How the learning crisis affects boys

Blog

Gender

Educational wastage

We are far from achieving the commitment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 that by 2030 all children are in school for 12 years and that they are learning.

A new UNESCO publication ‘Leave no child behind: Global report on boys’ disengagement from education’ shows that in many countries, boys are at greater risk than girls of repeating grades, failing to complete different education levels and having poorer learning outcomes in school. Where previously boys’ disadvantage seemed most notable in high- or upper-middle-income contexts at the beginning of the millennium, this has shifted and now includes several low- and lower-middle-income countries. Secondary education is where boys’ disadvantage is most prevalent.

Boys have poorer learning outcomes in reading

In 57 countries with data on learning poverty (not being able to read and understand a straightforward text at age 10), 10-year-old boys fare worse than girls in mastering reading skills and adolescent boys continue to fall behind girls in reading skills at the secondary level. Gaps in reading skills are found to start early. While data on learning is limited for the early grades, in 23 of 25 countries with data for proficiency in reading at Grade 2/3, the proportion of girls achieving minimum proficiency in reading was higher than that of boys. The largest disparities are found in Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati and Lesotho (see figure 1). In mathematics, the gender gap that once worked against girls at the start of the millennium has narrowed or equalized with boys in half of all countries with data.
Further, the most recent round of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) shows that gender gaps in numeracy are not particularly pronounced among young adults under 25 in 32 OECD countries. This reflects greater equity in educational opportunities over the last two decades. Among older adults, however, differences in educational attainment and gendered occupational choices and labour market outcomes may partially explain disparities in literacy and numeracy proficiency at older women’s expense, particularly in numeracy.

**Gendered norms and expectations as well as practices at school impact on boys’ learning**
Gendered norms and expectations impact on boys’ motivation and desire to learn. In many contexts, school activities and certain subjects are considered at odds with expressions of masculinity. This makes education unpopular with boys, impacting negatively on their achievement. Boys are also expected to contribute to the family income in many countries, leaving them less time to learn. As one 15-year-old boy from Lesotho interviewed for the UNESCO report noted:

Parents tell me to go and search for missing cattle, I sometimes return late and no longer have a chance to read.

A head of school from Fiji reported:

Parents always look up to their boys as a ‘source of income’ and even encourage them to do some odd jobs and holiday jobs to earn some pocket money. While they see this exercise as a symbol of maturity and responsibility, it leads to boys being disadvantaged as they lose interest in school work.

Practices such as the streaming of classes and gender segregation contribute to boys’ low motivation, underachievement and disengagement from education. Harsh discipline, corporal punishment and other forms of school-related gender-based violence impact negatively on boys’ academic achievement and attainment. As one male student of secondary age from the United Arab Emirates put it: “I still remember the hitting. In Grade 5, I had a teacher who for some reason hated me and made me hate studying. As a result, I became stubborn and refused to study.”

Boys are more likely than girls to experience physical bullying and are often targeted because of their real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. Fear and experiences of violence hinder students’ learning processes and outcomes, lead to increased absenteeism and may contribute to dropout.

**Learning outcomes must be improved for all**

While improving educational opportunities for girls globally continues to be of paramount importance to achieve gender equality in and through education, this focus on achieving gender parity also requires attention to boys.

The UNESCO report makes several recommendations on how to improve learning outcomes for boys:

- Monitor students’ learning performance following up with students and parents as necessary.
- Create gender-transformative and inclusive learning environments that address all learners’ needs. This includes training teachers on gender-transformative pedagogies, enabling them to challenge rigid gender norms and making curricula, teaching and learning materials gender-transformative, inclusive and free of stereotypes.
- Promote a positive learning culture that stimulates the interests of all learners. This includes teachers being fair and having high expectations of all learners, and providing constructive
feedback to students, building high-quality teacher-student relationships.

- Prohibit corporal punishment at school; introduce, disseminate and enforce codes of conduct for teachers and students; and provide training on positive non-violent discipline for teachers, as well as effective monitoring and response mechanisms.
- Abolish the streaming of classes and minimize gender-segregation practices.
- Develop and make use of effective pedagogical strategies to develop boys’ reading skills.
- Prevent and respond to all forms of school-related gender-based violence, through legislation, policy guidance, teacher training, whole-school approaches, community-based interventions and robust monitoring and reporting mechanisms.
- Offer extracurricular activities that keep boys engaged in the school environment and build social and transferable skills.
- Collect and make publicly available data disaggregated by sex and intersecting characteristics to better understand boys’ educational participation, progression and learning outcomes, including the most marginalized. Use these data to inform policies and programmes.

Addressing boys’ disengagement from and disadvantage in education is not a zero-sum game. It benefits both girls and boys and society as a whole. Education must be improved for male, female and non-binary learners, leaving no one behind.