



Department
for Education

Research Brief

DFE-RB262

ISBN 978-1-908666-44-4

December 2012

PIRLS 2011: Reading achievement in England

Twist, L., Sizmur, J., Bartlett, S., and Lynn, L.
National Foundation for Educational Research

The IEA Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international study comparing the reading attainment and attitudes of ten-year-olds. PIRLS 2011 took place in 45 countries and 9 jurisdictions¹. The National Foundation for Educational Research conducted the study in 129 schools in England on behalf of the Department for Education.

Main findings

Reading attainment at age 10 in England has significantly improved since 2006 and is similar to the country's performance in PIRLS 2001. Asian countries continue to lead the field. New entrants Northern Ireland and Finland are among the top performers. Sweden continues its downward trend in reading.

Aims and coverage of PIRLS

PIRLS measures the reading achievement of children internationally in the equivalent to Year 5 in England. The 2011 study is the third (after 2001 and 2006) in the series. PIRLS benchmarks England's performance against other countries, measures trends over time, identifies factors that affect pupil attainment, and enables countries to learn from the policies and practices of others. Forty-five countries and 9 jurisdictions or "benchmarking participants" took part in PIRLS 2011 with pupils aged 9-10; 4 countries assessed pupils aged 11-12.

The 2011 PIRLS sample in England met the rigorous sampling standards, with 129 primary schools taking part. England's sample is suitably representative of the national population of pupils at national level, though there was some use of replacement sample schools. Pupils completed assessments in May/June 2011.

¹ Jurisdictions are sub-national participants, such as US States or Canadian provinces. The study refers to them as "benchmarking participants" and reports their performance, but only whole countries count in rankings of performance.

The PIRLS 2011 survey in England

The PIRLS 2011 survey is the third in the IEA's² series of comparative international surveys of reading achievement of pupils in the fourth grade (Year 5 in England). The PIRLS cycle is five-yearly, so the 2011 survey updates the picture of performance from 2006. PIRLS first ran in 2001³ and the next survey is due in 2016. In 2011, 45 countries participated with 9-10 year old pupils. England has taken part in all three surveys.

England's PIRLS 2011 sample, with the inclusion of replacement schools, met the IEA's stringent participation targets and can therefore be deemed nationally representative of Year 5 pupils. Information about methodology appears in Appendix A of the national report.

Overview

England's performance in PIRLS 2011 was well above the international average and significantly higher than that seen in 2006. There is a wide range of achievement in England: the best readers are among the best in the world but there are a greater proportion of weaker readers than in many other high achieving countries.

Girls performed significantly better than boys in England and in almost all other participating countries. The difference between the performance of boys and girls was greater than that seen in many other countries.

In common with a number of other high achieving countries, pupils' attitudes to reading were less positive in England than the average internationally. The more able readers were more likely to enjoy reading and be motivated to read than the weaker readers. Compared to 2006, fewer pupils in 2011 reported 'never or almost never' reading for fun out of school. Over half of pupils in PIRLS 2011 reported reading for half an hour or more every day out of school.

Teachers' reported levels of career satisfaction were similar to, or higher than, those of teachers in the highest achieving countries and teachers rated their working conditions relatively positively compared with other countries.

Reading attainment in PIRLS 2011

England's average scale score of 552 is significantly above the scale centre point of 500. Amongst all participating countries, England's score was similar to eight other countries, significantly higher than thirty-one countries, and significantly lower than just five countries.

This performance is an improvement over that in the 2006 survey. The highest scoring countries in 2006 (Hong Kong, Russian Federation and Singapore) remain the highest scoring countries in 2011. Two new entrants, Finland and Northern Ireland, also scored higher than England.

² International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA): <http://www.iea.nl>

³ NFER administered the PIRLS 2011 survey and previous cycles in England. Outcomes from previous cycles of PIRLS internationally and in England and other UK regions are available through the NFER website: www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls

Following a fall in 2006, England's performance is now very close to that of 2001. Of the higher achieving countries (average scale score over 500), only two, the United States and Chinese Taipei, showed a greater improvement between 2006 and 2011.

Range of attainment

There is a wide distribution of scores in England. The highest attaining pupils in England are among the best readers in the survey internationally, but the lower attaining readers do less well than the weakest readers in other high scoring countries.

This wide range of achievement was also characteristic of England's performance in PIRLS 2001 and 2006.

Attainment by gender

Girls performed significantly better than boys in PIRLS in England and in almost all other participating countries.

The difference between the attainment of boys and girls was greater in England than in most other countries and has remained stable across all three PIRLS surveys.

The language context of PIRLS in England

A fifth of pupils in the survey in England reported speaking at least one other language in addition to English at home.

Pupils' attitudes to reading

Over a quarter of pupils in England gave responses that showed they enjoyed reading but a fifth of pupils gave responses that placed them in the *Do not like reading* category. In England and in all other countries, pupils who reported the most enjoyment in reading also attained the highest scores.

In contrast to the picture *within* countries, *between* countries those with the highest average reading scores tended to have a high proportion of pupils in the *Do not like reading* category.

Two-thirds of pupils in England reported high levels of motivation to read. Pupils in countries with the highest average reading performance reported the lowest levels of motivation to read.

Pupil reports of reading confidence in England are similar to the international average.

Although trends over time are difficult to identify due to changes in the analysis methodology, it appears that pupils' enjoyment in, and motivation for, reading has improved from 2006, and has surpassed the levels seen in 2001.

Between countries, pupils in countries with the highest achievement reported the lowest levels of engagement in reading lessons. In England, a third of pupils reported a high level of engagement in reading lessons.

Teachers in England reported a high level of use of strategies intended to engage pupils in their learning.

Reading attainment: purposes and processes in PIRLS 2011

Pupils in England performed equally well on the two reading purpose scales: reading for literary purposes and reading to acquire and use information.

Performance on both purpose scales was significantly higher in England in 2011 than in 2006.

Compared to England's overall score, on the processes of reading comprehension scales, pupils in England scored higher on the interpreting, integrating and evaluating scale, than on the retrieving and straightforward inferencing scale.

The scale scores for England on both reading process scales are significantly higher in 2011 than in 2006.

In England, girls achieved significantly higher average scores than boys on both of the reading purpose scales and on both of the comprehension process scales.

The curriculum and teaching

Teachers of pupils in England spent more time on language teaching (the teaching of English) than the average time spent internationally.

The amount of time spent on the teaching of reading, including reading across the curriculum, was just less than the international average, although internationally, responses regarding the time spent teaching reading varied greatly. Generally, pupils in higher performing countries spent less time on reading activities than the average, while pupils in English-speaking countries spent more.

England had the highest proportion of pupils in schools where teachers reported that the teaching of a range of reading skills was emphasised at or before the academic year in which pupils turned eight (Year 3 in England).

In England and internationally, the average achievement of pupils who began learning a range of reading skills earlier was higher than the average achievement of those who were introduced to the skills later.

The percentage of pupils in England whose teachers reported that they practised a range of comprehension skills and strategies on at least a weekly basis was close to or above the international average.

Average achievement in England was slightly higher for pupils who did not have access to a computer for reading lessons, although the difference is unlikely to be significant.

Internationally, the average achievement scores were the same regardless of whether or not computers were available for use in reading lessons. A higher percentage of pupils in the top performing countries used computers in reading lessons than did those in less well performing countries.

The school teaching environment

In England, three-quarters of pupils were taught reading by teachers whose teacher education included an emphasis on English Language.

In England, almost all pupils had teachers who reported that they were 'satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied' with their careers.

Teachers in England reported high levels of collaboration to improve teaching.

Headteachers and teachers in England reported among the highest levels of emphasis on academic success.

The vast majority of pupils in England had teachers who reported that their schools were safe and orderly. Three-quarters of pupils attended schools where the headteacher reported hardly any problems of discipline or safety.

The vast majority of pupils in England had teachers who felt that their teaching was rarely limited by disruptive or uninterested pupils.

Reports of bullying from pupils in England corresponded very closely with international averages; just under a half of pupils reported that they were almost never bullied but a fifth reported that they experienced bullying behaviours about weekly.

School resources

Teachers in England gave among the highest overall ratings about their working conditions, alongside those of the US and Australia.

On average, teachers in England reported minor or hardly any problems relating to working conditions.

Teachers in England reported making use of a wide range of different materials for teaching reading, but by far the most widely used resource was 'a variety of children's books'. They also reported the lowest use of workbooks and worksheets as a basis for teaching among all participating countries.

Schools in England had the highest reported computer provision of all participating countries.

Compared to the international average, schools in England were less likely to have school libraries of 5,000 books or more but were more likely to have class libraries with more than 50 books.

England was one of the countries where pupils were most likely to be given class time to use their class library at least once a week and be able to borrow books from it.

According to their headteachers, the vast majority of pupils in England were not greatly affected by reading resource shortages.

The home environment in PIRLS 2011

Pupils in England reported having among the most books at home of all participating countries. Pupils in England who reported a larger number of books at home had higher mean achievement scores than pupils who reported fewer books at home.

The average achievement of pupils in England was higher for pupils who reported spending more time reading outside of school than those who spent less. This pattern was not clearly apparent in the international data.

Compared to 2006, fewer pupils in 2011 reported 'never or almost never' reading for fun out of school. Over half of pupils in PIRLS 2011 reported reading for half an hour or more every day out of school.

The average achievement for pupils in England who reported having their own television, mobile phone or DVD player was lower in each case than for those who did not possess these items.

Teachers were asked the extent to which they thought their teaching was limited by pupils' lack of prerequisite skills and knowledge, basic nutrition and sufficient sleep. Responses were in line with international averages with regard to prerequisite skills and knowledge, and basic nutrition. Teachers of a greater proportion of pupils in England reported their teaching was limited by pupils' lack of sleep than the international average.

References

Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Foy, P., & Drucker, K.T. (2012). *PIRLS 2011 international results in reading*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College.

<http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/reports/international-results-pirls.html>

Twist, L., Sizmur, J., Bartlett, S. & Lynn, L. (2012). *PIRLS 2011: Reading achievement in England*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls

Additional Information

The PIRLS 2011 national report of findings for England and links to IEA international reports are available free of charge from www.NFER.ac.uk/PIRLS

Copies of the full report are available on a print-on-demand basis by writing to: Publications Unit, NFER, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks., SL1 2DQ. Email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk Tel: 01753 637002. There is an administration charge of £20 plus postage and packing for a single copy, with a 10% discount for bulk orders of 10 copies or more.

The research brief can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from Adrian Higginbotham, 53-55 Butts Road, Earlsdon Park, Coventry, CV1 3BH. adrian.higginbotham@education.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.