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The role of women school principals in improving learning in French-speaking Africa¹

Synthesis

I Rationale

Exploring the association between school principal gender and pupil performance is part of the quest to improve learning and fight gender inequalities, two key development issues for Sub-Saharan Africa.

While the positive impact of women's leadership has been rigorously documented in politics, healthcare, and business, compelling studies in the field of education are rather scarce.

However, emerging evidence documents key insights on the benefits of women's school leadership on creating positive school environments, generating greater teacher commitment, giving pedagogical support, motivating, and supporting teachers, prioritizing quality management school practice, promoting parental involvement, and supporting the well-being of the school community.

Research has also shown that the presence of women leaders influences girls' career aspirations and education outcomes and helps to combat gender stereotypes.

As part of the "Women in Learning Leadership" WILL initiative², this IIEP-UNESCO Dakar (Gender at the Centre Initiative-GCI) original research piece presents new evidence on the association between female school leadership and student achievement in fourteen French-speaking African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Niger, Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Chad, and Togo.

I Method of analysis

Using data from the PASEC2019³, the analysis carried out is based on the estimation of a learning model that, in addition to math and reading scores and the principal's gender, controls for a set of school context variables at the pupil, class, school and principal levels.

¹ Based on Alban Conto, C. and Guilbert N. "The role of women school principals in improving learning in French-speaking Africa"; IIEP-UNESCO; 2023

² The project Women in Learning Leadership (WILL) "Successful and gender-equitable school leadership for enhanced learning" is a joint initiative of IIEP-UNESCO Dakar, the Gender at the Center Initiative-GCI, and UNICEF Innocenti-Global Office of Research and Foresight.

³ Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems: <https://pasec.confemem.org/en/>.

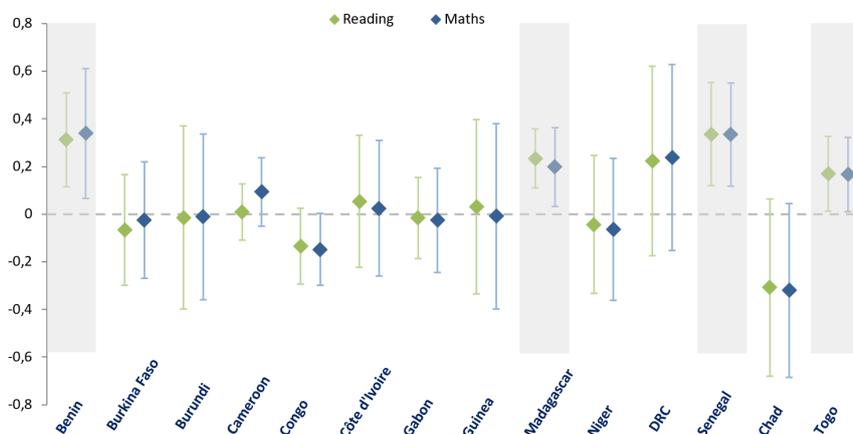
Findings

Considering the context in which school leadership takes place is crucial to accurately assess the weight of the characteristics of the principal, such as gender, in relation to other variables.

The analysis confirms that male- and female-led schools differ on several factors in the countries considered. In most cases, female principals work relatively more in urban areas, in schools with better infrastructure, and with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to contextual differences, in some countries there are differentiated school management practices between male and female principals. Female-led schools are more likely to organize meetings with parents, to offer remedial classes to students in the last grade of primary school, and to report less frequent absenteeism of their teachers.

It is essential to pay more attention to the leadership and management practices applied by female principals. Contextualized econometric analysis reveals a statistically significant association between the gender of the principal and student achievement in favor of female principals in four of the fourteen PASEC2019 participating countries: Benin, Madagascar, Senegal and Togo.

Correlation coefficients (measured in number of standard deviations) between student scores and being enrolled in a female-led school (PASEC2019)



Being enrolled in a female-led school is associated with 0.31 additional standard deviations in standardized reading scores and 0.34 in mathematics in Benin, respectively 0.23 and 0.2 in Madagascar, 0.33 in Senegal, and 0.17 in Togo.

Note: Calculations based on PASEC2019 data. Diamonds represent the correlation coefficients and vertical bars represent 90% confidence intervals. When the vertical bars cross the dotted line, it means that the coefficient is not significant

Next steps

This paper contributes to documenting some differences in elementary school leadership in fourteen sub-Saharan African countries and confirms that in some contexts having a female principal is associated with better learning.

Further research is crucial to closely examine the institutional context related to the representation of women in school leadership positions in the region and to continue exploring the barriers to more equitable and successful representation. Examining indicators other than academic achievement will help to better understand the schooling mechanisms and processes by which management and leadership practices, particularly by women, can positively influence children's learning on a large scale.

WILL, is seeking to further explore these questions conducting complementary fieldwork in three countries in the region, Benin, Madagascar, and Chad, together with the Ministries of education.

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