

THE READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF 9TH GRADE STUDENTS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DO DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS MAKE?

Edit Katalin Molnár *, Gabriella Zentai **

** Institute of Education, University of Szeged*

*** Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged*

Keywords: disadvantaged background; reading comprehension; written expression

In national and international large scale surveys, the impact of family background is regularly investigated. The variables used for socioeconomic and socio-cultural status vary from simply parental education to composite indicators that express the impact of several factors. The focus of the analysis is usually the identification of differences in performance, but studies of resilience also appear. While reading is often included in the domains assessed, other communication skills receive much less attention. In a Hungarian context, the study of written expression can still be considered neglected, with a large scale study conducted about every ten years and with scattered small scale studies of different methodologies in between. General tendencies have been identified but there is a lack of developmental and contextual information that could aid instructional practice.

This paper aims to analyse the reading and writing performance of students in upper secondary education in relation to their status of being disadvantaged, a category defined and applied in everyday school practice. The results come from data collected in the 9th grade classes of a Hungarian town in 2010 (N=1,393), in a project aimed at a municipality level assessment of educational efficiency. Previously developed and published instruments were adopted. Tests of word reading, reading comprehension and writing skills were administered along with a questionnaire for background information. In reading comprehension, authentic continuous and non-continuous texts were presented; the writing tasks called for the composition of short narrative, expository and explanative texts in realistic situations. The classification data of participants as disadvantaged or not was obtained from the schools. A fifth of the sample were classified as with disadvantage or multiple disadvantages, but the ratios varied by school, between one third in vocational training and one eighth in academic secondary schools.

When considering the whole sample, t-tests showed disadvantaged students performing below their peers. Small, but persistent and significant differences were observed that were more pronounced in reading comprehension than in written expression. When the analysis was repeated by school type, however, these differences largely disappeared. At the same time, an ANOVA showed significant differences by school type. Parental education contributed between 6 and 10% to the disadvantaged status. Maternal education seemed to have a positive effect on resilience. No other factor of systematic impact could be identified among the affective and academic performance variables included in data collection.

The findings suggest that instruction should focus on educational stages before grade 9. Also, they indicate the necessity of further research to identify areas for intervention and elements of effective intervention especially in written expression.