

## Experiences of Boy Learners in a Single-Sex High School in Eswatini: A Guidance and Counselling Perspective

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### Abstract

*This study explored the lived experiences of boy learners in a single-sex high school in the Manzini region of Eswatini. Particular attention was given to how the absence of structured guidance and counselling services affects their emotional and psychosocial well-being. It sought to understand how masculine norms and school culture shape the boys' emotional expression, identity development and engagement with counselling support. A qualitative phenomenological design within the interpretivist paradigm was employed. Ten boys aged 14–18 were purposively selected from Forms 3–5. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and then analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach. Four major themes emerged which include personal growth and discipline; pressures of masculinity; emotional suppression and support needs; and resilience through brotherhood. The study found that while single-sex schooling promotes discipline and unity, it also reinforces restrictive masculine expectations that discourage emotional openness and help-seeking behaviour. The absence of gender-sensitive counselling services limits boys' access to psychosocial support, leading to emotional strain. Grounded in equity feminism (Sommers, 2000) and Kivel's (1999) man in the box model, the study demonstrates that effective guidance and counselling in boys' schools requires challenging traditional masculine ideologies and integrating gender-sensitive approaches. It recommends policy reforms that institutionalise structured counselling in single-sex schools, teacher training in gender-responsive guidance and peer mentorship programmes that foster positive masculinity and emotional resilience.*

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### Introduction

Single-sex education has attracted a lot of global debate, which sparked much controversy among academicians, social workers, parents and education practitioners (Halpern et al, 2011). In Eswatini, single-sex boys' schools are often praised for fostering discipline, academic focus and moral behaviour among learners (Tsikati, 2018). However, such praise tends to overlook the psychosocial and emotional dimensions of boys' experiences, which are deeply shaped by restrictive masculine norms and limited access to structured guidance and counselling services (Ratele, 2016).



Masculinity is socially constructed to equate strength with emotional restraint, discouraging boys from seeking help or showing vulnerability (Connell, 1995). As a result, many boys internalise stoicism as a marker of manhood, often at the expense of their emotional well-being (Way, 2011). This tendency is particularly pronounced in boys-only schools, where peer pressure and institutional culture reinforce ideals of toughness and self-reliance (Sommers, 2000).

Globally, scholars have acknowledged the value of guidance and counselling in supporting learners' personal and emotional development (Way & Rogers, 2023). However, in Eswatini, guidance and counselling programmes are implemented inconsistently across schools and are often undervalued compared to academic achievement (Ministry of Education and Training, ETGPS; Guidance & Counselling Life Skills Education Handbook, 2022). As a result, the emotional struggles of boy learners remain largely invisible within educational discourse, and few studies have examined how the absence of structured counselling affects their school experiences.

This study therefore examined the experiences of boy learners in a single-sex high school in the Manzini region of Eswatini. Particularly, the study focused on how school culture and masculine expectations influence their engagement with guidance and counselling services. The study contributes to the discourse on guidance and counselling in education by centering boys' voices and advocating for gender-sensitive counselling practices that promote holistic development, emotional literacy and equitable support systems for learners of all genders.

### **Background of the study**

The concept of single-sex schooling dates back centuries, founded on the belief that separating learners by gender improves discipline and academic performance (Salomone, 2003). In Eswatini, many traditional boys' schools continue to operate under this philosophy, emphasising discipline, academic competition and respect for authority (Tsikati, 2018). However, while such schools are often regarded as centers of excellence, their rigid structures can suppress emotional expression and discourage boys from seeking help when facing personal challenges (Ratele, 2016).

In Eswatini, the Ministry of Education and Training recognises guidance and counselling as an integral component of holistic education through the Educational Testing, Guidance and Psychological Services (ETGPS) department. The department's 2022 Guidance and Counselling Life Skills Education Teacher's Handbook stresses that learners should be supported not only academically but also emotionally and socially. Despite these policy provisions, implementation in boys' schools remains inconsistent. Teachers often lack formal training in counselling and learners hesitate to seek emotional support, fearing stigma or ridicule from peers (Dlamini & Mabuza, 2025).

Studies in Eswatini and beyond have shown that traditional notions of masculinity restrict boys' emotional freedom. Motsa and Morojele (2017) found that boys in single-sex environments often perform toughness to maintain social acceptance, a behaviour that limits empathy and emotional openness. According to international studies, Bigler and Signorella (2011) caution that single-sex education may reinforce gender stereotypes if not accompanied by gender-sensitive interventions. Similarly, Kivel's (1999) man in the box model explains how boys learn early to confine their emotions within rigid social boundaries, avoiding behaviours perceived as unmanly.

Against this background, the guidance and counselling perspective in education offers a vital framework for addressing boys' emotional and psychosocial needs (Ministry of Education and Training, ETGPS; Guidance & Counselling Life Skills Education Handbook, 2022). When well implemented, school-based counselling and life-skills programmes can challenge harmful gender expectations, promote empathy and self-awareness, and equip learners with emotional resilience, outcomes supported by international guidance on wellbeing and school mental-health interventions. This study therefore investigates how boys in single-sex schooling environments experience guidance and counselling, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the development of inclusive, gender-responsive support systems in Eswatini's education sector.

### **Problem statement**

In Eswatini, single-sex boys' schools are commonly associated with discipline, competitiveness and high academic performance. However, this reputation conceals the emotional realities of boys who are expected to conform to narrow definitions of masculinity that discourage openness, empathy and help-seeking. The majority of these schools lack structured guidance and counselling programmes, despite the national policy framework that mandates such services across all educational institutions (Ministry of Education and Training, ETGPS; Guidance & Counselling Life Skills Education Handbook, 2022).

The imbalance in gender-focused interventions has further widened the gap. While much attention has been given to girls' empowerment and academic achievement, the emotional and psychosocial well-being of boys remain underexplored (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). As a result, boys often navigate adolescence in silence, internalising emotional distress and confusion without adequate support systems (Ratele, 2016).

Existing literature has highlighted that guidance and counselling are essential components of holistic education, promoting emotional stability, self-awareness and positive behavioural change (Dlamini & Mabuza, 2025). However, implementation challenges, including inadequate training of teachers and the absence of qualified counsellors in schools, continue to hinder effective delivery. In boys-only schools, these limitations are compounded by the influence of rigid masculine norms, which stigmatise emotional expression and portray counselling as a sign of weakness.

Therefore, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of boy learners in a single-sex high school in the Manzini region of Eswatini to understand how school culture and masculine expectations shape their emotional well-being and engagement with guidance and counselling services. The study was guided by the equity feminism and man in the box theoretical models, which together provide a framework for understanding boys' experiences through a gender-sensitive, psychosocial lens.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study was anchored in two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Equity Feminism, as articulated by Christina Hoff Sommers (2000), and the Man-in-the-Box Model, proposed by Paul Kivel (1999). These frameworks complement each other in examining the intersection between gender norms, masculinity and the need for inclusive guidance and counselling in boys' schools.

According to Sommers (2000), equity feminism advocates for fairness and equality of opportunity between males and females without favouring one gender over the other. It

challenges the assumption that boys naturally occupy a position of privilege in education. Instead, it recognises that both genders face unique challenges that require tailored forms of support. From this perspective, gender equity in education must include attention to boys' psychosocial and emotional needs, particularly in environments where rigid masculine expectations restrict emotional expression. Within Eswatini's context, equity feminism highlights the importance of designing counselling interventions that promote empathy, self-awareness and healthy expressions of masculinity among boys.

The man in the box model (Kivel, 1999) offers a psychosocial explanation for the socialization of boys into narrow gender roles. According to this model, society places boys inside a 'box' of expectations: to be tough, unemotional, dominant and self-reliant. These norms discourage vulnerability and make boys reluctant to seek emotional or psychological help. Within single-sex schools, the model becomes particularly relevant, as such settings often reinforce conformity to masculine ideals. Boys who attempt to step outside the 'box' by expressing emotion or seeking counselling risk ridicule or social rejection.

Together, these theories illuminate the structural and cultural factors that shape boys' school experiences in Eswatini. They guide the analysis of how masculine expectations influence boys' engagement with guidance and counselling and how educational institutions can develop gender-sensitive counselling frameworks that encourage emotional resilience, self-reflection and holistic development.

## **Literature Review**

### **Guidance and Counselling in Eswatini Schools**

In Eswatini, guidance and counselling services are formally recognised by the Ministry of Education and Training through the Educational Testing, Guidance and Psychological Services (ETGPS) Unit. The services aim to promote learners' emotional, social and academic well-being. However, research indicates that implementation remains inconsistent, with many schools, particularly single-sex institutions, lacking trained counsellors or structured programmes (Dlamini & Mabuza, 2025).

The Guidance and Counselling Life Skills Education Teacher's Handbook (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022) underscores the importance of equipping learners with life skills such as emotional resilience, empathy and self-awareness. Despite these policy intentions, schools often prioritise academic outcomes over emotional support. Teachers assigned counselling duties frequently lack formal training, resulting in limited interventions when boys face emotional distress or social challenges.

### **Masculinity and Emotional Suppression**

Masculinity norms remain deeply embedded in Eswatini's educational and cultural systems. Boys are frequently socialised to equate emotional restraint with strength and vulnerability with weakness (Motsa & Morojele, 2017). In single-sex environments, these expectations are intensified as peer culture reinforces toughness and competitiveness. Tsikati (2018) observed that boys often suppress emotions to maintain social acceptance, while those who seek help may face ridicule from peers.

Kivel's (1999) man in the box model offers insight into this dynamic, showing how boys internalise rigid expectations to conform to a narrow image of manhood. These patterns of emotional suppression have serious implications for boys' mental health and interpersonal

relationships. In the context of schooling, they may lead to decreased help-seeking, disengagement from counselling and emotional burnout.

### **Gender Equity and Inclusive Support**

From the perspective of equity feminism, gender equity in education must extend beyond equal access to classrooms and academic resources to include equitable access to psychosocial support (Sommers, 2000). Ntinda et al., (2016) argue that boys' emotional needs are often invisible in gender equality programmes, which traditionally prioritise girls' empowerment. Similarly, Bigler and Signorella (2011) caution that single-sex schooling, if not managed with sensitivity to gender stereotypes, can reinforce traditional roles that hinder holistic development.

Halpern et al., (2011) further suggest that exposure to diverse perspectives, including emotional and social diversity, enhances learners' empathy and emotional intelligence. Therefore, the absence of structured guidance and counselling in single-sex schools not only limits emotional expression but also narrows the scope of boys' personal growth.

### **The Role of Guidance and Counselling in boy's Schools**

In the Eswatini context, counselling services in boys-only schools must consider the influence of masculinity norms on learners' attitudes toward emotional support. Mabuza (2025) observed that when counselling is perceived as a sign of weakness, boys are less likely to seek help even when experiencing stress or anxiety. Effective counselling therefore requires gender-responsive approaches that acknowledge boys' cultural realities and encourage emotional openness through trust-based relationships.

Way and Rogers (2023) advocate for redefining masculinity in schools by integrating vulnerability, empathy and self-expression into boys' development frameworks. When counselling adopts these principles, a transformative process that empowers boys to balance strength with sensitivity, essential traits for personal growth and leadership, could be managed.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design and Paradigm**

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design situated within the interpretivist paradigm. This approach was appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of boy learners and understanding how they make meaning of their schooling environment in relation to masculinity and guidance and counselling services. Phenomenology enables the researcher to capture participants' perceptions, emotions and interpretations as they navigate their educational experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted in a single-sex boys' high school located in the Manzini region of Eswatini. The school was purposively selected because it reflects typical features of Eswatini's boys-only institutions: an emphasis on discipline, academic performance and traditional masculine values. Ten (10) boys aged between 14 and 18 years, from Forms 3 to 5 were purposively selected to participate in the study. Participants were chosen based on their willingness to share experiences and their active engagement in school life. Two primary methods were used: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Individual interviews allowed participants to express personal reflections on masculinity, emotions and counselling without peer pressure. FGDs captured collective experiences, peer interactions and shared perceptions about school culture. Data collection adhered to ethical research standards, including voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Eswatini's Faculty of Education research procedures. Participants were informed of the study's

purpose and their right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities. The researcher ensured respect, privacy and cultural sensitivity throughout the process (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024). Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase framework. Emerging themes were coded, categorised and refined through iterative reading to capture both shared and individual perspectives. Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through member checking, peer debriefing and maintaining a detailed audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

Data collected from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were organised thematically based on recurring patterns in participants' experiences.

### Research Questions:

1. How does the absence of structured guidance and counselling programmes in single-sex schools affect the emotional well-being and identity development of boy learners in Eswatini?
2. What school-based intervention strategies can promote the holistic development of boy learners through inclusive and gender-responsive guidance and counselling services?

The four major themes that emerged were (1) Personal growth and discipline; (2) Pressures of masculinity; (3) Emotional suppression and support needs; and (4) Resilience and brotherhood.

### Theme 1: Personal Growth and Discipline

Participants' perceived discipline as a core value embedded in the school culture. They associated the strict environment with character development and maturity. The following verbal quote corroborates the above findings:

*I learned to be a disciplined child because in this boys-only school, they expect us to behave like men, not to engage in unwanted behaviour, to guide ourselves, and to be vigilant in whatever we do. (PA, I, F3)*

The school culture promoted responsibility and self-control, qualities seen as vital for success both in and outside the classroom. However, while discipline fostered academic focus, it also reinforced the belief that emotional expression was a sign of weakness. This finding resonates with Riordan (2015), who argues that single-sex schools often promote focus and order, yet may inadvertently discourage emotional openness. From a guidance and counselling perspective, the findings indicate a need for balanced programmes that combine academic discipline with emotional literacy and psychosocial support.

### Theme 2: Pressures of Masculinity

Participants described intense social pressure to conform to dominant masculine ideals. They reported that emotional vulnerability was viewed negatively and that boys who showed sadness or sought help were labelled as 'soft'. The following verbal quote corroborates the above findings:

*You can't show emotions in front of these boys here at this boys' school; they'll say you're too soft and should go learn with girls and do feminine duties. (PG, FGD2, F5)*

This sentiment illustrates the operation of Kivel's (1999) Man in the box model, where boys internalise rigid expectations of toughness, control and dominance. Such pressures restricted participants' willingness to engage in counselling or express emotional concerns. Similar findings by Motsa and Morojele (2017) show that Eswatini boys often suppress emotions to

maintain social acceptance. Consequently, these pressures highlight a critical area for intervention through gender-sensitive guidance and counselling, aimed at challenging stereotypes and normalising emotional expression among boys.

### **Theme 3: Emotional Suppression and Support Needs**

Many participants admitted difficulty in discussing personal or emotional problems, especially in the absence of structured guidance and counselling services. The few counselling interactions available were limited to disciplinary issues or career advice rather than emotional support. The following verbal quote corroborates the above findings:

*We don't talk about problems unless they're serious, and you can't discuss them with a female teacher because you would feel uncomfortable in this boys-only school. (PI, I, F5).*

This finding underscores the gendered nature of emotional support in boys' schools, where the presence of female counsellors may deter boys from opening up. The data also reveal a gap in professional counselling provision, consistent with observation that most schools in Eswatini lack qualified counsellors trained in gender-responsive approaches Mabuza (2025). The boys' reluctance to seek help demonstrates how masculinity norms intersect with institutional limitations, reinforcing emotional isolation.

### **Theme 4: Resilience and Brotherhood**

Despite emotional barriers, participants expressed strong bonds of solidarity and mutual support. Peer relationships played a central role in coping with school pressures. The following verbal quote corroborates the above findings:

*We help each other like brothers here at school because we promote the spirit of unity between us as boys. (PE, FGD1, F4).*

This sense of 'brotherhood' provided an informal network of empathy, guidance and motivation. Although not a substitute for professional counselling, peer solidarity served as a protective factor that fostered resilience and belonging. From an equity feminism perspective (Sommers, 2000), these findings emphasise the importance of fairness in emotional support systems, ensuring that boys, like girls, have equitable access to psychosocial care. Guidance programmes can therefore build upon this spirit of unity by incorporating peer mentorship models and group counselling initiatives that promote positive masculinity and emotional resilience.

## **Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight how the experiences of boy learners in a single-sex high school in Eswatini are shaped by intersecting cultural, institutional and gender expectations. Although the boys valued discipline and unity, the school's masculine culture limited emotional expression and contributed to the underutilisation of guidance and counselling services.

In line with Kivel's (1999) Man in the box model, participants described feeling confined within social expectations of toughness and emotional control. These pressures discouraged help-seeking and promoted emotional suppression, confirming the assertion by Motsa and Morojele (2017) that Eswatini's boys often conform to rigid definitions of masculinity to maintain social approval. The absence of gender-responsive counselling services further entrenched this problem, leaving boys without appropriate emotional outlets or professional guidance.

The findings also support Sommers (2000) equity feminism, which calls for fairness and inclusivity in educational support systems. Equity feminism emphasises that gender equity does not mean favouring one sex but ensuring that both boys and girls have equal opportunities to thrive emotionally, socially and academically. The boys' experiences reveal a gap in policy implementation; while the national framework (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022) recognises guidance and counselling as essential, schools remain poorly resourced in trained counsellors and emotional support structures.

The theme of brotherhood and resilience demonstrated that despite institutional gaps, boys relied on peer solidarity as an informal coping mechanism. This confirms the view of Way and Rogers (2023) that emotional resilience among boys can be strengthened through peer-based approaches that integrate empathy, reflection and shared responsibility. The challenge for schools, therefore, is to transform these informal peer networks into structured mentorship programmes that complement professional counselling.

The study also underscores that guidance and counselling in boys-only schools must address the social construction of masculinity. Counsellors and educators should be trained to engage boys in conversations that normalise vulnerability and redefine strength to include emotional awareness. When guidance and counselling adopt gender-sensitive approaches, they not only promote emotional well-being but also cultivate future men who are empathetic, responsible and mentally resilient.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that while single-sex schooling in Eswatini promotes discipline, academic focus and social cohesion, it also perpetuates restrictive masculine norms that hinder boys' emotional development. The limited presence of structured guidance and counselling services deprives boys of safe spaces to express vulnerability and process emotional challenges. Without deliberate efforts to make counselling accessible and gender-responsive, boys remain at risk of internalising emotional distress and developing maladaptive coping behaviours.

The combination of equity feminism and the man in the box model provided a useful theoretical lens to understand the interplay between gender expectations and boys' experiences. Together, these frameworks affirm the need for equitable emotional support that recognises the specific psychosocial realities of male learners. By giving voice to the lived experiences of boys, this study contributes to the growing discourse on inclusive counselling practices and holistic education in Eswatini.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and theoretical insights, the following recommendations are suggested. Recommendation for action to: Ministry of Education and Training; Develop structured, gender-sensitive guidance and counselling sessions that help boys express emotions freely, address peer pressure and build resilience. School Administrators; Provide professional training for teachers and school counsellors on managing the emotional and psychological needs of boys affected by restrictive masculine norms. Teachers and educators; Create peer-support and mentorship programmes that model positive masculinity, empathy and respect and link them to counselling units for continuity of care.

Recommendation for future research: Investigate how school-based counselling programmes influence boys' emotional well-being, behaviour and academic performance in Eswatini's single-sex schools; Examine how cultural and social beliefs about masculinity affect boys'

willingness to participate in counselling and emotional support programmes; and Study boys' views on gender equity, that is, perceptions of support gaps versus girl-focused initiatives.

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