

READING LITERACY IN NEW ZEALAND

PIRLS 2005/2006 –
a summary of findings
for New Zealand



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga



2005/2006 WHAT IS PIRLS?



Every five years New Zealand students take part in an international study that looks at primary school students' reading literacy achievement. This study is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – PIRLS. New Zealand took part in PIRLS in 2001 and 2005. From this study, parents, whānau, teachers, principals, policy makers, and the public are able to compare New Zealand children's progress in reading literacy with similar age children in other countries. It also gives information on how the New Zealand education system fares as new policies are put in place. The information in this brochure relates to the study undertaken in 2005/2006.

What is the focus of PIRLS?

PIRLS looks at the two main reasons why middle primary students read. They read for literary experience and to acquire and use information. As well as looking at the reasons for reading, the study looks at the processes and skills of reading comprehension. For example, when students read they often need to interpret and integrate ideas in order to understand the underlying message of a story. Students' attitudes towards reading, their views of themselves as readers, and what they do to develop their reading literacy are also important aspects of the study.

Which countries took part?

Forty countries from around the world took part in the 2005/2006 study. The majority of the countries (37) were in the Northern Hemisphere – Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia, North America, and the Caribbean. These countries administered PIRLS in early 2006. The remaining three Southern Hemisphere countries took part in the study in late 2005.

Which students took part?

As middle primary school is an important transition point in a child's reading literacy development, the study focuses on Grade 4 students around the world. In New Zealand this is equivalent to Year 5. New Zealand students that took part in this study were 10 years-old on average. This is about the same as the average age of students in most of the countries that participated. However, students from some countries had more years of formal schooling and students from other countries had less.

School starting age and pre-primary education

New Zealand, and, for example, English and Scottish children start school at age 5, but this is not the case in most other countries. For example, in France and Singapore children start school when they are 6 years-old and in Sweden when they are 7 years-old. New Zealand is unique in that most children start on or just after their 5th birthday. In other countries children start at specific points such as the beginning of the new school year.

Pre-primary education also differs markedly across countries. For example, in Germany most (90%) children go to kindergarten or pre-school from 3 to 5 years of age but there is no special instruction in reading until they enter primary school at 6 years-old. Children are introduced to reading in the first or second grade depending on the state (länder). In Sweden, formal schooling starts at age 7. However, almost all 6-year-olds attend pre-school classes. One of the main goals of Swedish pre-school education is to encourage students' interest in the written language.

What did the students have to do in PIRLS?

Each student was given a booklet that contained one *story* and one *information* text. There were five different stories and five different information texts so that students did not all have the same material. Each passage (story or information text) was followed by a series of questions that were designed to assess the student's reading comprehension. Some questions were closed (i.e., students selected an answer from those provided) and some questions were open (i.e., students had to write their own response to the question).

What other information was collected in PIRLS?

Students, parents and caregivers, reading teachers, and school principals were each asked to complete a questionnaire. Their responses were used as background data to see which factors might be linked to reading achievement. The questionnaires covered topics such as students' views about reading, the availability of educational resources at home, early literacy activities in the home, and teachers' organisational and instructional practice for teaching reading.

In which language were students assessed?

All countries that took part in PIRLS assessed students according to the language in which they received their instruction. Many countries tested in more than one language because more than one language was used for instruction in their country. In New Zealand schools were given the option of testing students in English or in te reo Māori. Countries combine the responses for the different languages and so does New Zealand. The achievement results described relate to *all* Year 5 New Zealand students.

How well did New Zealand Year 5 students do?

The majority of these results are in a bigger report – *Reading Literacy in New Zealand: an overview of New Zealand's results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2005/2006*. Here are some of the key findings.

How well do New Zealand students read on average?

Firstly PIRLS provides information about the *average (mean)* reading score for each country that took part.

- The international average reading score was 500. The average reading score for New Zealand Year 5 students was 532.
- The average reading score for New Zealand students was
 - significantly above the international average
 - higher than the average score for students in 19 countries
 - similar to the average score for students in three countries – Chinese Taipei, Scotland, and the Slovak Republic and
 - significantly lower than the average score for students in 17 countries including England, Hong Kong, and the United States.
- New Zealand showed a slight increase in the average reading score from when Year 5 students were assessed in 2001 to when they were assessed in 2005 but in statistical terms this was not a significant change.
- Over the same period the average performance of students in eight countries, including Hong Kong and Singapore, increased significantly while the performance of students in six countries, including England and Sweden, decreased significantly.
- New Zealand Year 5 students tended to show better performance on the information texts they read than on the literary texts (stories). This is the opposite of what was observed in 2001.
- New Zealand students tended to show stronger performance on questions where they had to interpret and integrate ideas than on questions where they had to locate discrete pieces of information.

What is the range of scores in New Zealand?

As well as looking at the average score, PIRLS can also provide us with information about the range of scores within a country, information about both stronger and weaker readers.

- New Zealand has a relatively wide range of scores among its students from those who demonstrated very advanced reading comprehension skills to those who had difficulties with understanding the material they read.
- The difference between New Zealand's highest and lowest achieving Year 5 students – the range – was 290 score points. It is wider than the range for many other higher-performing countries, but the same as for England (290). In Sweden (210) and the Netherlands (174) the range of scores is much narrower.

- New Zealand's weaker readers were likely to have difficulties in locating a specific part of a story, or locating and reproducing explicitly-stated information in a text.

New Zealand girls and boys

New Zealand Year 5 boys and girls achieved above the international averages for boys and girls. In all but two countries, Spain and Luxembourg, girls were consistently better readers than boys. New Zealand was no exception.

- New Zealand girls scored higher overall (544) on average than boys (520) in reading, with the average difference between them one of the biggest internationally. The difference between boys and girls in New Zealand (24) was similar to Scotland (22) and marginally bigger than England (19).
- The difference between the New Zealand Year 5 boys and girls who were high achievers in reading was not very large. It was among the lower achievers in reading that the difference was clearer. On the whole, those girls who were lower achievers in reading scored higher than their male counterparts.

Overall, there was no change in reading achievement from 2001 to 2005 for either New Zealand Year 5 boys or girls.

Did speaking the language of the assessment test at home make a difference?

New Zealand students were asked how frequently they spoke the language in which they were assessed in PIRLS at home. The average score for those students who frequently speak the language of the PIRLS assessment at home (542) was noticeably higher than those students who sometimes (or rarely) did (519). This difference was larger than England and the United States but smaller than some western European countries like Germany.

Are there things about the home environment that made a difference to students' reading achievement?

Reading at home

The home has an important role in fostering reading. Access to educational resources at home such as books; parent, caregiver and whānau engagement in reading activities and their positive attitudes to reading all play a role in supporting a child's confidence and enjoyment in reading outside school.

Starting early makes a difference

New Zealand parents and caregivers were more likely than parents and caregivers in other countries to report that they engaged frequently in a variety of literacy-related activities such as reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with the alphabet or word games and reading labels and singing aloud prior to their children entering primary school. According to their parents' responses, prior to starting school, about three-quarters (74%) of New Zealand Year 5 students had a high level of engagement in these activities compared with about half (54%) of students internationally.

Most (90%) New Zealand Year 5 students had attended an early childhood education (ECE) facility for more than 1 year before starting school. On average, the Year 5 students who had not attended an ECE facility, or had only attended for up to 1 year, had lower reading achievement than other Year 5 students.

Students' love of reading

Compared with students in other countries, New Zealand Year 5 students were positive towards reading. However, they were less sure about their reading ability than many of their international counterparts and less sure about their reading ability than they were in 2001. Year 5 students who report reading for fun and reading stories or novels every day, generally achieved higher reading scores.

What did PIRLS say about the classroom and school for reading?

To understand the context in which children are reading in school, PIRLS gathered a lot of information from school principals and teachers. This included information on the time allocated to teach reading, how classes are organised for reading, the types of activities in reading, the types of reading materials used, and the allocation of homework.

- In 2005, a New Zealand teacher of Year 5 students was typically teaching a class of about 27 students, one student less than in 2001.
- In New Zealand an average of 3.2 hours per week was allocated to formal reading instruction. This was higher than the international average of 2.5 hours per week.
- Internationally, teachers used a variety of organisational approaches when teaching reading. New Zealand teachers were no exception.
- The single organisational approach most likely to be used by New Zealand teachers was to arrange Year 5 students into same-ability groups. This approach was rarely used in most other countries. Teaching reading as a whole-class activity was a common approach used by teachers in many countries but rarely used by New Zealand teachers.
- New Zealand and Scottish teachers were more likely to use a reading series in their reading programmes than teachers in England. Children's books were used more often by teachers in England.

What happens in reading on a typical day?

New Zealand Year 5 students were likely to be working in groups based on their reading ability.

Compared to students in other countries, they were:

- More likely to be read aloud to by their teachers;
- Much less likely to read aloud to the class (similar to Sweden but unlike England);
- More likely to be doing silent reading;
- More likely to be taught some techniques for decoding sounds and words (similar to the United States but twice as likely as students in England); and
- Less likely to be helped with new vocabulary than many students internationally, but a little more likely than English and Scottish students.

In school

The majority of New Zealand Year 5 students were in schools where resource shortages or inadequacies had little or no impact on reading instruction and where New Zealand school principals were positive about the climate for learning. Relatively few Year 5 students attended schools where absenteeism was considered to be a problem.

New Zealand parents/caregivers were relatively happy with their child's school, their own level of involvement and the effort schools made to keep them informed about their child's progress at school.

Although some New Zealand Year 5 students had experienced some negative behaviours at school, generally they were very positive about their school life, including what they felt about their teachers and their fellow students.

There were, however, a significant proportion of New Zealand Year 5 students who did not feel that they received regular feedback about their reading from their teachers.

Literacy in New Zealand

The goal of the New Zealand literacy strategy is to raise literacy achievement for all New Zealand students. To realise this goal, a number of policies and initiatives which aim to improve literacy achievement have been put in place. The *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4* is a handbook for teachers of students in the first four years of their schooling. It was distributed to all primary schools in August 2003. Building on the success of this guide, *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8* was also made available to schools in 2006.

As well as the guides, a number of teacher professional development initiatives are in place such as the Literacy Professional Development Project which began in 2004. What is currently known is that there have been significant shifts in students' achievement in the schools where the professional development has been held. However, as PIRLS was conducted in New Zealand at the end of 2005 it was unlikely that these shifts would have shown up in this cycle as significant improvements at the system level.

Who conducted PIRLS?

PIRLS is co-ordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The Ministry of Education's Comparative Education Research Unit is responsible for PIRLS in New Zealand.

Would you like more information?

You will find the New Zealand report on PIRLS-05/06 on www.educationcounts.govt.nz.

The international report and a companion encyclopaedia on reading education are on the PIRLS web site: www.pirls.org.

Countries and Canadian provinces participating in PIRLS-05/06

Austria	* Hong Kong SAR [†]	Luxembourg	* Russian Federation
Belgium (Flemish)	* Hungary	* Macedonia, Rep. of	* Scotland
Belgium (French)	* Iceland	* Moldova, Rep. of	* Singapore
* Bulgaria	Indonesia	* Morocco	* Slovak Republic
Chinese Taipei	* Iran, Islamic Rep. of	* Netherlands, the	* Slovenia
Denmark	* Israel	* New Zealand	South Africa
* England	* Italy	* Norway	Spain
* France	Kuwait	Poland	* Sweden
Georgia	* Latvia	Qatar	Trinidad and Tobago
* Germany	* Lithuania	* Romania	* United States

^cCanadian provinces

Alberta	Nova Scotia	* Quebec
British Columbia	* Ontario	

Notes

^c The Canadian provinces took part separately. Their information was not used in any of the international calculations. They are referred to as *benchmarking* participants.

* Countries participated in PIRLS-01

[†] Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

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