



This paper is taken from

*A Europe of Many Cultures
Proceedings of the fifth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2003

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 369 7

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
 - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
 - a official of the European Commission
 - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

Kušcer, M P. (2003) Compulsory education, equal opportunities and inequality due to a child's background, in Ross, A. (ed) A Europe of Many Cultures. London: CiCe, pp 273 - 278

© CiCe 2003

CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of DGXXII for their support and encouragement.

Compulsory education, equal opportunities and inequality due to a child's background

Marjanca Pergar Kušcer
University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)

Introduction

The experiences and learning opportunities given in the early years play an important role in a child's future life. Children who encounter problems at school often come from deprived environments: there is a lot of evidence which shows that children from different social classes achieve differently, and that the average higher-status child stays at school longer and does better than the lower-status child. However, social class may be influential in several different ways - beside the cost of education, it may affect family expectations, cultural background, language problems, the attitude of teachers and peer-group influence.

How does the typical pupil's social-class background affect educational success?

Cost of education

To keep a child in high school and especially to put a student through college is expensive, particularly when indirect costs (the loss of the student's potential earnings) are taken into account.

Family expectations

If the family expect that a child will remain in high school and attend college, the expectation will influence the motivation of the student.

Cultural background

Middle-class and upper-class children are socialised in a way that maximises their learning potential. They live in homes that are more likely to be stocked with books, are more likely to be given educational toys and are more exposed to the values needed for educational success.

Language problems

Some students from minority groups may be considered unintelligent because their language does not conform to the standard of acquired language knowledge of children from the dominant group.

Teacher attitudes

Pupils who do not behave according to middle-class norms risk being considered as less able, regardless of their actual ability.

Compulsory education – equal educational opportunities?

There is a lot of evidence which shows that social stratification is closely related to power, respect and wealth as well as academic achievements (Apple, 1982). Compulsory education should equip children to continue their schooling at a later stage. However, from the records of their results in school it is easy to deduce that there are many

differences among children due to various inequalities. Milharčič (2002) groups those inequalities in the following categories:

- inequality due to the child's background, including his/her family, regional and ethnic background;
- inequality in the child's ability to cope with the school work, which can be due to his/her poor adjustment to the hidden curriculum or to difficulties of cognitive nature;
- inequality in the school environment, including teaching methods, teaching aids, status of the school;
- inequality in acquired knowledge and skills measured by tests and/or by the possibility of progressing to higher levels of education;
- inequality in life opportunities, to a large extent determined by the level of education.

In economically and technologically developed societies, knowledge is becoming highly valuable (Robertson, 1989). Marginal social groups do not consist only of migrants but also of unskilled workers and uneducated young people (Rus, 1995).

Schooling is an organised, formalised transmission of knowledge, skills and values. In the last decade, a range of published materials has dealt with the topic of education for the twenty-first century. Notable among them is *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors *et al.*, 1996) which emphasises the importance of education as a value that can help mankind achieve peace, freedom and social justice. School reforms and new curricula appearing in many European countries are indicative of the search for a common European dimension in education.

Socio-economic status and the academic achievement of children

Academic achievements count. Good results lead to further education, higher education leads to better employment opportunities and subsequently to better income. However, as Jencks (1972) points out, social inequality is related to academic achievements but is not caused by them. As a result of different social and economic status, children are from the beginning of their education differently equipped to take advantage of opportunities. Public schools are not designed to engage all children intellectually and emotionally. Children from wealthier families are certainly privileged in an educational sense because their parents can pay their way to private schools which guarantee above-standard conditions which lead to higher academic achievements, but the academic results of such children indicate that they are also higher achievers in public schools. There are many studies that indicate that equally able students achieve on average different results, translated into grades, in relation to their social and economic status. In other words, a child's social-economic status is a more accurate predictor of his/her school success than any other single information base, such as IQ or other personality traits.

The case in Slovenia: some overviews of researches in the last three decades

Research data from 1977 (Toličič, Zorman)

Nearly thirty years ago a wide, systematic and very complex study was conducted that looked at differences in academic achievements, intellectual abilities, occupational and

educational aspirations, study habits, style of learning and some other personality characteristics among children according to their socio-economic status. The purpose of the study was to alert the general public to the very difficult conditions in which some children were growing up and not only to promote the necessary school reform but also to make the public do something for these children. The study included many independent variables related to the children's parent's standard of living and many dependent variables such as school grades, knowledge tests, reading tests, IQ tests, a questionnaire on their learning habits, a special questionnaire for determining pupils' occupational aspirations and expectations etc. Teachers also provided records of how often parents attended parent-teacher meetings, and head teachers provided records of the schools and teachers who were included in the research.

The results showed what an important role socio-economic factors (and demographic factors) play in the development of the child's personality and how seriously they influence the child's success in school. They showed that children of equal IQ who had uneducated parents and a lower standard of living achieved less and had lower occupational and educational aspirations.

Research data from 1984 (Makarovič)

This research confirmed that social inequality influences the realisation of the child's intellectual potential. The research focused on underachievers – those whose achievements in school were lower than their actual abilities promised and who took up occupations less demanding than those for which their potential fitted them. The results showed that the low social status of the family does not encourage intelligent children to further their education, leading them to underachieving; but that higher social status does encourage less able children to achieve, leading them to overachieving.

Recent analysis of statistical data (Pučko et.al, 2002)

The goal of this investigation *Identification of criteria for evaluation of a just education* was to analyse the scholastic achievements of primary school pupils enrolling in secondary schools in the context of social status, gender and religion. I describe only that part of the extensive statistical data that allows one to infer certain connections between the attained degree of parental education and the opportunities of children to further their education.

Table 1 encompasses the statistical data for 363,430 pupils, enrolled into different secondary schools between the years 1994 and 1997 (after which year the State Statistical Office did no further tracking of data on parental education because this would allegedly breach their privacy under the Personal Data Protection Act). The data amassed over the four years reflect between 88 to 99% of the total population of pupils in Slovenia who have completed primary education, being also the number of pupils whose parents' education was appropriately documented. Parental education was taken as an independent variable based on which the socio-economic status of the family can be inferred. The enrolment of the pupils into various school programmes was the dependent variable.

Table 1 The enrolment of pupils into different secondary schools programmes with respect to the education of their fathers

Parental education		Children's enrolment to secondary education		
		Vocation school	Technical school	High school
Primary school	23.8 % Father	38.3 %	14.4 %	6.7 %
	28.9 % Mother	35.0%	22.7 %	10.5 %
Vocation school	42.2 % Father	43.8 %	44.5 %	30.6 %
	25.7 % Mother	20.2 %	29.7 %	19.4 %
High school	19.3 % Father	12.8 %	25.4 %	26.1 %
	32.3 % Mother	40.0 %	34.4 %	35.6 %
Higher education	14.7 % Father	5.1 %	15.7 %	36.6 %
	13.1 % Mother	4.8%	13.2 %	34.5 %

The data point to the conclusion that a very small number of pupils from families with only elementary parental education are enrolled into high schools with a general program (gymnasiums). It is this secondary education programme that allows pupils a straightforward continuation of their education to university level, and it is not surprising that most of the pupils in the gymnasiums come from the families with high levels of parental education.

Conclusion

The studies confirmed that social inequality influences the realisation of the child's potential. Even though School legislation (1996, p 10) states that 'children from socially less advantaged surroundings should be given the same opportunity for education', research shows that school still maintains inequality among children. Such research results do not differ from those found in other countries, which measure the child's socio-economic status by the parents' education, their income, subsidised meals, and sometimes by race and refugee status.

It seems that there is also a link between the parents' aspirations and expectations and their child's education. If the family expects the child to continue his/her education in high school and further at university, the child is motivated to do so. Children from better socio-economic backgrounds and of parents with higher education live surrounded by books and educational toys; in other words, they are exposed to values which lead to higher achievements in school; they also often live in smaller families where they get more attention; they become socialised earlier and that maximises their learning potential. Most children who live in a social environment that enforces rules similar to those applied in schools do not experience any problems. Children who have problems in schools come most often from deprived environments (Smith, Cowie, Blades, 1998). Robertson (1989) argues that most teachers have middle-class values. Children who do not behave in accordance with the teacher's standards risk being seen by the teacher as less able, regardless of their abilities.

Despite the findings of most empirical studies demonstrating a clear link between the child's family environment and his/her school achievements, it is clear that schools are not

doing enough to compensate for the deprivation caused by an unsupportive social environment. The experience children gain in the first years of schooling is extremely important for their self-image. If the child feels that he/she is respected, it makes sense for him/her to work harder to learn and to have better relations with his/her peers (Pergar, 1999). The key to quality education remains the teacher. Only good and motivated teachers who believe in the power of knowledge and the ability of their pupils to learn can induce changes in the knowledge of the less motivated children (Milharčič, 2002).

In order to develop a more complex understanding of the child's educational opportunities, it is necessary to take into account not only his/her biological attributes, but also the social, cultural and economic background in which education takes place. Children learn when they feel safe and comfortable and are suitable motivated. Social interaction is more than just a teaching method – it is the source of higher mental processes. For this reason, the efforts to reform education and provide equal opportunity for all children should also address the question of training better and more creative teachers who love their profession, who will care for their pupils and who will understand that classroom teaching needs to develop the child's feeling of belonging and mutual understanding as well as academic learning.

References

- Apple, M. W. (1982) *Education and power: Reproduction and contradiction in Education*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Čuk, I., Peček, M. (2002) Šola in pravičnost (School and justice). V C. R. Pučko et al. *Zaključno poročilo projekta: Identifikacija kriterijev za vrednotenje pravičnosti v izobraževanju*. Ljubljana: Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Delors, J. (1996). zgoja in izobraževanje: potrebna utopija (Education: The necessary utopia), in J. Delors et al. *Učenje skrit zaklad (Learning: The treasure within)*. Ljubljana: Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport.
- Jencks, C. (1972) *Inequality: A reassessment of the effect of family and schooling in America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Krek, J. (ed) (1996) *White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia*. Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sport.
- Makarovič, J. (1984) *Družbena neenakost, šolanje in talenti (Social inequality, schooling and talents)*. Maribor: Založba Obzorja.
- Milharčič, H. M. (2002) Koncepti šolske pravičnosti (The concepts of educational justice), in Pučko et al. *Zaključno poročilo projekta: Identifikacija kriterijev za vrednotenje pravičnosti v izobraževanju*. Ljubljana: Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Pergar, K. M. (2002) Pravičnost v izobraževanju in socialno ekonomski status iz perspektive razvojne psihologije (Justice in education and social-economic status in perspective of developmental psychology), in V C. R. Pučko et al. *Zaključno poročilo projekta: Identifikacija kriterijev za vrednotenje pravičnosti v izobraževanju*. Ljubljana: Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Pergar, K. M. (1999) Social dimension of early education, in J. Hytonen, C. R. Pučko, G. Smyth (eds) *Teacher education for changing school*. Ljubljana: Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Pučko, R. C., Lukšič, H. M., Milharčič, H. M., Peček, Č. M., Pergar, K. M., Zadnikar, D., Čuk, I. (2002) Identification of criterions for evaluation of the just in education. *Report of the project*. Ljubljana: Pedagoška Fakulteta.
- Robertson, I. (1989) *Society – A Brief Introduction*. New York: Worth.

- Rus, V. (1995) *Slovenija po letu 1995 – razmišljanja o prihodnosti (Slovenia after 1995 – thinking about the future)*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za družbene vede.
- Šolska zakonodaja (School Legislation) (1996) Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sport.
- Toličič, I., Zorman, L. (1977) *Okolje in uspešnost učencev*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije