PIRLS 2021:
Exploring the contexts for reading of primary school pupils in Ireland

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CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6: Characteristics of Low-, Medium-, and High-Achieving Pupils in Reading

This chapter focuses on three groups of pupils that have been identified using the PIRLS International Benchmarks, which are the performance levels used to group pupils based on their reading achievement and describe the skills and strategies demonstrated by pupils at various levels of reading achievement. Specifically, the chapter explores the profiles of pupils that we define as low-, medium-, and high-achieving, relative to the population of pupils in Ireland as a whole. Low-achieving pupils are defined as those performing at the Below Low, Low, and Intermediate Benchmarks, medium-achieving pupils are defined as those performing at the High Benchmark, and high-achieving pupils are defined as those performing at the Advanced Benchmark. These categorisations reflect the strong overall level of reading achievement observed in Ireland, where the average score of 577 falls above the High Benchmark. Proportions of pupils in Ireland for the PIRLS 2021 cycle within each of these groups are presented by pupils' gender, their country of birth, the extent to which they were confident in and liked reading, their socioeconomic status, and their school DEIS status.[38]

Gender

Figure 6.1 shows the percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland in 2021 by their gender. Although approximately one-third of both girls (30%) and boys (35%) were low achievers in reading, the difference of five percentage points between the two genders was statistically significant, with boys more likely to be low achievers than girls. The difference of six percentage points at the high achievement group was also statistically significant, favouring girls, while girls and boys were equally likely to be medium achievers in reading.

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38   Given that the DEIS Rural category of the school DEIS status variable includes 3.9% of the sample, estimates in this chapter related to this category should be interpreted with caution.

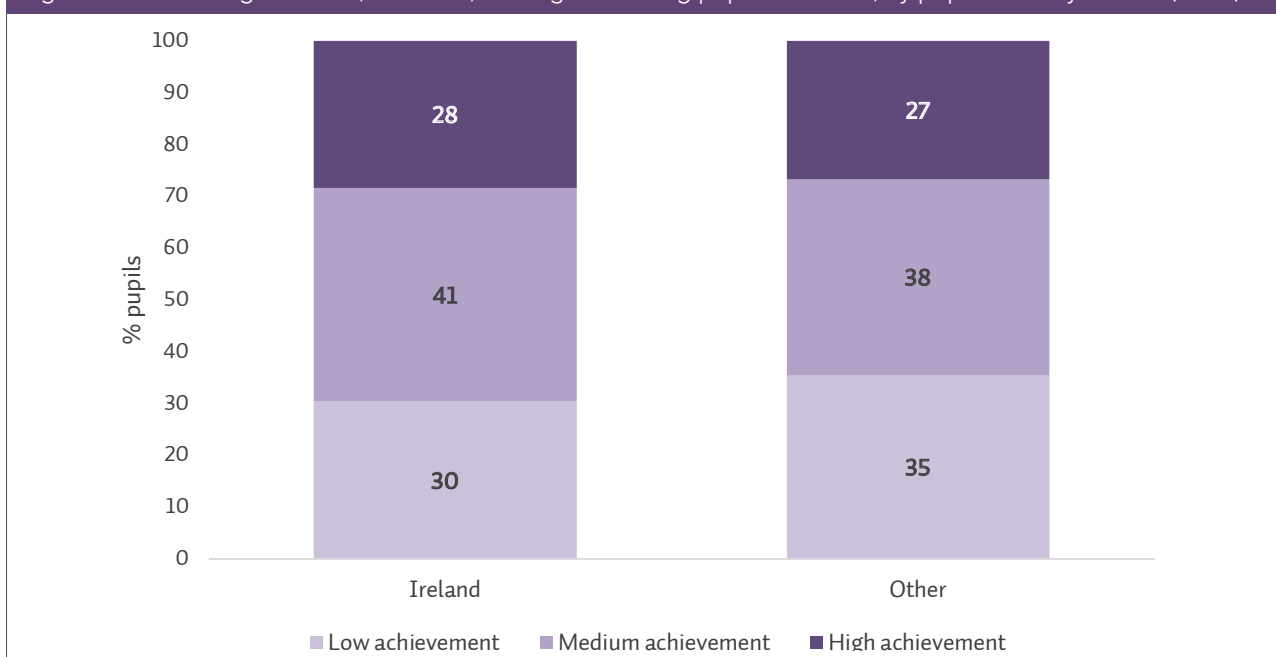Figure 6.1: Percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland, by pupils' gender (2021)
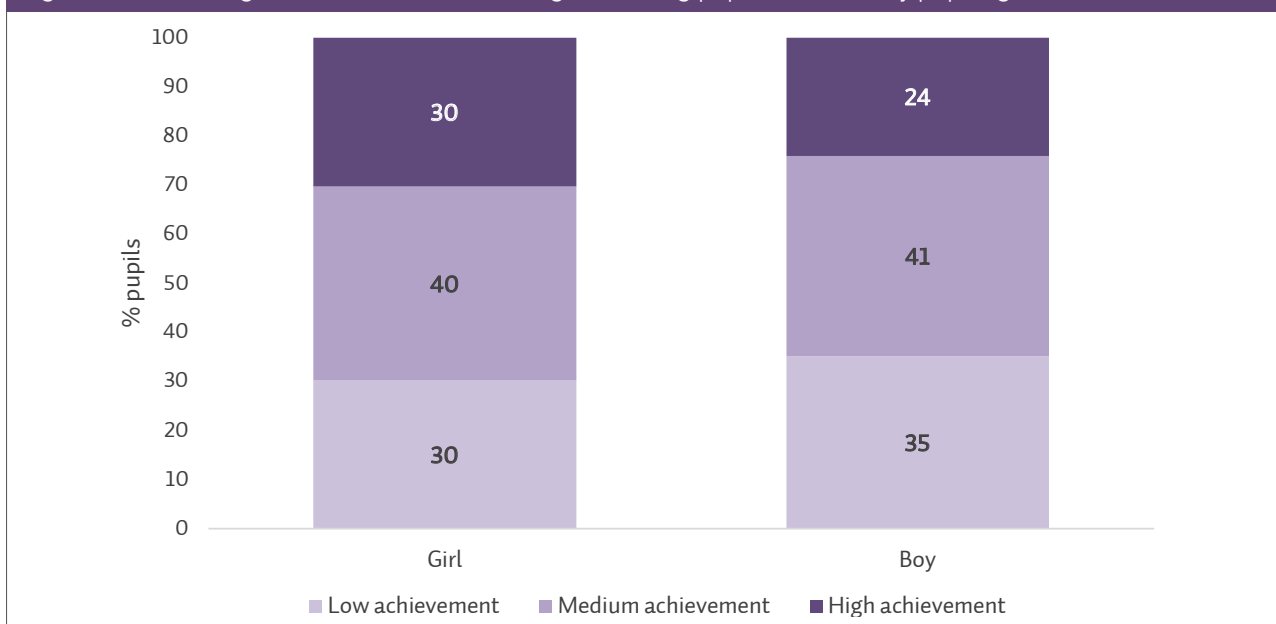
Source: Appendix Table A6.1.
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Country of birth

Figure 6.2 shows the percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland in 2021 by their country of birth. Although a slightly higher percentage of pupils born outside Ireland were low achievers in reading compared to their peers born in Ireland (35% vs 30%), this difference was not statistically significant, and neither were the differences within the other groups.

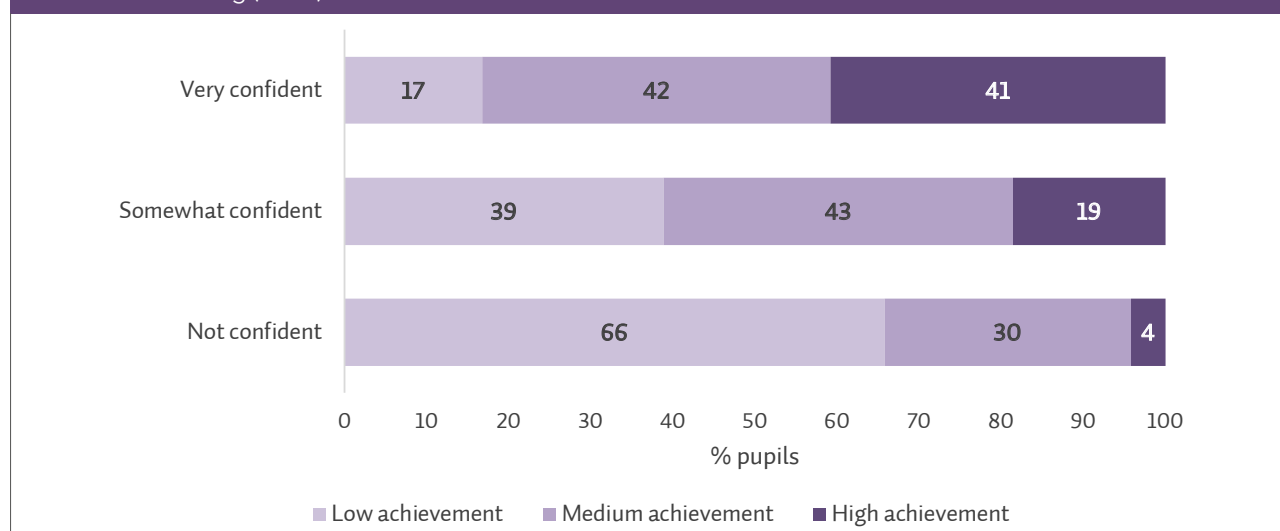Figure 6.2: Percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland, by pupils' country of birth (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A6.2.
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Confident in reading

Figure 6.3 shows the percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland in 2021 by the extent to which they were confident in reading. *Very confident* pupils were statistically significantly less likely to be low achievers in reading than their *somewhat confident* and *not confident* peers, with 17%, 39%, and 66% of pupils within each of these categories being low achievers, respectively. Although differences were less pronounced within the medium achievement group, *very confident* pupils were, again, more likely than their *not confident* peers to belong to that group. *Very confident* pupils were statistically significantly more likely to be high achievers in reading than their *somewhat confident* and *not confident* peers. Specifically, the proportion of *very confident* pupils within the high achievement group (41%) was more than double the corresponding proportion among *somewhat confident* pupils (19%) and more than 10 times the corresponding proportion among *not confident* pupils (4%).

Figure 6.3: Percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland, by the extent to which they were confident in reading (2021)
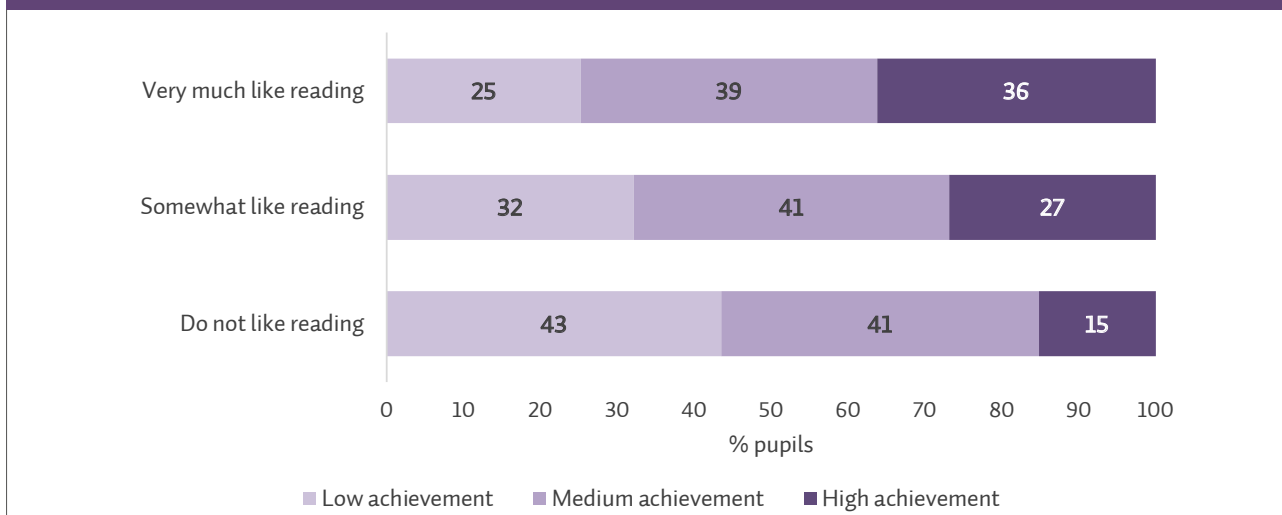

Source: Appendix Table A6.3.
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Liking reading

Figure 6.4 shows the percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland in 2021 by the extent to which they liked reading. Pupils who *very much like reading* were statistically significantly less likely to be low achievers in reading than their peers who *somewhat like reading* and *do not like reading*, with 25%, 32%, and 43% of pupils within each of these categories being low achievers, respectively. Differences were less pronounced within the medium achievement group, with similar percentages of pupils who *very much like reading*, *somewhat like reading*, and *do not like reading* belonging to that group. Pupils who *very much like reading* were statistically significantly more likely to be high achievers in reading than their peers who *somewhat like reading* and *do not like reading*. Specifically, the proportion of the pupils who *very much like reading* who were high achievers (36%) was nine percentage points higher than the corresponding proportion among pupils who *somewhat like reading* (27%) and more than double the corresponding proportion among pupils who *do not like reading* (15%).

Figure 6.4: Percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland, by the extent to which they liked reading (2021)
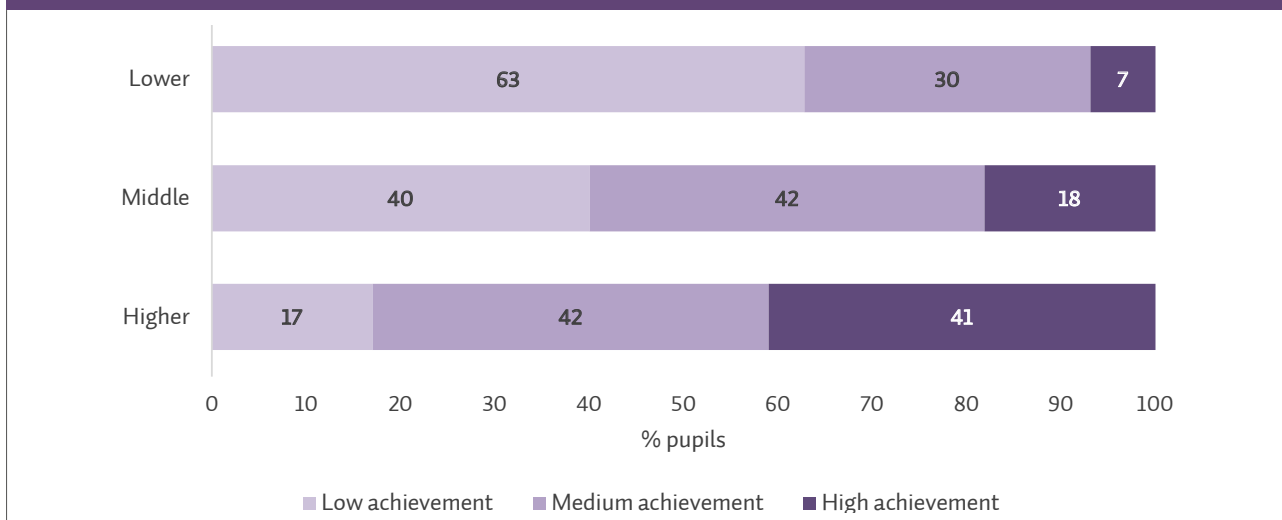

Source: Appendix Table A6.4.
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Socioeconomic status

Figure 6.5 shows the percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland in 2021 by their socioeconomic status group (as indicated by the internationally defined categories of the PIRLS *Home Socioeconomic Status* index). Notably, 63% of pupils in the *lower* socioeconomic group were low achievers in reading, with this percentage decreasing to 40% among pupils in the *middle* socioeconomic group and 17% among pupils in the *higher* socioeconomic group. Looking at the upper end of the achievement distribution, only 7% of pupils in the *lower* socioeconomic group were high achievers in reading. This percentage was more than double among pupils in the *middle* socioeconomic group (18%), while four out of 10 pupils in the *higher* socioeconomic group were high achievers in reading. All differences between the *higher* and the other two socioeconomic groups were statistically significant except for the one with the *middle* socioeconomic group within the medium achievement group.

Figure 6.5: Percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland, by pupils' socioeconomic status (2021)
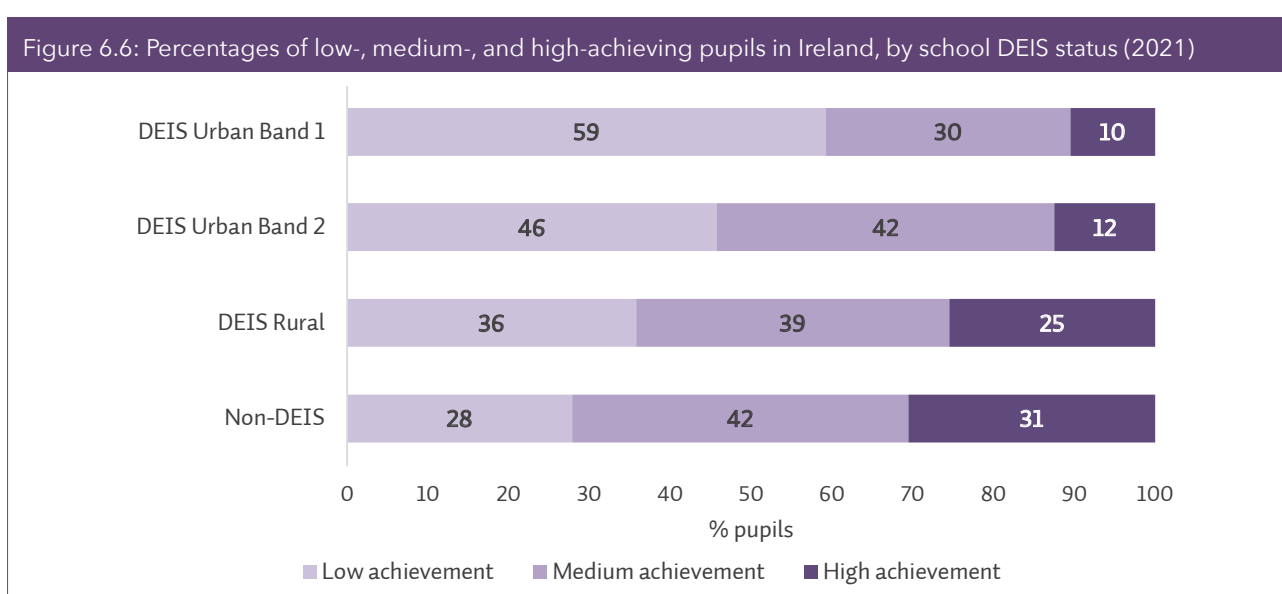

Source: Appendix Table A6.5.
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

School DEIS status

Figure 6.6 shows the percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland in 2021 by their school's DEIS status. Pupils attending non-DEIS schools were statistically significantly less likely to be low achievers and more likely to be high achievers in reading compared to their peers attending DEIS Urban schools (Band 1 and Band 2), with differences being more pronounced for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. Among pupils attending non-DEIS schools, 28% were low achievers and 31% were high achievers in reading, while, among pupils attending DEIS Urban schools, between 46% and 59% were low achievers and between 10% and 12% were high achievers in reading. Although pupils attending DEIS Rural schools were slightly (though not statistically significantly) more likely to be low achievers and slightly (though, again, not statistically significantly) less likely to be high achievers in reading compared to their peers attending non-DEIS schools, estimates for this category should be interpreted with caution due to the low numbers of pupils comprising it.

Figure 6.6: Percentages of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils in Ireland, by school DEIS status (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A6.6.
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, an analysis of PIRLS 2021 data for Ireland focusing on the profiles of low-, medium-, and high-achieving pupils (defined with reference to overall national performance) was presented. Results indicated that pupils' gender, the extent to which they were confident in and liked reading, their socioeconomic status, and their school's DEIS status were related to their chances of belonging to the low, medium, or high achievement group in reading, while their country of birth was not related to their chances of belonging to one of these groups. Specifically, girls, pupils who were *very confident* in reading, those who very much liked reading, those in the *higher* socioeconomic group, and those attending non-DEIS schools were statistically significantly less likely to be low achievers and statistically significantly more likely to be high achievers in reading compared to boys, pupils who were *somewhat* or *not confident* in reading, those who somewhat liked or did not like reading, pupils in the *middle* and *lower* socioeconomic groups, and those attending DEIS Urban schools, respectively.