

SEPTEMBER 2023



GENDER AND THE RETURN TO SCHOOL IN KENYA

Authors: Sarah Kabay and Victoria Kiasyo Isika



Presenter: Victoria Kiasyo Isika

Associate Director of Policy, Innovations for Poverty Action

Structure of Presentation

- Brief overview of study objectives & methodology
- Summary of key findings
- Recommendations

Study objectives

- Our qual research is part of a larger study
- Larger study aimed to develop & test a mobile phone intervention called ElimuLeo to support maths learning among primary-school-aged children in Kenya during school closures
- This study gave us the opportunity to include qualitative investigation more broadly to understand children's lives during school closures and the return to school from a gender lens

Study objectives & methodology



Objectives of the qualitative study

To understand:

- caregivers' and teachers' gendered perceptions of school closures and return to school*



Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews conducted shortly after the return to school following COVID-19 school closures**

Caregivers from 20 hhs interviewed in late Apr '21

21 primary school teachers interviewed early June '21



Qualitative data analysis

Transcripts were reviewed & analyzed by both authors (Oct '22 – June '23)

The authors used a process of open-coding

Data units were compared to identify emerging themes

Summary of key findings

- 1) Concerns for girls in education - early marriage & pregnancy
- 1) Findings on girls' academically outperforming boys
- 1) Reasons associated with girls' outperformance
- 1) Findings on boys academic underachievement
- 1) Reasons associated with boys' academic underachievement

1) Concern for early marriage and pregnancy

- Many teachers expressed concern that girls' experiences of early marriage and pregnancy increased during the pandemic and mentioned specific girls at their school
- Some research in Kenya supports these impressions (Zulaika et al., 2022) but these trends can be difficult to investigate
- For instance, analysis of data from Kenya's Health Information System did not find evidence of a dramatic increase, instead noting that these rates are typically high in Kenya (Kahurani, 2020)

2) Girls academically outperformed boys

- Despite the concerns for girls, many teachers believed that girls' educational performance was better than boys
- It was unclear whether this was a general trend or unique to their school
- Varied responses as to whether this trend existed before or during the pandemic

An example of how some teachers discussed this issue:

Respondent: **The girls again [are doing better]**, though the boys are coming but I don't know how I can put it but for boys there is a lot to be done. **I don't know if it is from my area or it is the whole country but for boys there is a lot to be done for the boys**

Interviewer: The girls really performed?

Respondent: **Boys are lagging behind**, yeah

Interviewer: And why is that?

Respondent: Eeh

Interviewer: Why is that, why are they lagging behind?

Respondent: (Laughing) I don't know. I don't know. Those who are performing well now are girls

3) Reasons for girls academic achievement

- No clear theories as to why girls performed better were provided.
- But possible explanations include:
 - Girls (including pregnant girls) responding faster/positively to guidance and counseling during school resumption (relative to boys)
 - Respondents believed that girls were intrinsically interested in studies and activities such as reading at home than boys (including during lockdown)

4) Boys academically underachieving

- Most respondents expressed deep concern for boys academic progress during school resumption
- Several theories or reasons associated with this observation

5) Reasons for boys' academic underachievement

- Several boys participated in gainful employment during pandemic.
- Hence, access to money was more attractive when school resumed
- Money made boys feel more masculine, thus, the studious boy imagery less appealing.
- But, parents/caregivers also played a negative role - some deprioritized learning, expecting boys to skip school to supplement hh income

5) Reasons for boys' academic underachievement (cont.)

- Boys less responsive to school guidance and counseling sessions.
 - Teachers seemed better equipped to tackle pandemic-associated challenges relating to girls e.g mentoring, encouraging pregnant girls by providing safe learning spaces
 - But less equipped to handle struggles unique to boys e.g drugs/alcohol abuse etc
 - Unclear whether a gendered approach to counseling was applied e.g to deconstruct harmful masculinity

5) Reasons for boys' academic underachievement (cont.)

- Some teachers cited investment in girls' education in Kenya before and during the pandemic as a reason for boys declining performance:

*“Now the girls are performing well than boys [...] because this time **there is a lot of monitoring for girl-child** and people are not.. **they have neglected these boys** and they, they have come up with another... **there are so many organizations favoring girls....”***

- Large investments in girls' education can provide additional explanations for why teachers felt less equipped to support “troublesome” or underachieving boys

Conclusion

- Boys face unique challenges in education which should be addressed
- More research is needed to better understand boys experiences in/out of school & how this correlates with their academic performance
- Recognizing that boys face unique challenges in education:
 - Does not mean that boys and girls must be in competition for educ resources (World Bank, 2021)
 - Can & should be done w/out undermining the importance of girls' safety & wellbeing in education
 - Should be done w/out ignoring the unique challenges experienced by girls before, during and after the pandemic e.g early marriages and pregnancies



Contact Us

www.poverty-action.org

vkisika@poverty-action.org

skabay@poverty-action.org