

Moving from learning to read to reading to learn

By Sue Thomson

International studies such as the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the IEA Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have provided Australian teachers and policy makers with valuable insights into the educational achievement of Australia's students, both within Australia and in comparison to other countries. Since the mid 1990s, TIMSS has helped to highlight some areas of strength and weakness in Australia's performance on mathematics and science achievement at Years 4 and 8, while more recently PISA has shown us that our 15-year-old students have performed consistently very well on mathematics, science and reading literacy. However, PISA has also shown that there is a substantial proportion of 15-year-old students who are not reading at a level which is deemed to be of a sufficient standard for them to engage in the type of tasks that they will be required to undertake as part of the 21st century workforce.

Comprehensive information about the reading achievement of primary school students has to date been missing from the picture. This is set to change later this year when, for the first time, Australia takes part in the IEA Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, known as PIRLS. While it is Australia's first year of participation, PIRLS 2011 is the third in a five-year cycle of assessment that measures trends in children's reading literacy achievement and policy and practices related to literacy. It is conducted in over 50 countries by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the same organisation responsible for TIMSS.

Reading achievement is acknowledged as being a cornerstone of education. As noted in the PIRLS framework:

reading literacy is one of the most important abilities students acquire as they progress through their early school years. It is the foundation for learning across all subjects, it can be used for recreation and for personal growth, and it equips young children with the ability to participate fully in their communities and the larger society.

PIRLS focuses on the achievement of young children in their fourth year of schooling (Grade 4 for Australian students) as well as the experiences they have at home and at school in learning to read. Middle primary school is an important transition point in a child's reading development; most children would have learned to read and are now reading to learn. In the assessment of reading, PIRLS focuses on the two main reasons middle primary students 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.

An array of contextual information is also collected in PIRLS. Students, parents and caregivers, reading teachers, and school principals are each asked to complete a questionnaire. Their responses to a range of questions are used to better understand the context of students' reading achievement. The questionnaires cover 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. Students' attitudes towards reading, their views of themselves as readers, and what they do to develop their reading literacy are important factors which have been found to be linked to achievement.

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Results will provide an important collection of information about Year 4 students' level of reading achievement, as well as home, school, and classroom influences on that achievement. The previous administration of PIRLS, undertaken in 2006, found that the Russian Federation, Hong Kong SAR and

Singapore were the three top-performing countries. That study also showed that, on average, girls outperformed boys in reading literacy across all countries, and that children's enjoyment and appreciation for reading was declining.

Forty countries participated in the 2006 study, and more than 50 will participate in 2011. Among the countries joining Australia as first-time participants are Finland, Ireland, Croatia and the United Arab Emirates. The aim of Australia's participation in PIRLS is not simply to see where Australia sits on an international literacy league table. Its purpose is to look closely at Australian students' reading abilities and examine what they know and don't know in relation to reading literacy, identify strengths as well as any gaps in knowledge and consider what we might need to do to make improvements.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is managing Australia's participation in PIRLS with the support of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Schools are randomly selected to join the study and then one or two Grade 4 classes in each school will be selected at random, based on strict international criteria to ensure that the students chosen to participate make up an accurate sample that is truly representative of Australia's whole school system. Schools from all states and territories and all school sectors will be included. Australia's PIRLS testing will coincide with the 2011 administration of TIMSS, and so Australian Grade 4 students taking part in TIMSS will also complete the assessments for PIRLS.

From May this year, schools have been contacted and invited to participate in the assessment. Later this year ACER will send all materials to schools along with detailed information about how the assessment is to be conducted. In the IEA assessments, whole classes are selected within schools, and PIRLS, like TIMSS, is generally administered by another classroom teacher, minimising disruption at the school level. From the end of October to late November, Australian students will complete the PIRLS assessments. While the assessment is officially known as PIRLS 2011, all students in the southern hemisphere will complete the tests in late 2010. This is because students around the world need to be assessed on what they have learned in the school year near its conclusion. Northern hemisphere countries, where the school year tends to finish in the middle of the calendar year, will conduct testing in early 2011.

For the PIRLS assessment, each student will be given a booklet containing either two literary (story) texts, two information texts, or one of each. There are five different literary texts and five different information texts which are distributed across a number of different test booklets so that students do not all have the same material. Each passage (story or information text) is followed by a series of questions that are designed to assess the student's reading comprehension. Some questions are closed (i.e., students selected an answer from those provided) and some questions are open (i.e., students had to write their own response to the question). The texts are presented in the format of a magazine or section of a book to make them appear as close as possible to the types of texts children of this age are used to reading.

The assessment will take approximately two hours to complete, including completing the student background questionnaire. Test booklets and questionnaires are then returned to ACER, where expert markers will score the constructed response items and other data will be entered.

As part of the administration of PIRLS, parents will also be asked to complete a survey about reading practices with their children. It's important to gather this information from parents as it will help researchers to identify possible home influences on reading achievement and, in turn, help policy makers identify children who may be at risk of being left behind. Feedback on student performance will be provided to schools. The public report on PIRLS will not report on the performance of individual students or schools.

When the first Australian study is completed, PIRLS will provide Australian educators with international comparisons of Australian students' reading literacy at a critical stage in students' development where they are, according to the PIRLS framework, moving from learning to read to reading to learn. Participation in future cycles of PIRLS would enable educators to track progress over time.

For further information see www.acer.edu.au/timss/overview

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