

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 11, 2013

New report compares life and learning in Irish primary schools with schools around the world

The Educational Research Centre today released ***National Schools, international contexts: Beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS test results***, edited by Eemer Eivers and Aidan Clerkin. The 2011 PIRLS and TIMSS study is the world's most comprehensive study of academic achievement in primary schools. Reports already released have focused on the reading, mathematics and science skills of Fourth class pupils. Now, ***National Schools, international contexts*** examines how Irish schools, teachers, classrooms, and pupils compare with their counterparts in other countries. The 10 themed chapters address a diverse range of topics, all of which have policy relevance for the Irish education system.

Pupils:

Compared to most other countries, Irish children (especially boys) are less inclined to like, or feel they belong, in school. Irish pupils are, however, more likely to feel safe in school, and less likely to experience bullying. Within Ireland, being bullied was more common amongst boys and pupils in large/urban/DEIS schools.

Irish pupils had more positive attitudes to reading and science than the international averages, but were more negative about maths. **Aidan Clerkin** explained that while Irish pupils were generally quite engaged in the classroom **“teachers reported a widespread problem with pupils coming to class too tired to concentrate. This may be related to pupils’ reports that more than half had a TV in their bedroom, and one in five had a computer in their bedroom.”**

Those who spoke English as an Additional Language (EAL) – particularly the small number who *never* spoke English at home – tended to do less well than native speakers on the tests. Commenting, Eemer Eivers said **“Perhaps contrary to popular perception, Ireland has fewer additional-language pupils than most countries. In particular, there are relatively few EAL pupils in rural or Irish-medium schools.”** Parents of EAL children were very positive about their child's school, but EAL pupils, while generally liking school, were more likely than native speakers to report being bullied in school.

Parents

Irish parents almost universally agreed that their child's school provided a safe environment and cared about their child's education. Irish parents were close to the international average for volunteering and well above average for monitoring and helping with homework. Commenting on home-school communication, Eemer Eivers notes that **“The type of information given to Irish parents is somewhat imbalanced. Compared to other countries, there is much less information on academic achievement and much more information on non-academic accomplishments. Ireland**

is unusual too, in the extent to which homework is used as a means of communication between home and school.”

Teachers, schools and curriculum:

Irish teachers are younger than average, have high levels of career satisfaction, average confidence in their ability to teach maths, and below average confidence in their ability to teach science. They report very low levels of collaboration with other teachers, and lower-than-average participation in continuing professional development activities for each of reading, maths, and science. Author Aidan Clerkin points out that **“for science, especially, the combination of low confidence and low uptake of science-related CPD suggests that this is an area where targeted CPD is needed to help support teachers’ confidence and competence in teaching science.”**

Irish schools tend to be considerably smaller than schools in most countries, and more likely to be located than rural areas. Ireland was one of only three countries where no children could access a science laboratory, and was slightly below average on availability of computers for pupils. The average number of pupils in a classroom in Ireland is slightly larger than average (26 pupils, compared to 24 or 25, internationally), but the overall pupil:teacher ratio is in the average range once all teaching staff are considered.

The curriculum experienced by Irish pupils is unusual in two regards. First, the reading, mathematics and science curricula are older than those in many other countries. Second, Irish pupils spent considerably less time than the international average in science lessons – whether we consider the official curriculum, or the curriculum as implemented by teachers. The overlap between the Irish curriculum and the framework underpinning PIRLS and TIMSS is examined in three chapters, each containing analyses of Irish pupils’ performance on a sample of actual test items.

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Notes for editors

PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and **TIMSS** (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) are international studies of reading, mathematics and science. In 2011, over 300,000 pupils in Fourth class (or its equivalent) took part in the studies. More than 4,500 pupils in Ireland completed the tests and questionnaires – providing comparative achievement information at primary school level for Ireland for the first time since 1995.

The Educational Research Centre manages Ireland's participation in the studies on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

National Schools, international contexts: Beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS test results (edited by Eemer Eivers and Aidan Clerkin) is published by the Educational Research Centre. The report can be downloaded in its entirety, or chapter by chapter, from www.erc.ie/pirlstimss. The 10 chapters are:

1. PIRLS and TIMSS 2011: Overview
2. Features of policy and provision
3. Pupil engagement
4. Pupils' languages
5. Teachers and teaching practices
6. Home-school interaction
7. Reading literacy in PIRLS 2011
8. Mathematics items: Context and curriculum
9. Science items: Context and curriculum
10. Understanding achievement in PIRLS and TIMSS 2011