PISA IN FOCUS 19

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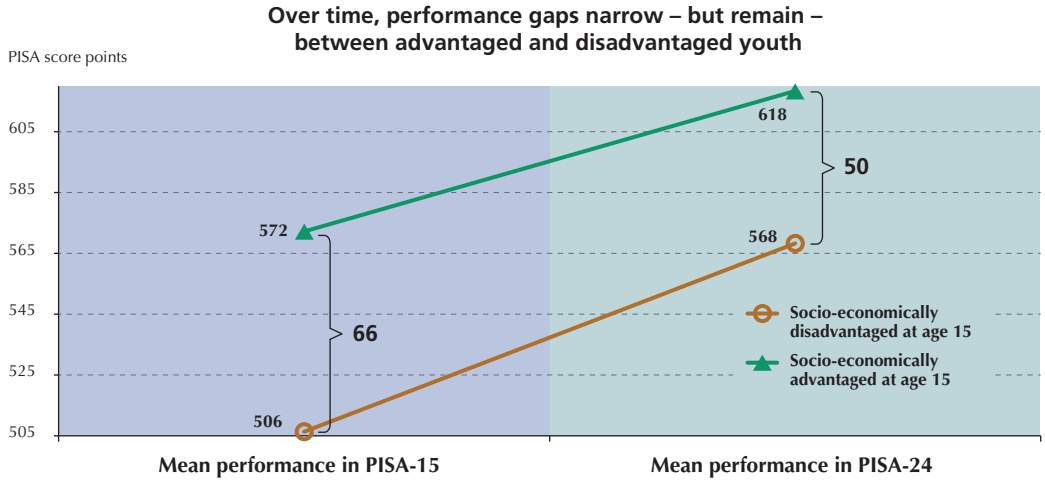
Is there really such a thing as a "second chance" in education?

- While the reading proficiency of Canadian 15-year-olds closely predicts reading proficiency at age 24, young adults can shape their reading skills after the end of compulsory schooling.
- In the transition to young adulthood, reading skills generally improve – but more for some groups than for others. Immigrants, in particular, manage to close performance gaps between the ages of 15 and 24.
- Participation in some forms of formal post-secondary education is consistently and substantially related to improvements in reading skills between the ages of 15 and 24.

The transition from adolescence to early adulthood, the period between the ages of 15 and 24, is a critical time in the social and intellectual development of young people. Once compulsory education is completed, adolescents have to make important decisions about post-secondary education, employment and other life choices that will have a major impact on their future learning and employment prospects as well as on their overall well-being. Having a solid foundation in reading will make it that much easier to succeed in specialised higher education or in job-related training. Conversely, if young people are not required – or choose not – to use their reading skills beyond age 15, they may begin to lose their proficiency in those skills.

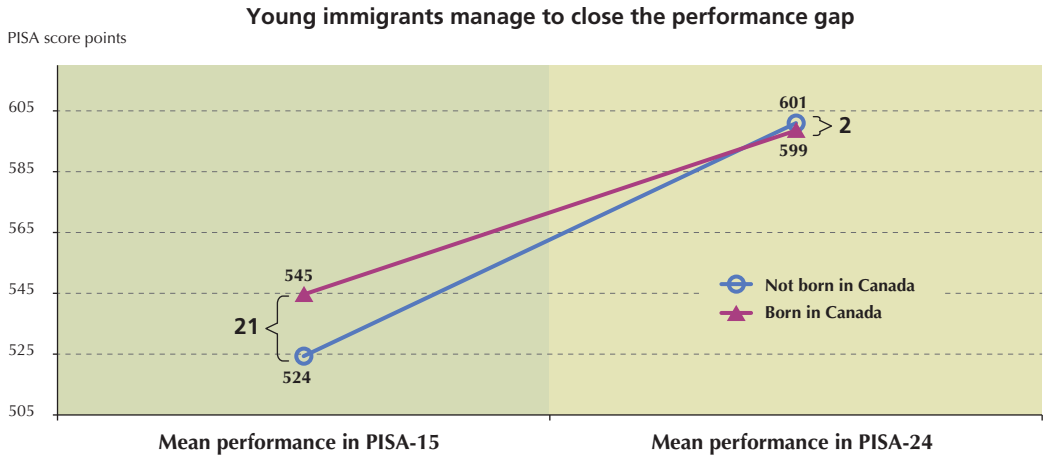
Where education and training opportunities are readily available, deficits in initial education do not doom individuals to poor reading proficiency for the rest of their lives.

A decade-long study undertaken in Canada coupled data collected from the PISA assessment of 15-year-olds in 2000 (PISA-15) with follow-ups conducted every two years through a national survey of those same students and parents (the Youth in Transition Survey). In 2009, the same students who had taken the PISA test as 15-year-olds in 2000 were re-assessed (PISA-24) to examine whether and how young people acquire and lose skills during this crucial time in their lives. On average, the young people surveyed gained 57 score points on the PISA reading scale between the ages of 15 and 24 – the equivalent of more than one school year. In addition, the proportion of young people who scored above proficiency Level 3 in PISA – the level at which students are capable of performing moderately complex reading tasks, and that is associated with a greater likelihood of enrolling in higher education – increased from 79% at age 15 to 93% at age 24.



Source: OECD (2012), *Learning beyond Fifteen: Ten Years after PISA,* OECD Publishing, Table 3.2.

Although those students who had performed poorly when they were 15 improved the most during the period, for the most part they were not able to fully catch up with their peers. For example, in 2000, when students who participated in PISA were 15, girls outscored boys in reading by an average of 32 points; by 2009, that gap had narrowed to 18 points. Similarly in PISA 2000, socio-economically advantaged students outscored their disadvantaged peers by more than 65 points; by 2009 that gap had narrowed to 50 points. However, the average score of 24-year-olds who had been considered disadvantaged at age 15 (568 points in PISA-24) remained below the average performance of 15-year-old advantaged students (572 points in PISA-15).



Source: OECD (2012), *Learning beyond Fifteen: Ten Years after PISA,* OECD Publishing, Table 3.2.

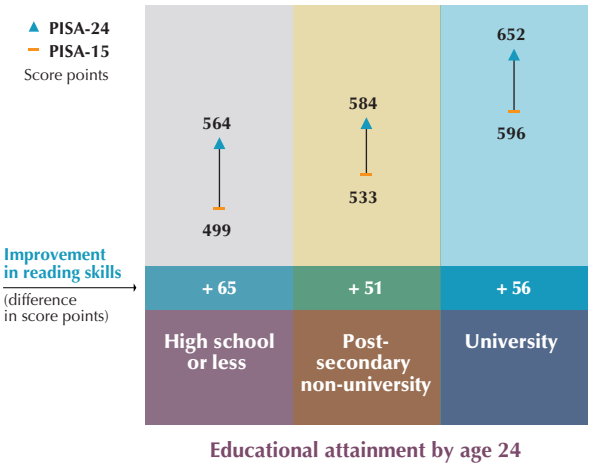
One group of students did close the gap entirely: students born outside of Canada. At the age of 15, those born in Canada outperformed those born outside of the country by more than 20 score points – 545 to 524 score points, respectively. By the age of 24, young people with an immigrant background scored on a par with those who had been born in the country – around 600 score points, on average. This significant finding reflects the effectiveness of Canada's education and integration policies.

Improvements in reading proficiency are strongly related to educational attainment…

What influences improvements in reading skills the most? Participation in some form of formal post-secondary education is consistently and substantially related to improvements in reading skills between the ages of 15 and 24. University graduates at age 24 had an average score of 652 points in the PISA re-assessment. In contrast, those with only a high school diploma scored, on average, nearly 100 points lower, at 564 points. When students in the former group were 15, they averaged 596 points on the PISA 2000 test – substantially higher than the scores attained nine years later by those whose highest educational attainment was high school.

Completing a post-secondary degree by the age of 24 is also strongly related to skills growth even after accounting for the level of skills acquired at age 15, socio-economic background and other individual characteristics. Those 24-year-olds with only a high school diploma or with more than three years of work experience had lower scores, on average, in the PISA re-assessment than those with higher educational attainment or less substantial work experience.

Everyone can improve their reading skills



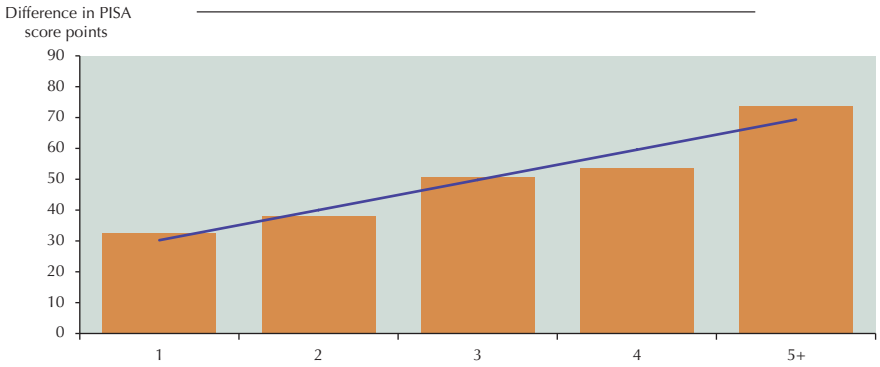
Source: OECD (2012), *Learning beyond Fifteen: Ten Years after PISA*, OECD Publishing, Table 6.1.

…and to participation in formal education and training.

While it is unlikely that low-achievers will be able to completely make up for initial disadvantage, this study identified several ways that such disadvantage can be overcome. Improvements in reading proficiency are strongly related to time spent in the education system, regardless of the educational pathways individuals follow. For instance, the improvement in reading skills among young adults who had spent four or more years in school after age 15 was about the same, whether they had actually completed a degree or not by age 24. Those who never completed a programme above high school, but who studied for four or more years after high school, improved their reading skills by 70 score points. Those who did complete a university degree improved their reading skills by 60 score points.

Greater proficiency at early ages is an advantage for further education and creates opportunities for additional studies that may not be as readily available to low-achievers. While taking the most common path – through secondary and then directly on to university-level education – appears to maximise improvements in reading proficiency, not everyone takes that route. The evidence in this unique study shows that given the opportunity, many low-achievers manage to find ways to improve their reading proficiency in the years following compulsory education. While not all of them catch up with the top performers, the skills they acquire later help them to participate in society more fully.

Reading proficiency improves with formal education



Total years in formal education between the ages of 15 and 24 among those with a post-secondary, non-university degree at 24

Source: OECD (2012), *Learning beyond Fifteen: Ten Years after PISA*, OECD Publishing, Table 6.2.

The bottom line: Learning does not end with compulsory education. The fact that young people, regardless of their educational attainment, can continue to acquire reading skills between the ages of 15 and 24 shows that no one should feel resigned to inferior reading proficiency because of poor initial education. Second-chance programmes and flexibility in education systems can help young people who have not had the advantages of supportive learning environments earlier in their lives.

For more information

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See OECD (2012), *Learning beyond Fifteen: Ten Years after PISA*, OECD Publishing.

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