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Educational Performance and Social Background in International Comparison

Abstract

The paper is based on the PISA 2000 survey and focuses on the international variation in reading scores of students in selected European nations. The analysis investigates the effect of students' sociological characteristics (like family background or family social and educational climate) as well as that of school climate and student-teacher relationship on students' performance. Both bivariate and multivariate relationships are considered in order to display the rank order of the countries with respect to the determination of students' achievement. The research confirms previous findings on existing variation how family background influences students' performance: this effect is stronger in some post-socialist countries (especially in Hungary) and in Germany, and is weaker in the Scandinavian and in some Anglo-Saxon countries. Students' reading skills turn out to be less affected by the school climate and teachers' behavior in comparison to family background.

Keywords: PISA 2000, school performance, educational inequalities

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Introduction

The usual research question used to investigate educational inequalities refers to the impact of social background on the highest level of education attained, the choice of various school types, or the probabilities of educational transitions.¹ This study, however, has a different topic and investigates another dependent variable, namely educational performance as reflected by students' abilities plus the results of the knowledge accumulated. Grading students is part of education, but its most frequent forms—the school grades—are far from the best and most objective measures of knowledge, especially in a comparative sense. It is well known that the *same* school grades can cover *different* competencies in various schools. Evaluation of students is relative, and the teacher's decision on how to grade a pupil's achievement can be affected by the school as a whole, the specific class community, the previous performance of the pupil, or some other consideration.² This is why alternative test methods have been developed in order to compare the actual knowledge and competence of the students. Accordingly, degrees and diplomas and the other markers of school progression indicate educational achievement on the one hand, while, on the other hand, the successful performance of different tasks and students' various actual competencies reflect the effectiveness of education. International comparative studies like the Adult Literacy Survey (OECD 2000) or the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD 2001) aim to investigate the latter type of educational outcomes. This analysis is based on the PISA 2000 database.³

¹ Examples of such studies in international comparison: Shavit and Blossfeld (1993), Erikson and Jonsson (1996); for Hungary particularly: Simkus and Andorka (1982), Róbert (1991, 2003), Bukodi (1999), Andor and Liskó (2000).

² School marks of different students in different schools cannot be compared because they are based on different answers to different questions at different times. Tests with the same content are better measures, such as those used in the secondary school final examinations (General Maturity Certificate 'érettségi')—except if they are evaluated by the teacher of the student in his/her school, as in Hungary. This explains why entrance exams to higher educational establishments or language exams involve identical tasks for everybody and why 'unknown' teachers evaluate the results anonymously.

³ The PISA 2000 survey was carried out by Péter Vári and his colleagues in Hungary. They have published several articles from the data in Hungarian, as well as a comprehensive book (Vári 2003). Their publications make extensive use of the materials that are available from the PISA reports. This analysis, however, is based on our own calculations from the original micro data, which are available on the internet.

The PISA survey was initiated by the OECD; about 265 thousand 15-year-old students were investigated in 32 countries in order to test their abilities with respect to their performance in reading, maths and scientific literacy. Researchers were not interested in replication of any 'lexicological' knowledge; instead they wanted to learn about students' analytical and problem-solving competence and about their ability to make use of learning skills under everyday circumstances. The PISA survey put a greater emphasis on reading skills and focused on students' ability to retrieve information from written texts by understanding, using and reflecting on them. Achievement was measured separately in these three dimensions and the results were summarized. In the fields of maths and science, the tests were less detailed and contained fewer items, but recognition of problems and skill in solving them were crucial in these respects, too. The performance of the 15-year-old students was measured on continuous scales. The whole approach differs markedly from investigating the extent to which students have mastered the school curriculum and are able to replicate it. On the basis of the PISA survey, the OECD aimed to reveal the level of students' capacity to continue learning, as well as their ability to use knowledge in real life. Accordingly, the PISA survey measures the relationship between educational inputs and learning outcomes in international comparison for tapping students' preparedness for life and for future employment ('skills for life')⁴.

In this analysis we use the performance of students to investigate the extent to which different countries are at risk from bad test results and low competency levels, insofar as these predict unsatisfactory labour market potentials for the future. We also present a multivariate analysis of how far students' achievement and test results are influenced by sociological factors. In this respect we place great emphasis on the impact of the family background. For students' performance the outcomes of the reading test are used, as it was considered the 'main field' in the PISA study and was measured more accurately.

⁴ For the theoretical framework of student assessment, see OECD (1999).

Competence disadvantages in international comparison

Based on the test scores derived from the reading items, the OECD researchers placed the students on five levels.⁵ The lowest level contains the ‘at risk group’ of 15-year-old pupils who have basic difficulties in understanding everyday texts and who are practically and functionally illiterate. According to the approach of the OECD, these youngsters will later be unable to participate adequately in the life of society because they will most probably have difficulties in finding any job or in continuing their studies to obtain the appropriate skills. The proportion of such students is displayed in *Table 1* for selected European countries, based on the PISA data.

The left-hand columns of *Table 1* reveal that between a fifth and a quarter of Hungarian youngsters will have difficulty participating in the division of labour or acquiring the necessary skills because of their inadequate reading competencies. The situation is similar in Germany and test results reveal even higher proportions of this ‘at risk group’ in Poland, as well as in two nations on the periphery of the European Union: Greece and Portugal.

Table 1: Students on the lowest level according to the reading test by countries and among the offspring of low-status parents

Country	Percentage (%)	Country*	Percentage (%)	Increase in percentage
Finland	6.9	Finland	9.9	3.0
Ireland	11.0	Ireland	18.2	7.2
Sweden	12.6	Sweden	22.0	9.4
United Kingdom	12.8	United Kingdom	22.2	9.4
Austria	14.6	Denmark	22.5	4.6
France	15.2	France	24.5	9.3
Czech Republic	17.5	Italy	27.0	8.1
Norway	17.5	Austria	31.4	16.8
Denmark	17.9	Norway	32.0	12.5
Italy	18.9	Greece	33.1	8.7
Germany	22.6	Portugal	35.6	9.3
Hungary	22.7	Poland	35.9	12.1
Poland	23.8	Czech Republic	36.6	19.1
Greece	24.4	Hungary	37.6	14.9
Portugal	26.3	Germany	38.2	15.6
N	41 002	N	7563	

Note: * Only those students whose father (or mother) is in the lowest quintile of the ISEI status index. (See also Footnote 6.)

Source: PISA 2000 Database, own calculations.

⁵ See pp. 25–26 in the Manual for the PISA 2000 Database (<http://www.pisa.org>).

One cannot speak, however, of a universal deficit among the peripheral European countries, since the proportion of the 'at risk group' is much lower in Ireland. Students from the Scandinavian countries, especially from Finland, performed very well in the test. Although, of the post-socialist countries, Hungary and Poland are characterized by bad results, the Czech Republic is situated in the middle of the rankings. *The pattern of the results is not so far unequivocal.* The international variation in educational performance or in competencies of the 15-year-old students cannot be interpreted as a centre-periphery distinction. Nor is it the case that the PISA study found the educational system of the former socialist countries to be wanting. The rankings do not prove the failure of the 'Prussian' educational system that one hears and reads so much about. The poor position of Germany and Hungary could have been interpreted in this way, but that does not explain the results of Greece and Portugal. It is especially interesting that the thesis of the 'common educational traditions of the Monarchy' is not confirmed by the data either, as the results presented above show that the position of Austria is rather better than that of Hungary.

This is why it is worth considering the social origin of the students. The right-hand columns of *Table 1* display the rankings of the countries based only on the performance of those students who come from disadvantaged, low-status families.⁶ The 'top nations'—those with a low proportion of students with poor competencies—are the same from this perspective as well: Finland, Ireland, Sweden and the UK. In addition, there is an improvement in the position of Denmark. The group of countries on the bottom, however, has altered and *the pattern has become more detectable.* Germany and three former socialist countries occupy the bottom positions (Hungary takes the place last but one and the position of the Czech Republic has worsened). These are countries where the educational system is/was characterized by its 'Prussian' nature and/or the rigorous and inflexible planning system. Greece and Portugal, however, fare relatively better in this second order of ranking.

The rightmost column of *Table 1* displays how much of an increase there is in the proportion of students with test results at the lowest level in consequence of coming from a disadvantaged family. This value is a double-digit number for the last four nations in the rankings. But disadvantaged family background increased by a similar amount the proportion of students who performed poorly in the reading test even in Austria and Norway, which occupy better positions otherwise. Greece and Portugal differ somewhat, in that having low-status parents appears to have less of a bearing on having a

⁶ Determining low-status family background is based on the ISEI scores (Ganzeboom *et al.* 1992). The PISA database contains a variable indicating this score for the father or mother depending on which has the higher value. Quintiles were computed from the parental status scores and the low-status family background equals the case where the index-value was in the lowest quintile.

low level of reading competence. The increase in the proportion of students in the ‘at risk group’ is moderate for France, Italy, Ireland, Sweden and the UK as well. The results are not unequivocal for the Scandinavian countries, because coming from a disadvantaged family background hardly impacts at all on performance in the reading test in some countries, like Finland or Denmark, but in Sweden, and especially in Norway, there is a stronger influence.

The determination of educational performance

After a descriptive examination of the international differences for the 15-year-old students’ educational achievement, we turn to investigating the influential factors of the test results (in particular for reading tasks). This causal analysis is built on the theoretical framework for social capital on the one hand, and focuses on the role of the family background on the other hand. Conceptually, we follow Coleman’s thesis (1988), which states that social capital plays a crucial role in the creation of human capital (in this context on skill competencies). Related research reveals that the attitude of parents to learning, and the connection between the parents and the school, have an impact on students’ educational performance (Coleman *et al.* 1982; Schneider and Coleman 1993). However, the students benefit educationally from the accumulated cultural and financial capital of their parents only if the parents invest in the human capital of their offspring (Coleman 1988).

Four groups of predictor variables are distinguished in the analysis.

(1) Two demographic variables are considered: the student’s gender and age.⁷

(2) In accordance with the social capital concept, we investigate the impact of the family climate—something which the PISA survey tackled in the student questionnaire. In this way, there is information on how frequently parents discuss political and social issues, books, films or television programmes with their offspring. The individual items have been aggregated into the cultural communication index labelled as *Parental academic interest*. Similarly, students were asked to report on how frequently parents discussed school issues with them, ate together with them around the table or spent time talking to them at all. These variables resulted in the social communication index labelled as *Parental social interest*. For social capital it also matters whether parents work with the student on their schoolwork or

⁷ Though it was in principle 15-year-old students who were examined in the PISA study, the sampling frame was a specific school grade and the field work lasted 3 months; thus there was some deviation in age among the students. Age was measured in months in the PISA database and its range was in fact between 182 and 195 in the sample.

help them to do their homework. The frequency of these events, as reported by the students, is measured by the *Family educational support index*.⁸

(3) We also investigate the influence of the teaching and learning environment. In this respect students were asked to report on how much interest teachers showed in their learning progress, how frequently teachers let them express their own opinions in school, or how frequently teachers helped them to understand course materials. The *Teacher support index* is based on these items. Further information was gleaned on the school climate by asking how students got on with their teachers, to what extent teachers were interested in the students, how much they listened to what students told them, how fairly they treated students. These questions are summarized in the *Teacher–student relationship index*. The next relevant aspect to be considered is how much the teacher wants students to work hard, how much he/she tells them they can work better, how much he/she dislikes it if students do not work well. What students report on these questions appears in the *Achievement pressure index*.⁹

(4) For measuring the family background, we use the ISEI scores of parental status, the number of siblings, and a few other variables that can be interpreted in the conceptual framework of social capital, such as the single-parent background or whether the mother works full time or part time.

Before we go into the details of the multivariate analysis, we should say that the strength of the statistical relationship between the reading test and various independent variables related to family background was examined in the different countries. These bivariate associations are presented in *Table 2*; the order of the countries is based on the correlation between students' performance and parental occupation (ISEI), which is displayed in the first column of the table.

This relationship turns out to be weaker again in some of the Scandinavian countries (especially in Finland and Norway in this case) and in Ireland. The strongest correlation between the reading test results and the parental occupation appears in Portugal and Germany, followed by the Czech Republic and Hungary. This ranking indicates some differences over the previous one presented in the right-hand panel of *Table 1*. Obviously, the results are not completely independent of how we approach the connection between students' performance and their social origin, e.g. one Scandinavian country, Norway, and one post-socialist country, Poland, fare better, while the UK occupies a much lower position in *Table 2* than before. But otherwise the

⁸ For further details of the concrete measures, see OECD (2001).

⁹ For details related to the exact measures, see again OECD (2001). We repeat that all information of this kind is based on students' answers. The PISA study contained a questionnaire for the students and the school principals, but not for the parents. This is a disadvantage when it comes to social capital measurement in PISA.

results are pretty similar. Moreover, when we look at the father's and mother's education, the coefficients are highest for Hungary, the Czech Republic and Germany.¹⁰

A higher number of siblings correlates negatively with reading performance in every country. This relationship is strongest in Portugal, followed by the Czech Republic, Italy, and Hungary again in fourth position. The number of children in the family has least impact on reading ability in Denmark, Austria and Finland. A working mother increases, rather than decreases, educational performance in most of the countries. This relationship is strongest in Portugal, the Czech Republic and Hungary, but is not present in Germany, Austria or Ireland. It is a disadvantage to live in a single-parent family only in some of the countries; this is quite noticeable in the UK and France, but is not significant in the former socialist countries or in Greece and Portugal.

For the family climate, a parent's academic interest (cultural communication) indicates a stronger correlation with educational performance than the parent's social interest (social communication). It is interesting that parental support correlates negatively with the test results in reading. This is probably explained by the fact that the parents are more likely to be helping their children if those children are having problems in their studies.

For the multivariate analysis we constructed a model around the data; the dependent variable is the student's performance in the reading test, and the independent variables are added to the equation in four steps. The first model contains the demographic variables, the second one involves the family background characteristics, the third model adds the cultural climate variables, and the fourth model includes the teaching and learning environment measures. *Table 3* displays the adjusted R^2 values from each model, i.e. the extent to which the given group of variables explains the student's educational performance.¹¹

¹⁰ In fact, it is Hungary (and Denmark) where education correlates more strongly with student performance than does occupation. Other Hungarian studies analysing educational inequalities found the same thing (Róbert 1991, 2003). In the majority of the countries, parental occupation is a stronger predictor than education.

¹¹ The R^2 value is a condensed measure for the explanatory power of the independent variables included in the statistical model. It is suitable for providing an answer to our research question using relatively few figures. The actual regression coefficients that belong to each independent variable are not presented here in order to keep the article short. The correlation coefficients in *Table 2* to some extent provide information about the size and direction of the effects.

Table 2: Statistical relationship between reading test results and family background indicators by country

Countries	Correlations with the family background								
	Parent occup.	Father educat.	Mother educat.	Number of sibling	Mother work	Single parent	Cult. comm.	Social comm.	Parent supp.
Finland	0.224	0.176	0.156	-0.084	0.071	-0.082	0.225	0.060	-0.048
Norway	0.247	0.156	0.140	-0.151	0.049	-0.090	0.260	0.152	-0.058
Denmark	0.273	0.282	0.318	-0.042	0.047	-0.061	0.343	0.199	ns
Ireland	0.275	0.150	0.150	-0.116	ns	-0.076	0.171	0.121	-0.091
Greece	0.279	0.218	0.240	-0.146	0.098	ns	0.179	0.084	-0.140
Italy	0.289	0.251	0.233	-0.187	0.130	-0.039	0.186	0.071	-0.103
Sweden	0.300	0.111	0.139	-0.126	0.111	-0.098	0.230	ns	-0.089
Poland	0.310	0.261	0.244	-0.104	0.133	ns	0.154	0.149	-0.164
Austria	0.314	0.226	0.242	-0.080	ns	ns	0.251	0.140	-0.141
France	0.326	0.192	0.215	-0.163	0.120	-0.106	0.203	0.126	-0.201
UK	0.350	0.191	0.204	-0.162	0.045	-0.116	0.269	0.175	-0.094
Hungary	0.367	0.383	0.400	-0.174	0.179	ns	0.155	0.112	-0.151
Czech Rep.	0.369	0.360	0.311	-0.213	0.191	ns	0.227	0.101	-0.136
Portugal	0.378	0.224	0.240	-0.242	0.193	ns	0.338	0.227	-0.079
Germany	0.378	0.299	0.346	-0.130	ns	-0.045	0.230	0.065	-0.145

ns = not significant on $p < 0.05$.

Source: PISA 2000 Database, own calculations.

Table 3: Determination of the reading test results

Countries	Explained variance (<i>and its increase</i>)*			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Finland	8.7	15.4(+6.7)	19.8(+4.4)	22.3(+2.5)
Norway	3.9	11.2(+7.3)	16.2(+5.0)	19.9(+3.7)
Ireland	3.0	12.2(+9.2)	16.4(+4.2)	18.1(+1.7)
Austria	3.8	13.6(+9.8)	20.1(+6.5)	20.4(+0.3)
Sweden	2.7	13.1(+10.4)	20.0(+6.9)	21.9(+1.9)
Greece	4.8	15.5(+10.7)	18.6(+3.1)	19.0(+0.4)
Poland	3.4	14.5(+11.1)	20.7(+6.2)	20.9(+0.2)
Italy	3.3	15.0(+11.7)	18.2(+3.2)	18.8(+0.6)
United Kingdom	2.4	15.0(+12.6)	22.5(+7.5)	24.4(+1.9)
France	3.0	15.9(+12.9)	22.1(+6.2)	22.3(+0.2)
Denmark	2.3	15.6(+13.3)	21.4(+5.8)	22.7(+1.3)
Czech Republic	3.2	18.8(+15.5)	24.4(+5.6)	24.8(+0.4)
Germany	3.4	20.5(+17.1)	25.8(+5.3)	26.9(+1.1)
Portugal	1.8	20.6(+18.8)	27.3(+6.7)	27.4(+0.1)
Hungary	2.8	23.7(+20.9)	27.5(+3.8)	27.9(+0.4)

Notes: * Adjusted R^2 in percentage; increase over the previous model in brackets in italic.

Independent variables in *Model 1*: gender, age.

Independent variables in *Model 2*: *Model 1* + parental occupation, education, number of siblings, working mother, single parent family.

Independent variables in *Model 3*: *Model 2* + parental academic interest, parental social interest, parental support.

Independent variables in *Model 4*: *Model 3* + teacher support, teacher–student relationship, achievement pressure.

Source: PISA 2000 Database, own calculations.

The ranking of the countries in *Table 3* is based on *Model 2*, i.e. on the italic values in *Column 3*, which express the amount by which the family background variables increased the explanatory power for the reading test results in comparison to *Model 1*. (*Model 1* plays only the role of control, it reveals that the demographic characteristics, gender and age, do not have much explanatory power—with the exception of Finland and perhaps Greece.) According to the results of the multivariate analysis, family background contributes to the differences in educational performance to a lesser extent in Finland, Norway and Ireland. (Denmark is in a worse position because of the stronger role of parental education.) Parental background seems to be less crucial in Austria and Sweden, in Greece (one more peripheral country of the European Union) and in Poland (one of the former socialist countries). It is in Hungary that social origin determines educational performance most—due to the strong relationship with parental education. Reading test results are strongly affected by family background in Portugal, Germany and the Czech Republic.

According to *Model 3*, the social and cultural climate in the family increases the explanatory power of the model only to a limited extent—at least if controlled for the hard characteristics of family background. The positive influence of parents' cultural and social interest and the negative effect of parental support make a stronger contribution to understanding students' reading competence in the UK, Sweden, Portugal, Austria, France and Poland. In Greece, Italy and Hungary, by contrast, family circumstances hardly affect students' test results for reading.

Model 4 examines the impact of the teaching and learning environment. In this respect, the focus was put on those criteria that can be interpreted in the framework of the social capital theory. Such institutional features like school infrastructure or teacher autonomy (for which measures are available from the questionnaire for principals) were not considered in this paper. We were interested in the possible influence of the climate in the school and in the class, and our results indicate quite a small contribution to the explanatory power of the model in the different countries. This kind of determination for the reading test results is more characteristic of the Scandinavian countries (especially Norway and Finland) as well as of the UK and Ireland, though to a lesser extent. These measures increase the explanatory power of the model by less than half a percent in the former socialist countries, in Portugal, Greece and Austria. These are the countries where the teaching and learning environment in the school plays a particularly small role in compensating for the differences in advantages or disadvantages of the family background.

Implications for educational policy

This paper has examined the social determination of reading performance for 15-year-old students, using data from the PISA survey. According to the OECD, the tests in the PISA survey aimed to measure students' competence for labour market participation in the future and for the accumulation of the skills needed for this purpose. In other words, the OECD research investigates the risk probabilities that students in the various countries cannot take part properly in the division of labour because of their missing reading proficiency. This study focused only on European nations. The analysis is based on different measurements and we grouped the data in various ways. Consequently, the order of ranking of countries was not completely equal for each step in the analysis, but the results were still consistent and in line with other publications based on the PISA data.

According to these results—and findings from other analyses with different methods—Hungary has one of the strongest associations between students' family background and educational performance. Here the offspring

of low-status families have a higher than average probability of belonging to the 'at risk group' with poorer chances of labour market success due to low competencies. While social origin affects students' educational performance in every country, in Hungary it increased the explanatory power of the related statistical model to a higher degree than elsewhere. We can confirm that the Hungarian results are similar to the German ones, but we cannot speak of a strict post-communist pattern. It is not possible to interpret the results either in terms of whether countries are at the centre or the periphery of Europe, or in terms of whether or not they have an educational system rooted in the traditions of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon educational systems seem to be more effective than the Prussian one, but this pattern is not consistent either.

Based on the results of the PISA survey, previous publications in Hungary argued that the requirements of the education and school curriculum should be brought closer to the demands of the labour market and practical life. One should add that narrowing the differences based on family background is a similarly important task, especially at a younger age, in the early stages of the school career. At present the PISA data prove that in Hungary social disadvantage and missing competencies feed off one another.

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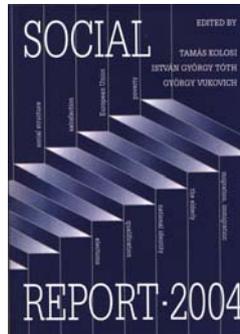
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