

Publisher

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre

Title of publication

Small-scale longitudinal assessment of mother tongue (L1)
From the end of basic until the end of upper secondary education

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Writing skills have been overshadowed by the results of the PISA test and the resulting debate on reading skills. According to the assessments of learning outcomes in basic education, however, the differences in pupils' skills and the differences in competence between the genders are considerable among Finnish pupils of comprehensive school age. What happens to these differences when pupils get older? To what extent do the results of the assessment of learning outcomes in basic education predict the results of the matriculation examination?

In this assessment, the competence demonstrated by pupils in mother tongue and literature in the 2014 assessment of learning outcomes in the final stage of basic education was compared to their performance in the mother tongue test in the matriculation examination in spring 2017. The last grade given in the ninth school year, submitted by pupils in the assessment of learning outcomes, was also included in the initial level. It was possible to compare the results because the assessment of learning outcomes focused on writing skills and the knowledge of the language, of which the latter included elements from tasks assessing textual skills and required reading, textual and thinking skills. Attention was paid to the links between the results of these two assessments by examining them also by background variable. All the research questions in the assessment were examined at the pupil, class and school level in basic education and at the student and school level in general upper secondary education.

The competence level demonstrated in the assessment of learning outcomes and the last grade in mother tongue together explained just over one third (33.6%) of an individual student's results in the mother tongue test in the matriculation examination. There is thus a statistically significant and strong link between the pupil's competence in grade 9 and performance in the matriculation examination; however, it is not set in stone: the result of a significant proportion of pupils either improved or declined in comparison with the assessment of learning outcomes.

The difference between girls and boys was slightly smaller in the results of the mother tongue test in the matriculation examination than in the assessment of learning outcomes. Boys accounted for a slightly larger proportion of the highest scores and a slightly smaller proportion of the lowest scores in the matriculation examination than in the assessment of learning outcomes. Although the relative position of boys seems to improve slightly in relation to girls, girls perform on average better than boys in the mother tongue test. Even if the pupils' initial level is taken into account, there is still a statistically significant difference between the results of girls and boys in favour of girls.

In addition to differences between pupils, competence differences in basic education are also visible as differences between classes. In the whole sample examined in the assessment of learning outcomes, differences between classes explained up to 13.6% of the variation in writing skills, while the percentage was only half of that (6.7%) regarding variation in the knowledge of the language. Special classes were not excluded from the sample in this assessment, which may partly contribute to the wide difference. Differences between schools were small both in the writing tasks and in the tasks requiring knowledge of the language.

Every year, different general upper secondary schools attract or receive students whose competence and skills are at very different levels. Consequently, skills in the knowledge of the language and mastery of the norms of standard language varied among students who started their studies at different general upper secondary schools in 2014 – not to mention their writing skills: in terms of new students' knowledge of the language, the differences between general upper secondary schools were considerably bigger than the differences between classes in basic education (12.9%). In writing tasks, general upper secondary schools' share of the overall variation was similar (12.0%) to the variation between classes in basic education.

A significant proportion of the differences between general upper secondary schools in matriculation examinations, at least in mother tongue and literature, result from differences that already exist between students at the beginning of general upper secondary education: the competence level demonstrated in the assessment of learning outcomes and the last grade in mother tongue explained almost one half (44.2%) of the performance of an individual general upper secondary school in the matriculation examination. The ranking lists of general upper secondary schools are therefore problematic. If ranking is considered to be necessary in the first place, pupils' initial level should be taken into account in the calculations.

The higher their parents' education, the better the pupils performed on average both in the assessment of learning outcomes in mother tongue and literature and in the mother tongue test in the matriculation examination. Furthermore, they were over-represented among the best-performing pupils at the high end of the score distribution in both assessments – even if students' initial level was taken into account. In general upper secondary education, the matriculation examination results of children whose parents had not completed the matriculation examination were slightly less often at the high end of the score distribution and slightly more often at the low end than in lower secondary school. However, it should be noted that the difference linked to the parents' educational background already existed in the final stage of basic education and no longer increased towards the final stage of general upper secondary education. Pupils' previous competence level

was indeed a significantly stronger factor (36%) explaining their performance in the matriculation examination than their parent's completion of matriculation examination (1%). The result also means that there are permanent differences in pupils' competence resulting from their parent's educational background and the school system does not seem to be able to even these out.

This assessment demonstrated that the knowledge and skills pupils have learned and assimilated in basic education have far-ranging consequences in terms of their further studies. The level of skills in mother tongue and literature demonstrated in the assessment of learning outcomes by students who went on to general upper secondary education strongly predicted their performance in the mother tongue test in the matriculation examination. The performance of an individual general upper secondary school in the mother tongue test is largely explained by what the students' competence level is when they start their general upper secondary education.

In this assessment, the results of the assessment of learning outcomes of pupils who started general upper secondary school were also compared to the results of the pupils who participated in the same assessment but headed for vocational education and training. The competence of the latter group in mother tongue and literature was on average significantly weaker than the competence of pupils who headed for general upper secondary education. In addition, their attitudes towards studying the subject were also significantly more negative.

Basic education and the early stages of the entire education system should be able to better stop the differentiation of pupils' skills and attitudes. Currently, school does not succeed in doing that, at least not when a civic skill as important as textual skills – the skills of receiving and producing texts, in other words reading and writing – is concerned.