INTRODUCTION

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international comparative evaluation of reading literacy of Grade 4 (9 year-old) learners. The study was established to provide countries with information about learners’ achievement in the core curriculum area of reading, as a complement to the mathematics and science data provided by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science study (TIMSS).

This chapter is placed against a background of monitoring as defined and discussed by Plomp, Huijsman, and Kluypfhout (1992) who take a systems approach to monitoring. These authors build on the work of others in describing monitoring as a system of activities comprising three mechanisms of regularly collecting information, evaluation of information and evaluation of results in an institutional action. Plomp et al. (1992) therefore regard monitoring as the whole of information collection, the procedures and instruments, systems of information storage and retrieval, and steps taken in the reporting and evaluation of the information. In addition to these, the entity which is monitored (in this case the status quo of a national education system as monitored by PIRLS) is also considered to be a system, with a context, input, process and output factors.

In this chapter, firstly the nature of PIRLS and its potential uses for education system feedback are considered. Thereafter, background to the PIRLS study as it was administered in South Africa in the 2006 and 2011 cycles is outlined. Specifically, the achievement profiles of South African learners are presented from both cycles as a prelude to the discussion of the need to not only consider the overall achievement in relation to other participating countries but to also utilise contextual data from such a study to understand potential reasons for the achievement levels evident. In this regard, the challenges of investigation into the South African PIRLS teacher questionnaire data from both cycles are highlighted with potential reasons for this postulated. In light of this discussion, ways of investigating the achievement data with teachers using the PIRLS benchmark achievement data and instruments as a
form of system feedback are presented and the actual macro level policy impact of PIRLS in South Africa in relation to teaching and learning outlined.

BACKGROUND TO PIRLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

PIRLS is run under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). As an organisation, the IEA undertakes international studies that benchmark performance of school-going children in mathematics, science, civic education, information, communication, technology and reading. In particular, PIRLS provides multi-level data of children’s reading literacy and the factors that influence reading acquisition. PIRLS aims to describe trends and allows for international comparisons of the reading achievement of Grade 4 learners (Mullis, Kennedy, Martin, & Sainsbury, 2004).

PIRLS focuses on three aspects of learners’ reading literacy, namely:

1. *Processes of comprehension*, that involves being able to focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, and examine and evaluate content, language and textual elements.

2. *Purposes for reading*, which include the examination of literary experience and the ability to acquire and use information. Here, learners are typically exposed to narrative text for purposes of assessing literary experiences, while texts of a factual nature are used for purposes of assessing learners’ ability to acquire and use information.

3. *Reading behaviours and attitudes towards reading*. As part of these foci, information on the home, school and classroom contexts of learners are also gathered (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007).

For purposes of PIRLS, processes of comprehension are investigated via learners’ performance in reading achievement on a range of literary and informational texts (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). For each of these texts, learners responded to questions that measure a series of comprehension skills, ranging from retrieval to inferencing and integration and evaluation as outlined above.

To date, South Africa has participated in two PIRLS assessment cycles, 2006 and 2011. The South African PIRLS 2006 study assessed a first population of Grade 4 learners, but also included a second population of Grade 5 learners as a national option within the study (Howie et al., 2008). Learners at both grades were assessed across all 11 official languages of the country. South African Grade 5 learners achieved the lowest score of the 45 participating education systems of 302 (SE = 5.6). Grade 4 learners achieved on average 253 points (SE = 4.6). Average achievement for both these grades was well below the fixed international reference average of 500 points.

For PIRLS 2011, the South African study assessed a Grade 5 population in an attempt to develop trends from PIRLS 2006 to PIRLS 2011. However, to assess Grade 4 learners, South Africa opted to participate in the progress in International