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## Leave it to the professionals

Ministers can't make children read.

BY [PETER WILBY](#) | PUBLISHED 6 DECEMBER, 2007 - 12:00



Forget dodgy donations and missing computer disks. The most devastating news for the government is that, in reading, maths and science, UK children seem to be falling towards the fifth division of the international school performance leagues. This is a major policy failure. New Labour intervened in schools at an unprecedented level of detail, particularly at the primary stage where ministers issued instructions not only on what to teach but also, through literacy and numeracy strategies, how to teach.

Yet the latest *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (<http://pirls.bc.edu>) puts England 15th in a league table of 41. Since 2001,

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the average score for English ten-year-olds has dropped more than that of any others except Romanians and Moroccans.

England came third in 2001, ahead of Italy, Germany, Hungary, Hong Kong and Singapore. It is now behind all those countries. In tests for 15-year-olds - from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment ([www.oecd.org/pisa](http://www.oecd.org/pisa)) - the UK dropped from eighth to 24th (out of 57) in maths, and from seventh to 17th in reading. Pupils taking those tests were educated almost entirely under new Labour.

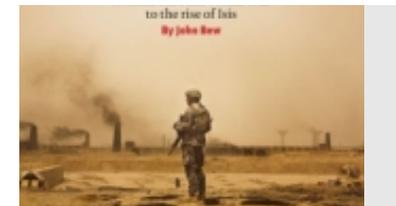
I am the first to treat such surveys sceptically. For example, the Russian Federation's top place for primary school literacy looks about as trustworthy as one of Putin's election victories. The Russians were mysteriously allowed to exclude nearly 8 per cent of their children from the tests. But British ministers chose to make international leagues the benchmarks for success - our schools were to become "world class", we were told - and they celebrated when English pupils did well, though it was then too early to attribute success to Labour policies.

Now, after a bad season, they can jolly well take the rap, just as football managers have to.

When the results came out, the Children's Secretary, Ed Balls, tried to blame parents for not reading bedtime stories. The Pirls study contains no data to support his graceless attempt to pass the buck. Though other countries conducted a parents' questionnaire, England didn't. However, in Scotland, which came six places lower in the league table, more than half the parents read to their children more than five hours a week - the second- highest proportion of any country.

A big difference between Scottish and English parents does not seem likely. What does seem likely is that new Labour's assault on primary school reading killed children's pleasure in it. Scotland came 35th and England 37th when children were asked about their enjoyment of reading; in both countries, the proportion who declared they found reading boring had risen

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## About Peter Wilby



Peter Wilby was editor of the Independent on Sunday from 1995 to 1996 and of the New Statesman from 1998 to 2005. He writes a weekly column for the NS.

## From the magazine



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The survey bears out conclusions reached independently by the Primary Review, the Cambridge-based review of English primary schooling ([www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)). "Reading attainment," wrote the researchers, "has shown just a very slight improvement and attitudes to reading have declined . . . £500m was spent on the National Literacy Strategy with almost no impact on reading levels. Clearer trials of material before general release, more attention to the research literature and serious consideration of cost-effectiveness would all surely have helped."

Nor does a favourite Tory theme receive any support. More than a quarter of English children in the Pirls survey were divided into ability groups for reading - a higher proportion than in any developed country except Scotland and New Zealand, which also did badly in the tests. Testing of science standards among 15-year-olds for Pisa found lower performance in schools that group children by ability - and the UK was the only country where such grouping was universal.

What always stands out in cross-national surveys is the unusually wide spread of performance in the UK. In the Pirls literacy survey, for example, 15 per cent reached the "advanced" level, better than all but three other countries. On the other hand, the proportion failing to reach even the "low" level was higher than all but ten other countries, which included Iran, Morocco and Macedonia. This inequality in results echoes economic and social inequalities.

There are no easy educational answers, therefore. But as the Pisa survey points out, socioeconomic differences between pupils are much less predictive of performance than socioeconomic differences between schools. A poor child's performance is boosted if he or she attends a school with children from more affluent homes rather than being placed in a ghetto of disadvantage. The policy challenge, then, is to design a school system that allows more mixing of children from diverse backgrounds. If ministers can



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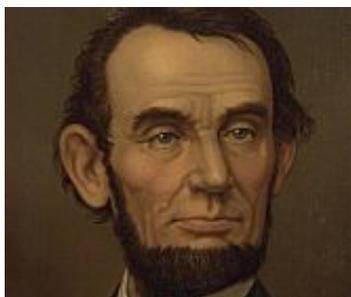
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