
COMPARING PATTERNS OF WRITING PERFORMANCE ACROSS COUNTRIES

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This session compared patterns of student performance across twelve countries using the results of the recent IEA Study of Written Composition. The session opened with a brief explanation of the rating system on which student performance measures were based. The International Study Committee attempted to create a reliable scoring scheme that would allow comparisons across countries. Although direct comparability of achievement is not possible, reliabilities within countries were generally high and a series of national profiles can be produced. The profiles look at student performance within a country in relation to reported background variables to provide insights into factors related to writing achievement.

Teachers examined multiple samples of student writing covering different categories in the defined domain of school writing. Both teachers and students completed questionnaires in which they reported (among other things) whether or not the task types had been assigned

either in the current year or in a previous year's OTL (opportunity to learn). Results show that, generally speaking, the task topics used in the study were assigned at some point in the students' schooling. However, student perceptions in this respect did not correspond completely with those of their teachers. Moreover, when teachers compared student-reported OTL to the mean achievement scores on these tasks the correlation in more than half of the countries was low. Based on the achievement scores, students in most countries found the narrative task the easiest and the reflective task the most difficult, an outcome that had been hypothesized. However, Hungarian and Dutch students found the narrative task to be difficult while the Chilean and Finnish students found the reflective task to be relatively easy.

Another analysis of the IEA writing study data confirmed earlier findings within the U.S. that girls outperform boys in written composition. This paper questioned the sources of girls' superior performance on writing tasks, and the consistency of the relationships between gender and patterns of achievement across countries. Preliminary analysis of the data from Chile, Hungary, Finland, and New Zealand supported the hypothesis that expressive differences between girls and boys are related to the development of different functional communicative competencies which grow out of sex role typing of activities.

The study used two indicators of sex-typed activities: the proportion of male/female teachers and student self-reported preferences and activities. Findings indicated that the size of differences in performance by gender varied across tasks. In these four countries, the smallest differences in performance between girls and boys were found on narrative and persuasive tasks, and the largest differences on reflective and letter writing tasks. Females tended to do better in the countries in which a higher proportion of teachers were female. In general it seems possible to produce a profile of gender activity typing which correlates with performance on the writing tasks.