

## Book Review

**Knut Schwippert (Ed.). (2007).  
*Progress in Reading Literacy.  
The Impact of PIRLS 2001 in  
13 Countries.***

*Münster: Waxmann. 280 pages,  
29,90 EUR, ISBN 978-3-8309-1759-5.*

### **Context**

Since the mid-1990s, when both the IEA and the OECD launched or began to prepare studies such as PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA, a renewed and increasing interest in international large-scale assessments of student achievement can be observed internationally among the scientific community, policy makers and in debates on educational policy. The results of these studies provide a broad framework for comparisons between the educational outcomes of the participating countries and enable studies that address questions on the variables which are related to students' achievement. PIRLS is the largest international study that focuses on students' reading literacy at the end of primary education and the 2001 sample covers nearly 150000 students from 35 countries. Numerous additional in-depth analyses have been conducted and published in international and national reports, in journals as well as in the media. The impact of the study also is visible in about 122000 Google hits for *PIRLS*.

### **Overview**

In the light of this considerable presence of the study, Knut Schwippert's edition on the impact of PIRLS 2001 meets a demand for a systematic review. His book comprises information and experienc-

es on the impact of PIRLS 2001 from 13 countries. The book provides an inside perspective, as, for instance the 13 national chapters were written by researchers who were involved in PIRLS themselves and report the impact in their respective countries. Canada, Iran, Hong Kong and ten European countries contribute chapters in which the authors describe national results, impacts, long-term effects and future activities of and within the PIRLS framework. In addition, the chapters contain brief information on the individual countries as well as their educational systems and experience in large-scale assessments. The first chapter provides an overview of the purpose of the book and the second chapter offers a brief summary of the design and major results of PIRLS 2001. The book closes with a comparative synthesis of the 13 country-specific chapters and a chapter with concluding remarks of the editor.

### **Introduction (Chapters 1 and 2)**

In the first chapter, Knut Schwippert introduces the scope of the book. He summarizes the main objectives of PIRLS 2001 and describes the focus of the Impact of PIRLS project and the present volume, namely to summarize and synthesize the impact of PIRLS on public opinion, educational policy and administration, on teaching and curriculum and on educational research (p. 13). In a section on the methodology, Schwippert mentions two different approaches that have been applied in comparative studies on TIMSS (Robitaille, Beaton, & Plomp, 2000) and PISA (Döbert, Klieme, &

Sroka, 2004). Both rely on a collection of national reports by experts from the respective countries. A number of criteria to be addressed in each country report provide a theoretical framework to enhance comparability. However, whereas the first approach ends with a compilation of the national reports, the second comprises an additional in-depth analysis of the national reports by an independent expert group. The second approach is favorable for many reasons but could not be applied to the present book because “the participating countries could afford neither the personnel nor the money to undertake this two-step approach” (p. 16).

Concisely, the second chapter outlines PIRLS's theoretical framework, target population and main findings to “give readers unfamiliar with the PIRLS 2001 assessment some background information” (p. 21).

### **Main Part (Chapters 3 to 15)**

The main part of the book contains the 13 country reports. Most of the authors are national research coordinators from PIRLS in their respective countries who have extensive knowledge and broad experience in large-scale assessments.

According to the mentioned framework, the chapters have a common structure: Each starts with a brief description of the country and the corresponding educational system. These descriptions vary in length and the issues they focus on. The Canadian contribution, for instance, covers five pages, whereas the Iranian does not cover more than one. Some of the chapters contain information on formative reforms, e.g. in Hungary or Sweden; others, like the one from Germany, do not go beyond the formal structure.

Each chapter lists the countries' participation in international large-scale assessments and most of them also inform about national tests. However, some are rather brief whereas others, like the French contribution, go into more detail and embed different kinds of assessments into a general governmental strategy.

The national results comprise about two pages in the country reports and contain information on the mean achievement and further selected information, e.g. on the amount of poor and excellent readers, attitudes towards reading, reading activities or differences between subgroups of students.

Each country report closes with a section on the impact of PIRLS. The descriptions vary considerably in quantity and quality. The impact section in the Hungarian and Slovakian reports span up to ten pages whereas the Romanian hardly takes up two pages. Such differences are surely related to the international variance in impact: The authors of the Romanian chapter report “a disappointingly limited impact” (p. 190) which is at least to some degree due to the ministry's policy, not to publish the results for a broader audience. The French author, in contrast, reports great efforts to distribute the results in the press, however, public interest in France is also rather small. On the other hand, the authors of the chapters for Germany, Hungary and the Slovak Republic connect the national PIRLS results to those of the OECD PISA study. In these three countries, the primary school students assessed in PIRLS achieved a comparatively better position in the international ranking than the 15 years old students assessed in PISA. This has been discussed in-depth among edu-

cational researchers and policy-makers as well as in the press.

To sum up, the 13 national reports describe a huge range on both the countries' characteristics and the impact of PIRLS.

### **Conclusion (Chapters 16 and 17)**

A comparative synthesis and a concluding chapter complete the book. The comparative synthesis summarizes the 13 national reports in a more or less comparative manner: Even if the editor intended to structure the country reports with a common theoretical framework, Isabell van Ackeren mentions a certain degree of heterogeneity in the country reports "due to the different yardsticks used in the Impact Study's country reports" (p. 259). From a methodological perspective, a low level of standardization means a certain degree of freedom for national characteristics but also lower comparability between countries. However, the synthesis follows the general structure of the book and starts with a comparative description of the 13 countries and the relating educational systems. Based on the national reports and additional information, the participating countries vary in their respective demographics, economy and wealth. The various educational systems differ, for instance, in the level of (de-)centralization, tracking and pre-primary education. Isabell van Ackeren also observes a considerable variation in the participation in international large-scale assessments and the implementation of national assessments between countries. These variations between the different kinds of countries' characteristics provide a framework for comparative analyses of the impact of PIRLS. However, often the synthesis is not comparative to such a degree as differences between countries

were not used in order to contrast impact patterns: rather, the analysis just lists national experiences. Nevertheless, the author works out the central issues of the national reports in a condensed manner and compiles the range of impact on media and policy. Particularly interesting are the compilations of the impact on reforms that strike schools' contexts, input, process and output variables.

In the short final chapter, Knut Schwippert and Martin Goy point out the importance of an international comparative perspective and the exchange of experience. Above all, they also mention the "limited amount of time that has passed since the publication of the PIRLS results" (p. 266) and suggest a long-term documentation to capture the ongoing and future impact of PIRLS.

### **Résumé**

Knut Schwippert's book is the only systematic review on the impact of PIRLS 2001 in this vein and in many ways an excellent source to gather information on this topic. In 13 national reports, researchers give an inside perspective on the impact in their own countries.

The heterogeneity in the country reports animates the book and shows the broad range of impact. However, as Isabell van Ackeren mentions, the authors use different yardsticks when they describe the impact. From my perspective, some additional constraints would have increased comparability, and consequently, the possibility to relate the countries' characteristics to different impact patterns.

The reports not only cover the impact of PIRLS but also additional background information on PIRLS, the countries' characteristics and their individual results. On the one hand, readers that

are already familiar with PIRLS might appreciate a somewhat more narrower focus on the impact, as the PIRLS results and background information have already been published in an international report and in the PIRLS encyclopedia (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Flaherty, 2002). On the other hand, this additional information is particularly interesting for readers unfamiliar with the study and helps them to interpret results.

All in all, Knut Schwippert's book accumulates and synthesizes international experiences and therefore, the book is a unique source to gather information on the impact of PIRLS from an international perspective.

## References

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