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Gender differences in Foundation Phase learners' literacy achievements

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Abstract: *In South Africa and internationally, numerous studies provide evidence of an incessant global pattern of boys' underachievement in literacy relative to girls. These studies focus more on the Intermediate Phase (Grade 4 to 6) and have sparked substantial attention among researchers and policy makers but little is known about the gender gap in literacy achievement in the Foundation Phase (Grade 1 to 3) in South Africa. This study aims to determine educators' views on gender differences in literacy achievement of South African Foundation Phase learners in selected primary schools. Thirteen Foundation Phase educators from five English medium primary schools in Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal were interviewed. The results suggest that in the Foundation Phase girls significantly outperform boys on literacy tasks and that the most critical determinants of girls' superiority in literacy achievement are greater motivation, higher levels of reading enjoyment, greater self-confidence, completion of homework, positive attitudes towards reading and writing, and greater effort and thought when writing. The findings of this study amplify the exigency for the improvement of boys' literacy achievement in the early years of schooling.*

Key Words*: Foundation Phase, literacy, gender differences, ANA, EGRA, PISA, SACMEQ, PIRLS*

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I. Introduction

In the context of this study, reading and writing constitute literacy. The ability to read and comprehend a simple text is one of the most essential skills a child can learn. The quality of writing is exacerbated, particularly when learners struggle to read. As school work becomes more cognitively challenging with each succeeding grade, learners who experience reading and writing difficulties may either drop out of school or continue to repeat grades. In this era, it appears that boys may find schooling more challenging than girls.

Boys' underachievement in reading relative to girls is well documented in various large-scale national and international literacy studies. It is therefore understood that gender differences in literacy achievement, particularly reading, is exhaustively researched but in South Africa, qualitative research related to gender differences in Foundation Phase learners' literacy achievement is relatively sparse. Nevertheless, majority of the findings from national and international literacy studies conducted with Intermediate Phase learners indicate a large gender gap that is in favour of females. This article provides further evidence of this perennial global problem. I examine the results of various international (Reading Literacy Study [RLS], Program for International Student Assessment [PISA], Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality [SACMEQ], Progress in International Literacy Study [PIRLS], and Early Grade Reading Assessment [EGRA]), and national (Annual National Assessment [ANA]) literacy studies. I then report on the educators' perceptions on gender differences in literacy achievement of South African Foundation Phase learners, based on interviews conducted with 13 Foundation Phase educators from five English medium Primary schools in Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal. Although the sample was small, input from the educators provide valuable information that could assist in improving the literacy levels of Foundation Phase boys. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do international studies reveal about the literacy achievement of boys relative to girls?
2. Based on the results of national and international literacy studies what are the literacy achievements of boys relative to girls in South African primary schools?
3. What are the perceptions of educators in selected English medium primary schools about gender differences in reading and writing achievement of South African Foundation Phase learners?
4. What educational implications arise from the results of this study?

II. International and National Literacy Studies

Reading Literacy Study

As far back as 1990 and 1991 the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Reading Literacy Study (RLS) was administered to about 200 000 learners in approximately

9 000 schools in 32 countries (Wolf, 1995:1). RLS aimed to determine the average levels of reading literacy among 9- and 14-year-olds (Elly, 1992:3).Substantial differences in achievement between boys and girls were observed in all the countries; with girls outperforming boys (Elly, 1992:56). Countries that reported the greatest gender discrepancies were Denmark, Iceland, and New Zealand at age 9 and Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Ireland, and Canada at age 14 (Shiel & Cosgrove, 2002:691). An important point to acknowledge is that the gender differences in reading literacy that were recorded approximately 30 years ago continue to persist in several subsequent literacy studies.

Programme for International Student Assessment

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was first implemented in 2000. It is an international assessment of reading, mathematics and science literacy that is administered to 15-year-olds every three years (Fleischman, Hopstock, Pelczar& Shelley, 2010:1). For reading literacy, PISA measures how well 15-year-olds are able to apply different reading methods to a variety of reading materials, such as government forms, local newspaper articles, school manuals, books and magazines (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000:3).

In PISA 2000, girls achieved significantly higher mean scores than boys on combined reading literacy in all 32 participating countries (with an overall average difference of 32 points) and were strongly represented at the highest reading proficiency levels, while boys were more strongly represented at the lowest levels (OECD, 2001:123, 2003:11; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000:10). Similar findings were reported in PISA 2003 in every country, except in Liechtenstein (OECD, 2003:35). A difference of 40 points in reading achievement separated females from males in Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Serbia and Thailand, and in Iceland the average gender difference was 58 points (OECD, 2004:284). In addition, comparable results were evident in PISA 2006 in 56 of the 57 participating countries (Shiel & Eivers, 2009:352). Differences ranged from 17 points in Chile to 66 points in Qatar. The OECD average difference was 38 points. Furthermore, the results indicate that on average girls were stronger than boys on higher-level reading processes (Shiel & Eivers, 2009:351-352).

Similarly, in PISA 2009 and PISA 2012, girls scored higher, on average, than boys on the combined reading literacy scale in all 65 participating countries (Fleischman et al., 2010:12; OECD, 2015:24). The gender gap in PISA 2009 ranged from an average difference of 9 points in Colombia to 62 points in Albania and in PISA 2012 the overall average reading achievement difference was 38 points. Between 2000 and 2012 this gender gap [favouring girls] widened in 11 countries (OECD, 2014:4).

PISA 2018 presented a recurrence of the surge in higher reading scores ingirls (an average of 30 points more than boys). The narrowest gender gaps [less than 20 points] were evident in Argentina, Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang [China], Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama and Peru; and the widest [more than 50 points] were observed in Finland, Jordan, the Republic of North Macedonia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (OECD, 2019:16).

Significant gender differences in reading achievement, in favour of girls, are observed in many OECD countries across all PISA cycles. This evidence provides OECD countries with a common focus to enforce vigorous strategies in order to reduce the reading achievement gap between the genders. Although South Africa did not participate in any of the PISA cycles, the results emerging can be beneficial in understanding the depth of this global trend.

Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Quality Education

The Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) was established in 1995 and presently consists of 15 Ministries (Moloi & Strauss, 2005:2). It aims to track trends in reading achievement and numeracy skills of Grade 6 leaners; and to monitor, assess and improve the quality of education in Sub-Saharan Africa (DBE, 2010:7; Spaull, 2011:13; Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2016:1). It is administered to Grade 6 learners approximately every seven years (1995, 2000, 2007, 2013). The overall means for the reading test scores of SACMEQ participating countries in SACMEQ I, II, II and IV are summarised according to gender in table 1.

Table no 1: Shows the means for the reading test scores of SACMEQ participating countries according to gender in SACMEQ I, II, III and IV

Country	**SACMEQ I (1995)**		**SACMEQ II (2000)**		**SACMEQ III (2007)**		**SACMEQ IV (2013)**	
	Boys	**Girls**	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Boys**	**Girls**
Botswana	DNP	DNP	507.2	534.4	519.7	549.4	550.6	584.8
Kenya	544.5	542.1	546.4	546.6	544.1	542.1	580.3	574.9
Lesotho	DNP	DNP	446.7	454.8	463.5	471.5	DNA	DNA
Malawi	466.9	457.8	431.9	425.6	438	429	DNA	DNA
Mauritius	544.3	556.3	523.1	550.7	559	589	573.9	602.7
Mozambique	DNP	DNP	518.4	514.1	478.4	473.2	DNA	DNA
Namibia	474.6	471.4	446.0	451.3	490	504	529.4	546.3
Seychelles	DNP	DNP	549.7	614.2	544	607	DNA	DNA
South Africa	DNP	DNP	478.3	504.8	484	506	528.2	548.7
Swaziland	DNP	DNP	525.0	533.9	545	554	567.1	573.1
Tanzania (Mainland)	DNP	DNP	554.3	538.2	586	570	DNA	DNA
Tanzania (Zanzibar)	488.4	489.9	479.1	477.4	526.2	539.6	559.6	564.8
Uganda	DNP	DNP	479.6	485.9	482	476	518.6	506.5
Zambia	479.8	474.7	439.8	440.7	437	432	DNA	DNA
Zimbabwe	500.6	485.9	DNP	DNP	501.5	512.5	DNA	DNA
Average	**499.9**	**496.9**	**494.7**	**505.2**	**506.6**	**517**	**551**	**562.7**

Source: Generated by the author based on SACMEQ data from the following sources: DBE, 2010:51, 2017:36; Department of Educational Planning and Research Services Research Unit,2018:27; Dwarkan, 2017:78; Karogo, Matei, Kipchirchir, Kawira & Omunyang'oli 2019:113; Ministry of Education and Sports 2017:64; Mwinyi, Wazir & Salim 2016:105; Shabalala, Nxumalo & Shongwe 2017:10; Shigwedha, Nakashole, Auala, Amakuyuwa & Ailonga, 2017:89; The SACMEQ, 2020.
Note: 'DNP' denotes 'did not participate' and 'DNA' denotes 'data not available'.

In five (Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe) of the seven Ministries that participated in SACMEQ I, a higher percentage of boys than girls reached the minimum level of mastery in reading literacy. The gender difference in mean scores ranged from 2.4 in Kenya to 14.7 in Zimbabwe, in favour of boys. In the other two Ministries (Mauritius and Zanzibar), girls performed better than boys. The overall average gender difference in mean scores for SACMEQ I is 3, favouring boys. This difference is not significant.

In SACMEQ II, in ten of the 14 participating Ministries, the reading scores of girls were higher than those of boys. In four Ministries (Botswana, Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa) girls achieved significantly highly reading scores than boys but in Tanzania (Mainland) the reading scores of boys were significantly higher than those of girls. In the other school systems, the differences were small to negligible. The overall average gender difference in mean scores for SACMEQ II is 10.5, in favour of females.

The SACMEQ III results indicate that the overall average reading scores were 517 and 506.6 for girls and boys, respectively. Although the girls' average score exceeded the boys' average score by 10.4 points at the overall SACMEQ level, the difference was not statistically significant. The reading scores of girls were higher than boys in nine of the fifteen Ministries. Significant differences in reading achievement in favour of girls were observed in six Ministries (Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Zanzibar). Boys' scores for reading were higher than girls' in six Ministries; apart from Tanzania (Mainland) where the difference in scores was negligible.

From the available data on only eight Ministries in SACMEQ IV, in six of the Ministries the gender differences in reading achievement were in favour of girls. In four Ministries (Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa) there were marked gender differences in reading achievement, with girls outperforming boys. In Kenya and Uganda boys performed slightly better than girls. The overall average reading score for girls was 562.7 and for boys 551; a difference of 11.7, in favour of girls. In the absence of the availability of data from the other seven Ministries, the overall average SACMEQ IV results in table 1 should be interpretedwith caution.

Since South Africa's first participation in SACMEQ, reading performance for South African girls and boys did not change much between 2000 and 2014 with girls performing consistently better than boys. In

SACMEQ II, SACMEQ III and SACMEQ IV the average reading scores of girls were 27, 22, and 21 points higher than those of the boys; respectively. From SACMEQ II to SACMEQ IV there has been a slight decrease in the gender gap. The reading achievement of both boys and girls increased significantly between SACMEQ III and SACMEQ IV.

The overall SACMEQ results (with the exception of SACMEQ I) illustrate that reading achievement scores are generally tilted towards girls. This pattern of reading achievement differences between boys and girls across SACMEQ countries could point to areas where additional educational resources might be focused. This could assist in balancing the reading and writing achievement scales of boys and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Progress in International Literacy Study

PIRLS is an international assessment of reading literacy that is administered to learners in their fourth year of schooling and is conducted every five years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Shiel & Eivers, 2009:346; Mullis, Martin, Foy & Hooper, 2017:3). From the inception of PIRLS in 2001, the gender gap has benefited girls and does not appear to be closing. In Grade 4, girls surpassed boys on the combined reading literacy scale on average in every PIRLS 2001 participating country. Internationally, the average score discrepancy between boys and girls ranged from 8 points [Italy] to 27 points [Belize, Iran, and New Zealand] (Ogle, Sen, Pahlke, Jocelyn, Kastberg, Roey & Williams, 2003:10).

Internationally, in PIRLS 2006, among Grade 4 learners, girls scored an average of 509 points and boys attained an average score of 492 (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Du Toit, Sherman & Archer, 2008:20, Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007:48); an average difference of 17 points [in favour of girls]. Girls achieved significantly higher scores than boys in all except two countries, Spain and Luxembourg, where the average achievement was equivalent between the genders (Mullis et al.,2007:3) and differences ranged from 5 points [Belgium] to 67 points [Kuwait] (Shiel & Eivers, 2009:352). In South Africa, Grade 4 girls had an average achievement score of 271, scoring 36 points more than the Grade 4 boys [235] (Howie et al., 2008). This gender difference is presumed to be amongst the highest in the world. The difference between South African Grade 5 girls' average achievement score of 319 and the average achievement score of boys [283] is also 36 points (Mullis et al., 2007:48).

In the 2011 prePIRLS and PIRLS girls outperformed boys in every country. In prePIRLS 2011, in South Africa, Grade 4 girls [average score of 475] outperformed the boys [average score of 446], by 29 points (Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse & Zimmerman, 2012:28). In PIRLS 2011 the South African Grade 5 girls [an average of 434 points] obtained higher scores than the boys [an average of 408], a difference of 26 points (Howie et al., 2012:37). From 2006 to 2011 there was a narrowing of the gender gap in reading achievement for South African Grades 4 and 5.

Of the 50 countries that participated in the most recent PIRLS study [2016], girls had higher reading achievement scores in 48 countries (Mullis et al., 2017:35). Two countries (Portugal and Macao SAR) had no differences in average reading achievement between the genders. The international average for girls was 520 and for boys it was 501 (Mullis et al., 2017:36); a difference of 19 points in favour of girls. South African Grade 4 girls achieved an average score of 347 and South African Grade 4 boys obtained an average of 295 (Mullis et al., 2017:36); a significant difference of 52 points. This average difference is the highest since South Africa's first participation in PIRLS in 2006. From 2011 to 2016 the gender gap for South African Grade 4 learners widened by 23 points. South African Grade 5 girls attained an average score of 421 and Grade 5 boys obtained an average of 391 (Mullis et al., 2017:37); a substantial difference of 30 points.

In summary, the PIRLS results examined here suggest that, overall, girls significantly outperformed boys in reading skills in virtually every participating country as they have consistently done throughout all the PIRLS cycles since 2001. This is a growing global concern for boys' literacy achievement levels.

Early Grade Reading Assessment

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) was developed in 2006 by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International. EGRA has been implemented in approximately 60 countries, with 23 of them in Africa (Gove, Habib, Piper & Ralaingita, 2013:374). EGRA is an oral reading assessment that is individually administered to Grades 1, 2 and 3 learners and it assesses basic foundational skills [letter-name and letter-sound knowledge, syllable decoding, familiar and nonfamiliar word reading, oral reading fluency, and listening and reading comprehension] for literacy acquisition (Sprenger-Charolles, 2008a:1; Roskos, Strickland, Haase & Malik, 2009:1). The assessment takes approximately 15 minutes to administer per learner.

The EGRA administrations across Sub-Saharan Africa prior to 2009 revealed that in most cases, girls significantly outperformed boys on early reading tasks (Piper, 2009:5). For example, in the 2007 Gambian EGRA study, girls obtained higher scores than boys in six of the ten tasks (Sprenger-Charolles, 2008b:9). However, this trend was not observed as the years progressed. The EGRA that was conducted in only one province [Katanga] in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in October 2011 showed that boys

outperformed girls in all grades in majority of subtests; the vocabulary subtest showed that in Grades 2 and 3, boys knew on average 0.3 and 0.65 more words than girls, respectively (Torrente, Aber & Shivshanker, 2011:38). In addition, the 2016 EGRA results in Niger showed that girls' mean scores for reading were significantly lower than boys in both the languages (Hausa and French). The mean scores for girls were 10 [wpm] in Hausa and 5 [wpm] in French; whereas the boys mean scores were 16 [wpm] in Hausa and 9 [wpm] in French (Hobbs & Tobin, 2016:14). The probability of scoring zero in the Hausa assessments increased if the learner is female, with 30% of girls scoring zero compared to 18% of boys. Furthermore, the 2016 EGRA results in Sierra Leone revealed that the average reading fluency score for girls was 6 [wpm] compared to 19 [wpm] for boys and in 2015, 79% of girls scoring zero in Grade 2 compared to 66% of boys (Hobbs & Tobin, 2016:15).

Although, in 2014 and 2016, in Ethiopia it was found that the EGRA subtasks did not reveal statistically significant differences in reading achievement between the genders (RTI International, 2014:31; American Institute for Research, 2019:27), by 2018 boys tended to perform better than girls in reading. The Grade 2 and 3 EGRA results indicate that boys were ahead of girls in reading skills in most languages. In Grade 2, significant differences, favouring boys, were noticed in Aff Somali [5.8 wpm], Haddiysa [4.3 wpm], and Sidamu Affo [5.3 wpm] (American Institute for Research, 2019). In Grade 3, considerable differences, favouring boys, were noted in Aff Somali [8.3 wpm)], Haddiysa [6.5 wpm], Sidamu Affo [7.6 wpm], Afaan Oromo [7.0 wpm], and Wolayttatto [6.7 wpm], whereas in Tigrigna the difference was marginal [3.5 wpm] (American Institute for Research, 2019:27). In both the grades girls achieved slightly higher scores only in Amharic, but the difference was insignificant. These EGRA results in Sub-Saharan Africa generally reveal a trend that is contrary to the SACMEQ results.

On the other hand, available EGRA data from Egypt (not a Sub-Saharan country) and Afghanistan revealed that girls outperformed boys. In March 2013, in a nationally representative sample of 200 Egyptian schools, Grade 3 girls demonstrated higher levels of competence in their knowledge of letter sounds, reading non words, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension than Grade 3 boys. A greater percentage of boys [16%] than girls [13%] were non-readers (LaTowsky, Cummiskey & Collins, 2013:21). The 2014 Grades 2 and 3 EGRA results in Afghanistan showed significant improvements in reading for boys and girls from baseline to end line. However, despite these improvements, the gender difference in average test scores remained statistically significant, with boys averaging 35 [wpm] and girls42 [wpm] (Hobbs & Tobin, 2016:14).

Encouraging strides towards gender parity in reading achievement was observed in some countries. The 2011 EGRA results at the end of Grade 2 or beginning of Grade 3 in Ethiopia, Gambia, Guyana, Honduras, Liberia, Mali, Nicaragua, and Uganda suggest that overall, there were no significant gender differences in the development of reading skills in the early grades (USAID, 2011:2). Moreover, the gender disparity that was evident in the Somalian baseline EGRA in 2013 had disappeared by 2015. In 2013 the mean reading scores for boys and girls were 31 (wpm) and 26 (wpm), respectively. In the 2015 end line assessment, there was no difference in scores between the genders (Hobbs & Tobin, 2016:13). Likewise, the Ghanaian EGRA study showed that differences in performance between boys and girls were very minimal across the EGRA subtasks, with boys performing only slightly better than girls (Kochetkova & Brombacher, 2013:14). The differences in performance were not statistically significant. Similar findings were reported in the 2008 EGRA in Senegal. Among children reading in Wolof, there were no significant differences in reading scores between boys and girls (Sprenger-Charolles, 2008a:9). In addition, the 2014 baseline EGRA results of Grades 2 and 3 learners in Nepal showed that the difference in mean oral reading fluency between the girls [20.9 wpm] and boys [20.3 wpm] was not significant and the average scores of boys and girls on all subtasks showed no statistically significant difference; except for the zero scores on the letter sound subtask in grade 2, where zero scores for girls [10%] were higher than for boys [6%] (Sitabkhan & DeStefano, 2014:6).

In the South African EGRA study of Grade 1 learners in January 2009, no statistically significant differences in reading skills were found between boys and girls; although a handful of higher-achieving learners on the letter sound recognition tasks were all girls (Piper, 2009:1). This baseline EGRA was conducted in three provinces [Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West] in South Africa (Piper, 2009:1); with ten treatment and five control schools from each province. A total of 650 learners were assessed. Between February and June, the Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) programme was implement in 291 treatment schools. A post-assessment using the EGRA toolkit was implemented in June 2009, with a sample of 546 learners (Piper, 2009:1). The results revealed an advantage for girls over boys in gains in literacy skill measures, such as letter sounding fluency, word naming, oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. In the absence of sufficient nationally representative EGRA data it would be premature to make assumptions on gender differences in reading achievement in the Foundation Phase in South Africa.

Most of the EGRA results in the discussion generally indicate that the differences in reading achievement between boys and girls were insignificant; showing a positive advance towards gender parity. However, when gender differences were found, in most cases they tended to tilt in favour of boys. These results

reveal a trend that is inconsistent with the one found in the later grades by international literacy studies. The evidence from RLS, PISA, SACMEQ and PIRLS reinforce a trend in gender-based discrepancies in reading achievement which tend to favour girls in virtually every country that has participated in these studies. The findings of SACMEQ and PIRLS in the area of reading and its relationship to gender provide the South African DBE and educators a common focus for curricula reform that could result in increases in achievement of boys.

Annual National Assessment

The Annual National Assessments (ANA) were annual, nationally-standardised tests of literacy and numeracy achievement for South African learners in Grade 1 to 6 and Grade 9 (DBE, 2014:26). Trial runs of ANA began in 2008 and continued in 2009. It was only in 2011 that ANA produced adequately standardised data which allowed for analysis. Due to numerous criticisms of ANA, the assessment was discontinued. The final cycle of ANA was in 2014. Table 2 shows the overall average ANA literacy scores of South African Grades 3 and 6 learners according to gender.

Table no 2: Shows the mean literacy scores of South African Grades 3 and 6 learners according to gender in ANA 2014

Average mark				
	Grade 3		Grade 6	
Province	**Boys**	**Girls**	**Boys**	**Girls**
Eastern Cape	48.2	57.2	50.7	58.5
Free State	55.8	62.3	59.8	66.5
Gauteng	56.4	63.8	60.9	68.1
KwaZulu-Natal	55.4	63.8	60.9	68.1
Limpopo	46.2	56.0	50.6	57.7
Mpumalanga	50.2	58.4	58.4	65.4
Northern Cape	48.9	56.6	52.5	61.2
North West	48.7	56.9	57.8	64.7
Western Cape	54.2	61.7	61.1	68.3
National	52.2	60.5	59.0	66.3

*Source:*DBE, 2014:86-87

From table 4 it is evident that in ANA 2014 (Home Language), girls performed better than boys in both the grades and in all the provinces. In Grade 3 Limpopo had the greatest gender gap; a difference of 9.8 and in Grade 6 Northern Cape had the highest gender gap; a difference of 8.7. In both the grades Free State had the lowest difference in gender gap. Although these results are indicative of girls' superiority in literacy performance, the differences in both the grades are not statistically significant. The overall gender differences in literacy scores in Grade 3 is 8.3 and in Grade 6 is 7.3.

The literature review shows that gender discrepancies in reading achievement that existed approximately three decades ago (from the RLS in 1990 and 1991 to present-day) still persist in numerous countries. In addition, female literacy advantages have been found in the national assessment (ANA). In line with international trends of reading achievement of boys in relation to girls, national interventions should be targeted at boys. The finding that girls generally perform better than boys in literacy underlines how important it is that schools encourage reading engagement, and reading and writing proficiency in the early years.

III. Study locale

This study was conducted in five Government English-medium primary schools (School A to E) in Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal. Four of the five schools are located in urban areas and one of the schools is situated in a semi-rural area. The learner population is diverse; consisting of learners from a variety of linguistic, cultural, educational and racial groups.

Some of these learners entered school with emergent literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and oral language which are known to be fundamental to literacy development; while some learners entered school lacking these key skills and may be at increased risk of difficulties in language acquisition. In addition, there is also great variation in the home environments from which children enter school; some learners reside in urban areas, some in rural areas, others in townships, and some in informal settlements. Some of these children are English Second Language (ESL) learners but they have rich linguistic and cultural experiences. Some learners live near the schools, while others travel long distances to get to the schools. Many of these learners do have access to schools that are located close to their homes but their parents preferred to enroll their children in urban English medium schools. The educator-learner ratios in the schools vary from 1:38 to 1:45.

The five schools in this study have sufficient resources in order to cater for the educational needs of the learners. They have highly skilled principals, and competent educators with varying degrees of qualifications and experiences.

IV. Methodology

Research design

This research took the form of a qualitative study. In order to understand and interpret the perceptions of educators regarding gender differences in literacy achievement among Foundation Phase learners, a phenomenological investigation was utilised. The interview which is regarded as the most prominent data collection tool in qualitative research (Punch, 2009:144) was used as a means of data collection.

Ethical clearance was attained from the University of South Africa. The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and the principals of the five schools granted permission to conduct the research. In addition, written consent was obtained from the educators who participated in the research.

Sampling

Purposeful sampling ensured that "information-rich key informants" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:319) were selected from the five English medium primary schools in Port Shepstone. The five schools are within close proximity to each other. These samples were chosen because they were likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena that was investigated.

Both male and female Foundation Phase educators were selected. This did not ensure maximum variation because majority of the Foundation Phase educators in the five schools are females. Foundation Phase Heads of Department (HODs) and Foundation Phase level one educators were selected.

While there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry (Paton (2002) in Strydom & Delport, 2005:328); Dörnyei (2011:127) suggests an initial sample size of six to ten participants; and McMillan and Schumacher (2006:321) argue that purposeful samples can range from one to forty or more. As sampling in qualitative research is undertaken after the investigation has commenced (Strydom & Delport, 2005:328); in this study sampling was conducted simultaneously as data was collected and continued until data saturation was reached. The sample consisted of 13 participants; males and females.

Research technique

In an attempt to obtain in-depth information about the participants' perceptions and knowledge and to understand the participants' everyday experiences when teaching literacy in the classrooms; individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with educators. The interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions on an interview schedule. The interview schedule assisted in directing the interview; thus, allowing the researcher the freedom to digress and probe for additional information by encouraging the participants to elaborate on issues raised.

The questions addressed issues specifically related to gender differences in Foundation Phase learners' reading and writing achievement. Participants' biographical data were also obtained. A pilot study was conducted with educators from another school. The interviews were conducted at the schools and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis and interpretation of data

In qualitative studies there are no set procedures for data analysis (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006:364). Thus, in this study, data analysis was a continuous process which involved constant reference to the original field notes to validate conclusions. The topics embedded in the research instrument were utilised for data analysis. Each transcript was read to find regularities in the data. The regularities in the data were highlighted so that themes could be found. The developed themes were used to report the experiences of the participants.

V. Results of the study and discussion

Biographical data

The participants were thirteen Foundation Phase educators (one male and twelve females) from five English medium primary schools in Port Shepstone. Demographic data regarding the participants' school, gender, grade currently teaching and years of teaching experience were collected. Gender discrepancy in staffing was evident in the five research sites. There were only three male educators in the five schools and only one of them was a participant in the study. The interviewees were three educators from School A, two from School B, two from School C, three from School D, and three from School E. Of the thirteen educators interviewed, three taught Grade 1 learners, four taught Grade 2 learners and six taught Grade 3 learners.

All the educators who were interviewed have numerous years of teaching experience, ranging from eight to 35 years. The average years of teaching experience among the 13 educators is 20,7. In the Foundation Phase educators are required to teach any grade from Grade 1 to Grade 3. This implies that generally Foundation Phase educators are not expected to teach the same grade each year. Consequently, all the Foundation Phase educators have several years of experience teaching learners from Grade 1 to Grade 3. I was

therefore satisfied that the educators' responses about gender differences in Foundation Phase learners reading and writing achievement were based on the knowledge and experience gained over an extensive period of time.

Educators' views on gender differences in reading achievement among Foundation Phase learners

The widely held views of the educators converge with the results of most of the quantitative studies discussed in the literature review that revealed higher levels of reading achievement in girls than boys. Educator 13 emphasised, '*From my experience I've always found the girls to be quicker and better readers'* and Educator 6 stated, '*I think that in the Foundation Phase the girls read better'.*

Academic achievement is rarely attributed to ability alone (Pulford, Woodward & Taylor, 2018:678). Learners' motivation to read and write, and the effort that they expend plays a critical role in their achievements. Motivation, which relates to the choice of an action, the persistence with it, and the attitudes and affective states that influence the degree of effort that learners make to learn to read (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003:614; Ellis, 2000:75) is perceived to be more prevalent in girls than boys (Moss and Washbrook, 2016:4; Merisuo-Storm, 2006:111, 117). The findings of this study reinforce a trend which suggests that girls are more motivated to read than boys. Educator 1 '*found that girls are able to cope with reading better than boys'* because '*the girls are more eager to learn English … They are first to come up to read.Somehow girls, I feel they are motivated. They are much more motivated to want to learn, to practise, to improve their literacy levels but boys they have to be pushed.'* Similarly, the OECD (2015:20, 32) found that girls tended to be highly motivated to do well in school and many boys found school not in sync with their interests and, therefore were not motivated to work in school.

Because girls are more motivated to read than boys, Educator 6 asserted, '*… they enjoy reading'* and Educator 7 felt that they *'are more advanced.'* Likewise, Merisuo-Storm (2006:111, 117) found that girls enjoyed reading significantly more than boys. Similar findings were observed in the PISA 2009 and PISA 2018 results; which showed that in all the countries that participated [except in Korea in PISA 2009], girls demonstrated greater enjoyment of reading than boys (OECD, 2015:47, 2019:16).

The PISA 2009 results suggest a strong correlation between reading enjoyment and reading achievement. It was found that learners who enjoyed reading the most performed significantly better in reading than learners who enjoyed reading the least; and that better readers tended to read more because they were motivated to read, thus leading to improved vocabulary and comprehension skills (OECD, 2015:45). This has dire consequences for the reading achievement levels of Foundation Phase boys as they showed very little interest in reading.

Another affective factor that played a crucial role in boys' underachievement in reading relative to girls, is lack of confidence. It was found that girls are more confident readers as stated by Educator 5, '*I think the girls are more expressive than the boys. Like if you heard me earlier when we did reading you would have found that the girls would change their voices whereas the boys are shyer to do so.'* This is consistent with research that showed that boys were more inclined to have lower levels of confidence when reading than girls (Cole, Jane, Suggett & Wardlaw, 2016:11; Uusen & Müürsepp, 2012:1802). In the Foundation Phase learners are very often required to read aloud. Many learners are afraid of making mistakes; consequently, they find reading aloud terrifying and most learners, especially boys, would like to avoid it (Merisuo-Storm, 2006:111, 123).

Lack of confidence may inhibit learners' abilities to reading fluently and with expression. Conversely, high self-confidence can propel learners, thus motivating them to read and persevere (Pulford et al., 2018:678). Consequently, self-confidence plays a pivotal role in reading, particularly reading aloud. Much of boys' lack of motivation to read and write can be attributed to the limited confidence they frequently have in their abilities (Senn, 2012:215). Self-confidence enables high-achieving learners to reach their potential (OECD, 2015:31). Unfortunately, for many Foundation Phase boys even if they are high achieving learners, lack of confidence may hinder their progress in reading.

The findings of this study revealed that boys showed very little interest in doing their reading homework, thus they were more likely to achieve lower reading scores than girls. This was emphasised by Educator 1, who said, *'…if you give them* (referring to the girls) *a written text and tell them to go home and practise, they will do it but the boys are most likely not to …,'* as did Educator 6, who asserted, *'The boys want to do more practical stuff and they rather be making things.'* The PISA 2012 results revealed that on average girls spent 5.5 hours per week doing homework while boys spent less than 4.5 hours (OECD, 2015:49). The results also showed that doing homework was associated with improved reading performance and; as boys spent less time doing homework their performance suffered (OECD, 2015:49).

Two educators felt that the difference between the performance of boys and girls in reading was negligible. Limbrick, Wheldall and Madelaine (2012:355) also found that there were few, if any, gender differences in reading in the early school years. Similarly, Reynolds, Scheiber,Hajovsky & Kaufman

(2015:335) identified a small but consistent advantage for females in reading. The views of the two educators in this study also converge with the EGRA studies which generally showed insignificant differences in reading achievement between boys and girls.

There is a strong relationship between phonics and reading. If learners have a strong foundation regarding the acquisition of phonics, they would be able to break down words, and to recognise initial sounds in words, and word endings with much ease when reading. Thus, Educator 12 emphasised this point, saying, '*I find if they are able to use the phonic method to be able to recognise and read words, it's both, girls and boys can read just as well'.*

Only Educator 10 was ambivalent about the reading achievement of girls in relation to boys. She argued, '*Well, I don't know. I haven't really made a distinct note but if I talk about my current class, I just have a handful of boys who give me trouble* (referring to reading)*.'* The views of Educator 10 suggest that gender differences in reading achievement may go unnoticed in the Foundation Phase and this could exacerbate the reading achievement disparities between the genders in the later grades.

Overall, considerable gender disparities in motivation to read, reading enjoyment, self-confidence when reading and completion of homework (in favour of girls) appear to be prevalent at the selected schools. In addition, the gender difference in reading performance appears to be mainly attributed to a motivation gap. If boys had a similar value on the index of motivation to read as girls, the gender difference in reading achievement could be reduced. This implies that more boys may enjoying reading, develop self-confidence when reading and complete their homework. As this study revealed that motivation to read is strongly associated with higher levels of reading achievement, increasing levels of motivation may be the key to increasing the reading achievement levels of boys.

The RLS revealed that in five countries where 9-year-old girls were found to have significantly higher levels of reading literacy than boys; 71% of the primary school educators were female (Elly, 1992:58). In this study 12 of the 13 participants are females. Thus, future studies could investigate the hypothesis that boys' literacy achievement relative to girls' is reduced by the preponderance of female educators in the Foundation Phase.

Educators' views on gender differences in writing achievement among Foundation Phase learners

As mentioned earlier, 11 out of 13 educators felt that in the early years of schooling, stark differences in reading achievement, in favour of girls, exist between boys and girls. Since reading is an antecedent to writing and 'fluent readers are usually skillful writers and struggling readers are usually poor writers' (Merisuo-Storm, 2006:123); it was anticipated that girls would also outperform boys in writing. This was corroborated by Educator 6, who stated, '*There again* (referring to writing) *I think it's because the girls read more and they have more ideas*' and also supported by Educator 13, who emphasised, '*Even with writing I find that the girls are always writing better sentences and stories than the boys'* and Educator 9 who asserted, '*Even with writing, girls tend to do better, much better.'* These findings concur with quantitative research that showed that girls enjoyed writing far more than boys and they scored significantly higher in writing than boys (Merisuo-Storm, 2006:120, 124).

This study also found that girls were more creative and invested greater effort when writing stories. Consequently, they had greater confidence in their ability to write. Educators 12, 1 and 10 highlighted this point, saying, '*Girls definitely tend to put more thought into their writing while boys just want to write and complete the activity', 'The girls, definitely the girls … do better than the boys'* (referring to writing), and '*My girls write better than my boys';* respectively. Comparable findings were reported in which girls were found to be more inclined than boys to focus and plan schoolwork, manage their studies effectively, to persist in their endeavours and to have better work ethic; whereas boys were more inclined than girls to 'self-sabotage' (Martin, 2004:142; Jackman & Morrain-Webb, 2019:7). In addition, studies also revealed that boys were more reluctant writers than girls and they tended to produce shorter written compositions containing fewer correctly spelled words which were judged to be of a lower quality than texts produced by girls (Merisuo-Storm, 2006:111; Adams & Simmons, 2018:235). This suggests that male learners are at greater risk for writing failure than are females and may require constant support and encouragement in order to improve their confidence in their writing skills. If educators employ statements that attribute to learners' successes or failures in writing tasks to effort; these may assist boys to understand their ability to control their performance (Wilson & Trainin, 2007:278).

Only Educator 2 felt that '*the boys are able to write better'*;and only Educator 4 who stated that '*you will find a balance of both'* felt thatthe difference between the performance of boys and girls in writing is insignificant.

Since poor language skills at age 5 is a significant predictor of lower literacy attainment at age 11 (Moss & Washbrook, 2016:13) and this study found that generally in the Foundation Phase, boys are more

susceptible to reading and writing failure than girls; there is an exigency for the improvement of boys' literacy achievement.

VI. Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study brought attention once again to literacy achievement disparities between boys and girls by corroborating most of the findings in the literature review that have repeatedly shown that boys lag behind girls in reading and writing. Given this global situation it becomes imperative to understand the factors that hinder the development of literacy skills in boys in order to minimise the barriers to literacy. This study showed that the most critical determinants of girls' superiority in literacy performance are greater motivation, higher levels of reading enjoyment, greater self-confidence, completion of homework, positive attitudes towards reading and writing, and greater effort and thought when writing.

This study calls for educational policy strategies and interventions aimed at improving the confidence levels, attitudes and motivation of Foundation Phase boys towards reading and writing; and in so doing raising their literacy achievement. Since the early years of primary school are viewed as a critical phase of learner development (Gove et al., 2013:374), it is anticipated that interventions made at this stage of schooling could assist in reducing the literacy achievement gap between the genders in the later grades. Broadening the selection of reading materials and making the teaching of reading and writing more pragmatic could be considered when planning the school literacy curriculum. Because boys' interests vary considerably, and they enjoy reading comics, humorous stories and adventure books and dislike reading poems, fairy tales and typical school texts (Merisuo-Storm, 2006:117), a wide selection of reading materials could be made available to learners in the classroom reading corners and in the school libraries.

This study showed that doing homework is strongly associated with improved reading performance, and gender differences in time spent doing homework could have a strong impact on gender differences in reading and writing achievement. If boys and girls could spend more or less the same amount of time doing literacy homework this could assist in narrowing the gender gap in reading and writing. Parents' support for their children's reading relates positively to children's motivation to read (Klauda, 2009:358) and parental involvement in writing can contribute to the production of better texts (Camacho & Alves, 2016:253, 273). Thus, parental involvement in ensuring that their children successfully complete their homework each day can be crucial in enhancing boys' literacy achievement.

Generally, a learner's success in school subjects is linked to his or her ability to read. Since boys are overrepresented among the low performers in reading and writing, future research could focus on developing a programme to strengthen the literacy levels of Foundation Phase boys and to increase their levels of motivation to read. In addition, as suggested by Adams and Simmons (2018:235), the role of motivational factors in explaining gender differences in early writing abilities should be further explored. A revision of the reading and writing curriculum could also assist in addressing the literacy achievement gap.

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