



Reading Skills and Gender: An Analysis

The fairness and quality of an education system can be measured by its ability to provide equal opportunities for boys and girls to access school and to learn fundamental skills.

In many parts of the world, girls are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis boys in their opportunities to be enrolled—and remain—in school. In many countries, girls’ enrollment rates in primary and secondary school are less than 80% those of boys (sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia), and girls tend to have higher repetition rates (sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab states) (UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2008*).

Once girls are enrolled in school, however, data from international assessments indicate that in most countries, by grade 5 or 6, girls are doing equally well or even better than boys with regard to reading acquisition (although girls remain at a disadvantage in mathematics and science results). Reading results from African and Latin American countries participating in the francophone Program for Analysis of Education Systems, or PASEC (2004); the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, SAQMEC (2007); and the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study, SERCE (2006) either show no significant gender differences or indicate that girls outperform boys in reading in 37 out of 39 participating countries. A similar trend has been found by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in developed countries.

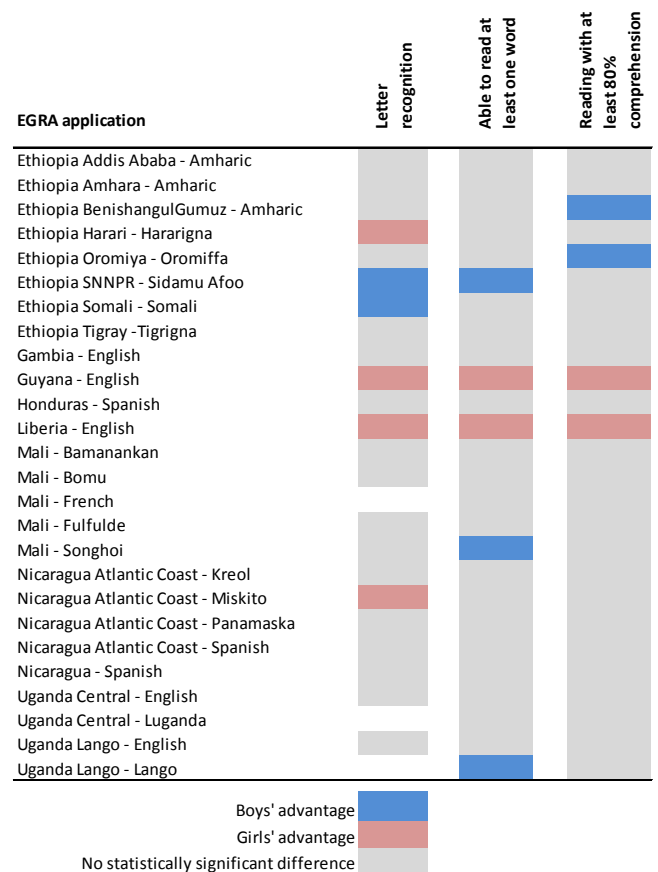
Analyzing gender gaps in the early grades

The results from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in eight countries analyzed below show a trend consistent with the one found for later grades by international assessments. EGRA is designed to easily and accurately measure how well children in the early grades of primary school are acquiring key reading skills, and if not, what areas of instruction need to be improved. EGRA results can tell us whether boys and girls are progressing equally toward achieving reading fluency and compre-

hension and therefore whether they are on target to transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

Exhibit I summarizes the gender differences in EGRA applications conducted at the end of grade 2 or the beginning of grade 3 in Ethiopia, Gambia, Guyana, Honduras, Liberia, Mali, Nicaragua, and Uganda. Boys’ advantage is shown in blue, while girls’ advantage is shown in red. Grey boxes indicate no statistically significant gender difference was found.

Exhibit I. Gender differences in early grade reading skills



Letter recognition. The letter-naming section of EGRA measures whether students are able to correctly identify letters in the language in which they are being taught to read. In general, no significant gender difference was found—exceptions being Guyana, Liberia, the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (Miskito), and the Harari region of Ethiopia, where girls outperformed boys in the number of letters they could identify; and the Southern Nations,

Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR) and Somali regions of Ethiopia, where boys outperformed girls.

Nonreaders. Most EGRA applications have shown no statistically significant gender differences in the percentage of students who cannot read a single word of a short narrative text (grey boxes in Exhibit 1). However, five EGRA applications found significant differences between boys' and girls' skills. A greater percentage of girls than boys were unable to read in Ethiopia (SNNPR region, 79% of girls vs. 60% of boys), Mali (Songhoi language, 89% of girls vs. 78% of boys), and Uganda (Lango region and language, 85% of girls vs. 78% of boys). In contrast, a higher percentage of boys than girls were nonreaders in Guyana and Liberia (30% and 35% of boys vs. 17% and 25% of girls, respectively).

Reading fluency and comprehension. The reading fluency and comprehension section of EGRA assesses how well children are able to read and comprehend a short narrative text passage targeted for the second- grade level. Overall, EGRA results have shown no significant differences in the percentages of boys and girls who can read with at least 80% comprehension by the end of grade 2 (or the beginning of grade 3). Exceptions are the Oromiya and Benishangul-Gumuz regions of Ethiopia, where boys outperformed girls; and Guyana and Liberia, where girls outperformed boys.



Girls in Egypt practice reading as part of the USAID-supported Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes project. Photo: Infonex.

In summary, the EGRA results examined here suggest that, overall, there are no significant gender differences in the development of reading skills in the early grades. It is important, however, that EGRA results—particularly in Africa—have shown that both boys and girls are performing very poorly on most subtasks. For example, in Mali and Uganda, the percentage of students reading with at least 80% comprehension was as low as 0%. The absence of statistically significant gender differences may therefore stem from low variability in results.

In addition, a closer look at EGRA results suggests that gender disparities in early grade reading skills need to be

analyzed taking the specific context into account. For example, while Ethiopia results in general showed no statistically significant gender difference in most regions, when results were disaggregated by school location, girls outperformed boys in urban schools, but boys outperformed girls in rural schools. However, this was not the case in Kenya, where girls at the end of third grade outperformed boys in both rural and urban schools (results not shown in Exhibit 1). Thus, gender differences in early grade reading skills may vary within a country and can be context-specific. This is an area that warrants further research.

Interventions to Improve Reading Acquisition: Effects on the Gender Gap

To date, interventions designed to improve reading outcomes (such as EGRA Plus in Liberia, and Systematic Method for Reading Success [SMRS] in South Africa) have shown similar benefits for both boys and girls, and occasionally have shown a differential treatment effect favoring the gender that was at a disadvantage at the outset of the intervention (as in The Gambia). As was noted earlier, in countries evaluated for this brief, student performance overall was very poor and gender differences were found not to be significant. Therefore, attention should be focused on improving student performance in general.

When significant gender differences do exist and gender parity needs to be improved, it may be necessary to incorporate into reading interventions specific strategies to address the gender gap. Interventions should take into account root causes of gender disparities to ensure that both boys and girls have access to school, remain enrolled, and are able to learn in a safe and supportive environment. Gender-sensitive interventions should create school and classroom environments that are equally inclusive of all students. Examples include developing reading materials appealing to both girls and boys (i.e., ensuring that stories include female as well as male characters), and training teachers on explicit strategies for ensuring girls' and boys' equal participation in the classroom.

More Information

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