The place of reading in the Australian national curriculum

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Effective reading instruction for all
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Professor Barry McGaw has been a half-time Professorial Fellow in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne since January 2006. In 2006-2008, he was Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute. He is currently Executive Director of the international *Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills* project established and funded by Cisco, Intel and Microsoft which has its headquarters at the University of Melbourne. In the other part of his professional life his current major role is as Chair of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority.

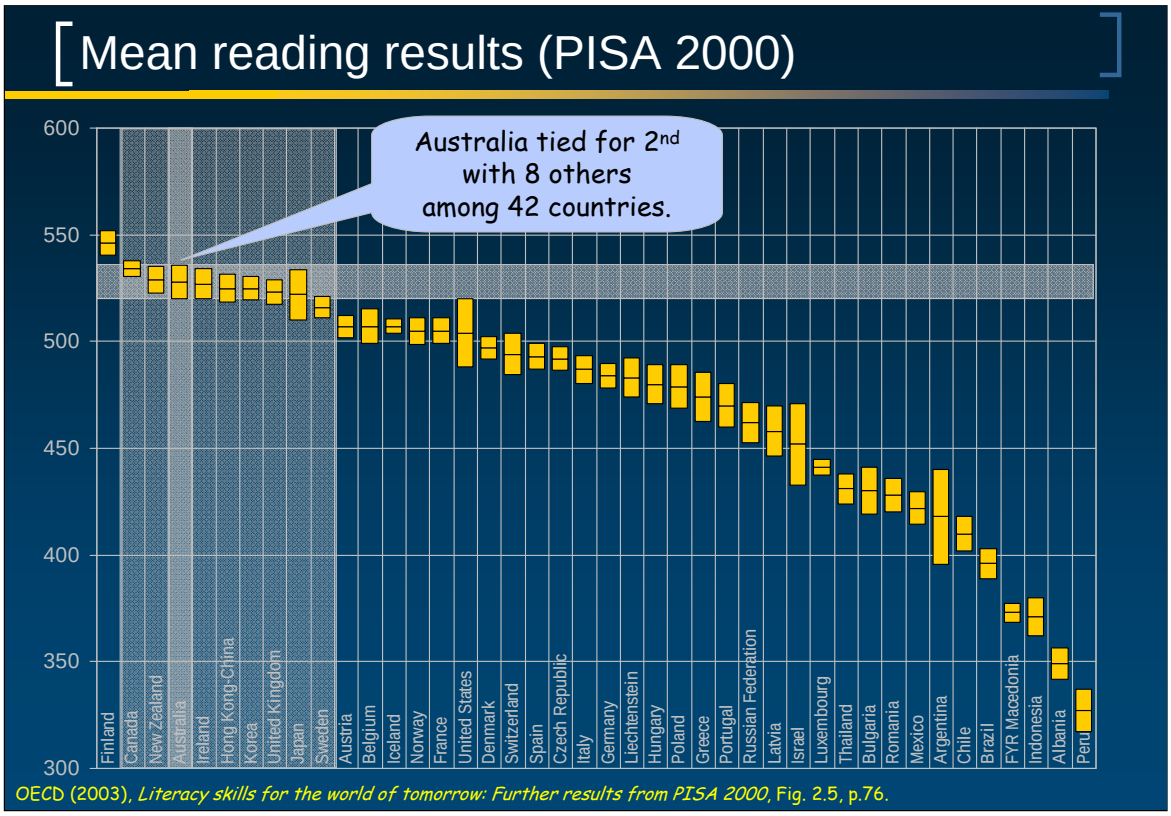
Prior to returning to Australia at the end of 2005, he was Director for Education at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). He had earlier been Executive Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Professor of Education at Murdoch University.

Outline of presentation

- Reading performance of Australian students
  - Overall quality
  - Position of low performers
- Reading in the new Australian curriculum
  - English curriculum
  - Other curricula

Reading performance of Australian students

Overall quality by mid-secondary school



The figure above shows the mean performances of countries in reading literacy in PISA 2000. Reading literacy assessed in PISA is the capacity to use, interpret and reflect on written material.

The line in the middle of the box for each country gives the mean performance of 15-year-olds in the country. The size of a box reflects the precision with which a country's mean is estimated. Where the boxes overlap on the vertical dimension, there is no significant difference between the means for the countries. (Further details are given in the PISA report indicated at the foot of the figure.)

The results reveal marked variations in performance levels among the 42 participating countries – ranging from Finland, significantly better than all others at the top, to Peru, significantly worse than all others at the bottom.

Australia ranked in 4th place but its mean is not significantly different from those of two countries above it or six below it. It is, therefore, appropriate to say that Australia ranked between 2nd and 10th or that Australia tied in 2nd place with eight other countries among the 42 participating.

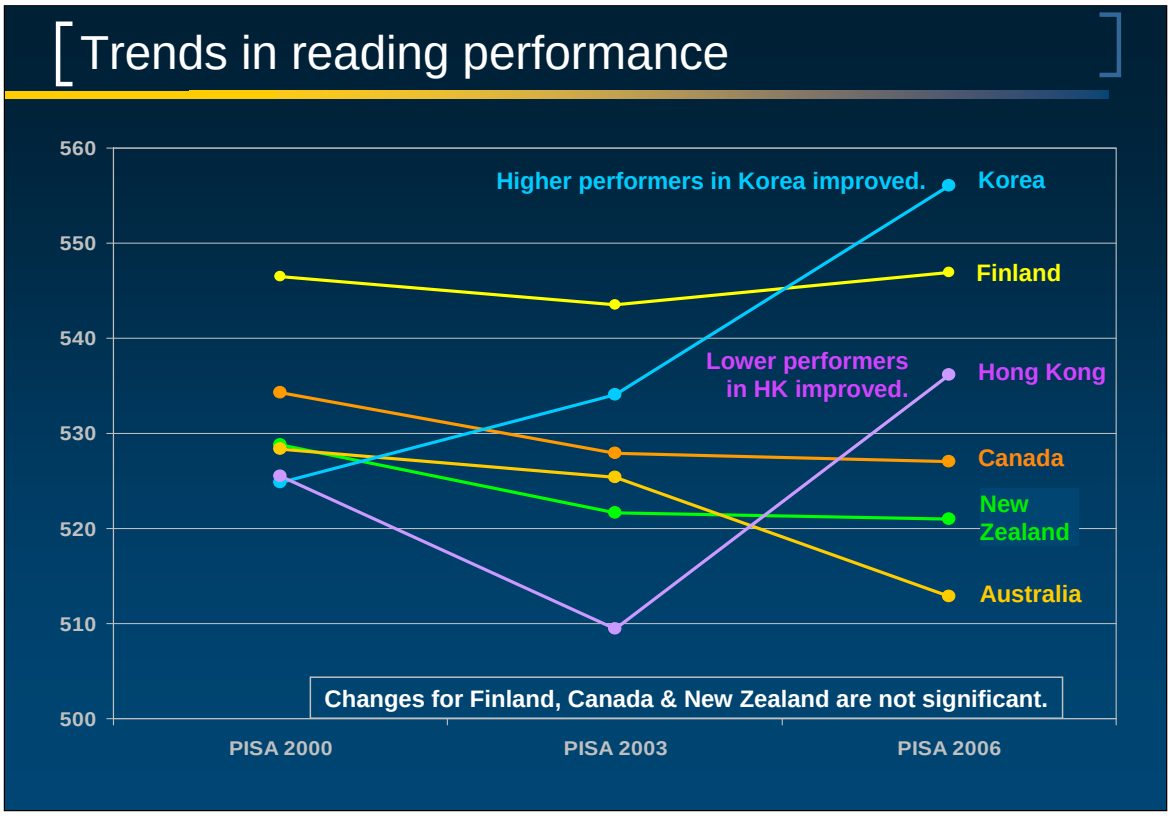
Australia's ranking in OECD/PISA Reading

- Reading ranks
  - PISA 2000: 4th but tied for 2nd
  - PISA 2003: 4th but tied for 2nd
  - PISA 2006: 7th but tied for 6th

	PISA 2000	PISA 2003	PISA 2006
Ahead of Australia	Finland	Finland	Finland Korea Canada NZ Hong Kong
Same as Australia	Korea Canada NZ Hong Kong	Korea Canada NZ	
Behind Australia		Hong Kong	

Australia's relative position in the three PISA assessments slipped from 2nd in 2000 and 2003 to 6th in 2006. The reason is that four countries that were at the same level as Australia, or even behind in the case of Hong Kong in 2003, were significantly ahead of Australia 2006.

PISA expresses results on the same scale on each occasion so, as shown in the next slide, it is possible to see how the changes in rank order relate to shifts in levels of mean performance.

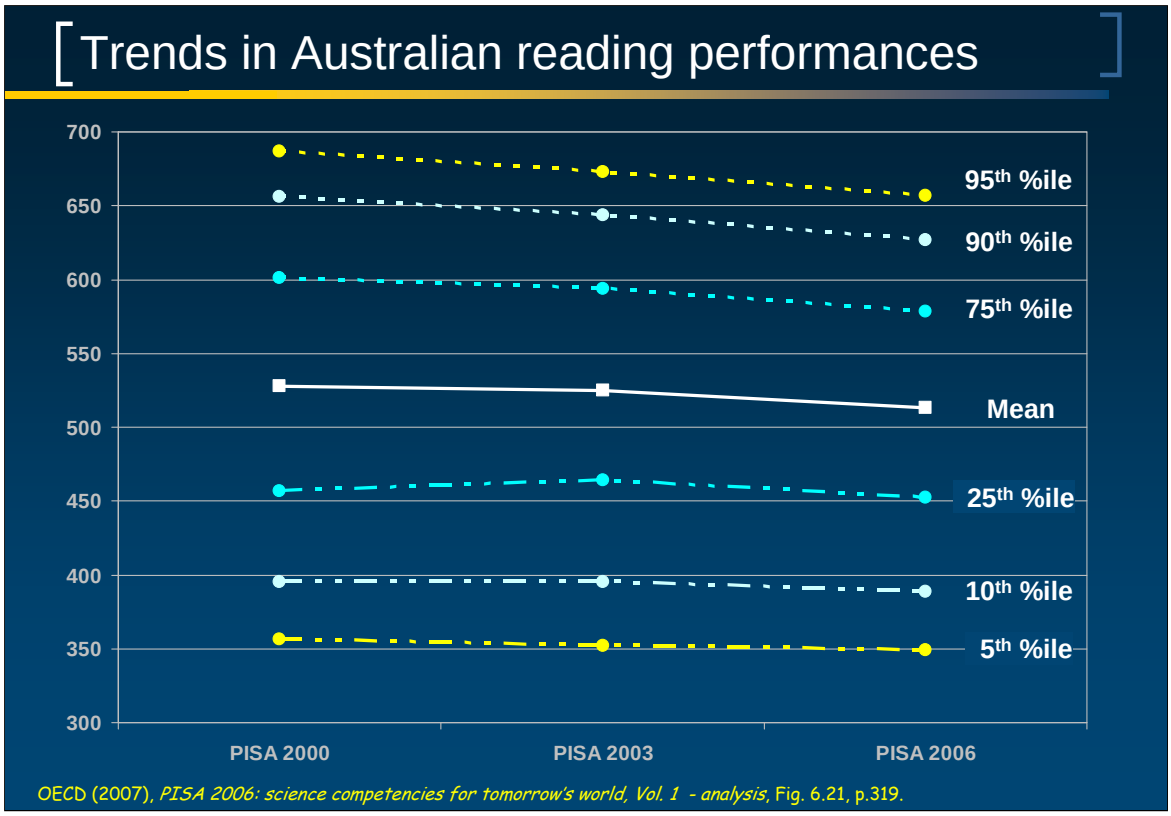


Australia's rank dropped because the Australian mean performance declined to 513 in 2006 from 528 in 2000 and 525 in 2003. This decline, which was statistically significant, occurred primarily because of a decline in performances at the highest level. The reasons for this are not immediately evident from the data but it at least clear that it is due to schools focusing more on basic achievement levels and not so much on the development of sophisticated reading of complex text.

Korea, on the other had, significantly improved its mean performance and did so by raising its performances at the highest levels. The sources of this improvement appear to be a new curriculum with more emphasis on essay tests and expanded use of essays in assessments for university entrance.

Hong Kong raised its mean performance by raising the performance of its poorer performing students and attributes this primarily to teacher development.

There were no significant changes for Finland, Canada and New Zealand.

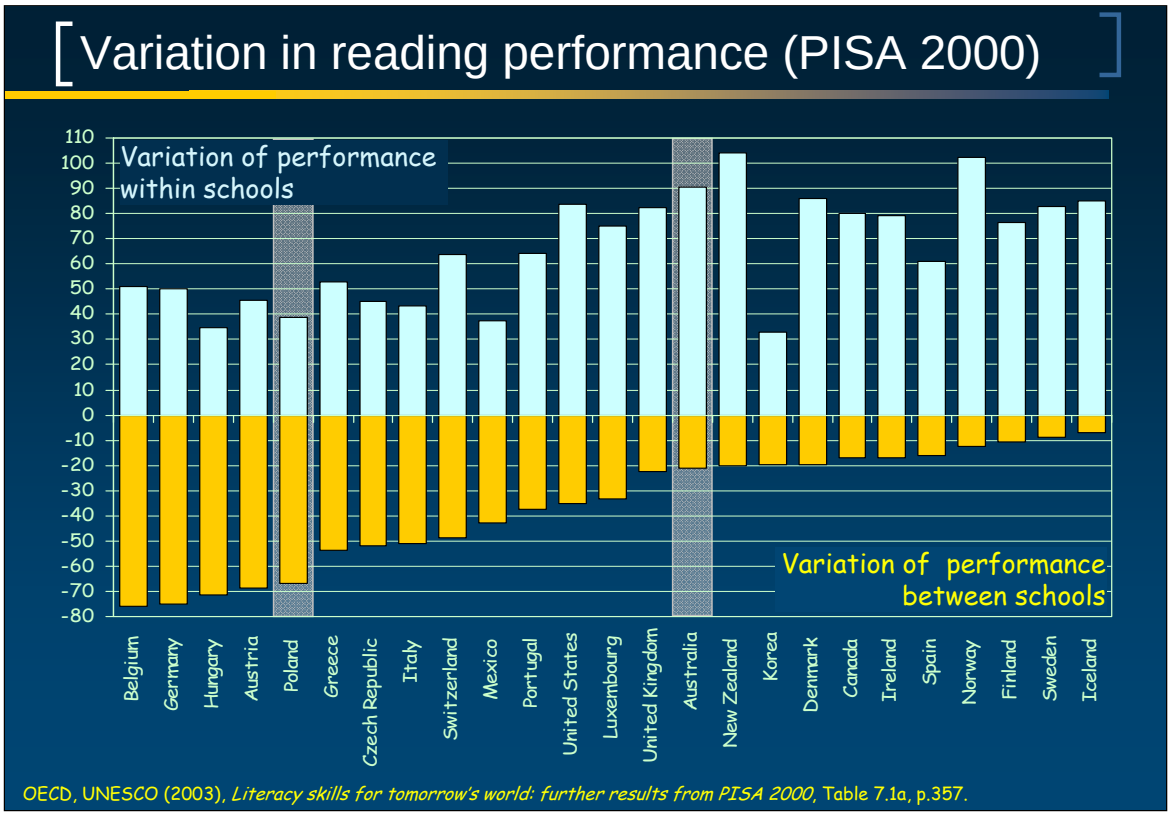


The decline in Australia's mean performance is shown again the graph above together with the trends in performance levels of Australia's 15-year-olds at the 95th, 90th, 75th, 25th, 10th and 5th percentiles. (The 5th percentile is the score below which the performances levels of 5 per cent of the Australian students lay, and so on for the other percentiles.)

Performance levels at the lower percentiles did not drop, while those at the higher percentiles did. This shows that the significant drop in Australia's mean performance was due to a decline among high performers.

Lessons from these international comparisons

- Focus only on significant differences
- Focus on distributions as well as means and thresholds
- Respond with attention to the whole distribution of students
  - Consider Korea and Hong Kong as shown earlier
  - Consider Poland

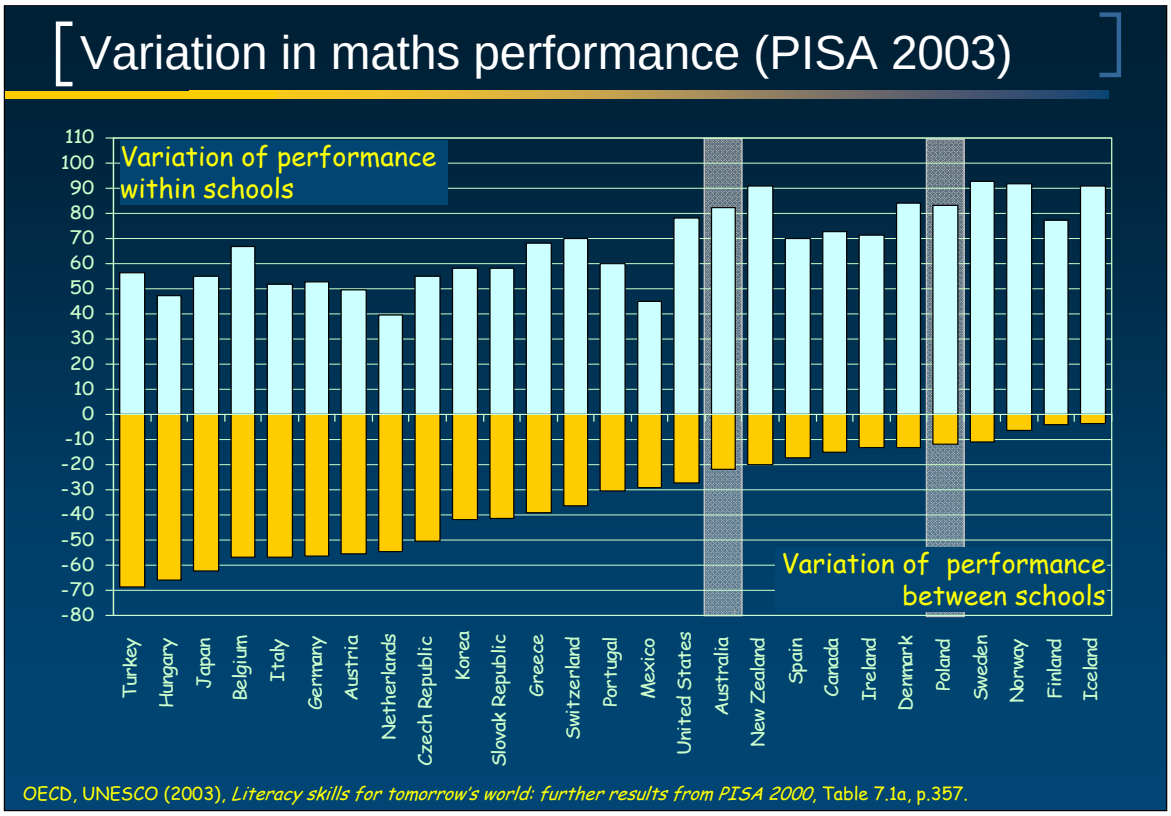


The figure above divides the variation in student performance in reading in PISA 2000 for each country into a component due to differences among students within schools, shown above the zero line, and a component due to differences between schools shown below that line.

In Iceland, Finland and Norway there is very little variation in scores between schools. Choice of school is not very important because there is so little difference among schools.

Among the countries in which there is a large component of variation between schools, there are some in which this occurs by design. In Germany and Poland, for example, students are sorted into schools of different types according to their school performance as early as age 12. The intention is to group similar students within schools differentiated by the extent of academic or vocational emphasis in their curriculum. This is intended to minimise variation within schools in order then to provide the curricula considered most appropriate for the differentiated student groups. It has the consequence of maximising the variation between schools.

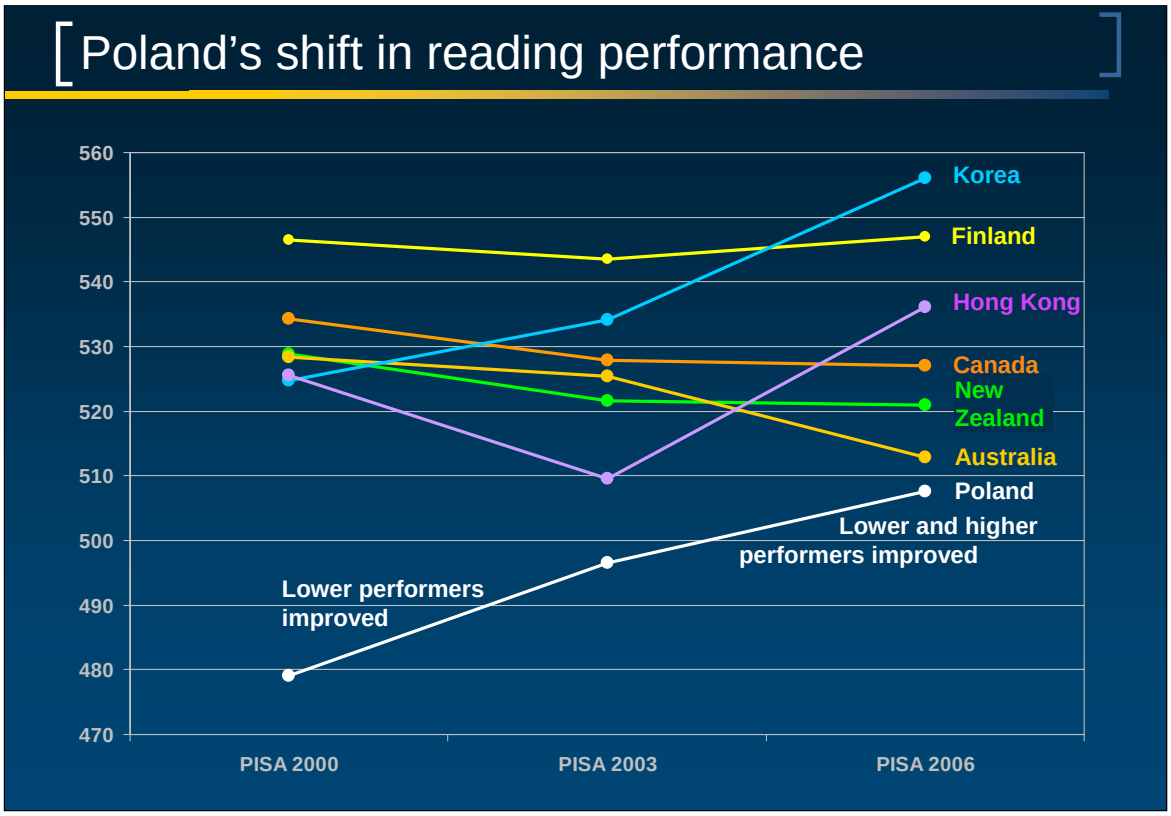
In some other countries, the grouping of students is less deliberate but, nevertheless, results in substantial between-school variation. In the United States, for example, 30 per cent of the overall variation is between-schools. In Korea, 37 per cent is between schools. In Australia, 19 per cent is between schools.



The figure above shows the within-schools and between-schools variation in student achievement in PISA 2003 mathematics.

The pattern is essentially the same as for PISA 2000 reading, shown in the previous slide, except for Poland.

For Poland, in PISA 2000, 63 per cent of the variation in reading was between-schools whereas in PISA 2003 in mathematics only 13 per cent was between schools. This remarkable difference was due to a reform in which early streaming of students into schools of different types was abandoned in favour of comprehensive schools for students up to the age at which PISA measures their performance.



This slide shows that move to comprehensive schools in Poland has been accompanied by not only the obvious reduction in the extent of variation in students' performances between schools but also in an improvement in mean performance levels. This was achieved between PISA 2000 and PISA 2003 by improving the performance of lower performers, presumably by raising expectations of them in the new, comprehensive school settings. Between 2003 and 2006, improvements across the whole distribution were achieved. In PISA 2006, Poland's mean reading performance was not significantly different from Australia's.

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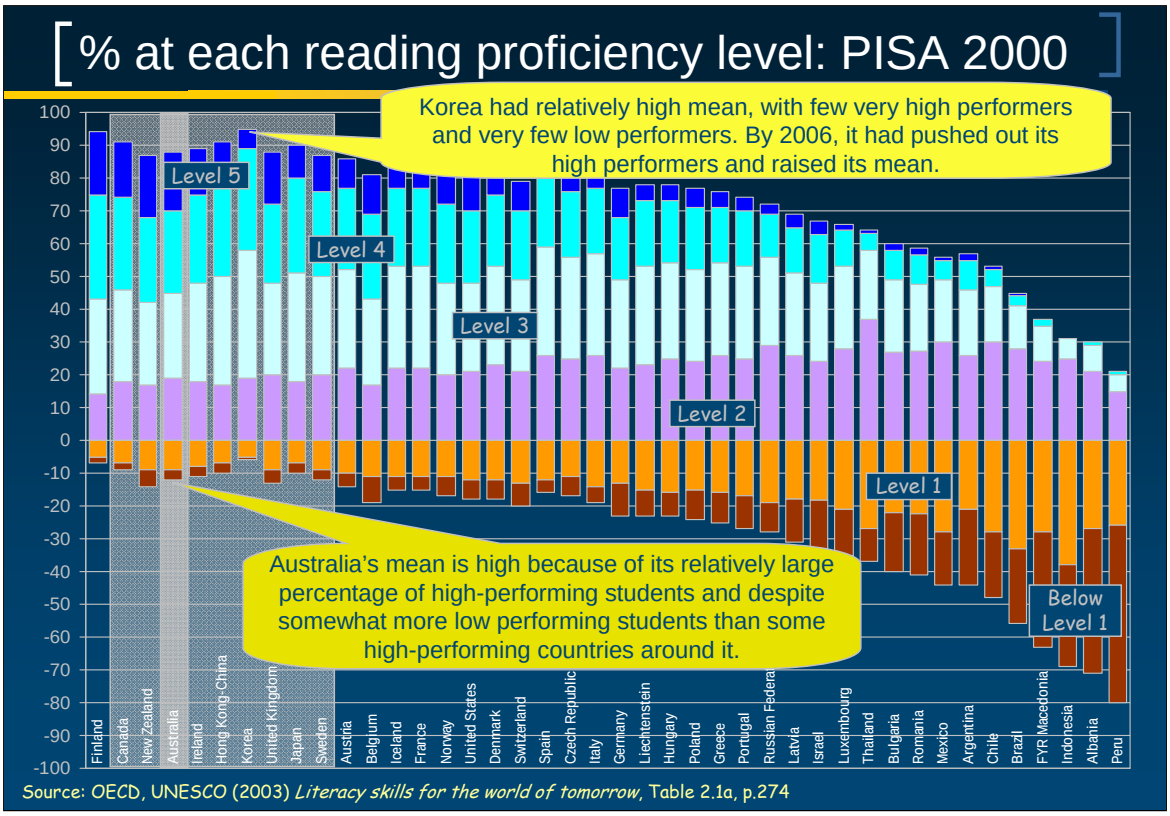
Position of low performers by mid-secondary school



In the main domains of assessment in PISA, there is sufficient information to establish and describe well-defined levels of performance on the relevant scale. In PISA 2000, five levels of performance were defined on the reading scale, with an additional lower domain not well measured and described only as 'below Level 1'. Students at this level may be literate in the sense of being able to decode printed words and to read text but they do not have a level of literacy sufficient for further study and learning. Even those at Level 1 are highly likely to be deficient in this respect.

The figure above shows the percentage of students at each level in each country. Countries are arranged in order of their mean performance with those around Australia covered by the grey box being the ones with mean performances not significantly different from Australia's.

Australia stands out in two important respects from some of the other high-performing countries around it. Australia has a considerably higher proportion of students at the highest level (Level 5). It also has a rather larger percentage at Level 1 or below than some of the others.

There is, thus, a slightly higher proportion of poorer performers in reading in Australia than in some of the other countries that are similarly high performing on average. As shown earlier, however, there has been a decline in Australia in the numbers of high performers since PISA 2000.

Korea provides an interesting contrast. It has a considerably smaller proportion of high achievers but a correspondingly small proportion of very low achievers. In fact, Korea has the mostly narrowly dispersed student performances.

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Reading in the new Australian curriculum

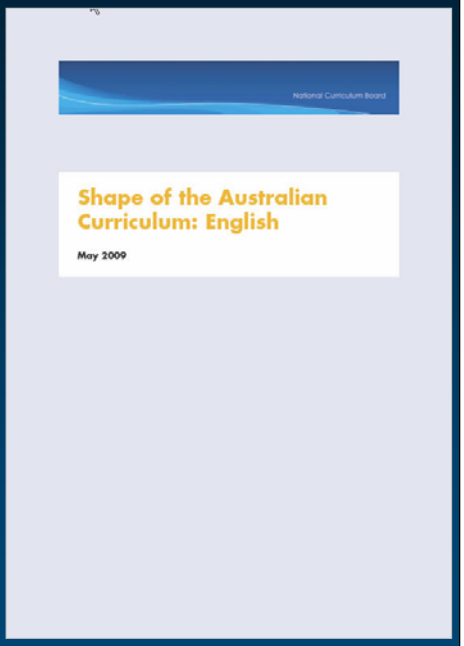
Development process and schedule

- Broad features developed with consultation
  - Shape of the Australian curriculum
  - Shape of the Australian curriculum: Specific learning area
    - Statement of purpose
    - Broad scope and sequence
  - June 2008 to April 2009
    - Small teams drafted initial documents
    - Public consultations
    - Revisions posted on website for comment over 3-4 months
    - Final versions published
- Current activity
  - Scope and sequence being elaborated
  - Workshops held with invited experts from across country

English curriculum

Shape of the English curriculum

- Three strands
  - Language
    - Knowing about the English language
  - Literature
    - Understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature
  - Literacy
    - Growing repertoire of English usage
- Some emphases important for Board
  - Phonics and phonemic awareness in initial teaching of reading
  - Grammar through the years of the curriculum
  - Literature central to development



Current elaboration of scope and sequence

- Document
  - Rationale and aims
  - Year-by-year broad outline of content by strand
- Language strand (some examples in current draft)
  - Phonological awareness, phonics and the alphabet
    - K: rhyme, syllabification, alphabet, read CVC words and some high frequency irregular words by sight
    - Year 1: match all of the letters of the alphabet with sounds, manipulate sounds including phoneme deletion and substitution; recognise and write consonant digraphs letter combinations (grapheme/phoneme correspondences)
  - Spelling
    - Year 1: use relationship between letters and sounds when spelling
  - Punctuation and layout
    - Year 1: ? and !, commas in lists, inverted commas
    - Year 2: apostrophes to indicate contractions and possession

Next steps

- Public consultation on document
  - Content scope and sequence
  - Achievement standards
    - Illustrated with annotated samples of students' work
- Final document electronic
  - Relatively brief
  - Linked to resources for teachers and students
  - Completed by mid-2010
  - Implemented from 2011

Other curricula

Other curricula

- Board committed to language and reading development across the curriculum
- Detailed strategy being developed
- Literacy continuum to be developed
  - Will inform NAPLAN

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