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Attitudes to *reading* at  
ages nine and eleven:  
full report

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## Introduction

This NFER survey of 4477 primary school pupils in summer 2007 investigated their attitudes to reading – both enjoyment and confidence. It found that levels of enjoyment had held steady since 2003 – a contrast to the five years preceding that, when levels of enjoyment had declined very significantly. Levels of confidence, which had increased in the preceding five years, also remained unchanged since 2003.

This full report explains the background to the survey, sets out the findings in detail and discusses them in relation to contextual factors.

## Background

The 2003 NFER survey, based on the same questionnaire as in 2007, responded to concerns raised by the PIRLS study of 2001. In this international survey of pupils' reading attainment and attitudes, pupils in England had recorded very low levels of reading enjoyment as compared to their international peers (Twist *et al.*, 2003). The NFER survey sought to find out more about this, including whether there had been a decline since a similar survey in 1998. Children's enjoyment of reading had indeed declined significantly over these five years, while their confidence as readers had improved (Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004). At the same time, PIRLS noted high levels of reading attainment amongst English pupils. It was hypothesised that this combination of high attainment but poor enjoyment could have been related to the National Literacy Strategy, which had been introduced in a fairly prescriptive form across schools in England in 1998.

In 2003, government policy was adjusted with the publication of a document called Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003), together with the replacement of the National Literacy Strategy by the Primary National Strategy. This reduced the number of objectives in the literacy framework and placed a new emphasis on speaking and listening. The renewed framework also gave guidance to teachers on using assessment to inform their everyday teaching, and personalise learning. The overall thrust of this policy was to introduce more flexibility into the primary curriculum. Four years on, therefore, in 2007, it was appropriate to measure attitudes again in the same way. This coincided once again with a PIRLS study, which was carried out in 2006 and reported in 2007 (Twist *et al.*, 2007).

There is a well-established research literature on attitudes to reading (for example, Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; McKenna *et al.*, 1995; Baker and Wigfield, 1999), while Twist *et al.* (2004) specifically consider complexities within the reading attitude findings of PIRLS 2001. A working definition of attitude to reading can be derived from this research and underpins the NFER surveys. Central to such a definition is the idea of intrinsic motivation

in the form of a positive self-concept as a reader, a desire and tendency to read and a reported enjoyment of or interest in reading; and its opposite, a negative self-concept as a reader, a desire and tendency to avoid reading and a reported dislike of the activity. The previous research, however, gives little attention to the particular qualities of the *reading* experience that might give rise to such feelings. The motivation literature tends to deal with reading in the same way as other school subjects.

Involvement in reading, however, may offer an emotional engagement that goes beyond that of other subjects, and it is to children's literature research that one must turn in order to find an elaboration of these ideas (for example, Appleyard, 1991). Benton and Fox (1985), for example, say that stories 'provide the possibility of educating the feelings and can offer their readers potential growth points for the development of a more subtle awareness of human behaviour' (Benton and Fox, 1985, p.15). Involvement in books allows children to experience through imagination other worlds and other roles, and this involvement contributes to their personal and social development as well as to their reading abilities. Perhaps even more than for other school subjects, attitude to reading has a central importance, alongside acquisition of reading skills.

## Method

Since measuring change over time was part of the aim of this research, it was necessary to use a comparable instrument and sample. The 2003 and 2007 questionnaires were the same, consisting of 18 questions. The first 13 were first-person statements expressing an attitude to reading, some negative and others positive. The children were asked to agree or disagree with each of these statements by ticking one of three options: 'yes', 'not sure' or 'no'. In order to ensure that they understood that a 'yes' response meant agreement with the statement (even if negative), three practice items were included. Question 14 asked how often children read at home, with four options: 'every day', 'most days', 'not often' and 'never'. Question 15 was multiple-response and asked what reading material children read at home: story books, comics, magazines, newspapers, information books and poems. The final three questions asked about support for reading at home: whether adults read to the child or listened to the child reading, and whether anyone else at home read with the child.

The questionnaires were posted to schools for administration by the class teachers in June 2007, approximately the same time in the school year as the 2003 administration. All the children in years 4 and 6 in the participating schools were invited to complete a questionnaire. The teachers were instructed to work through the practice items with the children, to give any help needed with reading the questionnaire, and to reassure children that their individual views were being sought, rather than any 'right answers'.



## The sample

The main sample in 2003 had been nationally representative in its composition. For 2007, a nationally representative sample was again drawn, but composed in part of schools that had participated in 2003 and had also participated in the original research of 1998. The numbers of schools and pupils achieved in 2007 are given in Table 1, alongside the comparable figures for 2003 and 1998. It can be seen that 27 schools out of the total 61 had participated in both the previous surveys.

**Table 1 Achieved sample numbers**

	2007 main sample	2007 repeat subsample	2003 main sample	2003 repeat subsample	1998 sample
Schools	61	27	74	28	28
Year 4 pupils	2278	1053	2459	1158	1137
Year 6 pupils	2199	964	2617	1206	1170
Total pupils	4477	2017	5076	2364	2307

Chi-square tests showed that the main sample of 61 schools was not significantly different from the national population of schools in terms of school size, region of England and overall attainment as judged by key stage 2 test results. There was a slight significant difference in terms of school type, and London boroughs were slightly over-represented at the expense of counties. The findings of this survey can be taken as a good representation of the national picture. The repeat subsample, by contrast, had a very significant over-representation of lower-attaining schools and of schools in London boroughs and metropolitan authorities, although in fact questionnaire responses differed little between the main sample and the repeat subsample.

## Results

### Current attitudes: results for the main sample

The initial analysis consisted of calculating frequencies for each response. Table 2 gives these raw results for the main sample.

The figures in Table 2 show generally positive attitudes, for example in the substantial majorities answering in the affirmative to 'I like reading stories' and 'I enjoy reading' in both age groups. Overall, attitudes in year 4 were rather more positive than in year 6. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by McKenna *et al.* (1995) in the United States, which surveyed attitudes in grades 1 to 6 and found a gradual but steady decline across this entire age range. Differences between the age groups can also

**Table 2 Responses to the questionnaire, main sample (percentages)**

	Year 4			Year 6				
	Yes	Not sure	No	Yes	Not sure	No		
1. I like reading stories	69	17	13	62	21	18		
2. I am not interested in books	17	17	64	17	19	63		
3. I like reading comics or magazines	71	14	14	77	12	10		
4. I like reading poems	47	21	30	36	24	39		
5. I think reading is difficult	11	19	69	8	17	74		
6. I like reading silently by myself	73	12	13	71	15	13		
7. I like watching TV better than reading books	48	28	23	54	30	15		
8. I don't like reading at home	21	17	60	22	20	57		
9. I like going to the library	55	22	22	38	25	37		
10. I like reading information books	44	23	31	34	26	39		
11. I like reading with a grown-up to help me	33	20	46	20	15	65		
12. I enjoy reading	69	18	12	59	24	16		
13. I think reading is boring	14	16	68	18	20	61		
15. Which of these do you read at home?								
Story books	78			73				
Comics	59			56				
Magazines	68			78				
Newspapers	37			41				
Information books	46			35				
Poems	48			33				
16. Grown-up at home reads to me	41		58	23		76		
17. Grown-up at home listens to me read	71		27	50		50		
18. Others at home read with me	43		56	28		72		
	<b>Every day</b>	<b>Most days</b>	<b>Not often</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Every day</b>	<b>Most days</b>	<b>Not often</b>	<b>Never</b>
14. How often do you read at home?	26	46	24	4	21	46	28	5

Based on responses from 2278 year 4 pupils and 2199 year 6 pupils  
Note: percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding



be observed in the choice of home reading matter, with an increase in popularity amongst the older children for magazines and newspapers and the opposite pattern for all the other categories listed. The percentage of children who found reading difficult declined from year 4 to year 6, probably reflecting gains in reading ability over that period. This was accompanied by a decline in the level of adult and other support reported when reading at home.

### Gender and attainment

Boys' and girls' responses were analysed separately, and girls' attitudes were found to be significantly more positive than boys', with higher percentages agreeing with questions 1, 4, 6, 9 and 12, whereas boys were significantly more likely to agree with 2, 5, 7, 8 and 13. This pattern has consistently been noted in previous research (for example, McKenna *et al.*, 1995; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

A measure of reading attainment was collected, in the form of a teacher assessment of the National Curriculum level for reading for each participating pupil. There was a significant relationship between higher attainment and positive attitudes, with more positive responses to questions 1, 3, 6 and 12 from the higher-attaining group. Lower attainers were more likely to agree to questions 2, 4, 7, 8 and 13. Again, this confirms the pattern observed in much previous research. Items 5 and 11 were also answered significantly more affirmatively by the lower-attaining pupils. These are questions about the perceived difficulty of reading, and the responses suggest that children's perceptions of their own reading ability are relatively accurate, since those whose attainment was lower were significantly more likely to say that they found reading difficult and to seek help with their reading.

Table 3 summarises these patterns for the first 13 items of the questionnaire. This table gives only the percentages answering 'yes' to each item. Percentages for boys and girls are given separately for each year group. To illustrate differences in attainment, two levels from the ascending National Curriculum scale are selected to represent the range for pupils of that age. The significance test used is a chi-square, which gauges the significance of the overall pattern of responses to each item. (That is, in calculating significance, those answering 'not sure' and 'no', and the National Curriculum levels not reported in the table have also been included).

**Table 3 Patterns of difference by gender and attainment**

	Year 4				Year 6			
	Boys	Girls	L2	L4	Boys	Girls	L3	L5
1. I like reading stories	60	78 <sup>***</sup>	61	78 <sup>***</sup>	55	68 <sup>***</sup>	51	71 <sup>***</sup>
2. I am not interested in books	21 <sup>***</sup>	13	27 <sup>***</sup>	10	21 <sup>***</sup>	14	28 <sup>***</sup>	10
3. I like reading comics or magazines	75 <sup>***</sup>	67	67	71 <sup>**</sup>	78 <sup>*</sup>	77	75	79 <sup>***</sup>
4. I like reading poems	36	58 <sup>***</sup>	51 <sup>***</sup>	47	26	47 <sup>***</sup>	43 <sup>**</sup>	31
5. I think reading is difficult	13 <sup>**</sup>	9	21 <sup>***</sup>	3	10 <sup>***</sup>	5	17 <sup>***</sup>	3
6. I like reading silently by myself	70	76 <sup>***</sup>	63	80 <sup>***</sup>	68	74 <sup>**</sup>	64	77 <sup>***</sup>
7. I like watching TV better than reading books	59 <sup>***</sup>	38	56 <sup>***</sup>	40	63 <sup>***</sup>	45	56 <sup>***</sup>	46
8. I don't like reading at home	24 <sup>***</sup>	18	31 <sup>***</sup>	11	27 <sup>***</sup>	18	33 <sup>***</sup>	14
9. I like going to the library	48	62 <sup>***</sup>	53	59 <sup>**</sup>	32	44 <sup>***</sup>	40 <sup>*</sup>	38
10. I like reading information books	49 <sup>***</sup>	38	42	43	39 <sup>***</sup>	30	35	33
11. I like reading with a grown-up to help me	32	34	55 <sup>***</sup>	16	21	19	41 <sup>***</sup>	6
12. I enjoy reading	60	78 <sup>***</sup>	58	79 <sup>***</sup>	52	67 <sup>***</sup>	46	70 <sup>***</sup>
13. I think reading is boring	20 <sup>***</sup>	8	20 <sup>***</sup>	8	23 <sup>***</sup>	13	26 <sup>***</sup>	11

Chi square: \*  $p < 0.05$       \*\*  $p < 0.01$       \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$   
Asterisks identify the group more likely to agree with the statement.

## Factor analysis

Factor analysis is a technique that groups together the questions in a questionnaire that relate to a similar broad characteristic. It can be useful in clarifying overall patterns and giving a brief summary of trends.

A Principal factor analysis, with Varimax (orthogonal) rotation, was used to show how items might link into a scale. This gave rise to the two factors listed in Table 4, which include 15 of the 18 questions in the survey. The loadings for the two-factor solution appear against each question.



**Table 4 Factors for main sample**

		Enjoyment	
I enjoy reading	Q12	0.943	-0.022
I think reading is boring (reverse coded)	Q13	0.895	0.004
I like reading stories	Q1	0.882	-0.027
I am not interested in books (reverse coded)	Q2	0.755	0.076
I like watching television better than reading books (reverse coded)	Q7	0.707	-0.036
How often do you read at home?	Q14	0.686	-0.034
I don't like reading at home (reverse coded)	Q8	0.642	0.063
I like reading silently to myself	Q6	0.565	0.119
I like going to the library	Q9	0.512	-0.229
I like reading poems	Q4	0.416	-0.216
		Support	
I think reading is difficult	Q5*	0.31	0.404
Does any grown-up at home listen to you read?	Q17	0.12	-0.775
Does anyone else at home read with you?	Q18	0.075	-0.763
Does any grown-up at home read to you?	Q16	0.068	-0.759
I like reading with a grown-up to help me.	Q11	-0.041	-0.754

\*Complex loading

Extraction method: Principal Axis Analysis. Rotation method: Varimax.

Factor 1 accounts for 35 per cent of the variance and represents a grouping of positive responses to those questions addressing enjoyment of reading, together with negative responses to those expressing negative feelings about reading. In terms of the definition of reading attitude outlined above, this factor can be seen as the combination of feelings of enjoyment and desire to read that was defined there as a positive attitude.

The second factor (17 per cent) has been characterised as 'Support for reading'. Finding reading difficult is grouped with responses expressing a preference for reading with adult or other support. Factor 2 is related to the notion of self-concept as a reader. These responses express a lack of self-confidence as an independent reader.

### Changes between 1998, 2003 and 2007

The analyses in this section were conducted on the repeat subsample of around 2000 children in 27 schools that had taken part in both the two previous surveys. Tables 5 and 6 give the raw data for responses in 1998,



**Table 5 Responses to the questionnaire, year 4 repeat sample (percentages)**

	1998			2003			2007		
	Yes	Not sure	No	Yes	Not sure	No	Yes	Not sure	No
1. I like reading stories	77	12	11	71	17	12	69	18	12
2. I am not interested in books	20	15	65	21	16	63	19	16	62
3. I like reading comics or magazines	65	15	20	66	14	20	70	14	14
4. I like reading poems	68	15	17	62	18	20	52	19	27
5. I think reading is difficult	17	27	56	15	19	65	12	19	67
6. I like reading silently by myself	71	12	16	73	12	15	72	13	13
7. I like watching TV better than reading books	47	25	28	53	21	26	49	26	23
8. I don't like reading at home	26	18	56	24	18	58	24	16	57
9. I like going to the library	70	16	14	63	16	21	56	20	21
10. I like reading information books	59	21	20	47	23	30	43	21	32
11. I like reading with a grown-up to help me	46	17	37	38	17	45	37	20	41
15. Which of these do you read at home?									
Story books	84			82			76		
Comics	55			58			58		
Magazines	63			65			66		
Newspapers	40			38			37		
Information books	57			51			44		
Poems	69			68			52		
15. Grown-up at home reads to me	45		55	40		60	41		58
16. Grown-up at home listens to me read	76		24	73		27	73		27
17. Others at home read with me	47		53	49		51	41		58

	Every day	Most days	Not often	Never	Every day	Most days	Not often	Never	Every day	Most days	Not often	Never
	14. How often do you read at home?	29	48	21	3	25	48	22	6	24	48	23

*Note: percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding*



2003 and 2007 for year 4 and year 6 pupils, respectively. Questions 12 and 13 do not appear in this analysis, as they were added to the 2003 and 2007 questionnaires and did not appear in 1998.

These raw results give an overview of the general pattern across the three occasions. Broadly, there were large differences between 1998 and 2003, but relatively little change from 2003 to 2007. For example, on Question 1, both age groups saw a sharp decline in enjoyment of reading stories from 1998 to 2003, but this has levelled out over the four years from 2003 to 2007, with only a very small decline in year 4 and a very slight rise amongst year 6 pupils.

Confidence in reading (lack of need for support) also appeared to change little from 2003 to 2007 after a sharp increase over the preceding five years. Question 16 shows that the proportion of pupils who have an adult reading to them at home dropped from 1998 to 2003, but held steady after that.

There are one or two questions that seem to differ from this overall trend. Question 4, enjoyment of reading poems, shows a continuing steep decline, from 68 to 62 to 52 per cent for year 4 and from 58 to 50 to 43 per cent amongst the older age-group. The chi-square statistic needs to be used with caution in a complex table such as this one, but for Question 4 the pattern emerged as highly significant. Similarly, Question 9, enjoyment of going to the library, showed a continuing decline across the three occasions.

By contrast, the results for Question 7 show the proportion of pupils who prefer watching television to reading declining again, restored to close to 1998 levels. This seems to be a positive indication. However, the use of a 1998 questionnaire means that leisure activities such as computer games are not included in the questioning, leaving an unknown element in the results.

In terms of reading matter, comics and magazines continued to rise in popularity in comparison to books. Questions 1 and 3 show that they now achieve higher ratings than story books, for the first time.

### Trends from 2003 to 2007

When the figures in Tables 5 and 6 are compared with Table 2, it is clear that attitudes within the repeat subsample differed very little from those reported for the main sample. Comparisons from 2003 to 2007 can reliably be made by comparing the two nationally representative main samples from the respective years.

On this basis, the factor analysis was used to identify and summarise overall patterns of change amongst the different groups in 2003 and 2007. A 'factor score' was calculated for each group to demonstrate these patterns graphically. Figures 1 and 2 show these graphs. The horizontal line is the factor score; the vertical line indicates the 95 per cent confidence interval (derived from an analysis of variance). If these confidence intervals overlap, any difference is non-significant.

**Table 6 Responses to the questionnaire, year 6 repeat sample (percentages)**

	1998			2003			2007		
	Yes	Not sure	No	Yes	Not sure	No	Yes	Not sure	No
1. I like reading stories	77	13	10	65	19	16	66	18	15
2. I am not interested in books	19	15	66	16	17	67	14	18	67
3. I like reading comics or magazines	76	11	13	76	10	15	78	11	10
4. I like reading poems	58	19	23	50	20	30	43	23	33
5. I think reading is difficult	14	25	62	10	17	73	7	18	75
6. I like reading silently by myself	76	12	13	72	11	17	72	17	11
7. I like watching TV better than reading books	51	27	22	60	22	18	52	30	17
8. I don't like reading at home	26	19	56	23	18	60	21	21	57
9. I like going to the library	61	19	20	51	19	30	43	24	33
10. I like reading information books	52	24	24	36	24	40	37	25	37
11. I like reading with a grown-up to help me	32	18	50	21	14	65	24	17	59
15. Which of these do you read at home?									
Story books	82			77			72		
Comics	49			53			57		
Magazines	73			77			78		
Newspapers	44			47			47		
Information books	54			35			35		
Poems	55			48			39		
15. Grown-up at home reads to me	33		67	24		76	25		75
16. Grown-up at home listens to me read	67		33	54		46	54		45
17. Others at home read with me	37		63	29		71	31		68

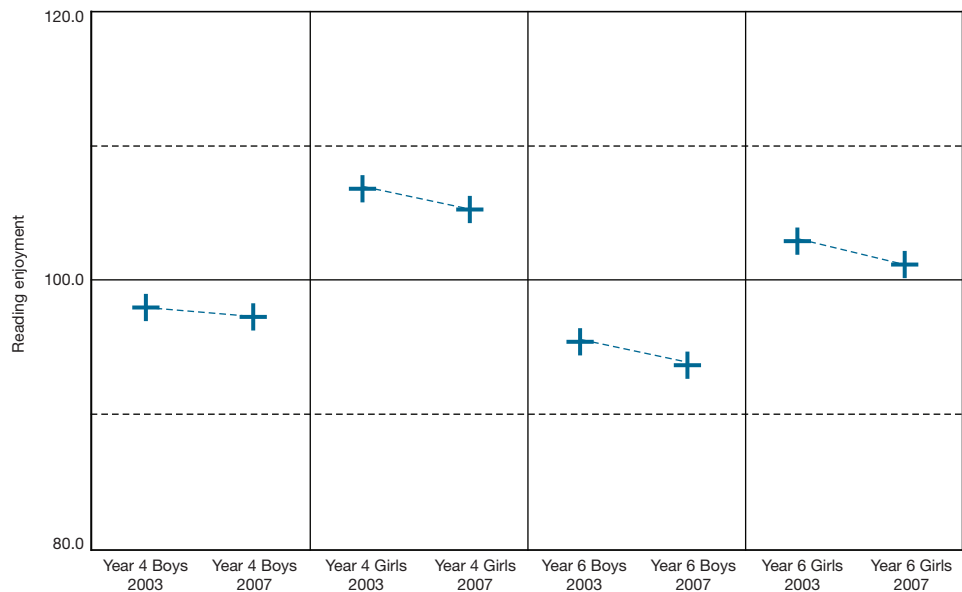
  

	Every day	Most days	Not often	Never	Every day	Most days	Not often	Never	Every day	Most days	Not often	Never
	14. How often do you read at home?	28	50	20	3	25	44	26	5	22	44	29

*Note: percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding*



**Figure 1 The reading enjoyment factor, 2003–07**

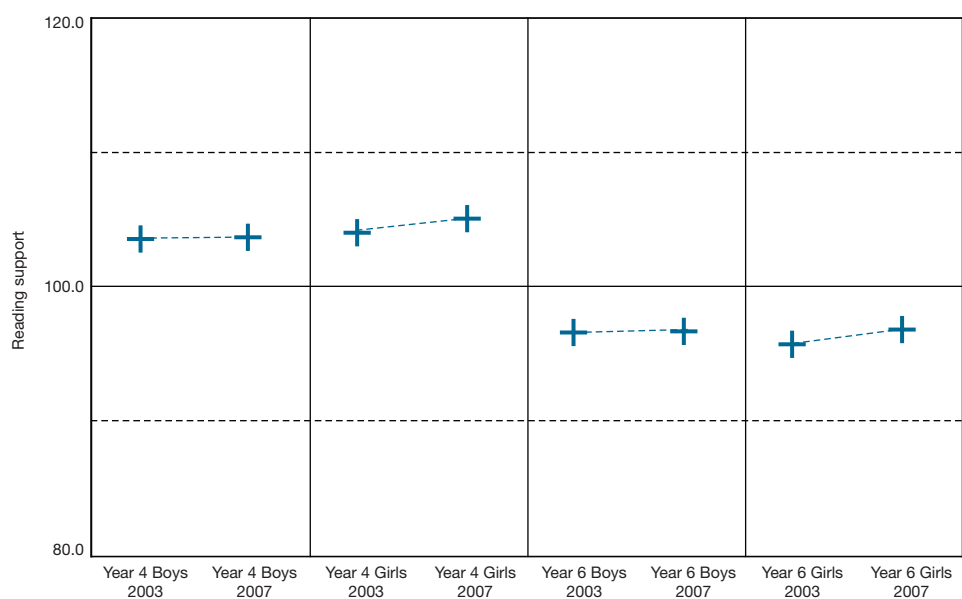


Although each of the trends is very slightly downwards, these patterns are non-significant for the boys, and only just attain statistical significance for both groups of girls. The higher overall enjoyment level for girls is very clear from this picture.

In a similar analysis from 1998–2003, the enjoyment rating fell significantly for all four groups, but particularly for boys in year 6 (Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004).

Figure 2 shows reading support factor scores from 2003 to 2007. Since this factor indicates a *lack* of confidence, a downward trend is a positive move.

**Figure 2 The ‘reading support’ factor, 2003–07**



None of these trends was statistically significant, showing that pupils' self-confidence as independent readers has broadly held steady since 2003.

In a similar analysis from 1998–2003, all four groups showed a large and significant drop in their need for support, indicating increased confidence.

In a further investigation, a multilevel analysis was conducted in order to discern which patterns remained significant when all background factors were taken into account. This confirmed the significant differences in enjoyment and support between year 4 and year 6. It also confirmed that girls enjoy reading significantly more than boys. There was no significant difference in either enjoyment or support/confidence between the 2003 and 2007 surveys. This result stands in notable contrast to the 1998–2003 analysis, which found a significant decrease in enjoyment and a significant increase in confidence.

## Summary and discussion

In overview, all of the findings discussed above confirm that the sharp changes in children's attitudes to reading observed over the period 1998–2003 have now halted. In particular, the powerful multilevel model analysis confirms that any slight changes in raw data are non-significant overall. Children's enjoyment of reading has stopped declining sharply, and their confidence in their abilities as readers has stopped increasing sharply. Instead, their attitudes have held steady over the four-year period.

The PIRLS international reading survey of 2006 (Twist *et al.*, 2007) confirmed that reading enjoyment amongst pupils in England is poor when compared to those in many other countries. It found a decline both in enjoyment and confidence since 2001 in pupils in England. In the PIRLS index of 'attitudes to reading' (the equivalent of reading enjoyment in this survey) there was a significant decline in pupils in the 'high' category and a small but significant increase in pupils in the 'low' category. In the PIRLS index of 'reading confidence' the change was less clear-cut, with a non-significant decline in the 'high' category but a small significant increase in the 'low' category.

These results would seem to be at odds with the present survey, but relating the two sets of findings is not straightforward. PIRLS sampled pupils in year 5, mid-way between the year 4 and year 6 groups reported here. Responses in the PIRLS survey were on a four-point scale (from 'agree a lot' to 'disagree a lot') rather than the three-point scale in this questionnaire. Finally, the period of comparison in PIRLS was 2001–06, whereas this survey concerns 2003–07.

Taken overall, then, the present results could be interpreted as compatible with those reported in PIRLS. This survey is more up to date, and indicates a levelling-off of attitudes, which was not apparent in the five-year span of the PIRLS questionnaires.



The lack of evidence about on-screen reading from this questionnaire, which appeared a minor constraint in the earlier surveys, now seems a more major disadvantage. It is clear that children are increasingly likely to search for information online, and that computer activities and games form a large part of the lives of many children. The PIRLS survey found that just over half of pupils in England reported reading on the internet every day, outside school, and 90 per cent playing video or computer games daily. Nevertheless, children's attitudes to book reading remain important, and the areas that this survey was capable of illuminating remain important ones.

The reasons and causes for the patterns reported in this survey were not investigated directly, and must remain a matter of conjecture rather than evidence. There was a shift in government policy in 2003 towards more flexibility and creativity in the primary curriculum, and it remains a possibility that these may have helped to slow the decline in reading enjoyment. However, other educational and social factors undoubtedly also came into play in ways that are impossible to quantify. Reading, in school and in society, continues to be a subject of major importance, and it is to be hoped that the cautious optimism revealed by this survey can be built upon for the future.

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