

The impact of gender, social background, and school location on reading levels in Southern Africa

Literacy data collected in five countries in Southern Africa have shown that while there were no differences between male and female reading levels at the end of primary school, there were, however, considerable variations among pupils coming from different socio-economic groups and living in different locations.

SINCE 1992 the IIEP has been working with many countries in the Southern Africa Sub-region in order to build the capacity of ministries of education to undertake large-scale educational policy research studies that can be used to monitor the quality of education. One of the major outcomes of this initiative has been the implementation of a cross-national survey of schools that gathered data about the conditions of schooling and reading literacy levels of pupils at the upper end of primary school. A total of five countries completed this important study in 1998 as part of the research programme of the *Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality* (SACMEQ). The data collected during the survey covered some 750 schools, 1,500 teachers, and 15,000 pupils and was recently used to address two major questions regarding Grade 6 reading literacy levels. Are there significant differences in the reading literacy levels of boys and girls? How does the magnitude of gender differences compare with the magnitude of differences related to social background and school location?

The reading literacy test used in this study was scored by calculating the percentage of test items that were correct for each pupil. Averages of these percentage correct scores were then calculated for each nation overall and also for sub-groups of pupils defined by gender, social background, and school location. The results of these

analyses have been presented in *Table 1* below.

For example, the first and final entries in the first column of the table show that male Grade 6 pupils in Mauritius had an average score of 52 per cent correct responses on the reading test, whereas the Mauritian national average score for Grade 6 pupils was 53 per cent correct.

It can also be seen from the table that the national average scores for all five countries ranged from a low of 37 per cent correct in Namibia to a high of 53 per cent correct in Mauritius.

Gender differences

In the first two lines of the table, the averages for male and female pupils have been presented. In Mauritius, these figures indicated that the average score for females were three percentage points above the average for males. This small difference was well within the bounds of chance fluctuation in the data and, therefore,

could not be interpreted as statistically significant. The gender differences in average scores for the other four countries were also not statistically significant. They ranged from one to two percentage points. It may also be seen that the course of these differences was not constant across countries.

The absence of gender differences in literacy levels in this Grade 6 study deserves further consideration. *First*, female participation rates at the Grade 6 level, although not shown in the table, were fairly equal for all countries at around 50 per cent. This suggested that the girls were **not** some form of a 'selected elite'. On the other hand, it is widely known that female participation in secondary and tertiary levels was lower than male participation. This could potentially mean that the equally talented girls at the end of primary school were not moving through to higher levels of education. *Second*, this lower female participation at higher levels of education has not always been accompanied by better

Table 1: Reading literacy levels by sub-groups of Grade 6 students

Sub-groups	Average percentage correct on reading literacy test questions					
		Mauritius	Namibia	Zambia	Zanzibar	Zimbabwe
Gender	Male	52	38	39	42	44
	Female	55	37	38	41	46
Socio-economic status	Rich	63	55	41	45	57
	Poor	43	31	33	32	37
School location	Urban	58	57	41	48	55
	Rural	50	31	38	39	41
National Average %		53	37	38	41	45

average examination performance for this sub-group of pupils. One of the countries involved in this study has disclosed that boys are doing much better at secondary school examinations even though the participation rate of girls is lower. This result goes against what would be expected and suggests the need for research to examine whether the educational environment of secondary schools in some parts of Southern Africa is as conducive to learning for girls as it is for boys.

Other differences

The averages on the reading literacy test for the pupils from rich and poor families have also been presented in the table. Since the relative wealth of the five countries was different, a categorization of 'rich' and 'poor' within each country was made on the basis of an inspection of the frequency distribution of a number of possessions in the home. The averages in the table showed that the differences

between the pupils from rich and poor families were quite large. The largest difference of 24 per cent was found in Namibia and the smallest was 8 per cent in Zambia.

The averages on the reading literacy test for the pupils going to urban schools and those going to rural schools in the table revealed that, with the exception of Zambia, there were considerable differences in reading literacy related to school location. The largest differences of 26 per cent were found in Namibia.

To sum up

While there were no differences between boys and girls in reading literacy at the end of primary school, the differences among pupils from different socio-economic groups and living in different locations were quite large. Further analyses revealed no interactions among these three factors, which indicated that boys and girls were reading at similar levels within the same socio-economic group and

within the same school location group.

There are large disparities in wealth in Africa, and the rich tend to live in urban areas where the better teachers prefer to live and the schools are better equipped. It could be concluded that there should be better allocation of teachers and resources so that the rural areas get some of the better teachers and more school materials. Further research to discover the causes of these inequities should provide valuable information that could be used to advise the ministries of education in the SACMEQ countries.

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A detailed article can be found in: Saito, M. (1998). "Gender vs. socio-economic status and school location differences in Grade 6 reading literacy in five African countries". In: *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 249-261. For more information on this research, please contact Mioko Saito at the IIEP.

SACMEQ NEWS

Appointment of first SACMEQ director

THE Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) has recently appointed Mr Friedhelm Voigts as its first full-time Director. In 1991, SACMEQ started life as a small project within the IIEP that was focused on capacity building programmes designed to provide educational planners in Zimbabwe with the skills to undertake large-scale educational policy research on questions related to improving the quality of education.

SACMEQ is now a thriving international non-governmental organization that is permanently housed at the UNESCO Sub-regional Office in Harare,

Zimbabwe. During 1998, seven countries completed SACMEQ national policy studies – five of which were launched in April at the MINEDAF Conference for African Ministers of Education. In 1998, educational planners from 14 ministries of education (Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania – Mainland and Zanzibar – Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) commenced work on the design of SACMEQ's second major policy research project.

Mr Voigts's appointment as SACMEQ Director represents a consolidation of the Consortium's role as a major contributor to policy analysis and development concerning

issues of educational quality. He comes to this position with many years of experience as an educational planner in Namibia and several years as one of SACMEQ's most successful National Research Co-ordinators.

The first task for SACMEQ's Director will be to prepare for the annual meeting of its Managing Committee, scheduled to take place in Harare on the 19 and 20 November 1998. This meeting will review progress to date and then finalize a programme of training and research for 1999.

The staff of the IIEP and the members and friends of the SACMEQ network wish Mr Voigts all the very best in his new and challenging role.

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