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HOW DIFFERENTLY LITERATE ARE BOYS AND GIRLS IN READING?

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ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses a follow-up research on the perceived contrasts in the reading performance of boys and girls. The etiology of the problem is traced to the emergent reader stage that is the stage at which children first access school and are just beginning reading. They are thus equipped with their innate ability and the experiential background (summate) which they have brought into the reading Programme. Results suggest that differences in boys and girls learning to read do not become obvious until much later a probable indication that emergent readers are capable of learning skills regardless of sex differences.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of the bringing together of strands of enquiry that have engaged my interest over the past ten years. The first of these is a sustained interest in the gendered nature of reading which began as the work for an M.ED dissertation in comparative reading and which was subsequently published as "A comparative study of Reading Achievement among senior secondary school students in Lagos State Okebukola (1994). This pre-occupation subsequently widened into an interest in gendered differences in the acquisition and use of literacy at all stages of Education.

The second is a pedagogical concern for the development of effective methods of encouraging all pupils' reading during early years of schooling based on classroom experience. Again, this interest widened when during an investigation into school-based reading habits, I became more and more conscious of the continuing influence of the home and the concept of readiness in shaping pupil's orientation towards reading in school.

This was also significantly reinforced by an investigation carried out to find out adolescents' tastes in reading carried out by Whitehead Capey and Madden (1977) in which teachers were alerted to the steady decline in the number of adolescents who choose not to read any book for leisure. One of the findings was the fact of boys' lesser enthusiasm than girls for reading and in particular for reading works of fiction. The survey had found that by the age of fourteen, thirty six percent of adolescents recorded that they no longer read any kind of books as a leisure activity. Forty percent of boys and thirty-two percent of girls fell into

- (c) Improving the quality of language education at the primary school with regards to reading skills which include the basic abilities of recognising individual alphabets, combining alphabets from words, combining words to form phrases and sentences for literal meaning and reading across and between the lines for hidden meaning. To these can be added such desirable skills as reading at an appropriate speed and developing a live for the printed word, to be able to lead a life which involves continuous reading for information, continued self-improvement and pleasure.
- (d) The enrichment (not merely overloading) of programs of adult and non-formal education. This will involve integrating into the conventional skills literacy the "emerging literacy" of functionality, empowerment, environmental population concerns, gender issue through reading materials, and group discussions in both the L1 and L2.
- (e) Creation of a literacy enhancing environment in the wider society through the provision of literacy service and a national publishing program that promotes works in National language and the development of indigenous authorship.
- (f) Audio-visual communications development including neighborhood radio and television networks, capitalising on indigenous capacities and language for production and diffusion of programmes.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been to show that language education plays a major role in the development of programme functional literacy. Functional literacy is a force at the very heart of sustainable human development. Human development is a continuous process, enriched by the capacity to adequately be tuned to changing times through the use of language. The paper has tried to show that concentrating mainly on an adult illiterate leads to a severe underestimation of the scope of the illiteracy problem. The language education policy and quality has to be revisited so that the formal education system can produce functionally literate citizenry. Above all, a number of needs to human civilization, (e.g. population the environment, emerging issues of importance to sustainable human development (e.g. peace, human rights, civic awareness, gender) and the powerful influence of science and technology and the dawn of an information age have created new needs, and new demands that literacy program ought to take into overall non-formal education program, for sustainable human development.

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this category, revealing a significant gender difference. Whitehead answered his own question of the need to investigate these matters by suggesting that reading held "a very special and unique position in education because the greatest bulk of the learning appropriate to the subject takes place outside of school in the home, the neighbourhood, the play ground and the street" (p.7). He therefore argued that it seemed important to set reading in its context in the social and cultural life of the children concerned. It was a concern I wished to develop further, so I began a small scale survey in which I had asked adolescents to talk to me about their tastes in reading from which I had begun to form a picture of some of the cultural and social factors that influenced their reading choice (Okebukola 2000).

Further impetus was given by the works of Ofsted (1993) 'Boys and English'. The report endorsed what many teachers and academics had suspected for some time, that imbalances in educational achievement were no longer being created by the relative failure of girls in school subjects such as mathematics and science but through boys' under achievement in every aspect of the languages curriculum especially reading. Under the sub-heading 'Boys' performance in English' the Ofsted report drew attention to the following.

Boys do not do as well as girls in reading in schools. There are contrasts in performance and in attitudes towards the subject.

Responses to reading therefore seem to be clearly implicated in the gender differences reported. The implication of this is that studies are needed to follow up these research efforts and to focus in particular on those aspects of the interaction of reading and gender that had become increasingly significant in the development of reading habits and skills in children.

This paper is therefore an attempt at tracing the etiology of gender differences to the emergent reader stage that is the stage at which children first access school and are just beginning reading. This is to determine whether or not the range of differences in reading achievement between boys and girls are traceable to this beginning stage or are a consequence of the teachers' intervention at the developmental stages of readings. Perhaps an evidence can be situated within a theoretical frame that can offer some explanation of the relative weakness of the boys.

As noted by Ofsted in the following comments:

"The reasons for boys' poorer achievements in reading are not identified easily. There is no firm evidence that the differences in boys and girls performance reflect difference in innate linguistic ability".

This no doubt is an indication that research studies on the existence of possible biological sex differences in reading ability are inconclusive. The present study focuses on emergent readers who have not received any formal instruction in reading. They are thus only equipped with their innate ability and the experiential

background (Schemata) which they have brought into the reading programme.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It has been established that boys do not do as well as girls in reading lessons. There are contrasts in performance and in attitudes towards the subject. The majority of pupils who experience difficulty in learning to read are boys. This problem of gender differences in reading ability is what this work sets out to investigate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of the study is to investigate the perceived contrasts in the reading performance of boys and girls. This is done by tracing the etiology of the problem to the emergent reader stage with a view of determining the probable evidence within a theoretical frame that can offer some explanation and recommendations for the development of more 'boy friendly' reading strategies for developing more flexible literacy practices throughout the school curriculum.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS.

The following research questions guided the study

1. What are the attitudes of emergents and how interested are they in reading?
2. What are the effects of gender of pupil male/female on the reading achievement of emergent reader?

HYPOTHESIS

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at a present alpha level of 0.05.

1. There is no significant difference between male and female emergent readers achievement as measured by:
 - a. fluency
 - b. word-by-word analysis
 - c. word recognition skill/miscues
 - d. identification of key words to literacy
 - e. reading comprehension.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE.

The target population for the study was made up of emergent readers. Emergent readers are defined as children who are just beginning to learn to read. They were enrolled in nursery II of private schools and primary one of public schools. Their ages range between 4 to 7 years. A total of 326 children participated in the study. 152 males and 174 females in intact classes.

INSTRUMENTATION.

Six instruments were used for data gathering. The development and validation of the instruments are described below:

1. Structured interview with pupils. In order to find out the level of interest and pupils' attitudes to reading, an interview session was arranged with each pupil with the assistance of the teachers. This took the form of an informal discussion on information such as name, age, home, address, parents' occupation, language spoken at home, ethnicity, language spoken in school, ability to identify a book, interest in reading, what they want to become in future, why they want to learn to read, whether or not parents or teachers read to them at home. Each pupil was allowed to make an attempt at reading.

READING ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

1. Test of key words to literacy (TKWL) developed by McNally and Murray (1962) modified by the researcher to suit the level of pupils. The preliminary trial of TKWL with a sample of Nigerian children conducted by the researcher gave a KR(21) reliability coefficient of 0.79.
2. Test of fluency (TOF), through oral reading using Wide Span Reading Test developed by Brimer (1972) and modified by researcher. Test -retest reliability with one week interval = 0.69. The scoring scheme of test is shown below:
3. Test of Word recognition skill (TWRS) Goodman (1968) modified by researcher.
Tick miscues as wrong x
Total words in passage 16
$$\text{Score} = \frac{80 - \text{total errors committed} \times 100}{80}$$
4. Test of comprehension (TOC) devised by the researcher using prescribed reading text for Nigerian primary schools – New Oxford English course Bk. II by A. Banjo et al. And Queen's Primer Book I by T. Nelson and Sons. Reliability coefficient of 0.83.
5. Test of word Analysis (TOWA) developed by the researcher.

DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS.

The study began with an in-depth observation of classroom teaching and learning in Nursery and primary one classes with a special focus on reading. This was followed by structured interview with pupils. The experiment began with the administration of TKWL, TOF, TWRS, TOWA and TOC to all the pupils as pretest. This was followed by the treatment using the same scheme with all the pupils. Treatment lasted for 8 weeks after which TKWL, TOF, TWRS, TOWA and TOC were given as posttest

The structured interview used to find out the level of interest and pupils' attitude to reading revealed that all the pupils (100%) showed considerable amount of enthusiasm and eagerness to learn how to read. It was further shown that almost 80% of the pupils in the public schools have not acquired enough background experience in the form of contact with English Language. 20% of them made attempts at reading unsuccessfully. They however recognized some letters of the alphabet? Over 90% of the pupils from the private schools speak English language at home and are exposed to English speaking situations e.g. watching T.V., visit to airports and Zoos which could enhance their acquisition of English language. All the pupils in both public and private schools both males and females show positive attitudes towards reading. Pupils from the private schools were able to recognise all the letters and 10% of them could read a few two-letter words.

The hypothesis that there is no significant difference in reading achievement of male and female emergent readers was tested using t-tests on the posttest scores for each of the measures since no significant differences were recorded for the pretests. The results showed that on all the measures except literacy score on key words, the boys and the girls in the sample were not significantly different. Ho a,b,c, and e were therefore not rejected. Ho d was rejected. The means of the two groups for the dependent measures are graphically depicted in Fig 1.1 Appendix II.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS.

The structured interview to find out the interests and attitudes of male and female emergent readers to reading revealed no contrasts in interest and attitudes. Both male and female express willingness to learn how to read and made frantic efforts at reading.

The hypothesis was to find out if there would be any significant difference in the reading achievement of male and female readers as measured by fluency, Word by Word Analysis, Word Recognition, and Identification of Keywords to Literacy and Comprehension. The results obtained showed that there was no significant difference in the reading Achievement of male and female readers of measures of fluency, word-by-word Analysis, word Recognition and Reading comprehension. However the boys in the sample performed significantly better than the girls in the test of key words to literacy

The mean scores are provided below:

Fluency	Male	=	5.3
	Female	=	6.18
Word by Word Analysis	Male	=	5.84
	Female	=	5.96

Word Recognition

Male	=	28.76
Female	=	29.91

Key Word to Literacy

Male	=	8.83
Female	=	5.93

Reading Comprehension

Male	=	12.95
Female	=	12.76

The findings of this study is at variance with previous works in the area of gender and reading achievement Whitehead, Cappey and Maddien (1975), Gorman, White and Brooks (1988), Ofsted (1993)

Whitehead et al (1975) reported the findings of a study on children's gender and reading achievement that boys has lesser enthusiasm than girls in reading and performed better in reading achievement.

Ofsted's (1993) publication "Boys performance in English" reported imbalances in the achievement of Boys and girls in English curriculum including Reading. Also Gorman, White, Brooks (1988) recorded significant differences in both performance and attitude between sexes in favour of girls.

All these research efforts reveal a range of differences in achievement between boys and girls without situating the evidence within a theoretical frame that can affect some relative explanation of the relative weakness of the boys. For example; ofsted in this report noted that:

"The reasons for boys poorer performance in reading are not identified easily. There is no form of evidence that the differences in boys and girls performance reflect difference in Innate Linguistic ability."

It is also pertinent to note that all these studies were carried out on children aged between 10 and 17 years who have spent at least 6 years in school learning to read and not on beginners as in the present study. The result of this study probably shows that even though there may be differences in boys and girls learning to read, the difference might not become obvious until much later in reading development. It might not be visible at the early stage of beginning reading.

The fact that boys and girls in the sample were not significantly different on all measures except the identification of key words to literacy is therefore a probable indication that emergent readers are capable of learning to read and acquiring these skills regardless of sex differences. The better performance of key words to literacy could be due to the effect of the socio-economic background of the boys or their level of oral competence development as it has been established that pupils whose oral language development is high perform better on all reading measures than those with low competence Abodunrin (1987).

The findings of the study however confirm the opinion expressed by Ofsted

that the better performance of boys might not be connected with the possession of a superior innate ability. The cause of the difference may be premised on the way reading is presented at the developmental stage in schools. For example at an age where teachers want pupils to begin to progress from children's stories towards fiction for older and adult readers, a larger number of pupils stop reading altogether. Also many boys read as little in school as they are allowed to get away with Ofsted (1993).

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby advanced.

1. There is the need for an evaluation and overhauling of the Teacher Training Syllabus at all levels of our educational system. Attention should be paid to reading instruction in the areas of individualization of reading instruction, beginning reading skills – fluency, word analysis, word recognition, identification of key-words to literacy and reading comprehension skills.
2. Teacher training institutions including universities should expose prospective teachers to Development Reading and Study Skills. This will help them assess, diagnose and identify individual strengths and weaknesses.
3. Teachers should be encouraged to use appropriate methods in the teaching of beginning reading irrespective of the gender of pupils since they are capable of acquiring the reading skills without bias to gender.
4. Since it has been found that older boys are not sufficiently engaged in the reading process thereby missing out on an essential element of learning, teachers should be concerned with ways of adapting the current approach to reading in ways that are more 'boy friendly' without losing sight of practices that have enabled girls to succeed. This can be done in the following ways:
 - (a). Auditing individual pupil's reading through interview questionnaire and assignment.
 - (b). Improving book provision. This involves teachers' need to devote more of their energies and resources to the encouragement and development of voluntary book reading as early as pupils are able to read simple sentences.
 - (c). The teachers should secure the continuing support of parents for the promotion of interest in books and activities associated with reading.
 - (d). Promoting enthusiasm for books. This is the use of imaginative ways of promoting reading, including "Readathons" (marathon reading stints) where children obtain sponsorship for long periods of sustained, uninterrupted reading.
 - (e). School libraries need to be ruthlessly culled to remove out-dated volumes that are no longer relevant or which no one cares to borrow. School libraries also need to adapt to the new technologies to encourage engagement with a

wider range of literacies by providing access to CD ROM-s and Network services that address pupils' own purposes and interests.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated the impact of pupils' gender on the reading skills of fluency, word recognition, word-by-word analysis, key words to literacy and reading comprehension. It also investigated the interests and attitudes of emergent readers to reading. The findings of the study include:

1. Boys and girls in the sample showed keen interest and positive attitudes to reading.
2. Boys and girls were not significantly different on the measures of fluency, word-by-word analysis, word recognition and reading comprehension.
3. The boys in the sample however performed significantly better than the girls on the measures of identification of key words to literacy.

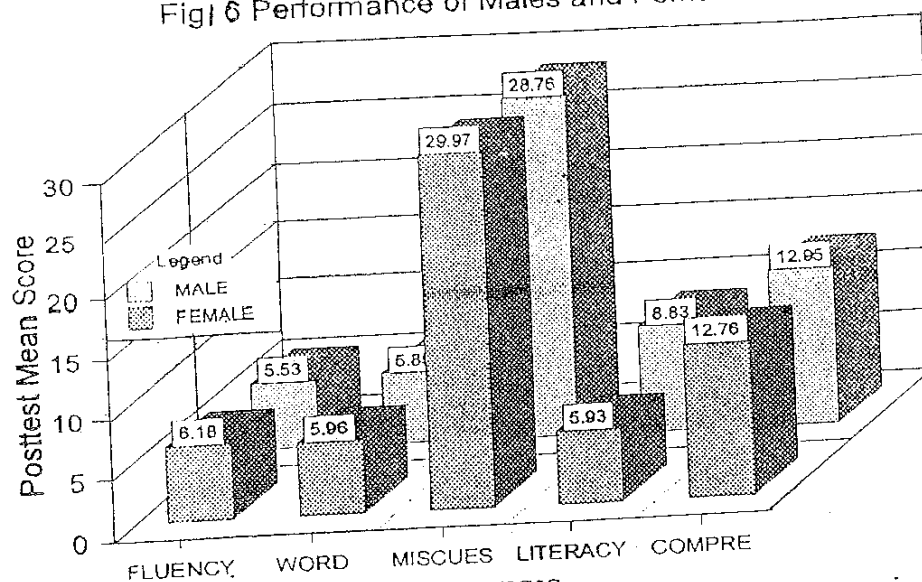
From the above results it is evident that emergent male and female readers do not exhibit contrasts in their attitudes and interests towards reading. The fact that the boys and girls in the sample of the study were not significantly different on all measures except the identification of key words to literacy provides evidence that emergent readers are capable of learning to read and of acquiring these skills using the appropriate methods as revealed in the results of the study regardless of sex differences.

APPENDIX I

Table 1 : t-test on Reading Achievement Measures of Male and Female

MEASURE	GENDER	N	MEAN	S.D.	t
FLUENCY	MALE	152	5.53	2.44	1.84 (ns)
	FEMALE	174	6.18	2.71	
WORD-BY-WORD	MALE	152	5.58	2.84	03 (ns)
	FEMALE	174	5.96	2.48	
WORD RECOGNITION	MALE	152	28.76	3.80	13 (ns)
	FEMALE	174	29.97	4.59	
KEY WORDS TO LITERACY	MALE	152	8.83	3.39	2.31*
	FEMALE	174	5.93	3.78	
READING COMPREHENSION	MALE	152	12.95	9.56	1.58 (ns)
	FEMALE	174	12.76	9.42	

Figl 6 Performance of Males and Female



HYPOTHESIS

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