

# PIRLS

## Chapter 3



# Chapter 3

## Reading Habits

*Chapter 3 provides trends in several variables related to the extent to which primary/elementary-school students read voluntarily in their leisure time, and trends in how often they borrow books from the school or public library. For contrast, this chapter also includes students' reports about their television viewing.*

Children's motivation for literacy learning can have a considerable impact on their reading achievement. Yet, studies in a number of countries have found that students' reading activity out of school is declining – in line with the rise of televisions, videos, and computers.<sup>1</sup> Students infrequently read books in their leisure time, and, even as they progress through primary and elementary school, they seem to place less value on reading.<sup>2</sup>

### Reading Books and Magazines

In IEA's 1991 Reading Literacy Study, primary/elementary-school students were asked how often they read books and magazines for fun. Good readers reported reading more books for fun, but magazine reading was not very common (although Cyprus was among the countries reporting it most frequently), and the relationship with achievement tended to be negative.<sup>3</sup>

For the countries repeating the 1991 study, Exhibit 3.1 shows trends in students' reports about how often they read books for fun. In 2001, in each country, students reporting reading books for fun on a daily basis had higher reading achievement than those reporting reading books for fun only once a month or less often. In some countries, there was a direct relationship between more frequent reading of books for fun and achievement. For the most part, increases and decreases in achievement, across the different categories of students, reflected the overall trends for the countries. Nevertheless, in Italy and Singapore, the greatest gains in achievement were for the students reporting reading for fun the least often.

Except in Iceland, primary/elementary-school students reported either no change or less reading for fun in 2001 than a decade earlier. In Iceland in 2001, the majority of students (51%) reported reading books for fun on a daily basis, which represented an increase of 4 percentage points from 1991.

Greece, New Zealand, and the United States showed stability between 1991 and 2001. In 2001 in New Zealand, 44 percent of the students read books for fun daily, 29 percent weekly, and 27 percent only monthly or less. Reading books for fun was somewhat less prevalent in Greece and the United States (36 to 37% daily, 30 to 32% weekly, and 31 to 34% monthly or less).

- 1 Eccles, S.J., Wigfield, A., Harold, R., & Blumenfeld, P.B. (1993). Age and gender differences in children's self- and task perceptions during elementary school. *Child Development*, 64, 830-847.
- 2 Guthrie, J.T., & Greaney, V. (1991). Literacy Acts. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.). *Handbook of reading research* (Vol.2). New York: Longman.
- 3 Elley, W.B. (Ed.). (1994). *The IEA study of reading literacy: Achievement and instruction in thirty-two school systems*. Oxford, England: Elsevier Science Ltd.

Between 1991 and 2001, reading books for fun became less popular for primary/elementary-school students in Hungary, Singapore, and Slovenia. These countries had rather substantial increases – from 12 to 16 percent – in the percentages of students reporting that they read books for fun only monthly or even less frequently. Italy and Sweden had more modest increases (3 to 4%) in the percentages of children infrequently reading books for fun.

Exhibit 3.2 contains the changes between 1991 and 2001 in primary-/elementary-school students' reports about how often they read magazines. In general, across the participating countries, the percentages of students reading magazines on a daily basis were essentially constant over the decade, remaining at a relatively low level. In 2001, children's daily magazine readership ranged from 6 percent in Italy to 16 percent in Greece and Slovenia. Four countries, however, saw significant decreases in weekly magazine reading accompanied by commensurate increases in doing such reading less frequently (only monthly or less) – Greece, Italy, Singapore, and Sweden.

Also, the relationship between reading magazines and performance on the reading literacy assessment remained negative or nonexistent. In 2001, the pattern, if anything, was curvilinear with slightly higher achievement most often observed for students reading magazines weekly. The four countries with significant improvement overall, generally, had increases across the categories of magazine reading. For Sweden, however, the 7 percent of students reporting daily magazine reading did not show a decline in their reading achievement; whereas those reading magazines less often followed the national pattern. In Italy and Singapore, significant increases in reading achievement were found in students reading magazines monthly or less often (75 to 81% of the students).

## Exhibit 3.1: Trends in Students Reading Books for Fun

ISC  
RLS Trend  
1991–2001

Countries	Daily		Weekly		Once a Month or Less	
	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	37 (1.9)	-1 (2.4)	32 (2.1)	-2 (2.5)	31 (2.1)	3 (2.5)
Hungary	31 (1.2)	-15 (1.6) ▼	35 (1.0)	3 (1.4) ▲	35 (1.2)	12 (1.5) ▲
Iceland	51 (1.8)	4 (2.0) ▲	23 (1.0)	-2 (1.2)	26 (1.7)	-3 (1.8)
Italy	27 (1.5)	-5 (2.0) ▼	29 (1.3)	1 (1.9)	44 (1.6)	4 (2.4)
New Zealand	44 (2.2)	3 (2.7)	29 (1.5)	-3 (1.9)	27 (1.7)	0 (2.1)
Singapore	26 (0.9)	-9 (1.5) ▼	26 (0.9)	-7 (1.3) ▼	48 (1.1)	16 (1.6) ▲
Slovenia	36 (1.7)	-12 (2.1) ▼	32 (1.7)	-1 (2.1)	32 (2.0)	13 (2.1) ▲
Sweden	46 (0.9)	-3 (1.4) ▼	25 (0.9)	0 (1.2)	29 (1.0)	3 (1.3) ▲
United States	36 (2.5)	-2 (2.6)	30 (1.7)	-2 (1.8)	34 (2.3)	4 (2.5)

SOURCE: Trends in IEAs Reading Literacy Study 1991–2001

Countries	Daily		Weekly		Once a Month or Less	
	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	521 (9.0)	42 (10.4) ▲	517 (6.5)	43 (9.5) ▲	487 (7.7)	39 (10.5) ▲
Hungary	501 (5.4)	16 (6.7) ▲	479 (3.8)	25 (6.1) ▲	449 (5.0)	30 (7.4) ▲
Iceland	540 (3.6)	29 (4.0) ▲	506 (4.5)	14 (5.5) ▲	475 (4.7)	25 (5.5) ▲
Italy	517 (6.0)	10 (9.0)	517 (6.0)	0 (9.0)	509 (5.5)	19 (8.8) ▲
New Zealand	540 (6.7)	11 (8.1)	497 (7.7)	-1 (9.4)	452 (7.5)	-4 (9.9)
Singapore	507 (9.8)	7 (10.7)	483 (8.2)	5 (8.9)	483 (7.7)	20 (8.6) ▲
Slovenia	517 (5.9)	41 (7.1) ▲	497 (4.9)	45 (6.0) ▲	464 (4.3)	41 (6.5) ▲
Sweden	520 (4.3)	-11 (6.4)	492 (4.4)	-21 (7.1) ▼	468 (5.5)	-13 (7.9)
United States	531 (8.2)	-10 (9.0)	513 (6.7)	-12 (7.6)	494 (6.9)	-5 (7.8)

▲ 2001 significantly higher than 1991

▼ 2001 significantly lower than 1991

( ) Standard errors appear in parentheses. Because results are rounded to the nearest whole number, some totals may appear inconsistent.

A dash (–) indicates data are not available. A tilde (~) indicates insufficient data to report achievement.

Exhibit 3.2: Trends in Students Reading Magazines

ISC  
RLS Trend  
1991–2001

Countries	Daily		Weekly		Once a Month or Less	
	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	16 (1.4)	-2 (1.6)	24 (1.2)	-4 (1.8) ▼	60 (1.7)	6 (2.1) ▲
Hungary	9 (0.7)	-2 (1.0)	25 (0.9)	0 (1.3)	66 (1.1)	2 (1.6)
Iceland	7 (0.6)	-1 (0.8)	13 (0.9)	1 (1.0)	80 (1.1)	1 (1.3)
Italy	6 (0.8)	-1 (1.0)	14 (1.0)	-4 (1.6) ▼	81 (1.2)	6 (1.8) ▲
New Zealand	9 (0.8)	2 (1.1)	17 (1.5)	-2 (1.8)	74 (1.9)	0 (2.2)
Singapore	7 (0.6)	-1 (0.8)	18 (0.9)	-10 (1.1) ▼	75 (1.2)	12 (1.5) ▲
Slovenia	16 (1.4)	2 (1.8)	32 (1.4)	0 (1.9)	52 (1.9)	-2 (2.5)
Sweden	7 (0.5)	-1 (0.8)	14 (0.6)	-3 (1.1) ▼	79 (0.9)	4 (1.4) ▲
United States	9 (0.9)	-1 (1.0)	21 (1.5)	3 (1.6)	70 (1.8)	-2 (1.9)

SOURCE: Trends in IEAs Reading Literacy Study 1991–2001

Countries	Daily		Weekly		Once a Month or Less	
	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	504 (9.3)	45 (10.6) ▲	514 (8.6)	42 (11.1) ▲	510 (6.7)	41 (8.6) ▲
Hungary	479 (6.2)	33 (9.9) ▲	488 (4.4)	21 (6.9) ▲	470 (4.4)	10 (6.1)
Iceland	516 (9.7)	26 (10.8) ▲	520 (7.6)	10 (9.0)	513 (3.2)	28 (3.5) ▲
Italy	484 (11.5)	-18 (17.3)	511 (9.1)	-2 (11.5)	517 (4.3)	15 (7.2) ▲
New Zealand	475 (16.2)	-19 (19.4)	518 (8.2)	-1 (9.7)	506 (6.0)	11 (7.7)
Singapore	412 (11.8)	-45 (13.1) ▼	478 (8.8)	-8 (9.6)	499 (7.8)	17 (8.7) ▲
Slovenia	507 (7.3)	43 (9.1) ▲	511 (4.8)	50 (6.1) ▲	479 (4.5)	24 (6.0) ▲
Sweden	508 (6.8)	8 (10.5)	526 (4.8)	-16 (6.8) ▼	492 (4.1)	-17 (6.4) ▼
United States	490 (8.7)	-18 (11.0)	514 (7.7)	-20 (8.7) ▼	515 (7.4)	-8 (8.1)

▲ 2001 significantly higher than 1991

▼ 2001 significantly lower than 1991

( ) Standard errors appear in parentheses. Because results are rounded to the nearest whole number, some totals may appear inconsistent.

A dash (–) indicates data are not available. A tilde (~) indicates insufficient data to report achievement.

## Borrowing Library Books

Trends in students' reports about borrowing books from a school or public library are presented in Exhibit 3.3. Across the 27 countries in the 1991 Reading Literacy Study, those students who borrowed library books more often had higher average reading achievement.<sup>4</sup> For the countries repeating the study in 2001, the relationship with achievement was much less pronounced. Also, borrowing library books appears to be somewhat on the wane, although primary/elementary-school students reported considerable variation in library use among the 9 countries in the trend study.

In 2001, more than half to nearly two-thirds of students reported borrowing books at least weekly in New Zealand (61%), Singapore (57%), Slovenia (66%), and the United States (62%). In comparison, 42 percent so reported in Iceland, and only about one-fifth to one-third in Greece (31%), Hungary (26%), Italy (20%), and Sweden (33%). The 2001 levels of weekly library book borrowing represented a significant decline for Hungary (9%), Singapore (7%), Slovenia (5%), and, in particular, Sweden (24%). In Hungary and Slovenia, the declines in weekly borrowing were accompanied by increases in monthly use. (New Zealand also showed some evidence of this pattern.) In Singapore, the shift was toward never or hardly ever borrowing library books. In Sweden, the shift was somewhat to monthly borrowing (8%), but primarily to never or hardly ever (16%).

Increases in borrowing books from the library were reported by Greek and Icelandic students (7 to 8% from never to monthly). Italy, with relatively infrequent library use, and the United States, with relatively high use, showed essentially no change.

## Watching Television or Video Outside of School

In today's world, children have an ever-increasing array of activities to choose from in their leisure time, with reading books and watching televisions or videos being competing choices. In the 1991 study, most countries had a negative relationship between reading achievement and level of viewing, with the United States being the only one of those participating in the trend study

4 Elley, W.B. (1992). *How in the world do students read?* The Hague: The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.



**Exhibit 3.3: Trends in Students Borrowing Books from a School or Public Library**ISC  
RLS Trend  
1991–2001

Countries	At Least Weekly		Monthly		Never or Hardly Ever	
	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	31 (2.5)	0 (3.2)	25 (2.5)	8 (3.0) ▲	44 (2.6)	-8 (3.4) ▼
Hungary	26 (1.5)	-9 (2.1) ▼	35 (1.6)	6 (2.1) ▲	38 (1.9)	3 (2.7)
Iceland	42 (2.7)	-1 (2.7)	25 (1.5)	8 (1.6) ▲	33 (2.5)	-7 (2.6) ▼
Italy	20 (2.2)	3 (2.6)	18 (1.6)	-4 (2.3)	61 (2.4)	1 (3.3)
New Zealand	61 (2.2)	-4 (3.1)	18 (1.5)	4 (1.9) ▲	21 (1.6)	0 (2.2)
Singapore	57 (1.2)	-7 (1.8) ▼	15 (0.8)	2 (1.0)	28 (1.2)	6 (1.6) ▲
Slovenia	66 (2.2)	-5 (2.5) ▼	26 (1.9)	8 (2.1) ▲	9 (0.9)	-2 (1.2)
Sweden	33 (2.0)	-24 (3.1) ▼	32 (1.7)	8 (2.4) ▲	35 (1.7)	16 (2.1) ▲
United States	62 (2.5)	-2 (2.9)	12 (1.2)	-1 (1.3)	26 (2.1)	3 (2.5)

SOURCE: Trends in IEAs Reading Literacy Study 1991–2001

Countries	At Least Weekly		Monthly		Never or Hardly Ever	
	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	505 (7.5)	29 (11.4) ▲	517 (6.6)	40 (10.2) ▲	505 (7.7)	44 (8.8) ▲
Hungary	472 (4.9)	13 (7.1)	491 (5.1)	26 (7.2) ▲	464 (5.9)	7 (7.9)
Iceland	517 (3.8)	24 (4.6) ▲	534 (6.2)	30 (7.0) ▲	495 (5.5)	21 (6.0) ▲
Italy	516 (5.9)	35 (9.6) ▲	534 (8.4)	16 (12.8)	506 (5.6)	4 (8.1)
New Zealand	518 (5.9)	13 (7.2)	502 (8.7)	-22 (12.7)	463 (8.3)	-5 (11.7)
Singapore	494 (8.7)	8 (9.4)	501 (9.5)	20 (10.8)	470 (7.9)	7 (9.1)
Slovenia	499 (3.4)	36 (4.7) ▲	494 (6.9)	40 (9.1) ▲	454 (8.8)	18 (10.7)
Sweden	495 (6.4)	-22 (7.8) ▼	515 (5.0)	-8 (7.7)	483 (4.9)	-7 (8.4)
United States	515 (6.3)	-10 (7.3)	520 (11.2)	-23 (11.9)	499 (8.7)	-2 (9.6)

▲ 2001 significantly higher than 1991

▼ 2001 significantly lower than 1991

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exhibiting the most clear-cut relationship between the two.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Italy and Sweden were two of the five countries in which moderately heavy viewing was associated with higher reading performance. Possibly, Swedish students gained experience in reading through subtitles, but no such tradition exists in Italy. As shown in Exhibit 3.4, the relationship between television viewing and reading achievement was still negative in the United States in 2001, but not as strong as before. For Italy and Sweden, the positive relationship was also less evident. Students watching a moderate amount (between 1 and 3 hours) of television had the highest achievement.

Trends in primary/elementary students' reports about how many hours they watched television each day indicate that, in some countries, television may be in decline as a favorite pastime. Across the trend countries, more students reported watching television less than 1 hour per day in five countries, and fewer reported watching more than 3 hours in an equivalent number of countries.

Between 1991 and 2001, students in Iceland reported a dramatic shift – with 20 percent more reporting watching less than 1 hour of television per day, and 20 percent fewer watching more than 3 hours. Students in Hungary, New Zealand, and the United States reported a pattern similar to Iceland, but with smaller percentages. In Singapore, the percentage reporting minimal viewing (less than 1 hour) rose 11 points; but the decreases were split between watching 1 to 3 hours and watching more than 3 hours. Not all countries reported decreases, however. Students in Greece, Italy, and Sweden reported little change in their television viewing habits; even though there was significant movement away from heavy viewing in Italy (4%), and from light to moderate viewing in Sweden (3 or 4 percent).

An exception to the general trends, the elementary school students in Slovenia reported a significant shift from moderate to heavy viewing. Eight percent more students reported 3 or more hours of television viewing per day than in 1991 – up to 29 percent in 2001 – and among the highest of the trend countries. In 2001, the United States (with 38%) had the most students reporting watching more than 3 hours of television per day, followed by New Zealand (with 33%). With the exception of Slovenia, the rest of the trend countries had 20 percent or less of their students watching more than 3 hours of television per day.

5 Ibid.

**Exhibit 3.4: Trends in Hours per Day Students Watch TV or Video Outside of School**
**ISC** RLS Trend  
1991–2001

Countries	Up to 1 Hour		Greater Than 1 Hour, Up to 3 Hours		More Than 3 Hours	
	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Percent of Students in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	39 (2.2)	-3 (2.6)	43 (2.9)	0 (3.1)	17 (1.8)	3 (2.0)
Hungary	34 (1.1)	5 (1.6) ▲	46 (1.2)	-1 (1.8)	19 (1.0)	-4 (1.4) ▼
Iceland	42 (1.4)	20 (1.5) ▲	47 (1.5)	0 (1.6)	12 (1.0)	-20 (1.1) ▼
Italy	32 (1.5)	2 (2.0)	48 (1.6)	2 (2.3)	20 (1.3)	-4 (1.9) ▼
New Zealand	29 (2.0)	6 (2.4) ▲	37 (1.4)	1 (1.8)	33 (2.2)	-6 (2.6) ▼
Singapore	43 (0.9)	11 (1.4) ▲	37 (0.8)	-5 (1.2) ▼	20 (0.9)	-6 (1.2) ▼
Slovenia	22 (1.4)	-3 (1.8)	50 (1.9)	-5 (2.2) ▼	29 (1.8)	8 (2.1) ▲
Sweden	21 (1.0)	-3 (1.5) ▼	59 (1.0)	4 (1.5) ▲	20 (1.0)	0 (1.5)
United States	23 (1.9)	7 (2.0) ▲	39 (1.4)	3 (1.7)	38 (2.3)	-10 (2.5) ▼

SOURCE: Trends in IEAs Reading Literacy Study 1991–2001

Countries	Up to 1 Hour		Greater Than 1 Hour, Up to 3 Hours		More Than 3 Hours	
	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference	Average Achievement in 2001	1991 to 2001 Difference
Greece	503 (5.2)	33 (8.4) ▲	524 (6.7)	55 (8.8) ▲	482 (11.6)	26 (13.0) ▲
Hungary	474 (4.8)	23 (6.7) ▲	487 (4.2)	14 (6.4) ▲	450 (5.8)	4 (8.1)
Iceland	513 (4.7)	39 (5.7) ▲	521 (3.6)	28 (4.0) ▲	492 (7.8)	5 (8.3)
Italy	507 (6.7)	2 (9.5)	525 (4.2)	20 (7.0) ▲	491 (6.8)	1 (12.2)
New Zealand	515 (8.1)	25 (10.3) ▲	517 (8.3)	-2 (9.6)	480 (6.8)	-7 (8.9)
Singapore	490 (7.3)	15 (8.2)	501 (8.6)	9 (9.5)	465 (10.3)	-5 (11.0)
Slovenia	485 (6.9)	33 (8.3) ▲	501 (4.4)	36 (5.7) ▲	488 (6.3)	41 (8.0) ▲
Sweden	492 (6.0)	-13 (7.8)	505 (4.2)	-16 (6.2) ▼	482 (4.8)	-23 (7.7) ▼
United States	510 (7.8)	-21 (9.0) ▼	526 (6.4)	-10 (7.4)	500 (7.1)	-10 (8.2)

▲ 2001 significantly higher than 1991

▼ 2001 significantly lower than 1991

( ) Standard errors appear in parentheses. Because results are rounded to the nearest whole number, some totals may appear inconsistent.

A dash (–) indicates data are not available. A tilde (~) indicates insufficient data to report achievement.