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Snapshots issue 2: Excellence and equity

Sue Thomson

ACER, sue.thomson@acer.edu.au

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SNAPSHOTS

Global Assessment // Local Impact

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by Sue Thomson

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Excellence and equity

- In Australia, the difference between 'more disadvantaged' and 'more affluent' schools for Year 4 reading is, on average, 56 score points.
- Other countries, which also score higher in reading than Australia (such as Hong Kong and Canada), have a smaller gap in achievement between 'more affluent' and 'more disadvantaged' schools.
- Within Australia, the largest difference, 80 score points, is in the Northern Territory, while the smallest difference, 24 score points, is in South Australia.

One of the reasons that countries participate in large-scale assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is to benchmark the performance of students, and by extrapolation school systems, and to make comparisons between countries.

Countries may have differing expectations about national student achievement, for example high overall average scores or a particular proportion of students achieving minimum benchmarks. While all school systems have a similar interest in student achievement outcomes, the vast amount of contextual information these studies also collect provides an opportunity to examine the equity of educational systems and to make

comparisons between countries addressing equity.

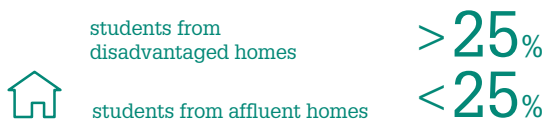
PIRLS asked school principals to report on the economic composition of their school, in particular the approximate percentage of students from economically disadvantaged homes and affluent homes, in order to identify three categories:

- ▶ Schools with 'more affluent' than disadvantaged students – that is, fewer than 25% from disadvantaged homes and more than 25% from affluent homes
- ▶ Schools with 'more disadvantaged' than affluent students – that is, fewer than 25% from affluent homes and more than 25% from disadvantaged homes
- ▶ Schools with more neither more advantaged nor more disadvantaged students: all other response combinations.

Affluent school



Disadvantaged school



Neither more disadvantaged nor more affluent school



DID YOU KNOW?

Research indicates a clear link between socioeconomic background and achievement. From the early studies of Coleman et al. (1966) to more recent studies using PISA data, research has shown that student socioeconomic background is important, and that the pooled effect of student socioeconomic background is even more important (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2009). There is a clear advantage for students attending schools in which there is a predominantly advantaged student intake.

The international picture

Australia's performance on PIRLS was not as high as might have been thought, given that our students generally perform well on PISA reading literacy. However there is also a wide gap in achievement on PISA between students from a disadvantaged background and students from an affluent background. While some students in disadvantaged schools perform well, and some students in affluent schools perform poorly, one way for Australia to improve its performance on international assessments is to improve the performance of all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

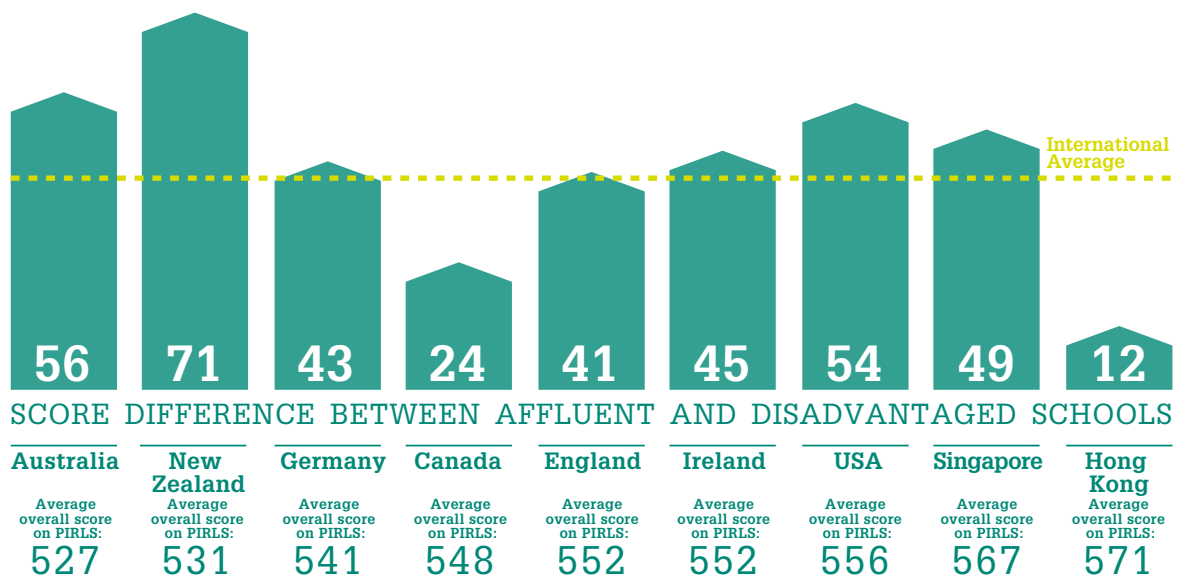
In Australia, the difference between 'more disadvantaged' and 'more affluent' schools for Year 4 reading is, on average, 56 score points, more than half a standard deviation.

In Canada – a high-performing country with an overall average score of 548 – the difference is just 24 score points.

In Hong Kong, where 50 per cent of schools are 'more disadvantaged' and just 12 per cent 'more affluent,' the difference is just 12 score points.

Clearly, it is possible to achieve excellence and equity in a school system.

Country	More disadvantaged schools (%)	Neither more disadvantaged nor more affluent schools (%)	More affluent schools (%)
Australia	27	41	32
New Zealand	28	33	39
Germany	26	41	16
Canada	28	33	39
England	35	33	32
Ireland	31	30	39
USA	51	31	18
Singapore	10	50	40
Hong Kong	50	30	20

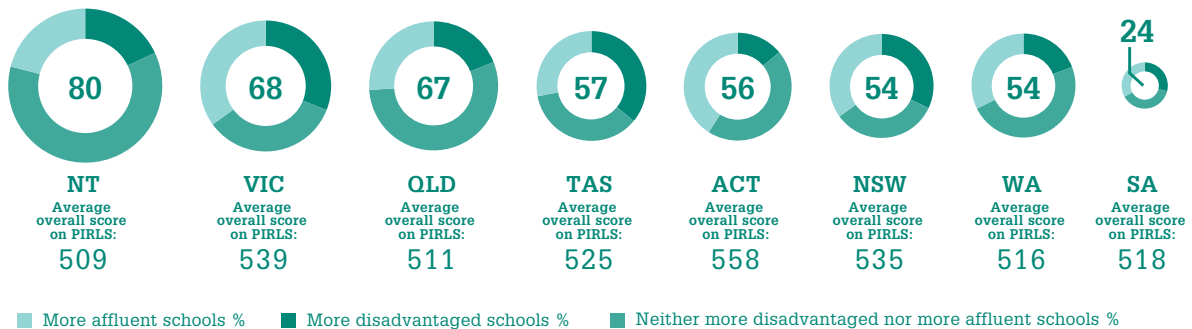


ASK YOURSELF

Given the relationship between student composition and Year 4 reading achievement is not the same across countries, or even across Australian states and territories, what factors do you think might account for the differences? What might we be able to do to change this situation in Australia?

The Australian picture

SCORE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AFFLUENT AND DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS



In all states other than South Australia, the difference between ‘more affluent’ and ‘more disadvantaged’ schools is large – more than half a standard deviation – while the largest difference, 80 score points, is in the Northern Territory, which also has the lowest overall average score of 509. In South Australia, by comparison, the difference is just 24 score points.



ASK YOURSELF

What are the factors that you think might help explain why students from disadvantaged homes do not perform as well as those from affluent homes on assessments such as PIRLS?

Why might this be worse for students from disadvantaged homes who go to school with a large proportion of similarly disadvantaged students?

Why might the differences be less for students from disadvantaged homes who attend more affluent schools?



STAY TUNED...

International research points to a framework for effective schools. The next edition of Snapshots will explore some of these factors within Australia for ‘more disadvantaged’ schools and those from ‘more affluent’ schools.

References

- Coleman, J.S., Campbell, E.Q., Hobson, C.J., McPartland, J., Weinfeld, F.D., and York, R.L. (1966). *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Thomson, S. & De Bortoli, L. (2009). *Challenges for Australian Education: Results from PISA 2009*. Camberwell: ACER.

The data presented here are drawn from the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2011), part of a suite of international comparative education studies that Australian students take part in, including the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which are part of Australia’s National Assessment Program. Further information about Australia’s participation in TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA can be found at www.timss.acer.edu.au or www.acer.edu.au/ozpisa.

Sue Thomson is the Director of the Educational Monitoring and Research Division at ACER.