



LITERACY IN GERMANY

COUNTRY REPORT
SHORT VERSION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction.....	4
2	General Information about the German Education System.....	5
3	Literacy Performance Data	7
4	Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development (age-specific and across age-groups).....	9
4.1	Creating a Literate Environment.....	9
4.1.1	Pre-Primary Years.....	9
4.1.2	Primary Children and Adolescents	9
4.1.3	Adults.....	10
4.2	Improving the Quality of Teaching.....	11
4.2.1	Pre-Primary Years.....	11
4.2.2	Primary Children and Adolescents	11
4.2.3	Adults.....	13
4.3	Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity	14
4.3.1	Pre-Primary Years.....	15
4.3.2	Primary Children and Adolescents	15
4.3.3	Adults.....	16
5	References.....	17

1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Germany is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries¹. ELINET aims 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 reports are based (wherever possible) 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:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity⁴).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels**; both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"⁵.

¹ For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.

² In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following 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/good-practice/>.

(*"Bildungsstandards"*), and the application of standards-based tests for evaluation. Other reforms refer to changes in the school structure (some Länder have discontinued selecting pupils at the end of primary school in three school types and adopted a two-type model – secondary schools and Gymnasium – and efforts to have more *"Ganztagsschulen"* – all-day-schools). There is a consensus between the Federation (Bund) and the Länder that greater efforts must be made to develop the German education system in the years ahead. The Qualification Initiative for Germany, *Aufstieg durch Bildung* (*"Getting ahead through education"*, 2008, 2014)⁷ includes a catalogue of objectives and measures, some of which are related to literacy policies areas as they are outlined below.

A new challenge ahead is the task to realise inclusive education as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*⁸ is legally binding in Germany. Article 24 stipulates the right to inclusive education and postulates the attendance of regular schools for disabled children – this aim has not yet been realized.

⁷ See https://www.bmbf.de/pub/beschluss_bildungsgipfel_dresden_en.pdf

⁸ See <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

3 Literacy Performance Data

Germany participated in the IEA's PIRLS studies (4th graders reading comprehension) in 2001, 2006 and 2011, in OECD's PISA studies (15 year-olds' reading literacy) since 2000, and in PIAAC (adults' reading literacy) in 2012. Thus it is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency, according to different characteristics of the readers, and to compare reading proficiency levels of different age groups.

Germany performed significantly above the EU average in PIRLS 2011 (541 vs 535 EU-average) and above the average in PISA 2012 (508 vs 489 EU average). While the performance in PIRLS remained about the same in 2000 and 2011, a significant increase (+ 24 score points) - the equivalent of about half a year of schooling - was observed in PISA between 2000 and 2012.

A limited proportion of pupils (about 15% in both studies) can be considered as low performing readers. This is less than the average across EU countries. These students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, or make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. The proportion of top-performing readers is 10% in PIRLS (vs 9% in EU) and 9% in PISA (vs 7% in EU), just a little more than in EU countries on average.

The proportion of low-performing readers slightly increased in PIRLS between 2000 and 2011 and decreased quite drastically in PISA between 2000 and 2012 (from 22.6% to 14.5%). This might look at first sight quite contradictory, but the increase observed for 15 year-olds is possibly linked with some changes related to the characteristics of students sampled in PISA. Indeed, the proportion of students who has repeated a grade in the PISA sample in 2012 has decreased, while the proportion of students attending an academic track (Gymnasium) has increased. The combination of these two changes is likely to have a strong positive impact on the proportion of low achievers. Attending a more advanced grade or program means having benefited from more opportunities to learn reading and potentially lead to better reading skills.

The gap according to the pupils' socioeconomic background is somewhat lower than the EU average in PIRLS (63 vs 76 on average). In PISA, it is higher than the EU average (105 vs 89 on average). However, the indices of socioeconomic background are not the same in PIRLS and PISA, so the comparison should be taken with caution. The higher socioeconomic gap among 15 year-olds is potentially linked with the structure of the German education system, in which tracking starts earlier than in most of the countries, after grade 4 or 6. Early tracking is known to increase inequity.

In PISA 2009, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was higher than in EU countries on average (56 vs 38 EU-average). Similarly, in PIRLS the mean score difference between those who always spoke the language of the test at home, and those who sometimes or never did so was slightly higher than in EU countries (32 vs 26). In PISA, this gap was very close to the EU average (58 vs 54).

In Germany, the gender gap (in favour of girls) is lower in PIRLS (8 vs 12 on average) and in PISA (40 vs 44 on average) than the corresponding EU average differences. The gender difference in Germany was lower in PIRLS 2011 (8 points) than in PIRLS 2001 (13 points). In PISA, the increase in reading performance observed between 2000 and 2012 was stronger among girls (+ 28 score points) than

among boys (+ 18 score points), resulting in an increase of the gender gap. However, it should not be source of major concern, as the performance of boys has increased in absolute terms.

In conclusion, Germany has increased its performance in reading overtime, mainly among 15 year-olds. Germany performs better than EU countries on average, and has a proportion of low-performing readers lower than (in PISA, with a drastic decrease between 2000 and 2012) or similar to (in PIRLS) the EU countries on average. The spread of achievement (gap between low and top performing readers) is smaller in Germany than in EU on average at both levels. Among adolescents the gap according to socioeconomic status, migration or language spoken at home tends to be somewhat higher in Germany than in EU on average. Germany is a little more efficient and a little less equitable than EU countries on average.

As far as adults are concerned, Germany performed at the same level as the EU in PIAAC (270 vs 271). It should be remembered that only 17 EU countries took part in PIAAC in 2012, so the comparison with other age groups should be taken with caution. The spread of achievement – namely the gap between top and bottom performers - is somewhat wider in Germany than the EU-17-average (122 vs 117 on average). The proportion of adults performing at or below level 1 in Germany is 17.8%, slightly more than the EU-17 average (16.4%).

Females perform somewhat worse than men (267 vs 271) and the gender gap in favour of males was somewhat higher in Germany (5 score points) than in EU on average (2 score points) which is coherent with what is observed in younger generations (the female advantage in PIRLS and PISA being smaller than in the EU countries on average). The gap according to parents' level of education is somewhat higher than in the EU countries on average (53 vs 41), reflecting the same trend as in PIRLS and PISA. The same is observed for the gap according to the language spoken at home: the gap between native and not-native speakers is larger than the EU-17-average (36 vs 28).

4 Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development (age-specific and across age-groups)

4.1 Creating a Literate Environment

4.1.1 Pre-Primary Years

Providing a supportive home environment: Compared to the European average, Germany has favourable scores as PIRLS data show: Most parents have positive attitudes to reading; however 15 percent of students have parents who do not like reading. The availability of children's books in the home is high; yet 7% of students in Germany had 10 or fewer books at home, and these students did less well on PIRLS overall reading literacy (by 93 score points), compared with students who had 200 or more books.

Parents engage often or at least sometimes in literacy related activities with their children. Since reading to the child is a predictor of future literacy achievement it is a matter of concern that there are differences concerning social class and migrant factors. While in higher social classes 85 percent of the parents read daily to their child, in families with low sociocultural background this is only the case in 56 percent. In the latter group about 10 percent of the children are never read to or less than once a week. There was also a difference related to migration background: 92 percent of native parents read often books to children compared to 80 percent of migrant parents.

More family literacy programs needed: There is a need for programs to raise awareness of all parents that literacy is a key to learning and life chances and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood.

4.1.2 Primary Children and Adolescents

Providing a literate environment in school: According to PIRLS 2011 **nearly 20%** of 4th graders in Germany were in classrooms without a library.

Supporting reading motivation, especially among boys and adolescents: In Germany there is a remarkable decrease in reading motivation from 4th grade (cf. PIRLS 2011) to age 15 (cf. PISA 2009). In PIRLS 2011 about 11 percent of pupils in Germany reported that they never or very seldom read for pleasure outside school, however, these figures show a considerable gender difference (16% male and 6% female pupils; cf. Bos, Bremerich-Voss, Tarelli & Valtin 2012, p. 130). According to PISA 2009, however, 41 percent of 15-year-olds report not to read for pleasure outside of school, among those 55 percent of the boys and 27.5 percent of the girls.

As we know from the PISA and other studies, there is a high correlation between reading for pleasure and reading performance. Therefore, schools, libraries, families and communities should do more in order to support reading motivation, reading habits and a stable self-concept as a reader among adolescents, especially boys and students from disadvantaged families (low SES, migrant background). Many local and regional initiatives exist already, but there is a lack of coordination and evaluation.

Strengthening the role of public libraries in reading promotion: There are no national library regulations in Germany. It is the decision of town councils whether a city runs and equips public libraries. This policy has two consequences: Libraries are often among the first institutions to

experience budget cuts by communities that are struggling financially. There is no systematic cooperation between the different agents in the field of reading promotion on local, regional and national level.

Offering digital literacy learning opportunities at school: A literate environment can also be created by incorporating digital devices into the school environment. The OECD study “Students on Line” (OECD, 2011) suggests that German students have to rely more on private resources than school support to acquire digital literacy. In a number of factors Germany performs well below OECD average. 83.2% of the student population report that they spend no time at all on computers during German lessons – the lessons most likely to be dedicated to literacy acquisition on computers (OECD average: 74,0%) (OECD 2011, 321).

4.1.3 Adults

Fostering literacy provision for adults: Despite the high level of need, as identified in PIAAC and the National Level One Survey LEO (Grotlüschen et al 2011) there is no statutory right to **literacy provision** in Germany and only a very small proportion of adults with low literacy skills currently access literacy provision in Germany.

In 2011 the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) initiated a National Strategy for Literacy and Basic Skills, which includes workplace literacy elements. The Länder and municipalities are responsible for the creation of an infrastructure and the implementation of promising project results.

The Federal Ministry (BMBF) funds a nationwide awareness-raising campaign “Reading and Writing – My Key to the World” on TV as well as regional events to promote adult literacy education. The National Strategy has strengthened the voice of literacy advocates and lobby groups and there are now networks and round table activities with stakeholders in municipalities and Länder in order to strengthen the field of adult literacy.

4.2 Improving the Quality of Teaching

4.2.1 Pre-Primary Years

Providing free or affordable high quality preschool education for all children / investing more money in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Germany is at the lower end among European countries for the total public expenditure per child on pre-primary education, the ratio of children to teachers, and the percentage of males among preschool teachers.

Raising the professional qualification level of staff in ECEC ("Erzieher"/"Erzieherin"): Compared with most other European countries teachers in kindergarten (*Erzieher* and *Erzieherinnen*) have a lower level of qualification regarding the minimum required level to become a qualified teacher (post-secondary non-tertiary level, ISCED 4) and the academic degree (which is a bachelor's degree in most countries). In some Länder there are initiatives to improve the quality of staff, and to attract more persons, especially migrant persons and males. These activities should be coordinated and evaluated.

Improving early language and literacy screening and training: All Länder have developed programmes and initiatives for fostering the language development and language level assessment. However these measures are not coordinated. Regular screening of 4-year-olds for language competence and obligatory courses for children who lack adequate competence should be introduced. It should be ensured that at age 4 all children are diagnosed in their oral language proficiency, and that there are obligatory courses for children falling behind in their acquisition of language competence. The aim should be that all children entering school can speak the language of the school so that they can profit from reading instruction.

Introducing comprehensive literacy curricula in pre-primary schools: In preschool, children can be prepared for formal instruction in school. Kindergarten teachers should provide a literacy environment where children learn and engage in the communicative functions of reading and writing with the aim of developing curiosity and motivation to learn to read and write in school. Not all Länder provide a comprehensive literacy curriculum in pre-primary schools.

4.2.2 Primary Children and Adolescents

Ensuring adequate time for language and literacy instruction in primary and secondary schools: According to PIRLS 2011 teachers in Germany report allocating less time to the teaching of reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (110 hours) than on average across EU countries (147 hours).

Improving the quality of literacy instruction: Analyses of teachers' reports in PIRLS indicate that for reading instruction in Germany there is a need for differentiation to bear witness to the different needs of heterogeneous groups and a need for more cognitively demanding instruction.

Although reading comprehension skills such as recognising plot sequence and character traits, describing the overall message or theme of a text, and comparing information across texts are mentioned in curriculum documents in Germany, data provided by teachers in PIRLS 2011 suggest that students are not required to use higher-level text comprehension strategies as frequently as on average across EU countries. Literacy instruction in primary and secondary schools should become more cognitively demanding, more individualized and targeted at using higher-level strategies. One crucial prerequisite for achieving those goals is adequate preparation of teachers.

Improving the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training: According to PIRLS 2011, fourth-grade students are typically taught reading by general-purpose primary school teachers who are responsible for teaching all basic subjects. About 17 percent of teachers in German language had no academic study in this subject – with great variations in these numbers, ranging from zero percent in Thuringia to 34 percent in Hamburg. In general, primary teachers in Germany reported that reading instruction receives less emphasis during initial teacher education, compared with the EU-24 average (PIRLS 2011).

Not all teachers who are or should be involved in teaching reading and writing skills in primary or secondary schools have a solid training in literacy. In the steering documents about standards for initial teacher education from the German *Kultusministerkonferenz* (2004, 2008) literacy as a concept does not play a role. Only limited aspects of literacy are mentioned in the section on mother tongue education. Literacy expertise should become a clear standard for teacher education in all grades and subjects, not only for primary teachers, but also for secondary teachers.

The aim of having high quality teachers requires selective teacher recruitment policies (cf. OECD recommendations, 2005). Those do not exist in Germany.

Improving the quality and quantity (participation rates) of continuing professional development (CPD): Although teachers in Germany are expected to participate in continuous professional education as a professional duty, the participation rates are still wanting. According to PIRLS 2011 25% of students in Germany were taught by teachers who had allocated no time to professional development in reading in the last two years.

Professional development (in-service teacher training) in Germany needs common quality standards as to the qualification of trainers and the quality of the programme offers, which might be guaranteed by accreditation procedures. The format of CPD should be changed from “one-shot-approaches” to middle- and long-term approaches which have a sustainable effect on improving classroom practice of teachers. CPD should closely connect theory to practice and systematically integrate practical application of the newly-learned content and methods into the teachers’ regular classrooms. Literacy promotion and literacy instruction across the curriculum should be a systematic part of CPD addressing teachers of all grades and all subjects.

Extending systematic assessment of literacy skills: There is a need to establish minimal standards of literacy achievement (benchmarks) for each grade (in Germany only benchmarks for grades 4, 10 and 12 are established), and to administer regular tests based on these standards, to allow for identification of struggling readers/writers. Literacy assessment is mostly done by cross-state examinations in 3rd and 8th grades (VERA 3 and VERA 8). To gain a more complete picture of literacy levels in the classroom, regular literacy assessments should be implemented at each grade level. Since in Germany teachers’ assessment of students’ performance is oriented on the performance distribution of the class, age-specific standards might be useful in offering more valid criteria of judgment. However, the main goal of those assessments should be to identify struggling readers and learners in order to systematically support them, allocating attention and resources accordingly, targeting low performing schools - in need of additional funding and resources - as well as low performing students within schools. Assessments therefore need closely to be linked with support programmes and adequate qualification of teachers and specialists.

Building a stronger focus on literacy into curricula: There is a need to mainstream reading / writing literacy across the curriculum and to offer content area literacy instruction in all school subjects

throughout secondary education, whether academic or vocational. The new generation of competence-based curricula have partially integrated literacy skills across subjects, but often literacy dimensions are not described in literacy-specific terms. It would be worthwhile to sharpen the literacy focus to help teachers of all subjects to become literacy teachers.

4.2.3 Adults

Monitoring the quality of adult literacy providers: Although the field of literacy and basic education has developed in Germany since the 1980s, there are clear delineations of responsibility between the Federal ("Bund") and state governments ("Länder") which mean that there is no regulation to provide courses on a nationwide level that would ensure continuity. As a result, the course offerings, general conditions and infrastructure in the respective Länder are different and there is no national inspection service to monitor the quality of adult literacy providers. (Advice and guidance also varies region to region and is mostly dependent on special projects.) This said, there have been a number of measures since the 1970s to improve the quality and professionalisation in adult education, with the Länder setting quality standards as a condition of funding.

Developing curricula for adult literacy: There is no national curriculum for adult literacy, but the German Adult Education Association has been developing a *framework curriculum* to support teachers and trainers and offer guidelines and materials. Teaching usually focuses on the empowerment of learners, with learner-centred approaches, focusing on daily life situations and learning counselling.

Adult literacy provision in Germany has a strong focus on addressing literacy needs in the workplace. Since 2012 there has been a specific BMBF-Programme, "Workplace orientated Literacy and Adult Basic Education". It is also in the workplace that diagnostic tools to measure literacy competencies have also been developed.

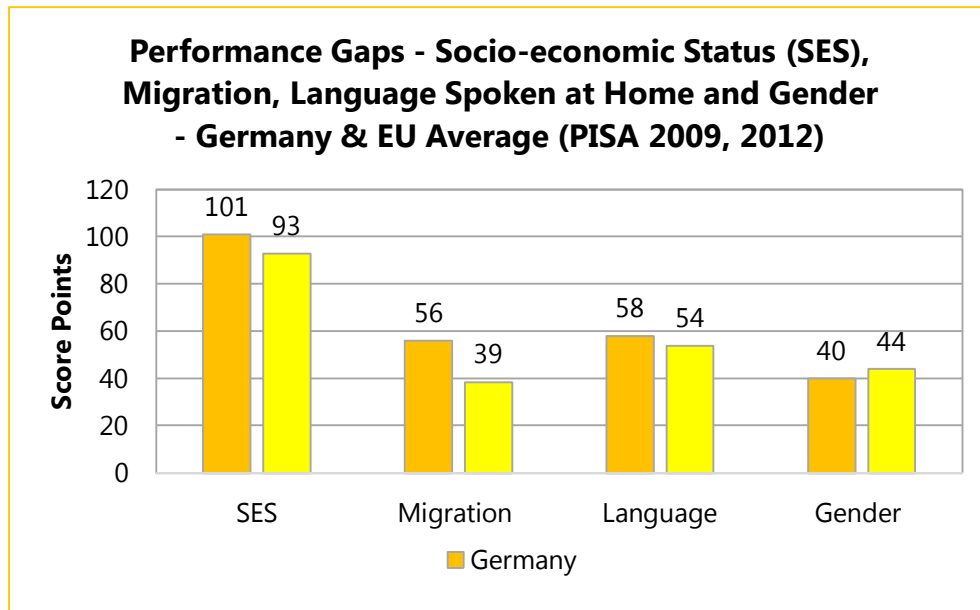
Improving the qualification and status of teachers of adult literacy: Teachers of adult literacy are not bound by statutory qualification requirements although there are a number of specialist qualifications available, including a post-graduate Masters programme (University of Education, Weingarten) in Adult Literacy Development and Basic Education and a number of single qualifications offered by the *Länder Associations of Adult Education Colleges* [Landesverbände der Volkshochschulen], *The Federal Literacy Association* [Bundesverband Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung e.V.] and adult education colleges. Funding is available to pay for some teacher education courses.

However, the status and salary of adult literacy professionals remains lower than that of other educators in Germany. Furthermore, most people (74%) working in continuing education do so on a self-employed, hourly-paid basis. There are no continuous professional development opportunities that focus on adult literacy development.

4.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

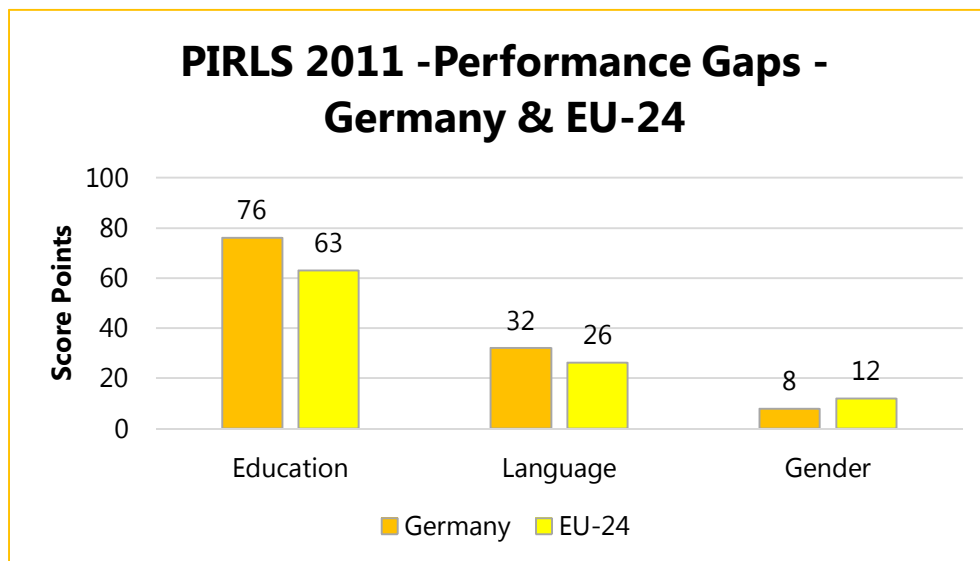
The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA). The following graphs illustrate the performance gaps in Germany, compared to the EU-average and in comparison between PIRLS and PISA results.

Figure 2: Performance Gaps according to PISA



SES: Top – Bottom national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status. Migration: Native - Students with an immigrant background, Home Language (Data from PISA 2012): Student speaks language of the test at home always - sometimes/never, Gender: Girl – Boy

Figure 3: Performance Gaps according to PIRLS



Education: Parent has University vs. Lower Secondary/Primary education; Language: Student speaks language of the test at home always vs. sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – boys

4.3.1 Pre-Primary Years

Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors: Germany has a high percentage of pupils which have a migration background (28%). About 19 percent sometimes speak another language than German at home. In migrant families with children in the age group 0 – 8, Turkish (32%) or Turkish and German (42%) are more often the language of communication than German (26%). According to the AIDA-study 68 percent of the migrant parents reported that they communicate with their children (age 0 to 6) mainly in German, 12 percent mainly in another language and 21 in both languages. The higher the social class the more German is spoken (Cinar et al. 2013, p. 83).

Increasing pre-school attendance of disadvantaged children: The participation rate at age 4 and age 5 is about 96 percent. However there is a difference in enrolment rate between children aged 3 to 5 with and without migration background: 85 vs. 97 percent, with great differences between the Länder. The length of kindergarten attendance has a positive effect on reading. Children who attended 3 years and more had a higher reading score at grade 4 (551) than children who attended between 1 and 3 years (540). Again migrant factors are important: Only 68 percent of children with one parent or parents born outside the country had visited the kindergarten for 3 years and more. For children with parents born in Germany the corresponding figure is 78 percent.

While in half of the European countries the entire period of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is free, in Germany parents in most of the Länder have to contribute financially in public and private kindergartens. Only some Länder provide one year or even a longer time of free pre-primary education. There is a need to provide free or affordable high-quality preschool education for all children.

4.3.2 Primary Children and Adolescents

Supporting struggling literacy learners: Germany is one of seven OECD-member states that, according to PISA 2000 - 2012, had significantly improved in reading competences during the first decade of the 21st century. This progress was attained mainly by raising the performance of the poor readers. In particular, students with migrant backgrounds improved considerably: in 2009 they achieved 26 points more than in PISA 2000, twice as much as the whole German cohort (+ 13 points). Nevertheless, the gap between native speakers and second language learners is still large: the difference of 44 points is equivalent to more than one year of schooling. Another problem remains persistent: Boys are over-represented in the lowest proficiency levels (24% boys versus 12.6% girls, PISA 2009).

The *Bildungsbericht 2014* (National Education Report) states: Up to 30 percent of children and adolescents belong to the disadvantaged group that is affected by at least one risk factor: parents who are unemployed, at risk of poverty or with a low level of education. Migrant children have a greater risk to be affected by these factors. This disadvantaged group is at risk in their literacy achievement and needs attention and support. All PISA results (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012) gave clear evidence that the "poor achievers" in general shared three characteristics: low SES, migrant background and male gender. All Länder should ensure that there are programmes to support all children and young people with migrant backgrounds and without adequate competences in the German language in their language and literacy development.

As PIRLS 2011 demonstrates not all children in need of remedial support in reading receive such support when they need it. Just one-quarter of students in grade 4 in Germany are in classes in which a specialised professional is available to work with children with reading problems.

Students who do not reach a minimal standard of literacy should have a legal right to individual support. Schools should provide *support systems* (additional instruction time, additional experts like reading experts, psychologists, speech therapists) for students falling behind in reading.

4.3.3 Adults

Supporting language courses and orientation courses are available for learners with German language needs. Immigrants can access free courses in "German for Professional Purposes" from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), but integration courses usually require some financial contribution from learners who are not in receipt of welfare benefits. Teaching on integration courses is by specialist teachers accredited by the BAMF.

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