Enjoyment of reading

Surveys such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) enable educators, policymakers and the wider community to compare Australian students with each other, as well as their counterparts across the world.

Australia’s results from the most recent cycle of PIRLS (2016) indicated that the average reading performance of Year 4 students had improved significantly since Australia first participated in 2011.

PIRLS focuses on Year 4 as the point in schooling where most students are moving from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’. However, reading is much more than a tool for education or work. It can take the reader out of themselves and their own experiences, engage and develop emotions and provide new perspectives.

This Snapshot examines how these Year 4 students feel about reading – do they enjoy it? Do they think they learn from it? Do they read for fun?
Who likes to read?

A great deal of research over many years has shown that positive attitudes and achievement are related, and that the influence runs in both directions: attitudes influence achievement and achievement reinforces (or perhaps alters) attitudes. The importance of establishing strong positive attitudes towards learning, and particularly towards reading, which underlies so much of student learning, is undeniable.

PIRLS recognises the important role of student attitudes in reading achievement by collecting responses to two attitude scales: the Students’ Like Reading scale (a measure of participation in and enjoyment of reading), and the Students’ Confidence in Reading scale (a measure of their self-rated ability in reading).

The Students Like Reading scale

This Snapshot focuses on the Students Like Reading scale, and summarises student responses to eight questions about how often they participate in and how much they enjoy reading. Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement (agree a lot; agree a little; disagree a little; disagree a lot) with each of the following eight statements:

- I like talking about what I read with other people.
- I would be happy if someone gave me a book as a present.
- I think reading is boring (reverse scored).
- I would like to have more time for reading.
- I enjoy reading.
- I learn a lot from reading.
- I like to read things that make me think.
- I like it when a book helps me imagine other worlds.

Students were also asked how often (every day or almost every day; once or twice a week; once or twice a month; never or almost never) they did the following activities outside of school time:

- I read for fun.
- I read to find out about things I want to learn.

Responses to these two sets of questions were combined to create the Students Like Reading scale.

Students who very much like reading had a score which corresponded to them ‘agreeing a lot’ with four of the eight statements and ‘agreeing a little’ with the other four, as well as reporting that they read for fun and read things they choose themselves ‘every day or almost every day’, on average. Students who do not like reading had scores corresponding to ‘disagreeing a little’ with four of the eight statements and ‘agreeing a little’ with the other four, as well as reporting that they read for fun and read things they choose themselves only ‘once or twice a month’, on average. All other students were assigned to the somewhat like reading category.

Figure 1 The Students Like Reading scale and Year 4 student achievement in reading: Australia and the international average
Figure 1 shows that 43 per cent of Australian students very much like reading, 41 per cent somewhat like reading and 16 per cent do not like reading. This was similar to the distribution found across all participating countries, on average. Some countries, such as Portugal and Kazakhstan, recorded higher proportions of students who very much like reading, while others, including countries who performed higher on average than Australia, had much lower proportions of students who very much like reading compared to Australia.

The relationship between enjoyment of reading and performance on the PIRLS reading assessment was positive although not very strong, with a correlation of only 0.12 among Australian students. There was a general pattern, however, in which students who very much like reading scored significantly higher in reading, on average, than did those who somewhat like reading, who in turn scored higher on average than students who do not like reading.

A correlation is a statistical measure that indicates the extent to which two or more variables fluctuate together. A positive correlation indicates the extent to which those variables increase or decrease in parallel; a negative correlation indicates the extent to which one variable increases as the other decreases.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Which students in your own classroom like reading a lot?
- Which students don’t like reading? Which ones are lukewarm?

Gender differences

In most countries that participated in PIRLS 2016 (except Macao SAR and Portugal), girls outperformed boys in reading literacy. In Australia, girls outperformed boys by 22 score points: girls scored an average of 555 points and boys scored an average of 534 points.

Figure 2 shows that the pattern of stronger reading performance by students who reported that they very much like reading compared to their peers who like reading less, was also found among girls and boys. What is interesting, though, is the difference in the proportions of girls and boys at each level of enjoyment. Around one in ten girls (12%) compared to around one in five boys (21%) responded to the items on the scale in a way that indicated that they do not like reading.

To unpack the gender differences further, each of the items that make up the scale are shown in Table 1, along with the percentage of girls and boys that agreed or strongly agreed with the item.
What do students think about reading?

Overall, the gender difference seen on the scale average, where girls scored higher than boys, is also present in each of the contributing items. However, there was some variation, with the larger differences on some items, and relatively smaller ones on others.

The highest levels of agreement for both girls and boys were with items that focused on getting a book as a gift, learning a lot from reading, and reading helping children imagine other worlds. Both boys and girls were more inclined to say that they read for fun (71% and 83%, respectively) rather than reading to learn (63% and 69%, respectively).

Table 1 Percentage of students who responded ‘agree a lot’ or ‘agree a little’ to Enjoyment of reading items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Girls (%)</th>
<th>Boys (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like talking about what I read with other people</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be happy if someone gave me a book as a present</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think reading is boring*</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to have more time for reading</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy reading</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learn a lot from reading</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to read things that make me think</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it when a book helps me imagine other worlds</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I read for fun</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I read to find out about things I want to learn</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This item is reverse scored when included in the scale. The percentages here reflect agreement with the item as it was presented to students.

ASK YOURSELF:
- Does this reflect what you see in your classroom?
- Why do you think that such a substantial proportion of young students does not enjoy reading?
- Why do you think that such a large proportion of boys, in particular, say that reading is boring?