

## FOREWORD

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 53 States bound by a set of shared values and principles. One of those principles is that every child in the Commonwealth, girl or boy, has the right to a quality education. It will take some time for this right to be realised, however, since the majority of the 115 million children globally not in school live in Commonwealth countries. The majority of these children are girls. It is therefore right that the Commonwealth has focused attention on removing the barriers faced by girls in accessing education. More recently, however, Ministers of Education from across the Commonwealth have raised the issue of boys' underachievement and poor attendance at school, a growing phenomenon in all regions. This study, undertaken jointly by the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Secretariat, responds to that concern.

The underachievement of boys in education is a subject that raises heated debate and a host of conflicting hypotheses. Three persistent myths surround the subject:

Myth one is that this is about 'boys versus girls'. It is not. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by all Commonwealth governments in 2000, commit States to eliminating gender disparities in education. That means addressing the needs of whichever gender – girls or boys – is falling behind in either access to education or achievement. We want therefore to understand and address boys' underachievement in education in the contexts where it is an issue whilst continuing to focus on girls' access to education elsewhere. It is not either one or the other. We are committed to doing both.

Myth two is that boys' underachievement results from 'a war of the sexes', and that somehow girls and maybe female teachers are responsible for boys falling behind. The roots of girls' exclusion from education lay in discrimination whereby girls in some places were banned from education, or more school places were provided for boys than girls. There is no such suggestion here that boys' underachievement is a result of any similar formal discrimination. In fact, this study argues that the same socially determined gender roles may impact negatively on both boys and girls. Both sexes can be victims of a culture that, for example, prescribes education as not 'cool' for boys and also tolerates violence against girls.

Myth three is that boys' achievement at school should be measured against that of girls. To further demonstrate that this is not a war of the sexes, both boys' and girls' achievement at school should be measured against objective education standards for all children at that stage of education. We are not saying, therefore, that boys are underachieving in education compared to their female classmates but that they are doing so against objective standards of literacy, numeracy, etc for their peer group.

A pan-Commonwealth study of boys' underachievement in education was an ambitious endeavour. Inevitably, there have been challenges concerning the availability and comparability of data. Inevitably also, given the diversity of the Commonwealth, there were differences in the social and educational contexts of the four case study countries. For example, the cattle herding duties that keep large numbers of boys out of school in Lesotho are unlikely to be a factor in Samoa. It is noteworthy, however, that despite the diversity of the countries it has been possible to identify common elements and trends.

It is generally accepted that a child's achievement at school will be determined by factors both inside and outside the school environment. The big question for many Ministries of Education will be what can be done inside the education system to improve the attendance and performance of boys. This study identifies examples of successful practice and initial recommendations for policy direction. Surprisingly, there were few examples of open and distance learning (ODL) strategies contributing to better performance in education by boys. This is an area COL will now pursue.

We believe this first Commonwealth policy study on boys' underachievement in education will spark important discussion at the 16th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Cape Town, December 2006. We anticipate that the issue will remain a significant one in our drive to ensure quality education for all in the Commonwealth and meet our shared commitment to eliminating gender disparities.

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