Australian students’ access to and use of libraries

Surveys such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 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.

Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, PIRLS 2021 managed to collect reading information from over 400,000 primary school students around the world. In Australia, over 5000 Year 4 students participated in the PIRLS 2021 reading assessment and answered questions about their attitudes towards reading and their reading behaviours inside and outside of school. The principals and classroom teachers of these students also completed questionnaires about the context of and practices around reading instruction in these schools.

This Snapshot examines Australian Year 4 students’ access to and use of libraries (classroom, school and local) and relationships between their library use and reading performance as measured in PIRLS 2021.
Australian students' access to libraries according to principals and teachers

Access to appropriate and high-quality reading materials may be an important factor in the development of students’ attitudes towards reading – how much they enjoy it and value it as a pastime – as well as how well they perform in assessments of reading comprehension (e.g. Lindsey, 2010). School and classroom libraries are an obvious point of access to such materials for students in schools. The PIRLS context questionnaires for school principals and classroom teachers of Year 4 students asked whether students have access to a school library, a classroom library or reading corner, and how many different book titles are in these collections.

According to principals of Australian Year 4 students, the vast majority - over 99% of students - are in schools in which there is a school library. Those schools with a school library appear to have access to a range of titles in their libraries – 27% had collections with 2000 or fewer books while 73% had more than 2000 books in their libraries. The size of the library collections did not vary across schools’ socioeconomic composition – 74% of more affluent schools had more than 2000 books in their libraries, which was not significantly different to the proportion of more disadvantaged schools with more than 2000 books in their libraries, 67% (see Figure 1).

Teachers who participated in PIRLS 2021 were asked whether their classroom had a class library or reading corner. Just over 90% of Year 4 students were in classrooms with a class library or reading corner. However, the size of these classroom libraries varies, as shown in Figure 2. While 35% of students were in classrooms with quite sizeable reading corners, with over 100 different book titles available, just under 6% of students were in classes with 25 or fewer different books.
While the results from PIRLS 2021 indicate that the majority of Australian Year 4 students have access to libraries at their school or in their classrooms, it appears that not all students are allowed to borrow materials from these collections. Around 7% of students were in schools that had a library but did not allow students to borrow books to take home from these collections.

Better to lose a book to a child, than to lose a child to illiteracy – Richard Allington

More understandable perhaps, is a restriction on students taking books home from a classroom library or reading corner, particularly in situations where a teacher may have built the collection using their own books or through purchasing books with their own funds rather than school funds, or where the classroom library consists mainly of classroom sets of levelled readers or set materials.

More than 50% of students in classes with a classroom library or reading corner were able to borrow materials from these collections to read at home if they wished, according to their teachers. Just under half (48%) were not allowed to borrow materials from their classroom libraries to read at home.

Use of school and classroom libraries

Teachers were also asked to indicate how often they allowed their students to use the classroom library or reading corner (where available) and how often they take or send their classes to use the school or local library.

Their responses suggest that both classroom and school libraries are in frequent use, with the majority of Australian Year 4 students given time to use classroom libraries every day or almost every day (84%) and taken to their school or local library at least once or twice a week (87%).

Being in the library does not necessarily mean that the students are interacting with the books in the library though. When students were asked to indicate how often they borrowed books from their school or local libraries, the results indicated that close to half of Australian Year 4 students were not regular borrowers.

While 56% of students borrowed from their library at least once a week, around 30% borrowed a few times a year up to once or twice a month. Thirteen percent of students indicated that they never or almost never borrowed from books from their school or local library.

It is gratifying to see that the regularity with which students are borrowing books does not differ between schools that have policies that do not allow students to borrow from the school library and schools that allow students to borrow from their collections. Presumably, students in schools

![Figure 2 Proportion of Australian Year 4 students with access to classroom libraries of different sizes](image)
that do not allow them to borrow books from the school library are accessing and using their local libraries to borrow books instead.

When comparing the PIRLS 2021 reading comprehension scores of students according to their borrowing habits, students who reported never or almost never borrowing books scored lower, on average, than the rest of their peers.

Further reading:

For further discussion of the role school and classroom libraries and librarians play in student outcomes – School libraries supporting literacy and wellbeing, by Margaret K. Merga (2022) published by Facet Publishing.


The only thing you absolutely have to know is the location of the library – Albert Einstein
Australia’s participation in PIRLS 2021 was managed by the Australian Council for Educational Research and funded by commonwealth, state and territory governments. Further information about Australia’s participation in PIRLS can be found at https://www.acer.org/au/pirls

ASK YOURSELF:

- Do my students have access to range of high-quality reading materials, either in our school library or in our classroom library?
- Are we encouraging and supporting our students to make use of the resources we have access to? Do they know how to search for and borrow books from our libraries?

References:


Figure 5 Frequency of borrowing books from libraries according to Australian Year 4 students

Figure 6 PIRLS 2021 reading scores grouped by students’ reports of frequency of book borrowing