

# **THE BOY CHILD, EARLY SEXUAL DEBUT AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING IN COUNTY-Q IN KENYA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The data for this study is drawn from a large study that was conducted with boys from two primary and two secondary schools in what we are referring to as County-Q in Kenya. The pseudonym is meant to camouflage the identity of the study site. The large study has four research objectives but this paper focuses on only one that was meant to find out the factors that encourage the boy child to engage in sexual activities at an early age, and ways in which that impacts on teaching and learning. The study was informed largely by Participatory Action Research (PAR) and focus group discussions and journal writing were the two main methods used to generate data. The results indicate that the boy child in the region under investigation lacks positive role models; and consequently, lack of sex education from conscientious and responsible adults contribute to early sexual debut, which has negative impact on his academic performance.

Keywords: sex education, sexual debut, boy child, sexual activities

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this study was to establish the contributing factors to early sexual debut by the boy child in County - Q. The larger study where data for this paper is drawn from was informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory. The theory discusses the role played by the five major ecologies of development namely —

the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exo-system, Macro-system and Chrono-system. Each system contains roles and norms that shape human development. Microsystem is the system closest to the child because it comprises of immediate family members, school community, peers and the neighborhood. Interactions between the child and the systems determine the development of certain aspects of behavior. The Mesosystem comprises of connections between the significant entities within the Microsystem. However, interactions between a family and peers, is a good predictor of adolescents' sexual behaviors.

The Exo-system is the external environment setting that includes networks like the extended family, parent's work place, mass media and educational policies. This system defines the larger social system in which the child does not function within directly. The larger cultural context, the Macro-system is the outermost layer in the child's environment and it comprises of cultural values, customs, the collective attitudes, ideologies and laws of the land. Finally the Chrono-system; which can be described as the interaction of the environmental factors and how that manifests itself as one transits over the course of life. The environmental factors encompasses the dimensions of time as it relates to a child's environment. According to this theory, and in the context of this study, the systems interact with each other and the impact is to a large extent responsible for the initiation of certain sexual behaviors among the youth. The home environment which operates at the Meso-system level is expected to provide protective factors with physical and psychological security, and positive role modelling. It is also at the Meso-system level where the youth interact with their peers, who may

have a lot of influence on the adolescent sexual behavior; which in most cases overpower parental influence.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The data for this paper is from a mini study within a larger study that begun in 2008. The mini study was designed as a follow-up and was conducted in four schools in County-Q in Kenya; two primary schools and two secondary schools. The four schools were included in the study because they had participated in an essay writing competition and had an entry of over 30 participants per class. The four schools were both none residential and co-educational. Because the researchers were involved in the earlier study, the research site was therefore familiar and re-entry was welcomed by the stakeholders — teachers, pupils and school management committees.

The study was informed largely by Participatory Action Research (PAR) and as mentioned above, the mini-study was a re-entry into the site. Many boys participated in the essay writing competition and through the essays, they revealed a lot of issues that we needed to follow up, confirm, and understand from the point of view of educators, researchers and parents. We therefore went into this study with the need to hear from the boys. Journal writing and focus group discussions were the two methods that could allow us to engage the participants systematically. Journal writing as a method of investigation was introduced to the boys as the first step. Each participant

was provided with a note book and a pen. We asked them to write about *the plight of the boy child in their community*. This was the same question posed during the essay writing competition. There was need to confirm whether the issues raised during the essay writing competition will arise from this exercise. The journal writing process took a month. They wrote every week in the presence of the first author and their English teacher. The first author collected the books, read, noted the issues raised, and returned to them the following week. After a month of journal writing, focus group discussions begun between the participant and the first author. Through the focus group discussions, the participants clarified the issues they raised through journal writing. The data generated from the boys was shared with the teachers and school management boards as an avenue for seeking solutions and intervention jointly.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This paper focuses on one of the research objectives. The aim was to find out the factors that lead to early sexual debut among young boys in the study site and how that affects the teaching and learning. The findings are discussed under the following headings: freedom, lack of proper sex education, onset of puberty, housing, circumcision songs, pornography, women dressing, and poverty.

## Freedom

The study revealed that after circumcision the boys get little guidance and counselling and supervision from parents because they are treated like adults even though legally they are minors. After circumcision the boys are given unlimited freedom. They have their own cottages, *Isimba*, away from the parent's houses where they invite friends without parents knowing. This contributes to them engaging in various kinds of sexual activities. Nickson wrote:

Boys are separated from parents, they build a separate house for them. We do not read, we just open a book and realize that you are tired, you just sit there and an idle mind is the devils workshop. You start thinking about some things, you start lusting and eventually you open the door and go to get a cow (Form II, Town School.)

Raphael and Gabriel added:

Madam for me I do what I want no parent asks or bothers about what I do. I can be away all night and no one cares about my whereabouts. My mother does not know where I sleep or with whom. I can even bring a girl to my room and no one cares. Parents are contributing in the destruction of our lives (Raphael, Class 7, Miles School, Journal)

Our parents contribute to boys dropping out of school. You go to a drinking den with your father and he does not bother you. We really want our parents to get involved in our lives and to put a bit of control (Gabriel, Form II, Mahala School, FGD).

The boys' narratives are supported by Juarez and LeGrand (2005) who explain that the growing independence from parents makes adolescence more susceptible to peer pressure. There is a likelihood of engaging in risky sexual practices which are further enhanced by the often distorted perception of such risks and sense of incapability that characterizes this age group. The so called grown men may be 13, 14 or at most 16 year old boys who require parental supervision especially with school work. Parents hardly go into the *Isimba*; to know what goes on there. The participants expressed a desire that parents once in a while check on them to know what happens there. One participant said, "many times we are not in those cottages but out in funerals sleeping [having sex] around with girls... and when we are in the cottages we are doing other things not reading" (Form II boy). This statement shows how boys such as this one boy have their priorities influenced by the social environment which also affects their academic performance.

The building of a separate house for the boys after circumcision is not unique to the community in the research site. In the Kikuyu community, young men are also required to move out of the parents' house and occupy a separate room in the homestead after

circumcision, and they would be free to have a girlfriend and engage in sexual activities (Khamasi, 2010).

In a focus group discussion, teachers explained that the freedom given after circumcision contribute to truancy and makes teaching and learning difficult. The stakeholders agreed that this freedom contributed to school dropouts and poor academic performance. Too much freedom according to Lehman (2011) provides many opportunities for poor choices and mistakes that result in serious problems. The boys may rebel and decide to test out adults by skipping school among other behaviors like smoking, using drugs, and engaging in sexual activities.

### **Lack of credible sex education**

As the boys go through the rite of passage, they are given lessons on sexuality. One of the lessons is freedom to sleep with women. Incorrect information given leads to indiscriminate sexual indulgence. They reported being advised that 'every open door is yours, with the exception of married women' (open door here means unmarried girls/women). Tim, Simon, and Kerry had this to say:

....Our parents do not tell us anything about sex or that sex at an early age is bad (Tim, Class 8, Kings School, FGD).

We get confused about many things due to lack of sex education, we even fall on elderly women, and hens to satisfy our lust. Our parents

build us small houses. We are never in those houses especially at night, we are in funerals or other festivities and our parents are not aware. There we meet girls and seduce them. If they refuse we rape them or go to the ducks (Simion, Class 7, Miles School, FGD).

When a boy gets circumcised he is given tips on how to seduce girls to prove his manhood. In that process, we do not have correct information so we believe what we are told. We spend our time looking for girls in order to test ourselves. We look for girls every time and this has affected us a lot (Kerry, Form III, Town School, FGD).

Lack of factual sex education suitable for school going children/minors encourages the boys to engage in risky sexual activities, majorly because men are primarily and secondarily socialized into believing that certain characteristics portray their manliness and therefore masculinity (Gwartney, 2003). Many of the boys in this study were socialized to believe that their manliness or masculinity is measured by the number of women they have sex with. The boys reported that they are advised to “clean” themselves after circumcision. What is supposed to be cleaned is the dry skin that peels off on a healing wound. The cleaning process involves engaging in unprotected sex. The boys also reported to have received information on how to seduce women. This form of sex education developed an element of sexual aggressiveness in the boys, which is heightened by the belief that getting to age 20 without being sexually active renders one infertile. The belief forces them to engage in various kinds of sexual activities at an early age. The form of sex education that the boys reported to have been exposed to is counterproductive because the consequences are life threatening.



## **Onset of puberty**

Puberty is the onset of many mixed emotional feelings and physiological changes taking place. This confuses young boys who may not understand the biological changes taking place. The participants explained that onset of puberty fast tracks sexual activities as explained below:

The adolescent stage is very bad, you think unthinkable things, have sex with girls and other things (Jack, Class 7, Miles School, FGD).

When sleeping we have wet dreams, dream about beautiful girls and think of how to meet this girl. If the girl is around the area you will go look for her and the moment she touches you, you will just finish everything (Matt, Form II, Town School, FGD).

The onset of puberty has several physical changes. For boys pubertal changes include among others, the penis and testicles increase in size, pubic hair appear, the head of the penis develops and may have their first ejaculation or wet dreams (Poncelet 2009) and [http://kids health.org/kid/boy/boyspuberty](http://kidshealth.org/kid/boy/boyspuberty))

Once the boy gets his first ejaculation, he may think that it is a gate way to start having sex unless there is a responsible adult and preferably male who can help him understand the physiological changes he has to go through as an adolescent. For most

boys, the changes affect their class concentration thereby interfering with teaching and learning.

### **Housing dilemma: A sister or a cow?**

Unavoidable circumstances may force a boy after circumcision to sleep in the same house with the parents. This may be in a one roomed house where there is no privacy for the parents. The study participants acknowledged that such a situation contributes to boys engaging in certain sexual activities. Wesley, Charlie, and George had this to say:

There are boys who sleep in the same house with their parents. The parents may be busy doing these things in their bedroom and the boy may pretend to be studying but he is just listening to what the parents are doing.... he will just decide to have sex with the cow since the cow cannot tell anyone (Class 8, Kings School, Journal).

When you live in a single roomed house with all the children and parents, you listen and hear as the parents are having sex behind the curtains especially if they make noise. That is why boys have sex with their younger sisters sleeping next to them (Form II, Mahala School, Journal).

George gave his views in Kiswahili and said:

*Unasikia baba na mama wakifanyana ni kana kwamba wanafanya kitu kizuri sana , hata wewe unasikia unataka temperature inaruka hapo utaenda na chochote, dada yako, au kuku. Ukishaonja na kusikia utamu wa hiyo kitu utaendelea tu kila wakati, utaangukia mwenye atakuruhusu na wakikataa utaenda kwa ngombe, au kuku, hiyo kitu ni tamu sana (Class 8, Kings School FGD)*

You hear dad and mum doing it, it is as if they are doing something good, you feel like you want it, the temperature rises and you will go to anything your sister or hen. When you have tasted and felt the sweetness of that thing you will just do it every time, you will have sex with whoever allows you and if they refuse you, you will go to a cow or hen. That thing is very sweet

Bandura through the social learning theory explained that through observing others, one could form an idea of how behaviors are performed and later, that information serves as a guide for action (1977). It is therefore evident that what children observe in their immediate environment, or what they are exposed to, can be replicated in the future. Hence the narratives shared above were recorded in the participants' journals and reiterated in during focus group discussions. The boys' narratives confirm that the hormonal changes of puberty increase sexual responsiveness (Myers, 1989) and for the boys, it is worsened by lack of privacy in a home. Children exposed to sexual activities

without proper explanation from a responsible adult may be emotionally and psychologically disturbed. This may also impact negatively on their studies as reiterated by the participants.

### **Circumcision Songs**

The participants reported that circumcision songs distract their attention and they can barely concentrate on school work i.e. reading. The lyrics of the song just talk about sexual intercourse as one participant explained:

...if a neighbor starts playing the bells and you are at home reading the words of the songs just pull you there... The songs describe how sex is good and that makes you not to concentrate with studies. We know that girls are there and we desire to go there and taste them (Antony, Class 8, Miles School Journal)

The songs are so appealing. When you sing and see a girl, ah! you just throw away the books and run to the girls... dance to the songs. Most of the songs are about sexual intercourse and these things make the boys forget studies, we stay without education (Eric, Class 8, Kings School, FGD)

It is a fact, songs and dance are used by many communities for example the Kikuyu to teach about sex and sexuality (Khamasi, 2010). The songs are meant not only to sexually excite the initiates, but even those that are present – the crowd. The

carnivalisue mood legitimize indulgence in irresponsible sex. Unfortunately, these school going boys are not psychologically ready for such a carnival and are therefore caught unaware. During the focus group discussions the participants expressed that they found the carnivalisue scene shocking particularly when they heard and watched adults that they respected very much dance to the obscene songs.

### **Pornography ruins our lives**

The participants explained that they watch pornographic movies that make them sexually aroused. Jimmy a Class 8 pupil from Miles School expressed the following in a FGD: "Watching videos and pornographic movies make us sexually active, those things ruin our lives and we end up dropping out of school".

Charles from the same class added:

Pornographic movies make your temperature go up and if you talk to a girl and she takes a long time to agree you fall on [have sex] anything that is close to you.

Pornography is nothing new to world societies. There has been depictions of human sex acts far back into history. Despite the fact, research indicates that pornography has a negative effect on both adults and adolescents. Hughes (1998) emphasizes the fact that pornography introduces children to sexual sensations that they are developmentally unprepared to contend with. This awareness of sexual sensation can

be confusing and over stimulating for children. The boys reported that they spend time at the movie dens watching porn at the expense of their studies.

### **Peer pressure, drugs and sex**

Peer pressure is that which friends and age mates exert on one to conform to a certain behavior. It can be positive or negative. Peer pressure can lead to experimentation with drugs and alcohol, sexual activity, truancy and various high risk behaviors. The participants expressed the fact that the desire to conform leads them to abuse drugs like peers. After taking drugs, they can have sex with anything. Eric had this to say:

Sometimes when you have taken kukumanga you can fall on anything ... (Class7, Kings School, FGD).

Sam added:

Boys who dropped out of school teach us how to seduce young girls. If they turn us down we rape them, if we do not succeed, we go to the cows and that is a problem (Class 7, Kings School, FGD).

Frank said:

Boys do these things because they lack good role models and peer influence, when friends say that animals are sweeter than girls they want to have that experience (Form II, Town school, FGD).

Simon said:

Boys tell friends how they had sex with a girl and it was sweet, boys who may not get a girl will go to an animal to have the experience and a story to tell (Form II, Town school, FGD).

According to Bernstein (2005), peer pressure is the most powerful influencer in a teenager's life. It can help mobilize one's energy positively, motivate one to strive for success, and encourage one to conform to a healthy group norm. Alternatively, it can impair good judgment and fuel risk taking behavior. Peer pressure is hard to deal with especially when it comes to issues of sex. Some teens may decide to engage in sexual activities because their friends describe it as cool, others feel pressured by the person they are dating, while others find it easier to give in than to try and explain why they cannot do it. Knowing how one feels about themselves is usually the first step in handling peer pressure. When young boys give in to negative peer pressure, many things including school work are affected.

## **Fear**

The fear of contracting HIV makes boys look for alternative ways of sexual satisfaction.

One participant said:

The deadly killer HIV scares us. My neighbor says since he cannot control himself he will sleep with animals instead of women (Jose Form II, Mahala School, FGD).

The fear of being rejected drives boys to the animals and other fetish objects. Keith in Class 6 said:

Some boys go to cows because cows cannot say no (Miles School, FGD).

The fear of responsibility makes men release themselves on cows. when you impregnate a girl they send you to jail. Boys end up going to the goats and cows (Sam, Form III, Town School, FGD).

Some boys cannot seduce a girl. They just stay and their minds wonder to other things (Peter, Class 7, Miles School, FGD).

Fear of various consequences make adolescents to engage in various kinds of sexual activities

### **Mode of dressing raises temperatures**

The participants (boys) acknowledged that the women who wear very tight revealing garments or miniskirts sexually aroused them. The sentiments were echoed thus:



Some girls wear very tight trousers or miniskirts, when you look at them your temperature rises [sexually aroused] until you follow her and may be tempted to rape her (Clement, Class 8, Miles School, Journal).

'Women sit provocatively in public places with garments that expose their bodies', reported the participants. The practice 'force' the boys to seduce them. Eli, Gideon, and Gordon had this to say on the issue:

Some women sit badly, you try to forget your eyes keep looking. When you seduce them they readily accept (Eli, Form II, Mahala school, Journal).

Girls dress in tight clothes, when boys see that they get aroused and go to a small goat who will not hide, refuse or tell anyone (Gideon, Class 6, Kings School).

Once I dreamt about a well-dressed girl. I woke up went to dig until I was very tired, I still could not stop thinking about her, I still needed to have sex with her even though I could not even walk. May be I am cursed, I don't know (Gordon, Class 8, Miles School).

Despite the boys allegations, Western (2008) argued that sexual arousal is normally not on the minds of most women as they select what to wear every morning. However, human beings are known to select apparel for reasons such as: to be attractive, be liked, be popular, be noticed and to be fashionable. Unfortunately, the participants acknowledged being sexually aroused by the women's mode of dressing particularly indecent dressing styles.

**Because of poverty you cannot say no**

Boys from poor backgrounds may not have the courage to approach girls. They can neither afford to pay for commercial sex or be well groomed to attract women. According to the participants, boys from underprivileged background fear to approach girls and this forces them to look for alternative ways to satisfy their sexual desires.

Ken said:

Many poor boys are so dirty, and cannot seduce girls. When he sees a chicken, he looks around to see if people are looking then he will start having sex with the chicken. At night he will sneak out and do the same to the cow (Ken, Form II, Mahala School, Journal).

Tira, Josh and Dave said:

Some poor boys are employed as herd's boys after dropping out of school. If a girl turns them down he will just have sex with a cow (Tira, Form III, Town School, FGD).

Madam I come from a very poor family, this sugar mummy has a very beautiful house I have never seen Ksh. 500, have never eaten rice and I sleep in a very humble bed. When you to go and live in her house, in the morning, they put warm water in the bathroom, they bring you tea on the bed, they give you money.....you will never concentrate in

school.... and you will be waiting for 4 o'clock to go and see her....(Josh, Form II, Mahala, FGD)

Some will promise to give you a house, a car and have proven that by giving you 20 thousand shillings, have done your shopping, one will not refuse even if it were you, you cannot say no (Dave, Class 8, Kings School, FGD)

Studies by Jensen (2012) and Horgan (2007) report that children raised in poverty rarely chose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront. Their brains have also adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance. Children living in such conditions also believe that they will not get the same quality of schooling, or same outcomes as children living in better conditions. Children with such perceptions may therefore not be able to cope with the demands of schooling unless someone intervenes on their behalf particularly those in close contact with for example teachers.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of the study reveal that various factors contribute to the adolescent participants engaging in various sexual activities at an early age. At the Micro-system level, the adolescent is undergoing physiological growth spurts in terms of sexual maturity. The home environment that operates at the Meso-system level is expected to

provide protective factors like warmth, love, physical and psychological security as well as positive role modeling. It is at the Mesosystem level where the adolescent encounters the peer world which is both influential and instrumental to adolescent sexual behavior. But as the participants have narrated, the home environment seems to have neglected its role during the circumcision process and instead exposed the boys to different forms of abuse in the name of culture and socialization to masculinity. The aftermath of a process that is meant to be beneficial to the boys is a long term effect on the boys' emotional, spiritual, social, mental and physical health. Part of the effect can be measured through the lens of academic performance. The reports from teachers showed that when the boys return to school after the circumcision period, most are disrespectful to teachers generally; and particularly to the female teachers. They also acknowledged that the freedom granted to them as 'men' in the community and in their families make it difficult to cope with the demands of schooling. Consequently, the boys who find it difficult to obey the school rules drop out eventually; and most of those who remain in school, if in that category, perform poorly.

Whereas offering sex education from an early age may help furnish the youth with the much needed information that will help make informed decisions, parental monitoring and counseling may help delay onset of sexual activity. Though there may not be any simple solutions to this phenomena, a society desiring to promote healthy sexual development of the youth must encourage wise and responsible decisions by young boys. We must also aim at enhancing and creating conditions that can nurture and support them. Parents should be held accountable in all ways.

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