

PISA 2018 Indicates Gender Reading Gaps are Closing: Is It Time to Celebrate?

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[Results from PISA 2018](#)¹ reveal a persistent gender gap in favour of 15-year-old girls in reading. On average, across 29 OECD countries with comparable data since 2000, this gap was 32 points in 2000, 39 points in 2009 and 30 points in 2018. PISA scores have a standard deviation of around 100 points: this means that gender gaps in reading were large in 2000 and remain large in 2018. In some of the countries that are often considered to be champions of gender equality, boys' underachievement in reading is especially pronounced: in Finland it was 51 points in 2000, 55 points in 2009 and 52 points in 2018. In Norway it was 43 points in 2000 and 47 points in both 2009 and 2018.

Reading Gaps Over Time

[One of the big stories](#)² that came out of the PISA 2009 administration was that reading performance had improved since 2000 but that such general improvement was accompanied by a worsening of the gender gap. The fact that the gender gap in reading narrowed between 2009 and 2018 should make us happy – shouldn't it?

After PISA 2009, [we researched extensively boys' underachievement in reading](#)³, which remains understudied compared to the amount of attention that is devoted to

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¹ <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>

² <https://doi.org/10.1787/5k9h362shtlr-en>

³ <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-gender-eng.pdf>

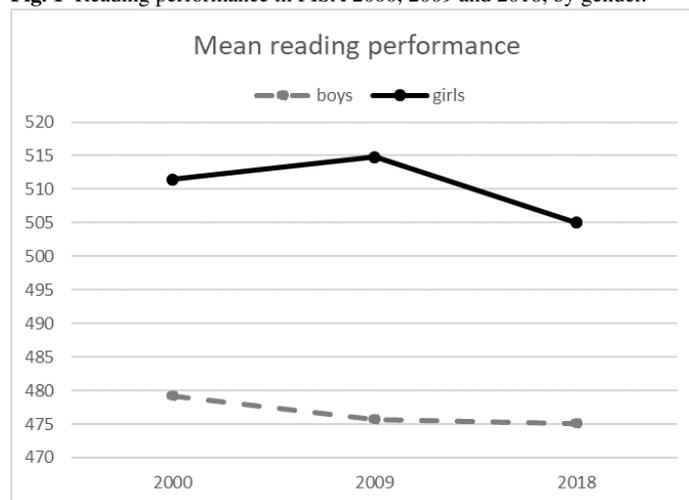
examine girls' under-representation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Such underachievement is particularly pronounced at age 15⁴ and can vary depending on characteristics of the test such as how it is delivered⁵, how long it is⁶ and what types of reading material are used⁷.

No Time to Celebrate Just Yet...

A quick glance at Figure 1 suggests that, on average across OECD countries gender gaps in reading closed because the performance of girls declined, rather than because the performance of boys improved. Among the 29 OECD countries with available data (at this time, results have yet to be released for Spain), the average performance of boys was 479 in 2000, 476 in 2009 and 475 in 2018. The average performance of girls was 511 in 2000, 515 in 2009 but 505 in 2018.

However, averages mask large differences in the learning trajectories of different groups of students. In particular, Figure 2 indicates that the performance of the low-

Fig. 1 Reading performance in PISA 2000, 2009 and 2018, by gender.



Source: PISA 2000, 2009 and 2018 databases. Results represent the mean reading performance of boys and girls across the 29 OECD countries with comparable data in all three PISA rounds.

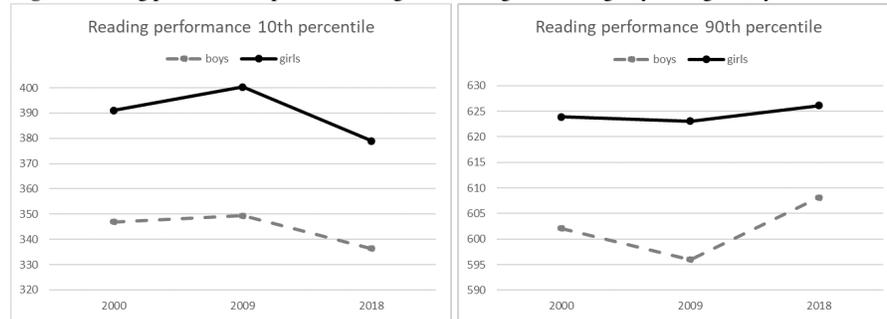
⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1787/51479ec2-en>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140197116000051?via%3Dihub>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1041608016300851?via%3Dihub>

⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1787/51479ec2-en>

Fig. 2 Reading performance profiles among low and high achieving boys and girls, by PISA round.



Source: PISA 2000, 2009 and 2018 databases. Results represent the 10th and 90th percentile of the gender specific and country specific distribution of achievement across the 29 OECD countries with comparable data in all three PISA rounds.

est achieving 10% of boys was 347 in 2000, 349 in 2009 and 336 in 2018, a decline of 13 points. The performance of the lowest achieving 10% of girls was 391 in 2000, 400 in 2009 and 379 in 2018, a decline of 21 points! By contrast, the narrowing of the gap among high achieving students was due to the fact that while the performance of high-achieving boys and girls improved between 2009 and 2018, the performance of boys improved more than that of girls. Because the performance of low achieving boys and girls worsened and the performance of high achieving boys and girls improved the overall effect was an increase in polarization between high and low achievers.

Pockets of Success

We invite those interested in examining gender gaps in reading to look in detail at data for the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Slovenia and Sweden. In these countries boys’ performance improved and girls’ performance remained stable or improved but less markedly than boys’ and the gender gap narrowed as a result. While the Irish results should be considered carefully because 2009 results in Ireland were very low compared to other cycles, improvements in the remaining countries are noteworthy. They helped to narrow above average gender gaps in reading, they led to overall average improvements or, as in the case of Sweden, a marked change of course following years of declining performance.

United Kingdom's Mixed Results

In the United Kingdom, the picture is bitter-sweet: on average boys' performance improved while girls' performance remained stable, although boys' improvement was not large enough to lead to a statistically significant narrowing of the gender gap. However an analysis of which boys improved reveals that the improvement was concentrated among middle and high achieving boys. In fact, high achieving girls were the group with the largest improvement overall.

This text has been posted on the blog international-education.blog and it is available in different languages on international-education.blog

Borgonovi, F., & Volante, L. (2020). PISA 2018 indicates gender reading gaps are closing: is it time to celebrate? Retrieved from <https://international-education.blog/en/pisa-2018-indicates-gender-reading-gaps-are-closing-is-it-time-to-celebrate>

The blog International-Education.Blog is an outcome of the project OCCAM. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 76500.

