

Gender and Reading Literacy in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how gender plays a role in literacy in early childhood. This paper focuses on reading skill as the first literacy skill. What we mean by reading in this paper includes reading the text, reading illustrated stories and other symbols. According to PISA in 2018, Indonesian children's interest in reading ranks 72nd out of 77 countries surveyed. Thus, increasing children's interest in reading is very important. There are widely believed assumptions that gender is one of the analytical factors in literacy skills. The myth is that boys have lower reading interests than girls. Thus, analysing literacy in early childhood education from a gender perspective would contribute to understanding of literacy development in early childhood education. Through literature research this paper examines how to address gender gap in literacy.

Keywords: Children, gender issues, reading literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, gender gap occurs not only in term of access to education but also in terms of subject mastery. For example, it is often reported that boys and girls have different ability in mathematical literacy, science and reading (Reilly, 2012). One of widely believed myths of gender gap in cognitive ability is the "girls are better (than boys) in language, and boys are better (than girls) in maths". The myth has been validated by the result of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 which showed that across 65 participating countries girls consistently outperformed boys in reading literacy and boys consistently outperformed girls in mathematics (Reilly, 2012). Although the significance of the difference is highly debatable, it is important to make sure boys' and girls' equal access to every subject. What we mean by equal access is not only about opportunity to learn but also the opportunity to learn the best way possible for each student regardless of their gender.

In the past ten years, there has been a push to increase reading literacy of Indonesian children since it always ranks very low compare to other PISA participating countries. According to the result of PISA in 2018, Indonesian children's reading literacy ability is in the 72nd place out of 77 countries (Kurnia, 2019). Gender gap in terms of reading literacy is also high. Girls outperformed boys by 25 points (OECD, 2019). This paper will not scrutinise on why the score is low and the gap is high, this paper will focus more on identifying best practices to overcome the gender gap in reading literacy, especially in the early childhood education level where early literacy first formally introduced.

Reading literacy in early childhood context is related to the ability to communicate through spoken language, images and text, that are shaped by children's interaction with their

social environment. Therefore, literacy movement needs to involve the government, school's communities, academics, publishers, mass media, families and the local communities (Hammer, Farkas, & Maczuga, 2010; Sari, 2018). As stated by Warren (2002) that not only schools, parents also play an important role in children's reading literacy.

In Australia and other developed countries, linking home literacy to school literacy programs such as providing the same story books to boys and girls, was triggered by growing children's reading interest (Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, & Allen, 2017). In Indonesia, gender myths interfere the process of introducing reading literacy to young children. For example, the myth leads people to believe that girls are better in reading literacy than boys. Boys who are not interested in reading will be tolerated since boys love motoric activities. In this paper, we will explore the gender myth in reading literacy and how to overcome gender gap in reading literacy through deconstructing the myths.

2. THE MYTH OF GENDER AND READING LITERACY

There is a common assumption that girls are superior to boys in academic achievement because people perceived them as more diligent and neater than boys. Another assumption is that boys are more intelligent than girls, but in terms of tenacity women are superior than boys. Boys are better than girls in math and science, thus professions that requires a lot of math and science are more suitable for men than women. The myths come to realisation in early childhood education. Many children adopt the stereotypes. The stereotypes then restrict certain kinds of activities to certain gender. Gender stereotypes determine children's interest in particular area (Bian, Leslie & Cimpian, 2017).

Another myth is that girls are better than boys in language and social skills. The myth is also endorsed by gender bias research that analyses gender difference in certain skills by quantitative research. These studies perpetuate biased knowledge about gender. An example of the study is Uswatun (2017) who claims that gender is one of the factors that determine the difference in reading ability of group B children in Bantul, Indonesia, where the reading ability of girls in the study is better than boys. Reading disparities in kindergarten and early grades of elementary school is related to lack of exposure to reading both at school and at home (Chatterji, 2006). In the Netherlands, boys tend to have a high interest in digital media literacy, while girls are interested more in literacy activities for educational purposes (Ünlüsoy, de Haan, Leseman, & van Kruistum, 2010).

3. DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH IN READING LITERACY

Gender myths enhanced by quantitative research would transform into “a regime of truth” that control how teachers approach reading literacy learning. The gender myths encourage teachers to treat boys and girls differently as shown by Adriany & Warin (2014), Warin & Adriany (2017), and Adriany (2019). Different treatment will result in different skills between boys and girls which then will be used to validate the myths. It will go round and round like a cycle. Therefore, we suggest to break the cycle by deconstructing the myths.

The myths can be deconstructed by displaying the opposite to what have been promoted by the myth. For example, we introduce a female mathematician to the children to deconstruct the myth of boys are better than girls in Math. To overcome gender gap in literacy, teachers should encourage boys to read by introducing male authors or male figure who are good at communication and reading skills. We can start the deconstructing the myth by choosing a story that has a boy who likes to read in it. The teachers can then read the story to the children. The teachers can also ask the children both boys and girls of what stories that they would like to read, and provide the requested stories for them. It is very possible that the children would choose gender stereotypical book such as superheroes stories and princess stories. It is okay to provide them the book, but adding a more gender equal superheroes and princess stories would be an additional benefit. We are not only encouraging the children to read but also introducing a more equal understanding of gender to the children.

In the cultural and social context in Indonesia, which is still very close to stigma and vulnerable to discrimination, Damayanti (2014) and Dewayani (2013) analyze the discourse of gender construction in textbooks showing that the illustrations that accompany language texts reinforce the representation of gender asymmetry and construction future self through the writing of street children about their future certain groups, both men and women have access to development and care at all levels of education, have

literacy and numeracy skills without gender disparities in education.

4. CONCLUSION

Gender gaps in reading literacy can be narrowed by deconstructing gender myths related to language and literacy development. The teachers should be made aware of how the myths as become a regime of truth that drive them to treat boys and girls differently. The deconstruction of the myth should be done by the teachers and the parents since they are the ones who have most opportunity to teach literacy to the children. Teachers and parents should involve both boys and girls in choosing books to read to them, so they can make sure that the story they read to the children or the book they provide for the children to read is interesting to the children.

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