

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

Vasiliki Pitsia, Sarah McAteer, Gráinne McHugh, and Emer Delaney

Educational Research Centre

**CHAPTER 7**

# Chapter 7: Pupils' Wellbeing, School-Related Experiences, Reading Attitudes and Behaviours

This chapter focuses on data from the PIRLS pupil questionnaire about pupils' wellbeing, school-related experiences, and reading attitudes and behaviours. Ireland's data for 2021 are presented by different variables including pupils' gender (*girl/boy*), their country of birth (*Ireland/other*), their socioeconomic status (*lower/middle/higher*), and school DEIS status (*DEIS Urban Band 1/DEIS Urban Band 2/DEIS Rural/non-DEIS*). Findings in this chapter build on findings reported in the PIRLS 2021 national report by Delaney et al. (2023) and in Chapters 3 and 5 of this report, where overall proportions are provided and relationships of these variables with achievement are examined.

## Wellbeing and school-related experiences

This section includes pupil absence, arriving at school tired and hungry, bullying, and sense of school belonging. These variables related to pupils' wellbeing and school-related experiences are explored by pupils' gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status.<sup>39</sup>

### Pupil absence

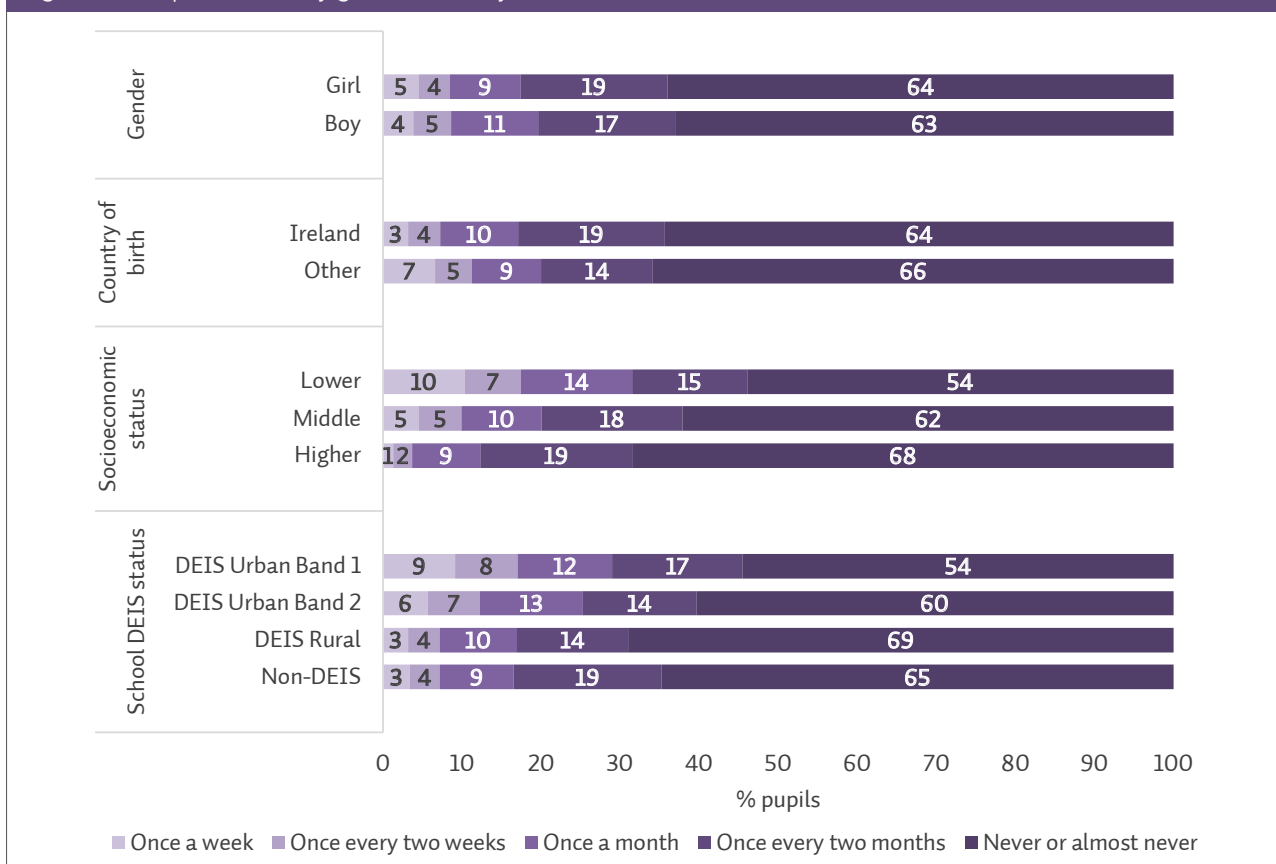
As part of the pupil questionnaire, pupils were asked about the frequency with which they are absent from school. The five response options were *once a week*, *once every two weeks*, *once a month*, *once every two months*, and *never or almost never*.

Figure 7.1 presents the percentages of pupils in Ireland by the frequency with which they were absent from school, by gender, country of birth, and socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. Looking at pupil absence by gender, boys and girls did not statistically significantly differ in the frequency with which they were absent from school. Pupils born outside of Ireland were somewhat more likely to be absent *once a week* than their peers born in Ireland, though this difference was not statistically significant. The proportions of pupils who were absent *once a week* and *once every two weeks* were statistically significantly higher in the *lower* and *middle* socioeconomic groups than in the *higher* socioeconomic group. Accordingly, the proportion of pupils in the *higher* socioeconomic group who reported to *never or almost never* be absent from school (68%) was statistically significantly above the corresponding proportion in the *lower* socioeconomic group (54%). The frequency with which pupils were absent from school seemed to also vary somewhat by school DEIS status. The proportions of pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools who reported being absent *once a week* or *once every two weeks* (9% and 8%, respectively) were statistically significantly higher than the corresponding proportions in non-DEIS schools (3% and 4%, respectively). Also, statistically significantly higher proportions of pupils in non-DEIS schools reported *never or almost never* being absent (65%) compared to pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (54%).

39

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

Figure 7.1: Pupil absence by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.1 to A7.4.

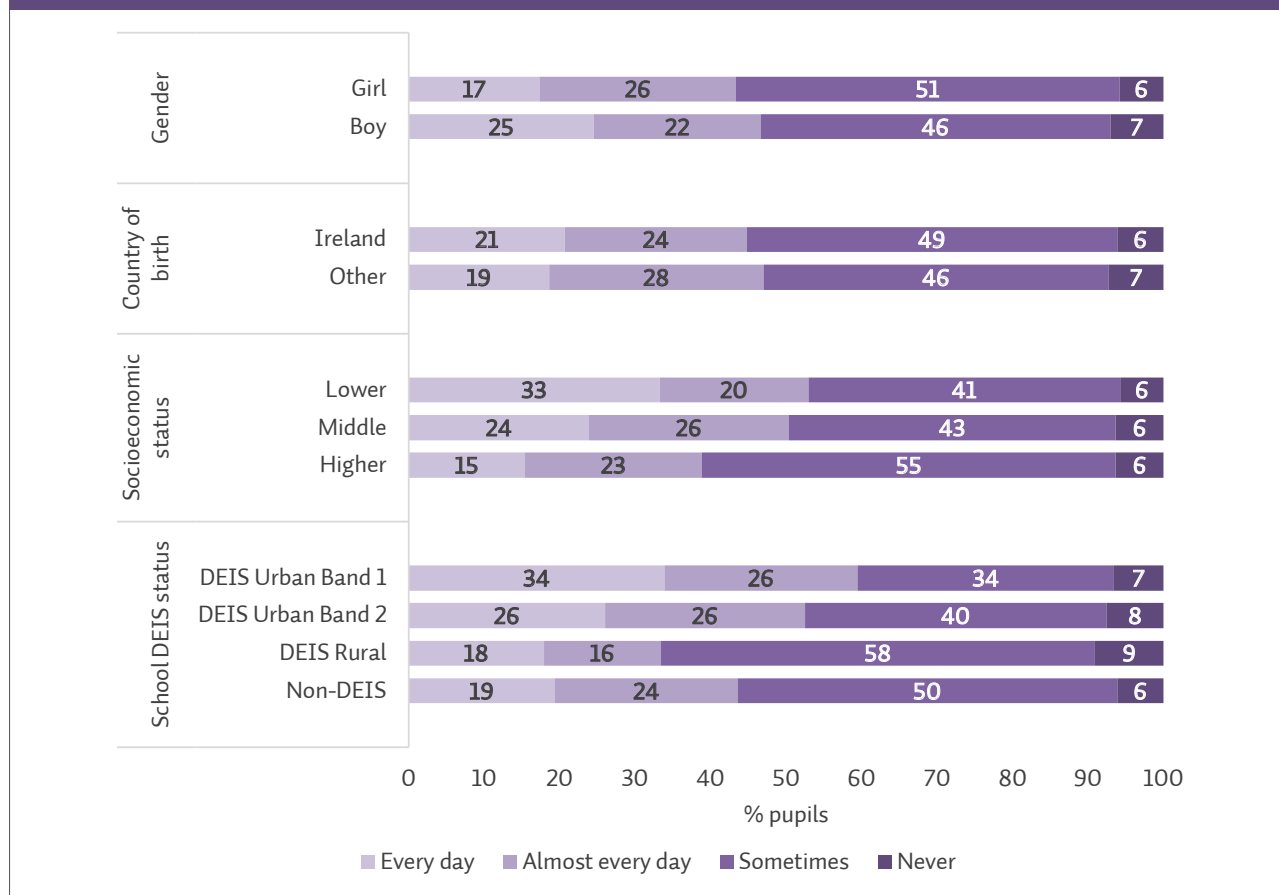
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

### Pupil feeling tired or hungry upon arrival at school

As part of the pupil questionnaire, pupils were asked about the frequency with which they felt tired or hungry upon school arrival, and the four response options were *every day*, *almost every day*, *sometimes*, and *never*.

Figure 7.2 presents the percentages of pupils feeling tired upon arriving at school by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. One-quarter of boys arrived at school feeling tired *every day*, which was statistically significantly higher than the corresponding proportion reported by girls (17%). Broadly similar proportions were reported across each of the response options for pupils who were born in Ireland and those born in another country. The *higher* socioeconomic group comprised of a statistically significantly lower proportion of pupils (15%) who reported feeling tired on arrival at school *every day* than the *middle* (24%) and *lower* (33%) socioeconomic groups. Similarly, the proportions of pupils in DEIS Urban schools who reported feeling tired on arrival at school *every day* (DEIS Urban Band 1: 34%; DEIS Urban Band 2: 26%) were statistically significantly higher than the corresponding proportion in non-DEIS schools (19%). However, the proportion in DEIS Rural schools in this response category (18%) was similar to the corresponding proportion in non-DEIS schools.

Figure 7.2: Frequency of feeling tired upon arriving at school by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)

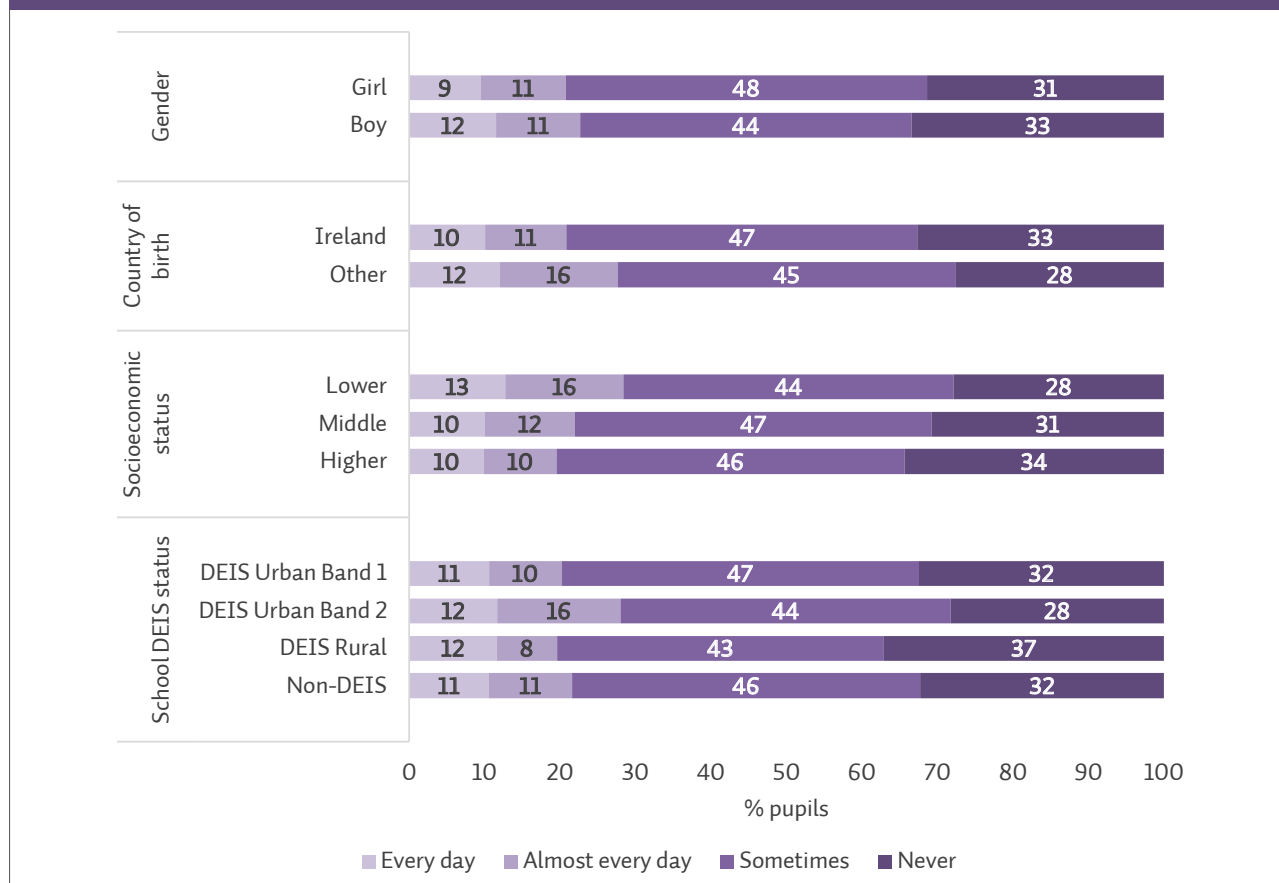


Source: Appendix Table A7.5 to A7.8.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Figure 7.3 presents the percentages of pupils feeling hungry upon arriving at school by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. A slightly higher proportion of boys (12%) than girls (9%) reported feeling hungry *every day* when they arrived at school, though this difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, a slightly higher proportion of boys (33%) than girls (31%) reported *never* feeling hungry when they arrived at school but, again, this difference was not statistically significant. Pupils who were born in Ireland and those who were born outside Ireland did not statistically significantly differ in the frequency with which they feel hungry on arrival at school. Higher proportions of pupils in the *lower* socioeconomic group (13%) reported feeling hungry *every day* on arrival at school than those in the *middle* and *higher* groups (10%, respectively). There were no statistically significant differences in the frequency with which pupils arrived at school hungry by school DEIS status. Approximately one-third of pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 (32%) and non-DEIS (32%) schools reported *never* feeling hungry on arriving at school. Slightly higher proportions were reported in DEIS Rural schools (37%), and slightly lower proportions were reported in DEIS Urban Band 2 school (28%), though none of these differences were statistically significant.

Figure 7.3: Frequency of feeling hungry upon arriving at school by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.9 to A7.12.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

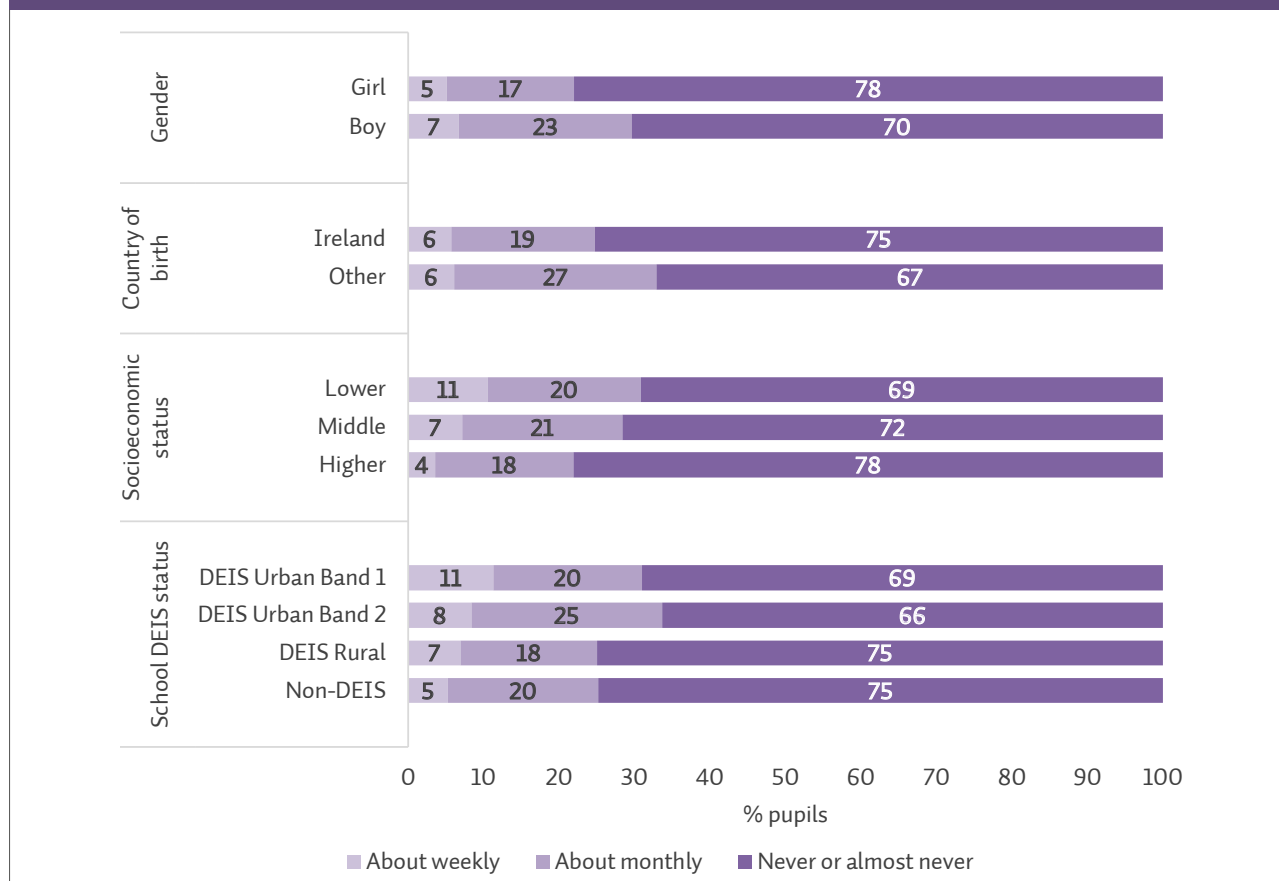
## Pupil bullying

As mentioned in Chapter 5, PIRLS pupils were asked to report how often they experienced bullying in school. Pupils were asked how frequently they experienced 10 bullying behaviours: *Made fun of me or called me names; Left me out of their games or activities; Spread lies about me; Stole something from me; Damaged something of mine on purpose; Hit or hurt me (e.g., shoving, hitting, kicking); Made me do things I didn't want to do; Sent me nasty or hurtful messages online; Shared nasty or hurtful information about me online; Threatened me.* Pupil responses were used to create the PIRLS *Student Bullying* scale, on the basis of which, pupils were grouped into three categories: *never or almost never*, *about monthly*, and *about weekly*.

Figure 7.4 presents the percentages of pupils by the frequency with which they experienced bullying behaviours by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. Boys (7%) were statistically significantly more likely to experience bullying *about weekly* than girls (5%), and girls (78%) were statistically significantly more likely than boys (70%) to *never or almost never* experience bullying. Looking at the proportions by country of birth, pupils born in Ireland were statistically significantly more likely to *never or almost never* experience bullying compared with pupils born outside of Ireland. There were large and statistically significant differences in the proportions of pupils who experienced bullying *about weekly* by their socioeconomic status. Less than 5% of pupils in the *higher* socioeconomic group reported experiencing bullying *about weekly*, which was statistically significantly below the corresponding proportions in the *middle* (7%) and *lower* (11%) groups. Similarly, pupils in the *higher* socioeconomic group were statistically significantly more likely to *never or almost*

never experience bullying when compared to pupils in the lower socioeconomic group. Over one-tenth of pupils (11%) in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools reported experiencing bullying *about weekly*, which was statistically significantly above the proportion reported in non-DEIS schools (5%). The proportions reported in DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (8%) and DEIS Rural schools (7%) were higher than the proportion in non-DEIS schools, though these differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 7.4: Pupils' bullying experiences by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.13 to A7.16.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

### Pupil sense of school belonging

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the extent of pupils' sense of school belonging was captured through five items in the pupil questionnaire: *I like being in school; I feel safe when I am at school; I feel like I belong at this school; Teachers at my school are fair to me; I am proud to go to this school*. Pupils were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each of these statements and their responses were used to create the PIRLS *Sense of School Belonging* scale, on the basis of which, pupils were grouped into three categories: *high sense of school belonging*, *some sense of school belonging*, and *little sense of school belonging*.

Figure 7.5 presents the percentages of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Sense of School Belonging* scale by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. More than three-fifths of girls (63%) were classified as having a *high sense of school belonging*, which was statistically significantly above the proportion among boys (50%). More than one-tenth of boys (11%) were classified as having a *little sense of school belonging*, which was more than double the proportion among girls (5%), forming a statistically significant difference. Looking at

pupils' sense of school belonging by their country of birth, the proportions were broadly similar for the two groups across the different categories, with no statistically significant differences. The three socioeconomic groups of pupils did not statistically significantly differ in their sense of school belonging. Specifically, 59% of pupils in the *higher* group, 55% of pupils in the *middle* group, and 54% of pupils in the *lower* group reported having a *high sense of school belonging*, while 7%, 8%, and 10% of pupils in each of these groups, respectively, reported having a *little sense of school belonging*. Proportions of pupils in the *high sense of school belonging* category in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (47%) and non-DEIS (58%) were statistically significantly different, while the proportions of pupils in the *little sense of school belonging* category by school DEIS status ranged from 8% for non-DEIS to 11% for DEIS Urban Band 2 schools.

Figure 7.5: Pupils' sense of school belonging by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.17 to A7.20.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

## Reading attitudes and behaviours

This section presents the extent to which pupils felt confident in reading, their liking of reading, and their engagement in reading lessons. These variables related to pupils' reading attitudes and behaviours are explored by pupils' gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status.

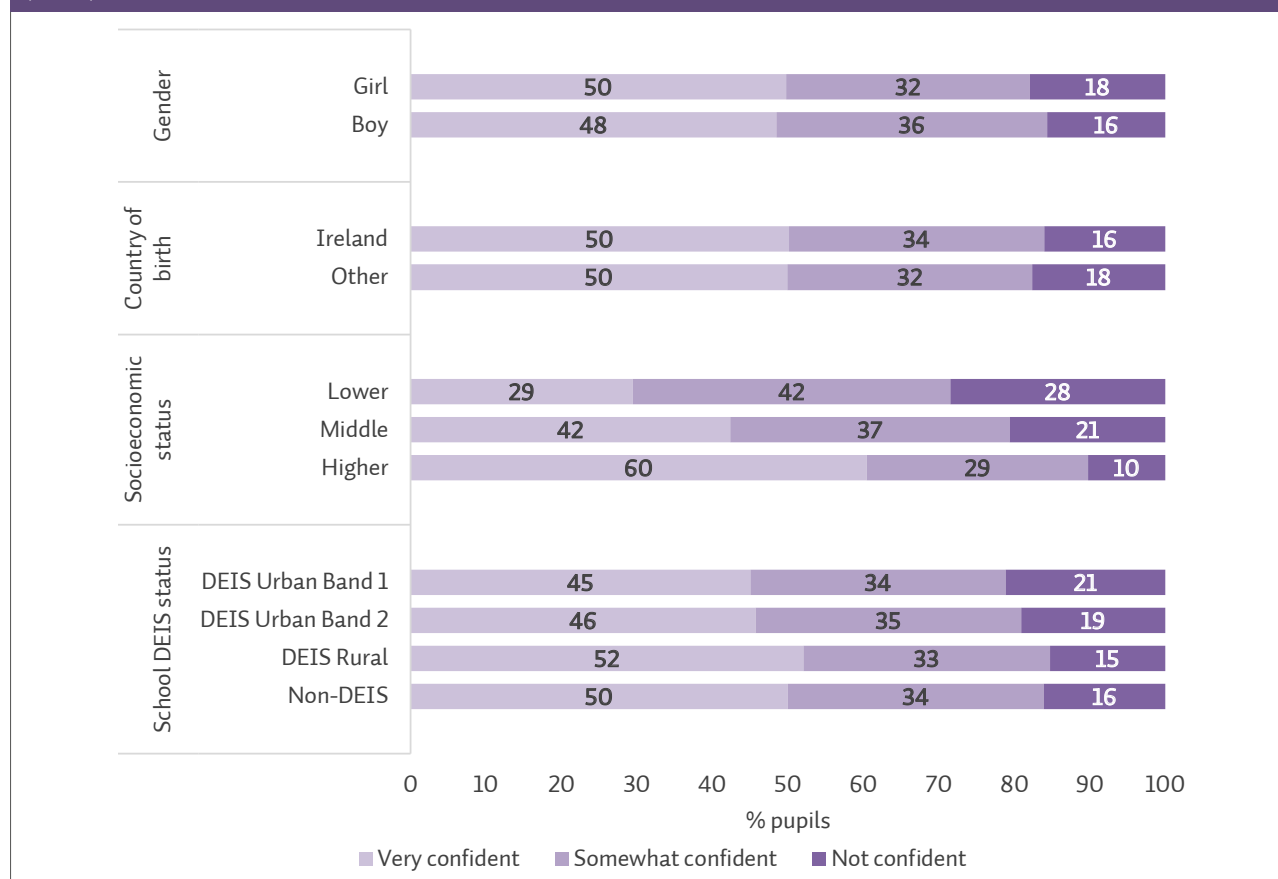
### Confident in reading

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the extent to which pupils felt confident in reading was captured through six items in the pupil questionnaire: *I usually do well in reading*; *Reading is easy for me*; *I have trouble reading stories with difficult words* (reverse coded); *Reading is harder for me than for many of my classmates* (reverse coded); *Reading is harder for me than any other*

*subject* (reverse coded); *I am just not good at reading* (reverse coded). Pupils were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each of these six statements and their responses were used to create the PIRLS *Students Confident in Reading* scale, on the basis of which pupils were described as *very confident*, *somewhat confident*, or *not confident* in reading.

Figure 7.6 presents the percentages of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Students Confident in Reading* scale by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. The proportions of girls and boys in each of the categories were broadly similar. Similarly, pupils born in Ireland and those born outside of Ireland had relatively similar proportions in each of the categories. Contrary to these non-substantial differences, there were large differences by pupils' socioeconomic status. Three-fifths of pupils in the *higher* group reported being *very confident*, which was statistically significantly above the proportion in the *lower* group (29%) and above, though not statistically significantly, the proportion in the *middle* group (42%). Pupils in the *higher* group were also statistically significantly less likely to be *not confident* (10%) than pupils in the *middle* (21%) and *lower* (28%) groups. Some variation in the proportions of pupils across the different categories was also noted by school DEIS status. Statistically significantly higher proportions of pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools reported being *not confident* in reading (21%) when compared to their peers in non-DEIS schools (16%).

Figure 7.6: Pupils confident in reading by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.21 to A7.24.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

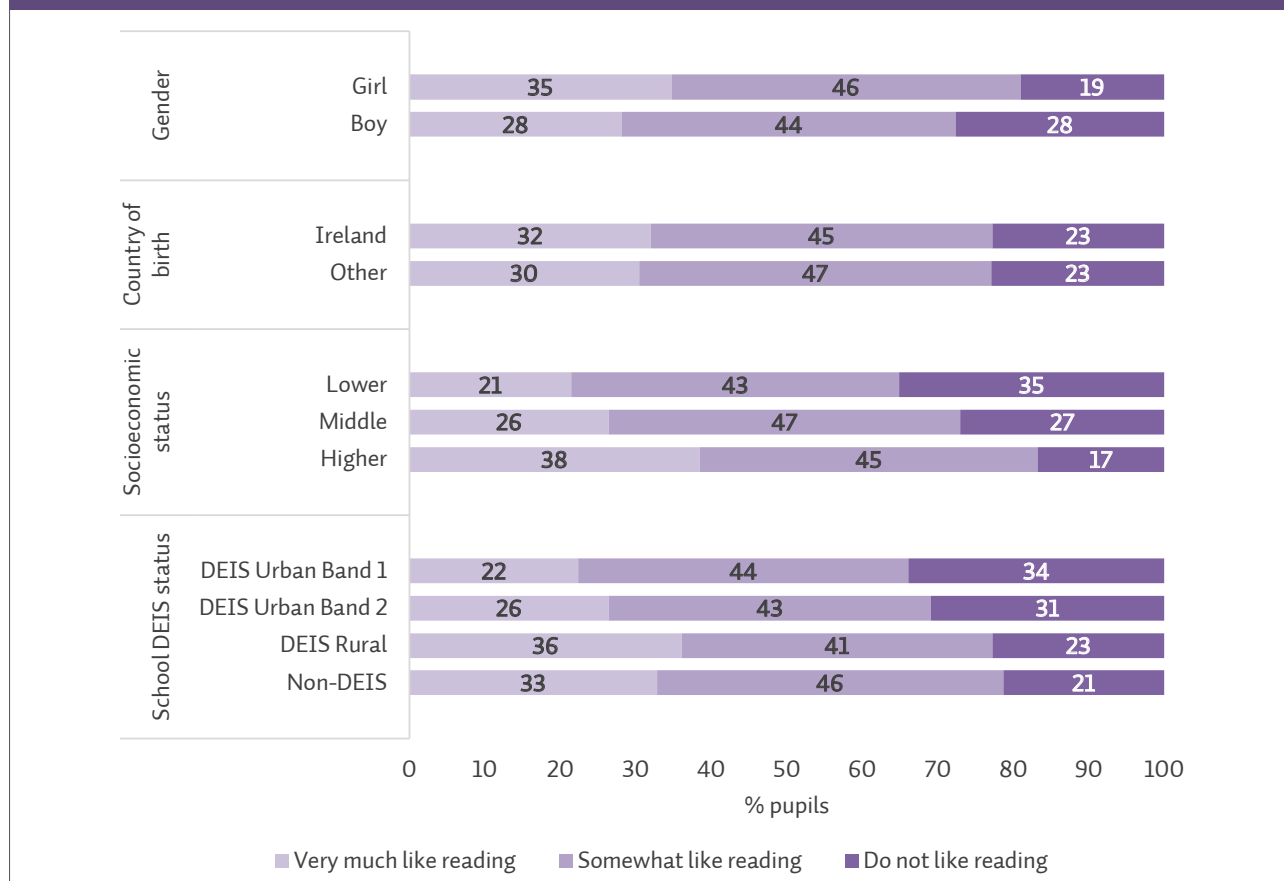


## Liking reading

The pupil questionnaire included 10 items relating to pupils' liking of reading. The 10 items included: *I like talking about what I read with other people*; *I would be happy if someone gave me a book as a present*; *I think reading is boring* (reverse coded); *I would like to have more time for reading*; *I enjoy reading*; *I learn a lot from reading*; *I like to read things that make me think*; *I like it when a book helps me imagine other worlds*; *I read for fun*; *I read to find out about things I want to learn*. Pupils were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the first eight statements and how often they did two reading activities outside of school (with response options ranging from *every day or almost every day* to *never or almost never*), and their responses were used to create the PIRLS *Students Like Reading* scale, on the basis of which pupils were grouped into three categories: *very much like reading*, *somewhat like reading*, or *do not like reading*.

Figure 7.7 presents the percentages of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Students Like Reading* scale, by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. Approximately one-third of girls (35%) indicated that they *very much like reading*, while statistically significantly lower proportions were reported for boys (28%). Also, statistically significantly higher proportions of boys (28%) than girls (19%) reported that they *do not like reading*. Although no statistically significant differences were noted for pupils' liking of reading by their country of birth, proportions in the *do not like reading* category statistically significantly differed by their socioeconomic status. Over one-third of pupils in the *lower* socioeconomic group (35%) and over one-quarter of pupils in the *middle* socioeconomic group (27%) belonged to the *do not like reading* category. These were statistically significantly higher than the corresponding proportion within the *higher* socioeconomic group (17%). In the *higher* group, over one-third of pupils (38%) reported to *very much like reading* while the proportions in the *middle* (26%) and *lower* (21%) groups were substantially, and in the case of the *lower* group statistically significantly, lower. Pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were statistically significantly less likely to belong to the *very much like reading* category (22%) and statistically significantly more likely to belong to the *do not like reading* category (34%) compared to their peers in non-DEIS schools (33% and 21%, respectively). The proportion of pupils who *do not like reading* was also higher for DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (31%) than non-DEIS schools (21%), though this difference was not statistically significant. Finally, proportions of pupils in the *do not like reading* category were similar in DEIS Rural and non-DEIS schools. However, some caution is needed when interpreting these findings from DEIS Rural schools due to the large standard errors around the estimates due to the small sample size.

Figure 7.7: Pupils' liking of reading by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.25 to A7.28.

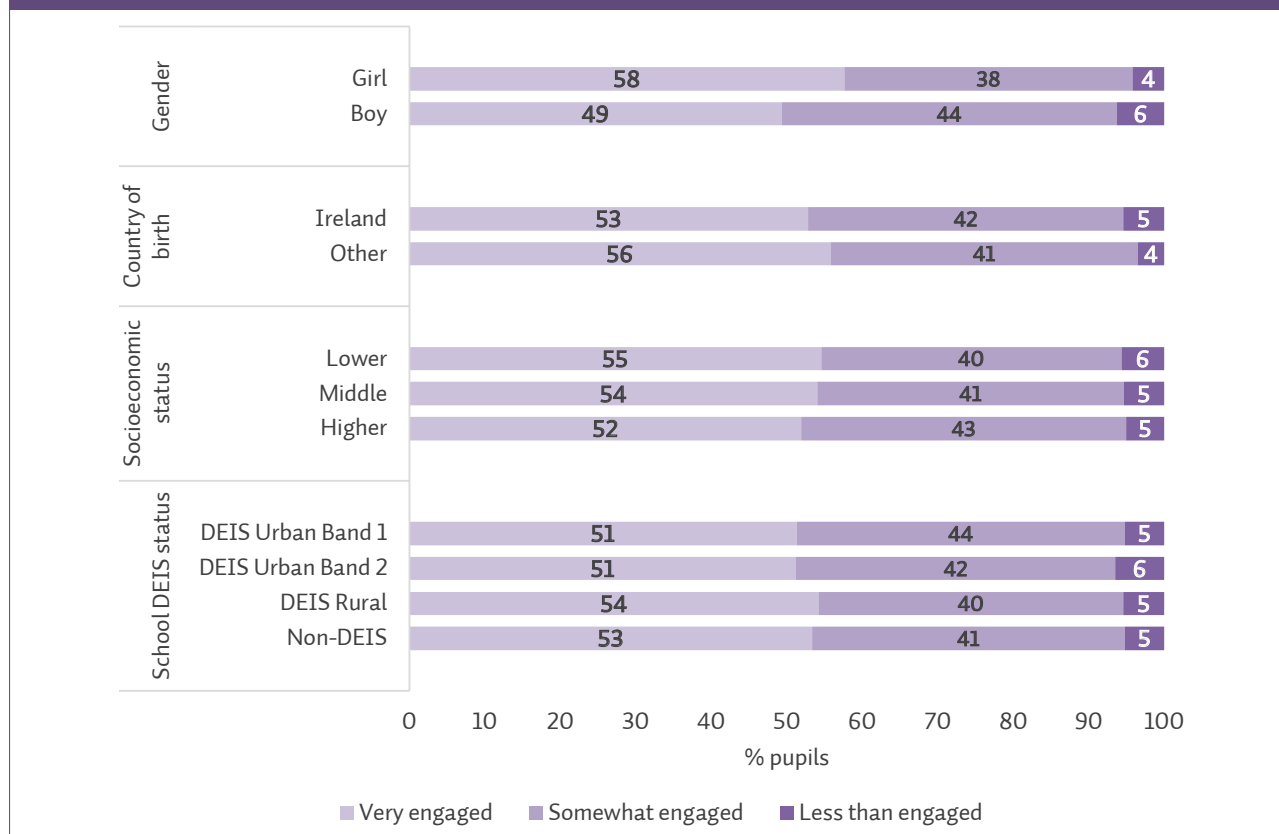
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

## Engaged in reading lessons

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the extent to which pupils were engaged in reading lessons was captured through nine items in the pupil questionnaire: *I like what I read about in school*; *My teacher gives me interesting things to read*; *I know what my teacher expects me to do*; *My teacher is easy to understand*; *I am interested in what my teacher says*; *My teacher encourages me to say what I think about what I have read*; *My teacher lets me show what I have learned*; *My teacher does a variety of things to help us learn*; *My teacher tells me how to do better when I make a mistake*. Pupils were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each of these nine statements and their responses were used to create the PIRLS *Students Engaged in Reading Lessons* scale, on the basis of which pupils were described as *very engaged*, *somewhat engaged*, or *less than engaged* in reading lessons.

Figure 7.8 presents the percentages of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Students Engaged in Reading Lessons* scale by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status. Girls were statistically significantly more likely than boys to be *very engaged* and statistically significantly less likely to be *less than engaged*. Slightly more pupils who were born outside of Ireland (56%) were *very engaged* compared to pupils born in Ireland (53%), though this difference was not statistically significant. The proportions of pupils in each of the categories of the PIRLS *Students Engaged in Reading Lessons* scale by socioeconomic status and school DEIS status were broadly similar.

Figure 7.8: Pupils' engagement in reading lessons by gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A7.29 to A7.32.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

## Chapter summary

The proportions reported by boys and girls about the frequency with which they are absent from school were broadly similar. Pupils born outside of Ireland were somewhat more likely to be absent more regularly (*once a week*) than pupils born in Ireland. *Lower* and *middle* socioeconomic groups had statistically significantly higher proportions of pupils being absent *once a week* and *once every two weeks* in comparison to the *higher* socioeconomic group. There were also statistically significant differences between DEIS Urban Band 1 and non-DEIS schools in the *once a week*, *once every two weeks*, and *never or almost never* categories, all indicating a higher frequency of pupil absence in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools.

Looking at the proportions who felt tired on arrival at school, boys were statistically significantly more likely to feel this way on a daily basis than girls, as were pupils in the *lower* and *middle* socioeconomic groups compared to pupils in the *higher* socioeconomic group, and pupils in DEIS Urban schools (Band 1 and Band 2) compared to pupils in non-DEIS schools. Despite these statistically significant differences in the frequency with which pupils reported feeling tired on arrival at school, the frequency with which they reported feeling hungry on arrival at school was broadly similar by pupil gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status.

Boys were statistically significantly more likely than girls to experience bullying *about weekly*, while girls were statistically significantly more likely to *never or almost never* experience bullying. Pupils born in Ireland were statistically significantly more likely to *never or almost never* experience bullying compared to pupils born outside of Ireland. There were also statistically significant differences in the proportions of pupils who experienced bullying *about weekly* by

their socioeconomic status, with higher levels of socioeconomic status being associated with lower exposure to frequent bullying, on average. This pattern was also noted for school DEIS status, whereby the proportion of pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools experiencing bullying *about weekly* was statistically significantly above the corresponding proportion of pupils in non-DEIS schools.

A statistically significantly higher proportion of girls than boys had a *high sense of school belonging*, and, accordingly, the proportion of boys in the *little sense of school belonging* category was more than double the proportion of girls. While there were no statistically significant differences in pupils' sense of school belonging by their country of birth or individual socioeconomic status, this was not the case for school DEIS status. Pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were statistically significantly less likely than pupils in non-DEIS schools to belong to the *high sense of school belonging* category.

Proportions of boys and girls were broadly similar in each of the categories of the PIRLS *Students Confident in Reading* scale (*very confident*, *somewhat confident*, and *not confident*), as were the proportions of pupils who were born in Ireland and those born outside of Ireland. Differences in the extent to which pupils were confident in reading by their socioeconomic status were more substantial. Over one-quarter of pupils in the *lower* socioeconomic group and one-fifth of pupils in the *middle* socioeconomic group reported being *not confident*, while this proportion was one-tenth in the *higher* socioeconomic group (and these differences were statistically significant). There was less variation by school DEIS status, with the only statistically significant difference being noted for the *not confident* category, where pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were statistically significantly more likely to belong to this category than their peers in non-DEIS schools.

Approximately one-third of girls indicated that they *very much like reading*, statistically significantly above the over one-quarter of boys. More boys reported to not like reading than girls, and this difference was also statistically significant. There were large and statistically significant differences in the extent to which pupils liked reading by socioeconomic status in particular in the *do not like reading* category, with higher socioeconomic status being associated with higher levels of liking of reading, on average. Pupils in DEIS Urban schools were less likely to *very much like reading* and more likely to not like reading when compared with their peers in non-DEIS schools.

Small and generally not statistically significant differences by country of birth, socioeconomic status, and school DEIS status were noted for the PIRLS *Students Engaged in Reading Lessons* scale. Gender differences, though, were statistically significant, with girls being statistically significantly more likely than boys to be *very engaged*, and, conversely, boys being statistically significantly more likely than girls to be *less than engaged* in reading lessons.