

# PIRLS

## **Introduction**



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PIRLS 2001

International Report

*Since a literate population provides the foundation for any nation's social and economic health and the ability to read is essential for the personal growth of its citizens, it is crucial to have easily accessible information about students' achievement in reading. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) provides a vehicle for countries to obtain internationally comparative data about the reading achievement of their primary school students (the fourth grade in most participating countries).*

## PIRLS has been designed to assess changes into the future.

PIRLS is the first in a continuing five-year cycle of trend studies in monitoring reading progress internationally, and has been designed at the outset to assess changes into the future.

Conducted under the auspices of IEA, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education, PIRLS data collection took place in 2001 in

35 countries around the world. To provide a blueprint for IEA's continuing work in assessing reading literacy, the PIRLS assessment was based on a collaborative effort of the participating countries. The goal was to conduct the most innovative and comprehensive measure of reading achievement possible within the constraints of a large-

scale international data collection. As such, PIRLS is based on a newly developed framework, describing the interaction between two major reading purposes (literary and informative) and a range of four comprehension processes.<sup>1</sup> The assessment itself was based on a variety of texts, and included a special PIRLS Reader printed in color (see back pocket of report), as well as a significant proportion of questions asking students to write out their answers.

The IEA is an independent international cooperative of national research institutions and governmental agencies with a permanent secretariat based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Its primary purpose is to conduct large-scale comparative studies of educational achievement to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of policies and practices within and across systems of education. During its nearly 50-year history of educational research, IEA assessed reading most recently in 1990-91.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the PIRLS data collection coincided with the 10th anniversary of IEA's 1991 Reading Literacy Study, providing participants in the 1991 study the additional opportunity to replicate that study and obtain a 10-year measure of the trends from 1991. Nine countries took advantage of that opportunity, and the results are reported in *Trends in Children's Reading Literacy Achievement 1991-2001*.<sup>3</sup>

Consistent with IEA's primary purpose of providing policy and instructionally relevant information, PIRLS included a full range of context questionnaires. Most notably, since the home environment plays such an

1 Campbell, J.R., Kelly, D.L., Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., & Sainsbury, M. (2001). *Framework and specifications for PIRLS assessment 2001* (2nd ed.). Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College.

2 Elley, W.B. (Ed.). (1994). *The IEA study of reading literacy: Achievement and instruction in thirty-two school systems*. Oxford, England: Elsevier Science Ltd.

3 Martin, M.O., Mullis, I.V.S., Gonzalez, E.J., & Kennedy, A.M. (2003). *Trends in children's reading literacy achievement 1991-2001: IEA's repeat in nine countries of the 1991 Reading Literacy Study*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College.

important role in providing children with early language and literacy experiences, parents and caregivers were asked to complete a questionnaire about various aspects of fostering reading development. Additionally, school administrators were asked about their reading curricula, programs, and resources; teachers about their professional development and different types of reading instruction; and the students, themselves, about their reading, in and outside of school. By gathering information about children's experiences in learning to read, together with reading achievement on the PIRLS test, it is possible to identify factors or combinations of factors associated with high levels of reading literacy.

### Which Countries Participated?

The map on the next page shows the 35 countries that participated in PIRLS 2001. The decision to participate in any IEA study is made solely by each member country according to its own data needs and resources, and is coordinated through IEA's secretariat in Amsterdam. Each participating country designated a national center to conduct the activities of the study and a National Research Coordinator (NRC) to implement it in accordance with international procedures – a considerable responsibility given the complexity of the data collection and the measurement instruments. The quality of the study depends on the work of the NRCs and their colleagues, and all those involved deserve deep appreciation for their continued commitment to the project. Appendix F contains a list of the PIRLS 2001 National Research Coordinators and advisory committees.

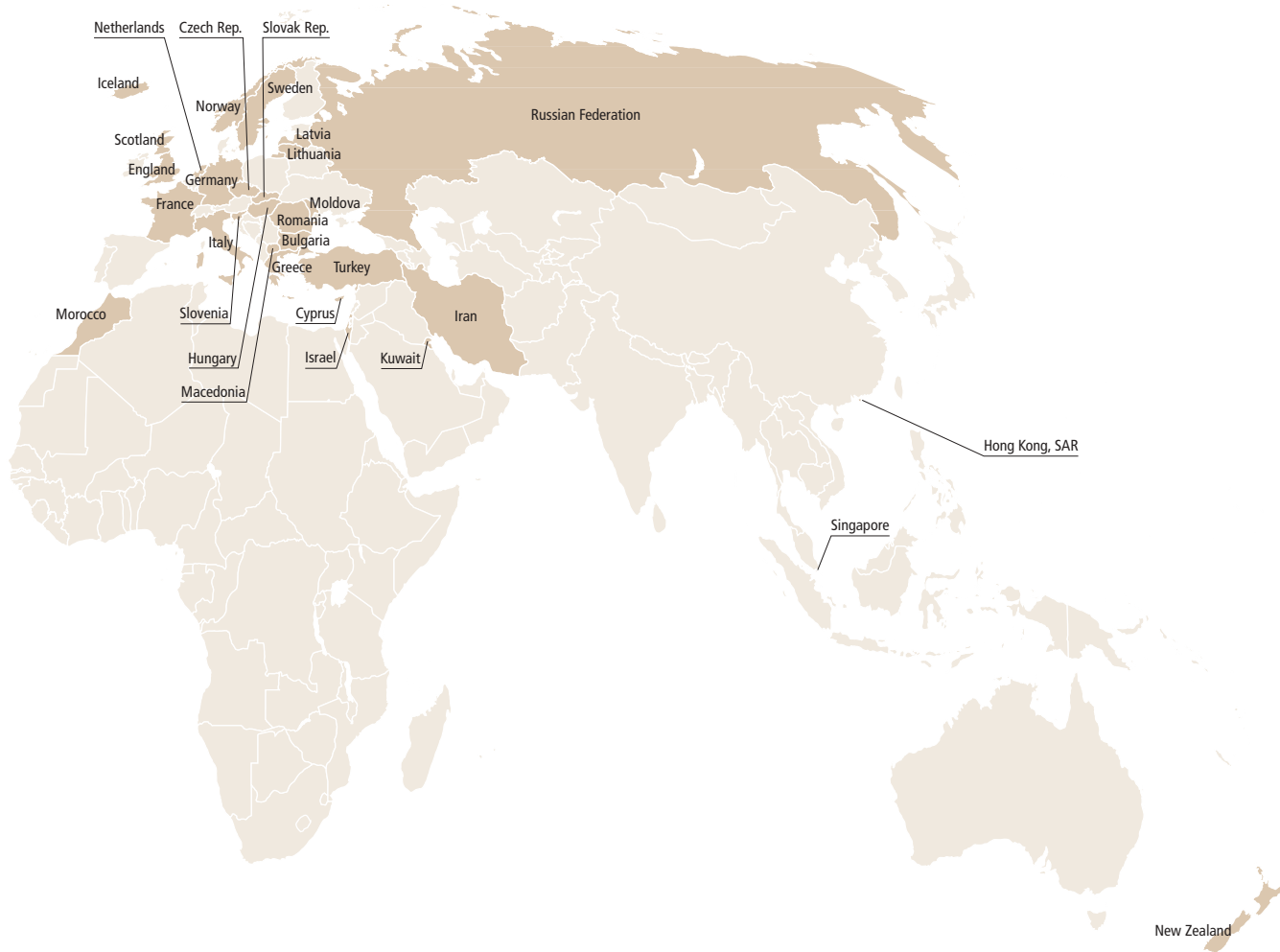
Most, but not all, countries tested students in the fourth year of formal schooling (typically, 10-year-olds). Thus, solely for convenience, the report usually refers to the grade tested as the fourth grade. PIRLS worked very hard to take years of schooling, students' ages, and curriculum covered



## Map of Countries Participating in PIRLS 2001

Argentina  
Belize  
Bulgaria  
Canada (O,Q)  
Colombia  
Cyprus  
Czech Republic  
England  
France  
Germany  
Greece  
Hong Kong, SAR  
Hungary  
Iceland  
Iran, Islamic Rep. of  
Israel  
Italy  
Kuwait  
Latvia  
Lithuania  
Macedonia, Rep. of  
Moldova, Rep. of  
Morocco  
Netherlands  
New Zealand  
Norway  
Romania  
Russian Federation  
Scotland  
Singapore  
Slovak Republic  
Slovenia  
Sweden  
Turkey  
United States





into consideration to maximize comparability across the grades tested in each country, the effect being that a few students were in the third grade while some were in the fifth grade. Exhibit 1.1 in Chapter 1 contains information for each country about the years of formal schooling and average age of the students tested.

For the sake of comparability across countries, all testing was conducted toward the end of the school year, most often in April through June of 2001, for countries in the Northern Hemisphere. The four countries on a Southern Hemisphere school schedule (Argentina, Colombia, New Zealand, and Singapore) tested in September through December 2001, which was the end of the school year there.

### The PIRLS 2001 Encyclopedia

To provide a rich context for interpreting the results, the NRCs for PIRLS 2001 agreed at an early stage of the project to work together to produce a publication to complement the data collected by the study. Entitled the *PIRLS 2001 Encyclopedia*,<sup>4</sup> the resulting volume provides general information on the cultural, societal, and economic situation in each country, as well as a more focused perspective on the structure and organization of the education system as it pertains specifically to the promotion of reading literacy. The *PIRLS 2001 Encyclopedia* describes primary/elementary schooling as it pertains to reading within each country: including teacher education and training, reading curricula, classroom organization and instruction, and assessment practices. As such, it is an extremely valuable companion publication to this international report, providing insights and detailed information about the policies, practices, and resources within each country.

### Quality Control

International studies of student achievement provide valuable comparative information about students' performance in the context of varying curricula and instructional practices. Accompanying the benefits of international studies, though, are the challenges associated with comparing achievement across countries, cultures, and languages. PIRLS made every effort to attend to these

4 Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Kennedy, A.M., & Flaherty, C.L. (Eds.). (2002). *PIRLS 2001 encyclopedia: A reference guide to reading education in the countries participating in IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College.



issues through careful planning and documentation, cooperation among the participating countries, standardized procedures, and rigorous attention to quality control throughout. For example, an extensive series of verification checks was conducted to ensure the comparability of the test translations, and detailed documentation was required to satisfy adherence to the sampling standards. Appendix A contains an overview of the procedures used. More detailed information is provided in the *PIRLS Technical Report*.<sup>5</sup>

The PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College, directed by Ina V.S. Mullis and Michael O. Martin, was responsible for all aspects of the design, development, and implementation of the study, working closely with the PIRLS advisory committees, the NRCs, and partner organizations responsible for particular aspects of the study. These included the IEA Secretariat, which provided guidance in all aspects of the study and was responsible for verification of all translations produced by participating countries; Statistics Canada, which was responsible for school and student sampling activities; the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, which had major responsibility for developing the reading assessment; the IEA Data Processing Center, responsible for processing and verifying the data from the 35 countries; and Educational Testing Service, which provided software and support for scaling the achievement data.

## Funding

A project of this magnitude requires considerable financial support. IEA's major funding partners for PIRLS included the World Bank, the U.S. Department of Education through the National Center for Education Statistics, and those countries that contributed by way of fees.

5 Martin, M.O., Mullis, I.V.S., & Kennedy, A.M. (Eds.). (2003). *PIRLS 2001 technical report*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College.