

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS 2016: a cautionary tale

By Margaret M Clark OBE

The first PIRLS study involving 35 countries took place in 2001. The results generated headlines in England such as “English primary pupils are among the best readers in the world” (DfES). In 2003 I published an article critiquing the results, with the subtitle a “cautionary tale”; such cautions are relevant to any international study (see chapter 19 in Clark, 2016).

In December 2017, the PIRLS 2016 report was published on standards of reading comprehension of ten-year-olds in 50 countries, one of which was England (Scotland and Wales did not take part in this cycle). By 5 December the Standards Minister for England, Nick Gibb, had made a speech at the British Library, the transcript of which is downloadable from DfE (<https://www.gov.uk>). In that speech, and subsequent speeches, the latest in Fiji to the Commonwealth Education Ministers, he claimed that this international evidence “confirms that our approach is working” as the international study of 9-year-olds’ reading ability showed that “England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016” and that the low performing pupils are gaining most rapidly.

The speech is full of unsubstantiated claims including a belief that by the time of the first check in 2012 synthetic phonics had indeed been adopted as the method of teaching reading in England. The evidence base for these claims is examined by seven literacy researchers in *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017) and by a further twelve in *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (Clark, 2018), where Part II is devoted to an analysis of the PIRLS results. The literacy policies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are very different from England and both ranked statistically higher than England. It is therefore surprising that in a government claiming to have an evidence-based policy no consideration has yet been given as to what we might learn from these results and policies (see chapters 6 and 7 in Clark, 2018).

PIRLS 2016

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international comparative study to assess and compare the reading performance of pupils in their fourth year of formal schooling across participating countries when around ten years of age. England has taken part in all four PIRLS cycles every five years since 2001. A total of 50 countries took part in PIRLS in 2016. Three aspects were assessed 1) reading comprehension 2) a student questionnaire and 3) a questionnaire to head teachers and teachers. A questionnaire was also distributed to a parent/guardian who was asked to provide information about their child and their home environment related to reading activities. England and the United States were the only two countries that did not administer these questionnaires. It means that for England we have only the views of the head teachers, teachers and pupils who sat the test as to the home circumstances, with no possibility of comparing their views with that of the parents themselves.

In answer to an enquiry as to why the United States did not administer the parent questionnaire we immediately had a response indicating that: ‘NCES found that parents tend to feel as though the questions may be a bit too intrusive or time consuming, consequently, we do not administer the parent questionnaire in many studies’.

I sent a Freedom of Information Question to the Department for Education. “On page 19 of the recently published PIRLS 2016 Report for England it is stated that England and The United States are the only two countries (out of 50) not to administer the questionnaire to parent/guardians. No indication is given as why this decision was made or by whom. Why was this decision made and by whom?”

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The reply stated: "The decision that England should not administer the PIRLS 2016 home questionnaire was taken in September 2014 by DfE ministers. Much of the information asked for in the PIRLS home questionnaire is collected by the department in other ways for example, pupils' earlier performance at school, and their socio-economic background. A further consideration was the additional burden this would put on the parents. Previous experience of international questionnaires to parents demonstrate that they tend to elicit very low response rates, which, in turn, makes the data unusable."

Initiated in 2016 was a computer-based reading assessment of students' ability to acquire and use information when reading online. Fourteen countries took part in ePIRLS, including Ireland. From this there was both interesting information on the pupils' ability and their attitude towards online reading. I also enquired why England did not participate in this assessment.

The reply I received stated: "The decision that England should not administer ePIRLS was taken by DfE ministers in June 2013. The ePIRLS assessment would take around 1.5 hour in addition to the 2.5 hours of the paper-based assessment, and it was recommended by the study organisers that ePIRLS be administered on a consecutive day to PIRLS. The need to release year 5 pupils for two consecutive half days would make it extremely difficult to engage schools. We already participate in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which moved to a computer-based mode of delivery in 2015. This has provided insights into on-screen skills for reading (and also for mathematics, science and collaborative problem solving) albeit at age 15, rather than primary age pupils."

Some of the information for this article is taken from the National Report for England (McGrane, Stiff et al., 2017). However, there is an international report and reports for individual countries, all of which can be downloaded. I consulted these, and the reports for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as both ranked statistically higher than England and both gave the parental questionnaires. As England did not administer the parent questionnaire this aspect is not discussed in the report on England.

In 2016 England's sample was around 5,000 Year 5 pupils from 170 primary schools. The average age of pupils participating in PIRLS 2016 was 10.2 (in England 10.3). England's average score in PIRLS in 2016 is 559, significantly higher than in 2006 and 2011. However, it is significantly lower than the Republic of Ireland (567) and Northern Ireland (565). In chapter 5 of Clark 2018 I discuss the findings and how much we can legitimately conclude from the report on any causal connection between government policy and the improved results. PIRLS 2016 is the first opportunity to assess how performance in the phonics check introduced in 2012 and taken at the end of Year 1 relates to performance in PIRLS; thus, this aspect has prominence in the report for England. However, warnings are expressed in the report: "Drawing unqualified conclusions about the causal effects of policy is impossible on the basis of PIRLS data alone ... Some policies will not have been in place for long enough to have an effect upon Year 5 pupils' literacy levels in 2016 ... the current results should be somewhat cautiously interpreted given that other countries have also adopted phonics approaches over varying lengths of time and the results have been mixed in terms of average PIRLS performance" (McGrane, Stiff et al.: 146) and "there is no sustained evidence that countries with phonics programmes have higher average PIRLS performance in general" (page 149).

It will be no surprise that the pupils who met the standard on the phonics check (a mark of at least 32 out of 40) had an average score much higher than other pupils. However, the range of individual PIRLS scores at each raw mark on the phonics check is quite wide (McGrane, Stiff et al. 2017 figure 4.6: 65).

Further findings

As noted by the minister "a higher proportion of pupils in England were categorised as being 'very confident' readers (53%)". However, they were reported as being slightly less engaged in their reading lessons as compared with pupils internationally and the percentage of pupils reporting they like reading is lower than the international median. The number of books that pupils in England reported they have at home is strongly related to reading confidence and enjoyment as well as average performance on PIRLS. We have no confirmation from the parents in England of the accuracy of these estimates.

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Career satisfaction of primary school teachers

Thirty-five percent of the pupils in England who sat PIRLS in 2016 had current teachers with less than 5 years teaching experience (Northern Ireland 11% and The Republic 17%). As many had recently trained it is not surprising that in England the percentage of pupils in England with teachers who in the last two years had dedicated time for reading-related professional development is substantially lower than in the comparator countries. NB These are not the early years teachers involved in the phonics check, but the pupils' current teachers. Career satisfaction in NI (62%) and The Republic (60%) was higher than in England (51%). Career satisfaction in the Republic of Ireland in PIRLS 2011 and 2016 has been higher than in many other countries and associated with high scores.

It is interesting to note that in *The National Report on England* by McGrane et al., 2017, page 127 is devoted to 'career satisfaction of primary school teachers in the Republic of Ireland', with references from other research to back the statements. Recruitment and retention of teachers in some countries, including England, has become a growing problem. Indeed, concern has been expressed very recently in England by the Secretary of State for Education. However, his focus has been on reducing the workload. That may only be part of the problem. Excessive testing of young children for accountability, and dictation by central government not only of policy in general but how to teach, has removed the professional autonomy not only of teachers but also of head teachers. Even the content of continuing professional development is dictated within narrow policy confines.

These constraints in England may well be discouraging young people from entering the profession and causing others to leave; the extent to which this is true is worth investigating. In contrast, in the Republic of Ireland teacher training courses remain highly competitive and trainee teachers are typically academically high achievers, whereas it is claimed that in the United Kingdom they are those with sufficient qualifications, 'but rarely the highest achievers'. Teaching is perceived as a highly valued and respected career in the Republic of Ireland, it is stated, which has not been the case elsewhere. It would seem worth investigating in what ways the literacy policy itself, the way it was developed and the autonomy granted to teachers have contributed to the Republic of Ireland's high ranking in international studies, to the high regard for the profession and the career satisfaction of the teachers.

The influence of home background on PIRLS results

Raising the percentage pass on the check year on year had not yet come to dominate practice in the early years in England at the time the pupils who were assessed on PIRLS sat the check in 2012. It is yet to be seen whether the full implementation of this policy does indeed improve the level of reading comprehension of pupils in England, their confidence in reading and desire to read. There are important findings from PIRLS on the influence of early preschool literacy experiences on attainment. We need to look beyond the results for England to examine this aspect.

England had a large proportion of pupils' headteachers who believe that parental expectations for pupil achievement are 'low or very low' (14%) much higher than the international median of 3%. However, the pupils' teachers were less likely than headteachers to report that parental expectations or support for pupil achievement are low or very low. As noted above we do not for England have any corroboration of this from parents.

According to the international report "good readers had an early start in literacy learning". The information from the parents revealed two ways that pupils get an early start in literacy, namely, having parents who often engage them in early literacy activities and attending pre-primary education.

Parents are the students' first teachers and 39 per cent of the students had parents who reported often engaging their children in early literacy activities such as reading, talking or singing to them as well as telling them stories and teaching them to write alphabet letters. These students had higher attainment. This is downloaded from <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/pirls/summary> It is claimed that students whose parents reported that their children could perform early literacy tasks when beginning primary school 'illustrate that early preparation at home appears to have an effect on

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attainment in fourth grade'. In the report for Northern Ireland it is reported that parents' enjoyment of reading was also associated with higher attainment. In Northern Ireland 49 per cent of the parents who responded to the questionnaire reported that they "very much like reading", a percentage greater than in any comparator country; their children had higher average attainment in reading. In England in the absence of such data the influence of the home, even preschool, on literacy achievement may be under estimated and that of school literacy policy over emphasised. It is possible that in England the parents contributed both to the pupils' high score on the phonics check and on PIRLS.

Literacy online

In the fourteen countries which participated in ePIRLS it is reported that good readers had little difficulty reading online, that a high degree of achievement was demonstrated, that they were able to navigate to the appropriate webpages, completing the assessment in the allotted time. Irish pupils performed as well on the digital ePIRLS assessment as they did on the paper-based PIRLS assessment.

Final Comment and caution

Policy makers should be prepared to consider whether there are lessons to be learnt from countries with very different policies, especially countries which achieve significantly higher ranking. For England, two such countries are Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The absence of home data from parents in England also makes it possible that the contribution of homes to pupils' achievement may be underestimated and the role of the school over stated.

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