

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONAL OPTIONS IN IEA INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDIES: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY UPON SECONDARY STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN TIMSS'99 MATHEMATICS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Apart from the international comparative data and analysis that International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies traditionally provide, there is also an opportunity for countries to include national options that may enrich a country's knowledge in a focus area. This paper reports on research that was conducted by including a national option in IEA's TIMSS'99 and illustrates the potential and richness of such studies for individual countries. The research was a secondary analysis of the performance of the South African pupils in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study 1999 (TIMSS'99) in which pupils wrote tests in mathematics and science; in South Africa pupils also had to write an English test, which was included as a national option. The South African pupils' performance in mathematics was significantly below that of all other participating countries including other developing countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Chile, Indonesia and the Philippines. This paper presents the final results of a three-year research project (Howie, 2002) and includes the final Partial Least Squares analysis and multilevel analysis of the effect of language and other contextual factors on mathematics at student and school level.

### **Objectives of the study**

The research reported here concentrates on the final outcomes of the exploration of the performance of the South African pupils in mathematics and most especially the relationship between mathematics achievement and pupils' proficiency in English. Its relevance stems from the fact that English is spoken as a first language by less than ten percent of the population and is the language of business and government. It is also one of two languages usually used at South African schools although it is not the most widely spoken language at home. However, the issue around the language policy for teaching and learning has become a sensitive and controversial topic in South Africa just as it is in many other post-colonial countries.

The factors relating to the pupils' performance in mathematics and English language proficiency were explored in relation to the background information that was also collected from the pupils, teachers and principals of the schools included in the study.

The following research questions addressed in this paper are:

1. What is the effect of language on South African pupils' performance in mathematics?
2. How does the effect of language relate to other background variables collected at school and student level?

The extent of the pupils' aptitude in English and mathematics was analysed. Every South African pupil in TIMSS'99 completed a standardised written skills and language usage test (HSRC, 1990). The performance of the pupils in this test indicates a measure of language proficiency in English. As English language proficiency in South Africa is correlated with other important background variables due to the nature of the country's political past, other background variables were explored and included in a multilevel model developed to address the second research question.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of reports and articles have been written on the status of mathematics (and science) education in South Africa (Arnott & Kubeka, 1997; Kahn, 1993; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999, amongst others). Many have commented on the poor results achieved in the mathematics matriculation examinations. However, there have been no national surveys on secondary pupils' achievement in mathematics conducted by the Department of Education or other government departments. Only in 2001 was the decision made to introduce sample-based national assessments at grades 3, 6 and 9 levels to provide policymakers with information regarding the effectiveness of the education system. Research conducted, which included achievement data, were case studies on local and regional samples (see Maja, Du Plooy & Du Toit, 1999; Monyana, 1996; Rakgokong, 1994, amongst others). Because these which were not nationally representative samples, only limited inferences could be made from the data.

However, a number of factors have been reported pertaining to the poor performance of pupils in the matriculation examinations and in general (Adler, 1998; Arnott & Kubeka, 1997; Kahn, 1993; Monyana, 1996; Setati & Adler, 2000; Setati, Adler, Reid & Bapoo, 2001; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999). These include: inadequate subject knowledge of teachers, inadequate communication ability of pupils and teachers in the language of instruction, lack of instructional materials, difficulties experienced by teachers to manage activities in classrooms, the lack of professional leadership, pressure to complete examination driven syllabi, heavy teaching loads, overcrowded classrooms, poor communication between policy-makers and practitioners, as well as lack of support due to a shortage of professional staff in the ministries of education. Most of these were reported on the basis of classroom observations and discussions with teachers and other stakeholders. Only Monyana (1996) collected data for the purpose of analysing the factors that had an effect on mathematics performance and utilised inferential statistics. However, there is a study involving data from 100 schools as part of the Quality Learning Project that has also collected background data in order to infer reasons for pupils' performance in mathematics (and science) (see Prinsloo, Kanjee, Pfeiffer & Howie, 2001). In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted in 1995, the performance of the South African pupils was significantly below that of all the other 40 participants in the study (Howie, 1997; Howie & Hughes, 1998). TIMSS provided South Africa with the first national representative overview of how South African pupils were performing in mathematics (and science). However, there were significant language and communication problems with South African pupils learning mathematics in a second language. Pupils in all three Grades (7,8,12) showed a lack of understanding of mathematics questions, and an inability to communicate their answers in instances where they did understand the questions. Pupils performed particularly badly in questions requiring a written answer (Howie, 1997; Howie & Hughes, 1998).

Internationally, research studies addressing factors related to achievement in mathematics were found using data from, for example, Belgium (van den Broek & van Damme, 2001) and Eastern Europe (Vari, 1997), but most were found in the USA (Sojourner and Kushner, 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000, amongst others). No studies were found either nationally or internationally that attempt to link English Language proficiency to mathematics achievement at secondary level using such a comprehensive dataset with data on pupil, class and school levels.

Studies regarding the effects of language on mathematics achievement appear to indicate the importance of language in achievement generally, including mathematics (Berry, 1995; Clarkson, 1991; Tartre & Fennema, 1995; Young, 1997). There seems to be sufficient evidence internationally and some evidence locally to warrant the assessment of language and its relationship to mathematics on a large scale in South Africa.

Clearly, many factors have been found at school, class and student levels to have positive and negative effects on mathematics achievement (see Howie, 2002, for a comprehensive discussion). Here summary conclusions are presented whereby only references to African research and/or pertaining to less developed countries are included.

The factors on *student level* discussed in the literature included: socio-economic status (Afrassa, 1998; Cherian, 1992; Howie & Pietersen, 2001, amongst others), books in the home, parental education, parents occupation (Afrassa, 1998; Eshetu, 1988, Gennet, 1991), parental relationships (Eshetu, 1988), parental press, parent's self-concept, pupils' attitudes to mathematics, family size (Behutiye & Wagner, 1995), jobs in the home (Deresse, Wagner & Alemaychu, 1990; Daniel, 1995)), pupils' aspirations, peer group attitudes, pupils' self concept (Howie & Wedepohl, 1997), self expectations, pupils' anxiety (Maqsd & Klalique, 1991), enjoyment of mathematics, attitudes towards maths (Sayers, 1994), reading ability, gender (Afrassa, 1998), age, attitudes towards teachers (Georgewill, 1990), time spent on homework (Afrassa, 1998). Of these most were investigated in this study as well. The exceptions are parents' occupations, parental relationships, parents' self-concept, pupil anxiety, cognitive ability, reading ability and attitudes to teachers. This is not because they are not important, but rather due to the limitations of the dataset that was used.

On *classroom level*, factors found in the literature were the learning environment, teacher's characteristics (including gender) (Monyana, 1996), teacher's personality, streaming, computers, teachers' competence (Georgewill, 1990; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999), teacher's confidence, education background, teacher's qualifications (Arnott & Kubeka, 1997; Mpofana, 1989), teachers' methods, class size (Cohn & Ressimiller, 1987), time on task, disruptions in class, calculators, content coverage, and assessment. Of these factors, most were explored in the study, the only exceptions being teacher's personality and content coverage, the former not having been included in the questionnaires and the latter due to data problems where the data could not be recovered.

Finally on *school-level* a number of factors have been investigated in previous studies. These included textbooks, teacher quality, time on task, leadership, organisation, management (Riddell, 1997), decision-making, within-school hierarchy, communication, school size, professional development (Cohn & Ressimiller, 1987), location, commitment, and the controlled environment. In this study, only textbooks, time on task, leadership, decision-making, school size and location were explored, as the other factors were not included in the data collection.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In order to address the objectives of the study, a conceptual model was developed. This was to allow for the exploration of contextual factors within different levels having an effect on pupils' achievement in mathematics within the context of South Africa. A summary of the model description is given here whilst a complete description can be found in Howie (2002).

The model was informed largely by Shavelson, McDonnell and Oakes, (1987), as well as other literature discussed in the previous section. The model presents the education system in terms of inputs (including contexts), processes and outputs. The inputs are the policy-related contexts on a national, provincial and local level from which the intended curriculum (meaning what should be taught in schools and learned by the pupils) is also designed and developed. They also include the antecedents: the economic, physical and human resources supplied to different levels of the system; the characteristics of the teachers and the background of the pupils. Inputs into the system affect all the processes of education, which may also be seen as the practice in education. Different processes (relating to what is taught and how it is taught) take place within the districts, schools, and inside the classrooms in terms of the implemented curriculum (meaning what is actually being taught in the classrooms), teaching (meaning the context and conditions under which teachers work) and instruction. The outputs, also seen as the outcomes, eventuate in terms of the achievement of learners in specific subjects such as mathematics; participation in class and school activities, and finally learners' attitudes towards subjects and schooling and aspirations for the future. It is expected that, due to the dynamics of the processes included in the model, there will also be indirect benefits and outcomes, such as improved learner participation partly due to improved curriculum quality.

The model serves as an important theoretical and conceptual basis for the analysis of the TIMSS'99 data. As the data were collected on a number of education levels, namely, school, classroom and learner level, the model serves as a guide to explore the causal links for the learners' achievement.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research was divided into two phases. Phase one concentrated on describing the South African pupils' performance in mathematics and provided descriptive information regarding the background characteristics of the pupils, their mathematics teachers and the schools that they attended. However, this is not the focus of this paper and can be found in Howie (2002).

The second phase of the study was an exploratory and analytical phase focusing on the secondary analysis of the TIMSS'99 data related to mathematics achievement. A summary of the methods used as well as the findings are discussed in this paper. The data were explored to investigate the reasons for the pupils' performance and to explore the inter-relationships of achievement and the background variables revealed by pupils, teachers and the school principal. In particular, the exploratory part of the study was to determine the factors that influence mathematics achievement and performance of South African pupils and to ascertain the effect of South African pupils' language and communication skills on their achievement in mathematics.

### **Sample**

The TIMSS requirements stipulated that a minimum of 150 schools be tested and that a minimum of one class (preferably one whole class) per school be tested. The South African initial sample was expanded to 225 to accommodate the inter-provincial analysis required. The nationally representative sample was drawn stratified by province, school sector and medium of instruction. A two-stage stratified cluster sample of 225 schools was randomly selected and stratified according to province, type of education (government or private) and medium of instruction (English and Afrikaans). Tests and questionnaires were administered (by the Human Sciences Research Council based in Pretoria, South Africa) to more than 9000 pupils. Questionnaires were also administered to 200 school principals and 400 teachers of mathematics and science at Grade 8 level. After the data cleaning a representative sample of 194 schools and 8146 pupils was used in the data analysis.

### **Instruments**

In addition to the TIMSS'99 instruments, namely eight test booklets containing mathematics and science achievement tests, pupil questionnaire, mathematics teacher questionnaire, science teacher questionnaire, and school questionnaire, an English language proficiency test was included specifically for South African pupils. This instrument had previously been validated by the Human Sciences Research Council and standardised for Grade 8 Second Language pupils in South African schools (HSRC, 1990). At the time of the TIMSS'99 study, this test was the only standardised South African second language test at the Grade 8 level that could be found. Questions were also included in the TIMSS'99 pupils' and teachers' questionnaires, to ascertain the extent and level to which the pupils are exposed to English. They included pupils' home language, ethnic group, the language spoken predominantly by the pupils in the mathematics class, the language used by the mathematics teacher in class, media languages pupils are exposed to and the language of their reading materials. In this research, data from the test booklets, pupil questionnaires, mathematics teacher questionnaires, school questionnaire and the national option were analysed.

### **Data Analysis**

After examining frequencies, building constructs and reviewing correlation matrices, Partial Least Square analysis and multilevel modelling were applied.

Given that there are a number of variables reported to influence pupils achievement as well as the vast number of variables in the database, and that some of these were intricately inter-related, Partial Least

Square analysis (PLS) (Sellin, 1989) was used initially to analyse those student-level and classroom-level factors that influenced pupils' achievement in mathematics. This type of analysis allows one to estimate or predict both the direct and indirect effects of a set of independent variables on a dependent variable (with each path taking into account the effects of all the other variables).

Due to the fact that data were collected on three levels – student-level, class-level and school level, multilevel modelling (Institute of Education, 2000) was applied. In this study, multilevel modelling was used to distinguish between the variance in mathematics achievement uniquely explained by student-level factors as opposed to the variance uniquely explained by the classroom and school-level factors and to investigate the individual effects of variables inserted in the model once the multilevel structure of the data is taken into account. As only one class per school was sampled, only two levels could be analysed and this was due to the original TIMSS'99 design where class and school are considered one level.

## RESULTS

### Results of the mathematics tests

Overall, South African pupils achieved 275 points out of 800 (standard error, 6.8) in the mathematics test, whilst the international average was 487. This result is significantly below the mean scores of all other participating countries, including the two other African countries of Morocco and Tunisia as well as that of other developing or newly developed countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Chile.

The results of pupils' scores are given in Table 1 with reference to the regularity with which the language of the test is spoken at home as this is believed to have an influence on the overall results. The scores appear to reveal a trend that pupils that speak the language of the test more frequently also attain higher scores on the mathematics test. When comparing those pupils that almost always or always speak the language of the test to those that never speak the language of the test, the former achieve scores that are more than 140 points higher than the latter.

*Table 1: Mean Mathematics Scores for South African Pupils Who Always or Almost Always, Sometimes or Never Speak the Language of the Test At Home*

	N	Always/almost always			Sometimes			Never		
		% of pupils	Mean	SE	% of pupils	Mean	SE	% of pupils	Mean	SE
South African pupils' score	8146	23	370	2.2	53	259	1.6	24	224	1.8

Source: Mullis, Martin, Gonzales, et al, 2000.

From a comparative analysis of South African pupils' results with other countries in TIMSS'99 (see Howie, 2001), some interesting observations were made. More than 70% of pupils from South Africa, Indonesia, Morocco, Philippines and Singapore did not always speak the language of the test at home. Nonetheless, the mean achievement scores vary considerably across this group of countries and there are also some interesting trends in the data. Pupils in Malaysia generally did considerably better in mathematics than those from Indonesia. Nonetheless, there is a similar trend in both countries where pupils who never speak the language of the test at home, namely 9% in Indonesia and 10% in Malaysia, still appeared to outperform those who always or sometimes spoke the language of the test at home. It suggests therefore that the differences between language groups are not only dependent on language. Indonesia, for instance, is described as a highly diverse country with more than 600 languages and 200 million people (Baker & Prys-Jones, 1998, p. 375) and yet apparently their pupils do not appear to have been as disadvantaged by writing the test in a second language. A similar pattern was also observed for Morocco and the Philippines in mathematics. In Singapore there does appear to

be a difference, yet those who never speak the language of the test at home still outperform pupils from 33 other countries.

Looking at the other African countries, the scores of those never speaking the language at home are better in the case of Morocco for mathematics and are comparable for those from Tunisia. This issue needs to be explored further, as it appears from the data that the pupils from other developing countries do not seem to be disadvantaged by writing tests in their second or third language in mathematics or science. However it is not clear why this is. Important lessons for South Africa may lie in the answers.

In South Africa, pupils who spoke either English or Afrikaans at home achieved higher scores (about 100 points above the national average) than those who did not. What is illuminating is that children who spoke other languages at home (for example, Greek, Portuguese or Tamil) and therefore also learned in a second language, scored only 20 points on average lower than first-language speakers. However, children speaking African languages at home attained 100 points less than the other group of second-language speakers (Howie, 2001). No group of pupils came close to attaining the international average for mathematics.

### **Results of the English language test**

In addition to the mathematics and science tests conducted in TIMSS'99, an English language proficiency test was included that aimed to assess pupils' writing related skills and language usage in English. The test comprised 40 items, which were multiple-choice items. Thirty of the forty items had four options, whilst the remaining 10 items had two-answer options.

The overall mean score for the language test was 17 out of 40 (42.5%; n= 8349). The minimum score attained was 0 and the maximum score 40. In general, the scores for boys and girls were comparable. The scores varied across the nine provinces with the wealthiest and most urbanised provinces (Gauteng and Western Cape) attaining the highest overall scores. The results for the language performance appear to follow a similar trend to that of mathematics, meaning that those provinces that performed better in mathematics also tended to perform better in the language test.

As the test was designed for English second-language speakers, it is not surprising that native English speakers performed the best of all language groups (25 points out of 40), although one might have expected the scores to have been higher given this fact. The Afrikaans speaking children attained the next highest score with 21 points out of 40. The scores were more or less consistent across the pupils whose main language was an African language. The Tswana and Southern-Sotho speaking pupils attained the highest scores out of those speaking African languages. This may reflect the urbanisation of the people speaking these two languages although other interpretations for this may also exist, for instance, the emphasis on English language and communication skills in the former Bophutatswana, where most of the Tswana-speakers originate.

### **PLS Exploration of the contextual factors on student, classroom and school**

Three hypothesised models on student, class and school level were analysed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis to explore the direct and indirect effects of individual variables on all three levels. The results of these analyses were scrutinised and thereafter the class and school level models were combined into one model and reanalysed. The main results are summarised here and the detailed explanation and discussion of these PLS results can be found in Howie (2002).

#### **Student- level factors**

Data pertaining to the pupils' home background, their personal characteristics, their aptitude and competencies were explored. A high percentage of variance (50%) in the pupils' mathematics score was explained. Six factors were found to have a direct effect on South African pupils' performance in

mathematics, namely the pupils' proficiency in English (*engtest*), their own self concept in terms of mathematics (*selfcnp*), the language pupils spoke at home (*lang*), their socio-economic status at home (*SES*), whether or not they, their friends and their mothers thought that maths was important (*mathim*) and language of learning in the classroom (*lanlearn*).

### **School-only level factors**

Some important aspects of school quality related to school leadership, parent involvement, school profile, physical resources, human resources, autonomy, learning environment and school administration were explored in the data from the school principal's questionnaire. Two important antecedents related to the type of community and the home language of the pupil were included in the model. Sixty-two percent of the variance in the pupils' scores in mathematics could be explained by three factors at the school level, namely, the community where the school was located, the influence that the teachers union has on the curriculum, and an aggregated pupil variable, the extent to which the pupils in the class spoke the language of instruction as their first language.

### **Classroom-level only factors**

From the mathematics teacher questionnaire, a number of classroom level factors were also explored and these resulted in including the following factors in the model: teachers' gender, teaching experience, teachers' level of education, time spent on activities, lesson preparation, teaching load, time on task, teachers' attitudes, success attribution, teachers' beliefs, teaching style, resources, limitations, and class size. In total, this model explained 46% of the variance in the pupils' mathematics scores by seven factors - the teachers' attitudes, their beliefs about mathematics, the extent of their teaching and other workload, the size of the class they are teaching, their gender, resources and their dedication towards lesson preparation.

### **Combined school-class level factors**

Because only one class per school was included in the study, class effects could not be studied independently from school effects. Therefore the school level model and the class-level model were combined and the predictors of mathematics achievement were selected from both models and combined with four aggregated student-level antecedent factors into one model. Therefore factors related to teachers' characteristics, pupils' home background, their aptitude, their attitudes, school quality, teaching requirements, curriculum quality and instructional quality were all explored in one model. Finally, six factors were found that had direct effects on pupils' achievement in mathematics and that explained 27% of the variance in the mathematics score. These were the location of the school, class size, the attitude of the teacher, teachers' beliefs about mathematics, the teachers' workload (including teaching) and their dedication toward lesson preparation.

### **Results from the Multilevel Analysis**

From the Partial Least Squares analysis, the factors that had a direct effect on math achievement were identified and included into the multilevel analysis: language pupils spoke at home, socio-economic status, pupils' English test score, pupils' own self concept in terms of mathematics, whether or not they, their friends and their mothers thought that maths was important, language on the radio they most often listen to, size of the class the teachers were teaching, community where the school was situated, language spoken most often in the class by pupils and teachers, teachers' beliefs about mathematics, attitude of the teacher towards the profession, teachers' dedication toward lesson preparation, teachers' teaching load and teachers' total workload. A final variable was included because it was believed to be important from a political perspective, namely the number of pupils enrolled in a school. Ultimately 183 schools and 7 651 South African pupils were included in the multi-level analysis.

In the first step of the analysis the only independent variable included was the school of the learner (this is the so-called Null model). The Null-model in Table 2 shows that more than half of the variance in the mathematics achievement scores is situated on the school level (55%) whilst 45% of the variance can be situated on student level.

In the next step of the multilevel analysis the six student variables were entered successively in the model. The results are summarised in Table 2, column ‘Student model – Model 6’, in which the numbers represent the regression slopes associated with the various variables (e.g., 5.35 is the regression coefficient associated with ‘home language’). Table 2 shows that all regression coefficients are significant, meaning that mathematics achievement tends to be better when the scores are higher on the variables home language, socio-economical status, English tests, self-concept, importance of mathematics and radio language. One explanatory remark should be made: as self-concept has a negative scale, the negative regression coefficient should be interpreted as ‘the more difficulties a learner has with mathematics, the lower the achievement score’. Howie (2002) illustrates these data with two examples to show the influence of the language factor. The model predicts a difference of

Table 2: Multi Level Analysis Of The South African TIMSS'99 Data With The Math-Test Score As Dependent Variable (Weighted Data)

Fixed effect	Null Model (Model 0)	Student Model (Model 6)	Student- School (Model 15)	Extended Student- school model (Model 16)
<i>Student level</i>				
Intercept	<b>288</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>299.5</b>	<b>285.5</b>
Home language		5.35**	3.27	2.83
Socio-economic		1.20**	.88*	0.79
English test		4.07 **	4.00**	3.79**
Self-concept		-6.32 **	-6.29**	-6.20**
Importance of maths		6.39 **	6.35**	6.45**
Radio language		4.75 **	3.95**	3.98**
<i>School level</i>				
Status			-17.27**	-15.24**
Beliefs about maths			-4.46**	-3.68**
Location			8.00**	7.07*
Class language			2.59**	2.55**
Enrolment			.00	0.00
Work time			.52**	0.49**
Class size			-.27	-0.14
Lesson planning			8.02*	7.16*
Teaching time			.10	0.14
<i>Random effects</i>				
School level variance	6520 (55%)	2451	1336	1087
Student level variance	5342 (45%)	4 570	4 560	4535
	N/A	1 340#	132.80#	1087#
Difference in deviance				
<i>Explained proportion of variance in math achievement</i> (when compared with Null Model):				
School level variance	.61	.79		
Student level variance	.44	.50		

Notes: Intercept represents the grand mean of the mathematics scores (differs slightly from the South African mean score of 275 on the international test due to the fact that a number of schools could not be included in the analysis)

N = 7 651 pupils in 183 schools (one class per school);

\* t-value > 1,96, this resembles a confidence interval of 95%;

\*\* t-value > 2,58, this resembles a confidence interval of 99%;

# The difference between the deviances is significant ( $p < .001$ ).

57 points on the math achievement scale (with national mean score of 275 scale points) between a pupil who has the mean score on the English test (10 out of 40 points) and a pupil who scored 24 points (the average achieved by native English speakers). As a second example, a pupil who speaks an African language at home and never listens to an English radio station is predicted to score 25.6 points less on the mathematics achievement scale than a student who speaks English at home and always listens to an English radio station. It is therefore very clear that, if one only looks at variables at student level, there is a strong influence of language on achievement in mathematics.

A final remark on the Student-model pertains to ‘difference in deviance’ (see Table 2). Given that the deviance is a measure for the appropriateness of a model (if it is a good representation of the reality represented by the data), the fact that the difference in deviance between the Student model and the Null model is highly significant means that the Student-model is a highly significant improvement when compared to the Null-model.

The next phase in the multilevel analysis was to enter the nine school level variables, resulting in the ‘Student-School model’, also called model 15 as the model is based on 15 independent variables. The results are summarised in the final column of Table 2. In total, 11 of the 15 factors were found to be significant predictors of South African pupils' achievement in mathematics. Enrolment, class size, teaching time and home language appeared not significant in the Student-School model. Once the school-level variables were entered, the effect of home language, which was significant in the Student model, lost its significance as a consequence of the school level variables such as location of the school. On the other hand, the English test score again appears to be one of the most significant (see Howie, 2002). Another result that can be derived from the full model is that *SES* is no longer significant (see Howie, 2002). The strength and significance of the school-level variables compensated for the pupil variables, resulting in home language and *SES* losing their significance in the multilevel analysis.

The quality of the Student-School model as the best one in representing the relationship between the independent variables and achievement can be shown from two other parts of Table 2. At first, the difference in deviance between the Student-School model (model 15) and the Student-model (model 6) is significant, indicating that the Student-School model is superior. Furthermore, as can be concluded from the lowest part of Table 2, the strength of the Student-School model is also illustrated by the variance in mathematics achievement explained by this model, being 79% of the variance at school level, and 50% of the variance at student level.

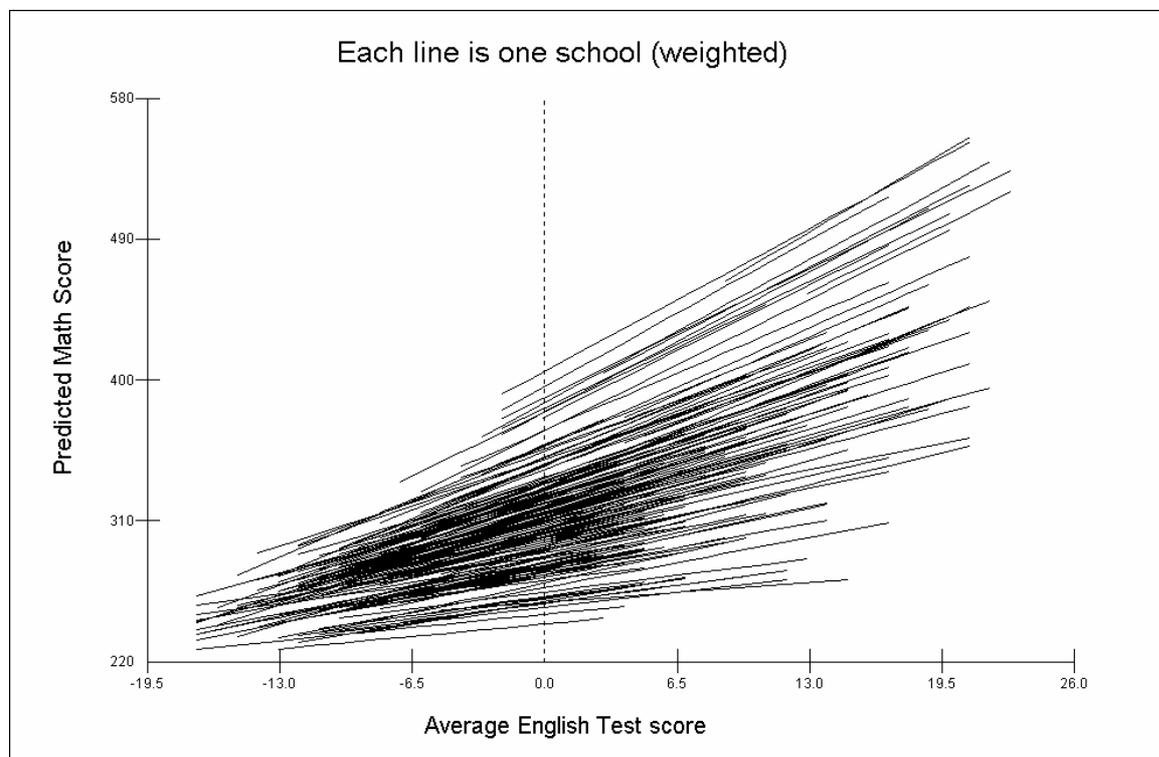
### **The extension of the Student-School-Model**

Due to the amount of the explained proportion variance on school level by the English test score (*engtest*), the student-school-model was extended with random slopes (i.e. with a random slope for each school) of the average English test score (*engtest*). The results in Table 2 indicate that this model is a significant improvement over the full model (Model 15), as the deviation from the full model is highly significant ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 2). Noteworthy is that the data of Model 16 show that the extension of the full model with random slopes results in *SES* being no longer significant. This means that the other school variables explain the variance in *SES* (as was concluded for home language (*hlang*) when discussing the full model). Another observation in the data of Model 16 is that the inclusion of the random slopes (i.e., per-school average value on *engtest* instead of taking the national average) results in lower estimates on all school variables, which shows that language proficiency is related to all school variables in another way.

Figure 1 shows the final model graphically extended with a random slope for each class on the English test (*engtest*) with the other axis representing the mathematics achievement score (resulting in Model 16).

If one looks at the pattern of the slopes in Figure 1, it would appear that the impact of the English test (*engtest*) on mathematics achievement is less in classes with a low average score on the English test. In other words in schools where pupils did poorly in the English test, their proficiency hardly made any difference to their mathematics score. Conversely, the better that classes of pupils performed on the English Test, the stronger the relationship of this outcome was with mathematics. In other words, the correlation between the English test and the mathematics score is higher for classes with an average high score on the English test. There appears to be a curvilinear relationship between English and Mathematics, which means that language proficiency matters more when the English proficiency of classes is higher.

*Figure 1: Random Slopes Representing the Predicted Score on Mathematics for Each School/Class (Based on the English Test Scores)*



Note: the mean of the English test score is 17.01, but set zero in the figure.

Another observation should be made here. Figure 1 shows that there are schools with a high average score on the English test and yet a low average performance on mathematics, combined with a low correlation between the two variables. This is an indication that there are, in addition to English proficiency, other variables (either within the model, e.g., location may be a candidate to investigate, or outside the present study) that are related to mathematics achievement. One possibility is that some informal tracking of pupils may be implemented at schools. So, there may be classes where the majority of pupils speak English at home, but may be grouped into a low ability mathematics class. Possible evidence of this practice was highlighted during the data collection for TIMSS1999 where in at least six schools principals prevented field workers from testing the sampled class on the grounds that it was a low achieving group and insisted that the "A" class be tested. Pupils from these schools were subsequently withdrawn from the TIMSS-1999 sample.

In conclusion, once all the predictors are added to the model, most of the school-level variance in pupils' achievement scores could be explained in the Student-School model. This is not the case for the student-level variance, as a large percentage of the variance on student level (50% of the 45% in the Null model) could not be explained by the predictors (including a number of language related variables) used in this model. This may be due to the fact that other variables that are not included in this study are important as well. For example, cognitive ability was not measured in this study, but was included in the Belgian-Flemish study as a national option. Van den Broek and Van Damme (2001) show that in Belgium this variable explains a great deal of variance on student level, and in fact explains more than any other single variable in their multi-level model. Clearly more research is needed here for South Africa.

However, the predictors did explain a high percentage of the variance between schools for the South African data. This means that a large part of the differences between schools in pupils' mathematics achievement can be attributed to these variables. The Student-School model indicates that significant predictors for how pupils in different schools perform in mathematics are the pupils' performance in the English test, the socio-economic status (to a lesser extent), the pupils' self concept, the pupils' perception of the importance of mathematics, their exposure to English, how pupils' maths teachers perceive their professional status, maths teachers' beliefs about mathematics, the location of the school, the extent to which English is used in the classroom, the amount of time teachers spend working and the amount of time teachers spend in lesson planning. They are also significant predictors of how well pupils perform in the same school (within-school variance), but to a lesser extent. Noteworthy is that two of these variables have a negative effect, teachers' perception of their status and their beliefs about mathematics. The stronger the teachers' ideas about mathematics and the perception about the status of the profession are, the poorer their pupils perform in mathematics. This observation should not be looked at in isolation, but in conjunction with the other variables that have a significant effect on mathematics achievement. However, further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The *first research question* addressed the effect of language on South African pupils' performance in mathematics. This research shows that in South Africa, pupils tended to achieve higher scores in mathematics when their language proficiency in English was higher and were more likely to attain low scores in mathematics when their scores on the English test were low. Children who spoke English or Afrikaans at home tended to achieve higher scores in mathematics. Alternatively, children from homes where African languages were used were more likely to achieve lower scores. Pupils in classes where the pupils and the teachers mostly interacted in the official media of instruction (English or Afrikaans) were more likely to achieve better results in mathematics.

A key finding from this research is that pupils who spoke either English or Afrikaans *at home* achieved higher scores in both the mathematics and the English tests than those who did not. There is often a mismatch in many cases regarding the language of the pupil and the language of the teacher. With the increasing heterogeneity of South Africa's schools in culture and language, offering children the opportunity to learn in their own home language is becoming increasingly challenging, as is also illustrated by other (qualitative) studies in South Africa about the relationship between mathematics and language (see e.g., Adler, 1998; Setati & Adler, 2000; Setati, Adler, Reid & Bapoo, 2001).

With regard to language another key finding was that the average English test score was very low and the majority of pupils' English language proficiency was poor. Pupils speaking African languages had very low English language proficiency when compared to other second language learners. Furthermore, there is no room for complacency as native English speakers as a group did not perform substantially better than the Afrikaans-speaking group given that this was an English second language test. The low proficiency may be linked to another finding from the research (see Howie, 2002) that more than two-thirds of pupils had very few books in the home. It is clear that an urgent and intensive intervention is needed in both English as a discipline in the schools and as a medium of instruction. Above all, children need to be encouraged to read in their leisure time, but they also need to be given more opportunities to write in English so that they become familiar with articulating thoughts and

knowledge in English and this should be targeted to all children, not only the second language speakers.

The *second research question* focused on how the effect of language relates to other background variables collected at school and student level.

The Student-model (model 6) shows that in addition to the language of the home and English proficiency other variables such as SES, self-concept of the learner (about having difficulty with mathematics) and importance of mathematics (according to mother, friends and the learner) are also related to mathematics achievement.

The Student-School model shows the influence of the location of the school in rural or urban areas on mathematics achievement, which is not surprising given the under-development in rural areas in South Africa. However, as 50% of South Africa's population live in rural areas, the fact that students attending school in rural areas perform worse in mathematics than those attending schools in urban areas should be of considerable concern to the education and other authorities and policy-makers. An interesting outcome was the strength of teachers' attitudes, beliefs and dedication as predictors of pupils' achievement. Teachers with strong mathematical pedagogical beliefs were also those whose pupils were more likely to achieve lower results. But those teachers were also the teachers who believed that mathematics is primarily a formal way of representing the real world; that mathematics is primarily a practical and structured guide for addressing real situations; if students are having difficulty an effective approach is to give them more practice by themselves during the class; that more than one representation (picture, concrete material, symbol set, etc) should be used in teaching a maths topic; that mathematics should be learned as sets of algorithms or rules that cover all possibilities; and that basic computational skills on the part of the teacher are sufficient for teaching secondary school maths. This may mean that the teachers with stronger beliefs have less content knowledge and less understanding of the philosophy of mathematics, perhaps due to their training or lack thereof. This may also result in teaching pupils through rote learning whilst reporting in a way that reflects the philosophy of the new South African curriculum, namely pupil-centred and problem-based teaching. On the other hand, teachers that had weaker beliefs may reflect a group of teachers who had good training, have a good content knowledge and have confidence in their preparation to teach, but stick to traditional teaching methods in contrast to those advocated by the new curriculum. Pupils of such teachers may have performed better on the TIMSS'99 test, a test, that has been criticised by proponents of realistic mathematics in the Netherlands as too traditional in its design and content. Further investigation of teachers' beliefs in relation to pupils' achievement is needed.

Teachers with feelings of being appreciated by society and their pupils were more likely to produce pupils with lower results. This could be due to the fact that these are teachers in more rural areas who are highly regarded by their communities, as they are well educated compared to others in those communities. However, schools in these same communities are also poor and lack resources and pupils come from poor homes and have much exposure to the languages of learning than their urban counterparts. So, although teachers feel affirmed, they are also challenged by the conditions in their schools, which results in pupils attaining lower scores. On the other hand, teachers who feel less affirmed work in better conditions in urban areas and where their pupils come from different backgrounds. Teachers' commitment appears to play a key role in pupils' performance. Pupils whose teachers spent more time with work-related activities at school tended to achieve higher results in mathematics, although the amount of time that teachers spent actually teaching had no effect. Likewise, the amount of time that teachers spent preparing lessons resulted in pupils being more likely to achieve higher results.

The lack of effect of class size as a predictor of achievement confirms previous findings in studies of developing countries. In the case of South Africa, those classes with large numbers of pupils (on average 50 pupils) are also those schools with poor conditions described earlier and therefore it is possible that a type of bottom effect is felt here and therefore, the effect of the actual number of pupils is slight.

Finally, when all other factors were considered, the most significant factor was the English test score and this was highlighted in the final extended model where the strength of the effect could be clearly seen. The data of Model 16 (the full model with random slopes for the English test) showed that the extension of the full model with random slopes results in *SES* no longer being significant. The strength

and significance of the school-level variables compensated for the student variables resulting in home language and *SES* losing their significance in the multilevel analysis.

These findings are significant against the background of the situation in many South African schools, particularly in those where there are African pupils taught by African teachers. In these schools the conditions are the worst: limited resources and facilities, large percentages of under-qualified teachers, pupils from poor socio-economic backgrounds and instruction occurs in a secondary language.

The findings give rise to a *number of reflections* on the relationship between language and achievement in relation to the language policy implemented by the South African government. The difficulty of not being able to communicate fluently in a common language is leading to increased frustration for the teacher, disorientation on the part of the child, a slow rate of learning, disciplinary problems and teacher centred instruction. Although teachers are aware of the national language policy they may have very different interpretations of it (Setati, 1999). The majority of parents, pupils and teachers perceive English as the gateway to opportunities more globally and therefore many want the pupils to participate in their education through the medium of English. The implementation of the language policy needs reassessing regarding its feasibility and the desires of the community. Unless, some hard decisions are taken, and quickly, by decision-makers, pupils and teachers will continue to struggle and pupils will under-perform in mathematics and other subjects. If, as the majority of parents seem to desire, English is increasingly used then the necessary support mechanisms need to be put into place including intensive language training of second language teachers who will be teaching through the medium of English. On the other hand, if the decision is made to teach in mother tongue beyond grade 5, the ramifications are enormous considering that in urban environments, almost all the official languages are found and there are increasingly more foreign languages (from elsewhere in Africa and beyond). Segregating children and indeed teachers in terms of language (as clearly offering 11 languages of learning will be impossible within a single school) will be an enormous task and may reverse the cultural integration beginning to take place. Of course, in many rural areas where one language is almost always clearly dominant, it may be more feasible. The danger of considering only one approach in the language policy, albeit an important one (for example, only considering cultural identity or the political perspective), is that the multiple functions of schooling will be ignored. For the curriculum and pupils' education have to fulfil the desires of society, namely, that of educating them towards being a responsive citizen in a democratic society, of attaining certain basic knowledge and skills, being prepared for the workplace and/or further education and acquiring adequate social and interpersonal skills. The government has to take a firm lead in finding the appropriate balance between these perspectives, for if this is left to the schools, the status quo will remain.

*In conclusion*, the strength of the language component represented in a number of variables that have strong effects on mathematics achievement seems apparent. Moreover, the dedication of the teacher matters with regard to their pupils' achievement and the location of the school is another important predictor of South African pupils' achievement in mathematics. In the past few years, some progress has been made addressing shortcomings in South African schools. Although significant progress has been made with regard to administrative restructuring, policy development and infra-structural improvements, nonetheless the quality of education that the majority of pupils are receiving is far from satisfactory. The study (Howie, 2002) highlighted the most significant predictors of mathematics (of which language is only one) within the scope of the data available and has raised a number of questions and issues that are believed to be pertinent to the future development of South African education, in particular in mathematics. The challenges abound within the education system of this country, and besides to the issues of access and equity, the most important challenge awaiting South Africa now is that of quality.

This paper has described one case of a national option that was conducted within an IEA study. This research has been able to fill a void in research exploring the relationship between language and mathematics in South Africa. The IEA's TIMSS'99 provided the opportunity for researchers in South Africa to conduct this research, which would not have been possible otherwise given the limited resources within the country. The IEA's technical standards ensured the quality of the sample and implementation of the TIMSS'99 within this country and others. Furthermore, by allowing a country

such as South Africa the possibility to include additional data collection (i.e. the national option) enabled the collection of quality data to pursue national research interests and in this particular project also the development of research expertise within a country with limited expertise. Finally, the authors believe that national and regional options should be greatly encouraged for all IEA studies to increase the relevance of each study for participating countries and for the development of knowledge and skills in the more developing environments in particular.

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