

Teaching Initial Literacy

Policies, Evidence and Ideology



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First Edition published 2018

by Glendale Education, 61 Jacoby Place, Priory Road, Birmingham B5
7UW

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Also available as a paperback book from amazon.co.uk
ISBN: 978-0-9928931-4-9

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Ebook preparation by Witley Press Ltd, 24-26 Greevegate, Hunstanton,
Norfolk PE36 6AD

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THE PROGRESS IN INTERNATIONAL READING LITERACY STUDY PIRLS 2016: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE RESULTS?

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(This is a shortened version of an article that will appear in Primary Practice Spring edition 2018 and is included here with permission)

Background

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 School 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 and a further speech on 23 January 2018, he claimed that this international evidence ‘confirms that our approach is working’ as:

The international study of 9-year-olds’ reading ability in 50 countries showed that England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016....it is the low performing pupils who are gaining most rapidly.

In the report on England there is an emphasis on the relationship between the results of the pupils on the phonics check and their performance on PIRLS. However, it should be noted that attention is drawn in the report to the fact that: ‘the range of individual PIRLS scores at each raw mark on the phonics check is quite wide’ (see Mc Grane *et al.*, 2017: 65).

The speech by Nick Gibb is full of unsubstantiated assertions and claims said to be evidence-based for which there is contrary evidence. One example is the minister's belief that by 2012 teachers had implemented the mandate that synthetic phonics be *the* method of teaching reading.

According to the Minister, 'prior to our reforms, schools were using variations of a method called 'look and say':

We faced opposition from various lobby groups: those opposed to testing; those professors of education who had built a career on teaching teachers to use the 'look and say' approach; and the teaching unions.

These results are stark. They stand in defiance to those who still choose to ignore the evidence.

Whilst the evidence from the PIRLS data demonstrates that phonics has improved comprehension levels, there is also data that dispels their other tawdry myths about pupil confidence.

These results are a vindication of the government's boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism.

And they are a reminder of the damage that can be caused when dogma flies in the face of evidence.

(Gibb, 2017)

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. 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 headteachers 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. I am attempting to find out who made this decision for England and why. It means that for England we only have the views of the headteachers, teachers and pupils with no possibility of comparing their views with that of the parents.

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 am also enquiring why England did not participate in this assessment.

Much of the information for this article is taken from the National Report for England (McGrane *et al.*, 2017). However, there is an international report and reports for individual countries, all of which can be downloaded. 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 5000 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 was 559, significantly higher than in 2006 and 2011. However, it is significantly lower than The Republic of Ireland (567) and Northern Ireland (565). It is claimed that 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, though warnings are expressed by those who wrote 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 and ‘there is no sustained evidence that countries with phonics programmes have higher average PIRLS performance in general.

(See McGrane *et al.*, 2017: 146 and 149)

The School Standards Minister predicts there will be an even higher performance in five years following the full implementation of the phonics policy and the increasing percentage pass on the phonics check year on year. There is a possibility that the effect of this policy might not be as he predicts. There are also many initiatives aimed at boosting an enjoyment of reading some in local areas, which, should the results improve, might be entitled to some credit.

Although comparisons are made in the National Report for England with Northern Ireland and The Republic, both of which ranked statistically higher than England in 2016 no reference was made by politicians in England or Ofsted to lessons that might be learnt from the balanced literacy policies in these two countries. In the articles here by Shiel and Kennedy and by McMurray we provide some details of these policies.

Further findings

Thirty-five percent of the pupils in England who sat PIRLS in 2016 had 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 in the past two years the percentage of pupils in England with teachers that have had dedicated time for reading-related professional development is substantially lower than in the comparator countries. NB These are not the early years teachers, but pupils’ current teachers who will not have been involved in the implementation of the phonics policy. 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.

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 the views of the parents.

In any debate as to a causal relationship between the phonics policy in England and attainment it is important to bear in mind the findings of the NFER research commissioned by DfE (Walker *et al.*, 2015 reported in chapter 16 of Clark 2017). At the time that these pupils who sat PIRLS 2016 were learning to read many teachers had not yet accepted the government’s demand that they adopt synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading. Also raising the percentage pass on the check year on year had not yet come to dominate practice in the early years. Since then, as schools have been expected to increase their percentage pass on the check each year, practice of words in isolation, including pseudo words, is dominating the literacy experience of many young children in early years classrooms (see Clark, 2017: 91-2) for the voices of young children based on a research by Jane Carter). 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 (see Reid in this book). As the parents’ views were not investigated in England it may be that the importance of home background and the parents’ contribution is not being fully acknowledged.

The influence of home background on PIRLS results

According to the international report ‘good readers had an early start in literacy learning’. The information from the parents revealed:

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 reading achievement than students whose parents engaged them less frequently in early literacy activities.

Downloaded from <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/pirls/summary>

This illustrates 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 attainment in fourth grade’. In the report for Northern Ireland, one of the countries that ranked statistically higher than England, it is reported that parents’ enjoyment of reading was also associated with higher attainment. In Northern Ireland for example, 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 and their children had higher average attainment in reading (<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/centre-for-international-education>). 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. We have no way of knowing the extent to which in England the parents contributed both to the pupils’ high score on the phonics check *and* on PIRLS since the parents were not asked to complete the questionnaire.

Literacy online

We have no information from PIRLS on the ability of pupils in England to read online or of their attitude to such reading. However, 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

All politicians search international studies such as PIRLS in the hope of showing the success of their policies; their opponents search for evidence of failings. Policy makers should be prepared to consider whether there are lessons to be learnt from countries with very different policies which achieve

significantly higher ranking. For England, two such countries are Northern Ireland and The Republic (see Shiel and Kennedy and McMurray in this book).

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