

# SECTION 7: OVERVIEW



The discussion in this section pulls together findings from other research – international and national – to allow readers to reflect and understand the context of the findings from PIRLS 2005/2006.

New Zealand's Year 5 students, on average, demonstrated that they had relatively strong reading comprehension skills and strategies as measured by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2005/2006). Furthermore, a significant proportion of Year 5 students used skills and strategies that placed them among the best readers internationally. The performance of these higher-achieving students was also consistent with that of their 2001 counterparts, while the performance of students with weaker reading skills in 2005 was also found to be the same as that of their weaker 2001 counterparts. The data also show that the average achievement differences between girls and boys remained unchanged. Of continuing concern are the differences in achievement among the ethnic groupings, with the performance of each group in 2005 essentially the same as that of their respective 2001 cohort.

As well as the cognitive outcomes from PIRLS, the study also provides invaluable insight into Year 5 students' attitudes to reading, their ratings of themselves as readers, their opinions about aspects of school life, including whether or not they liked being at school and felt safe school there. Furthermore, all these factors were found to have a strong, positive association with students' reading literacy achievement. The findings on students' beliefs and attitudes do highlight however that among New Zealand 10 year olds there is a notable size group who do not consider reading a part of their repertoire of recreational activities. Also, for a significant minority school was not a place they liked been at nor was it perceived as safe place to be.

Both PIRLS studies have highlighted the large range in the *reading* performance of New Zealand's Year 5 students. A similar wide range of performance was found for England in 2001 and again in 2005/2006. Whetton and Twist (2003) conjectured as to why the 'English-speaking' countries in PIRLS-01 exhibited relatively large ranges of achievement. As well as looking at curricula and pedagogical practice, and the availability of specialist support, Whetton and Twist also considered the complexity of the English language in relation to students who have lower reading ability. With a very similar pattern of performance exhibited again among the English-speaking countries in 2005/2006 (Twist, Schagen, & Hodgson, 2007), further work is being undertaken by England's PIRLS researchers to look at patterns of achievement across the different language groupings in PIRLS.

Results from this second cycle of PIRLS again highlight the importance of the relationship between the home and reading literacy achievement, with the time spent on early literacy activities and the positive role that parents/caregivers can play in promoting reading being examples of such factors. It is also revealing to see how important these factors are in New Zealand when viewed in an international context.

Using PIRLS 2001 data, Martin, Mullis, and Gonzalez (2004), for example, identified factors associated with *effective* homes in terms of literacy development by middle primary school. The factors they identified discriminated between higher-achieving students and lower-achieving students. Parents/caregivers reading to their children on a frequent basis was one such factor. In several countries, including New Zealand, the practice is common. However, in New Zealand's case, while the parents/caregivers of the majority of New Zealand's higher-achieving students (90%) reported they had read to their child, a little over one-half of the parents/caregivers of New Zealand's lower-achieving students (55%) reported this practice; the difference of 35 percentage points was one of the highest internationally (c.f. the international average of 22%). Parents'/caregivers' attitudes to reading was another factor which discriminated between New Zealand's higher and lower achievers. In every country, significantly higher proportions of higher-achieving students than lower-achieving students had parents/caregivers who held positive views about reading. However, New Zealand had the largest the difference (39%).

A strong early foundation in literacy through parents/caregivers actively engaging in early literacy activities with their child, and later their child participating in early childhood education, is also a key precursor of later success at middle primary school as measured by PIRLS. Recently, Tunmer, Chapman, and Prochnow (2006) explored the connections between New Zealand students having 'literate cultural capital' at school entry, a set of reading-related factors that have been strongly influenced by early literacy activities undertaken in the home, their family socio-economic circumstances, and their reading outcomes later in school. Their longitudinal study found that children from low-income households had considerably less literate cultural capital than students from higher-income households. Furthermore, literate cultural capital at school entry was a strong explanatory variable for reading achievement when students were in Year 7.

Socio-economic factors and their relationship with student reading literacy achievement cannot be ignored. The findings described in this report emphasise the achievement differences among Year 5 students who have access to different educational resources in the home as well as households with different incomes. The disparity that exists between households that are relatively well-off and those households that are less well-off is illustrated further at the school level. According to the PIRLS socio-economic measures, New Zealand schools where the student body is predominately from economically disadvantaged backgrounds had on average markedly lower achievement than those where there was little economic disadvantage. This finding was confirmed using the school's decile indicator, a New Zealand measure of socio-economic disadvantage. Schools with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage were also more likely to be faced with other challenges, such as dealing with negative student behaviours, than were schools with lower levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

Interestingly, the data revealed that not all differences in achievement among the ethnic groupings were accounted for solely by differences in the socio-economic circumstances of the households in which students reside. Moreover, the information in this report on individual socio-economic measures such as household income and books in the home does suggest a need for a finer, aggregated measure of socio-economic circumstances; such a measure could include, for example, parents'/caregivers' occupation and their highest level of education. Such a measure could be used in conjunction with other variables to better explain the relationships with achievement for students from the different ethnic groupings. It is worth noting that Nash (2004) offers insight into the effect of socio-economic circumstances and ethnicity and its relationship with student achievement in New Zealand.

As well as being a research study, PIRLS plays an important monitoring function and is used in conjunction with information collected from the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP). NEMP assesses the achievement of students in reading every four years, with reading comprehension assessed in 2000 and again in 2004. According to Crooks and Flockton (2005), the cohort of Year 4 students assessed in 2004 achieved at the same level on the trend reading tasks as their 2000 Year 4 counterparts. NEMP also provides information on students' attitudes to reading, the findings of which are consistent with those found for PIRLS. Interestingly, Year 4 students in 2000 were mostly Year 5 students in 2001, and Year 4 students in 2004 were Year 5 students in 2005, making them the same cohort as that assessed in PIRLS. This shows there was no change in reading achievement in the same cohorts as measured by the two very different assessments.

In early 1999, the Literacy Taskforce's report was released to advise the then Government on how to achieve its goal that "By 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write, and do maths for success." (Ministry of Education, 1999). Recommendations made by the Literacy Taskforce subsequently informed the work of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*. The strategy essentially has provided an alignment and consistency for a range of policies, programmes, and projects, which have been designed and implemented in English-medium settings and which have aimed to improve literacy achievement outcomes. However, most of the initiatives have been implemented after 2001, the year in which the first cycle of PIRLS was administered. For example, the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP), a successful programme which has involved close to 300 schools, only started in 2004 (McDowall, Cameron, Dingle, Gilmore & MacGibbon, 2007). It is therefore unlikely that the positive outcomes of this relatively small-scale activity would have been reflected in a large-scale assessment like PIRLS.

A number of other countries taking part in PIRLS have had some major structural and curricular changes. Four examples are described in Appendix D, and they highlight the scale and number of years needed for improvements to appear in system-level data such as PIRLS. The IEA, the organisation with overall responsibility for PIRLS, has also recently published a book containing articles from 13 countries on the impact of PIRLS 2001. In putting the book together, impact was defined "as the study's influence on public and published opinion, on education policy, on teaching and curriculum development, and on educational research." (Schwippert & Goy, 2007, p. 265)

Since PIRLS was administered in New Zealand in late 2005, a number of other important policy initiatives have been released, which provide a mandate for making change. Specifically in relation to reading literacy in English-medium settings is the (draft) tool *Literacy Learning Progressions*, a resource which explicitly sets out the “literacy expertise that students need in order to meet the demands of the curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.3). More recently, the Māori-medium literacy strategy *Te Reo Matatini* was released in order to align existing literacy-related initiatives, as well those related specifically to Māori-medium education (Ministry of Education, 2007b).

*Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success*, the Māori education strategy for 2008–2012 (Ministry of Education, 2008), sets out goals and specific actions in order to “improve education outcomes for and with Māori” (p. 5). Strengthening the participation of whānau in Māori children’s learning and improving teaching and the learning of literacy for Māori children in their first years of school are two of six stated goals. Examples of actions include the extension of the LPDP into schools with a higher proportion of Māori students, and developing an equivalent literacy programme for and with Māori-medium settings (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 31).

Improving the literacy foundations of Pasifika children, and is identified as a key stated goal in the *Pasifika Education Plan 2006–2010* (Ministry of Education, 2007c). Furthermore, “positive shifts in performance as measured by national and international assessments (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS, and NEMP) by 2010”<sup>55</sup> (p.16) is one of the targets to be able to measure the success of the work related to improved student outcomes in education.

Finally, the third cycle of PIRLS is scheduled to be administered in New Zealand and other Southern Hemisphere countries in late 2010, and in early 2011 in Northern Hemisphere countries. Although the international data will not be available until the end of 2012, some preliminary (national) data will become available during the first half of 2012, which should provide some indication of the progress made since 2005 in shifting student achievement in reading literacy.

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<sup>55</sup>The current plan is a large scale map which set outs the targets for 2010-2011. The map has the year 2011. However, an attachment which sets out some revisions to the current plan has the target year as 2010. The document cited here is the monitoring report which also outlines the targets for the period.