



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN COEDUCATIONAL BOARDING SCHOOLS AND THEIR IMPACT  
ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF THE BOY-CHILD IN KENYA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the disciplinary practices employed by teachers on boys in coeducational secondary schools in Kenya based on a study on the effect of coeducation on the discipline and academic performance of boys. Data was collected through structured face-to-face interviews with six teachers in charge of discipline in six mixed boarding schools in Nakuru District. The findings revealed that the coeducational setting presented unique challenges to boys' discipline. Moreover, boy-girl affairs, which abounded in such settings, resulted in poor academic performance for the boys. The boys were lacking in academic focus, indulged in petty theft and exam cheating and other related vices in order to win the admiration of girls in school. Further, disciplinary practices adopted by teachers in the schools were unfavourable to the boy child's general well being and indeed were detrimental to boys' academic performance. The negative effect of such practices manifested in the form of low self esteem, lack of confidence, embarrassment, humiliation and loss of interest in academic work. It was recommended that school administrators employ stringent measures to discourage unhealthy relationships among students in mixed schools and structured forms of punishment be employed to correct the behaviour of the boy child.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Over the past three decades, there has been an ongoing debate on the advantages of coeducational and single-sex education for children's socio-emotional and educational development. The origins of this debate lie in the early British findings reported by Dale (1969, 1971, and 1974) which suggested that coeducational schools were better placed to meet the social and educational needs of young people. Those in favour of coeducation assert that co-educational schools better reflect society and can develop as communities which reflect the real world in which men and women live and work together (Riordan, 1985, Dale, 1974). Proponents of single-sex schooling support their position on the grounds that coeducation presents the possibility in which the presence of the opposite sex becomes inherently distracting, hindering academic success (Signorella *et al.*, 2006; Brophy, 1985; Bauch, 1988). They also argue that coeducational schools tend to reinforce gender stereotypes so that boys will disengage from subjects that are considered "female" (such as literature and music) while girls may shy away from subjects that are considered "male" (such as math and physics).

Based on this notion, increased single-sex schooling is thought a way to increase the representation of females in the hard sciences. Research done on the merits or demerits of coeducation has based their discussions on academic achievement as a basis of comparing coeducational and single sex schools (Bosire *et al.*, 2008; Mallam, 1993). Few have had discipline as their research focus and in the few cases that have obliquely touched on this important area, majority focused on girls and their experiences in these unique environments. Research does agree that coeducational schools and classrooms discourage rather than motivate girls' academic achievement due to the fact that in co-ed schools, girls suffer various kinds of subtle, unobtrusive, discriminatory pedagogical practices, and in some cases sexual verbal harassment from the male students (Bosire *et al.*, 2008; Woodward *et al.*, 1999; Hamilton 2006). It appears that male students are seen as discipline problems and the reason female students under-achieve in a coeducation set up. Previous research generally does not adequately discuss and describe disciplinary problems faced by the boy child that are unique to coeducational schools yet both sexes have been known to underachieve in coeducational settings. Moreover, no research has looked at the impact of disciplinary practices employed by teachers in coeducational schools on the male student attitudes toward school and by extension on academic achievement.

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This is informed by the fact that when discussing something that has two opposite elements such as coeducation, it is vital to look at both sides. This research was thus aimed at investigating the effects of disciplinary practices in coeducation schools on the attitudes of male students in order to establish a causal link with academic underachievement. This case is justified by what related literature and past research say regarding male response to a mixed gendered setting as is the case in coeducational schools; and the likely impact of this on discipline and academic achievement.

### **Review of Literature**

Gender differences in behaviour, attitudes and academic achievement have been widely researched and documented in literature. It is generally accepted that these differences are basically genetic in origin except for intelligence where there is no dramatic difference in either gender (Tickner, 1992). These differences have implications on decisions for single sex school or coeducational in order to create an appropriate learning environment for both sexes.

Some research findings on the relationship between gender and achievement have shown some mixed results. For example, a study done in Kenya by Boit (1986) found that girls in government and government aided secondary schools performed as well as boys, and pupils in single-sex schools performed better than those in mixed schools. Some studies have shown that girls in single-sex schools performed better than girls in mixed schools in Nigerian and Swaziland schools (Lockhead and Komenan, 1988; Kaino, 1996). However, Bosire *et al* (2008) reported that Kenyan students taught in coeducational classes scored relatively higher compared to those in single-sex schools. Similarly, they reported that taken separately, both boys and girls scored relatively higher in Mathematics exams when taught in coeducational settings. As alluded to earlier, none of these researches examines disciplinary problems experienced or disciplinary practices employed in these settings that may impact on the results reported. This is the knowledge gap that this research aims to fill. Over the past decade, data collection on coeducational schools has been for the benefit of females, with very little research dedicated to studying the effects on males. For example, the relationship between female academic underachievement and male indiscipline in coeducational schools has been implied in research reports. Signorella, Frieze, & Hershey (1996) found out that in a mixed-sex environment, girls receive less attention than their counterparts; are less likely to be called on by teachers and are more likely to be ignored. This frequently occurs because male students are seen as discipline problems and need to be controlled; therefore they become the focus of the teacher in the classroom. Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson (2000) also report that in mixed classrooms, boys are punished more than girls and that their punishments are more severe. This implies that boys are primarily a discipline problem and girls are the victims of their misbehaviour and the teachers' subsequent overemphasis on control of the same.

There is also a common perception that mixed-sex schools heighten boys' indiscipline. This notion is driven, in part, by the belief that boys are disruptive and that they alter the classroom dynamics in ways that are not conducive to

learning. Supporting this idea, researchers have found that a larger number of boys than girls in a school is associated with worse academic outcome for all students (Lavy and Schlosser 2009, C. Hoxby, 2000). In addition to academic gender differentiations within coeducational settings, behavioural differences also become more predominant factors in the educational process. Boys are more likely than girls to seek special needs services (for learning and behavior disorders), and are more likely to receive principal referrals for discipline violations (Gurian, 1996; United States Department of Education, 2004; Sax, 2005). In support of this argument, UNESCO (2007) adds that in poorly managed schools, there is the risk of boy classmates physically or sexually abusing the girls. In addition to sexual abuse, there are other forms of violence, intimidation and embarrassment. Gurian (1996) also documents that boys in single-sex schools were more likely to be better behaved and to find learning more enjoyable and the curriculum more relevant. Based on this evidence, it would therefore seem that the presence of girls in coeducational settings brought out the worst in boys and are therefore unlikely to provide conducive environment for excellence. It would therefore seem that coeducational settings are limited by their capacity to accommodate the large differences in cognitive, social and development growth rates of boys and girls aged between twelve and sixteen.

### **The Role of Teachers in Disciplinary Practices**

Teachers form a crucial part in education either in single sex or coeducational schools. The majority of time at school is spent with teachers; so they are influential role models to the students (Ferrara, 2009). In formation of gender roles, the teacher becomes extremely important due to the fact that they send multiple-gendered messages through their disciplinary practices. The questions this paper aims at addressing are: How do teachers handle discipline for girls and boys in a co-educational setting? What differential attitudes and expectations do they hold toward them? How do male students react to the prevailing messages and practices?

According to Woodward *et al* (1999), though many teachers express the view that they treat boys and girls equally and that their gender is irrelevant, this position provides a false sense of objectivity and impartiality, often at variance with actual practice. In practice, teachers' attitudes may reflect biases toward girls and boys. Biases are subtler than visible discrimination and may result in unconscious behaviours that give more careful attention either to girls or boys. These behaviours may foster, among the less favoured students, a sense of alienation and hinder personal, academic, and professional development (Davis, 1993). Sexist attitudes introduce inequalities and hierarchies in the treatment individuals receive based on sex differences which may in the long term affect academic achievement (Subirats, 1994). In terms of classroom discipline, Datnow, Hummard, & Woody (2001) found that in terms of gender differences in discipline, educators held a preconceived belief about males and female behaviour which continued even when students were in single gender classrooms. Ferrara (2009) reports that the student teacher interactions are typically stereotypical and girls are considered quiet and well behaved while boys are considered talkative, loud and restless. These stereotypes extended to classroom management, where teachers reported that girls

needed to have less structured discipline methods while boys needed to be more controlled. This is supported by Kitetu (1998), who reports that in Kenyan secondary schools, there is teachers' differential treatment of girls and boys, but in this case teachers were harsh on boys and very gentle with the girls; an attitude underpinned by society's cultural beliefs. There is a Kenyan cultural belief that boys should not be 'softened'. They are expected to be tough, active and brave while girls are often treated as 'soft'. As such, teachers' treatment of boys and girls in these classrooms reaffirmed gender in accordance with cultural norms which define masculinity and femininity (Kitetu, 1998).

Brophy (1985) provides up-to-date results of a qualitative analysis of the findings on the same topic. Both reviews by Brophy (1985) concluded that teachers interacted more with boys than with girls, and that this was particularly true for criticism. Criticism can be regarded as the result of boys' disruptive behaviour. Boys' disruptive behaviour was also observed by other researchers. For instance, Busweel (1981, cited in Kelly 1988: 20) reports that at least four lessons were observed where the 'disruptive behaviour' of boys took all the teacher's attention for the whole lesson. Similar findings were observed by Altani (1995), who through a questionnaire, surveyed 54 male and 72 female teachers in seventeen primary schools in Greece, and asked them to respond by expressing their agreement or disagreement with the statement: 'boys are more disruptive in the classroom than girls'. Most teachers (66.7%) agreed with the statement.

These research findings are however not clear on whether the boys' disruptive behaviour is directly caused by the presence of girls. Moreover, it is unclear what disciplinary practices were employed by the teachers on the boys in coeducational settings. The consequent effects of these disciplinary practices on the boys' academic performance are also unclear. What is in question is therefore a threefold dilemma that this paper intends to address: the nature of the male indiscipline in a coeducational school; the teachers' response to the male indiscipline and the impact of these responses on the male student's attitude towards school and academic achievement. The literature generally does not adequately discuss and describe discipline, specifically from a male student perspective in a coeducational setting. This research addresses these voids of information by exploring coeducational schools and finding differences between female and male discipline practices in these schools. The relationship between the teacher and the students will be emphasized in the hope of providing others with more information about these settings. The specific objectives of the study were to: determine whether there is a difference in the discipline of the boys and girls in coeducational schools; determine whether there is a difference between teacher discipline practices for boys and girls in coeducational schools and determine the effect of teacher disciplinary practices in coeducational schools of the boy child's academic performance.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted the ex-post facto design. In such a design, research inferences about relationships among variables are made systematically and empirically without direct control of independent variables because their manifestations have

already occurred and also because they are inherently non-manipulatable (Ajowi *et al.*, 2010). The study was also basically descriptive (describing conditions as they are at a particular time) (Jurs & Wiersma, 2005). The study was carried out in Nakuru District of Rift Valley Province and targeted mixed schools in the district. The area was chosen as the study site because of its accessibility to the researcher. As per records obtained from the District Education office at the time of the study, the area had a total of six mixed boarding schools. All the schools were included in the study due to their small number. The study methodology was mainly qualitative for in-depth data and for 'thick descriptions' alluded to by Best & Khan (2005). The study tool was mainly structured interview schedule used with discipline masters in the schools. The discipline masters were chosen due to their daily interaction with the students and also because they were in charge of all discipline cases in their schools. By the very nature of their jobs therefore, they were considered the ideal respondents for the study due to the fact that they would combine their experiences as classroom teachers and administrators to reveal information pertinent to this study. The reliability of the instruments was ensured by assessing the responses from the respondents during the pilot study in one mixed secondary school in the neighbouring Rongai District. The purpose of conducting the pilot study was to check on suitability and the clarity of the questions on the instruments designed, relevance of the information being sought, the language used and the content validity of the instruments from the responses given.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Disciplinary problems depicted by the boy child in a coeducational school*

To answer this question, the respondents were asked whether boys presented more disciplinary problems than the girls in coeducational schools. All the respondents (100: n=6) affirmed that boys indeed presented discipline problems than the girls. One respondent summed up the general sentiments thus:

'Yes indeed boys are more problematic than girls. Many discipline cases reported are instigated by boys. However some boys are well behaved. It is just that on the whole boys are more difficult to manage than girls.'

Pressed for more details, the respondents cited some examples of cases of indiscipline as

'... rudeness, vandalism, assault, drug abuse, theft, missing classes, insubordination of teachers and prefects and laziness'.

The above finding confirms previous research findings that indeed boys are rougher, louder and inclined to horse play and other forms of indiscipline (Davies, 1993; Tickner, 1998). However, the finding in itself was irrelevant to the study: a cause – effect relationship was not established within coeducation- more specifically whether the presence of female students prompted the behaviour observed. In order to establish a cause and effect relationship between the disciplinary problems with the presence of girls, the

respondents were further asked to identify those discipline problem depicted which were caused by the presence of the girls. The following were the responses:

**Table 1. Disciplinary Problems experienced by Boys in Mixed School Influenced by the Presence of Girls**

Disciplinary Problem	F	%
Loss of academic focus	6	100
Sagging & violation of dress code	6	100
Showing off	6	100
Rudeness	5	83
Rebellion	5	83
Theft	6	100
Cutting Classes	3	50
Boy- girl affairs	6	100
Theft	4	67
Fighting	5	83
Intimidation of girls	6	100
Exam cheating	5	90

From the findings depicted in Table 1 above, it is clear that boys in mixed school setting experienced discipline problems due to the presence of the girls. One respondent reported:

'To some extent some discipline problems are provoked by girls- for example sagging of trousers and general violation of dress code-to show off. Some boys even steal clean clothes from the dry lines in order to impress the girls. Deviant acts such as drinking alcohol emanate from boys. They smuggle in alcohol and influence the girls to drink.'

It was also noted that all misbehaviour on the boys' part was based on the need to impress the girls. This means that in the absence of girls the boys' misbehaviour would be minimized. Moreover, the educational disadvantages boys face by the distraction of girls in the coeducational setting would also be reduced. One could reasonably conclude from this study that both boys and girls are academically disadvantaged in co-educational schools, but that the disadvantage is greater for the boys. Woodward *et al* (1999) refer to the high school period as the "hormonal" years which were tightly bound to the sexuality of girls and their "primping" for boys, the disruptive behaviour of boys and their physical "performing" for girls. Besides, boys were seen to be already academically "behind" girls, so the distraction was seen as more of a disadvantage to them (Woodward *et al*, 1999; Hamilton, 2006). The most notable case of indiscipline reported was the occurrence of the boy- girl relationships, which abounded in such settings. It emerged from the interview sessions that this was the root cause of boys' indiscipline. All the respondents reported that nearly all boys in their schools indulged in this practice and 'it was rare to find a boy without a girlfriend'. Following this, boys attention was distracted by the affairs hence the loss of academic focus. The violation of dress code such as sagging of the trousers was a defiant act intended to win the attention of girls by adopting a 'macho' appeal. Other disciplinary issues emanating from the boy-girl affair and the need to impress the girls were found to be rudeness, rebellion and petty theft of cash to spend on the girls. Boys were also found to involve themselves in fighting over girls and spending too much time on their appearance - all in an attempt to win and attract as many girls as possible. Indeed some were reported to be running multiple affairs. For the academically challenged boys, some resorted to exam cheating in order to impress their

girlfriends while for the academically gifted, academic excellence is reportedly used to impress girls of their choice.

#### ***The Impact of Male Indiscipline on Academic Performance of the Boy Child***

Needless to say, these reported cases of indiscipline have had a negative impact on the academic performance of boy child. All the respondents (n=6) attested to this. Commented one discipline master:

'It is quite true that academic performance of the boy child is affected in mixed schools. Those who engage in boy- girl affairs tend to lack concentration in class especially if the girl in question is a class mate. They keep fantasizing about the girl as they figure out how to win the girls and as a result they lose focus'.

Another reported:

'Some naughty boys waste time in preps as they move from class to class talking to their favourite girls. Some boys spend a lot of money in the canteen buying presents for these girls. They also waste time discussing in the dormitory about their conquests instead of reading. This affects their class work'.

The sentiments hereby expressed reveal that girls in mixed schools are a distracting influence on the boys. This is especially so since the average high-school-going child in Kenya is between the ages of fourteen and eighteen; the pubescent age when hormonal changes heighten the attraction of the sexes. This finding is confirmed by research conducted elsewhere in which academic performance between single sex and coeducational schools are compared. Hamilton (2006), studying students in Jamaica, found that students attending single-sex schools outperformed students in coed schools in almost every subject tested. Hamilton noted the same pattern of results which has been found in most studies worldwide: girls at single-sex schools attain the highest achievement; boys at single-sex schools are next; boys at 'coed' schools are next; and girls at 'coed' schools do worst of all. This means that being in coeducational settings in effect hampered the educational attainments of both boys and girls.

One discipline master blamed the girls for loss of focus on the boys. Said he:

'Some of these girls are provocative. They come in short skirts to class. The school administration discourages this kind of skirts...They also sit in revealing manners especially in discussion groups. Definitely, this is invitation and the boys respond even when the boy was not interested in the first place. The problem here is that the academic work of both the girl and the boy is badly affected.'

Two discipline masters felt strongly that mixed school setting was detrimental to the academic performance:

'There are a lot of challenges in mixed schools which are ignored or which we as teachers are not aware of. Only extremely focused students succeed. Boys do

better in single-sex schools as it has been observed in the KCSE results. Forces of nature (adolescence) are to blame. It is very difficult to manage these forces of nature in mixed schools. Let them be mixed at the university but not in high school where everything is at its peak. It is like fighting forces of nature.'

The prevailing sentiments that can be derived from these findings are that mixed-sex schools disadvantage boys due to the fact that the presence of girls is inherently distracting to them. In addition, these distractions lead to various forms of indiscipline emanating from the boys' need to impress the girls.

#### ***Approaches adopted by teachers on boy child indiscipline in coeducational school***

The third question that this study sought to answer was to find out the disciplinary strategies utilized by teachers to correct indiscipline by the boy child. The aim was to establish whether there was differentiation in terms of punishment meted out on boys and girls found to have committed a similar mistake. The results indicate that all the respondents felt that boys were treated more harshly than girls. Said one:

'Teachers are rough on the boys. Male teachers are especially rough on boys but have a soft spot on the girls.'

Further probing revealed that cultural stereotypes and attitudes regarding male sexuality played a role in this treatment. This is best summarized by one respondent:

'You know boys have to be toughened up. These people have to know they are men... they have to be tough. But girls are weak and soft. They might collapse if you treat them unkindly. Some punishments are also not suitable for girls. Girls should be talked to but for boys rough treatment (mainly corporal punishment) is an extension of dialogue. They will understand better.'

The main disciplinary strategies reported by the respondents are summarized in the table below:

**Table 3: Disciplinary Strategies used on Girls in Mixed Schools**

Disciplinary Strategy	f	%
Kneeling	6	100
Standing in class	6	100
Counselling	6	100
Refer to authority	6	100
Washing of corridors	6	100
Verbal reprimands	6	100

The results displayed on Table 2 above suggest that the most popular forms of discipline strategies for boys were kneeling, sitting on the bare floor, frog jumps, push-ups and splitting firewood or slashing grass. Although admittedly still practiced, respondents were reluctant to admit using corporal punishment as this had been outlawed by the government of Kenya through Legal Notice No. 56/ 2001. Other forms of disciplinary strategies adopted against the boy child that went against their human rights were verbal abuse and slapping. The respondents confessed that this went on undercover to

hide the fact from the school administration who would take stern measures against the teachers who practiced such. In order to create a clear contrast between disciplinary strategies employed on the boy and girl child, the respondents were further asked to list some of the strategies used on the girls. The following table depicts their responses:

From Table 3 above it is clear that girl child indiscipline is punished differently from the boys. None of the respondents mentioned corporal punishment or the imposition of rough treatment on the girls. On being asked about this, all the respondents were categorical that girls were softer than boys hence the differentiation of treatment. Said one disciplinary master:

'Girls are delicate. Punishing them is very difficult. They are also generally more disciplined and rarely get into mischief. When they do, they respond very effectively to verbal reprimands. Rarely does one need to go further than this. In any case for those difficult girls, the administration (meaning the principal of the school) can deal with that matter.'

There was also the general fear that punishing a female student in a rough manner may lead to interdiction or dismissal from employment in case the student sustained injuries. One respondent summarized this sentiment:

'One can get into trouble when dealing with girls. You can lose your job if they are injured. Besides, what if you are accused of sexual harassment?'

It was therefore observed that discipline masters (all male) were fearful of repercussions of punishing girls. They therefore adopted a cautious approach when punishing female, preferring to play it safe and refer difficult cases to 'higher authority'. This caution was missing when teachers were punishing boys as the general feeling was that boys could take any form of rough treatment without complaining; for to do so would demean their manhood.

#### ***Effect of teacher disciplinary practice on the boy child's academic performance***

The fourth objective of the study was to find out the effect of the disciplinary strategies employed by the teachers on the boy child on their academic performance. The aim was to find out whether girls' presence played an important role in establishing this relationship. Analysis of the comments made by the respondents indicated that all (100%) of the respondents felt that indeed boys' academic performances were affected by the disciplinary strategies employed on the boy child especially in the presence of the girls. One disciplinary master's views best summarized this:

Boys feel ridiculed and humiliated especially since most of these punishments are meted out in class in the presence of girls. Their egos are diminished.

Another related comment was:

They feel embarrassed especially if it (the punishment) was done in front of a girl. The boys will develop low self-esteem and withdraw

psychologically from the teacher. They feel despised and defeated. Other students make fun of them and no one wants to sit with them in class. This is worse in a mixed school. As a result, they go down academically and fail in their performance.'

The overriding response was that the boys punished in a demeaning manner such as through verbal barrages or being held by the pants would 'view the teacher as an enemy' and may rebel and 'neglect their academic work'. In addition, they may transfer the negative feelings aroused by the punishment to schooling in general.

As one respondent revealed:

'Boys who are punished in front of their peers (especially of the opposite sex) begin to develop a negative attitude. They may begin to be lazy, sleep in class during lessons and neglect their appearance... they appear shaggy. They start resenting the teacher who meted out the punishment and by association, the subject such a teacher teaches. They also keep grudges. By failing in academics, they believe this is revenge against the teachers.'

Such feelings would obviously not augur well for their academic performance. However, some respondents were quick to point out that not all boys responded in such a negative manner

'It depends on the boy. Some take it positively. They are remorseful and strive to work hard. If they outgrow their bad habits, they improve academically.'

On further probing, it was however revealed by the respondents that the number of boys who took correction positively was smaller compared to those who rebelled. It was therefore felt that teachers needed to be careful how they handled punishments in mixed-sex schools. There was the general feeling that there was need to be 'fair' and 'discreet' in dealing with boys in order to reduce the undesirable effects of punishments.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the study that there exist unique challenges in terms of discipline on the boy child in coeducational settings. The presence of girls in such settings provokes these discipline problems emanating from boy-girl relationships reported to be common in co-educational settings. Secondly, there exists a differentiation in dealing with indiscipline of girls and boys in coeducational settings. Boys in mixed schools are treated to rougher forms of disciplinary methods, some of which infringe on the rights of the child as advocated for in various legal provisions both locally and internationally. Further, it is concluded that there exists a relationship between strategies employed on the boy child and their academic performance in that such strategies primarily affect negatively the academic performance of the boy child by causing negative feelings of defeat, humiliation and embarrassment due to the fact that such disciplinary measures are commonly undertaken in the presence of girls.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that administrators in coeducational schools adopt a more proactive approach in stemming out discipline problems unique to such settings. Guidance and Counselling should be strengthened to focus on such issues as negative effects of boy-girl relationships. In addition, more attention must be placed on the discipline of boys in coeducational setting in order to avoid marginalization of the boys. Clear guidelines should be put in place by school administrators so that there is no differentiation between disciplinary strategies employed for boys and girls. Lastly, since this study relied on anecdotal evidence to relate boy child indiscipline in coeducational schools rather than basing conclusions on actual academic results of the mixed schools under study, future studies should seek to establish a correlation between discipline and academic performance by using actual academic results.

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