girls are taught 'care giving values', while boys are largely left to fend for themselves. In school, he sees the problem being compounded by female teachers. With two-thirds of the staff being female, the more experienced among them are '... genuinely interested in raising the level of consciousness of the boys ...', but because of the boys' home socialisation and the female teachers' 'soft' (or motherly) approach, this becomes difficult. He goes on to show that the younger teachers who are unsure of themselves may try tactics that do not work, in other words they do not know how to '... approach the male of the species'. Thus, in his view, women do not know how to deal with boys – not mothers or experienced or inexperienced female teachers. The overabundance of female teachers in this all-boys school is likely to entrench the problem of males' underperforming. However, he does say that the female teachers on staff work much harder than the men. Yet that is in line with his thesis that women are taught to care and to nurture, so that they labour more than the men on staff.

This is a hard and deterministic view that sees the problem of male delinquency and underachievement as resulting from the dominant influences of females in their lives. As a result, there is little room for intervention because home and society play the major roles in shaping gender identities. Gender socialisation is reinforced in schools, because it is largely a female teaching profession. However well elaborated this principal's thesis may be, it is really a set of stereotypes that he invokes to explain

relationships between boys and women. Moreover, under his headship nothing will be done to nurture ideas about gender equality or sensitising boys on gender issues, because he feels that they have already been wired a certain way.

Another view is again underscoring home socialisation and the influences of the wider society in explaining why boys underachieve. It does not lay blame on women, but on the boys themselves and their 'openness' to these influences.

Response: *'My personal feeling about influencing the male is that it is very difficult now as a teacher, because [of] the outside influences, the world, having become a very materialistic world – I call the present generation a Nescafé generation – everything is now for now. They need instant satisfaction. And so when I try to put across to them the old values that we might have been accustomed to, it seems to have no relevance to them. Still what I try to do is to always keep pointing out to them and looking at present day occurrences in the society, crime for example – look at the young men – what have they achieved? Victims and perpetrators of crime. What have they achieved in their short lives? You keep asking them – "Do you think you will ever reach ... an age where you will be able to look back and say, 'Ah... this is something I have done in life'?".'*

This is a male teacher at one of the co-educational schools presenting his position regarding boys and being 'at risk' in the school environment. His point is that the school can hardly make an impact on the influences from the home and wider society because they are so all-pervasive. All a teacher could do is appeal to 'conscience' or the 'inner person'. This is a fatalistic view that seems to put young men even more at risk, because nothing seems possible by way of a classroom or school effort to address the issue. The most damning stereotype at work here is the belief that boys' socialisation via the mass media and youth culture is so totalising that there are no 'spaces' or potential left for teachers to work with. The organisation of schooling seems above the social issues affecting students; the emphasis continues to be on academic issues.

A seemingly more-balanced view is put forward by a female teacher who teaches mainly boys. She indicts the school generally and teachers in particular in dealing with students from the lower socio-economic classes. She probably comes closest to seeing the school as being poorly organised to encourage healthy relations.

Response: *'What I am saying is that the cultural difference between a teacher and most of students coming out from working-class homes and what we perceive as a difficult environment. It is so different that when a teacher looks at that child, their body language, the manner in which they speak, ... their whole persona ... they [will] show their own disapproval. And the children [will] see it. And the chances are that that child has been experiencing that from the time they entered the system in primary school. I think that students react because they are accustomed to people always*

> *being on the attack. And they have to find their [own] way to survive and to feel safe. And that's the only way they know.'*

She feels that it is not necessarily a gender issue, but one of social class. The teachers at her school were mainly middle class, while most of the students came from lower socio-economic environments where poverty and hardship permeated their lives. Boys in particular were at risk, and much more of a pastoral programme was necessary to rescue them. The stereotypes then that imbue schooling and put boys at risk stem, in her view, largely from an inability on the part of teachers to deal with cultural diversity. The milieu of the comprehensive school, where there is the largest number of students from low socio-economic groups, presents to teachers problems of relating to the 'other'.

Male underperformance therefore elicits strong views from principals and teachers, each in some way perpetuating gender stereotypes that frame the problem as being insurmountable. What may be instrumental in helping to perpetuate these stereotypes is the 'traditional' nature of schooling – the pressure for academic rather than more affective goals, the uniform nature in which learning is understood and the social distance that separates teacher and student. These are the 'normal' processes of schooling and they do not encourage discussion, critical reflection or even something as elementary as feedback. It may be instructive for us to think about relationships in schools as being the heart of what children learn – and in terms of remedying problems, whether gender based or not, relationships may be the key.

Rendering the female invisible

In the discussions and arguments that surround contemporary schooling in Trinidad and Tobago, there is an implicit understanding that girls are 'non-problematic', are 'okay', but there is also the position that girls' success may be continuing to disadvantage boys. A strong theme coming from male teachers at school B and elaborated by others is that boys need to be 'rescued' so that their education is of utmost importance. As one teacher puts it, '... it is still a man's world out there and boys have to be groomed to take over the mantle'. Another male teacher added, '... women have just taken over their place, so boys have to show their mettle'.

In the eyes of the vice-principal of the rural school, we again see 'gender' as a relational concept being misunderstood. He sees it as referring to 'male' and 'female', yet in his discussion he never sees girls as experiencing any disadvantage. He says, 'the females are dominating education ...' and female teachers '... want to get rid of the boys, instead of dealing with the boys in a class situation ... and relating to them'. He is almost saying that the balance should be shifted, so that the boys are on top once more. He reveals this more clearly in discussing sports.

> '*In sports now, the males have become the dominant gender and our school is a top sports school. In the past, the females were the top sports gender. So the males have taken that*

> *role! ... That's what we need to do with the males – build their self-esteem... We tend to pull them down and take away their manhood.'*

This ignores girls and how they might feel; he even sees boys as only being affirmed when they have beaten girls at something.

Another teacher echoes such sentiments, showing well thought out positions about boys but failing to see that girls are equally implicated. This female teacher noted that boys lived mostly with mothers, grandmothers and aunts, and so what they learned about modelling, life and interaction would come mainly from females – and she didn't see this as healthy. Yet, she thought it 'normal' for girls. These assumptions tend to be widespread in society in Trinidad and Tobago – that the absence or occasional presence of a 'father figure' in a girl's life doesn't affect her; it only affects boys. Yet learning to be female is not confined to only learning things about women. To a lot of people gender issues are seen in binary terms and what policies they suggest are mired in a separatist philosophy of boy versus girls.

In addition, male teachers readily admit that they treat girls differently to boys, and their perceptions of girls actually minimised their contact with girl students as opposed to boys. They tended to be very lenient with girls, seeing them as 'dainty', and were quite at a loss in having to deal with aggression in girls. Most of the time they would speak to them about their wrongdoing and in rare cases sent them to the office – usually when they couldn't help it because the girls had been involved in a fight. With boys they felt more secure, giving them harsher punishments – such as using sarcastic language to condemn their actions, making fun of them in front of the class, putting them outside the class or sending them to the dean. Both male and female teachers expected girls to be 'ladylike', and as a result excused boys for certain behaviours but took the girls to task for the same behaviours.

'Normalising sex equity as gender equity' leads to a number of problematic ways in dealing with the issues of male underachievement in schools. It confuses exactly what the discourse is about, so that stereotypes and gender prejudice prevail and masquerade as genuine arguments. At the same time, it tends to render females invisible while the gendered processes of schooling seek to sideline girls, making even their seeming success a reason to ignore them.

Legitimising a hegemonic masculinity

This section focuses on how schools seem to play a major role in the construction and reconstruction of masculinities. It may be that it is certain conceptions of masculinity that actually jeopardise the achievement potential of boys.

Sports: a metaphor for the masculine

Earlier we saw that one principal saw sports only in terms of boys' participation. At the same time, a vice-principal felt vindicated when boys as sporting heroes

triumphed over the girls' record. While some girls are involved in sports, more boys either play or elicit a deep interest in sports, mainly football. The only exceptions were at the all-girls school, where a vigorous sports programme is pursued, and the co-educational grammar school, where the all-girls football team is more successful than their all-boys team.

In the rural, co-educational comprehensive school, the girls in the observed class formed two netball teams while boys played free football in a nearby field. One small boy was included in the netball team: a boy looking on called him 'gay' and a girl called him a 'faggot'. Both boys and girls stood on the sidelines and commented freely. The (male) teacher's focus remained on the students playing netball and when a male student made remarks to him about one player's bottom, he made no comment.

In this brief scenario, we see certain aspects of how sports are gendered. Boys watching netball are more inclined to speak of the female form rather than the skills displayed. Boys never play netball; if they do, they are not 'true' males. In this case, onlookers – both male and female – call into question the nature of the masculinity of the lone boy netball player. So, females too find that it traverses the drawn gender lines for a boy to allow himself to play netball. The reverse is apparently not the case with the all-girls' football team from the co-educational, grammar school, where girls receive acclaim for their success. Perhaps it is only when girls excel at a heavily dominated 'male' sport that they are regarded seriously.

While girls engage in sports for physical exercise and to develop their skills and talents generally, boys seem to gravitate towards sports as a means of continuing to construct their image of themselves, their masculinity. The sporting arena is the one place, not the classroom, which hails a hegemonic, 'hard' kind of masculinity. In the classroom, the innocent enough events that are discerned through the eyes of constructing gender may seem ridiculous, but they show the continued urge and drive to always be interpreting a boy's own and others' behaviour in terms of developing masculinity. For example, in the all-boys school during a biology lesson on heating and cooling of the body, one boy responding to the teacher said that you could stand in front of a fan to cool off and was reprimanded by his fellow students with, 'You gay or something?' By contrast, the playing field construed as an opportunity for demonstrating 'maleness' also made it the venue where all sorts of typically gendered statements and stereotypes could go unchallenged. There is much scope in addressing how sporting stereotypes has separated the sexes. Encouraging sports that are not as heavily gendered (swimming, lawn tennis, cricket, badminton) and games (chess, scrabble, draughts) could provide spaces where boys and girls may interact equally and freely.

Male as protector

Heavily gendered images in a traditional mould tend to characterise boys' and girls' aspirations for themselves – though with girls there were some contradictory signals.

Despite all the talk about male marginalisation and boys' underperformance, boys believe they are the future breadwinners and will be the 'head' of the family. They spoke of protecting their wives and felt that they would not like their wives to work. In their homes, they did not have any substantial domestic responsibilities compared to their sisters. Consequently, they were growing up in home environments that did not challenge the usual stereotypes of gendered family responsibilities or the spheres of interaction, where males were more active in the public domain and females in the private domain of home, family and other relatives. The spectre of male underperformance did not seem to impinge on what their future scenarios might be like.

Girls on the other hand showed more diverse and contradictory interpretations. For example, they did not mention getting married and having a family in any specific way. At the all-girls school, they spoke with some distaste about the details and indignities of pregnancy and childbirth. All spoke of their desire for 'independence', which translated into 'making their own money'. Yet at the same time they co-operated with traditional gendered notions of body image. While agreeing on the principle of gender equality, girls felt that hard manual labour, being dirty and sweaty, was generally not a 'respectable' image for a 'lady'. That boys held this view as well could explain why girls shied away from thinking of careers in some technical–vocational areas. Their attraction to the opposite sex plays a major role in how girls think of themselves – so that choice of career may depend a lot on what is considered 'ladylike'.

Gendered stereotypes about what is considered feminine and masculine in terms of careers, interactions and negotiation with the opposite sex, and what goes on in families, are largely unchallenged in the normal course of schooling, family life and preparing for choosing a career. These gendered images and stereotypes continue to perpetuate ideas about male superiority and female inferiority. Among other scenarios, they do not help females deal with the very real possibility of having partners who cannot match them in terms of earning power; while for males it means that their notions of masculinity may be not be flexible enough to accommodate a partner who may be contributing as a head of a household or main 'breadwinner'.

This is a social issue that schools ignore. The heavy emphasis on the academic curriculum circumscribes the full development potential of young people. There are spaces, contradictions and opposition to the traditional stereotypes, but without some recognition and discussion they remain as 'outliers', and even though they may become more and more commonplace, in people's minds they tend to remain as 'outliers'. The exploits of the girls' football team, the resolve of some girls to 'follow the money' rather than be 'ladylike', the lone boy playing netball, the incidence of girls fighting over boys, could all form the basis of some vigorous discussions about gender relations. The fact that it seems to be more and more girls who are traversing the gender-drawn lines of what is acceptable is also something to be openly discussed.

Reinforcing masculinity

Boys spoke of having to do heavy lifting like moving tables, which they did not necessarily mind. What they grumbled about was being expected to bring a chair for a girl who did not appear to be incapacitated in any way and when the chair was within arm's reach. Sometimes they said teachers asked them to clean up the classroom, while the girls stood outside 'looking nice'. However, it seemed to be good-natured grumbling, because one principal said that he witnessed occasions when boys insisted on carrying the girls' chairs. Boys and girls seemed to enjoy the encounters where boys showed some form of gallantry and girls enjoyed the attention. In co-educational schools, therefore, boys and girls found something enabling in the contact between the sexes. Boys in school B, on the other hand, felt unanimously that girls should not be allowed to come to their school (they would be too much of a distraction). Boys in co-educational schools believed that the presence of girls gave them more opportunities to practice masculinity, while boys in the single-sex school felt that a place apart from girls gave them the opportunity to continue to build masculinity without the threats that girls might provoke. Traditional ideas such as the pervasive masculine roles of provider, aggressor and protector, and of females as the 'second sex', all seemed to be routinely inscribed into their daily interactions at school.

Boys' interactions with male teachers were underscored by notions of preserving the masculine sphere. With some of the male teachers, there would be sexist remarks if they saw boys working closely or sitting together. This was not regarded as a form of sexual harassment. In both co-educational and the all-boys school, male teachers treated boys as if they were 'partners' with a great deal of joking and sexual innuendo. Such behaviour on the part of male teachers hints at a certain kind of 'boy–boy' relationship designed to maintain if not a hardcore masculinity, then one that is commonly accepted as masculine. On the whole, men and boys display a sharper and better-defined sensitivity to masculinity than femininity. Females are not so preoccupied with observing and commenting on boys' masculinities as boys themselves. At the same time, females have a lot of leeway in their interactions with other females, as a matter of fact much of this interaction goes unnoticed and without comment.

Boys said that they could speak freely to male teachers and felt more camaraderie with them than female teachers, though they admitted that male teachers seemed to have less patience than female teachers. They felt that the bond they shared with the male teachers had its origins in the fact that they had both experienced 'growing up male'. However, they were quick to point out that in interacting with a male teacher, however close the bonding, there was a limit to what would be tolerated, whereas with girls the male teacher could be far more caring and sympathetic (although girls disagree about this). Male teachers, then, do not allow too close a contact with male students, because such contact is opposed to a masculinity that should be strong and autonomous. It seems then that male teachers play a pivotal role in the gendered

processes of schooling – shoring up traditional masculinity and femininity by drawing lines about how much emotional involvement to invest in students.

Boys, especially in the all-boys school, felt that the normal relations of peer pressure could get out of control and could affect their ability to get on with their work. Boys are often challenged when attempting to do school work and called names such as 'nerdy' or 'girly'. To a large extent, boys among themselves establish norms of behaviour that emphasise rough play and controlled aggression. To be able to tolerate and take part in the building of this type of masculine interaction is seen as a form of strength. Those who cannot do so are seen as weak and become susceptible to repeated acts of bullying. This common mock-aggression becomes transformed into something more sinister if it is suspected that the weakness being shown stems from a feminine masculinity. Schools are not safe places for boys who do not subscribe to the rough and tumble norms for male behaviour; this is especially the case for those who seem to display an alternative sexual orientation.

Boys in school E spoke of the worrying issue of a boy who seemed of a different kind of masculinity: they felt that he didn't belong there and he made them uncomfortable. To them this kind of masculinity is a 'weakness', and so it brought a sense of uneasiness because they felt that to condone it would mean that the whole place, the school, would acquire an image of being a 'soft' or a 'queer' place.

Boy: *'This boy does actually say he like boys and girls beat him up ... because he is always saying to the girls to get out of here ... and he is overdo it, he is always saying like "yuh want to be meh friend" ... and ... he is retarded!'*

Interviewer: *'The boy wants to be your friend – that's not retarded.'*

Boy: *'Miss, something wrong with him. Something mentally wrong with him.'*

Interviewer: *'What if he has a deficiency as you all claim ... so just talking to him wouldn't help because he has a deficiency, right? ...'*

Boy: *'Yes, but if he was so deficient, he not supposed to be in a school like this!'*

Schooling is characterised by processes that legitimise a hegemonic masculinity. Other masculinities, such as the one described above and those that do not revel in sports or emphasise academic success, are sidelined and subject to different levels of ridicule in order to induce conformity. Femininity is not a dominant or even readily visible gender identity – only when a range of femininities arises is there outrage or even bewilderment at 'unladylike' behaviours.

Masculinities, femininities and learning

Overwhelmingly teachers agreed that boys are more 'action oriented' when it came to learning compared to girls and they seemed to enjoy project work, visual aids,

technological input and were quite able to brainstorm ideas for design and critique models, inventions and artefacts. 'The whole idea of going home and studying for a test, somehow they don't respond too well'. Boys, it was agreed, tended to shy away from the 'reading subjects'. Those in the all-boys school and the co-educational schools agreed that teaching and classrooms in general did not cater to these characteristics, and so it was only in specific subjects that some boys could have more enabling learning experiences – technical drawing, physical education, computer science, music, art, technical–vocational subjects and science. They saw boys' liking for mathematics in terms of their penchant for problem solving.

Teachers spoke of having to go at a slower pace with boys and being more 'teacher centred' in their interaction with male students. They felt that girls had a greater capacity for independent work and seated work. Most teachers admitted that they did not use separate strategies consistently and tended to fall back on whole class approaches that relied mainly on traditional, didactic interaction. Undoubtedly, then, one of the reasons why males may underachieve is because schooling and class work is construed as 'feminine' and teachers themselves, accustomed to stable portrayals of the traditional classroom, are reluctant to invest in a more active pedagogy.

All students have aspirations of completing their secondary education successfully and going on to the tertiary level. Their career choices were very similar – law, medicine, accountancy, business. Only boys chose to be engineers or pilots, while one boy wanted to be a chef. It is a matter of concern that students, whether in high-achieving or low-achieving, schools spoke of careers that demanded many years of tertiary education such as medicine or the law. Boys and girls who were low achieving said that they had no reason to feel that they would not achieve their goals, even those who came from low-income families. Ten years ago, I conducted research in one of these schools on career aspirations and the findings were remarkably similar. However, I found that by the time they had reached form 5 and their internal examination marks could not be ignored, they had begun to 'downgrade' their aspirations from 'accountant' to 'working in an office' and from 'owning a business' to 'store clerk'. It is something that we should note – that schooling and examinations serve to sort and allocate students to different rungs on the labour market, and for the majority of these students there is a certain loss of self-esteem in relinquishing cherished ideas and having to settle for 'lesser' jobs (Mohammed, 1996).

No girl or boy felt pressured to choose a career because of the wishes of their parents. They all felt that their parents wanted them to be successful at whatever career they chose, and felt that they would receive support and encouragement. Although the boy who wanted to be a chef stated that his mother was not too happy with his choice, his sister is a chef, while another boy said he was expected to go into the family's business. The limited influence of parents on the career choices of their children today probably stems from the wide range of careers that now exist, of which they may know little or nothing at all. As a result, parents are more open to the career choices of their children.

Boys felt that their parents liked them because of their humour and because they could be relied on to do heavy chores and run important errands when the need arose. Girls on the other hand could not say whether their parents liked any specific characteristic, but liked them to be 'good girls'. One girl at school A said, 'I'm really, really limited and restricted. I'm not allowed to talk to boys or anything. Not any kind of contact with boys and I really don't like it. That is really my only problem with my parents'. The anxieties that parents suffer in particular about their 'girl children' are so complex that adolescents tend to be impatient with the limits imposed. A typical worry of parents of high-achieving girls is that they may become involved with a boy who is not academically inclined and will thus derail the girl from achieving her full potential. Gender relations for the girls are a normal part of life; for their parents it becomes a frightening prospect.

Girls and boys learn in both the classrooms and at home that there are different expectations for each. While there is a semblance of democracy in homes, girls are heavily sheltered and constrained. In classrooms they learn how to put 'being ladylike' or 'invisible' to work for them – whether classes are boring or not – as they seem to be continually aspiring towards 'independence'. The obstacle course that families put in their way, and which they encounter in schools as 'expectations for young ladies', predisposes them to always be thinking of strategies, scenarios, implications and consequences as a matter of course. It is difficult to ignore the conclusion that they learn how to come to terms in a practical way with the situations that schooling and family life present. Boys, on the other hand, expressed their liking for being a boy by equating the status with 'freedom' from the restrictions that usually related to girls, and with people looking to them to take charge. The expectations that popular stereotypes equate with young manhood disadvantage boys – most boys aspire to but cannot fully realise the dominant forms of masculinity. In addition, while femininities can run the gamut (even amidst notions of 'being ladylike'), masculinities are only acceptable within a narrow range of behaviours and dispositions. Boys learn from early on that they have to go through the rites and rituals of aggressive masculinity, and whether they can 'manage' or not becomes a daily and unending mode of being. In a way, boys are 'trapped', while enjoying their 'freedom'. These gendered life courses determine to a large extent what boys and girls learn.

Gender as text: portraying relationships

Textbooks were the main resources used in classrooms in the schools studied. To some extent, the analysis of each text reveals an effort on the part of authors and publishers to portray men and women authentically, mindful of the varieties that can occur.

English. There are many photographs and drawings of males and females, though the ratio is approximately 3:1 and the images tend to depict women in traditional roles as mothers or out shopping and men socialising, outdoors or in scenes of violence. Both men and women are portrayed in positions of power in the work-

place, but men more than women. The extracts used, such as poems and literary works, are almost totally derived from men – Emerson, Naipaul, Lawrence. There is liberal use of 'he' and 'his' and thus more attention to males in the text.

Social studies. The text attempts to portray men and women equally and they are shown in a variety of roles, traditional and non-traditional. Both males and females are depicted as having power and authority or being passive. While there seems to be a conscious attempt at gender balance, it can be noted that portrayals of negative activity seem to emphasise males. All instances related to juvenile delinquency and street children feature males. Particular attention is paid throughout the text to ensure that both males and females of different ages, ethnicities and socio-economic statuses are shown in a variety of roles.

Mathematics. Diagrams and tables comprise the bulk of the illustrations and tend to be abstract, and so do not portray any social situations where gender is a consideration. Mathematical problems show attempts to portray men and women equally as motorists and in business. However, people are usually referred to as doctors, scientists, teachers, students and athletes, and in such cases the reader's own stereotypes may be invoked. The learning approaches and assumptions of the texts seem to succeed in getting students to examine their practices, because real-life situations are depicted for problem-solving exercises. These help in nurturing reflection, which may transfer to other areas of their experience.

Information technology. Drawings are limited to flow charts and computer screens and there are no illustrations of people. The text deals with theories and concepts that relate to programming and hardware. There is no content depicting the contributions of men and women. The language tends to be impersonal, often using 'you'. The learning approach of the text does not allow for reflection, communication and negotiation, rather exercises require clinical statements of facts and practical applications of theory. Certainly the use of computers is not a simple and straightforward matter, there being a whole psychology of use question which may be gendered to some extent. Therefore, only content that may be examinable is treated in this text, and not the social situations that impact on information technologies and how they are perceived. Texts like these give subjects like information technology a male bias.

Biology. The illustrations do not reveal any bias towards males or females. However, in the captions to diagrams and in the chapter titles the author uses the term 'man' frequently to refer to men and women – 'The sense organs of man', 'The skeleton of man'. This is counteracted to some extent in the actual text, where 'human' is more often used to refer to males and females.

Home economics. The illustrations in this text represent males and females in a variety of situations, traditional and non-traditional and they seem to be shown equally. In the section on sexuality and puberty, cartoons are used which seem to downplay the issue of gender and lends an air of gender neutrality to the illustrations. This could have been a deliberate decision to reduce the kind of attraction that photo-

graphs and conventional diagrams seem to have for the adolescent when human reproduction is being studied. While this could be a specific technique for this issue, nevertheless it succeeds in making females invisible, even though the topic is their own biology.

The analysis of textual materials used for instruction shows that the issue of gender equality is one with which authors and writers continue to struggle. The equal distribution of illustrations and the variety of ways of depicting males and females seems to be easier to do than to make the actual text gender fair. Subjects like science, information technology and mathematics continue to present a gender-neutral stance, while they are heavily gendered in appeal.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy

This study highlighted the nature of prejudice and stereotypes that impacted on gender equality and equity in schools. It is evident that there is no urgency or pressure to examine 'taken for granted' assumptions about males and females. Some people have well thought out views and elaborate theories based on their personal convictions about gender. Thus, it becomes quite easy for a male principal to blame women for the plight of boys.

These unexamined beliefs and convictions are the source of the problem, and they solidify into stereotypes that guide and fashion the nature of the educational experience, not only for boys and girls but also for male and female principals, teachers and supervisors. When the topic of gender is raised, the participants in this study tended to think of 'sex' – whether one is male or female, and the so-called traits associated with each. This male–female dichotomy confounds any meaningful discourse on 'gender'. At the level of the nation, 'gender equality' is enshrined in law and the Ministry of Education allocates resources and entitlements equally to males and females. Yet what results is merely 'sex equity' – that boys and girls are treated in the same way, they are both given the same kinds of resources and opportunities. 'Gender awareness', however, which few people discussed, involved an understanding of differences and relationships and therefore that 'same' did not necessarily mean 'equal'. This is where stereotypes and prejudices come in: monies are allocated to schools, for example, for a sports programme (the assumption being that it is spent equally on boys and girls) and the facilities may be provided; however, because of prevailing norms and stereotypes girls do not take up the opportunity. This kind of discussion grasps the nature of 'gender'.

When there is a clear understanding of what 'gender' entails, inevitably teachers and principals will begin to question curricular norms and routines, and will begin to interrogate their own practice. When one understands gender, it does not make sense to say that gender issues are not highly relevant in an all-girls school because of its single-sex status. In fact, it has been found that in many all-girls schools there is a pronounced 'male' orientation to curriculum using males as the model for perfor-

mance and development of knowledge (Schmuck, Brody and Nagel, 2002). In this study, most people were either at the point of unexamined biases or they had an understanding of gender equality as 'sex equity' (Schmuck, Brody and Nagel, 2002). The most pressing concern that emerges from the study is for people to understand what they are talking about. For this to happen, really deep-seated policy changes need to take place, going beyond the usual recommendations to interrogate the very assumptions we have about the school as an organisation.

The study of classroom, school and system processes clearly reveals a number of stereotypes that serve to engender schooling in Trinidad and Tobago and seem to a large extent to be going unquestioned. These stereotypes are summarised below:

- **Gender equality is a controversial issue and should be ignored in schooling or only introduced in a limited way**. This attitude does not appreciate a deeper exploration of social life. It is also symptomatic of the school's curriculum – ignoring controversial issues, yet consistently advocating critical thinking. It speaks to a one-sided view of the curriculum – the academic over the affective.
- **Since there is a general principle of equality for all enshrined in the institutions of the land, and since there are few glaring examples of unequal practices, then gender equality must be a reality in schools**. Such pre-judgements tend to be based, like the first point, on a notion of social life that is ordered and harmonious and questions like these seem to have the potential to create disturbance.
- **Gender is about the separate characteristics of men and women**. This view tends to reify and reinforce the traits associated with conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. It stereotypes males and females in terms of these characteristics and does not recognise the varieties of masculinities and femininities that exist.
- **The education of boys is a much more urgent and critical problem than the education of girls.** This stereotypes all boys as doing badly and all girls as doing well. It ignores the fact that high-achieving boys do as well as high-achieving girls, and that underperformance of both boys and girls is an urgent issue – particularly for certain categories of students: those from low-income families, in low-achieving schools and in rural areas.
- **Girls' schools or boys' schools have little to do with issues of gender.** This is as a result of the stereotype that sees males and females as binaries – yet gender by definition is about the relationships between boys, men, girls and women. This relational aspect was almost absent from the views expressed by participants in this study. Schools do little to focus on the relational aspects of students and staff.
- **The issue of boys' underachievement and underperformance results from the influence of females.** This view indicts female teachers as not knowing how to deal with boys. It sees the relative success of girls as creating low self-esteem in boys and that females cannot be appropriate role models for boys. These are all

stereotypes based on a notion of boys' and girls' affairs, interests and schooling as separate and distinct processes.

- **Boys need male role models to improve performance.** This ignores the notion that girls, too, may well need both males and females to better understand themselves as people.
- **Sports are an avenue through which boys can find themselves**. This portrays females as less inclined to be athletic and more oriented to the home and 'lady-like' pursuits. It militates against the all-round schooling and development of girls and 'non-athletic' boys.
- **Teacher-directed learning and pedagogy is the best way to 'do' education.** This stereotype exists even though research shows (and teachers acknowledge) that the conventional classroom does not enable or interest boys to a large extent. Again, we see emphasis on the academic curriculum without serious consideration being given to learning styles or students' needs.
- **Males are strong and females are the weaker sex**. These stereotypes, while being eroded in the wider society, are still held firmly by boys, and girls. Adults today are less inclined to make such bald and bold claims. Students, especially those who do not read widely, need a learning experience that will challenge these stereotypes.
- **Sexual harassment is 'much ado about nothing'.** This targets behaviours that boys consider 'normal' for men in Caribbean societies. Schools do very little to help override the strong pressures to keep silent about acts of harassment or to challenge the mindset of the perpetrators.
- **The masculine self becomes 'stronger' through sports**. To this may be added, the sciences, aggression, being non-serious and minimal participation in activities that may seem to be 'girlish'.
- **Heterosexuality is normal.** Other sexual orientations are deviant and people who display them should be marginalised.
- **Gender exists as a robust variable.** Boys' underperformance can be explained solely in relation to what happens to boys or their own dispositions. Such stereotypes fail to take into account how social class and ethnicity at least serve to disaggregate boys into very different sub-groupings.

There was little evidence that the processes of schooling were helping students and teachers to question the stereotypes that prevented the full expression of gender equality and equity in schools. The research however showed that:

- giving boys and girls both the opportunity to take the same sleight of subjects from forms 1 to 3 laid the foundations for less gendered subject choices in later years,

- physical education as an examinable subject at CXC might introduce a wider group of students, girls and boys, to sports in the near future,
- the visual and performing arts for CXC is an avenue for non-traditional interactions between boys and girls, such as opportunities for more expressive communication,
- subjects like social studies had the potential to be a platform to begin a dialogue about these issues; social studies texts tended to be more sensitive to gender issues in terms of how illustrations and the actual text depicted social life and the relationships between the genders,
- most schools had a well-stocked library, which could be also be a platform to mount a more vigorous debate about these issues,
- some girls were assuming leadership positions along with boys, and
- some girls were not inclined to be quiet and submissive as the prevailing gender norms seem to suggest, but were quite outspoken and openly challenged boys.

The policy implications include the need to address:

- an explicit recognition on the part of educational authorities that gender equality and gender equity are not being realised in schools, even when resources appear to be distributed equally,
- more widespread attention to the fact that 'gender' issues are really treated as 'sex' issues where boys and girls are seen as separate entities – a biological perspective that reduces 'gender' to essentialist views of males and females; gender has to be seen on the part of decision-makers in a more relational way and in education not as if males and females lived in separate worlds,
- a determined thrust to build gender sensitisation and awareness sessions into teacher education programmes, into the professional development activities of schools, into parent–teacher associations and into the school's curriculum,
- homophobia, bullying and racism as institutionalised aspects of social relations,
- the production of materials that could be used in gender-sensitisation workshops for all categories of education personnel – supervisors, principals, teachers and students,
- the creation of a research agenda by the Ministry of Education to collect both quantitative and qualitative data in schools, so that more can be learned about gender issues and schooling – especially about low-achieving girls, rural populations and Tobago among others, and pedagogy that could enable both boys and girls to improve achievement, and
- the institutionalisation of a national gender policy to provide a rational set of guidelines for the education sector about raising awareness of gender, gender equality and gender equity

A final word

Taking on gender as a relational concept necessitates that all groups in the school interrogate their interactions and the assumptions guiding their interactions. Schools are not set up this way. Instruction, at the heart of all the relationships in the school, continues to be about **teaching**. If schools focused on **learning** they would have to come to grips with knowing more about their students in all their dimensions, bringing to the fore all the biases, perceptions and stereotypes that groups have about themselves and one another. Schools, even after experiencing wave after wave of reform, still stabilise around images where the Ministry of Education tells principals what needs to be done, principals transmit these dictates to teachers, who tell students as a substitute for instruction. In a milieu where sedimented practices are stronger than any reform, standard operating practices lie in obedience, conformity and maintaining the status quo. The tremendous emphasis on the academic curriculum sidelines any viable attempt to address the affective, the emotional and the relational in the lives of all stakeholders at the school.

Studies like this one show the need for schools to be redesigned, allowing the ideas guiding instruction to emerge from the school's dialogue and debate with itself about a more humane experience. Gender sensitivity awareness sessions can only be successful in fracturing stereotypes if they feed into a process of school-wide re-thinking and research about the norms governing schooling. To attempt to fracture stereotypes while the entire organisation remains firmly entrenched in an authoritarian, masculinist, achievement-oriented paradigm just echoes the futility of the spate of reforms that the education system has been undergoing since the early 1990s. Tinkering with the system may result at best in the semblance of change. Our challenge (and gender is only one ingredient in this agenda) is to begin to see the main project of the school, instruction, in a more relational way – one that it includes all stakeholders interacting in collaborative and collegial ways. Collaboration and collegiality about what matters continue to be given only lip service in schools today.