What can students do in reading?

- In OECD countries, an average of 8.6% of students read at Level 5 – the highest level – of the PISA reading literacy scale; around 20% read at or below Level 1.
- Although there were large differences in the mean performance of countries in reading literacy, variations among students within each country were much larger.
- With 21.7%, Korea had the highest percentage of students at the highest reading level; in contrast, under 1% of students in Mexico achieved this level.

Significance

This indicator examines the reading skills of 15-year-old students in the 2006 PISA round. PISA defines reading literacy as the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential, and participate in society. This definition goes beyond the traditional notion of decoding information and literal interpretation of what is written towards more applied tasks.

Findings

In the OECD area, an average of 8.6% of students were at Level 5 in reading. This level – the highest in the PISA reading literacy scale – indicates students can locate and use information that is difficult to find in unfamiliar texts, show detailed understanding of these texts, and build hypotheses that may be contrary to expectations. Korea had the highest percentage of students, 21.7%, reading at Level 5, while more than 14.5% of students in Canada, Finland and New Zealand also read at this high level. In contrast, under 1% of students in Mexico achieved this level. In nine of the partner countries/economies, the percentage of students performing at the highest level was less than half of one percent.

Countries with quite similar percentages of students at Level 5 had quite different mean scores for the overall student population. Take Finland and New Zealand: these two countries had similar percentages of students at Level 5 with 16.7 and 15.9% respectively, but their averages were significantly different –

547 score points for Finland and 521 for New Zealand. This difference could be partly explained by the fact that Finland had only 4.8% of students at Level 1 or below, whereas New Zealand had 14.5%.

A number of OECD countries – Greece, Italy, Mexico, the Slovak Republic, Spain and Turkey – had at least 25% of students reading at or below Level 1, the lowest level in PISA. At Level 1, students are capable of completing only the simplest reading tasks developed for PISA, which threatens to have life-long implications. Extensive evidence suggests that it is difficult in later life to compensate for learning gaps in initial education. Literacy skills and continuing education and training seem to be mutually reinforcing, with the result that continuing education is often not pursued by the adults who need it most.

In general, girls scored higher in reading than boys. This gap may be due to girls' greater engagement with most forms of reading, the diversity of materials they read, and their greater use of school and community libraries.

Definitions

See introduction to this section.

Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see Chapter 6 in *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World*, Vol. 1 Analysis.

Further reading from OECD

PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World, Vol. 1: Analysis (2007).

PISA: Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries: Results from PISA 2000 (2002).

Figure S.2. Student performance in reading in PISA 2006

This figure shows the percentage of students at each performance level in reading; students with scores at Level 5 are the strongest performers, those at Level 1 and below are the weakest.

Source: OECD (2007), PISA 2006, Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World, Volume 1: Analysis, Table 6.1a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/142046885031>.

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