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**Literacy in Hungary – a short country report based
on ELINET framework**

Abstract

The European Literacy Policy Network, ELINET, was established in February 2014 with the aim to improve literacy policies in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. The network was founded to complete a two-year work programme targeted to develop evidence-based tools for all actors in the diverse field of literacy, as well as support existing and initiate new activities. ELINET intended to further expand and deepen the knowledge on literacy in working out separate Literacy Country Reports for all involved countries including Hungary based on ELINET framework. The aim of the article is to present the results of a study carried out in Hungary in the years 2014–2016 within the ELINET project’.

Keywords: country report, literacy performance, ELINET framework, policy areas, literacy instruction

This report on the state of literacy in Hungary is based on one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and had 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries. ELINET aimed to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports¹ are based (wherever possible)

¹ The article contains extracts of a document Ildikó Szabó & Veronika Szinger, contributing authors (in alphabetical order): Christine Garbe, Lucia Kákonyi, Dominique Lafontaine, David Mallows, Judit Reményi-Somlai, Gerry Shiel, Renate Valtin, Katalin Varga (2016). This document has been published by the European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET) and is available at: http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf.

on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012². All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: *ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference*³.

The Country Reports are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG's literacy report:

1. Creating a literate environment; 2. Improving the quality of teaching; 3. Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity)⁴.

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases separate Long Reports for specific age groups (Children/Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups were published. Additionally, for all 30 countries, Short Reports were published covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports.

This article introduces the results of age-group Children/Adolescents, and the results since the ending of the project regarding this age group.

2. Literacy Performance Data⁵

Hungary participated in IEA's PIRLS (4th graders reading comprehension) in 2001, 2006 and 2011, in OECD's PISA (15 year-olds' reading literacy) since 2000, and in OECD's PIAAC (adults' reading literacy) in 2012.

Hungary performed at the EU average in PIRLS 2011 (539 vs. 535 EU-average) and at the EU average in PISA 2012 (488 vs. 489 EU average). While the performance in PIRLS slightly decreased (4 points) between 2001 and 2011, it has slightly increased in PISA between 2000 and 2012. However, a great shock was caused by PISA 2015 results as they show that Hungarian students have an achievement much lower than their OECD counterparts.

In PIRLS, 19% of students performed at or below the Low benchmark on overall reading. This is very similar to the EU average (20%). In Hungary, 12% of

² In the following, the report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referred as "HLG report". The report can be downloaded under the link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.

³ See <http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/>.

⁴ Equity was added by ELINET.

⁵ See http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf, p. 8.

students achieve at the Advanced benchmark. This is above the EU average (9%). Hungary's standard deviation of 78 is 8 points higher than the EU-24 average, indicating a wider spread of achievement in Hungary. The proportion of low-performing readers was even higher in 2000: it gradually and drastically decreased between 2000 and 2011 (from nearly 40% in 2001 to 29% in 2011). In PISA 2012, the percentage of low-performing readers was the same as in the European countries on average (19,7% vs. 19.7%). The proportion of high-performing readers is somewhat smaller lower than in European countries. Between 2000 and 2012, the proportion of low-performing readers has slightly decreased (by – 3 %) in Hungary, mostly among girls (– 4,9%).

The proportion of top-performing readers was high in PIRLS (12% vs. 9% in EU) and lower than the EU average in PISA (5,6% vs. 7% in EU). However, PISA 2015 results were very low; the Hungarian 15-year-old students' score were the third lowest among the OECD states, much lower than the average. Taking the tendency since 2000 into consideration, Hungarian results seem to be stagnating until 2006; when the results were improving, reaching the peak point in 2006. They were lowering a bit in 2012, and in 2015 a dramatic dropping with the lowest ever scores can be detected. The ratio of students with excellent scores in OECD countries was 8,3 %, while that of Hungary was only 4,3%; it means that less than one-fifth of the Hungarian students had excellent scores, which is about half of the OECD average. The average of students with scores under the basic level is expected to be between 18% and 20%. In 2012 this number of students was already 19,7%, in 2015 it increased to 27,5%. What makes the situation even worse is the low achievement in digital literacy. These results show that the 15-year-old Hungarian students' achievement in PISA 2015 is not only very low, but is decreasing; it has reached its lowest point. Another shocking element is that the number of students with outstanding achievement is just the half of the OECD average. On the other hand, the number of students with the lowest results has increased with the half of the OECD average; their level equals to that of functional illiterates. Their ration in their age group is one-fourth, 25%.

Regarding the gender gap, in PIRLS girls in Hungary achieved a mean score on overall reading that was higher than boys (16 vs. 12 on average) in 2011. Interestingly, the gap had fallen to 5 point in 2006, before rising again in 2011. In Hungary in PISA, between 2000 and 2012 the performance very slightly increased among boys (+ 3 score points); the girls' performance increased more (+ 12 score points). Nevertheless, one can observe that the increase in reading performance was higher in 2009, especially for boys (+ 10 score points).

4. Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development

4.1. Pre-Primary Years

According to ELINET report⁶ the importance of parental attitudes to reading is shown by the fact that in Hungary there are great differences in reading performance at grade 4 between children whose parents like to read (average achievement 570) and those who do not (average achievement 501). The availability of children's books in the home is very close to the EU figures in Hungary, 13,8 % of students in Hungary had 10 or fewer children's books at home, compared with a European average of 12.

There is a need for more family literacy programs with a focus on supporting parents and carers working with minority children in understanding and fostering the literacy development of their children.

4.2 Primary Children and Adolescents

As it is stated in ELINET report⁷, just a very little proportion of students in Hungary (5%) are taught by teachers who use a variety of children's books as a basis for reading instruction, compared with an EU average of 29%. Ninety-seven per cent of pupils in Grade 4 in Hungary are taught by teachers who use textbooks as the basis of reading instruction, compared with an EU average of 70%. Three per cent of students in Hungary are taught by teachers who report that computer software is used as a basis of reading instruction – about the same as the EU-24 average (5%) – while 39% of students in Hungary use computer software as a supplement, compared with 47% on average across EU countries (Mullis et al. 2012, exh. 8.12, p. 236, EU averages obtained from PIRLS 2011 database, s. Table H1 in Appendix). Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 79.9% of students in Hungary are in classrooms which have class libraries – above the corresponding EU – 24 average of 73% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table H2). In Hungary, 12.5% of students were in classrooms with more than 50 books, which is below the EU-24 average of 21%.

In Hungary in the recent years the role of the public libraries in reading promotion has increased significantly. Libraries are not the only actors in reading promotion. In cooperation with them or as of their own initiatives other organizations – state or civil – also offer a great variety of programmes to foster reading engagement among children of all ages – both at regional and national level. HUNRA, the Hungarian Reading Association stands out as an exemplary

⁶ See http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf, p. 10.

⁷ See http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf, pp. 10–11.

initiator of such projects. A large scale national project titled *My library* partly aims to improve the efficiency and efficacy of Hungarian education by offering competence-based, skill developing library services that also promote learning skills. Moreover the project has a national advisory board which is a network of 40 professionals closely working together with schools all over the country. The project is run by Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library, and it involves all the 19 county libraries, the Library Institute of National Széchényi Library, National Educational Library and Museum, and other professional bodies. The objectives of the project are to improve reading culture, digital literacy, reading literacy, individual and collaborative learning. The programme also gives an opportunity to do researches. New methodology and sample programme sets are to be designed. By collecting and sharing 90 good practices they are to be integrated in libraries nationwide. An outstandingly important aspect of the project is to help to avoid early school leaving. Four accredited training courses are developed to help to modernise librarian profession. Eighty different multifunctional events – including a conference and a workshop – are in the project to promote professional communication. There is going to be a national library and reading promotion campaign organized in the first quarter of 2019. By the end of the project period a methodology publication series is to come out⁸.

5. Improving the Quality of Teaching

5.1. Pre-Primary Years

The ELINET report⁹ states that Hungary has a preschool curriculum. It is the *National Core Programme* both for kindergarten/nursery school and creche education in Hungary, which apply to all kindergartens/nursery school and creches respectively, regardless of the maintainer. Both are a core curriculum defining the general pedagogic principles and objectives of education and care. The staff in each kindergarten/nursery school and creche is responsible for developing the local educational programme (i.e., local curriculum) in line with the *National Core Programme*. Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. Pre-school programmes should focus on developing children's emergent literacy skills through playful experience rather than systematic training in phonics or teaching the alphabet.

⁸ See <http://www.azenkonyvtaram.hu/>, p. 10.

⁹ See http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf, p. 12.

5.2. Primary Children and Adolescents

The new *National Core Curriculum* referred to in ELINET report¹⁰ was adopted in May 2012 and it recognizes literacy as a basic and transversal skill which has to be developed in the whole education. This recent version of curricula in Hungary is much closer to the modern definition of literacy, but basic literacy skills are still developed mostly on primary school level. Requirements of useful literacy skills getting higher, that is the very reason for the need of more time of teaching basic literacy skills, not only in primary level. The Core Curriculum makes a reference to the 8 key competences and describes them as essential competences for the 21st century. Literacy is mentioned in the description of communication in the mother tongue and learning to learn. Learning to learn is a key competence which must be addressed by every teacher in every subject. Literacy is included in the developmental tasks of Language, Literature, Foreign language, Mathematics and Media Literacy. However, it is not mentioned in the parts belonging to sciences. Literacy remains an accented area at upper primary / lower secondary and secondary level as well. Reading comprehension and text construction at these stages too constitute part of the Hungarian Language and Literature framework curricula but appear as separate and focused areas to be improved.

The curriculum pays more attention on functional literacy, literacy in everyday life in primary, elementary and middle schools. *National Curriculum* takes care about teaching, learning functional, digital literacy skills. This appears on cross curricular level, for instance in the field of teaching methods and strategies.

In Hungary initial teacher education needs a compulsory focus on developing literacy expertise among future primary and secondary teachers, suggests the ELINET report¹¹. The problem is that literacy is still regarded to be the expertise of primary teachers or teachers of Hungarian literature and language both in primary and secondary levels. There are only few other disciplines (e.g., physics) of which teachers deal with content area literacy. Teachers of lower primary section (grade 1–4) think that developing (content area) literacy is not an expectation in secondary section. They think that reading skills should be acquired in the lower primary section and later should be automatically applied. Secondary teachers think that incorporating development of literacy skills into their disciplinary lessons is time-consuming. Only just few of them understand that it is a means of making teaching and learning processes more efficient. It is mainly the conductive teachers who could appreciate such a course, however, they do not teach whole classes and they are not disciplinary teachers.

¹⁰ http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf, p. 13.

¹¹ See http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/user_upload/Hungary_Short_Report1.pdf p. 14.

6. Conclusion

Although in the new *National Curriculum* (2012) and frameworks (2013) literacy is spread throughout the whole curriculum, it is known from research that education is the field where changes happen very slowly. Because of this, it is important to inform principals, decision makers in conferences, workshops, seminars about the state-of-the-art research results, and convince them about the importance to teach literacy across the curriculum.

Content Area Literacy (CAL)-courses are still not widely known. There was not enough time given and devoted to make them known among education professionals and/or teachers themselves. Still, there is huge potential in such a course. In Hungary education has been undergoing significant changes in the past years. Innovation and reforms could be really efficient if they are large-scale and ongoing (no “one-shot” events). Enhancing CAL-courses could have such effects. Improving the quality and participation rates in continuing professional development targeted at building literacy expertise of teachers is a challenge for Hungary.

There is a need to mainstream reading / writing literacy across the curriculum and to offer content area literacy instruction in all school subjects throughout primary and secondary education, whether academic or vocational. Requirements of useful literacy skills are getting higher, that is the very reason for the need of more time of teaching basic literacy skills, not only in primary level. Other subjects, disciplines do not pay attention on literacy skills, literacy is mainly included in language and literature. It would be worthwhile to sharpen the literacy focus to help teachers of all subjects to become literacy teachers. Schools and teachers should be provided with tools and means to implement literacy aspect of the curricula effectively and the implementation process should regularly be monitored and supported. There is a strong need for change in attitude and content area literacy training both in initial and in-service teacher training.

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