Lithuania

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

Lithuania's Parliament defines the basic principles, structures, and objectives of education, while the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport devises and implements education policy. The Ministry defines the curriculum in use throughout the country and determines teacher salaries, requirements for teacher qualifications, priorities for qualification development, and the assignment of education staff. Local municipalities are responsible for administering and financing general education schools, with the exception of some national level schools. The municipalities also are responsible for the assessment of schools, administrators, teachers, professional development, and student achievement.

The levels of education in Lithuania are divided according to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011.[1] Education is compulsory for students ages 7 to 16. While preschool education is optional for children ages 0 to 6, one year of compulsory preprimary education is provided in Kindergartens, schools, or multifunctional centers for 6-year-old children as of September 2016.

Primary school consists of Grades 1 to 4. According to the Law on Education, children who have reached age 7 must attend first grade. By parents' request, a child can begin the school year earlier.

Basic school comprises Grades 5 to 10. Upper secondary school consists of Grades 11 and 12. *Gymnasia* form a parallel system of education lasting four years and corresponding to Grades 9 to 12. Currently, schools are being reorganized with three types of public schools: primary (Grades 1 to 4), *progymnasia* (Grades 1 to 8 or 5 to 8), and *gymnasia* (Grades 9 to 12).

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Lithuania participated in International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)'s PIRLS in 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2016. Prior to the inaugural PIRLS 2001, Lithuania participated in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1995 and 1999, but PIRLS 2001 was the country's first large-scale reading literacy study. The Ministry of Education and Science and the National Examinations Center (the institution responsible for the Matura and basic school leaving examinations) were responsible for national implementation of PIRLS 2001. At the outset of PIRLS 2001, the examination system had just undergone reform, with the

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centralized national examinations having been introduced at the high school leaving or university entrance level; a culture of assessment was growing in the country, basic analysis of the results of the Matura examinations were beginning to be conducted and disseminated, and ideas about other assessment possibilities (e.g., diagnostic tests and national assessments) were being shared. Given the timing, PIRLS had both a direct and indirect impact on the development of these processes. This means it is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency based on readers' characteristics and to compare reading proficiency levels of different age groups.

The positive results of PIRLS 2001 came as a pleasant surprise to the Lithuanian education community. Lithuania performed well, which may be one of the reasons why people listened to and disseminated the results. Lithuania's results in PIRLS were slightly lower in 2006 and 2011, but were discussed widely with more extensive secondary analyses and widely disseminated conclusions. The results influenced changes in the curriculum and in textbooks used for teaching reading, along with familiarizing language education specialists with the PIRLS assessment framework. In 2015, PIRLS 2011 results and recommendations led to changes to the preprimary curriculum and the design of new methodological tools to improve reading skills in the primary grades. All this had an impact on current primary education policy changes. The description of primary education programs was approved by the Minister of Education and Science in December 2015, and the revised Lithuanian language curriculum for primary education was approved in January 2016.[2] Students in first grade began following the new curriculum in September 2016, and since September 2017 Lithuanian language development has been held under the new programs in all grades of primary education (Grades 1 to 4).

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The national curriculum integrates reading instruction in primary school into mother tongue instruction. The language and reading curriculum describes the basic listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills students are expected to achieve by the end of Grades 2 and 4. The curriculum also describes language and reading achievement (e.g., attitudes, knowledge, skills) and provides educational guidelines, methodical recommendations, and examples for reaching them. The current national curriculum distinguishes the aspects of reading much more than prior curricula and conceives of reading as encompassing two major areas: Reading Technique and Text Comprehension (conscious reading); and Basic Knowledge of Literature and Culture. The latter area is divided further into Reading Skills, Reading Functions, and Reading of Literary and Nonliterary Texts. Throughout Grades 3 and 4, students are expected to develop knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- Reading Skills—While reading literary and nonliterary texts, including children's periodicals, students constantly improve their reading skills, including reading expressiveness and text

comprehension. Based on the reading purpose and specific situation, students choose the type and tempo of reading (e.g., verbal or silent and a slow, medium, or fast rate).

- Reading Functions—While reading and analyzing study materials, students start to recognize cognitive, educational, and value oriented or aesthetic functions of reading. The cognitive function refers to reading to know or to discover. The value oriented or aesthetic function refers to reading for enjoyment.

- Reading of Literary and Nonliterary Texts
  - While reading literary works or excerpts, students learn to evaluate a text, describing why they like or dislike it; indicate what in the text makes them laugh or feel happy or sad; admire, get angry, or experience other emotions; and identify vivid words and expressions.
  - While reading nonliterary texts, students learn to find needed information and to describe what is important in the text and what new things they have learned.
  - While completing tasks from textbooks, exercise books, or other texts, students learn to use explanations, suggestions, advice, and rules to carry out exercises for understanding language composition, learning writing, and doing creative tasks.
  - After reading fairy tales, stories, or legends, students learn to perform and retell those works with proper intonation, solve riddles, play children's folk games, and sing songs.
  - After reading prose works, students learn to define themes, main ideas, characters, places, and time of action; explain what they like in the works and why; and identify vivid verbs, synonyms, and comparisons.
  - Teachers help students recite poems and discuss their imagery and mood.
  - Students learn to understand originality of dramas and how to prepare and act out parts in dramatic works.
  - Students purposefully read nonliterary texts in books and periodicals and on the internet to find necessary information and to distinguish main from secondary information. They purposefully read periodicals and watch children's television programs and can recount what they read or saw.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Although there is no specific program for professional development in reading, in-service training centers provide ongoing professional development for teachers. Since 1993, teacher professional development in Lithuania is encouraged through the assignment of qualification categories: junior teacher, teacher, senior teacher, teacher methodologist, and teacher expert. Teachers' salaries in public schools primarily depend on their qualification category and length of service. Teachers must be recertified every five years to confirm their present category or advance to a higher one.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Nationwide standardized testing based on the fourth grade reading curriculum has been used to assess and monitor student achievement in reading. Administered in schools with Lithuanian, Russian, and Polish as languages of instruction, the main aims of standardized testing are to identify the strong and weak points of schools and students and to ensure learning support for reading and writing. The development of test items, assessment instructions, and recommendations for how to interpret the results of standardized tests are centralized, but schools are responsible for test administration, accommodations, and scoring procedures.

Special Reading Initiatives

Many school or class level reading promotion programs are implemented in basic schools in Lithuania. National initiatives also encourage students of all ages to read more, to develop reading skills, and to raise the prestige of reading. Some book publishers and distributors invest in reading promotion campaigns and projects that are carried out by publishers with their own resources or partial financing by national funds or the Lithuanian Publishers Association. All of Lithuania Reads to Kids (based on the international All of Europe Reads to Kids initiative) involves Lithuanian schools, teachers, and students with their parents. Established in February 2014, the European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET) unifies Lithuania and other European countries engaged in literacy policymaking and reading promotion for the purposes of reducing the number of children with low literacy skills, helping to improve reading skills, and encouraging students to read for pleasure.[3]

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In an attempt to control the spread of COVID-19 in Lithuania, primary education and other educational activities were suspended twice: from March 16 to May 22, 2020, and from January 4 to March 12, 2021. Subsequent decisions on school closures were made according to the epidemiological situations of municipalities and were influenced by agreements among school founders, heads of schools, and the community.

The provisions of the General Education Plan of the Primary Education Program for the School Years of 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport state that during quarantine, emergency, or extreme event, the education process can be adjusted or temporarily suspended. If education at a school is organized through distance learning, the school shall devote at least 50 percent of the time provided for the education process to synchronous education, and not more than 50 percent to asynchronous education. Schools also should work to

monitor students' emotional health, as well as provide specifics on the education of students with special education needs and other education assistance.

In the summer of 2020, the National Agency for Education prepared a *Distance Learning/ Education Guide*, which provides recommendations and methodological suggestions for distance learning for teachers and school leaders. The National Agency for Education also organized many virtual seminars to support teachers and school leaders during the lockdown.[4]

Students were supported in these ways: access to technological equipment from schools and digital materials for learning,[5] a special television show with lessons for primary students called "LRT Lessons,"[6] and provision of education assistance for students with special education needs.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The national student achievement checks for fourth grade students in 2020 have not been organized due to COVID-19. However, fourth graders took a national reading test on May 3 and 4, 2021, and a national mathematics test on May 5 and 6, 2021. The national average of the points scored in Mathematics was 27 out of a maximum of 40 points, and the national average of points scored in Reading was 21.9 out of a maximum of 31 points.

Policy and Practice Changes

During COVID-19 changes in legislation were made in the provisions of the General Education Plan of the Primary Education Program for the School Years of 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, including a new chapter about organization of education in quarantine emergencies, extreme events, or events that pose a risk to learners' health and life or in circumstances at school in which the daily education process cannot be organized. Another legislative change was an order by the Minister called On Approval of Learning Forms and Description of Training Organization Procedure.

New documents created due to COVID-19 included a description of criteria for organizing the distance learning process approved by the Ministry in 2020 and a *Distance Learning/Education Guide* prepared by the National Agency for Education in the summer of 2020.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

During the 2019–2020 academic year, the pandemic resulted in PIRLS 2021 field testing being completed only partially. The pandemic also disrupted the administration of the main test in the 2020–2021 academic year, with testing postponed to the fall of the following academic year.

Suggested Readings

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3   *Visa Lietuva skaito vaikams* [All of Lithuania reads to children]. (2012). Retrieved from http://www.vlsv.lt/joomla/index.php?lang=lt

4   Ministry of Education, Science and Sport & National Agency for Education. (2020). *Nuotolinio mokymo(si)/ugdymo(si) vadovas* [Distance education guide]. Retrieved from https://www.emokykla.lt/upload/nuotolinis/Nuotolinio%20mokymo%20Vadovas_3.pdf

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6   Lithuanian National Radio and Television. (2020). *LRT pamokėlės* [LRT lessons]. Retrieved from https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/video/lrt-pamokeles