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Overview of IEA's PIRLS Assessment

The IEA and Reading Literacy

Reading literacy is one of the most important abilities students acquire as they progress through their early school years. It is the foundation for learning across all subjects, it can be used for recreation and for personal growth, and it equips young children with the ability to participate fully in their communities and the larger society.

Because it is vital to every child's development, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) conducts a regular cycle of studies of children's reading literacy and the factors associated with its acquisition in countries around the world. IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) focuses on the achievement of young children in their fourth year of schooling and the experiences they have at home and at school in learning

to read. Designed to measure trends in reading literacy achievement, PIRLS is conducted every five years. The first PIRLS assessment took place in 2001; the next assessment after the 2006 assessment is planned for 2011.

Throughout the framework, various sources that have provided a research and scholarly basis for the framework are referenced.

These references are only a sample of the volumes of literature and research that have informed the PIRLS framework, including considerable research by countries participating in PIRLS.

IEA's 1991 Reading Literacy Study (Elley, 1992, 1994; Wolf, 1995) served as a foundation for PIRLS. It provided a basis for the PIRLS definition of reading literacy and for establishing the framework and developing the assessment instruments. Although the 1991 study provided the groundwork for PIRLS, the PIRLS Framework and Specifications were newly developed for the first assessment in 2001 (Campbell, Kelly, Mullis, Martin, & Sainsbury, 2001) and updated for the 2006 assessment. The PIRLS Framework and Specifications for 2006 and the instruments developed to assess the

framework reflect the IEA's commitment to be forward-thinking and incorporate the latest approaches to measuring reading literacy.

Many of the countries participating in PIRLS 2006 also participated in the 2001 study. These countries will be able to measure trends in reading achievement across the five-year period from 2001 to 2006.

A Definition of Reading Literacy

In naming its 1991 study, the IEA decided to join the terms *reading* and *literacy* to convey a broad notion of what the ability to read means – a notion that includes the ability to reflect on what is read and to use it as a tool for attaining individual and societal goals. “Reading literacy” has been maintained for PIRLS, as it remains the appropriate term for what is meant by “reading” and what the study is assessing.

In developing a definition of reading literacy to serve as the basis for PIRLS, the IEA looked to its 1991 study, in which reading literacy was defined as “the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual.” The Reading Development Group for 2001 elaborated on this definition for PIRLS, so that it applies across ages yet makes explicit reference to aspects of the reading experience of young children. For 2006, the Reading Development Group refined the last sentence to highlight the widespread importance of reading in school and everyday life. The definition follows.

For PIRLS, reading literacy is defined as the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.

This view of reading reflects numerous theories of reading literacy as a constructive and interactive process (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Chall, 1983; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004; Walter, 1994). Readers are regarded as actively constructing meaning and as knowing effective reading strategies and how to reflect on reading (Clay, 1991; Langer, 1995; Thorndike, 1973). They have positive attitudes toward reading and read for recreation. Readers can learn from a host of text types, acquiring knowledge of the world and themselves. They can enjoy and gain information from the many multi-modal forms in which

text is presented in today's society (Greaney & Neuman, 1990; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1999; Wagner, 1991). This includes traditional written forms such as books, magazines, documents, and newspapers. It also encompasses electronic presentations such as the Internet, email, and text messaging as well as text included as part of various video, film and television media, advertisements, and labeling.

Meaning is constructed through the interaction between reader and text in the context of a particular reading experience (Rosenblatt, 1978). The reader brings a repertoire of skills, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and background knowledge. The text contains certain language and structural elements and focuses on a particular topic. The context of the reading situation promotes engagement and motivation to read, and often places specific demands on the reader.

Discussing what they have read with different groups of individuals allows students to construct text meaning in a variety of contexts (Guice, 1995). Social interactions about reading in one or more communities of readers can be instrumental in helping students gain an understanding and appreciation of texts. Socially constructed environments in the classroom or school library can give students formal and informal opportunities to broaden their perspectives about texts and seeing reading as a shared experience with their classmates. This can be extended to communities outside of school as students talk with their families and friends about ideas and information acquired from reading.

Overview of Aspects of Student's Reading Literacy

PIRLS focuses on three aspects of student's reading literacy:

- processes of comprehension;
- purposes for reading; and
- reading behaviors and attitudes

Processes of comprehension and purposes for reading are the foundation for the PIRLS written assessment of reading comprehension.

Figure 1 shows the reading processes and purposes assessed by PIRLS and the percentages of the test devoted to each. It should be noted that the four processes are assessed within each purpose for reading. The reading purposes and the processes for comprehension are described in Chapter 2.

The reading purposes and comprehension processes will be assessed using test booklets containing five literary and five informational passages. Each passage will be accompanied by approximately 12 questions, with about half multiple-choice and half constructed-response item format. The design of the written assessment is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 and sample reading passages and questions from the PIRLS 2001 assessment are presented in Appendix B.

Figure 1
Percentages of Reading Assessment
Devoted to Reading Purposes and Processes

Purposes for Reading	
📖 Literary Experience	50%
📖 Acquire and Use Information	50%
Processes of Comprehension	
📖 Focus on and Retrieve Explicitly Stated Information	20%
📖 Make Straightforward Inferences	30%
📖 Interpret and Integrate Ideas and Information	30%
📖 Examine and Evaluate Content, Language, and Textual Elements	20%

Reading Literacy Behaviors and Attitudes

Reading literacy involves not only the ability to construct meaning from a variety of texts, but also behaviors and attitudes that support lifelong reading. Such behaviors and attitudes contribute to the full realization of the individual's potential within a literate society.

A positive attitude toward reading may be among the most important attributes of a lifelong reader. Children who read well typically display a more positive attitude than do children who have not had a great deal of success with reading (Mullis, Martin, González, & Kennedy, 2003). Children who have developed positive attitudes and self-concepts regarding reading are also more likely to choose reading for recreation. When children read on their own time they are not only demonstrating a positive attitude, they are also gaining valuable experience in reading different types of texts that further their development as proficient readers.

In addition to reading for enjoyment, reading for knowledge and information is a hallmark of reading literacy acquisition. Using informational texts to learn more about a topic may help children develop their interests and gain confidence in their reading abilities. Furthermore, the knowledge gained through such reading enhances subsequent reading, broadening and deepening the reader's interpretation of texts.

Discussing one's reading, orally or in writing, establishes the reader as a member of a literate community. Readers can further develop their understanding of texts and explore various perspectives and interpretations by talking with other readers. These exchanges of ideas sustain a literate community, which can promote intellectual depth and openness to new ideas within society.

A student questionnaire will address students' attitudes towards reading and their reading habits. In addition, questionnaires will be given to students' parents, teachers, and school principals to gather information about students' home and school experiences in developing reading literacy. To provide information about national

contexts, countries will complete questionnaires about reading goals and curricula and a profile of reading education in each country will be compiled. Chapter 3 describes the reading contexts addressed by the PIRLS questionnaires.

Student Population Assessed

PIRLS assesses the reading literacy of children in their fourth year of formal schooling. The target population is defined as follows.

The target grade should be the grade that represents four years of schooling, counting from the first year of ISCED Level 1.

ISCED stands for the International Standard Classification of Education developed by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Level 1 corresponds to primary education or the first stage of basic education. The first year of Level 1 should mark the beginning of “systematic apprenticeship of reading, writing and mathematics (UNESCO, 1999).” Four years later would be the target grade, which is the fourth grade in most countries. However, given the linguistic and cognitive demands of reading, PIRLS would not want to assess very young children. Thus PIRLS also tries to ensure that students do not fall under the minimum average age at the time of testing for PIRLS 2001, which was 9.5 years old.

This population was chosen for PIRLS because it is an important transition point in children’s development as readers. Typically, at this point, students have learned how to read and are now reading to learn. By assessing the fourth grade, PIRLS is providing data that will complement TIMSS, IEA’s Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which regularly assesses achievement at fourth and eighth grades. By participating in PIRLS and TIMSS, countries will have information at regular intervals about how well their students read and what they know in mathematics and science. PIRLS also complements another international study of student achievement, the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),

which assesses the reading literacy of 15-year-olds. In Appendix C, the similarities and differences between PIRLS and PISA are discussed in more detail.

