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What do Australian 15-year-olds think about reading?

The most recent OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey enables educators, policy makers and the wider community to compare Australian students with each other, as well as with their counterparts across the world.

PISA measures the extent to which 15-year-old students near the end of compulsory education have acquired the knowledge and skills that young adults need to meet the challenges of the future.

This Snapshot examines aspects of reading focusing on 15-year-olds' attitudes towards reading and how they have changed between 2000, 2009 and 2018. Do students enjoy reading? How often do they read for enjoyment and what are the similarities and differences in reading enjoyment by different groups; sex, Indigenous background and socioeconomic background?

What the data tells us ...

Australia's results from the most recent cycle of PISA in 2018 (Figure 1) indicate that the average reading performance of 15-year-olds has decreased significantly since PISA first began. Between the first cycle of PISA in 2000 and the 2018 cycle, the mean reading literacy performance declined by 28 points for female students and by 25 points for male students. Between 2009 and 2018, the mean reading literacy performance declined for female students by 14 points and by 9 points for male students.

Note: Due to rounding, some differences may not match the totals in the text. Rounding applies to all figures in this Snapshot.

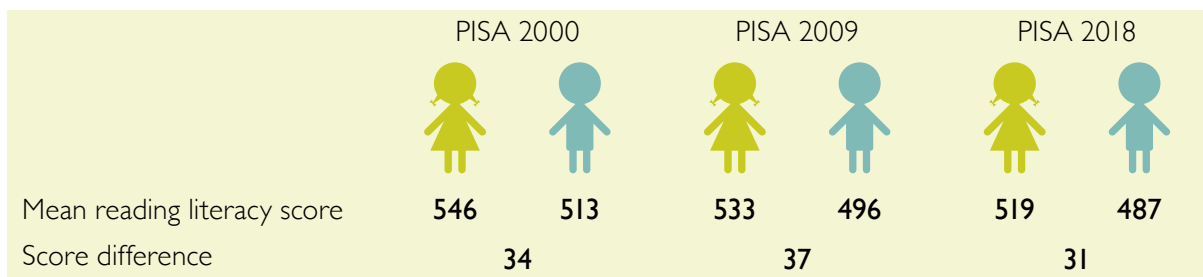


Figure 1 Average student reading literacy performance by sex and average sex differences across PISA cycles

The ability to read competently is an important educational goal. Over the past two decades many studies have identified factors that are positively influenced by reading for enjoyment. Reading for enjoyment has been shown to be positively associated with enhanced academic performance at school (Mol & Jolles, 2014),¹ can result in increased empathy, improved relationships with others (Howard, 2011),² and enhanced mental health (Levine, et al. 2020).³ In addition, Mak and Fancourt (2020)⁴ reported that reading for enjoyment has social benefits and can improve students' sense of connectedness to the wider community as well as providing an insight into human nature and decision-making.

In 2018, PISA asked students about the motivational characteristics of their engagement in reading and out-of-school reading activities. Students were asked to take into account diverse kinds of reading material, such as books, magazines, newspapers, websites, blogs, emails and social media, and to indicate their level of agreement (strongly disagree; disagree; agree; strongly agree) with five statements:

- ▶ I read only if I have to.
- ▶ Reading is one of my favourite hobbies.
- ▶ I like talking about books with other people.
- ▶ For me, reading is a waste of time.
- ▶ I read only to get information that I need.

These five items were also asked of students in PISA 2000 and 2009. Over the 18 year period between 2000 and 2018, there were some significant changes in Australian 15-year-olds' enjoyment of reading.

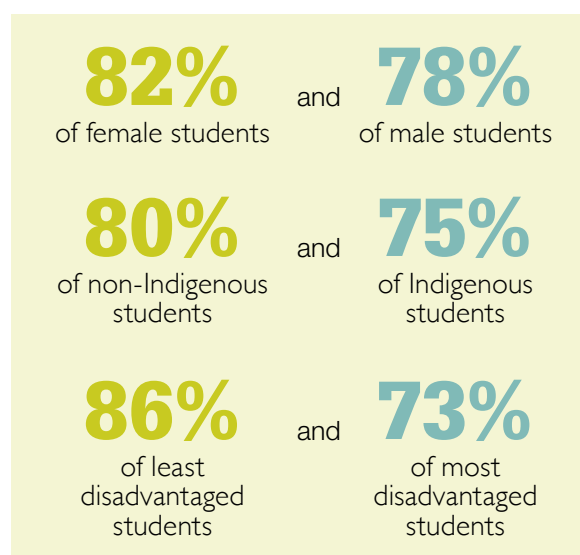


Figure 2 Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that I am a good reader.

Note: The difference between each comparison group was significant.

¹ Mol, S. E., and Jolles, J. (2014). Reading enjoyment amongst non-leisure readers can affect achievement in secondary school. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5.

² Howard, V. (2011). The importance of pleasure reading in the lives of teens: Self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Sciences*. 43(1).

³ Levine, S.L., Cherrier, Holding, A .C. and Koestner, R. (2020). *For the love of reading: Recreational reading reduces psychological distress in college students and autonomous motivation is the key.* *Journal of American College Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1728280>

⁴ Mak, H. W. and Fancourt, D. (2020). Reading for pleasure in childhood and adolescent healthy behaviours: Longitudinal associations using the Millennium Cohort Study. *Preventive Medicine*. 130.

Change over time: Sex

Overall, irrespective of sex, students' reports of enjoyment of reading declined between PISA 2000 and 2018.

Figure 3 shows the percentages of PISA students who reported they agreed or strongly agreed with statements about their level of enjoyment of reading, by sex, along with the change in the percentage of students between PISA cycles in 2000, 2009 and 2018 when reading was the major assessment domain.

The significance of the changes over the 18 year period is highlighted.

- Most stark is the decrease between 2000 and 2018 in the enjoyment that 15-year-olds in Australia get from reading. There was a 16 percentage point increase for female students and a 15 percentage point increase for male students who reported *I read only if I have to*, while there was an 8 percentage point increase for female students and a 9 percentage point increase for male students who reported *for me, reading is a waste of time*.
- Over the 18 year period, the percentage of male and female students who reported *reading is one of my favourite hobbies* remained the same. However, less than one in four male students, and two in five female students reported this.

Change over time: Indigenous background

Figure 4 shows the percentages of PISA students by Indigenous background who reported their level of agreement with each statement related to level of enjoyment of reading, along with the change in the percentage of students between PISA cycles in 2000, 2009 and 2018.

- Between 2000 and 2018, there was a 9 percentage point increase in the percentage of 15-year-old Indigenous students who reported *for me, reading is a waste of time* while there was a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of Indigenous students who reported *I read only if I have to*. These increases indicated that 15-year-old Indigenous students' reading enjoyment has decreased over time.
- In 2018, 59% of Indigenous students and 54% of non-Indigenous students reported *I read only if I have to*. However, the percentage increase from 2000 in students holding this view was more pronounced among non-Indigenous students (15 percentage point increase) than their Indigenous peers (10 percentage point increase).











Enjoyment of reading	2000		2009		2018		% point difference between 2000 & 2018		% point difference between 2009 & 2018	
										
I read only if I have to	30	46	31	52	46	61	16 ▲	15 ▲	15 ▲	9 ▲
Reading is one of my favourite hobbies	41	23	47	23	42	24	1	1	5 ▼	1
I like talking about books with other people	40	20	52	25	43	26	3 ▲	6 ▲	9 ▼	1
For me, reading is a waste of time	17	29	19	34	25	38	8 ▲	9 ▲	6 ▲	4 ▲
I read only to get information that I need	34	55	31	55	44	62	10 ▲	7 ▲	13 ▲	7 ▲

Figure 3 Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about their level of enjoyment of reading, by Sex

Note: The symbols indicate if the percentage point (pp) change is significantly higher (▲) or significantly lower (▼).

Enjoyment of reading	2000		2009		2018		% point difference between 2000 & 2018		% point difference between 2009 & 2018	
	Ind	non-Ind	Ind	non-Ind	Ind	non-Ind	Ind	non-Ind	Ind	non-Ind
I read only if I have to	50	38	58	40	59	54	10 ▲	15 ▲	1	13 ▲
Reading is one of my favourite hobbies	28	31	20	36	29	33	1 ▲	2 ▲	9 ▲	3 ▼
I like talking about books with other people	27	30	23	39	30	34	3 ▲	5 ▲	7 ▲	5 ▼
For me, reading is a waste of time	27	24	38	25	35	31	9 ▲	8 ▲	2	6 ▲
I read only to get information that I need	59	45	61	42	61	53	2	8 ▲	0	11 ▲

Figure 4 Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about their level of enjoyment of reading, by Indigenous background

Note: The symbols indicate if the percentage point (pp) change is significantly higher (▲) or significantly lower (▼). 'Ind' - Indigenous students, 'non-Ind' - non-Indigenous students

Change over time: Socioeconomic background

Figure 5 shows the percentages of PISA students by socioeconomic background, focusing on students in the lowest quartile (most disadvantaged) and the highest quartile (least disadvantaged) who reported their level of agreement with each statement about their level of enjoyment of reading, along with the change in the percentage of students between PISA cycles in 2000, 2009 and 2018.

- Over the 18 year period, between 2000 and 2018, the percentage of most disadvantaged 15-year-old students reporting *I read only if I have to* increased by 11 percentage points to 60%. The percentage of least disadvantaged students who reported *I read only if I have to* remained similar between 2000 and 2009, but then increased by a substantial 17 percentage points between 2009 and 2018 to 44%.
- Between 2000 and 2018 a 5 percentage point increase was observed among the most disadvantaged students reporting *I read only to get information that I need*, in contrast to a 12 percentage point increase among least disadvantaged students.

Enjoyment of reading	2000		2009		2018		% point difference between 2000 & 2018		% point difference between 2009 & 2018	
	Most	Least	Most	Least	Most	Least	Most	Least	Most	Least
I read only if I have to	49	26	52	27	60	44	11 ▲	18 ▲	8 ▲	17 ▲
Reading is one of my favourite hobbies	26	43	26	48	28	41	2 ▲	2	2	7 ▼
I like talking about books with other people	23	39	27	53	27	45	4 ▲	6 ▲	0	9 ▼
For me, reading is a waste of time	30	16	34	15	38	23	7 ▲	7 ▲	3 ▲	8 ▲
I read only to get information that I need	56	30	54	27	61	42	5 ▲	12 ▲	7 ▲	16 ▲

Figure 5 Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about their level of enjoyment of reading, by Socioeconomic background

Note: The symbols indicate if the percentage point (pp) change is significantly higher (▲) or significantly lower (▼). 'Most' - most disadvantaged students, 'Least' - least disadvantaged students.

Time spent reading for enjoyment?

In PISA 2000, 2009 and 2018, when reading was the major assessment domain, students were also asked how much time they spent reading for enjoyment. These additional items provided data on the behavioural characteristics of students' engagement in reading.

The data in Figure 6 show:

- Over the 18 year period, a higher percentage of male students than female students consistently reported they did not read for enjoyment.
- In 2018, 17% of Indigenous students reported reading one or more hours each day for enjoyment, this represented an increase of 7 percentage points from 2009, while, over the same period, the time non-Indigenous students spent reading for enjoyment remained the same.
- Between 2000 and 2018, the percentage of least disadvantaged students who reported they don't read for enjoyment increased by 13 percentage points from 20% in 2000 to 33% in 2018, while the percentage of most disadvantaged students reporting this rose by 11 percentage points.
- In contrast, the percentage of most disadvantaged students who reported reading for one or more hours each day for enjoyment increased by 2 percentage points, while the percentage of least disadvantaged students decreased by 2 percentage points.

Demographic group	I don't read for enjoyment			% point difference between 2000 & 2018	% point difference between 2009 & 2018	One or more hours each day			% point difference between 2000 & 2018	% point difference between 2009 & 2018
	2000	2009	2018			2000	2009	2018		
Females	26	27	36	11 ▲	9 ▲	19	19	20	1 ▲	1
Males	40	47	53	13 ▲	6 ▲	13	10	11	3 ▼	0
Indigenous	39	52	50	10 ▲	2	14	10	17	3 ▲	7 ▲
Non-Indigenous	33	36	44	11 ▲	8 ▲	16	15	15	1 ▼	0
Most disadvantaged	43	48	54	11 ▲	6 ▲	12	12	13	2 ▲	1
Least disadvantaged	20	24	33	13 ▲	9 ▲	20	19	18	2 ▼	1

Figure 6 Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about the amount of time they spent reading for enjoyment.

Note: The symbols indicate if the percentage point (pp) change is significantly higher (▲) or significantly lower (▼).



ASK YOURSELF:

- Are these results a surprise to you?
- Do these findings reflect the attitudes among the students you teach?
- Do you think the Australian curriculum includes a wide enough range of genres to engage the interests of a diverse range of students in your English classes?