



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

**AGAINST ALL ODDS:
Understanding
men's success amid
disengagement from
education in the
Caribbean**

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Commonwealth of Learning

505 Burrard Street, Suite 1650, Box 5

Vancouver, BC V7X 1M6, Canada

Telephone: +1 604 775 8200

Fax: +1 604 775 8210

Web: www.col.org

Email: info@col.org

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| CAPE | Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination |
| COL | Commonwealth of Learning |
| CSEC | Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate |
| CXC | Caribbean Examinations Council |
| EdD | Doctor of Education |
| NYS | National Youth Service |
| PATH | Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education |
| SDC | Social Development Commission |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |

Introduction

The persistent challenge of boys' educational underachievement in the Caribbean has been documented extensively. Boys consistently attain lower academic results, have more incidences of disciplinary issues, repeat grades more frequently and are placed in special education programmes at disproportionately higher rates than their female counterparts. This pattern of underperformance among boys reflects broader trends observed in Western educational settings, where boys tend to progress at a slower pace and achieve lower levels of academic success. Therefore, this issue warrants urgent attention to explore alternative narratives that could inform innovative and sustainable solutions to support boys' educational development.

The “How They Succeeded Against All Odds?” Understanding Educational Disengagement among Boys and Men in the Caribbean from Outliers' Perspective project, commissioned by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), represents a significant endeavour to understand educational disengagement in the context of young men who defied the statistical odds. These individuals are outliers who have been successful despite facing adverse circumstances that typically lead to educational failure. Their perspectives are critical to our understanding of boys' disengagement from education because, rather than concentrating on the reasons for failure as so many other studies have done, the “How They Succeeded Against All Odds?” study examined the factors underlying boys' success. The research was conducted by a team from The University of the West Indies, Mona, across three nations — Jamaica, St Vincent and The Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago — and involved 11 participants.

This report presents the findings of the study, which are grounded in the lived experiences of successful outliers, an analysis of the findings and some recommendations for anyone undertaking an initiative to assist boys or young men. The questions that guided the study explored significant moments in the participants' personal and educational journeys and their interpretation of how they managed to defy the odds. The participants addressed the personal, institutional, family and community influences they believed contributed to their success and how their perceptions of gender influenced their educational pursuits. They also offered recommendations for boys or young men who are on a similar education journey.

The participants' accounts largely represent stories of survival, creativity, determination, drive, grit, mental fortitude and a will to win. They share a resilient attitude — which is what has enabled these young men to succeed.

The findings indicate that the participants believe they challenged adversity, and their life stories corroborate this assertion. Limited financial and material resources, single-parent households, uninterested or absent fathers, undesirable community influences and the negative effects of gender stereotypes are prominent themes. Mothers and other women, particularly teachers, played a pivotal role in fostering the participants' educational success. Mentorship and an unwavering determination to overcome the constraints of their challenging socio-economic circumstances and psychological conditioning — whether it was dealing with being labelled homosexual, resisting negative peer pressure or managing the hazards of violence-prone communities threatening their education — all contributed to their achievements.

Finally, the report looks at the gaps, silences and contradictions that require further investigation and suggests innovative approaches and recommendations to address them.

Significant Moments in Participants' Personal and Educational Journeys

Important moments in the participants' personal and educational journeys include times when they paused and, upon reflection, recognised they were at a turning point in their lives. Such moments prompted them to strengthen their resolve, redouble their efforts and take advantage of opportunities and assistance that were afforded to them to achieve the results they desired, despite their respective challenges.

The personal and educational moments highlighted seemed intertwined in most instances, as most of them are school-related, across post-primary educational levels. However, a few related to the participants' home circumstances.

Ash pointed to experiences with a high school Mathematics teacher whose “approach to teaching and learning and how he related”¹ to students resonated with him as being pivotal for him. He reported improving his performance in Mathematics while under the tutelage of this instructor. He also indicated that his years in teachers' college were marked by several significant moments because he developed a passion for teaching.

Sage reported that being placed in a low-performing class, failing diagnostic tests and subsequently being advised to repeat a grade were pivotal moments for him. He explained his feeling of personal failure: “I wanted to find a way to do better. I knew I had potential. I never wanted to fail.” He also recounted devising a strategy to seek assistance to help him improve his academic performance: “I also started to find a way to get a job in the evenings, so I could pay for such classes.” His dedication and hard work resulted in his being promoted to a higher stream. He reasoned why it was significant: “That for me was the turning point . . . because I felt accepted.” His promotion placed him near the high performers and gained him the teachers' approval. This, he claimed, boosted his confidence because he was close enough to the “brilliant class,” “the teachers were more accepting” of him because they no longer thought he was “a failing kid” and he was now “showing great potential,” thus demonstrating the absolute power of the proximity principle and acceptance.

Oakley, Hawthorne and Heath noted that support for their tertiary education was key to their achieving their ambitions and therefore represented a very important marker on their road to success. Two pivotal moments stood out for Oakley. The first was when he passed his primary school exit examination at a very young age. That in itself was a big achievement, but the high school that he started to attend resisted accepting him because he was younger than the average Form 1 student. Convinced that he could not manage high school-level work because of his age, the school administered a diagnostic test, which he passed with flying colours. The second significant moment, he claimed, was when he realised that pursuing higher education was not a

¹ All participant quotes have been reproduced verbatim.

rite of passage. Instead, he said, “it is something that is like the cornerstone of your being.” This suggests he believed that it was the next natural step for him but not for most others.

Hawthorne’s significant moments centred around receiving support and motivation to access tertiary education and pursue his professional journey in the higher education space. Heath is a first-generation holder of bachelor’s, master’s and PhD degrees. He studied overseas and was the first Black student to be inducted into one of the oldest academic societies and one of the first Black students in his course of study at Florida International University. As a professional, he has travelled to various countries, met several presidents and Queen Elizabeth II and received many awards. He lists all these as significant professional and academic milestones and moments.

The significant moments described above were rooted in positive experiences, mainly linked to school, but this was not the case for all participants. In Orion’s case, a significant moment occurred when his mother was called to his school because of his bad behaviour. She broke down in tears, and Orion realised he did not want his mother to be unhappy because of his poor conduct. He decided to change his ways, regain focus and pursue a positive path. Two other respondents, Reed and Fire, pointed to the demise of their parents’ relationships as significant moments in their journey. Each respondent took a different approach to this unfortunate circumstance. Reed experienced depression and substance abuse initially, and Fire was driven to craft a path that was uniquely his own, leading him to pursue multiple means of earning an income and maintaining his independence as a young man.

Although the significant moments varied in context and nature, they all played a powerful role in shaping the participants’ destinies.

Participants’ Accounts of How They Defied the Odds

The findings demonstrated that participants felt they defied the odds, including extreme poverty, parental separation, lack of family support, violence-plagued communities and other challenging social circumstances. Over 80% of the respondents identified inadequate resources as being among the greatest obstacles they faced, and over 70% had absentee fathers. The overlapping odds compounded to create seemingly insurmountable obstacles for the young men who participated in the study. How did they succeed when so many young men do not?

Ash explained that he defied the odds by breaking the cycle of academic underperformance in his family. Thanks to his parents’ significant sacrifices, he became a young male scholar in an environment in which he is an anomaly. He further rationalised his success by pointing out the age at which he became a teacher educator, his leadership of a national training institute and the level of academic achievement he has attained to date:

I am from a family where my parents did not complete secondary education, and I was the first in my immediate family to go to college to get a degree, to get a master’s and I am now on a journey to completing a doctoral degree.

For Ash, the odds against him included very limited finances. He recalled having to seek special permission to sit examinations and pay his tuition costs later. In detailing his family's modest means, he noted, "I am from a relatively poor family background where my mother was a seamstress at the time and our father was a farmer."

He attributed defying the odds to relying on "those values and attitudes that were deemed important as it relates to being diligent, being industrious and being committed to a cause." This was important, because he reported knowing "that ultimately one day the trajectory will change, and it is based on how you navigate with those sacrifices that have been made for you." He also credited the very strong emotional support he received from his family during challenging days while he was studying.

Ash's relatively rapid career trajectory also played a role in his defying the odds. He reported that progress in his professional life has been above average:

I went against the tradition because within our spaces in teacher education traditionally you would need to amass a significant number of years to then transition to a second order teacher as the literature describes us, but I would have attained what was required in terms of my five years of experience prior to becoming a teacher educator and then to transition from that to becoming a programmes officer . . . to senior director and within months of being senior director in a government entity as director. Some would say that it is unusual as well for a male to perhaps rise or to ascend in such a short space of time. When I go to the executive meetings, I often look around the room and I am always the youngest male in that space to be contributing to decision-making and policymaking in this country and so perhaps some would say socially it is not the norm.

Rowan, Sage and Cedar all overcame poverty, broken families and limited guidance to chart successful courses by exploring and creating opportunities and seeking support from influential people who had a positive impact on their lives.

Rowan's mother was a single parent who could not care for him adequately, and Rowan lived on his own from the age of 14. Despite his young age, he ran a business to support himself. His unfavourable circumstances affected his academic performance negatively, but he acknowledges that he had some help — "With the help of school personnel, four women took me under their wings" — and managed to achieve success in a few Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) subjects. He reported the uncertainty that he often experienced: "I . . . didn't know what I was going to do with my life because I had no guidance as to where I should go as it relates to a career and anything."

Cedar's mother was also a single parent. She earned meagre wages and was his sole provider. Cedar was born in a rural community where there are mainly farmers and no university-trained professionals. He achieved a high level of education and is now based in the United States of America and enjoys the distinct privilege of being the youngest — and only Black male — assistant professor on staff where he works. Like most of the other respondents, the odds he had to

overcome were primarily financial, but he realised that “getting the education and making a way out would be sort of my ticket out.” He therefore maintained a steady focus and completed his course of study.

Hawthorne asserted: “I’ve been able to defy the odds. Perhaps on multiple occasions.” His family background was unstable, and he lacked both emotional and financial support.

Pine struggled with poverty and the negative effects of the subculture of the depressed community in which he was raised.

The odds faced by Orion included a lack of support and love from family and being ridiculed by a family member. He indicated that “there was no support . . . I mean, my family was there, but the support that I needed wasn’t there, you know, being laughed at by your own cousin. It was very hard.” Inadequate finances also presented a challenge, as there were insufficient resources to cover his basic expenses. He noted that the hardship of his home life and the lack of money to cover expenses such as books, travel to school and proper meals proved to be significant challenges.

Fire asserted with confidence that he has overcome the odds that were stacked against him: “Yeah, really, defied them 100%.” He pointed to creative ways in which he harnessed and optimised resources as a youngster and how he passed five CSEC subjects and established multiple income streams as an adult to gain economic independence.

Oakley enjoyed reasonable stability. He shared that he came from a stable family and admits that although he had to overcome certain obstacles, they could be considered trivial when compared to the pressing issues that others have had to deal with. The odds he reported defying relate to his professional journey. He was falsely accused of wrongdoing. The accusation could have tarnished his career and seen him blacklisted, but he was eventually vindicated and continues to enjoy success as a technology professional. He demonstrated resilience as he grappled with the injustice and explained, “I had to fight. I had to get lawyers involved. I had to get the police involved. Other special investigators and I had to fight tooth and nail to clear my name.”

Heath believes that he is still in the process of defying the odds, including surviving a violent community “where male children were prone to being in a cycle of violence, being a part of gangs.” He was also negatively impacted by limiting stereotypes perpetuated by those who expressed that “you are just going to be worthless, like people in your community.”

Nine out of the 11 respondents reported that they had to overcome a significant lack of resources. Unstable family backgrounds also affected the majority of the participants and had an adverse effect on their academic journey and well-being. The respondents show self-awareness, determination, resilience and a will to win, demonstrated through efforts such as entrepreneurship, requesting payment extensions and connecting with mentors.

Personal Influences on Success

This section presents the research questions and an analysis of the responses to them. The research questions sought to explore how personal influences contributed to the participants’ success, determine the influence of institutional factors on success and probe the influence of community

and family support systems on success. The questions also addressed gender perspectives, how acquiring an education affected quality of life and solicited recommendations from the participants for addressing boys' underachievement.

Research Question 1: How do participants describe the personal influences that contributed to their success?

SOME SOURCES OF INSPIRATION THAT HELPED PARTICIPANTS SUCCEED DESPITE THEIR CHALLENGES

All but one of the respondents credited female relatives as well as present fathers, teachers and mentors as inspiring them to pursue their efforts to achieve educational success. The exception said he had inspired himself, but he also acknowledged that several people in his life offered encouragement. Seven of the 11 participants named their mothers as their main source of inspiration. Reed, Ash and Oakley named both parents as having had a significant influence on their academic success and the shaping of their paths.

Reed noted that “both parents played an active role in my early childhood and primary school education.” Oakley acknowledged the support of his extended family: “I would say, my family, my mother, my father, my sister, those were my idols or my inspiration growing up.”

Other respondents noted the glaring absence of their fathers. According to their accounts, in some cases the fathers were physically present but emotionally absent or irresponsible. Pine reported:

While he [his father] was living in the same house, it was like he was present physically, but mentally, emotionally, there was no support for me as a young man growing up. It was a struggle for us to basically ask him for money to go to school.

Cedar hailed his mother as a major source of inspiration, but noted that his son, to whom he is a single father, was also a source of inspiration and made him maintain focus and remain anchored. He explained: “You have a child, and I have to do what I have to do for him, especially as a single dad, raising a young Black kid. So, definitely my son, definitely my mom as well.” His deep consciousness and desire to create a legacy and an easier life for his son than he had caused him to be deliberate about parenting properly and being successful. Another source of inspiration came from the fact that he wanted to provide for his mother, as she provided for him as a child:

She tried her best to make sure that I got whatever I needed. She followed me down the road and made sure seh mi get a taxi to go on my way. So, just that kind of support and drive from her. Now she lives with me. I take care of her, and I'm able to just kind of throw back the rope, you know. It's a beautiful feeling.

Heath cited three layers of inspiration — his mother and grandmother, the cadet corps and Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States of America — but clarified that his mother and grandmother were his chief sources of inspiration. He recognised the depth of their support.

Despite having little education, they worked extremely hard to ensure that he could attend church and school:

Unfortunately, I did not even grow up with any of my uncles. I grew up in a home with just women — my sisters, my grandmother and my mother. My father left Jamaica when I was three years old. From time to time, he would visit Jamaica, and of course, from time to time, he would send money and everything. But obviously, there was a total emotional absence in my life because the physical presence wasn't there and obviously, money couldn't solve all the issues. When any money was sent, it had to be dedicated to food. So, we were always put in a position to decide whether to get a book or have dinner the next day.

Joining the cadet corps² equipped Heath with discipline and problem-solving skills, which he applied to his academic work. Barack Obama inspired him “because of the way he spoke and the way he carried himself and the way he spoke about the audacity of hope.”

The issues of coping with inadequate funds and managing competing needs came up repeatedly. Some interviewees highlighted the critical roles played by teachers and mentors who provided both tangible and intangible support that significantly aided their educational success. Ash, whose parents did not complete their secondary education, credited a “superior being” for guiding him. He pointed out that most of his mentors were women.

The recognition of maternal figures as sources of inspiration continued with Rowan, who said his mother had a significant impact on his journey to success. However, he credited himself as being his own inspiration, declaring, “Yeah, of course I had people who guided me, people who gave me encouragement. But, as I said before, I learned early on that there's absolutely nobody coming to save me.” He was acutely aware of the limitations of his circumstances, having been born to a single mother, but his mother in particular strongly encouraged him to pursue an education.

My mother being a single mother who at times did not have it inculcated a love for reading, and which subsequently led to me having a consistent search for knowledge. My brain is the only thing I can use to survive.

Hawthorne credited teachers and other key persons who became unofficial mentors to him as sources of inspiration, noting, “They helped me in more ways than one to focus, tap into my potential and believe in myself.” Orion cited his mother as being his chief source of inspiration on his academic journey, and Fire said his primary source of inspiration was an uncle and a mentor whom he called Auntie Gail-Ann. Oakley was the only participant who cited his father as being influential in his pursuit of an education.

² A cadet corps is a youth programme, often associated with military or paramilitary organisations, that provides training in discipline, leadership and life skills to help participants become well-rounded citizens.

THE IMPACT OF SELF-CONFIDENCE ON THE PARTICIPANTS' JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

Ash asserted that self-confidence is very important to success. He claimed to have developed a high level of confidence because of his in-depth knowledge of his job. Despite being young, he can conduct presentations and training sessions with great self-assurance. He clarified:

I am confident and deliberate in my work. Knowing that I would have read widely, I drew on realistic scenarios to convey content in training sessions. I think those things have helped me tremendously in terms of bolstering my self-confidence and overcoming timidity.

Cedar also underscored the importance of self-confidence, noting that this valuable characteristic has been instrumental in helping him on his academic path and has led to his assuming positions of leadership. He explained:

Because of my confidence, I think that's why I'm the way I am today. It's why I have all these credentials behind my name as well. That level of confidence allowed me to do some things, even though I was scared, and never wavered. I've seen how it has allowed me to gain this level of presence and respect from people as well, and to be somebody who people are willing to come to, to fight for them. Because I think the confidence that I had, people always wanted me to be their leader. I was head boy.

Oakley emphasised that “believing in oneself is paramount. It's a make-or-break. It is all a matter of mindset in terms of how it is done, or can it not be done?” He shared that when he has doubted his ability to deal with situations, the results were unfavourable. Conversely, when he has entered spaces boldly, the results have been positive:

I've experienced going into some boardrooms or going into some meetings with high-value clients, high-value companies, and the mere fact that I go in with the mindset that “listen, I am the subject matter expert,” they have to listen to me. “I am the one who is coming to educate you on whatever this software does or whatever I can do for you, or whatever it is that you're looking to invest in or merge or acquire.”

He was also fortunate to have had very supportive parents. That, too, has been instrumental in building his self-confidence.

For Heath and Rowan, self-confidence is not second nature, but over time, recognising its importance, they have developed great belief in themselves.

Heath's description of his journey towards developing self-confidence comes across as evolutionary. He noted that he had low self-belief all the way from primary school to university and questioned whether he should occupy the same spaces as those who had greater resources than he had. However, over time, he moved “from being shy and unimpressive to becoming confident in self.”

Rowan declared that he does not have the greatest self-confidence. Nonetheless, he credits his ability to take action as the reason he got ahead: “What I have is the ability to do it. So, even when I seem to be confident, I’m not confident, but I’m doing this anyway.” Around age 27, he had an epiphany:

A light went off in my head, and I said, wait, don’t you see who you are? Why are you allowing this imposter syndrome to hold you so tightly? Why are you allowing yourself to be held back? And I had to do a lot of positive self-talk and sometimes very frank self-talk with myself in order to step out and do some things.

Hawthorne said that his confidence grew in tandem with the development of a level of self-awareness:

I was able to understand that I was meant to be myself, and not anybody else. So, I was not required to look like anybody else or have the qualifications or the profile of anyone else, but myself. And once I was able to lean into that understanding, I used that as like my superpower, somehow.

Pine conceded that he still struggles with self-confidence. Nonetheless, being certain about his goals and wanting to make himself and his family members proud has helped him push past the limitations imposed by self-doubt. Similarly, Orion admitted that self-confidence does not come easily for him. However, being clear about what he was aiming for and seeing his peers succeed motivated him to overcome his timidity. Fire reported that having to cope with the challenges of life, including seeing his best friend being shot to death, has helped him develop a high level of confidence. The trials have made him determined to push forward. He asserted, “I don’t even feel that death can faze me right now.”

NEGATIVE PEER PRESSURE RELATIVE TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The participants reported varying experiences with negative peer pressure. Most agreed that pressure and negativity existed in general, but they had the mental strength to thrive despite these realities.

Orion reported being negatively affected by peer pressure. He acknowledged that when his friends persuaded him to skip classes by promising they would help him with his schoolwork afterward, they did not keep their promise. At that point, he realised that there was no sense in being swayed by negative influences.

According to Sage, peer pressure in his school environment came from a set labelled the “wrong crowd.” He admitted that that was the crowd he felt most comfortable with. Such students were not performing well academically, but they accepted him readily despite his perceived shortcomings. Sage found communication challenging, and students who were performing well did not accept him. When he started taking his academic work seriously, those who previously welcomed him started referring to him as “Maama man” and “Sell-out.” As he deepened his determination to

succeed, he lost some of his friends. However, he was able to motivate some of his peers to work hard at improving their performance, although some were more receptive than others.

Gangs generally feed on bad behaviours, including rebelliousness and non-conformity, but they can create a feeling of belonging, especially among youth who are seeking validation. They can be havens for those who are struggling with unfavourable circumstances at home and low performance in school. However, their focus is often largely myopic, with no contemplation of future realities. Youth who have an innate desire to succeed despite challenging circumstances are likely to refrain from being influenced by negative peer pressure and joining gangs.

Both Cedar and Heath shared that they had been exposed to, but not adversely influenced by, negative energies. Cedar acknowledged that the negativity will always be there:

If I had listened to negativity, the negative talk, the naysayers, I would not have achieved anything that I have now. The negativity made me feel a way, but I always have this attitude that “okay, I feel a way, but, you know, it’s going to be done,” and no matter what they say, I’m going to do it.

Heath reported having many negative experiences. “There were negative interactions that I have had with peers and also with teachers who thought that nothing really good comes from where you come from.” He got the impression they thought,

We are not going to invest in you as much, but wherever you fall, you fall. There are many negative influences, and they have had an impact on my academics as well. Because then you started doubting yourself to say I really can’t do this.

Rowan did not report being affected by negative peer pressure. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that his natural inclination for the arts proved to be challenging for him because people would perceive him as being a homosexual. He explained that he recognised he would have to learn to manage his situation because he had passed up several opportunities. As he matured, he was increasingly able to do so. He shared the following:

I am a male who’s naturally inclined to the [literary] arts. Men who have that inclination in Jamaica are usually labelled as queer. I have had situations where, simply by speaking standard English, people have assigned labels to me. People have refused to be friends with me because, oh, I am educated, I love language, I am artistically inclined, so I must be queer. And that kind of pressure sometimes has led me to slacking off as it related to my education and rejecting some opportunities because I didn’t want to be labelled. It’s not so much now in this current dispensation, but when I was younger, I would shy away from certain things. Because nobody wants to be labelled as queer.

Oakley experienced a different type of peer pressure. His community members genuinely wanted him to excel and would exclude him from any deviant practices. He was also barred from playing sports if his grades were not up to par. He explained:

Some of the same people that I used to play football with, I am passing [them] going to school on the corner with spliffs in their mouths, puffing away or doing some unsavoury act. And it wasn't a matter of them saying, "Yow come and hang with us, or come and do this with us." It wasn't anything like that. They would see me as the example to say, "Yow, you get the opportunity. Don't waste it. Don't become like us." If they're on the corner and I roll up and I'm like, "Yow, what's going on?" And I'm there and we're talking like somebody will come and say, "Yow, you can't smoke around him, because if police roll up now, him might get into problem. You can't dim da light deh. Just easy."

His interpretation of his peers' approach to those whom they felt could succeed was "you try to let them make it and ensure that they make it and not falter by the wayside." He shared how his peers supported his mother:

When I was in school and wasting time, I remember I got one [bad] report, and my mother took it and went down to the shop and tacked it onto the shop piazza. She literally used a thumbtack and put it there for everybody to see. When I went the Sunday to play football, I was refused. They're like, no, if that's how you're going to behave at school and don't pass the grades, you can't come play football with us. No, go home, go tek up yuh book . . . and I could not play any football, or any cricket. I couldn't go to the shop. I couldn't play any arcade games. I had to go back home because those who made it out of the community brought good spotlight to the community, and so it was a pride and joy for them to see us in the morning with our uniforms going to school, and they were happy for us.

Pine and Fire determined that they were uncompromising by nature and were therefore not swayed by negative peer pressure. Pine described himself as a very strong-willed person who did not allow the negativity of his community to affect him:

Once I put my mind to do something I will get it done. I never saw myself being on the block nor saw myself going astray or getting myself involved in any illegal stuff or trouble. I never allowed that negativity or the negative environment to affect me in any major way. I knew what I wanted and I just kind of focused on that even though I would have been bullied in the neighbourhood because some people would say probably I was a bit too soft.

Fire said he was not affected by peer pressure because he was often surrounded by persons who were much older than he was. He claims that because of that reality, he developed “a kind of leader mentality.”

Anything me do, a me make the choice to do it. It’s never that two or three of my friends are doing it and I want to gang in with them or I want to be accepted by them that make me do it. A me choose to do it.

Neither Ash nor Reed was affected by negative peer pressure. Ash was fortunate to be positively influenced by his peers:

I have been blessed in that I can’t say specifically that I have been or that I have experienced peer pressure in terms of academic pursuit. I have always had supportive colleagues or peers going through college because, again, of the similarities and backgrounds in college. You look at people who are from families who are not wealthy that they are perhaps the first in their family to go to college or to attain a degree and so there are so many similarities and so I learned from them.

STUDY TECHNIQUES AND ROUTINES THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE PARTICIPANTS’ EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

The participants employed a range of strategies that proved useful on their academic journeys. These included set routines, timetables, note-taking, having discussions and teaching concepts to others to reinforce their own knowledge. Ash cited time management as a key component of his strategy for success: “I have learned, I believe, how to manage my time well.” He listed several times when he juggled multiple responsibilities simultaneously and thus had to be adept at managing his time. During secondary school, he had to complete assignments, do readings and pay attention in class. His modus operandi, which took shape in college, involved “meeting up with colleagues, doing those extra readings, doing group assignments and working in a collaborative way to get those things done.” But group assignments were not the only factor responsible for his success. He also credited his work ethic: “I believe it’s just the work ethic that I’ve been able to hone over the years.” He described the elements of that ethic as “being diligent, being meticulous in what I’m doing, and being deliberate in terms of spending time to get those things done.”

For Sage, who struggled with communication, improving his understanding of language was a key factor in attaining educational success. In the process, he expanded his vocabulary, which helped him to think more logically and hone his analytical skills. He also created a routine to organise his time:

I used to love wrestling, so every evening after school, Mondays and Fridays, it would start around 7 or 8 o’clock. After doing extra lessons in the evenings, I would go home, treat myself by watching for an hour, and go to bed. Then, I would wake up 1 or 2 o’clock, depending on the time I set my alarm for that day. Then I would study specific subjects.

As his knowledge and confidence increased, he began teaching his peers what he had learned. That, he claimed, helped him define and remember concepts. He was also clever enough to earn an income by teaching his fellow students, a practice that he said also reinforced his learning:

When I have those evening classes, teachers might be absent or might send work. So what I did was go on the board and start teaching the class, and that is when my love for teaching started. So, there came a point when I needed to make extra money. I would say to a couple of my classmates from the other streams that I would have classes with, and I would charge them 50 dollars to teach them.

Cedar noted that he found “reading out loud in front of the mirror” a useful technique. He clarified:

I am somebody who have to recall the information, say it out loud, talk to myself and do it. So, I’m never one to like study groups; it never worked for me [because] I would not retain anything studied in a group.

He also reported that he sought help in areas where he was weak:

What I would do is identify the weak areas. I was not a good Math student. I would try to do classes. I would try to do the extra classes with the teacher, and I would be the first one to raise my hand, and say listen, I don’t understand, and you know, I don’t feel any way about it.

Heath shared that because he lived in a community that was plagued by violence, he was forced to turn off the lights early. As such, he was compelled to start studying immediately after school ended:

The forced routine that I would say contributed to my success was that I lived in a community where, after 8:00 p.m. you try to turn off your lights because you don’t want when any gunshot is being fired, you are up. So my routine was that the moment I got home, it was sleep, school, study. I was forced to adopt that routine because of the circumstances around me. My mother would say, “The moment you get home, don’t even take a shower. Just make sure that all the homework is completed.” Even while doing my master’s or my PhD, that same level of discipline came up, where you had to develop such an enhanced routine for understanding what you want.

He also credited the cadet corps for helping him develop significant discipline and effective routines:

Cadet was drilling. But you know, from that, you create a routine of running or walking or going to the gym just to ensure that mental health or physical health is also maintained. Also, investing extensive time away from social media, away from the influences of the world, the parties and all those things by focusing on your

book, so I think that for me the routine for my academic success came strictly from a disciplined schedule, coming from the situation where I had no choice because of gang violence and in that same level of discipline that came from that spilled over to my other studies.

Self-discipline emerged repeatedly as a characteristic of several participants. This could be credited to their own convictions about the importance of tenacity in overcoming obstacles and achieving success, or it may have developed because of the influence of mentors and others such as parents, teachers and guidance counsellors.

Rowan shared that a critical strategy in his study routine was to build on whatever material was shared in class:

My technique is that I never rely on what is given in class. So, in class is a seed and I ensure that the seed germinates and becomes a full tree. So, I am going to always go out, I'm going to research. I'm going to create my own materials and I'm going to build out on what was taught to me in class. For many years, while I was working at the library, whenever a topic was taught or briefly mentioned, I would always have an earphone in my ear. Because I needed to listen to something that would help me dominate in that topic.

He also used study timetables and, like Sage, would teach others to help them while reinforcing his own knowledge.

Oakley asserted that “repetition deepens impression.” He would constantly review material until he retained it:

Learning for me came through repetition, doing so when I left school. I read over my notes before I leave school. Then, when I went home, I read it over again. And I just kept reviewing, reviewing every 10 to 15 minutes. I would just review, not with the intention of retaining, but just reading. Every time you read, you realise that, okay, you're now glossing over the words because the essence of what you're reading is now becoming a memory state.

He also benefited from a routine that his parents implemented. This regime required commitment and sacrifice, but it created structure, led to positive results and was not at all punitive:

My mom was a stickler for having a timetable, because in common entrance time, oh I hated that time! I had to wake up at 5:00 and study from 5:00 to 6:30 every morning. Then, during lunchtime, you had the prep work for common entrance. Then, after school, you had the evening class for common entrance as well. Then, as we got home, we followed the timetable: as you come through the door, take off your shoes and uniform, and then do your homework. Then my father would come

home at that time, [and] I would tell him what happened at school. He might ask me some questions. I asked him to explain something, and then by 7 o'clock, 7:30 I was in bed, because I had to wake up by 5:00 the next morning again to do my studying.

For Hawthorne, note-taking, despite its apparent simplicity, was very helpful to his academic journey and success. He also found discussions very helpful:

I was very intentional about the notes that I took. So, yes, I contributed in class, and this is more so at the university level, because I think that's where I really started to lean into my potential a bit more. I took notes, not just from a recording standpoint, but notes that would help me understand. The material that was being shared with me, and the themes that were coming out of whatever. So, that was one thing that I felt helped a lot with my approach. The other thing was discussions. These discussions help me a lot as well. So, each time I had the opportunity to sit with my peers, or maybe even a lecturer, or maybe just someone who is a subject matter expert within the field, I would bring this material and have a discussion around it; whether it's just questions I've had, just to better understand.

Pine reported that he reduced his socialising to focus on his studies. He admitted that he is not a structured person, but he would study in blocks of time, an approach that proved effective for him:

I study late at night, so I probably do like between two and three all-nighters. So when I come home from work, I would take a shower, grab something to eat, and I would stay up all night until 4:00 in the morning. Once I do that for at least two days a week, and then I include the weekends. I would work from morning 'til about midnight. Of course, little breaks in between so that was my plan for the entire year. That worked for me because I am not someone who is very structured. I prefer to take two to three-night all-nighters and I get it done.

Orion's strategy involved deepening his knowledge by asking many questions, building conversations among his peers and using pockets of quiet time to study:

I'll meet with them [classmates], bring back any relevant topics, and so forth, and we'll conduct some research. But I love to study when it is quiet. I can't study in noise. Being alone is my most comfortable way in studying. So, I do anything like after 12 o'clock, when everybody was asleep, and so forth, TV off. And you know, just quiet.

Reed reported that he never studied: “The same notebook that I used for my master’s, is the same notebook I used in high school, and it’s still not finished.” He noted that he was able to “retain information through discussion”:

Sitting in a class, taking notes, and rote [*sic*] practice never helped me to retain material. It wasn’t until I engaged with people who could discuss the material did I realise that I wouldn’t say I retained the material, but I would always remember the conversation. I would remember the emotional state of the conversation. And so, because I could remember the conversation, I could recall the material. And that has served me both in those later academic years, as well as my professional success has been hugely influenced by my ability to engage in a conversation and retain information from the conversation.

Like Reed, Fire reported that he did not really study. He credits his photographic memory as being very helpful.

It is evident that all the interviewees demonstrated personal growth and maturity as they progressed on their educational journeys. They learned what worked for them, how to seek help and how to develop a routine that would enhance their success. They reflected on their strategies and made the necessary adjustments to improve their results. For the most part, structure and routine were critical components of their strategies.

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Sources of inspiration

Overall, participants viewed maternal figures — especially their mothers — as their primary sources of inspiration and motivation, and they had the most lasting impact on the participants’ educational journey. This defies the commonly held, albeit anecdotal, view that boys and young men must have a strong paternal presence in their lives to thrive. Furthermore, it strengthens Brown and Chevannes’s (1987) arguments about Caribbean masculinity, which emphasise the importance of maternal support for boys. Conversely, many participants listed their fathers as largely absent. Others said their fathers were physically present but psychologically distant. The latter situation inhibited the kind of influence participants felt was necessary to succeed. This is unsurprising, as Brown and Chevannes argued as far back as 1987 that mothers bear the primary responsibility for childcare, and many also serve as breadwinners. A few participants said their fathers were present and active in their lives. Although few provided direct support for education, they provided financial support that enabled access to it. This aligns with the well-established notion of Caribbean men as providers in their homes (Brown & Chevannes, 1987). In these cases, the mothers remained the primary influencers of educational success.

The findings generally reflect those of Carpenter (2024), who found that most mothers (69.2%) reported that they influenced their sons through direct guidance, while 16.4% mimicked the desired positive behaviours for their sons. Those figures indicate that participants treated maternal influence as a form of validation, which invites us to reconsider the belief that boys are less likely to succeed

without paternal validation. Boys' educational success does not rely on the presence of positive male figures.

The notion that participants gained inspiration from role models they found through clubs and societies, which helped them develop other identities, is critical. This suggests that when families do not practise the behaviours that promote success in boys' educational journeys, schools can adopt a broader or more communal role beyond individual mentoring. Participants reported that they used the discipline and skills they gained while engaging in these spaces to further their academic pursuits. This points to the transformative potential of clubs and societies. The vital roles of mentors and teachers, as highlighted by the participants, supports this view.

Self-confidence

Many participants reported being self-confident and that this characteristic facilitated their educational pursuits. Those who lacked a robust sense of self, such as Rowan and Pine, described ways they portrayed confidence as a means of securing their success. This suggests that confidence can be both innate and cultivated for educational achievement, particularly among boys who are less inclined to succeed. This observation is significant because it is well established that self-belief is fundamental to academic success (Peng et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the performative aspect introduces a novel dimension by implying that successful young men can develop psychological strategies to enhance their success. The recognition that self-confidence can be cultivated further underscores the importance of Miller's (2004) assertion that boys' sense of educational belonging should not be left to chance.

Peer influences and study routine

Positive peer relationships foster confidence and resilience in the face of adversity, while negative or less cordial influences exacerbate anxiety and reduce academic engagement (Javaid et al., 2025). The participants in this study both resisted and conformed to this observation.

Oakley presented an excellent example of the power of community when he described how the gangs he gravitated to discouraged him from joining them by protecting him and respecting his academic journey. When gang members refused to smoke around him or engage in any activities that could compromise him, they were modifying their behaviour to safeguard his educational trajectory. One incident that illustrates this was when he had a poor school report card and his mother posted it on the shop window in his community. When he turned up to play football, his peers showed their solidarity with his mother by refusing to let him play. Thus, he was double-shamed into focusing on meeting the demands of his academic work. This underscores that the community understood the potential of education to bring their community into the spotlight, even though they were not the ones pursuing it. Oakley was their hope. Their response could suggest that these boys did not have the same chance Oakley had, or that they had squandered their chance. Drawing on the work of Frosh et al. (2002), Robinson (2020) explained that a key issue in the masculinity debate is that expressions of masculinity are shaped through social interactions in which boys respond to, negotiate and position themselves in accordance with dominant or idealised forms of masculinity known as hegemonic masculinity. An essential point in Oakley's story is that he did not fit the masculine mould that was available to him.

Although the other participants' experiences with peer influence were not abstract, each boy was able to change his trajectory in response to the pressure placed on him. This ability was especially pronounced as the boys became more mature — became men — and were able to exercise greater autonomy and make more strategic choices. This evolution reinforces the idea that the participants felt some qualities were innate and that boys do not have to conform to the stereotype of being bad.

The participants employed various study techniques and routines as they pursued their education. The fact that some preferred to work alone and others preferred to work collectively implies that one-size-fits-all strategies may not be effective in aiding boys' educational achievement to secure a livelihood. One profound insight that emerged about the study techniques is that participants had to contend with situations that limited when they could study and their ability to focus, such as violent incidents in the community. That they were able to mediate those factors and triumph suggests resilience and defiance of the environmental influences that could have shaped negative outcomes.

Research Question 2: What roles do participants feel school initiatives, programmes or policies played in their success? (Institutional factors)

SCHOOL-BASED INITIATIVES

Nine out of 11 participants considered educational institutions to be a fundamental component of their current success. They highlighted the diverse levels of engagement they experienced within these institutions and the supportive structures that facilitated their academic pursuits. The two participants who had different experiences noted that while schools contributed to their educational achievements in a general sense, they were not a significant factor.

Across all the participants, the relationships formed, ancillary structures and developmental opportunities provided by schools were identified as critical enablers of academic success and, ultimately, the security of the participants' livelihoods. The participants valued student-teacher relationships, seeing them as having played a role in their success. Almost all the participants who referred to positive experiences with school also pointed to the importance of teachers who were caring and considerate. These sentiments were mainly grounded in primary to high school experiences, although some participants mentioned their tertiary experiences.

Pine described the care he received and shared how well supported he was at school, especially during a time when he was grieving:

In terms of support from my schoolteachers, I had great support from them. During that time [a time previously mentioned], I also suffered a loss because I witnessed someone murder one of my aunts. As a result, I lost some time from school, and they were very accommodating. You know, they had patience with me, and I also received other support from them.

Rowan also singled out teacher support, highlighting teachers as nurturers and those whose persistence made him comply with the requirement to submit assignments:

In high school, I had teachers who would tell me: “We need this assignment from you in order for you to complete this requirement.” And this behaviour mirrored what I got in college. I had lecturers who were not only lecturers. They were also nurturers. So, the quality of the teaching, especially in college, and the type of people I have been exposed to within that space have helped shape me.

Like Rowan, Reed also valued school, especially the philosophical grounding that shaped his teachers’ philosophy. Unlike Pine and Rowan, though, he singled out his primary school teachers, as he is one of the two who felt neither high school nor university impacted him:

I would say that everything I have and that I am is rooted in the values and quality of education I received in primary school. In terms of the school’s philosophy, its approach, and the quality of teachers I had, looking back on it now, 30-plus years later, I recognise that I had the best of the best in primary school.

Heath expressed a similar conviction that his primary school played a crucial role in his academic development:

Overall, I would say that school is absolutely important. In all instances, at all levels, there were cases where there were individuals within the system who were very, very helpful or who had been very, very helpful in helping to shape me.

Cedar reflected, “Just having the teachers was great. Some of the teachers really believed in me. For example, Mrs Elaine Brown-Taylor . . . she’s like a mother to me.”

The experiences related above reinforce the elevated need for broad-based infusion of compassion, care, positive discipline and mentoring in teacher training and curricula.

FRAMEWORK FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

In addition to highlighting nurture and care, several participants commended the school frameworks that promoted personal development through the development of skills and competencies and supported their academic efforts.

Ash believed that the camaraderie at his college was particularly beneficial, even though by that point he was an adult who had established a stronger pattern of self-reliance. He outlined the sense of belonging he enjoyed at college:

What I appreciated about that institution was how it was structured. We had a very small department or faculty, and it was so close-knit that the lecturers knew you as an individual and would work with you to help you surpass your entry point.

He expanded on his thoughts, noting he was not the only one to have benefited:

The college, I believe, has some very good structures in place — support mechanisms and facilities that would accommodate your growth and development. I don't believe I was the only one to enter college with an unconditional acceptance, and so I believe those opportunities that have been provided to me and many others were tremendous or played a tremendous part in our development because the moment we decide not to give somebody an opportunity is a moment we may lose out on their achieving their fullest potential or growing from an experience at the university.

Other school structures that proved valuable to participants' development included those that facilitated self-expression and extracurricular participation, as well as a space for second chances. Orion praised his college's efforts to make adult continuing education an option for students who may have stumbled during their traditional journey. He noted, "People do other things. People make mistakes and so forth. So, with the adult and continuing class that gives you a chance to go back and . . . a chance you did not get."

Cedar listed a variety of activities he was involved in, such as 4-H, the Spelling Bee and the debating club, among others, and highlighted how he first became involved in school clubs in primary school, which laid the groundwork for his involvement in high school. However, he emphasised the role the school played in his specific case by filling the gaps created by his home life:

I was very involved. So all of those different pieces of involvement in school life really allowed me to see the world and see things that I don't think I would have seen otherwise. You know, Mommy would not even have the time to show them to me. We were guided by our Grade 5 teacher, Ms Huntley, who's a pastor. So, all of it started from the primary school, but when I went to high school, things got more serious, it was on a higher level, because now I was on national TV. I was the little one, singing with Romain Virgo in the choir. I was in the School Challenge Quiz from Grade 9 in high school.

Heath also supported the argument that schools filled the voids created by situations at home and extended this point by incorporating the community as a source of such voids: "The formations, the moulding that did not take place in the home or community takes place in the school and it's extremely important now."

There were also outlier perspectives on the overall effectiveness of schools. Fire and Reed expressed strong cynicism about the notion that school had any impact on their ability to secure a livelihood. Fire claimed that school was an anti-social space, riddled with gangs, crime and threats of reprisal. For him, schooling was the wisdom he gained through reasoning with

older men on street corners, despite having passed Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) examinations in several subjects and being gainfully employed. According to him:

I would say it's more my mentor dem. I said I was not gonna done school, and dem sey is stupidniss mi a guh duh. They give me insights and I go, and go, and go, no matter the pressure mi face until mi come through.

Reed attributed any impact that school had on him to his primary school experience and denied that his secondary and university experiences affected his achievements. While Sage did not dismiss the overall impact of schools, he noted that he did not experience a breakthrough until Grade 9, when a new school principal arrived and revolutionised his school. Therefore, he attributed his academic gains at that level to transformative school leadership. Reed and Fire come from different socio-economic backgrounds and achieved different school certifications, but they expressed similar thoughts about how school influenced them.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT OF SCHOOLS

The diversity of the socio-economic environment played a role in the participants' education journey. Participants associated with two dominant socio-economic circumstances: the one in which their schools were located, and the various cultures within each school. Reed, for example, attended a school that had a strong mix of affluent and disadvantaged students. However, the school was located "near downtown," which determined the socio-economic environment of the community in which it was based. The school's location ultimately had no significant influence on his educational pursuits, and he benefited from the school's culture of "collaboration and cohesion." He explained: "Everybody had something to offer, but everybody owed their best selves to what they were doing. So, it was not acceptable to bring less than excellence. And it encouraged a lot of competition." Hawthorne's school-based experiences were similar, but he "can't remember there being any extreme pressure to excel academically . . . but the social engagement was very positive and useful."

Heath and Rowan both came from disadvantaged social circumstances, but their school friends' socio-economic backgrounds served as a source of inspiration. Heath described the communities next to and behind his school as "probably the worst communities in the place where I grew up." However, he explained that the school had a diverse socio-economic profile, which benefited him. He elaborated: "As a student coming from a poor background, based on the socio-economic situation of other students, I could see where I would want to be like that." Rowan identified himself as one of the "have-nots" in a community where the "socio-economic conditions were quite good." This did not deter him, as he explained:

I saw where others had, and I also saw what life could be like if I applied my skills. So even though I didn't necessarily have it [wealth], I was in proximity to it because of the type of people I went to school with. I went to school with people who had drivers, who had helpers, and they'd come to school, and they'd tell me all these things.

Oakley's story aligns well with this idea of finding inspiration in socio-economic influences that are incongruent with a person's upbringing. A twist in his tale is the fact that he felt pressured to manage being in proximity to those who were more financially disadvantaged. He reported having gone to school with the "ultra-rich, the filthy rich, the affluent and the downright poor." He continued:

So, in terms of having a glance into how others lived, and the socio-economic pressures that came with that sort of thing . . . Yeah, we had that to deal with, but in every herd, I use the term herd to describe a group of people, you will find like-minded individuals that you just click with. You find like-minded individuals with whom you can do things and push together to achieve the same goal. So, in the school context, though, I'll say the economic standards that we had or the economic traits that we saw in that group, in some instances it did push us to do great because you wanted that for yourself, and you wanted that for your friends.

Despite Pine's school's socio-economic profile being a mixture, with "probably about 75% from humble beginnings," the school fostered a culture of care. "They had school lunch and breakfast, so that was provided for persons who came from humble beginnings." Healthy meals are significant enablers.

Sage's account painted a picture of a dreadful psychological experience and deteriorating physical conditions in his school. He cited "plumbing issues," "cracks in the walls" and "bats infesting the place," all of which contributed to a persistent unpleasant smell. He recounted the factors that led to his poor performance in Grades 7–9 at high school: "It felt like prison when you got there." His learning only improved when conditions changed after "there was a complete shift to focus on revamping the school and putting in different skills and competencies" following the arrival of a new principal who implemented strong leadership practices.

Overall, the insights about the socio-economic conditions do not indicate that either poverty or affluence was singularly responsible for the boys' educational success.

SCHOOL INITIATIVES, PROGRAMMES OR POLICIES THAT SUPPORTED BOYS' SUCCESS

The participants submitted a comprehensive list of activities offered within their respective schools that contributed to their academic success. Many of these activities can be classified as extracurricular, while others provided financial support and helped participants refine their leadership skills. The research revealed that numerous participants engaged in multiple activities, and that the programmes or initiatives that offered a financial buffer were particularly significant for individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, participants expressed high regard for activities that acknowledged and cultivated their talents. There were no evident formal policies in place to provide specific support for boys.

Ash, Rowan and Cedar all noted that they benefited from teacher support, an informal structure that includes nurturing, mentoring and meeting physical needs by, for example, providing food. Others, including Orion and Ash, discussed initiatives such as student leadership programmes that

enabled them to develop their leadership skills. Orion reported being the first president of his student council, and Cedar served as a student president.

PARTICIPANTS' DESCRIPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS THEY OVERCAME

Some participants, including Fire, Cedar, Pine, Orion and Oakley, insisted that they did not need to overcome any institutional barriers to succeed. In contrast, others expressed certain concerns, one of which was shared by two participants. Reed criticised his teachers' inadequate qualifications and level of teaching, claiming:

I don't think many of the teachers in high school knew what they were doing. I still don't think many of them do. I think they are people employed to teach. I do not think they were teachers. And so, for somebody who was academically bright, they seemed almost insufficient.

Pine bemoaned the lack of academic guidance from one teacher, which forced him onto an academic path he did not want to follow. He described his teacher's approach:

"Hear what, Pine [teacher speaking], it would be difficult to teach you building. Join your other three classmates in engineering drawing." So, he said I should just do engineering drawing along with them, so it would be easier for him . . . If I had gotten the proper guidance, then . . . I would have known better. I would have stood my ground.

Rowan and Heath shared experiences of how a student's background influenced how teachers treated them. Heath reflected:

Students who were of the highest level [of society] were treated differently from those who were of the lower level. If you are from the highest level and you got in trouble, then you get a slap on the wrist. But if you are from a community like mine or from a low socio-economic background, then you are put in detention.

He also felt that he was subject to possible political victimisation, which permeated the school:

I applied for PATH³ as well, and to this day, my mother and my grandmother have not been placed in the programme. All of this was because of politics back in those days. Only a certain number of persons benefited based on the particular area in which they lived.

Rowan articulated how a similar mindset contributed to the exclusion of socio-economically vulnerable students. He gave an example of when his batchmates chose him to be a valedictorian but the teachers who made the final decision overturned the nomination. The nomination was

3 PATH (Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education) is a social assistance initiative of the Government of Jamaica. Among other benefits, students are given free lunches and their tuition fees are waived.

particularly meaningful to him because he showed noticeable improvement in his schoolwork and more motivation to do well, which he attributed to the influence of other teachers. He expanded on just how much progress he had made:

A turnaround that was so noticeable that the vice principal said to me, “Um, what happened? What suddenly happened? In a few months, you were a virtually unknown person, but now you are the most popular person among your peers.” And they would have voted me to be valedictorian. However, institutionally, um, they said that I wasn’t the best fit to be a valedictorian. And they told me that, um, I couldn’t do it. So that was one of the things that I regret the most. Um, I think they didn’t, um, give me a fair chance.

He concluded, “Those people who are the ‘have-nots’ are sometimes not necessarily immediately picked for certain roles.” Nevertheless, he shared that had he not “rejected the labels, the institutional barriers would have held me down.” His case illustrates how a single event or attitude can have positive or negative influences or impacts.

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Institutional factors

Several institutional factors impacted the participants’ educational journeys. Deliberately crafted school initiatives, programmes and policies are crucial to improving young men’s academic achievements because they represent a structured and targeted approach to issues that boys face on their academic journey generally and specifically in relation to these findings.

The home environment

The Caribbean region is characterised by a high prevalence of single-parent households, with mothers often being the primary caregiver and head of the household. The absence of men could encourage young men to seek affirmation from their counterparts in other environments. If there is a negative influence, it could impede boys’ progress (Jha & Kelleher, 2006). Such potential outcomes justify the development, implementation and evaluation of initiatives that focus on enhancing the prospects of male youth. The positive impacts of such programmes can create helpful long-term advantages and ripple effects — for example, fathers playing an active role in their family and lower crime rates.

Educational institutions

Nine of the 11 interviewees agreed that educational institutions were a central influence on their success. The initiatives they participated in at all levels of the education system were impactful. The mechanisms for supporting the boys beyond the confines of the classroom included avenues for personal development, extracurricular activities and spaces that fostered a sense of belonging and allowed for freedom of expression and increased confidence. Competitive sports, clubs and societies, including the cadet corps and debating club, have had a lifelong impact on the participants. These activities helped the boys develop discipline and negotiation and public speaking skills, all of which

are useful transferrable skills. Christison (2013) argues that participation in extracurricular activities contributes to “greater academic success, greater character development, especially in the areas of time-management and leadership skills, more positive social development, and greater interest in community involvement” (p. 17). The participants’ home environments were often not conducive to assisting the boys in honing such competencies. Heath noted that school and community initiatives often filled crucial gaps for him.

Schools played a crucial role in the participants’ educational attainment and livelihood security. For the most part, the socio-economic environments of the schools the boys attended were modest, but school culture was demonstrably positive. The nurturing the boys experienced from teachers and other staff had a long-lasting positive impact on their educational outcomes.

The importance of government assistance

Programmes that provide financial assistance from the government, which some of the participants benefited from, have multiple benefits. At the most immediate level, they help families to meet their basic needs and buy essentials for school such as uniforms, shoes and school supplies. Boys can then attend school without facing social stigma or being unable to participate fully because they lack the required resources. In the long term, such assistance contributes to a reduction in absenteeism and dropout rates. Initiatives that offer grants or scholarships for tertiary education enable boys from underresourced backgrounds to go to university and improve their prospects and earning potential so they can break free from poverty. This type of financial assistance also leads to improved social and emotional well-being, as it reduces anxiety about how to secure basic needs, including healthcare and school lunches, and ultimately helps students focus on their education and development.

Gennetian and Magnuson (2022) describe the provision of cash to underresourced families as a “solid policy investment” given the wide-ranging benefits that such interventions yield in the short, medium and long terms. Social policy interventions that provide subsidised housing and transportation, among other kinds of support, can help change the trajectory of youth who are living in adverse socio-economic circumstances and reduce multidimensional poverty in the long term.

Despite a shortage of required resources, absentee fathers and other challenges, the study participants were able to defy the odds by harnessing the support of mentors and other influential persons. They also benefited from programmes that provided financial support and exposure to new ways of thinking and being. Few institutional barriers were reported, but wherever they were present, the boys managed to overcome them.

Research Question 3: What are participants’ experiences with the home, community or other organisations’ roles in their educational success? (Community and family support systems)

This section examines how home, community and organisational support systems influenced the study participants’ educational trajectories.

HOME

The study participants received varying degrees of financial, material and emotional support from their families. Female figures dominated the lives of at least eight of the young men, including Ash, Oakley, Cedar and Orion. Some enjoyed full support from both their extended families and their mothers, and others received unwavering backing solely from their mothers. Some had access to financial and material resources, but lacked emotional support.

Strong family support

Ash and Oakley enjoyed the full support of their families, with their mothers being the primary sources of encouragement, despite limited financial and material resources. Ash expressed that he attributed his desire to succeed to his family's unwavering support:

My parents were very integral in sending us to school so that we could get an education. Supporting us through the process by ensuring that we had our textbooks that we needed, whether they could buy them or get them from past students or family members who had been through the system. So, they were very instrumental in doing that. And again, my family has always been a very supportive one — always checking in to see how I am doing in school or asking, “What are you doing now?”

Oakley was equally generous in his praise for his family, particularly his mother. In response to a question about the role family played in his educational achievements, he exclaimed, “Oh, they were full 100%! They were the reason.” He added:

My mother was the most supportive, and the type of support I got was everything. Once it said education, or once it led to education, it was a given. I wasn't spared anything that was not within her means to give.

He elaborated that “she would find a way for extra classes if I was falling back and would sit up to do projects with me.” He recalled a recent conversation with her that reinforced his belief in her commitment to his education-related ambitions:

Last week, we were speaking, and she was talking about when I had a project to do, and we were working on the project the entire night. This was when I was in 1st Form in high school. At 1:30, I fell asleep, and I still had one paragraph to finish — the last paragraph was left to write, and she said she looked over and she saw me sleeping, and she was hard-pressed to wake me up to write the one paragraph. So, she took the pencil and wrote the last paragraph with her left hand, so that the teacher wouldn't realise that it was her writing . . . because I was just exhausted.

Their subsequent exchanges revealed the philosophy behind her drive to ensure he excelled educationally, as he explained:

I said [to his mother], there was not a time when you said, “Enough is enough. I’ve done enough for you now. You will have to do without.” She said, “No” [and explained] education lifted her out of extreme poverty. And, if education can do that for her with limited resources and a large number of siblings, then imagine what education will do for her children, who will be given more opportunities and a more level playing field to excel.

Candidates who did not report having their family’s full support lauded their mothers’ or grandmothers’ efforts, although some did so with restraint. Cedar acknowledged that he was part of a family and that family as a structure was important. However, he noted that “it was only a buzzword” in his situation. Although they provided “verbal encouragement and maybe a tap on the shoulder, which is important, when it came to it, it was just my mother.” He continued, “I recalled this lady said to me that my mother would teef [steal] to figure out how to get me to school. That really stayed with me.”

Heath also reinforced the value of family, remarking, “I would say my mother and grandmother were very instrumental in assisting me through school.” He expanded on this support:

They played a very important and critical role. My mother and my grandmother ensured that they found the funding necessary through working multiple jobs, or spending longer hours vending on the street, to ensure that I had access to maybe not all the books. Maybe one or two books, a school bag, shoes, and a uniform, even if it’s just one or two pairs of uniform that you wore for the entire week.

In contrast, Pine stated, “I would say that my mom . . . she was really my main support,” but he bemoaned her lack of emotional support. Like Heath, though, he recognised the tangible support his mother gave him:

She was able to financially support me throughout my education up until high school. Thereafter, in tertiary education, I had to do it on my own. But my mom lent me that financial support and ensured that I had all the utensils, equipment, and stuff to really complete any assignments and tasks.

He described the lack of emotional and mental support he experienced as characteristic of Caribbean parents: “I find in the Caribbean a lot of parents may not know how to have civil conversations with their children, especially growing up as a teenager, and stuff like that.” He concluded, “It was really me, myself and I.”

Weak or non-existent home support

Some participants, such as Hawthorne, Orion, Sage and Rowan, reported very weak or no family support. Hawthorne’s mother sent money occasionally to “get a pair of shoes or some essentials.

But that was really the extent of the family being able to support me, just because of what the circumstances were.” He shared some details about how his family did not play a significant role in his life:

Unfortunately, due to my family situation since birth, there wasn’t much of a role there. I did not grow up with family or spend time with family. So, I wouldn’t say that family played a significant role in my access to education.

Orion’s response was similarly unenthusiastic. According to him, it was only his mother who provided what little support he received. His family did not pay him any attention until he repeated a grade and passed some examinations. They then stepped up for him, claiming that school was important and so forth.

Rowan described his mother’s support as relatively basic and not particularly encouraging:

So, my mother, as I would have said before, has many misgivings, but she has never tried to stop me from getting an education. She may not necessarily be the best support system or biggest supporter. However, um, she does care and ensures that she tries to, um, to seem like she’s supporting me as best as possible, for lack of a better expression.

His father was absent, and he had the sporadic attention of an uncle who was mentally ill. The lacklustre support continued through college: “When I decided to go to teachers’ college, and I asked her, um, against my better judgement, for assistance, she told me that anybody who does so much schooling has to be a madman, or somebody confused.”

The hands-off approach was also evident in Sage’s description of his family’s influence on his journey. Although he gave credit to his mother for always ensuring he was in school, he cast doubt on her motivation, reasoning that maybe he was always sent there because his mother had to work and could not look after him. He explained:

I was never not in school, so I give them props for that. The challenges for me, when I’m looking back, are that the focus on education or at least, the follow-up at school, to know what was happening. So, I could be absent from class all week, and nobody asked. Nobody seemed to care. Homework was never something that was followed up on.

Fire’s experience aligns well with Sage’s. He referred to his mother’s minimal efforts and notes that his uncles and community members were the people who empowered him.

Reed was an outlier in terms of family involvement in his career. His experience demonstrated that although financial and material resources are strong enablers of educational success, they are not a guarantee. His parents provided him with material and financial support, but he said that they pressured him only to complete a degree and not to pursue a passion or live a meaningful life once

he gained an education. He subsequently shared that because they dissuaded him from becoming a teacher, his life was derailed, and he spent 17 years trying to decide what to do with his life:

They were also very traditional in their approach. You know, careers are doctor, lawyer, or as my mother would say, doctor, lawyer, Indian, chief — meaning there must be a clear and set trajectory towards a particular career or goal. I knew I wanted to be a teacher, in some capacity, but my mother, in her wisdom and guidance, told me that teachers don't make money. And at eight years old, I said that if teachers don't make money, I don't want to be a teacher.

Although his life contrasted with that of Heath, whose family worked multiple jobs, Reed was unable to manage, and his educational journey emerged as the only one that was distorted by rigid family expectations, particularly from his mother.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND OTHER PROGRAMMES

Community support was generally anaemic. Although some levels of cordiality and camaraderie were reported, they were not focused on educational outcomes. However, as Ash shared, “people were able to live and to be satisfied.” Most of the participants came from rural, deprived communities, and their experience highlighted the gaps in structured programmes and resources. Ash reported that “some people are still purchasing water.” Churches played a role in providing spiritual guidance, which some participants valued, but they did not offer educational empowerment. Heath recounted, “The church did something that the other entities and institutions could not have done, which was ensuring that spiritually I was solid and I was moulded in a particular way that gave me hope.” Other participants did not prioritise the church, but Reed was explicit in his rejection of it because he felt church people “were hypocritical.”

Some government and NGO programmes existed, and some participants were involved in them. Cedar and Sage took part in the Social Development Commission (SDC) programmes, Rowan and Sage were members of the National Youth Service (NYS) and Heath contributed to arts and culture efforts in his community. Some participants were unsure about the availability of certain programmes.

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTION 3

The role of the family

Participants' experiences with home, community and other influences on their educational success as they struggled to overcome barriers to achievement provided some interesting insights. Similar to socio-economic influences, a balanced set of home circumstances appears necessary for boys' success. Some individuals received emotional support but could have benefited from additional financial and material resources. Others had relatively more financial and material resources but lacked the emotional support and guidance they needed. This further confirms the findings of Jha and Kelleher (2006), who highlighted the complex relationships between family dynamics, community resources and institutional support as playing a key role in shaping the educational

outcomes of boys who have overcome the prospect of underachievement. The stark contrast in the available home support was revealing.

Some of the participants enjoyed comprehensive family support, including an extended family network, which cushioned their route to success. In some cases, the support was not targeted at their educational journey, but it helped them nonetheless. The implication is that extended family involvement bolstered participants' motivation by providing multiple sources of encouragement, guidance and practical help that the immediate family alone could not have provided. This also highlights the importance of collective efforts and underlines that any investment is likely to fill a gap, potentially propelling students who are underachieving to reach the desired levels of success.

Conversely, some of the participants, such as Orion, Sage and Rowan, navigated their educational journeys successfully despite the absence of a familial cushion or a sole dedicated parent. Their life narratives, both collectively and individually, exemplify notable resilience and agency among boys who achieved academic success with minimal support. However, their experiences are not uncommon, as indicated by Dr Herbert Gayle, who advocates for comprehensive investment in boys' education through robust financial and emotional support, coupled with family sacrifices to facilitate their college attendance:

If the boy ever finishes CAPE (Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination), he is 10 times safer than a boy who dropped out of school, and if you ever put your money behind this boy and support him and love him and sacrifice and get him into a college, he is 85 times safer than if he had dropped out of school. (Sterling, 2021)

Gayle's emphasis on different types of support underscores its general importance. Moreover, within the context of this study, it highlights the significant disparity that an unbalanced support framework can create. For example, Pine and Heath received financial aid, but the emotional support they received was insufficient to the extent that Pine remarked that Caribbean parents lack the skills to engage in civil discourse with their children. Additionally, it is noteworthy that others, including Sage, also expressed concerns about insufficient constructive intervention by parents, who tend to resort to "flogging" and "cussing." The potential impact of such cultural practices on boys' educational confidence remains to be determined and warrants consideration. Reed's case further underscores the importance of a balanced support system in achieving success. Material privilege and authoritarian parenting styles do not guarantee favourable educational outcomes for boys. Although the familial pressure he experienced was not ill-intentioned, it proved counterproductive and contributed to disrupting his life for over a decade.

Individuals they found most supportive

As with other aspects of their educational journeys, the participants highlighted that mothers were the central figures in their success, with fathers conspicuous by their absence. However, some participants perceived their mothers' attitudes as discouraging, as they did not demonstrate their support in a manner that would counteract any predisposition towards underachievement. If a father is absent and a mother is either uninterested or preoccupied by socio-economic circumstances or other factors, the fractured family structure may intensify the educational challenges faced by

boys, as it creates a void in terms of positive role models, which should ideally be first established within the household.

Community support

The presence of multiple models of familial support, contrasted with the notable absence of assistance from the broader community, raises significant concerns. Several critical factors appear to influence a child's success in educational environments, including their social background, family circumstances and the surrounding school and community context. Furthermore, the presence of multiple communal models and other types of community support imply that community-based support models for boys' education are feasible, as exemplified by Oakley's experience, whereby the community made an effort to ensure his success. A more significant concern pertains to the extent to which the divide in community support, an indicator of perceived social disconnection, represents the experiences within Caribbean communities more broadly, reinforcing the need for greater support in this area. The lack of targeted educational assistance underscores that social relationships alone are not enough to promote success without specific educational initiatives.

Research Question 4: What are participants' views about how being a male shaped their perspective and attitude toward acquiring an education? (Gender perspectives)

HOW BEING MALE SHAPED PARTICIPANTS' APPROACH TO EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Some participants felt that being male shaped their views about education because they had to assume the position of being protectors and providers in their families, and an education is one way to do this. When they were in that position, they were accepted by society. Others felt that being male put them at a disadvantage in school, as they did not feel the education system catered to them, while some expressed uncertainty about how their gender influenced their educational pursuits.

Two participants, Reed and Oakley, shared that being a man shaped their educational journey because they had to excel to be able to assume the roles of protector and provider. According to Reed, his experience was intensified by his being a first-born child. He explained:

There was a constant expectation of taking care of everybody else. So, everything I did, everything I was working towards, everything that was, that I had to invest in, was so that I could be in a position to take care of everybody else.

He noted, "I was very sacrificial," but hastened to add, "but the sacrifice is serving me well now, in my adult years. However, it was definitely a huge influence on my childhood and educational journey."

Oakley related a similar story: “It was a lot of pressure growing up because you know that males provided, and if it is that you cannot provide, then what?” He recalled what his father told him before leaving to travel overseas: “Oakley, you are the man of the house now. Make sure everything is okay for your sister and your mom.” This experience, he shared, guided all aspects of his life. He was even expected to decide what time his mother’s friends should leave when they visited, but he was often met by a rebuke and a reminder that he was “still a child” when he spoke up.

He also held the view that being male affected some participants’ approach to education because simply being male placed them at a disadvantage in schools and they needed to work harder to overcome that barrier.

Orion explained that once he got help, he accomplished what he needed to. Therefore, in that sense, being male did not impact him, but he recognised that the challenge existed. For example, he observed:

It is a problem. The majority of the girls used to be in the front, and the majority of the boys in the back. So we used to have a comparison. They used to always feel the girls were brighter than the boys. The girls tend to outperform the boys.

Heath’s perspective shared a striking resemblance to Orion’s when he declared, as a first response to the question: “First, being male, you feel like you are already starting at a big disadvantage because teachers and institutions would pay more attention to women.” In addition, being in a school with predominantly women teachers affected his approach to education: “The gender of the teachers played a significant role. In my case, the principal was the only male figure I had to look up to.” He concluded:

First, being male personally affected me because of where I feel males start. We start at the back. Second, the gender identity of the persons who were inspirational to me was mainly female, and they have been very helpful to this day in my life.

Implicit in the idea of “starting from the back” is the struggle to get ahead and the determination to achieve academic success. Some candidates focused strategically on their academic achievements, because such accomplishments would bring them closer to the company they aspired to join. For example, Sage reported on the shortage of men in his academic experience: “I didn’t really see many males; minus the few percent of the population who were doing quite well.” Thus, he reasoned about how being male influenced his academic pathway:

Where I found it [being male] to be serious though, is that the girls I was attracted to were academics, and in order to knock heads with them, I needed to also be a performer. So, to attract enough females, I would ensure that my scores are where they should be. So, they would ask for help first, and then I could sneak into their direct messages.

Like other participants before him, he also observed, “Boys are underperforming. I saw a lot of that around me. I was maybe one of the few who were able to do what I did. It’s not typical.” He confessed that he did not see his approach as gendered or anything else “outside of just wanting to be with the cool kids and the nice girls who were performing.” The metaphor that Rowan used to capture his experience of being male and navigating his education is powerful for the insight it provides. After exclaiming, “Oh, boy, that is a loaded question,” he said it is like “balancing on a two-edged, double-edged sword, um, when I decided to continue education in Jamaica.” He attributed this to the fact that he is male and pursuing an education in the arts; he was often the sole male student in his classes. He explained that he has had to be extremely focused to do well because his choice of discipline left him feeling “like education is a new woman’s world.” Sage, Rowan and Cedar also referenced having to develop strategies to overcome homophobic monikers in order to focus. Rowan said he had to be extremely careful to avoid being labelled, and Sage noted that men who excelled would be labelled either “Maama man or gay.” Cedar’s interpretation was that “people who are not exposed would see it as gay or effeminate or not masculine. If you are bright, dem tink yuh funny.”

Some outlier perspectives emerged. Ash was one of those who felt being male had no bearing on their experience of education, but he noted that throughout his life he has been influenced by women, including his mentor. Like some others — for example, Hawthorne — he has had only one man of any significant influence in his life. Thus, he concluded, “I am not sure it has shaped my academic journey.” Fire claimed that because he is male, he has had to earn respect to survive. Pine described his strategy for navigating education as working hard to avoid negative male influences in his community. He explained:

Growing up, you would always find a lot of males, especially in my community, on the block. You know, they would be finding themselves in trouble, illegal activities, and not making something of themselves. For me, wanting to be different really pushed me to be determined to be better and do better.

This final set of perspectives does not present a strong thematic focus that runs across the participants, but it is an excellent addition to the narrative, as it showcases the nuances of the participants’ experiences.

PARTICIPANTS’ FEELINGS ABOUT HOW THEIR EDUCATION EXPERIENCES MIGHT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT HAD THEY BEEN GIRLS IN SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES

Participants’ perspectives on this issue varied (see Table 1), although the dominant impression was that there was a bias in education that favoured girls. Some said they believed their educational experiences would not have been different if they had been girls, and others were uncertain. Four participants felt that school classrooms were skewed to girls’ advantage because they received more emotional and resource support, the curriculum was developed to favour girls and parenting styles reflected societal expectations about how boys and girls should be treated.

Ash admitted that he had “strong, confident, brilliant females as mentors,” but he felt that “females are usually more well supported in secondary and post-secondary education.” For example, he

cited a lack of transitional support for young men who did not perform well at the secondary level, comparing it to the support provided for girls to help them continue their education. He concluded that being female would not have changed anything for him, as both genders in his family are given equal opportunities to excel. Cedar ultimately concluded that he was uncertain if things would have been different for him if he had been a girl. However, he also noted, “Maybe they would have been a little more understanding because females get that type of intimate support that people feel that males do not need.” Heath supported this notion:

I think that women get more attention in terms of time, monetary efforts given, the type of environment, the fostering environment, the physical environment and how it is built in a very supportive way for them, but not so much for men.

Reed felt that “it lent itself to easier success for females” because “they are much more capable of sitting, discussing and retaining than boys.” He described himself as tactile and reflected that his style of learning “was never an option for me in high school.”

The difference between Reed and Rowan and Oakley is entrenched in societal expectations about boys’ behaviour. Oakley provided this example:

If you go to Emancipation Park, and you see a father and son and daughter, if the son runs and falls, the father is going to say, or most likely to say, “Get up, man, and brush yourself off. You’re tough enuh. You’re a man.” If the daughter falls, he’s going to run over and take her up and say, “Oh, my princess, let me kiss it for you.” They can be tender and gentle. A gentler hand or a smoother hand is lifted to them than to a male. For the male, the expectation is harsh.

Rowan expressed a similar opinion:

I think it’s much different for a male because men such as myself, especially from my type of background, my rough and tumble background, are not necessarily expected to go into education. We’re expected to hustle. A woman is more likely to be helped throughout life educationally, because “oh, she is a girl” and “oh she must be taken care of.”

He explained how that attitude played out in his family:

I can go back to my grandmother regarding the women in my family. She, with her own money, paid for my aunt and my cousin to go to college overseas. She was sending money from Jamaica to support their education overseas. Some of them have finished their education and have come to Jamaica to sit as bums. However, she ensured that she provided them with a good education, whereas men, the boys, are expected to seek it out for themselves. They’re not necessarily expected to be inclined towards education.

Sage’s perspective was that had he been a girl, his education journey would have been different because, generally, girls do better than boys, “because the females took education a lot more seriously.” Orion shared this perspective: “What I understand is that women are more open than boys.” Furthermore, “even though she may feel hurt, or whatever, I believe help and support would have been granted to her more quickly than to a male.”

Table 1. Participants’ perceptions of how masculinity influences educational achievement

| Participant | How masculinity influences educational achievement |
|-------------|---|
| Reed | <p>Reading and through work experience</p> <p>“Male and female neurology makes a big difference in how they approach things as well as the time of hormonal changes in the body and how it affects them. I think all of these come into play, in terms of how boys interact and learn versus how girls interact and learn.”</p> |
| Ash | <p>As a social construct</p> <p>“Masculinity I believe is a social construct that I don’t conform to as a male and one who identifies as a male.”</p> <p>“I acknowledge who I am in terms of my own development. I know culturally people will say that if you speak well, you may be deemed as a homosexual. I’m conscious of that but I do not allow that to deter me from using standard English when I speak in certain spaces.”</p> |
| Cedar | <p>Media influences</p> <p>“I think some media and just seeing other leaders . . . seeing people out there and how they regard males, as opposed to, you know, women leading. There’s always this thing like, oh, um, you know, males should be leaders, um, so, I guess just from media, uh, society on a whole.”</p> |
| Heath | <p>Through societal conditioning</p> <p>“Masculinity teaches us some level of toughness and because of this toughness, you are expected to play as part of that role.”</p> |
| Rowan | <p>Realising he had to compete with women to succeed</p> <p>“I realised early on that I had to always ensure that I worked harder to beat women. Um, um, because women are naturally thought of as brighter, women are given or are scaffolded in a way. So, I have always been the one to try to push out ahead of the girls because believe it or not, um, they are winning in education. I didn’t want to be lost. I had to ensure that I worked twice as hard, twice as long, because I was a man.”</p> |
| Hawthorne | <p>Neutral</p> <p>“I have never thought about it in terms of masculinity playing a major role in my educational development.”</p> |
| Orion | <p>Because of the increasing prevalence</p> <p>“Things and time change where you know where sex is concerned in terms of male going with male and female, with female, and so forth. In my time it didn’t have much of that . . . but now it is breaking now, people going brave with those things now.”</p> |
| Fire | <p>Through older men in his community</p> <p>“Through being around a lot of elder males than me. The ways that I would have seen like normal when I wasn’t around them, when I go around them and complaining, they show me the upside of how life really goes, reality. That is how I start to use the word reality a lot because I used to be delusional. I used to live by things whe’ me imagine and me feel 100% confident off it and it not gonna exist in real life. So, through being around elder males and they want me to be a dominant male like they are dominant males in life — as we would say alphas — I go respond to them as a me teachers them.”</p> |

PARTICIPANTS’ COMMENTS ABOUT THE MALE INFLUENCES IN THEIR LIVES

The majority of the participants reported having some type of male influence in their lives. What is interesting, however, is that the support they received from them for their education was negligible. Orion and Oakley were the only two participants who answered yes, definitively, to this question. Orion recalled that he had “one or two males who used to encourage me to be focused on my schoolwork.” The fact that both participants are now lawyers seems to place their experiences in

the space of higher education. Oakley acknowledged male influences in his home and the wider community, but he singled out his academic advisor as having been especially helpful. He explained:

There are males in my life, especially like my academic advisor when I was in university. I spent a lot of time speaking with him because he is quite successful in his area of expertise, and as such I often probed his mind about how he got there. What kind of techniques did he use? What's the philosophy that drives him? That sort of thing. So I'd say, my academic advisor. Generally, males who are older than me . . . I love having conversations with. So, if I go somewhere and I meet somebody, I'll have those kinds of conversations to understand how they got where they are, why they end up where they are in terms of whether it was a choice or was it just by sheer luck.

Reed and Ash said the male influences in their lives were men who worked hard because they had to provide for their families. Reed reflected:

I never felt like I needed to do well at school. If I'm being honest, the male influences in my life prioritised hard work and sacrifice over educational success. So, when I was messing around in high school, it was because I never felt that as a male, I needed to be smart. I just needed to work hard and provide.

Ash's response was similar — but stronger:

Not from an academic perspective but more so from a social perspective. Those would of course be my father and my two brothers, whom I respect fondly as individuals. They are the three males in my immediate family who have set very positive examples for me as a male.

He explained that the examples they set included family values, career progress, diligence, strong work ethics and a strong sense of the need to protect siblings.

Fire talked about a strong male influence outside of his formal education:

Well, there is a guy they call a teacher because he teaches me many lessons, including about smoking and other things. He gives me a lot of insight about life because he is an elder and has gone through a lot of things from both the good side and the gangster street side. He shows me lots that's out there. What's possibly out there, and I like to live off past experience, because then history, the past, does influence the future.

Heath, Rowan, Pine, Hawthorne and Oakley all reported a degree of male presence in their lives, ranging from interactions with men who directly influenced their educational pursuits to vicarious experiences. Heath recalled:

I did not have a direct male influence, but the male influence that I had was one from a distance. From a distance, I was just watching Barack Obama, the way he carried himself. I started pretending like I were him in dress, speech and manner.

Hawthorne also had a distant, yet impactful, example of male experience in his journey. He explained:

I actually had one male figure in my life. It was actually my dance teacher. And yes, he definitely played a role, as I was inspired by his journey. And yes, our experience of him just sharing and teaching and guiding definitely helped in my own journey.

Rowan had a more fragmented experience of male influence in his life: a male friend of his mother's who held an important position, an uncle and his father, whom he did not want to emulate. His summative response to the questions was "I didn't really have much male influence except for the fact that I knew I did not want to be like my father." This response supported Rowan's earlier assertions that his father was absent. He added:

My father would pop in maybe every six months, sometimes two or three years [and ask] "So what you want to be in life?" Oh, you can be a lawyer, or you can be a doctor. But he did nothing to encourage me to what he thought I could be.

He clarified his other sources of influence, beginning with his mother's friend:

The superintendent of police would call me and ask: "How yuh doing in school?" And I would tell him, and he would encourage me at some point. And if he saw me on the road, [he would say] "ensure you go a school enuh. I am giving you this money for your lunch money and make sure you don't waste it!" But outside of that, outside of him and my uncle, I didn't have much male influence.

Cedar and Sage reported little male influence in their lives. Cedar remarked, "No, not really. Most people who were there for me, who pushed me, were females. And I tend to get along much better with females."

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTION 4

Gender perspectives and education acquisition

The participants' perceptions of how being male shaped their experiences of accessing education in the Caribbean were complex and multifaceted. Their stories varied, and no single dominant theme emerged. However, a common theme was that they often felt that their educational spaces were feminised and therefore less able to deal with boys' needs. Despite these perceptions, they did not underperform academically. Jha and Kelleher (2006) observed that the long-established practice of blaming feminised systems for boys' underachievement is driven by gender stereotypes, socialisation and expectations at home and in school. Their observation is supported by the participants' comments that they were positioned as providers for and protectors of their families and that this expectation played a role in their determination to succeed academically. This suggests that in some Caribbean societies, the drive for academic success is rooted in expectations about masculine responsibility rather than intrinsic motivation to learn. Figueroa (2004) described the situation of educational achievement being a means to fulfil traditional masculine roles as male privileging.

Perceptions of the influence of gender on educational achievement

The participants strongly perceived the education system as being biased in favour of girls, pointing to classroom arrangements — for example, female students are generally seated at the front — prevailing and widely held beliefs that girls are more intelligent than boys and teachers' tendency to pay more attention to girls. Their comments corroborate the findings from Jha and Pouezevara's (Jha & Pouezevara, 2016, as cited in Welmond & Gregory, 2022) research in multiple Commonwealth countries, which indicate that boys' underachievement has become systemic — and contradict previous narratives about male privilege in education. The fact that participants, even those who were motivated by provider-protector ideals, adopted strategic approaches to pursuing education further challenges the concept of male privilege.

Other benefits associated with education — for example, upward social mobility, career advancement, access to professional and personal networks, romantic relationships and access to healthcare — were valuable motivators in the participants' efforts to be successful. These motivating factors substantially refute Parry's (1996) assertion that male gender identity conflicts with the academic ethos of education by highlighting how male academic achievement is also connected to credibility and social elevation.

In delineating the differences they perceived between boys' and girls' educational experiences, the participants overwhelmingly revealed their belief that girls received preferential treatment — both at home and in school — including emotional support, curricula advantages and access to more and better resources. Nonetheless, they persevered in their efforts to succeed. This suggests that boys have the capacity to be resilient once they have clearly defined educational goals and at least one strong support system in place. Their argument that girls receive preferential treatment remains paradoxical, as they also overwhelmingly reported receiving school-based assistance that ultimately contributed to their successful educational outcomes, and many had women teachers as role models. This indicates that, although teachers often act in boys' best interests, some unconscious

hegemonic practices may be embedded in relationships and curricula and continue to perpetuate terms of educational engagement that leave boys feeling they have to meet higher standards than their female counterparts to be considered successful.

How participants arrived at their understanding of masculinity

The participants' interpretations of masculinity were wide-ranging. Some saw it as biologically determined, others believed it was learned from male elders and still others said it is a social construct. Some also observed that masculinity propels gender-based competition within educational settings. This diversity reflects how their comprehension of masculinity influences their educational experiences. Such findings imply two key points: educational interventions directed at men must consider the different levels of gender consciousness, and alternative mentoring models could enhance boys' performance beyond the formal educational environment.

Male influences and educational achievement

It is noteworthy that some participants said that although they had male influences in their lives, they contributed minimally to their educational achievement. This perception points to a need to investigate whether the core issue is the availability of masculine influences or the nature of such influences in educational environments. Overall, the findings relating to this subtopic both align with and differ from Figueroa's (2007) assertion that, historically, men have held roles characterised by greater power, social status and access to resources. This historical context correlates with prevailing beliefs about how men should be educated at home, treated in educational institutions and compensated in the workforce.

Research Question 5: How do participants describe the effect/influence of acquiring an education on their quality of life? (Education and quality of life)

PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT HOW EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS SHAPED THEIR LIVES

The participants generally felt that education primarily shaped their lives by opening up access to spaces they would not usually enter, including personal and professional networks, and enhancing their ability to problem-solve and respond to challenges. All but one participant, Fire, responded affirmatively when asked if education had shaped their lives. Fire, who has CXC accreditations, explained his stance:

Zero. I say zero because right now I have five subjects and they not doing anything fi mi. Mi a do wholesale work. Mi nuh really plan fi go college. My next move is to learn a trade through an institution, you know. Once mi a do mi trade mi also send out a lot of online applications looking for larger scale of income if mi get through that mi I will try come into the business like being an entrepreneur.

Reed commented, “Education is the cornerstone of everything in the sense that the deeper my understanding, the better I can analyse.” This was after he differentiated schooling, which he admitted could provide access to lifelong networks, from education, which he described as a process with a more lasting impact, in terms of personal development. Ash’s and Pine’s positions were similar. Ash explained, “I would say that being educated on paper is very good, and it opens many doors, but I also believe in personal agency and dispositions that will complement the academic achievements.” He said that many of his colleagues graduated with an honours degree, but he was the one asked to teach classes. He explained why he thought he was chosen:

For me, I believe it returns to personal agency and disposition. How you carry yourself as an individual, or how I carried myself as an individual. How responsible I was, my way of thinking. My approach to teaching and learning.

Sage’s position reflected Reed’s to some extent, as he noted that acquiring an education changed his worldview, but he also emphasised other benefits: “It gives me options. It opens doors. It makes accessing things you need to survive a lot easier. It removes that cap that is put on you for things like minimum wage.” As he saw it:

The education I now have is so much easier for me to start and maintain a healthy family, because I have not only earning potential, but I also understand how to navigate the world a little better, knowing what impacts the world. I can understand financial markets. I can understand social and political issues.

Sage also showed similarities to Ash and Oakley in his thoughts about the personal benefits of educational achievement: “I’ve been able to figure out how to get into certain circles of either acquaintances or business or friendships that I typically wouldn’t have access to, because I am at that competence level.”

The idea that a degree by itself is insufficient emerged in Oakley’s response:

Well, first of all, it got me into a good job. But I remember when I went to the interview, the lady took out my resumé and took a red ink pen and crossed off my bachelor’s, and she said, “Okay, your degree got you into the chair. Now you need to tell me why I need to hire you.” And that was a very rude awakening for me, because it’s always oh, I have a degree. I’ll get that job. No, the degree gets you the interview.

Pine’s perspective that a combination of attitude and education impacted his life was closely linked to Oakley’s. He credited his CXC’s as opening doors for him early in his career, but clarified:

What moved me is my attitude, my performance and my work ethic. I started off in Grade 2, with only CXC subjects — nine subjects. Because of my work ethic, having the right attitude and being willing to learn, I was able to expand my knowledge

base within the company, and I jumped from Grade 2 to Grade 5. This was not normal, as we were often told we had to go up in order. After that, I did a diploma and then applied for the assistant manager position with only a diploma in business management. It was only last year that I completed my MBA. My education never really put me in that middle-class group. I was able to do that based on my attitude, work ethic and my performance.

Other participants, including Hawthorne, Rowan, Heath and Orion, agreed that education granted access to opportunities and gave more specific details about how it transformed their lives. According to Hawthorne, “I think that education has given me a chance to enter into spaces that I may not have been able to, until I followed [the path of education] qualifications.” He elaborated:

So, I think that education definitely has a significant role in that. It has helped in attracting opportunities, and being seen as well/being referred for different opportunities as well, which is closely related to that first point. Education has helped a whole lot there. I would really say that’s the umbrella, or that’s the main one.

Similarly, Rowan enthused that education opened doors to social acceptance, access to opportunities and secure livelihoods. He qualified his position by sharing his struggles with being “always a heavy-set person — the largest person in the room” and how that made him feel. His size meant he could not wear the best clothes or shoes, and it affected his health, living conditions and other comforts:

But getting an education placed me in a position where I could step into a store or go online, choose what I wanted and simply buy it. Or if not, buy it, I saved my money to buy it, depending on the cost. . . .

I have grown up in a circumstance where I was forced to eat things that I didn’t even know I had an allergy to. I just thought, “Oh, let me eat it. It burns my stomach.” I was able to go to an allergist who was able to pinpoint that “Hey, this is not just giving you an upset stomach. This is something you’re actually allergic to. So it [education] has improved my quality of life, materially, health-wise. I can access certain things. I live in a better environment. And I am generally in a better position. Not the greatest position, but in a better position than I would have imagined in my wildest dreams. Um, yeah, at age 32, I stepped out, and I have been working with an NGO. I didn’t know that there was a possibility for me to drive a car, much less go to ATL and say, “Hey, that’s the one that I want. ” I want that new car, and I want the top specs, and I want it this way and that way. And it felt surreal.

He concluded, “It impacted my life massively, because at each level of my educational journey, it opened a door each time I completed a degree or certificate, it opened several doors.”

When Heath was asked how education has impacted his life, he responded:

I would say that the pursuit of education has opened several doors to the point where I have to turn down offers and opportunities because they come in many forms and from different areas and countries, so yes, when I was growing up. They said it is the key that unlocks doors.

Although Orion acknowledged that nepotism often comes into play in the workplace, he also pointed to the role played by education — “most of the time, education speaks louder.” He explained:

Well, you see, if I hadn’t obtained the subjects, I wouldn’t have been an officer because qualification is what shapes you to achieve what you want. Now, qualification gives you your first preference over other people who don’t have one, or who don’t have sufficient. So, as they say, education is the key to the pathway, in my country.

Cedar’s perspective was an outlier:

Most of what I have done, I think, has taught me how to serve and serve well, thereby impacting other people’s lives. Education is not really the degrees and titles, it is how you change people’s lives — help people feel better about themselves. That is a win for me.

He closed by saying that those qualities impacted him on his journey and they are the things that matter most to him about how education impacted his life.

THE ASPECT OF EDUCATION THAT PARTICIPANTS FELT WAS MOST VALUABLE PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY

Reed and Orion felt that the aspect of education that benefited them most was the fundamental grounding that their primary education provided. Reed noted that “learning to read and write might be where it stopped” for him. He noted that none of his professional success could be attributed to his time in school — “no exams, tests or qualifications.” He could not reasonably attribute even his critical thinking ability to his educational experiences. He had to work when he was in school, and that was how he developed his skills. Orion said the basics, “reading, writing and spelling,” and the CXC subjects he passed had benefited him personally and professionally, and pointed to how he used them in a professional capacity: “Well, it is valuable because, as a police officer, I have to take statements and do my investigations and so forth. You have to be a critical thinker, you know, and a critical writer.”

Other participants said their tertiary education experiences had been the most beneficial, although the other stages were also useful. Oakley was very definitive: “My bachelor’s and university life.” Ash

acknowledged the difficulty of singling out any particular aspect because he enjoyed the journey of learning:

I don't know if any outranks the other. I believe my journey to earning my diploma has had tremendous merit, as it was instrumental in my development as a teacher. My bachelor's degree was also instrumental for where I was, in terms of my development. I honestly do not know if any[thing] has been more significant to me as an individual.

Using his description of both stages — “diploma has tremendous value as it was very instrumental” and “bachelor's degree was also instrumental” — one can deduce that his teaching diploma has particular personal and professional value for him. His PhD, he admitted, would be useful in giving him more impact and reach, and it would give his parents “bragging rights.”

Sage also referred to the benefits his college degree has brought him both personally and professionally:

The foundation skills that I learned as a teacher are the most valuable assets I have. You see, the ability to understand, to the extent that you've diagnosed how to remedy something, is very critical. It helps with problem-solving, conflict resolution and people management. It helps with understanding people's motivations and provides a perspective on what might contribute to how someone relates. It has become a significant part of how I operate in my daily life. I think through that lens all the time. It was the first real qualification after high school that I acquired. But it's something that I apply to everything I do.

He concluded by noting that that experience cemented his ability to sympathise effectively, a skill he uses in all aspects of his life, even his personal relationships. According to him, “It's invaluable beyond me!”

Rowan also lauded the professional and personal value of education in his experience:

The aspect of my education that has proven most valuable is the development of my skills in analysis and my ability to think critically. I have accomplished many things and applied myself to various situations, which sometimes is a surprise. I've written and lectured courses. I have written books. I have published books. I've completed projects that I didn't think or know existed when I was growing up. I have functioned professionally in roles that I didn't know existed; um, and I would not have known existed, had I not been exposed to education and being able to develop that professional acumen, that has allowed me to navigate.

Heath was another participant who pointed to his tertiary education as having been the most valuable aspect of his education. However, he singled out the particular value of his PhD, saying that such a degree is not common among men:

Acquiring a PhD was perhaps the most impactful, as it enables you to engage with governments from various regions and countries, who now consider your publications and research authoritative. Whatever I say, they believe it is valid because of the intensive data work and statistical analysis that have been done. So I would say that a PhD would have made that more.

One participant, Hawthorne, credited a second-chance opportunity that allowed him to complete his CXC to matriculate to Form 6 and then university as the most valuable aspect of his education:

When I graduated from Form 5, I did not have a full certificate, as I mentioned before, but I attained four subjects. Somehow it was seen as though I had potential. So with the four subjects, I was able to get into Form 6 under a unique arrangement. And the agreement was that I had to be doing at least one subject in January of the following year, so that I could have gotten a full certificate. So, that was one of the ways that well, a definite, like, significant appeal in my life when these four subjects represented potential and determination.

He then explained how meeting the requirements of the special arrangement allowed him to access tertiary education. Although he did not have the subjects directly related to his field of study, he was able to matriculate to university and that “opened doors for me” in his professional life. He also referred to “that critical time in my life when I was able to get the opportunity to pursue sixth form education, because my qualifications at the time represented potential and determination.”

PARTICIPANTS’ DESCRIPTIONS OF HOW ACQUIRING AN EDUCATION INFLUENCES THEIR SELF-PERCEPTION AND HOW OTHERS SEE THEM

Overall, the participants said their education helped them see themselves positively for several reasons. Some had a feeling of achievement or felt that being educated enabled them to help others, and others saw it as a way to clarify or reflect on their purpose.

Reed felt more attuned to his need to help others, and his ability to do so because of his education made him feel good and shaped how others perceived him. He was somewhat dismissive of the idea that his education should shape people’s perception of who he is, and pointed to his professional achievements as being more important:

Some people attribute value to the names of the schools I attended. I don’t particularly think that having a bachelor’s in this or a master’s in that changes the way anybody perceives me. What really makes people perceive me differently is the work that I’ve done or the things I’ve been a part of. The most notable things all lie in my professional career.

A sense of purpose unified Rowan and Heath — albeit in different ways.

Gaining an education has given Rowan confidence, and he admitted that this achievement has clarified his purpose:

Um, it has helped with my self-concept a lot, because of course, I indicated that I am, for lack of a better expression, mi nuh come from nowhe [I don't come from anywhere]. And, as Rex Nettleford said, um, I have experienced “smaddification” through education.⁴ My personal road has been made clear. It might sound weird, but I think it has helped to prop me up in a, in a way that would never have been possible. Um, but, um, it is also problematic, because people see you and they don't immediately see your education.

He noted that the community in which he lives has not forgiven him for his past as a hustler and explained why he described others' perception of him as “problematic”:

They see me as the boy from down deh suh. The boy whose mother is such and such. And it impacted me so severely that, initially, I could not secure employment comfortably in my hometown because, though I had gained the education that was necessary, and the qualifications, that I'm sure were more than enough to secure the job, people couldn't see beyond the fact that, this is that boy who used to be on the road. This is that boy who used to sell DVDs. And as such, I had to step out, uprooting myself from that garden and repositioning myself elsewhere, in order to bloom.

Rowan's experiences of how pursuing education made him feel confident but sometimes rejected by others contrasted with Heath's experience. Heath felt he was still searching for a purpose and had a sense of being unfulfilled because of that ongoing search, despite holding a PhD. Others admired him but, he admitted, “Sometimes even though I am at this level I still feel a little unfulfilled because I am still trying to find out what exactly my purpose is here on this earth.” He explained that he has won many “awards,” has “broken spells” and is “grateful for his opportunities and achievements,” but still questions “whether or not the things that I have done is sufficient for me you know, or if there is more for me to do or am I fulfilling the purpose that God has brought me here for. . . . I think it's still exploratory for me.”

Heath's presentation of how others perceive him because of his education was in stark contrast to Rowan's. He described being looked up to as a role model and an example:

I think they see me as an educated person and they see me as someone who they can now look up to and use as an example to say, “Look. Heath is doing well. He came from this community, and now he is doing this. He went through a very difficult situation, so if he can do it, you can do it too.” So, you are now looked at

4 See <https://www.mona.uwi.edu/marcom/newsroom/entry/3738>

as a role model for other young men and also young women who may be in a similar situation.

This perception also applies in his workplace, and it helps him command attention when he speaks, because, as he said, “they know that when I speak, I have not only experienced it through academia, but I have also experienced it in a real-life context and understand it from different perspectives.”

While Sage and Ash had a modest appreciation of how their educational accomplishments influenced their self-perception, they were less restrained about sharing how others felt about them. Sage said, “Well, they first think you’re the expert at everything.” However, that is not always a good thing: “The other part of it is that they sometimes look up to you as the one who has all the ideas. It’s not necessarily a good thing all the time, as it becomes a burden over time.” Like Sage, Ash felt there were elevated perceptions and expectations of him, especially among his colleagues, because he ended up teaching some of them. He always had to address this situation because, as he said:

It makes no sense I am up on this pedestal and I am not helping people. It is a decision I have made because some people may think I am out of their brackets . . . People see me as brilliant, but I try to be humble about it, where I am not perceived as being on a pedestal.

Pine, Hawthorne and Fire were not as restrained as some of the other participants when they described how their educational experiences affected their self-perception. Pine enthused:

I am actually very proud of myself, because even though I was determined to get an education, I thought it probably wouldn’t have happened. It was a far reach for me due to financial reasons, and I’m aware that I sometimes procrastinate. I did not think I was able to do it. So, I am really proud of myself. Given all the struggles and where I am now in life — being qualified and certified. It’s a truly proud moment.

Like many of the others, with the notable exception of Rowan, Pine enjoyed the admiration of his community, including his immediate and extended family:

An achiever and a go-getter despite the odds, despite my background. I know my mom is super proud of me, and so are my siblings. I know my inner circle is super proud of me. I am respected in the workplace.

Hawthorne reported that he was held up as an example of what is possible and that his positive self-perception is shared by others:

The perception that the majority of people have of me is the same perception I have of myself. You know, an education helped me to see myself as competent. My qualifications have helped me guide others, leading me to conclude that I’m

competent and skilled in various areas. Education has made this possible, as I was not seen in the same way prior to it. Nor did I see myself in the way I see myself now. So, education was very transformative in that regard.

Fire declared, “Well, how do I see myself? I see myself as a king.” He explained that the community he is from and the “road he has been on” — that is, his journey and his life choices — made developing a strong sense of self almost impossible. “Not everybody made it through successfully,” he reflected. As he saw it, “some nearly reach the end and just drop off. So, it shows me that I can be persistent with other things in life, which I would say is way simpler than that road.” In terms of how he was perceived, he felt that perceptions were mixed. He explained the positives: “Well, some see me as really great because they know where my family come from and all that. They always tell me, ‘Well, mi proud of you because mi never expected that from you.’” However, not everyone was equally positive. He shared how he thought some others felt, and justified their thoughts:

They expect me to go down the wrong road and all those things. I perceive a lot of them as them jealous or they envy me, because some of them never really want it for me. They always want to see me take the bad road. And they pray and pray for me to do it, but I never really do it. Me just do the opposite and come through and them aggo screw up them face but that nuh matter me, because dem haffi hold down dem head.

This sentiment echoes Rowan’s, as reported above. In addition, Oakley commented, “It depends on who is perceiving. Education, for me, is a plus, but others may see it as a bad thing. They may see it as . . . ’cause not everybody will want the best for you.” Nonetheless, his self-perception is positive: “It causes me to always reflect and gives me a certain type of confidence because now you are equipped with the tools and you can help people, younger or the same age, with these types of decisions.” Like Ash and others, he tries to regulate his feelings about his accomplishment to negate discomfort among those he associates with:

The consensus of how others perceive me is that I am a chill individual. I try not to flaunt. I try not to be in the spotlight. I fade to the background. I have conversations and I just blend in with the background in terms of the murmur and the chattering as to not stand out and be a sore thumb. In that way, others will see me as just a normal individual who can have a conversation and maintain a good vibe.

The ways in which the participants were perceived by others because they had an education were predominantly positive. They were mostly perceived as role models, the centrepieces of their family’s pride and experts in their fields — although that brought its own challenges. Some noted that they contend with jealousy or unforgiving communities and that they have had to devise ways of handling those issues.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTION 5

The most important ways acquiring an education impacted participants' lives

Cobbett and Younger (2012) observed that, for some boys, academic success is associated with homosexuality, and this study supported their findings to a degree. However, nine of the 11 men described several ways in which they felt that gaining an education had transformed their quality of life. This suggests that their concept of achieving an education negated the idea that the process would emasculate them. Additionally, education as a tool of emasculation was not a strong enough force to thwart their educational journey. This implies that with appropriate support from home, school and the community, boys and young men in challenging circumstances can devise educational survival strategies to overcome adversity and succeed, despite the stigma. In the Caribbean, this has the potential to shift the existing narrative about the conflict in men's education (Gayle & Bryan, 2019). This is especially true in light of the reality that many participants felt their education gave them access to enhanced critical thinking abilities, opportunities to access spaces they would usually be denied and opportunities for social mobility — all of which are evolutionary forces.

Furthermore, they did not view education as a means to an end, but instead embraced it as “the cornerstone of their lives,” which means that they valued it. Therefore, their triumph becomes a more powerful source of possibilities when viewed in the context of Miller's (1994, 2004) argument that male marginalisation is entrenched in systemic barriers, and the agency they harnessed to overcome the barriers. The impact education has had on their lives symbolises an evolution of the understanding and interpretation of the narrative and their elevation to positions from which they can advocate for a continued shift in alienating narratives.

The emphasis on the need to shift away from narratives that claim to marginalise and emasculate men towards those that emphasise the transformative power of education underscores the persistent denial of education's impact on an individual's livelihood, even after they complete secondary education. Fire's scepticism exemplifies this attitude and aligns closely with the traditional masculine response to formal education. The irony of this stance lies in his failure to recognise that it was his foundational education that laid the groundwork for his aspirations to pursue formal education in entrepreneurship and trade. Moreover, his perspective prompts all stakeholders involved in the education of at-risk boys to consider Miller's (1994) call regarding boys' success when they are engaged in technical and vocational fields aligned with their interests. This suggests that tailoring educational opportunities to suit boys' preferences enhances their prospects of success. Fire's stance highlights the lack of a uniform understanding of what education entails and how it functions within the Caribbean context.

The aspect of education seen as most valuable personally and professionally

Some participants noted that learning fundamental skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, along with more advanced competencies such as critical thinking and pedagogical skills, was the most valuable aspect of their education. This assessment challenges the prevailing assumptions or perceptions that Caribbean men generally reject foundational academic skills. It clearly illustrates that they perceive the acquisition of these skills as having had practical value for their personal

development as they progressed through their educational journeys, rather than viewing them as abstract intellectual pursuits.

The fact that all participants who underwent teacher training as part of their tertiary education highly praise that stage of their professional journey is strongly connected to their masculine professional identities. In the Caribbean, the teaching profession was historically male-dominated, but it gradually became what could reasonably be described as feminised, with values of nurture and care embedded within it. This characterisation stands in stark contrast to the macho-dominant disposition of Caribbean boys and men. Therefore, to succeed, these young men demonstrated exceptional emotional resilience by embracing teaching as a space in which they could thrive and exercise influence. Interestingly, most of them cited their post-secondary education as the most beneficial stage of their education, both personally and professionally, which reinforces Gayle's call for a strong focus on helping boys and young men complete high school and college (cited in Sterling, 2021), thereby significantly increasing their chances of securing a livelihood.

How does educational success influence how participants see themselves and how others see them?

Although the participants expressed a variety of positive feelings about themselves, only one reported feeling like “a king.” (This participant was also one of the least academically qualified.) This resonates with the typical Caribbean macho disposition of some men. It indicates they do not equate educational achievement with being masculine enough to boost their male ego. Such a stance could undermine boys' educational achievement by allowing them to deliberately sabotage or avoid educational opportunities to fit in. However, it is important to note that other participants did not link their self-worth to their educational achievements, although they valued the personal and professional benefits they brought them. The fact that they felt a greater sense of responsibility to help others after they gained an education shows that they were more appreciative of the agency it provided for their personal development and livelihood, as well as how it positioned them to assist others. A key conclusion is that boys who succeed in education at the post-secondary level might cultivate a more mature and socially conscious form of masculinity. This manifests as prioritising the development of their competence in their field and the contribution it enables them to make, as well as the capacity to assist others it affords them.

The duality in how others perceive them — either with pride and appreciation or with envy — also makes for an intriguing discussion, because it exemplifies the complex social dynamics the participants have had to navigate to remain focused. More importantly, it demonstrates that although education facilitates upward mobility, it can also engender additional social tensions. This suggests that education is neither a universal remedy nor an ultimate goal and reinforces several participants' perspective that positive personal dispositions and attitudes are vital in supporting the value of formal certification. Additionally, it indicates that educational achievement does not invariably surmount class and community prejudices, as evidenced in three cases, notably that of Rowan, who encountered a lack of acceptance within his community.

Nonetheless, being perceived as role models and examples shows the participants have achieved some success in managing the wider concerns about social mobility, masculinity and success. This casts doubt on the idea that educational achievement feminises Caribbean boys and that boys are expected to misbehave (Figueroa, 1996).

Research Question 6: What suggestions do participants have for addressing underachievement in the Caribbean so they can enjoy success? (Addressing boys' underachievement)

The study participants singled out persistence and resilience as key character traits for overcoming the odds and pointed to a solid support network as being vital to educational and lifelong success. They unanimously proposed early mentorship and the honing of technical skills that people can use to earn an income as ways for boys to achieve success and mature as men. They recommended that because boys learn differently from girls, curricular reform should include avenues for boys to apply concepts and not merely regurgitate information.

EVENTS AND FACTORS THAT HAD THE MOST SIGNIFICANT POSITIVE IMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Exposure to other environments had the most significant positive impact on Reed's educational success. He cited field trips as examples of activities that provided enlightenment for him and recalled with fondness the profound influence that visits to institutions such as zoos and museums had on his outlook and life experiences. In emphasising the lasting effects of different activities, Reed mentioned that he still has a walking stick he made in a woodwork class 27 years ago. He also signalled that interest and emotional engagement are crucial to attaining educational success: "The only way you can find the things that you're emotionally engaged in is to be exposed to a whole wide array of things and be given the freedom to recognise" your preferences. According to Reed, helping children discover what they are interested in is critical in helping them fuel their passion for education and learning. His socio-economic position was notably superior to that of most of the other participants, and he may have had opportunities and access to positive influences that the others did not. However, young men with fewer financial resources should explore free or low-cost opportunities that could bring them new perspectives and different ways of being.

Having positive role models who were educators played a role in Ash's educational success. He modelled the behaviours of these role models in his own teaching practice and noted that doing so "has been very instrumental" for him. Cedar credits the support he received from key people in his life, including his guidance counsellor, as being a critical contributor to his educational success. He also identified the importance of visioning and manifestation: "Just being able to dress up in my tie and my jacket and stand next to the principal's car, that for me did something to me, and it told me that I had to be great." Support and access to role models and mentors dominated the participants' responses; they underscored the importance of these factors in their efforts to overcome obstacles and achieve success in their academic, career and other endeavours.

Heath credited discipline and delayed gratification as having contributed to his educational success. He recommended that young men resist the lure of ill-gotten gains, even if they live in severe poverty, and look to the distant horizon with integrity. He believes that "discipline is the main contributing factor to my success."

Hawthorne pointed to the opportunity to attend university as the single most important factor that influenced his educational success. He noted that there was an "evolution of self that happened"

at this stage of his journey. This phase of his life led to his obtaining qualifications that opened up opportunities for him and helped him succeed.

Rowan tabled two recommendations. The first was to change the way young men are taught. Like other respondents, he considers that the classroom is “a gendered space.” He asserted that “boys’ and girls’ brains function in different ways.” Therefore, the curriculum should be reworked to cater to boys’ unique learning needs. The second was that there needs to be a shift in how boys view education. He stressed that “education doesn’t make men soft.” Such thinking ought to be debunked. He also advised that there should be “mentorship of young men” from “as early as Grade 7 all the way up.” Sustained support from role models would undoubtedly have a positive influence on young men. Efforts should also be made to help young men meet university matriculation requirements. He noted that he owed his educational success in part to the intervention of a teacher during his secondary school years, which enabled him to complete high school with passes in four subjects in the external examinations. This success motivated him to continue his pursuit of further education.

Support was repeatedly identified as a crucial contributor to the participants’ success. Pine noted that he received more support while pursuing tertiary education than during his secondary education. He had access to a life coach at university, and he later identified consistent support as the most impactful factor in his educational achievement. Orion highlighted the importance of family. Specifically, he recalled an instance when his mother was called to his school to discuss his poor behaviour. When she arrived, she cried out of frustration. This incident marked a turning point for him. He reported, “Well, it’s my mother, as I tell you, when she made that cry it caused me to . . . to, you know, make a U-turn.” Fire also described a time when his mother was brought to tears because he had given up on school and was told that he had to repeat a grade in high school. This was a pivotal moment for him. “My mom go down on her knees and hold on to me and start to cry. Me say me nuh want see my mommy cry again like that.” This event led him to become very determined. “If me meet up on something, mi complain, but mi naa stop.” He also praised his mother, his uncle and a respected encourager, Auntie Gail-Ann, for serving as accountability partners for him on his journey. He did not want to disappoint these key persons who had made sacrifices for him, and so he persevered despite the odds.

Having access to persons who were doing what he wanted to do was important in Oakley’s experience. He noted this as the chief influence on his educational success. According to his account, “in some instances it is okay, wanting to know what to do. But it’s a different thing regarding *how* to do what you want to do.” This illustrates the importance and power of the proximity principle, access to blueprints, mentorship, constructive dialogue and positive male role models:

So all through what I’ve been saying to you, you have noticed a common theme that I’ve interacted with my father. I’ve interacted with my uncles. I’ve interacted with male individuals who gave perspective as to how they got where they got, what they did to get there and how they overcame, or the path they charted to get there.

POLICIES, PROGRAMMES AND OTHER INITIATIVES THAT CAN HELP BOYS AND MEN OVERCOME AND AVOID UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The participants suggested that initiatives that are conceptualised around boys' and young men's interests and programmes that model acceptable masculine behaviours could help boys who are seeking to defy the odds.

Ash asserted that there is a “need to rethink achievement for males.” In his estimation, the current *modus operandi* runs counter to boys' needs. He sees certain practices in the current system — including having boys sit traditional examinations and then comparing their results with girls' results — as ineffective and unreasonable. Instead, he suggested that boys' performance should be assessed “against their own counterparts who develop pretty much similarly in terms of pace and rate.” He underscored that there should be a “whole re-culturing and rethinking about male performance and then to implement programmes that are more aligned with teaching and learning that are geared towards boys or males” because “teaching males cannot be the same as teaching females.” From his perspective, programmes and initiatives that promote approaches and teaching methodologies that cater to the unique learning style of boys would be useful in helping them overcome underachievement.

Sage described early assessments to diagnose learning difficulties as vital so that students can get the assistance and interventions they need. Students who do not get the help they need early in life often underperform drastically throughout their school years. He also suggested that boys benefit from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programmes.

According to Cedar, boys would benefit from parental support, more social interventions and home visits from social workers. He also recommended implementing more practical-oriented activities in which boys could participate and multiple pathways for them to explore varied interests. Like other respondents, he highlighted the value of practical skills training.

Programmes that appeal to the natural interests of most men, while finding a way to impart the requisite knowledge and training that help them to be role models and good fathers, were proposed. Reed pointed to the need for programmes that promote more positive male role models in society and for initiatives that train fathers for their role as parents. He also said that fathers should be recognised and celebrated for performing their roles well. Training for fathers, he suggested, should be designed in a way that appeals to men — for example, sports initiatives such as football matches could be used as a possible vehicle for bringing fathers together. These ventures should be government initiatives and should begin during early childhood education so that when boys become men, they have the foundational knowledge and skills they will need to be good fathers. This would be easier than trying to figure out how to become a good father when one becomes a man. More present and competent fathers, he suggests, would lead to an improvement in educational outcomes.

Another useful initiative, this one proposed by Heath, would be a tracking system from birth to adulthood to provide data on children's behaviour and educational performance. An analysis of the data could be used to determine strategies to address the deficits. He also suggested that removing boys from less-than-favourable environments and allowing them to live in boarding schools could

have a positive transformational effect on at-risk boys. He recommended equitable development for communities to give young boys a fair chance at success. His suggestions underscored the importance of family planning, parenting programmes and initiatives at both the government and the community levels as mechanisms that could lead to improved educational outcomes for boys. A combination of the programmes proposed would yield long-term societal benefits.

Hawthorne's suggestions included self-empowerment and self-actualisation programmes. Such initiatives would help young men understand themselves better and "create a roadmap to success." Ventures that "inspire a growth mindset" would be transformative for young men and boys.

Pine recommended that "all males should have a coach or mentor" who can provide critical guidance for them as they work towards their goals and assist them in developing life and social skills that go beyond formal education. Orion talked about how initiatives such as competitions, civic groups and outreach activities could help combat male underachievement. Fire proposed that young men should tune into podcasts, videos, etc. about business, motivation and discipline by social media personalities and entrepreneurs. Engaging with this information could improve their mindsets and help them on their journey to success. He maintains a very anti-government stance. He is unconvinced that government at any level is willing to implement policies that will help young men beat academic underachievement: "If they decide today or tomorrow they want to change it, they could, they have the power. But right now this is what they set up to do." He doubled down on his cynicism and anti-establishment position by noting that there is a deliberate attempt to derail healthy masculinity: "I wouldn't say that it can't happen, but it won't happen because they don't want it to happen."

Oakley suggested that long-term interventions with multifaceted partnerships among a variety of stakeholders could help boys overcome underachievement. Like Heath, he touted boarding schools as part of the solution. More broadly, he noted that there is a significant need to change attitudes towards boys' education and that institutionalisation and a change of environment would help young men on their journey to educational success: "A programme change would be to remove individuals from that environment altogether and put them in a place with like-minded individuals working together [towards] a goal." This, Oakley asserted, would foster "a certain level of self-management." The successes of well-established boarding schools could be replicated to benefit young men identified as being at risk.

ADVICE FOR YOUNG CARIBBEAN MEN WHO ARE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR EDUCATION OR MOTIVATION

The participants unanimously agreed that determination, resilience and a willingness to seek assistance when necessary were crucial characteristics for young men pursuing an education.

Reed recommended that young men seek exposure to a range of experiences and aim to find out what truly excites them. This journey of adventure will lead to self-discovery and an awareness of one's passions. In addition, he encourages young men to pursue formal training in their areas of interest, conduct research into their passions and make the most of the abundant information available online as they seek to advance their ambitions.

It is not possible to obtain a solid education and defy the odds without a strong support system. Sage advised that young Caribbean men seek and accept help from persons with whom they have established trust and push past humiliation in their quest to achieve their goals. Cedar recommended that boys seek to “build a strategic support network” and find mentors who understand both their academic requirements and their cultural contexts. Ideally, boys should seek out mentors with similar interests to them. He also recommended the creation of study groups and linkages with peers who have common interests. He noted that young men must develop character traits such as determination and resilience as they endeavour to overcome obstacles in pursuit of their ambitions; explore scholarship options; and explore new avenues and approach desired spaces to seek opportunities without feeling self-conscious or unworthy. Exploring unfamiliar environments would allow them to learn new things and develop their ability to converse and function in a range of circumstances and situations. Ash recommended that young Caribbean men should endeavour to “find like-minded people to support them.” He noted that an unwavering family support mechanism is also extremely helpful: “Emotional support from family members or from close friends or mentors who are able to guide them through and to be with them and to encourage them.” Additionally, he highlighted the need for systemic support for young men as they navigate the workplace in the early stages of their careers.

“You cannot give up” is Heath’s advice to young Caribbean men. He counselled that “you have to internalise the voice that you want to hear.” He underlined the need to embrace resilience, determination and positive affirmation and to take action. Similarly, Hawthorne counselled that young men should never give up on themselves. He recommended that young men dedicate time and energy to understanding the contributions they want to make to the world, their families and their communities, and then become intentional about making those contributions. He advised that “there’s a lot of value in having an ecosystem of support” and that young men must understand that value on their march towards success. Pine also advised that young men should be encouraged to persist regardless of the challenges they face and maintain laser focus on their goals. His advice was:

Do not let where you come from or where you grew up define who you are or who you should be, and once you put your mind towards something, just focus on that and despite you may experience struggles along the way and challenges just know that it is temporary and just know you are on that journey to do better and to be better.

According to Orion, young men should “push themselves.” He asserted that “only they could make it happen” and that young men should learn to put themselves “in the way for help.” In Orion’s opinion, young men should be encouraged to embody traits such as self-discipline, focus and faith to help them overcome any challenges they face with their education or motivation levels. Overall, he stressed the importance of accepting accountability for one’s actions.

Rowan encouraged young Caribbean men who are struggling with their education to simply “run their own race.” He pointed out that people begin life on an unequal footing; some are born with fewer advantages than others. In his estimation, “there is joy in actually waiting your turn.”

Fire’s general advice to young men was that they should be themselves, to know what they stand for and what makes them comfortable. He also counselled that they should aim to “stand out” so that their uniqueness could be easily seen. In addition, he suggested that young men set goals and fix timelines to achieve them. He noted that life presents obstacles, and boys should aim to push beyond them. His counsel mirrored that of all the respondents, who acknowledged that they had to be determined to find a way despite the tremendous odds against them. Like Orion, Fire counselled that young men should always push themselves and remember that people in worse circumstances than their own were achieving their goals despite the challenges. He reasoned that there is hardship everywhere, and so young men ought to rely on an internal compass that motivates them to be better than their circumstances: “Rain fall on everybody roof. Everybody have something to call pressure or what they feel irritated about. Don’t compare/complain or follow people and say you have it the hardest.”

“They should talk to somebody,” Oakley advised. “Ventilating issues is the easiest way to overcome [them].” He suggested that young men seek out other men with whom they can discuss their issues because they may be more understanding than girls and better able to relate to young men’s challenges. Young men may be able to obtain what he described as “actionable information” as they share their concerns. Oakley also noted that “closed mouths do not get fed” — that is, if someone does not talk about their issues, they will not get the help they need, no matter what resources are available. He suggested that there is value in a caring community and young men should seek to benefit from such a group. He also noted that informal but powerful spaces could be created via civic groups. Such avenues could facilitate meaningful and strategic connections between young men who are in need of guidance and older men who could serve as advisors. On the theme of taking responsibility for one’s actions, Oakley advised that time management is crucial — “You have to make time if you want to change your reality” — and that young men should make the most of meaningful opportunities as they seek to elevate themselves.

SYSTEMIC, CURRICULAR AND OTHER CHANGES THAT COULD HELP CARIBBEAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS BETTER SUPPORT BOYS’ EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Among the suggestions offered in response to a question about what changes are required to support boys’ educational achievement were a “need to rethink teaching and learning and assessment for males” and “the whole idea of masculinity.” Ash posited that the socialisation of Caribbean boys and men must be reimagined and that teaching, learning and assessment processes must be re-examined. He recommended that the benchmark used for girls not be used for boys, since the literature shows repeatedly that there are “stark differences” between the two groups.

Additional potential reforms concerned introducing parenting education, strengthening school-community partnerships and leveraging the wisdom of community elders. Such systemic changes could augur well for an improvement in Caribbean education systems and young men’s experiences. This solidifies the notion that educating a child involves a broad range of stakeholders, each of whom has significant value to add to the process.

Heath took issue with the physical structure of schools. According to him, “we have to think about the way how schools are built. We have not designed schools in a way that fosters creativity.” He

recommended investing in policies that focus on the redesign of schools. He also recommended that students should not be streamed and suggested that classes ought to comprise students of varying abilities because students “feed off energies.”

“A platform grounded in social equity” was one of Rowan’s proposals. He said that “our education needs to be more culturally relevant” and advanced the notion of “a national framework . . . for male underachievement that promotes inclusive schooling.” He also noted that funding is needed for programmes that specifically target men, and suggested that mentorship initiatives and male-focused leadership workshops could help foster success among boys and men in Caribbean education systems. Among his recommendations for systemic curricula changes were targeted interventions for men based on disaggregated data on boys’ educational performance.

Fire expressed the opinion that the academic year should be extended. He noted that the current timelines do not give some students, particularly those whose families do not support or encourage them, enough time to fully understand complex subjects. He explained that families facing financial difficulties often prioritise basic needs such as food, leaving little resources for external tutoring or additional academic support. Additionally, he proposed improving teacher training programmes as a strategy to improve the education sector and emphasised the need to assess and revise teaching methodologies in Mathematics, as current approaches continue to yield inadequate results.

Among the curricular changes proposed, a strong emphasis on incorporating technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and STEM subjects emerged. To better support male achievement, Reed believes that there should be an increase in vocational training from early childhood. He believes that in another two to three decades, degrees will “mean very little to the workspace.” Certification in skills will be paramount, and because certification will determine one’s value in the market, he recommended that curricula be changed to reflect “a very wide exposure to vocational training.” He also noted that “there must be some sort of tangible outcome from the thing that the child is doing, not just memory and regurgitation.” As boys are more tactile than girls, curricula should be reformed to cater to their unique way of learning. He emphasised that there must be “systemic and a policy change to save our boys.”

Both Reed and Cedar believe that “skills pay the bills.” Therefore, deepening expertise in technical skills and acquiring the requisite certifications have tremendous value and can significantly increase earning potential. As such, Reed encouraged young men not to limit themselves to traditional academics. Like other respondents, Cedar believes that skills training programmes should start early so that boys become aware of them when they are still very young. He also recommended creating mentorship programmes to connect boys with their peers and men across the region to improve male achievement. In addition, he proposed that teacher training programmes be changed to better equip teachers to teach boys and recommended actively recruiting more male teachers who can serve as role models for boys and offering them incentives to remain in the profession and mentor young boys.

In Oakley’s opinion, a “higher focus on STEM for males” is necessary. He proposed that the curriculum be changed to incorporate practical applications of STEM-based knowledge. This move would encourage a deeper appreciation of STEM and “foster critical thinking.” Fire suggested that

Mathematics be simplified and school terms be made longer to give students more time to grasp troublesome topics.

Contrary to other respondents who pointed to a need for a curriculum designed to meet the particular needs of boys, Heath said that curricula should be “inclusive to both genders.” He advocated for an increase in boys’ enrolment and mandatory participation in programmes created to help them achieve success. He also noted that an examination of the combination of factors that affect academic outcomes — for example, extra classes, parenting approaches, cognitive ability — is warranted. Research into how boys and men learn, effective delivery methods and appropriate techniques could also contribute to improving male educational achievement. Sage said that young boys and men could benefit from training in comprehension skills to deepen their understanding of information that is presented to them. Like Reed, he is against mere absorption and regurgitation. A deeper understanding of concepts could significantly help young men apply knowledge in practical contexts, and curricula could be changed so that students learn skills that can be applied to real-life situations. He also suggested reducing the number of subjects that students are required to do. He believes that a lightened load would improve student achievement.

Rowan stressed that “the curriculum must reflect Caribbean masculinity.” He advised that it is important “to pull on the lived experience of the boys, show them male heroes, show them male authors, show them culturally familiar narratives.” Like Reed and Cedar, he advocated “an emphasis on hands-on and practical learning” because boys learn by active engagement. He pointed to the value of promoting “positive male role models on education” and a need to recruit and retain male teachers, guidance counsellors and principals, but he recognised that often they do not remain in the education sector because of low wages.

Hawthorne reasoned that creating “positive spaces for learning beyond the classroom” would be integral to reforming Caribbean education systems. He advocated for “life lessons” to be incorporated into the curriculum. Education is a lifelong venture, and much of it occurs outside of the classroom. Bringing structure to a set of ideas that can guide young men as they transition from school to adulthood would be beneficial. Recognising that the curriculum cannot accommodate everything, he suggested that civic groups could be engaged to participate in such initiatives.

Like other respondents, Orion and Pine commented that a shift in curriculum design could improve boys’ educational outcomes. Pine suggested that programmes that enable boys’ learning should be accessible to boys from at least their first year of secondary school. Initiatives that treat critical matters such as mental health are also of great importance. Pine proposed that changes to the curriculum should include the addition of topics such as entrepreneurship to accommodate students who are thinking beyond the boundaries of traditional careers.

The participants shared other recommendations that did not relate to the key themes but were nonetheless very relevant. Other comments were that “community and parental engagement also need to be tapped into as well” and better programmes are needed to reintegrate “out-of-school boys and early leavers” into education and training pathways.

Aside from curricular changes, Fire suggested that some young men should be separated from their hometowns with government support. He reasoned that their likelihood of success would

be greater since they would be far removed from negative influences. Although this may appear impractical and costly at first glance, it is a suggestion worth considering for its potential long-term impact.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTION 6

Policies, programmes or other initiatives that are potentially helpful to boys for overcoming underachievement

From the raft of recommendations that participants made for policies, initiatives and other activities for addressing boys' underachievement, it is evident that structured programmes specifically designed for boys can yield considerable benefits. Boys and girls have different brain chemistry, and boys tend to learn differently from girls. Consequently, it would be reasonable to tailor curricula and programmes to accommodate these unique learning preferences. Thompson (2017) observes that “movement primes boys” (p. 1) for optimal learning. Doing jumping jacks for just sixty seconds before a test can positively influence how well a boy completes an academic task. Additionally, he notes that “whereas girls are primarily wired to learn through social interactions and relationships, boys are inherently oriented towards activity and movement” (p. 1).

Advice for young Caribbean men who are struggling with their education or motivation

Young Caribbean men who are experiencing challenges with their educational pursuits and are struggling to stay motivated can benefit from a range of strategies. Cavazos et al. (2010) noted that Latino/a college students overcome personal and academic challenges by using “positive reframing, acceptance, self-talk, maintaining focus on final goals . . . self-reflection, taking action, and seeking support” (p. 304). These strategies are similar to those used by the young men who participated in the current study. Those men were adamant that they could and would defy the odds. They also all demonstrated an ingrained desire to thrive, overcome the challenges they encountered and “send the ladder back down” by serving as mentors to their younger counterparts. When the participants' experiences are combined in tandem with the findings of Cavazos et al., there is a clear suggestion that introspection, self-awareness and self-reliance complement mentorship and financial and material help.

Systemic, curricular and other changes that could help Caribbean education systems better support boys and young men

Given the specific needs of young male students, there is a need to introduce systemic, curricular and other pertinent changes to Caribbean education systems for their benefit. The participants suggested several changes that would improve boys' experiences, including increasing the number of boarding schools, focusing more on TVET and framing teaching, learning and assessment around boys' unique needs.

Regarding the recommendation that boys be educated in boarding schools, Jha and Kelleher (2006) noted that the debate over whether boys perform better in single-sex or co-educational schools remains fragmented. Citing Hunte (2002), they share the example of Guyana, pointing out that single-sex high schools could improve boys' educational outcomes by focusing on their emotional and learning needs. Conversely, Figueroa (2007) countered arguments that there should

be a “return to segregated systems of education that give boys whatever special attention they need to perform on a par with girls” (p. 25) for two reasons: He believes that such a position perpetuates “the historic privileging of males” and that “further privileging males” is “self-defeating” (p. 25). He is convinced that “the ultimate solution is to provide a more balanced gender socialisation of boys and girls that ensures that both genders come to school with similar skills” (p. 25). Figueroa argues that there is an interplay between “gender socialisation and school experience,” which sees boys enjoying “historic male gender privilege” (p. 24). He asserts that boys tend to receive less preparation for school in their home environment “because of the freedom they have to roam the street” and that they have “lower levels of responsibility and self-control that are required of them” (p. 24) in a school setting. This line of thinking suggests that boys are more likely than girls to struggle to adapt to schools’ somewhat restrictive environments.

TVET helps create skilled workers who can meet the needs of new and emerging industries. It therefore contributes to reducing both unemployment and poverty. Morris (2016) underscores its importance as a tool to create economic growth and encourage sustainability in the Caribbean, arguing that training in this area “can improve productivity, make people employable, enhance human capital, improve creativity, and attract investment” (p. 23). His assertion aligns with the recommendations of several of the participants that young Caribbean men be given the chance to explore TVET. People who have developed strong technical and vocational skills can create their own employment opportunities, become entrepreneurs and provide employment for others. In doing so, they can simultaneously boost their self-confidence, achieve financial independence and contribute to both the local and the broader economies.

The participants’ recommendations for mentorship and proximity to and strong support from key persons of influence come from their direct experience. Observing the lived experiences of mentors, having access to them and being encouraged by them helped the participants navigate their own paths. In their exploration of the impact of role models and mentors on academic and social outcomes in adolescents, Atif et al. (2022) observe that identity formation is a dynamic process that begins in the teenage years. Adolescents look to adults as role models and mentors and often mimic the tendencies of the grown-ups who influence them, whether their behaviours are negative or positive. They concluded that role models can have a significant impact on various aspects of young people’s lives.

Overall, the range of recommendations suggests that a multifaceted approach is required to assist young men in overcoming the numerous challenges they face. However, young men are ultimately responsible for their own success. Even if they have a diverse array of mentors and supporters, they must have the drive and determination to succeed. Furthermore, while certain broad principles are universally applicable, there is no “one size fits all.” Any educational intervention targeted at boys’ underachievement should be designed to meet the specific needs of each individual.

Recommendations

The following table summarises the recommendations that participants offered in response to research question 6.

Table 2. Participants’ recommendations for strategies to address boys’ educational underachievement in the Caribbean

| Factors that had the most significant positive impact on educational success | Events that had the most significant positive impact on educational success | Policies, programmes and other initiatives that can help male students overcome underachievement | Advice to young Caribbean men who may be struggling with their education or motivation | Systemic and curricular changes necessary for Caribbean education systems to better support male achievement |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| Exposure | Intervention of teachers | Promote more positive male role models | Seek exposure to a range of ideas and disciplines; find what truly excites; pursue it with passion | Shift in how boys view education |
| Positive role models | Instances when mothers broke down in tears at school due to frustration and disappointment | Appeal to men’s natural interests | Find like-minded people who can provide support | Increase vocational training from the early childhood level |
| Support from key persons | N/A | Use methodologies that cater to boys’ unique learning styles | Seek and accept help from persons with whom trust has been established | Rethink teaching, learning and assessment of male students |
| Discipline and delayed gratification | N/A | STEM | Build a strategic support network | Adjust curricula so that boys can learn skills that are applicable to real-life circumstances |
| Opportunity to pursue higher education | N/A | Self-empowerment and self-actualisation | Create study groups and linkages with peers who have common interests | Leverage the wisdom of community elders |
| Importance of family | N/A | Mentorship | Develop key character traits such as determination, persistence and resilience | Redesign schools to foster greater creativity |
| Access to mentors | N/A | Competitions, civic groups and outreach | Be willing to persevere in the face of humiliation | Adjust curricula to include matters about Caribbean masculinity |
| N/A | N/A | Business, motivation and discipline | Focus on your own unique path | Simplify mathematics concepts to increase the likelihood of student success; lengthen school terms to allow students additional time to grasp concepts |

The following recommendations are derived from the life histories of the 11 participants who successfully overcame significant challenges to attain an education and establish their livelihoods. They emphasise key features and dimensions of the educational delivery system, as well as the support mechanisms in the home and broader community environments that can play a constructive role in mentoring and nurturing young boys, thereby enhancing their engagement

with education in the Caribbean. The recommendations are based on several themes that emerged from the study and are organised into four primary categories: home, school, community and government, with an option for macro- or micro-level adaptation and implementation. Additionally, they consider potential areas for further research.

1. HOME AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Within the family, women, particularly mothers, were identified as consistent and influential sources of inspiration, influence and support for their sons. Therefore, any intervention aimed at promoting boys' educational achievement to ensure their future livelihood should implement the following measures:

- a. Develop programmes to enhance mothers' capacity to provide educational support, strengthening existing gains and initiating other efforts for mothers who are less involved; train mothers in conflict resolution and effective communication/constructive dialogues to alleviate concerns about ineffective parenting communication strategies and provide better educational guidance that effectively validates their sons, thereby reducing potential damage to boys' confidence.
- b. Address the reality of absentee fathers and focus on those who are physically present but psychologically absent; those who are present and provide other support but do not value education; and those who are absent and, therefore, do not contribute to their sons' educational pursuits. National parent-teacher associations and support groups for parents could be conduits.
- c. Show families how educated sons can contribute to family and community well-being, without derailing their educational dreams. Help families understand that material privilege alone does not guarantee educational success, as other factors play a role.
- d. Encourage families to foster a tradition wherein successful men and women serve as mentors to other boys and young men within their families, thereby facilitating their access to education and a higher standard of living.

Macro-level support for families

- a. At the macro-level, the relevant Caribbean government agencies should expand employment opportunities to improve the financial capabilities of low-income and single mothers who bear primary responsibility for childcare and supporting the household.
- b. Make more resources, such as lunch and travel subsidies, available to young men and build on extended family networks where available.

2. SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT

- a. Implement policies that promote inclusive and equitable education, in accordance with recommendations from the Jamaica Education Transformation Commission and the Patterson Report.⁵ This can be achieved by introducing gender-sensitive teaching strategies to teacher training programmes and professional development initiatives to enhance educators' ability to understand boys' experiences of perceived discrimination.
- b. Cultivate formal mentorship competencies, care and compassion in educational settings and promote positive disciplinary approaches. This will reinforce existing practices — and where none exist, they should be integrated across all tiers of the education system — thereby addressing the paradox of boys encountering educational bias despite receiving substantial school support.
- c. Provide opportunities for school principals to upgrade their application of instructional and transformational leadership. For teachers, develop specific school initiatives that address unique learning preferences, particularly for those who feel that the education system has failed them by not incorporating activities with a balanced blend of hands-on opportunities and social interactions that appeal specifically to their gender.
- d. Expand TVET options and present them as a viable pathway for both boys and girls, in addition to traditional academic options, to give them the opportunity to choose between becoming job-ready (career-oriented) or pursuing post-secondary academic studies.
- e. Implement thematic lesson framing that can help counter the narrative that educational excellence is feminising or emasculating. This would allow educational institutions to foster or continue to develop environments that position academic success as compatible with masculine identity and foster boys' sense of belonging and confidence.
- f. Encourage boys to participate in extracurricular activities, such as clubs, societies or sports, to cultivate skills and competencies that will enhance their educational experiences, bolster their confidence and help them align their interests with their definitions of success.

Macro-level school-based support

- a. Caribbean governments should implement financial assistance programmes (like the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education [PATH] run by the Jamaican government) where they do not exist, or expand and promote them where they exist, to reduce absenteeism and dropout rates and encourage greater learning.
- b. Make post-secondary support available in the form of grants and scholarships to help male students improve their quality of life.
- c. Increase investment in early childhood education programmes, with a special emphasis on skills for boys and girls, to provide a strong foundation for future learning.

⁵ The Patterson Report refers to the Jamaica Education Transformation Commission's report titled *The Reform of Education in Jamaica, 2021*. It is available at <https://nationwideradiojm.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-8-JETC-Patterson-Report.pdf>

3. COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT

The following community initiatives to support boys' educational journeys are recommended:

- a. Increase community engagement by fostering partnerships between schools, communities and families to create a supportive environment for students.
- b. Expand clubs, societies and extracurricular activities to support a culture of care, even in spaces that have traditionally experienced violence, and identify the factors that promote this type of culture to help replicate it across Caribbean communities.
- c. In cases where communities do not prioritise education, because of their history or other influences, creating positive peer networks through study groups, youth discussions and veranda chats, for example, can support educational goals. When community members have influence but do not use it for educational purposes, suitable existing social programmes or content-specific initiatives should be developed to encourage activities that help boys develop identities beyond traditional masculine stereotypes.
- d. Develop initiatives that encourage communities to celebrate boys' educational achievements rather than fostering resentment, thereby enabling successful men and boys to continue living in their communities if they wish. These individuals can then serve as exemplary figures and role models for boys and young men who are facing comparable challenges.
- e. Address community dynamics that isolate high-achieving boys by implementing programmes that help residents understand how education can transform their individual and collective lives.
- f. Implement structured mentorship programmes that connect boys with accomplished Caribbean men from various sectors, thereby providing at-risk boys with the opportunity to acquire insights from real-world experiences and receive encouragement from exemplary mentors and role models.
- g. Encourage discipline and life skills development through participation in competitive sports, debate clubs, cadet corps, police youth clubs and other organised extracurricular activities outside of the school environment.
- h. Prepare boys and young men to effectively manage both their success and potential rejection from their community because of that success. Help them recognise that educational attainment does not inevitably overcome societal and community prejudices and that they must be able to navigate the social conflicts associated with upward mobility while maintaining strong ties to their communities.

Future Research

The findings from this study indicate opportunities for future research. For example:

- a. What strategies can be used to engage fathers who are physically, emotionally or otherwise absent or not interested in their sons' education?
- b. What specific maternal support strategies are most effective in supporting boys' educational achievement?
- c. How can contradictions between perceived bias and actual support be resolved to help boys gain an education and secure their livelihood?
- d. What systematic approaches can transform communities to celebrate rather than resent boys' success?
- e. What community model best supports boys' educational achievement?
- f. How can male influences be made more educationally relevant and effective?
- g. What combination of home, school and community factors results in the most sustainable educational success?

Conclusion

This study investigated the educational experiences of 11 Caribbean boys who attained academic success despite adverse circumstances, thereby challenging prevailing narratives about boys' underachievement in education. It provides evidence that Caribbean boys have substantial capacity for educational success when the appropriate support systems are implemented effectively. The participants' journeys from potential and actual underachievement to academic achievement and secure livelihoods offer a framework for systematic educational interventions that recognise boys' resilience while addressing structural barriers at both micro- and macro-levels. Their experiences suggest that transforming individual success stories into widespread educational achievement requires co-ordinated efforts among families, schools and communities to ultimately inform policy development.

The results should encourage Caribbean education stakeholders to reconsider the notion that boys' underachievement is an unchangeable fact of life. They indicate that strategic, evidence-based interventions could enable more Caribbean boys to access supportive conditions that foster their success. Effective interventions must be implemented at multiple levels, including individual, institutional, familial and community levels, rather than targeting boys in isolation. The challenge lies in scaling individual successes into substantial, systematic education reforms that will impact the entire region.

This research contributes to the academic discourse on gender and education by illustrating boys' agency in navigating structural obstacles and developing effective strategies for educational survival. Furthermore, it enhances our understanding of Caribbean masculinity by illustrating how successful boys can negotiate multiple masculine identities without rejecting traditional notions of masculinity entirely.

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Appendix

Demographics of the Research Participants

The following table presents a summary of the demographics of the research participants.

Table A1. Demographics of the research participants

| Country | Pseudonym | Age | Academic qualifications | Positions of responsibility |
|---------|-----------|-----|--|---|
| Jamaica | Reed | 36 | Bachelor's degree in Business Administration Currently in the last leg of a Master's programme in Leadership in Technical Vocational Education and Training & Workforce Development | Business consultant and corporate trainer |
| | Ash | 35 | Currently pursuing a PhD Has bachelor's and master's degrees | Leader of a key arm of the Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth and Information, Jamaica, serving as the interim principal director, leading the design and development of training programmes and learning initiatives Part-time university lecturer facilitating courses in Teacher Education and Curriculum Development |
| | Sage | 30 | Bachelor's degree in Education, with a specialisation in English Language, Literature and History MBA in Commerce Management and Business Development | Trained teacher but has done only part-time work to date Technical trainer for UNESCO Now corporate communication and promotion manager for an international company |
| | Cedar | 32 | Teaching diploma in education, teaching secondary education Bachelor's degree in Business Management, summa cum laude from Monroe University Master's degree with high commendation from PACE University EdD without dissertation (completed all courses and coursework, did not do the dissertation) PhD from North Central University in Human Resource Management A plethora of certificates and certifications in education and human resource management | Assistant professor at Howard University (currently on pause) Immigration consultant (helps people get themselves legitimised in the United States of America) |
| | Heath | 31 | PhD Master's degree Bachelor's degree | Consultant/Advisor to the Government of Jamaica on national security and cybersecurity |
| | Rowan | 34 | Undergraduate degree in Education, majoring in English Language and Literature MBA MSc in Business and Corporate Communication Currently pursuing a PhD in career and technical education | Educator Currently teaching but had other roles funded by USAID |
| | Oakley | 38 | Bachelor's degree Certifications in certain areas that pertain to work | System engineer |

| Country | Pseudonym | Age | Academic qualifications | Positions of responsibility |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------------|--|--|
| Trinidad | Hawthorne | 34 | Qualified in project management Highest academic qualification: Master's degree | Manager, student engagement at a regional university 10 years of experience in higher education, student affairs and student engagement |
| | Pine | 32 | Highest academic qualification: Master's degree | Assistant manager for a financial institution based in Tobago |
| St Vincent and the Grenadines | Orion | 31 | 6 CSEC subjects | Police officer (a constable with the Traffic department) |
| | Fire | Not supplied | 5 CSEC subjects | A wholesale worker; also multitasks to generate additional income by other means |

Programmes and Initiatives the Participants Benefited From

The following table presents a summary of the programmes and initiatives the research participants benefited from at various stages of their lives.

Table A2. Programmes and initiatives that the participants benefited from

| Categories | Programmes or initiatives/policy | Participants | Sample verbatim responses |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Extracurricular activities | | | |
| Sports- and service-oriented | Football, track, cricket, National Youth Council (NYC) & cadet core | Oakley, Fire, Heath, Rowan, Sage, Cedar & Orion | <p>"The cadet core was one of the main programmes that I have benefited from significantly" (Heath).</p> <p>"Cadet taught me discipline, and that taught me steadfastness, that taught me resilience . . . that taught me how to be very goal-oriented" (Oakley).</p> <p>"I was literally in everything [meaning extracurricular], so I would say Aabuthnott was the cornerstone sort of institution that really started the journey" (Cedar).</p> <p>"They had a lot of social events, so I was able to be a part of the sports day where we would play cricket. It had cheerleading, football, [and] a lot of various things where they allow interaction for all students based on what form you are in" (Pine).</p> <p>"NYC. Caribbean youth environmental. That is a non-government organisation. It deals with the environment and so forth. So, these are things that helped shape me" (Orion).</p> |
| Academic competitions | Debate, Math Olympiad, School Challenge Quiz, Spelling Bee | Fire, Heath & Cedar | <p>"Spelling Bee give me a lot of scholarships and money through high school. Mi win a lot of scholarships and free lunch fi three months . . . And I never come below second place in Spelling Bee" (Fire).</p> <p>"The Math Olympiad . . . helped me to see how young people across Jamaica solved problems and how they approach the problems" (Heath).</p> <p>"Just having those people just really supporting and providing the opportunities for me — debate, singing, you name it. I was in everything, and Aabuthnott was the one that really cemented it, so to speak. So now people know me as the bright young man who sings — the one from upper Buxton because now they were seeing me involved in different things and representing Aabuthnott Gallimore High School" (Cedar).</p> |

| Categories | Programmes or initiatives/policy | Participants | Sample verbatim responses |
|---|--|---------------------------|---|
| Cultural and creative activities | Choir, choreography & expansion of curriculum to include arts-based subjects | Hawthorne, Cedar & Rowan | <p>"I was the little one, singing with Romain Virgo on the choir" (Cedar)</p> <p>"Creative Writing and Theatre; those would be the areas or spaces that I excelled. So, I think the expansion of the curriculum was definitely something that I benefited from" (Hawthorne).</p> |
| Financial support and other types of initiatives | | | |
| | PATH, National Commercial Bank scholarships, free meals & transportation | Cedar, Pine, Sage & Heath | <p>"I was also a part of PATH. I don't know if you know about PATH, but PATH is a programme. They used to call me the PATH coordinator, because each day, I would collect the tickets and issue them out to each student and so those things really helped, because I know, you know, I would have gone to school many days without lunch money and if it weren't for PATH, I really don't know how I would survive" (Cedar).</p> <p>"The NCB Foundation paid for all my CXC's" (Pine).</p> <p>"In high school they had programmes where they have school lunch and school breakfast that was provided for students who came from humble beginnings. They would lend support where those things are concerned so that I signed up for both breakfast and lunch. They also had free bus where you reach out, you are picked up at a certain time — 6 o'clock, very early — and you will get a free ride to school back and forth so that assisted in a major way" (Heath).</p> |

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505 Burrard Street, Suite 1650, Box 5
Vancouver, BC V7X 1M6 Canada
Phone + 1 604 775 8200 / Fax + 1 604 775 8210

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