

READING ACHIEVEMENT AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the relationship between school performance and reading performance of 3rd grade students in Slovenian elementary schools. Data from PIRLS shows that the best readers also performed well at school; however, once we observe students below the top 10% readers, the relationship between school performance and reading performance is not longer so obvious. There is quite a number of children who had high reading achievement on PIRLS but do not perform so well at school, while there are children who perform very well at school and yet have poor reading achievement. Interestingly, children who perform well at school but have poor reading achievement perceive themselves as better readers than those children who, in fact, have high reading achievement but poor school performance. I expect to show under what circumstances school and reading performance do not correspond and how it is possible that successful students (in terms of good grades) are not necessarily good readers (i.e., do not necessarily understand what they read). I will discuss possible outcomes of the results regarding declared equal possibilities for all children at public schools.

INTRODUCTION

The most successful students are supposed to be good readers. Indeed, according to PIRLS 2001 Slovenian national data, students with the highest reading achievement are also very good students. But once we move away from the 20% of the best performing readers/students, we see an interesting picture: there we find some students with a high reading achievement on PIRLS but who are not so successful at school, and some top students whose reading achievement was not very good or even below average.

The issue of the relationship between reading achievement and school performance

arose while scoring open-ended items on the PIRLS main survey. Since in PIRLS we were checking children's understanding of written texts and not the quality of written responses, i.e., feedback on understanding, we noticed some obvious discrepancies between the points scored and, at that time, unimportant mistakes in writing. Or, vice versa, there were some beautiful sentences that respected all the rules of writing, but in the answer a point was missing that would imply the child's misunderstanding of the question and/or the relevant passage.

The Slovenian way of teaching is quite straightforward: children are taught syntactic rules of writing from the beginning of their literacy and these rules are very strict.

In PIRLS we tested children in the 3rd grade. Grade is important from two points of view. First, by the 3rd grade children have had 3 years of learning how to read and write, and second, at the age of 9 and 10 we don't expect to find much differentiation between several cognitive activities, e.g., between reading and other school activities. It would be quite acceptable for a capable teenager to have high cognitive abilities and not behave accordingly at school, e.g., such a student could have poor grades at school but we wouldn't suspect that there was anything wrong with the school or school system. We would rather suspect that the student isn't willing to study. When such a difference appears in a child at this age and stage of education it is rather unusual since we expect the child's abilities and performance to be more connected or interdependent.

Let's for a moment consider that good reading means knowledge. Now we can set a question: is it more important to know more or to have good grades? With the question seemingly so trivial, many people would put knowledge above grades. But is it really so obvious? Of course, for a student it is good to have both: knowledge for life and good grades at school for parents' sake (if they value good performance rewarded with good grades). In Slovenia, to say the least, it is equally important to have good grades. Let me explain: to proceed from elementary to high school (= upper secondary) children need to have a certain number of points. Approximately 50% of the points depend on grades in elementary school, regardless of knowledge (it is presupposed that achieved knowledge is properly reflected in the final grade)! This is obviously a failing in the system, but it is possible for a child who knows less but has good grades to enter a desired school, while her/his schoolmate with lower grades is left out. (Children obtain the remaining points by national tests that are the same for everybody.) Therefore, in order to guarantee a certain fairness in the system, the consistency between knowledge and grades is of great importance.

In this article I would like to examine the relationship between reading and school performance. The majority of students who took the PIRLS reading tests seem to be unproblematic from the mentioned point of view: there are students who are good both in reading and at school, and students who have poor reading achievement and low grades at school. Therefore, in this article I shall focus on two groups of students: students with a relatively high reading achievement and poor school performance in one group, and students with relatively poor reading achievement and yet good school performance in the other group. I will examine these two groups in order to clarify whether there are any significant characteristics that mark either of the groups.

METHOD

After the PIRLS tests were completed, the participating schools were asked to send information on the students' school grades. They provided information on students' general performance and their final Slovenian language grade. Students are guaranteed anonymity by law, so schools provided the information on the basis of a copy of the PIRLS participation form, which they kept at school on our request before the implementation of the survey.

The Slovenian elementary school grading system is based on five grades ranging from 1 (the lowest grade, a child does not pass) to 5 (the highest grade). At the time of the implementation of PIRLS 2001, children at grade 3 were schooled in the 8-year elementary school. In the meantime, the implementation of the 9-year elementary school began to take place. I mention this in order to present one of the "visible" differences between the two types (the old 8-year and new 9-year elementary schools), which is grading. In the first three levels of the new 9-year system, children are given descriptive grades, while in the old 8-year system they received (almost in every school) numeric grades from the very beginning.

There are 3,133 students in the sample from the PIRLS study. The average reading achievement of Slovenian students (502 points) almost exactly matches the international average (500 points). In this paper I used the national data with the average of 150.10 points. A Rasch score (name of the variable in the data is 'asrearsc') was used for students' reading achievement.

The average grade of students was 4.04 in Slovenian language and 4.16 as a general grade for their whole year performance. 40.0% of students had grade 5 for Slovenian Language; 32.6% had 4; 19.8% had 3; 7.1% had 2; and 0.6% students obtained grade 1. Grades for general performance were distributed similarly: 45.7% of students had 5; 31.1% had 4; 17.3% of students had 3; 5.2% of students had 2; and 0.7% of students had 1.

RESULTS

Basic relation between School Grades and Reading Achievement

How are reading and school grades connected in reality? One of the basic requirements of schooling in the first three grades is to teach children how to read and write. Reading is a component of both grades in school performance: performance in Slovenian Language and General Performance. The General Grade is compiled from grades in all school subjects that a student has at a certain year of schooling: the Slovenian Language, Math, Science, Art, Sports, etc. Students read in all subjects, so reading is even more a component of the General Grade than it is of language classes.

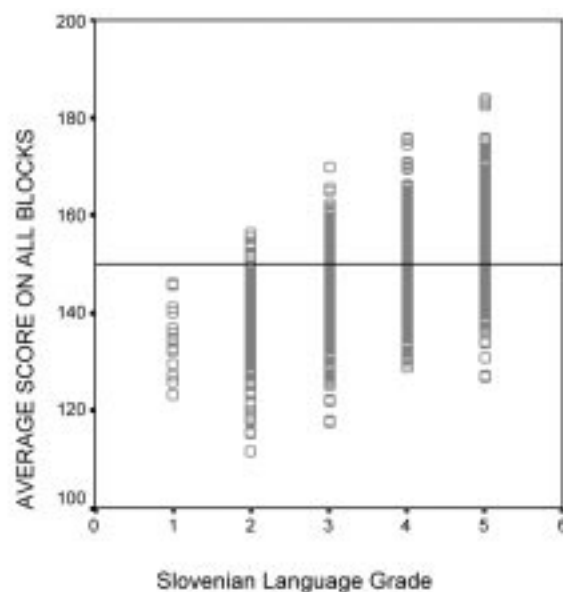
So even if we measure things that look different at first glance, they are so connected that we can expect a high correlation.

The correlation between reading achievement and school performance was high indeed. Correlation between *the average score on all blocks* (asrearsc) and the grade

for the Slovenian Language was high ($r = .61$); correlation between *the average score on all blocks* (asrearsc) and the General Performance Grade was also high ($r = .60$), and was even higher for the Slovenian Language Grade and the General Performance Grade ($r = .90$).

The relation between reading achievement and school performance is represented in Figures 1a and 1b.

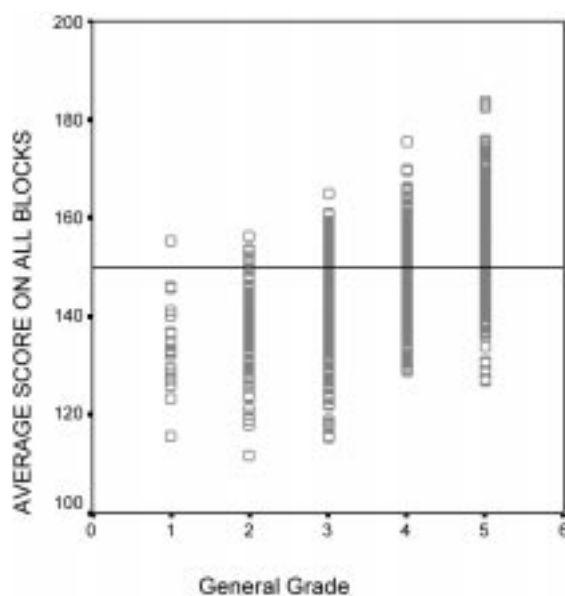
Figure 1a: Reading Achievement in Relation to Student's Grades for the Slovenian Language



We can see that the distribution of reading achievement according to school grades is wide. Children who had grade 5 for Slovenian Language had reading achievement ranging from 126.8 and 183.6; children with grade 4 in Language had reading scores from 128.8 to 175.7; children with grade 3 in Language had reading scores from 117.5 to 170.0; children with grade 2 in Language scored from 111.4 to 156.3 in reading; and children with grade 1 ('the negative' grade) in Language had reading achievement ranging from 123.1 to 146.0.

The distribution in Figure 1b is similar to the distribution in Figure 1a. Children who had grade 5 as the General, Performance Grade, had reading achievement from 126.8 and 183.6; children with grade 4 General had reading scores from 128.9 to 175.6; children with grade 3 General had reading scores from 115.2 to 164.9; children with grade 2 General, scored from 111.4 to 156.3 in reading; while children with grade 1 ('the negative' grade) General had reading achievement ranging from 115.7 to 155.2.

Figure 1b: Reading Achievement in Relation to Student's Grades for General Performance



From Figures 1a and 1b it is obvious that students with the same grades (General, Language) received very different reading scores. Students with good and bad grades can be found above and below the average (at 150.10 points).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I was particularly interested in students with special characteristics. To find the characteristics of a 'nontypical student', I divided students into 6 groups.

Table 1: Groups of Students According to their School Performance and Reading Achievement

	General Grade 1 - 3	General Grade 4	General Grade 5
Reading Performance above the average	Good Readers, Poor Students	Good Readers, Average Students	Good Readers, Good Students
Reading Performance below average	Poor Readers, Poor Students	Poor Readers, Average Students	Poor Readers, Good Students

I will deal mainly with two groups: the first group consists of Good Readers who are Poor Students, while the second is made of Poor Readers who are Good Students. From the reading point of view, the first group receives lower grades than expected, so I will call them "the losers". The second group gets higher grades at school than expected on the basis of their reading achievement, so I will call them "the winners". I stress that I use these expressions only as technical terms (!) in order to simplify

the reading of this article. In spite of the fact that these terms are technical, they make some sense, at least in the case of "the Winners": one would not expect that the child who doesn't understand what she/he reads to receive the highest grades.

On the other hand, children who understand what they read independently are not expected to get grade 1, 2 or 3, since these grades are well below the average (as mentioned before, the average grade is just above 4). In Slovenian schools, children who get grades 3 or less are not expected to ever become good students. To make the idea more tangible, I shall not deal with the average students at all, regardless of their being below or above the average reading achievement.

From 3 133 students there are 4.1% who are Good Readers & Poor Students (= Losers) and 7.7% who are Poor Readers & Good Students (= Winners). The remaining students fall into the other four groups (88.2%).

Home Background of Good Readers and Home Background of Good Students

PIRLS 2001 data shows that the Slovene children who come from wealthier families have a higher reading achievement. In *Home Questionnaire* there was a question regarding 'the income of the family'.

Following options were given in the Slovenian *Home Questionnaire*:

Group 1: less than 2 million SIT ('SIT' is the abbreviation for Slovenian national currency the Slovenian tolar, and 2 million SIT approx. equals 8,400 EUR or 10,000 USD)

Group 2: 2-3 mill. SIT

Group 3: 3-4 mill. SIT

Group 4: 4-5 mill. SIT

Group 5: 5-6 mill. SIT

Group 6: exceeding 6 million SIT (31 500 USD)

A large proportion of families of the children who participated in PIRLS 2001 are in group 1 (29.7%). In group 2 there are 27.6%; in group 3, 18.8%; in group 4, 11.5%; in group 5, 5.7%; and 6.8% of children surveyed by PIRLS come from families in group 6. More than half of the children (57.3%) come from families belonging to groups 1 and 2. Differences between the groups are statistically significant.

The average reading score in group 1 was 147.3; the average reading score in group 2 was 150.1; in group 3 151.3; in group 4 153.4; in group 5 153.5; while the average reading score in group 6 was 153.7.

The relationship between household income and the student's Slovenian Language Grade is also statistically significant ($F=52.167$, $df=5$, $sig=.000$) and the relationship between household income and the General Grade is statistically significant as well ($F=63.723$, $df=5$, $sig=.000$). The average grade for Slovenian language in group 1 was 3.68; in group 2 the average grade was 4.07; in group 3, 4.21; in group 4, 4.41; in group 5, 4.39 and; the average grade in group 6 was 4.49. The difference between groups 1 and 2 exceeds all others, namely it amounts to 0.39.

Figure 2: Family Income and Reading Achievement

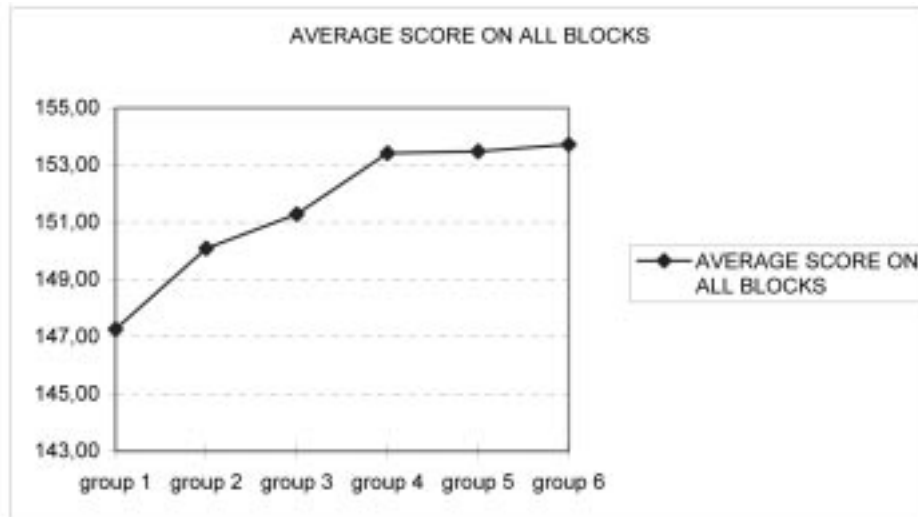
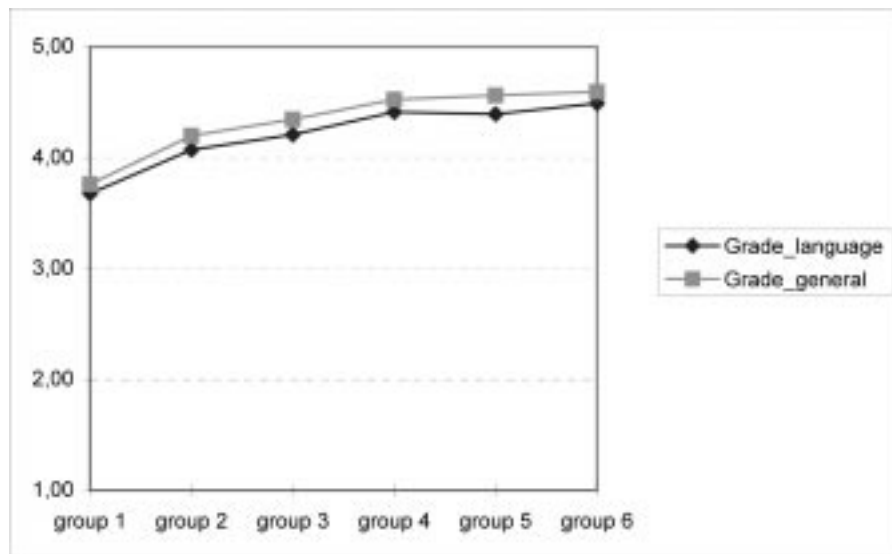


Figure 3: Family Income and Students' Grades



The average General Grade in group 1 was 3.76; in group 2 it was 4.20; in group 3, 4.35; in group 4, 4.53; in group 5, 4.56; and in group 6 the average grade was 4.59. Here, the difference between group 1 and group 2 is even bigger: 0.44.

The school performance of children who come from economically disadvantaged

families is worse than that of children belonging to more well-off families. This was expected, as many surveys confirm the relation between home environment and school success. Fairclough (1988) wrote: "...despite the claims of education to differentiate only on the grounds of merit, differentiation follows social class lines."

Children who come from wealthier families enjoy both advantages - higher grades and higher reading achievement (i.e., more knowledge, in our case).

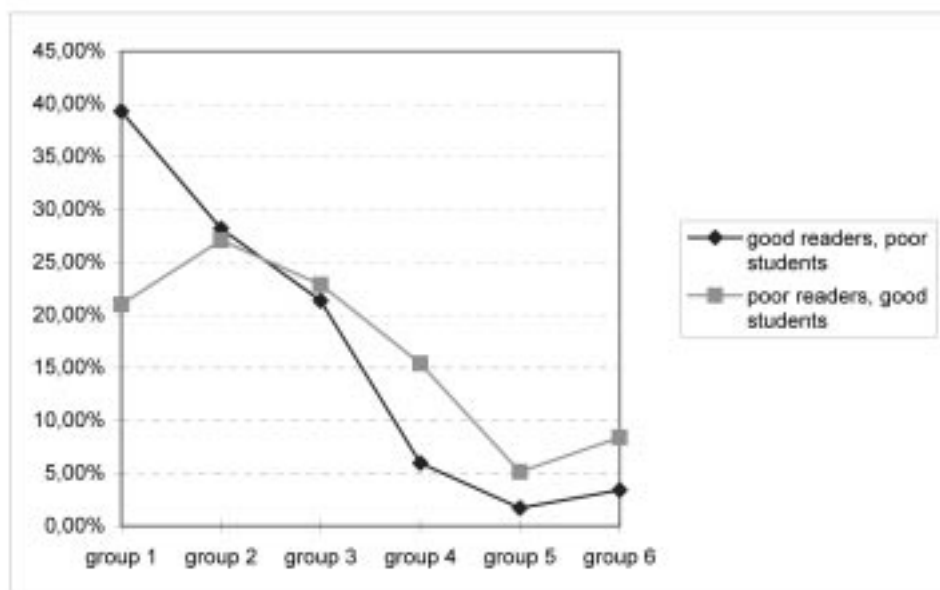
Let's take a look at home environment characteristics of the children who don't fit in this scheme.

Socioeconomic characteristics of 'Losers' and 'Winners'

There are various socioeconomic factors that are related to school performance and reading achievement: family income, father's education, mother's education, the perception of how well the family is situated in comparison with the neighborhood, number of books at home, immigration status, self-perception, etc.

First I shall examine the relationship between the Losers Group (i.e., Good Readers & Poor Students) and the Winners Group (i.e., Poor Readers & Good Students) in terms of family income.

Figure 4: Losers and Winners in Relation to Family Income



Data shows that the relation between the Losers and the Winners in group 1 is almost 2:1. In other words, it seems as though it is twice as likely that a student from the poorest group of families and who does not get grades in accordance with her/his

knowledge, will fall into the Losers group rather than the Winners group (i.e., if she or he will not be graded in accordance with her or his performance). The difference between the groups is statistically significant ($F = 19.994$, $df = 5$, $sig = .001$). The fact is well worth consideration, especially since we know that group 1 is the largest (29.7 % of children come from group1).

Table 2: Proportion of Losers and Winners in Different Family Income Groups

	<i>LOSERS Good Readers, Poor Students</i>	<i>WINNERS Poor Readers, Good Students</i>	<i>PIRLS 2001 population</i>
Group 1 (less than 10 000 USD per year)	39.32%	21.03%	29.5%
Group 2	28.21%	27.10%	27.4%
Group 3	21.37%	22.90%	19.0%
Group 4	5.98%	15.42%	11.3%
Group 5	1.71%	5.14%	5.7%
Group 6	3.42%	8.41%	7.0%
total	100%	100%	100%

Table 2 shows that almost 40% of students in the Losers group come from the poorest families. In the upper three groups 11.1% of students are in the Losers group, while 29% of the Winners are in the upper three financial classes.

PIRLS data show that 29.5% of students are in group 1.

How families/parents perceive themselves financially in relation to the neighborhood also contributes to the identification of the children who do not "fit" into the system.

Many more children in the Losers group belong to families where parents (at least one parent, who completed the questionnaire) think that they are financially disadvantaged in relation to the population: 23% vs. 6.5%. The difference between the groups is statistically significant ($F = 21.253$, $df = 4$, $sig = .000$).

One's self-perception is also significant: it shows that families are not only poor on the national scale but are probably also (at least in their own eyes) poorer than the rest of families in their neighbourhood; this measure takes a subjective point of view but it is quite possible that people who consider themselves poor (regardless of hard facts) judge their status in relation to their neighbours. In other words, they think they are poor if other people living around them perceive them as poor.

Table 3: How Parents Perceive their Financial Situation in Relation to Other Families

<i>WELL OFF FAMILY FINANCIALLY</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>	
VERY WELL-OFF	Count	2	9	11
	% within groups	1.6%	3.9%	3.1%
SOMEWHAT WELL-OFF	Count	21	40	61
	% within groups	17.2%	17.4%	17.3%
AVERAGE	Count	71	166	237
	% within groups	58.2%	72.2%	67.3%
NOT VERY WELL-OFF	Count	19	10	29
	% within groups	15.6%	4.3%	8.2%
NOT AT ALL WELL-OFF	Count	9	5	14
	% within groups	7.4%	2.2%	4.0%
Total	Count	122	230	352
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The family financial situation is related to parents' education, as on average, people with higher education have a higher income.

How educated are the parents of the Losers and Winners?

Table 4a: Education of Fathers of Losers and Winners

<i>HIGHEST EDUCATION / FATHER</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>
Finished Primary School	Count	18	19
	% within groups	15.4%	9.1%
Vocational School	Count	49	62
	% within groups	41.9%	29.7%
Upper Secondary School	Count	41	95
	% within groups	35.1%	45.4%
University	Count	9	33
	% within groups	7.7%	15.8%
Total	Count	117	209
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%

In the Losers group 15.4% of children have fathers with only primary school education, 41.9% with vocational school, 35.1% with upper secondary school and only 7.7% a university degree.

In the Winners group there are 9.1% children whose fathers have primary school education, 29.7% vocational school, 45.4% upper secondary school and 15.8% obtained a university degree.

PIRLS 2001 data show that 12.8% fathers had primary school, 31% had vocational school, 38.7% had upper secondary school and 17.5% of fathers had university degrees. The difference between groups is statistically significant ($F = 9.907$, $df = 1$, $sig = .002$).

Table 4b: Education of Mothers of Losers and Winners

<i>HIGHEST EDUCATION/MOTHER</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>
Finished Primary School	Count	28	20
	% within groups	24.1%	9.2%
Vocational School	Count	29	35
	% within groups	25.0%	16.2%
Upper Secondary School	Count	49	120
	% within groups	42.2%	55.3%
University	Count	10	42
	% within groups	8.6%	19.3%
Total	Count	117	209
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%

24.1% of children's mothers in the Losers group have only primary school education, 25.0% vocational school, 42.2% upper secondary school and only 8.6% a university degree.

In the Winners group there are 9.2% of mothers who have primary school education, 16.2% vocational school, 55.3% upper secondary school and 19.3% obtained a university degree.

PIRLS 2001 data show that 17.9% mothers had primary school, 16.8% had vocational school, 44.7% had upper secondary school and 20.5% mothers had university degree. The difference between groups is statistically significant ($F = 24.039$, $df = 1$, $sig = .000$).

More mothers (24.1%) than fathers (15.4%) whose children are in the Losers group have finished nothing more than primary school. On vocational school level, a directly opposite trend occurs: more fathers (41.9%) than mothers (25.0%) have vocational education. More mothers than fathers have finished upper secondary school. At the university level, the proportion is about the same.

In the Winners group, approximately the same proportion of mothers and fathers have finished primary school and nothing else, more fathers than mothers have finished vocational school, and more mothers than fathers have finished upper secondary school. Again, there are more mothers (19.3%) than fathers (15.8%) with a university degree.

PIRLS 2001 data confirms that about 85% of children had both parents born in the country. An interesting picture shows the proportion of immigrant parents in the two observed groups.

Table 5: Parents (not) Born in Country

<i>PARENTS</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>	
Both Parents Born in Country	Count	82	186	268
	% within groups	68.9%	84.2%	78.8%
Mother not Born in Country	Count	3	8	11
	% within groups	2.5%	3.6%	3.2%
Father not Born in Country	Count	3	9	12
	% within groups	2.5%	4.1%	3.5%
Both Parents not Born in Country	Count	31	18	49
	% within groups	26.1%	8.1%	14.4%
Total	Count	119	221	340
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

For more than a quarter (26.1%) of children in the Losers group, both parents were born outside the country. In the Winners group, there are 8.1% of children with both immigrant parents. Only 68.9% of children in the Losers group had both parents born in the country. The difference between groups is statistically significant ($F = 20.308$, $df = 3$, $sig = .000$).

Not all immigrant parents speak their native tongue in the family. Table 6 shows there are many (more than expected) children who always or almost always speak Slovenian at home. Even if there are 26.1% of children in the Losers group whose parents are immigrants, there are only 3.1% of Losers who never speak Slovenian at home. The difference is probably due to daily interaction with siblings in Slovenian. However, the difference between groups is statistically significant ($F = 8.856$, $df = 2$, $sig = .012$).

Table 6: Speaking Slovenian at Home

<i>SPEAKING SLOVENIAN AT HOME</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>	
ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS	Count	102	205	307
	% within groups	78.5%	85.8%	83.2%
SOMETIMES	Count	24	34	58
	% within groups	18.5%	14.2%	15.7%
NEVER	Count	4	0	4
	% within groups	3.1%	.0%	1.1%
Total	Count	130	239	369
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Again, there are significant differences between the Losers and the Winners: 78.5% of Losers always speak Slovenian at home and 85% of Winners always speak Slovenian at home. No children in the Winners group reported they never speak Slovenian at home.

In the final section, I am interested in seeing how self-perception relates to the sense of belonging to one of the observed groups. Even if there is no statistically significant difference between the groups, Table 7 shows an interesting phenomenon. Or better: there is no significant difference between groups, and that is interesting.

Table 7: Self-perception: reading is easy for me

<i>READING IS EASY</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>	
AGREE A LOT	Count	89	177	266
	% within groups	69.0%	74.7%	72.7%
AGREE A LITTLE	Count	30	50	80
	% within groups	23.3%	21.1%	21.9%
DISAGREE A LITTLE	Count	8	4	12
	% within groups	6.2%	1.7%	3.3%
DISAGREE A LOT	Count	2	6	8
	% within groups	1.6%	2.5%	2.2%
Total	Count	129	237	366
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Children in both groups perceive reading as relatively easy, though there is a small difference: 7.8% of Losers don't think reading is easy and only 4.2% of Winners share that view. However, this difference is not statistically proved.

Another indicator of a child's self-perception is captured in the question, whether the child thinks he or she reads better or worse than the rest of the children.

Table 8: Self-perception: I Do Not Read as well as Other Children in my Class

<i>NOT AS WELL AS OTHER CHILDREN</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>	
AGREE A LOT	Count	25	45	70
	% within groups	19.2%	19.0%	19.1%
AGREE A LITTLE	Count	44	62	106
	% within groups	33.8%	26.2%	28.9%
DISAGREE A LITTLE	Count	20	43	63
	% within groups	15.4%	18.1%	17.2%
DISAGREE A LOT	Count	41	87	128
	% within groups	31.5%	36.7%	34.9%
Total	Count	130	237	367
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

53% of children in the Losers group agree with the statement that they do not read as well as other children in the classroom, and 45.2% of Winners do, too. Even though the difference is not statistically significant, it is very interesting because, as PIRLS 2001 shows, Losers are better readers than Winners. An expected result here would be for Losers to perceive themselves as better readers than Winners. Children obviously judged themselves according to the feedback from the school: Losers are poor students (have General Grade 3 or less, which is well under the average for the third grade of elementary school!) and they perceive themselves as poor readers (even if they are above the average). In contrast, children who get the highest grades at school, perceive themselves as better readers than those who actually are better readers. School grades tell them they are good students, even if this is not necessarily true.

In Slovenian schools, reading aloud in front of the class is regularly practiced. Students get grades (within Slovenian Language classes) for reading aloud. A child can get a good grade for reading aloud, even if she/he is not a good reader in the sense that she/he does not necessarily understand what she/he reads.

Table 9: Reading aloud is hard

<i>READING ALOUD IS HARD</i>		<i>LOSERS</i>	<i>WINNERS</i>	<i>PIRLS POPULATION</i>
AGREE A LOT	Count	16	35	51
	% within groups	12.4%	14.8%	13.9%
AGREE A LITTLE	Count	10	38	48
	% within groups	7.8%	16.0%	13.1%
DISAGREE A LITTLE	Count	19	22	41
	% within groups	14.7%	9.3%	11.2%
DISAGREE A LOT	Count	84	142	226
	% within groups	65.1%	59.9%	61.7%
Total	Count	129	237	366
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

30.8% of Winners stated that reading aloud is hard and 20.2% of Losers think that reading aloud is hard, as well. This seems to be more consistent with who is in fact a better reader, but unfortunately we do not know what grades children get for their performance (for reading aloud).

CONCLUSION

My aim was to show the differences among the children who proceed well through the system, and those who do not. In this paper, I refer to them as Winners and Losers: again, Losers are those children who read well but receive low grades at school, while Winners are those who do not understand what they read and yet get the highest grades.

The analysis showed that the two groups have distinct characteristics.

Losers are children from economically disadvantaged families: 39% of children in the Losers group fall into the lowest group by family income, and only 11% into the 3 upper classes together (there were 6 classes). Parents of those children also think that they are poorer than the rest of the families in their neighborhood. Parents are less educated: 57% of fathers have finished nothing more than vocational school or not even that, and 49% of mothers have vocational school education or not even that. 25% children have parents who were both born outside Slovenia and 21.6% of children only occasionally or never speak Slovenian at home.

Winners are children who come from wealthier families, in comparison with Losers: only 21% belong to families with the lowest income. Parents of 6.5% of children think that their family is financially underprivileged in comparison to other families. Children in the Losers group – with the exception of the lowest income class, where there's a huge difference – are not so poor as children in the Winners group, but the Winners' families do not perceive themselves as economically deprived as the Losers' families. This could imply that Winners might well be poor, but their neighborhood does not perceive them as such, and that they can have more social power, or better, are socially not as powerless as Losers.

The Winners' parents are better educated, which can also be the reason for not perceiving themselves as poor. Here, 44% of fathers have vocational school at most (cf. 57% of Losers' fathers) and 15% have a university degree (cf. 7% of Losers' fathers). Data on the education of mothers can reveal even more. Only 25% of Winners' mothers have vocational school at most (cf. 49% of Losers' mothers), and 19% of Winners' mothers have a university degree (versus 8% of Losers' mothers). Mothers' education is more related to the student's belonging to one of the two groups. This can be explained by the fact that mothers in Slovenia are more engaged in their children's education; at least they have more contacts with school staff than fathers.

In the Winners group 8% have parents who were not born in Slovenia (this is much less than the percentage of immigrant parents of Losers - 26%). 85% of Winners always speak Slovenian at home. This percentage slightly exceeds that of Losers (78%). Families of Winners are obviously more assimilated into the Slovenian culture. The assimilation imperative is very strong in the Slovenian society – diversity is not much valued (Mocnik, 1988). There are also no Winners who always speak some other language at home.

Reading is relatively easy for both groups. 92% of Losers agree, at least to some extent, that reading is easy and 95% of Winners think so, too. Of course, PIRLS 2001 data does not show that reading is easy for Slovenian children, but if children thought that reading was only decoding signs, this result would be interpreted accordingly.

A slightly larger percentage of Losers than Winners think that they do not read as well as other children, but this is not statistically significant. It is surprising that they consider themselves good or bad readers regardless of their real reading ability. Even

if we compare the reading self-esteem with all children in PIRLS, there are no differences. It should be researched further why children think they are good or bad readers, and what reference they use. In Slovenian schools there is quite a lot of reading aloud and more Winners than Losers are convinced reading aloud is hard.

All this data shows Losers – in spite of the fact that this is just a technical term in this body of text – as a truly underprivileged social group: in general, they are poorer, their parents are less educated, more children have immigrant parents and even if they are better readers than other children, they do not regard themselves as good readers.

Equality in education is stipulated in all basic documents concerning education in Slovenia, but in reality it seems some students are not entitled to it. The findings imply that some children are limited by the expectations the society imposes on them, so they can develop only as high as the society (school, in this case) allows them to. On the other hand, there are children who get what they are not entitled to get. The latter represents a small problem, if it is a problem at all. Maybe these children get high grades because they do not need to read to comply with the school demands, so we cannot say they take advantage of the system. The advantage is more implicit than explicit.

The group that needs our further engagement are the Losers, because they do not actually have access to what the society is obliged to provide them with.

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