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Education in Slovenia after European Union Accession: A Cause for Pride and Concern

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Introduction

Slovenia joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, and the euro-zone in 2007. Is life in Slovenia better or worse now than ten years ago? Or, put differently, how is it different? Some data to answer these questions were recently published in a booklet entitled *This is Slovenia. Our first decade in the EU (2014*). The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia traced eleven indicators over a decade in two ways: first, through tables and description of data, and second, as they manifested themselves in the life of a young man named Peter, a statistically significant citizen. Education is one indicator the booklet includes, but my focus will be mostly on the quality of education, which is almost entirely omitted.

Although EU countries make their own decisions about educational systems and policies, they are involved in formulating common goals for education. The EU offers financial and professional support to its members for pursuing them. In the latest initiative, "Education and Training 2020," four strategic goals that address education at all levels and in all contexts were formulated: first, making lifelong education and student mobility a reality; second, improving quality and efficiency of education; third, promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and fourth, enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship. In order to monitor realization of these general goals, five benchmarks were developed. EU countries will strive to reach the following objectives by 2020:

1. At least 95% of children (between age four and the age for starting compulsory elementary school) should participate in early childhood education;
2. 90% of the population aged 20 to 24 should complete general or vocational secondary education;
3. 40% of people aged 30 to 34 should attain higher education;
4. An average 15% of the population aged 24 to 64 should participate in continuing education; and
5. The share of young people with insufficient reading, math, and science skills should be 15% or lower (Education and Training 2020).

Where was Slovenia in 2004 and where is it today regarding these benchmarks?

Four benchmarks address access to education, and only the fifth one focuses on its quality, which is defined rather narrowly with students' test achievement in the PISA (Program for International Students Assessment). The premise for the four benchmarks is the belief that formal education is one of the most important factors for wellbeing of individuals and societies. Thus, the first condition for attaining better education is making education accessible to all. Before discussing the quality of education as formulated in the benchmark, I will briefly address the four benchmarks.

Benchmark number 1. Slovenia has a well-organized system of preschool institutions for children ages one to five. In the last ten years, the number of kindergartens as well as the number of children enrolled rose. In 2004 and 2005, there were 752 institutions; in 2012 and 2013, there were 900 (This is Slovenia 2014: 18). In the period 2005–11, the enrollment of three-year olds rose from 67% to 83%; and of four-year olds from 76% to 89%; the latter was below the EU 21 (90%) average.[1] In part, this increase was due to the government's policies (2007), which financially supported families with more children. Kindergarten is not free, and parents have to pay a portion of the cost (on a sliding scale that takes into account a family's income and the number of children). In the school year 2013–14, 94.8 percent of five-year olds were enrolled in preschool institutions, just a bit shy of the 2020 goal (95 percent).[2]

Benchmark number 2. In 2011, 93% of the younger generation (twenty-five to thirty-four-year olds) had completed general high school or vocational school. This is above the OECD average (82%).[3] In the years 2012 and 2013, almost 92% of young people ages fifteen to eighteen were enrolled in general and technical high schools and vocational training. The average drop out rate for the high school population was under five percent, Slovenia has already surpassed the EU 2020 goals, set at 90% for completing high school education, and a drop-out rate of 10% (Education in Slovenia 2012: 8).

Benchmark number 3. In the last ten years, Slovenia has made big strides toward a more educated society. In 2005, only 16% of working age population (twenty-five to sixty-four-year olds) had attained higher education (college, university). In 2011, the percentage of the population

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1 See the table, Educational Access and Output.

2 SURS, www.stast.si/glavna navigacija/podatki/prikazistaronovico?IdNovice=6123.

3 Key Facts for Slovenia in Education at a Glance 2013, http://www.oecd.org/edu/EAG2012%20-%20Key%20Facts%20-%20Slovenia.pdf.

with higher education in the same age group went to 25%, still below the OECD (32%) and the EU (28%) average. However, by 2011, 38% of the 30 to thirty-four-year olds had attained university education, comparable to the OECD's (39%) and the EU's (37%) average. Also, in 2010, Slovenia was first among EU countries, with the highest percentage of young people enrolled in higher education.[4] The wider access in higher education was achieved with little additional public or private investment, as shown in the chart below. Slovenia lags behind developed nations in annual expenditure per student. For example, in 2011, it was $9,693, considerably less than the OECD average ($13,528).[5] Underfunding has had influenced the quality of higher education.

Fig. 1. Number of students and percentage of GDF going to higher education

[4] One reason for this increase is to reduce unemployment.

[5] Yearbook 2008, http://www.stat.si/letopis/2008/06_08/06-34-08.htm Yearbook 2012, http://www.stat.si/letopis/2012/06_12/06-28-12.htm (tables showing share of total public expenditure for formal education).

Benchmark number 4. The EU 2020 goal for participation of adults (twenty-five to sixty-four-year olds) in lifelong education was set at 15%. In 2010, Slovenia surpassed that goal with 16% of adults participating in lifelong education (Education in Slovenia 2012: 8).

Since becoming a member of the EU, Slovenia showed good progress regarding the four benchmarks addressing access to education. Benchmarks 2 and 4 have already been achieved. This is definitely a cause for pride. While access to education is important, quality of education also matters.

Where was Slovenia in 2004 and where is it today regarding benchmark 5, which addresses the quality of knowledge?

Slovenians value education and it seems that they are satisfied with the educational system, as indicated by the OECD Better Life Index, which measures people's perception of eleven important aspects of their life. Slovenians are the least satisfied with their income, ranking it at (2.4), but they rated education highly (7.6), after only safety (8.8) and community (8.8).[6] Educational policy-makers and some professionals speak highly of the ongoing reform of elementary and secondary education and its results.[7] In public conversation, especially in the daily media, positive elements are emphasized, while negative ones are marginalized, and rare serious criticisms are ignored.[8] There is a widespread belief among the population that Slovenian schools are among the best in the world, certainly much better than American ones. The supporting evidence of excellence cited are success stories of Slovenians abroad in all walks of life. However, a closer look at the results of international research studying the quality of the elementary education does not support this belief.

Before I deal with the data, I would like to stress two things. First, what worked in the past, does not necessarily work now or will in the future. The public school system, which developed mostly in the 19th century, was designed to prepare people for industrial production and

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6 http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/slovenia/.

7 Boris Chwatal. Spremembe so stalnica. *Šolski razgledi*, 5 February 2010. Available at: http://solski-razgledi.com/clanek.asp?id=940.

8 Criticism of the elementary school reform has been overlooked and/or explained away by saying that critics do not know the topic well, conditions in school, or even having questionable moral motives. For example, see France Strmčnik, Učna diferenciacija bodoče osnovne šole v luči kritike. *Sodobna pedagogika* 50 (1999): 70. There was very little debate about the provocative books, written by Musek Lešnik (2011a, 2011b). Professionals and politicians public discussions with him. See the interview with Musek in Lešnik, *Delo*, Sobotna priloga, 4 January 2014: 16.

obedient citizenship. The school of the past taught almost everything that people needed in life. This is an impossible task today. For the first time in history, the school reforms in the Western countries in the last thirty years put meaningful knowledge with understanding as the main goal for every student in public schools. In addition to content, schools need to teach how to learn, to stimulate creativity, inquisitiveness, and cooperation in order for people to work and live together. However, a traditional public school system is not well designed for these tasks and has to be replaced. Breaking the industrial mold of public educational systems is a big challenge for all countries, not only for Slovenia.[9]

Second, the quality of knowledge is difficult to evaluate. Taking students' test results as the only evidence of the wellbeing of educational system and students' knowledge is too narrow and even harmful. Even more dangerous is to compare students from very different cultural environments on the bases of a few test results without probing other factors. Testing, especially high-stakes testing, has negatively influenced school culture, teaching, learning, and students' development. In the U.S., a strong movement among parents and professionals against testing as the sole impetus for school reform has been lively.[10] It is well documented by research that "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." Bearing this quote by William Bruce Cameron (1963: 13) in mind, it is nevertheless useful for policy makers, teachers, parents and students to have some "objective" indicators of what students can and cannot do. The EU benchmark defines quality education by percentage of students who should achieve the most basic levels of knowledge in reading, math, and science. Researchers have also collected data on indicators influencing learning and students' growth. However, students' test results and international comparisons should be interpreted with caution. Although problematic in many ways,[11] international comparative studies do offer some useful insight into individual educational system.

My look at the quality of Slovenian education is limited, as I will consider mostly the data from two international comparative studies that Slovenia participates in. These studies are:

(1) In PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), developed by the OECD, the fifteen-year olds are tested in math, science, and reading literacy, and factors, relevant to students' achievement, are

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9 After a long preparation, in 2003 and 2004 Slovenia introduced a reform of elementary education. Two documents (*The White Papers*; *The Starting Points for Curricular Reform*) guiding the preparation were published in 1996.

10 NEPC memo February 2015. http://nepc.colorado.edu/pubication/esea

11 Rotberg (2011).

examined every three years, each time with a focus on a different field—e.g., the 2012 focus was on math, and the 2009 focus was on reading. The studies offer a wealth of data on various aspects of educational systems, their quality and effectiveness. Although the first study took place in 2000, Slovenia began participating in the study only in 2006. First, I will discuss PISA results.

(2) PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in Mathematical and Science Study). The studies, coordinated by IEA,[12] focus on elementary students (fourth and eighth graders), who are tested every five years. Factors influencing measured cognitive achievements also are studied. Slovenia has participated in the study since its beginning in 2001, and also in its predecessor, the Reading Literacy Study, in 1991.

For a better understanding of this discussion it is important to be aware that different levels of students' proficiency were defined—from level 1, the most basic, to levels 5 and 6, the most sophisticated ones. For example, reading at level 1: students can locate a single piece of information, identify the main idea of the text, and connect it to everyday life; and at level 2: they can locate straightforward information, make low level inferences, and understand the text using their existing knowledge. At higher levels the students can connect different parts of the text, can critically evaluate it, read difficult and unfamiliar texts, read between the lines, build hypotheses, etc.[13] The EU 2020 goal is that "there should be no more than 15% of the students performing below level 2 in any of the tested field. However, students are encouraged to attain higher levels in reading."

What fifteen-year olds know and what they can do with what they know

This is the question PISA wants to answer by measuring students' reading, math, and science literacy. The majority of participating students in the study are fifteen-year olds who had completed elementary education. Most of Slovenian students attend first year of high schools of various kinds. They have completed nine-year elementary education and the majority also attended one or two years of kindergarten. The results for Slovenian students over time are shown in table below.

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12 International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

13 For more precise descriptions of the levels in math and reading see: http://centerforpubliceducation.org/Libraries/Document-Library/Achievement-Levels/Description-of-PISA-Achievement-Levels.html

Fig. 2: Average scores of fifteen-year-old Slovenians and students in the OECD (PISA 2012).

PISA	**2006**		**2009**		**2012**	
	SVN	OECD	SVN	OECD	SVN	OECD
Math	504	498	502	496	501 (-3)	494 (-4)
Science	519	500	512	501	514 (-4)	501 (1)
Reading	494	492	483	494	481 (-13)	496 (4)

The data indicate that Slovenian fifteen-year-old students performed better in math and science literacy test scores than in reading literacy. However, the scores do not move in the right direction. The math and science averages fell from 2006 to 2012, but are above the OECD average in science and very close to the OECD average in math. A statistically significant drop of thirteen points is observed in the reading literacy for the same period. Unfortunately, the results for reading literacy were statistically significantly below the OECD average in 2009 and 2012. Slovenia is in the group of the lowest performing EU countries in reading literacy, with only the Slovak Republic having lower average scores. While the results for math and science could be cause for Slovenian pride, there is a serious concern about low and declining score points in reading literacy of Slovenian students.

However, a conclusion that elementary schools are doing a good job educating students in math and science but not in reading literacy is controversial. The fact that the Slovenian PISA results are compared to the OECD's is troublesome for some professionals. Not all OECD countries are developed, and they vary greatly in average students' performance.[14] Critics argue that Slovenians should be compared only to developed nations to which they aspire. A Slovenian psychologist, Kristjan Musek Lešnik, has pointed out that the Slovenian average score points for math and science are not above the average, if compared to those of developed nations, but just at the average. In addition, he also stresses that the Slovenian average scores in all tested areas have declined, and makes several valid points about the quality of elementary education in Slovenia. Musek Lešnik argues that the recent reform of elementary education is the culprit for the decline in students' achievement. He stresses that Slovenian educational establishment should be more critical of the school reform of elementary education,

[14] In 2012, the difference between the highest (Korea) and the lowest achieving (Mexico) in reading literacy was 112 score points, and in math in 141.

implemented in 2003 and 2004, and set for themselves higher educational goals.[15]

While I agree with many of his views, one has to be careful about setting goals that are unrealistic and too hard to achieve for students in elementary education. For example, each TIMSS study has examined factors influencing the score points in math literacy, and concluded that they have shown "a strong positive relationship within countries between students' attitude toward mathematics and their achievement" (2011: 326). Slovenian eighth-graders do not like school in general and math in particular. In 2007, 53% of students did not like learning math; in 2011, the percentage went up to 63 (TIMSS 2007: 177; TIMSS 2011: 330). The same trend is present in other countries, with high average math performance. Slovenian students expressed the most negative attitude toward mathematics of all participating countries in the study. Perhaps the goals are set too high; or perhaps they are too hard and meaningless to them? When these conditions are present in instruction, students are not prepared to make the effort required for learning. Motivation for learning, relevance of its content for their life, and a good attitude about school are critical factors in developing a positive attitude for long-life learning, diligence, curiosity and creativity. For healthy and productive teenagers, there needs to be a balance among their cognitive, emotional and social development in elementary education.

Performance at different levels of proficiency for each tested area

More interesting than overall testing results is students' performance at different levels of proficiency in each literacy, studied by PISA. Students performing below level 2 are not able to continue schooling and function in today's society successfully. Although the EU encourages students to achieve at higher levels, most attention is given to low performers, those below level 2; percentage of those students should not exceed 15 percent.[16]

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[15] In 2011, Kristjan Musek Lešnik published two books in which he analyzes the recent school reform in Slovenia. Sometimes I do not agree with his corroborating assertions, but he made extremely valid points for discussion about elementary education in Slovenia and about the recent school reform. His critical views should not be ignored and should be taken seriously. His interview (*Delo*, Sobotna priloga, 4 January 2014: 16) indicates that his criticism is not welcome or taken seriously in Slovenia.

[16] *Education and Training 2020*: European benchmarks are available at: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/statistics-and-indicators/education-and-training-2020.benchmarks.aspx

Fig. 3. Student performance at different levels in 2012 (percentages).

Data presented in the column chart show that Slovenia has already achieved the 2020 EU goal for science. In 2012, low performing students already accounted for 12.8%—less than the 15% EU 2020 benchmark. However, the percentages of Slovenian low performers in math (20%) and reading (21%) were above the EU 2020 benchmark and below achievement in other OECD countries. There are too many low performing students in math and reading. In addition, Slovenian students' achievement on problem solving tasks and critical thinking in all tested areas is one of the lowest among PISA-participating countries (PISA 2012).[17] Although the average score points for math and science are better than the OECD average, Slovenian students did not perform well on problem solving tasks either in math or in science. Also, the percentage of top performers in problem solving tasks was lower than the OECD average (6.6% vs. 11.4%), while the percentage of low performers was higher than the OECD average (18.5% vs. 21.4%). So, there is little reason to be optimistic about either

[17] Slovenia, Students' performance (PISA 2012). Students' performance in problem solving. http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile? primaryCountry = SVN&treshold=10&topic=PI

math or science knowledge of the Slovenian fifteen-year olds. The PISA results indicate that the major goals of the Slovenian elementary school reform, such as improving reading literacy, developing critical thinking, and problem solving are not being met. I will, however, look only at reading literacy because it appears to be the most problematic, and it is also crucial for students' success in almost every school subject and later in life. Further, language development has also been one of my professional interests for many years.

What might be possible reasons for low performance in reading literacy of the Slovenian fifteen-year olds?

UNESCO definition of literacy "as ability to read, understand, and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life," has been attained by almost entire population of Slovenia (99.8% in 2010). However, this level of literacy is not sufficient to function successfully in today's society. In PISA, reading literacy is defined as "an individual's capacity to understand, use and reflect on and engage with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society" (PISA 2009: 14). A similar definition is used by PIRLS.

Mojca Štraus, director of the Educational Research Institute, analyzed the PISA results from the Slovenian perspective and listed the following possible reasons for students' low achievement: socio-economic status, quality of teaching, and many dialects of the Slovenian language (Strauss 2012). All the factors listed do influence students' achievement. However, I wonder if in an age of mass and electronic media Slovenian dialects do really affect that much reading literacy of fifteen-year olds. Dialects are surely more of a problem for young students when they enter the school, especially if they hadn't attended kindergarten. Standard Slovenian language is the language of instruction and, in addition, over nine years, students have 1631 45-minute classes of instruction in Slovenian language and literature. It seems unlikely that dialects are a problem in learning.

In Slovenia, students' socioeconomic status, parental education, and regional differences are emphasized as the major influence on students' reading literacy. National Assessment of Knowledge (NAK) in Slovenia shows that the performance of the students in less developed regions, such as Prekmurje, is lower than of those in more developed regions, like the Central (Osrednja slovenska) region. Of course, the financial resources do matter, but they are not the only factor important for students' achievement. The 2009 PISA report states that "...while there is a positive correlation between the GDP per capita and students' performance, it predicts only 6% of the difference in average student performance across countries. The other 94% of the differences reflect the fact that two countries of similar

prosperities can produce very different educational results" (PISA 2009: 3). So there is a large potential for educational policies to make a difference. For example, some East European countries, albeit with fewer resources than Slovenia (e.g., Poland), are producing better educational results.

In Slovenia, elementary education has been well funded over the last 20 years. The yearly expenditure per student in 2010 was $8,935, more than the OECD or the EU averages of $8,277 and $7,974, respectively (Slovenia, Education at a glance 2013). Class sizes are relatively small (nineteen students in school year 2012–2013). There is an extensive network of professionals of all kinds (psychologists, social workers, educators), who are to support teachers with problem kids. It seems that the overall poverty in Slovenia is probably not the main reason for poor reading literacy of fifteen-year olds. However, there are regional differences in financial support for elementary education. These could be controlled, at least in part, by national educational policies of solidarity. In addition, attention should be paid to what Štraus calls "quality of teaching," and also to educational policies, which could make a big difference in schools. In the school year 2003–2004, the school reform was introduced in all elementary schools. What measures were put in place that might have influenced reading literacy?

Changes in the language and literature curriculum

When talking about reading literacy, what first comes to mind is instruction in the native language and literature. In the 1990s, a new Slovenian language curriculum was developed and implemented in all grades in school year 2003–2004. It has a more balanced approach to language instruction in several ways; for example, there is more attention to all four language skills and informational readings. It stresses reading for understanding. Although the new curriculum was not perfect, it was superior to the one it replaced. New language textbooks were written and teacher training was organized to educate teachers about the rationale for the reform and the new approaches in teaching and learning. Without much research of the curriculum implementation and its effect on the students' knowledge, the language and literature curriculum was modified in 2011.

Data from the international studies Reading Literacy Study (RLS) and PIRLS show that Slovenian nine- to ten-year olds raised their achievement in reading literacy in the last twenty years, as shown in figure 4.

Fig. 4. PIRLS: Reading Literacy, average score points for nine- and ten-year olds.

	RLS*	PIRLS		
	1991	2001	2006	2011
Slovenia	498	502	522	530
EU	-	532	536	536
Center score points	-	500	500	500

In 1991 Slovenia was included in Reading Literacy Study (RLS), a forerunner of PIRLS.

Fig. 5. Reading literacy, PIRLS: EU country average and Slovenia.

There was not much change from 1991 to 2000, but from 2001 to 2011, the average student's performance went up twenty-eight points. Segregated research findings also show that students made consistent progress in literary and informational reading, and also raised their achievement at all four levels of proficiency—from basic level 1 to level 4

(PIRLS 2011: 38, 99, 102). Although, fourth graders made a significant progress in reading literacy, they still lagged behind their peers in the EU. As the implementation of school reform coincided with the improvement of scores, it would be reasonable to speculate that this progress could have been due new reform measures: the new curriculum and new teaching approaches. This is also the opinion of international PIRLS experts (PIRLS 2011: 46). However, not everyone agrees that this improvement was due to the new curriculum. [18]

Slovenian educational policy makers and analysts were satisfied with the PIRLS results. In December 2012, Marjeta Doupona, a researcher and the national coordinator for PILRS study, presented results for PIRLS 2011 and, among other things, pointed to two, at least for me, important but nor expected facts. First, children's participation in kindergarten did not have any impact on reading development later in school and, second, only 8% of children's results on PIRLS were explained by schooling. The fourth graders' achievement on reading literacy was highly correlated with parents' education. According to Doupona, there was nothing schools could do about that, except trying to prevent bullying in schools, which had an important negative influence on students' achievement (Doupona-Horvat 2012). If my understanding is correct, elementary schools have not been doing their job teaching and promoting equity and social cohesion, which are the goals of the Slovenian school reform as well as of the EU goals for 2020. Children should be able to develop their natural potentials regardless of their parents' education and wealth. What happened to teaching in schools if only 8% of reading literacy is explained by school teaching, while all the rest is assumed to be the influence by outside factors, mainly home?

While Slovenian nine- to ten-year olds are not top performers in reading literacy, their results have been rising over time and they have been getting closer to the performance of their peers in EU and OECD countries. The trend is just reverse for fifteen-year old students as shown in figure 6.

Fig. 6: Reading literacy for nine- to ten- and fifteen-year-old Slovenian students.

Year of testing	1991	2001	2006	2009	2011	2012
PIRLS, 9 to10-year olds	498	502	522	0	530	
PISA, 15 year-olds	0	0	494	483	0	481

[18] Musek Lešnik argues that the new "nine-year" elementary curriculum is less effective than the old, "eight-year" one that was replaced (2011a: 43–47; 2011b: 26–30).

Fig. 7. Reading literacy for nine- and ten- and fifteen-year-old students.

Reading literacy for fifteen-year olds has declined and remains statistically significantly below the EU average. Especially bothersome is the high percentage of fifteen-year-old students (21%) who perform below level 2. Their relative strength is in remembering data from a text, but they did less well in analyzing it, and especially poor was their performance on problem solving tasks. Slovenian fifteen-year olds are at the bottom of the EU countries, the OECD members. National Assessment of Knowledge (NAK) for 9th graders confirmed trends, observed in PISA (*Letno poročilo 2012–13*: 91, 119, 573).

If the new language curriculum had a positive influence on nine- to ten-year olds' reading literacy, why did the new language curriculum for upper grades not have positive effects on reading literacy of fifteen-year olds? What changes were introduced in the instruction in upper grades (4 to 9) that might have a negative impact on reading literacy? I can think of two:

(1) extensive curriculum in upper grades, and
(2) ability grouping in the instruction of the Slovenian language

1. Extensive curriculum for upper grades: too many subjects

Reading literacy is not only the result of the instruction of Slovenian language and literature.[19] It is crucial to teach the students the techniques of reading, give them the grammatical base of the language, develop the vocabulary, and provide them with examples of how to treat literary or informational texts. Although basic reading techniques are taught in language instruction, developing literacy is the task of almost all subjects taught in school. Reading literacy is more about thinking than the technical aspects of reading, but it helps if students master them. They must be required to read and "be forced" to think about a text, and communicate their thoughts orally and/or in written form. Remembering what they have read (level 1 in the reading literacy test) is not enough, they have to understand a text, evaluate it and think critically about it. These skills have to be taught and required in evaluating students' success otherwise there will be no improvement in reading literacy overall. Remembering without thinking is not enough for several reasons. One that is not in front of educators enough is what such an approach in teaching means for students' learning and development.

Has the recent school reform[20] created conditions for the kind of instruction across the curriculum that focuses on reading and thinking in upper grades? I doubt it. Students in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades have from thirteen to sixteen subjects per week. While math, Slovenian and foreign language have between three to five 45-minute lessons weekly, all the other subjects have one or two.[21] Most European and American peers have fewer subjects, but longer school days and years. They can study the content more in depth than their Slovenian peers. The Slovenian curricula are demanding, having many objectives and standards to reach. For example, in seventh-grade history, there are seventy 45-minute periods a school year (two periods a week) in which they are to cover 500 years of world and national and local history. The history curriculum for eighth

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19 Musek-Lešnik (2011a, 2011b) stresses several times that one year and many more hours of language instruction did not make any difference in reading literacy. Hours and length of instruction can and do matter, but so does consistency of educational demands upon students.

20 Preparation for the school reform began in the early 1990s, immediately after introduction of multiparty democracy and the proclamation of an independent Slovenia. The blueprints (*Bela knjiga o izobraževanju* [1995], *Izhodišča kurikularn prenove* [1996] and the new law on elementary education (1996) were ready in mid-1990, but large-scale elementary education reformwas implemented in school year 2003–2004. In 2011, the White Book was revised.

21 Predmetnik osnovne šole (Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, http://www.mizs.gov.si/fileadmin/mizs.gov.si/pageuploads/podrocje/os/devetletka/predmetniki/Pred_14_OS_4_12.pdf).

grade has 137 standards, which students should achieve. Looking at the standards, the majority of them consist of factual knowledge and do not reflect the goals, set for history curriculum, such as reading historical documents and developing critical thinking about them, or developing the ability to understand different views about the same historical event. Little is known about how history is really taught, but anecdotal evidence warns us that in learning history emphasis is still on remembering and not on thinking, and as a result, content is quickly forgotten. Teachers are not used to selecting the topic and working with it in depth in classroom. Most often, they rush through the content and get grades. Students prepare for tests by remembering what they heard or read in the textbook without much thinking, which is not required from them. No wonder that Slovenian students' achievement on reading literacy and especially on critical thinking and problem solving is low. Students feel overwhelmed and overburdened by schools, not because it is too difficult but because it does not make much sense to them. What is disturbing is that there have not been any significant attempts to make changes in the school curriculum, such as reducing the number of subjects, organizing instruction around topics as interdisciplinary projects and making students read and think, talk, and write throughout in learning process.

With financial support by the EU, the RS Institute of Education organized a two-year project (2011–13) to improve reading literacy in fourty-two participating elementary schools (Nolimal and Novakovič 2013). Participating teachers have reported that they became aware how important reading was for learning, and that they learned a lot and tried out different reading strategies in class. Problems were reported, especially in upper grades, where teachers still have not recognized the need to deal with teaching reading and thinking. Although there was a limited evidence that reading, critical thinking and evaluation of a text have became part of daily instruction, the reports from schools and professionals who worked with teachers provided enough evidence that the project could improve reading literacy of Slovenian students if these efforts were continued and spread to other schools (*Opolnomočenje učencev z izboljšanjem bralne pismenosti in dostopa do znanja* 2014: 18–64, 82–84). The Institute of Education continues with the project and, in the school year 2013–2014, more elementary schools (120) joined it.[22]

Ability grouping in upper grades

In the school year 2003–2004, ability grouping was introduced in upper grades of elementary school for instruction in mathematics, native

[22] E-mail correspondence with the head of the reading literacy project, Nataša Potočnik, 5 November 2014.

and foreign language. Students in the eighth and ninth grades were divided according to their "knowledge" into three groups, and taught separately. Each group also had a different curriculum with different objectives and standards. This organizational form, called external differentiation, was obligatory. For the lower grades (4–7), ability grouping, called flexible differentiation, was advised. Students were to be taught in homogeneous groups in about 25% of the total lessons, planned for a school year for individual subjects (*Pravilnik o izvajanju diferenciacije pri pouka v osnovni šoli* 2006). It might seem logical and in theory possible, but the implementation of external differentiation is very complicated in practice and highly problematic in the results that it produces, especially for development of language and reading. The abundant research on language development shows that the best condition for language learning is a stimulating language environment, enhanced by linguistically more developed students and their interaction with linguistically less developed ones, whatever the reason for their differences.

The framework of this paper does not allow me to go into the "story" of ability grouping in public schools, which was "born" in United States as a part of the efficiency movement in the beginning of the twentieth century and generated many problems in American public education, yet has spread all over the world. A controversial approach to raising quality of education has been well researched. The research shows that this organizational form of instruction produces more problems than it solves. It is difficult to form homogeneous groups, and students end up being segregated by their socioeconomic status. Ability grouping deepens social differentiation, lowers motivation for learning and expectations for success. Overall learning achievement of students, taught in homogeneous groups, tends to be lower than of those taught in heterogeneous groups. The only group that benefits from ability grouping is the high ability group, and even these advantages are only cognitive in nature. Cognitive development of students is, indeed, important, but not the only one elementary education should strive for several reasons. Social, emotional, and cognitive development of students are intertwined; social and emotional aspects of learning give students the energy, patience and motivation needed to achieve demanding cognitive goals. So, ability grouping in elementary education defies the goals of the educational reform as it does not raise the quality of knowledge for most students, and has a negative impact on student's personal development and equity.

Providing instruction for different ability groups is also an organizational challenge, especially in small schools. Only two years later, in 2006, obligatory ability grouping was abolished, so that each school could decide how to organize instruction (*Pravilnik o izvajanju diferenciacije pri pouka v osnovni šoli* 2006). Yet, about two thirds of elementary schools still use it (Žakelj 2013: 383).

A few studies on ability grouping in Slovenian elementary schools were completed in the last ten years. In one of the studies, ninth graders' achievement in math and Slovene language on National Assessment of knowledge (NAK) was compared between schools using ability grouping and the ones without it. The results have shown that ability grouping did not produce higher grades or test results for students, except for high ability groups. In fact, the overall results were lower as figure 8 shows. The students in groups were heavily segregated by the socioeconomic status of students.

Fig. 8. Ninth-grade students' achievements in Slovenian language (NAK) in schools with instruction in homogenous groups and heterogeneous groups (Žakelj 2013: 387).[23]

Instruction/homogenous groups	Arithmetic mean for grade	Arithmetic mean for test results
Low	2.32	42.52
Middle	3.24	58.01
High	4.37	74.67
Average for all three groups	3.52	62.02
Instruction/heterogeneous groups	3.68	64.94

The focus in PISA 2009 was on reading literacy. Researchers wanted to understand what might have influenced students' achievement in various countries. They found out that "in countries where 15-year-olds are divided into several tracks, based on their abilities, overall performance is not enhanced, and the younger the age at which selection for such tracks occurs, the greater the differences in students' performance grouped by socioeconomic background without improved overall performance" (PISA 2009: 15). Also, PISA 2012 report states that some countries improved their PISA results with less ability grouping, e.g., Poland with more comprehensive schooling, and Germany with less tracking (PISA 2012: 16). The OECD advises limiting early tracking and streaming, and postponement of academic selections as the first step to more equity.[24] Lešnik (2011a, 2011b) writes about persisting myths among Slovenian professionals regarding ability grouping and its positive impact on students' achievement.[25]

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[23] The figure is simplified. Only arithmetic means are included for illustration.

[24] Overcoming School failure: Policies that Work. OECD Project Description, April 2010. p.7 www.oecd.org/edu/school/45171670.pdf

[25] See in particular myth 15 and myth 16 (2011b: 90–97).

However, the Slovenian educational establishment has not connected the research results about the ability grouping in Slovenia and the advice, stemming from international studies, with the low results of Slovenian fifteen-year olds on reading literacy. The revised White Paper on Education (2011) advises even more ability grouping in instruction than the one of 1996 (*Bela knjiga* 2011: 145–54). The external and flexible differentiation in elementary schools, especially for native language, might not be the most productive didactic approach for raising quality of education for all.

Pedagogical rule number 1 is that effective instruction has to be individualized; but from this does not follow that "individualization" has to have organizational form or has to be legislated, as a bureaucratic mind requires. Individualization of instruction is a task for competent teachers in subjects they teach, but who also have pedagogical knowledge to engage the students in the learning process and demand that they do the work. They have to listen to the students, give them feedback, so that they can do more relevant work to purse their goals. They care about the students and help them to see the relevance of the content they teach. The quality of knowledge depends on what is going on in the classroom, so the education of the teachers is the most important. Educated and empowered teachers are the key to raising reading literacy. It helps if teachers have good working conditions to be engaged in teaching and not in fighting with bureaucratic mind and action of the Slovenian educational politicians.

Concluding remarks

While Slovenia can be proud of their efforts to make education accessible, more emphasis need to be directed towards the quality, especially at the elementary level where students acquire basic literacy, curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. The continuation of the reading project is a good idea but might just not be enough to raise the quality and equity in education. The elementary school reform has to be reexamined, not as much its goals as the ways of pursuing them. Slovenian educational policy makers with their bureaucracies must look at the research evidence of the international comparative studies as well as those done in Slovenia, and take their results seriously with an opened mind, rather than explaining them away with spending precious financial and human resources on writing yet another expensive blueprint for development, or rewriting curricula and textbooks without really knowing what is going on in classrooms. Despite constant changes, there have not been significant attempts to make real changes in the school curriculum and teaching, e.g., reducing the number of subjects, organizing instruction as interdisciplinary projects and teach students read and think, talk and write throughout in learning process. It seems that the educational system is stuck in the

industrial mode, not suitable to materialize new declared goals in the documents.

Why is so that the school reform has not brought better results? There are many reasons besides the ones I talked about in this paper. It is difficult to change the social and school culture. However, I would like to mention one additional reason and name it professional "incest." Although formally many professionals collaborated on preparation of the elementary schools reform, only a small group of professionals formulated, implemented, and evaluated paths to achieve the goals of the school reform. They seem not to listen to practice, research or rare professional public dissent.

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POVZETEK

IZOBRAŽEVANJE IN VZGOJA V SLOVENIJI PO PRIDRUŽITVI EVROPSKI SKUPNOSTI: RAZLOG ZA PONOS IN ZASKRBLJENOST

Avtorica analizira slovensko šolstvo glede na 5 ciljev, ki si jih je zastavila E.S. do leta 2020. Štiri od teh se nanašajo na vključenost različnih delov populacije v šolski sistem na vseh ravneh - od vrtcev do univerze in institucij izobraževanja odraslih. Slovenija je bila upešna pri uresničevanju teh ciljev; do leta 2013 je presegla dva cilja in se pri dveh močno približala E.S. ciljem 2020, kar je gotovo razlog za ponos. Posebej velik napredek je opazen pri večji vključenosti mladine v visokošolski študij. Peti cilj pod drobogledom se nanaša na kakovost osnovnega šolstva. Mednarodne primerjalne raziskave in tudi domače opozarjajo na nekatere slabosti znanja učencev zaradi katerih bi morali biti zaskrbljeni. Slovenski učenci so uspešni pri reprodukciji učnih vsebin, manj pa v razumevanju snovi, njeni uporabi ter ustvarjalnosti, kar nujno za obstojno, gibljivo in generativno znanje v bodočnosti. Avtorica nekoliko bolj podrobno analizira bralno pismenost v osnovni šoli in razmišlja o morenitnih vzrokih za tako stanje 10 let po slovenski reformi osnovne šole.