



School resources and the gender reading literacy gap in South African schools



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ABSTRACT

The importance of reading literacy as a foundation for academic success is widely acknowledged. What is less well understood is why gender patterns in reading literacy emerge so early and continue throughout learners' educational careers. This paper adds to this literature by investigating the gender patterns of reading literacy (why girls outperform boys) in South African primary schools and whether changes in the schooling system can result in favourable changes in this gender reading gap. Compatible with international trends, girls in primary schools were significantly better readers than boys during the period of investigation. We found strong links between material and human resources and achievement in reading. The link between increased resource availability and improved educational outcomes was stronger for girls than for boys and therefore increased the female academic advantage. This finding remained consistent across socioeconomic levels. The implication is that either the school resources available in South African primary schools are more suitable for teaching girls how to read or that girls appear to be able to make use of the available resources more effectively to improve reading. Policy interpretations are discussed in the context of improved resourcing of schools.

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1. Introduction

Few would disagree that proficiency in reading lays the foundation for personal and social development. At the individual level, reading literacy is linked to educational opportunities, wellbeing and democratic participation. The reading literacy level of a population has been shown to have a positive effect on labour market productivity and the country's economic development (McCracken and Murray, 2008). Unlike a school's mathematics and science outcomes, gender-based differences in reading literacy tend to favour girls. In fact, the evidence suggests that girls emerge as stronger readers from a very early age (Whitmire, 2010). International studies have shown that gender gaps in reading literacy shift with time and vary, depending on the phase of schooling and the educational environment being considered (Marks, 2007). This paper explores this relationship in the context of South African primary schools in the first decade of the 21st century. The education research tradition in South Africa has been dominated by efforts to transform the public education system into one that more effectively serves children from impoverished communities. It is easy to understand why. Children from poor

homes lack educational support outside of the school, which raises the responsibility of the education system to prepare them adequately for their adult and professional lives. To further compound this problem, the quality of education received by South African children varies greatly. Children attending the richest 20% of schools achieve results that are incomparable to the rest of the school population (Fleisch, 2008; Lam et al., 2008; Reddy, 2006; van der Berg, 2007). On the one extreme are schools that are under-resourced and poorly managed. On the other are a handful of high quality schools that provide an elite group of learners with a world-class education.

In South Africa's highly differentiated schooling system, it would seem that a focus on gender gaps in learner performance has not been a primary source of concern. Although the role of gender in education has been part of the policy rhetoric, the topic has not been at the forefront in terms of implementation. Understanding the gender reading literacy gap in South African education is, however, important for many reasons. First, in an education system that is already plagued by profound inequalities (Branson and Lam, 2009; Branson and Zuze, 2012; van der Berg, 2009), if a set of learners is facing additional academic barriers, this only serves to increase their vulnerability. Second, South African education has undergone dramatic policy shifts over the last two decades and it is important to establish whether reading proficiency among boys and girls has been adversely affected by

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these changes. Finally, the gender education gap has largely focused on female disadvantage. It is less conventional to explore male underachievement or to ask whether an education system is failing its boys and yet this is a highly relevant question. The consequences of male underachievement are felt by individuals, families and entire communities (Harber, 2001; Rosenthal, 1998; Wegner et al., 2008). If boys who are already disadvantaged face additional setbacks to their learning, then the potential for education being used to break cycles of poverty becomes even more remote. Moreover, in co-educational learning environments the struggles of one group will invariably impose a strain on the entire learning process.

School investments are known to contribute to substantial gains in student outcomes (Fedderke and Luiz, 2002), particularly in deprived communities (Curto et al., 2011). In this school effects study, we estimate the relationship between resource inputs of South African primary schools and the academic achievement of boys and girls attending those schools. We recognise the limitations of the school effects framework. We note that such studies cannot always identify the causal direction between factors that influence schooling (Goldstein and Woodhouse, 2000; Wrigley, 2004). We do, however, maintain that identifying what is related to literacy achievement is a useful starting point in providing policy direction for educational planners.

We use data for Grade 6 learners in 2000 and 2007 that was collected on behalf of the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (Ross et al., 2004). We begin our study of gender reading literacy gaps by analysing performance patterns for boys and girls during this period and discussing the changes that have emerged. After establishing the reading literacy skill levels of boys and girls, we provide more textured descriptions of the differences. The analytic descriptions for gender gaps in reading literacy are based on both a student's individual background and the resources at the school. We discuss the theoretical and policy implications of our findings and end with a brief conclusion.

2. Key issues from the literature

2.1. Changing trends in gender education gaps

The question of what, how and why gender gaps in academic achievement exist is an important issue. The topic has gained prominence because it has been a focal point of both the development and human rights agenda (UNESCO, 2005). While this agenda has been pursued by governments and development agencies, there was limited research interest in the intersection between school achievement and gender during the 1990s and early 2000s. Part of the reason for the lack of attention was the increase in mass education movements during this period. Education policy makers supported a gender-neutral platform so that learners could be viewed equally, regardless of their gender status (Baker and LeTendre, 2005; Wiseman et al., 2009).

More recently, rich sources of data from cross-country achievement studies have become available to allow more in-depth questions about gender in education to be raised. What is apparent is that the gender gap in mathematics and science performance is not always statistically significant (Reddy, 2006). The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) has shown that globally the gender difference in mathematics and science performance is small at the 4th grade level. It increases at 8th grade level and favours girls. Although trends vary from country to country, there were no significant gender differences in South Africa in 1999, 2002 and 2011 at the grade 8 or 9 level. The Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows that, globally, there is no gender difference at the

grade 4-level although girls outperform boys. South Africa participated in a pre-PIRLS and girls significantly out-performed boys (Mullis et al., 2012).

The consensus from international research seems to be that girls have notably better literacy skills than boys (Gambell and Hunter, 1999; OECD, 2004; Riordan, 1999). Although some would suggest that claims of a female literacy advantage are overstated (Husain and Millimet, 2009), study after study has found that girls' advantage in literacy cannot be attributed to chance alone. Girls have been shown to achieve higher scores in literacy at different phases of schooling and to learn more during the course of an academic year (Fuller et al., 1994; Gibb et al., 2008). At the primary school level, the pro-female reading literacy gap was notable across nine industrialised countries evaluated in the 1990s and it seemed to increase with age (OECD, 2004). Although literacy gender gaps are usually longstanding, they may also surface unexpectedly. In Australia and Britain, for example, there was a marked increase in gender literacy gaps since the 1990s (Smyth, 2007). It is of particular concern that, globally, there is such a large percentage of boys at the lower tail of the reading ability distribution. Not only are boys lagging behind overall in reading, there is a significantly higher percentage of boys among the weakest readers (Hedges and Nowell, 1995; Robinson and Lubinski, 2011).

Educational outcomes for boys in South Africa are a source of concern. There is a significantly higher proportion of boys who repeat a grade (Branson and Lam, 2009; Lee et al., 2005). Boys also drop out of school in greater numbers. As a result, there is a larger pool of girls who participate in school leaving examinations, including girls with a weak educational background. The greater mix of girls who remain in the school system has meant lower average scores compared to the selective group of boys who write these examinations (Perry, 2003), and masks the true gender differences in performance. The gender reading literacy patterns for South Africa see boys falling behind early (Ross et al., 2004). This study will contribute to what is known about how these gender patterns are shaped in primary schools among South African children.

2.2. Gender, literacy and student background

Explanations as to why girls are better readers than boys range from the biological and behavioural (Bray et al., 1997; Ready et al., 2005; Warrington and Younger, 2000) to the societal and cultural (Smyth, 2007; Sommers, 2001). There is no single explanation to account for the differences between boys and girls. The fact that gender literacy gaps that favour girls have been identified as early as nursery school seems to suggest that girls enter primary schools with better literacy skills than boys (Taylor, 2004). Because of differences in the structure of the male and female brains, it is believed that girls mature more quickly and develop their verbal skills much earlier (Gurian, 2011). Chemical differences may mean that young girls find it easier to complete reading tasks than young boys.

These findings are far from being universally accepted and continue to be debated vigorously. Some researchers maintain that sociological factors are more important than biological explanations for why boys lag behind girls in reading. The thrust of these findings is that school-work in general, and reading in particular, are perceived as too feminine by boys. This line of research has also pointed out that boys have made progress when reading technical material, which seems to weaken the biological argument (Allo-way and Gilbert, 1997; Jackson, 2002). Research of reading behaviour in schools suggests that because school definitions of literacy are often based on the ability to read fictional material, boys are at a disadvantage in many assessment exercises. In fact,

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