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## Literacy research must look to the past

An overly negative view of literacy and reluctance to take account of history has limited research and led indirectly to the advancement of some unproductive ideas about literacy, according to a new review of research on literacy education released by ACER on 21 November.

Written by University of Sydney Professorial Research Fellow Peter Freebody, Australian Education Review 52, *Literacy Education in School: Research perspectives from the past, for the future*, aims to expand our understanding of literacy at a time when public and private lives have become increasingly literacy dependent, and literacy demands more complex and sophisticated.

The review brings together a rich variety of past and current research and encourages policy makers, researchers, and practitioners not to exclude a historical perspective of literacy education research, arguing that from the past we can learn lessons that can lead us forward.

However, many young researchers have been taught to distrust any research that is more than a decade old and as such many valuable lessons from the past have been omitted in recent studies which are often simplistic and repetitive.

"Many of the studies encountered while reading for this review are conceptually trite, repetitive, to all intents and purposes, of earlier studies, or so limited in their theoretical scope and practical benefits that they yield little for educators working with a concept of literacy beyond letter or word reading," Professor Freebody says.

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The review argues that a false dichotomy has developed in literacy theory between “code” and “meaning-emphasis”, a dichotomy sometimes wrongly equated with the debate between “phonics” and “whole language” approaches to teaching. This leads teachers of early literacy to believe that they must choose between the two methods, when in fact effective teachers use elements from both, as well as additional strategies.

Professor Freebody is also critical of the media portrayal of the teaching and learning of literacy as being in a state of crisis despite the high levels of performance on the part of Australian students in international literacy tests.

Professor Freebody is concerned that the idea of literacy is sometimes simply used as a form of punishment, saying “The effects of research are less productive when the primary function is to cut ‘underperforming’ teachers, students or target demographic groups out from the herd for naming, branding or punishment.”

He argues that future research into literacy education must include a focus on observational study of teaching in actual classrooms.

Australian Education Review number 52, *Literacy Education in School: Research perspectives from the past, for the future*, by Peter Freebody with a foreword by Professor Barry McGaw, Director, Melbourne Education Research Institute, is available for download from the Australian Education Review [series website](#).

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## The lesson of Jonah

*In this opinion article, originally published in Education Review, Professor Stephen Dinham, looks at the lessons that can be learned from the character of Johah in the recent hit television series Summer Heights High.*

In the final episode of Chris Lilley's Summer Heights High we saw Jonah, the smart-arse Tongan break-dancer, dragged from the school. School was the source of much of Jonah's identity and his problems.

Like many, Jonah was always up against it. His family background was literacy poor. Reading material was lacking in the home and Jonah wasn't read to as a young child. Jonah didn't attend pre-school and by the time he entered primary he was already two to three years behind some of his peers in literacy development. This gap widened. Jonah moved from school to school and each transition had a negative effect on his learning. Jonah was one of many and his teachers, well meaning and under pressure, didn't diagnose or deal with his literacy problems. Jonah didn't receive the individual attention, explicit teaching and feedback he needed. Jonah's lack of progress was attributed to his poor behaviour and attitude but his behaviour and attitude were largely a product of his lack of academic achievement.

Jonah couldn't master literacy and because so much of schooling is literacy based, he struggled in all curriculum areas. He knew he was falling behind and covered his inadequacy with bravado and over-confidence. Jonah avoided engaging with schoolwork as much as possible. He discovered he could make people laugh.

By the time he entered high school, Jonah was five years behind some of his peers. By year 8, he was seven years behind many in his year and found basic school work beyond him. His reading and writing skills were at year 3 level, lower than they had been in year 6. Jonah was going backwards.

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Fortunately, Jonah was good at break-dancing, something which became central in his life. Unfortunately, break-dancing also got him into trouble at school and was used as a means to punish Jonah when his behaviour got out of hand.

Jonah was placed in a special reading program where he received attention and encouragement but not the tools to master literacy. It was thought that recognising and valuing his cultural background through programs such as 'Polynesian Pathways' would motivate Jonah and his friends and develop feelings of self-worth, but the program itself had no depth, consisting of grass skirts and dancing, rather than knowledge and appreciation of Polynesia's rich cultures. Jonah's real issue wasn't with his cultural background – he was distinctive for other reasons. Jonah lacked the basics, but he wasn't challenged either.

When Jonah was cooperative and well-behaved, his teachers told themselves their strategies were working but a lack of academic progress made conflict inevitable. The brighter year 7 boys discovered they could wind up Jonah and get him into trouble. In all of this, Jonah's home background was a hindrance. An absent mother and an authoritarian, unresponsive father who couldn't help him with his work didn't support Jonah's development and learning. Threats to send Jonah back to Tonga failed to improve his literacy and schoolwork.

Jonah had a growing, 'bad' reputation and was backed deeper into a corner. The frustrations and incidents became more frequent. He was suspended, which was meant to teach him a lesson. Jonah came back to school even further behind. The cut and paste work he had done while on suspension was ridiculed. After more incidents, he was expelled, physically. Jonah had failed school, and school had failed Jonah, but he didn't want to leave. It was all he had. His final act was to deface the school and the teachers' cars.

Jonah would soon come to the attention of another set of authority figures and his education would continue on the streets and in other institutions. He would be backed into other corners.

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If he was lucky, however, his father or others might take an interest in him and give Jonah the guidance and warmth he needed. He might obtain an unskilled job and experience a sense of achievement and independence. Self-realisation might dawn. One day, he might even learn to read and write. At last resort, there are some good literacy programs in prison.

One day, Jonah might even be able to break the illiteracy cycle with his own children, although going 'up' to the school on their behalf would be always be difficult.

[Professor Stephen Dinham](#) is ACER's Research Director (Teaching and Leadership).

This article was first published in the November issue of Education Review, which is online at <http://www.educationreview.com.au>

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## Identifying dangers in the world of 'cyberia'

The greatest danger to children and teens online comes from their own peers according to leading adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg.

Dr Carr-Gregg, in conjunction with ACER's Leadership Centre, is conducting a national seminar series that will explore the world of 'Cyberia' and how today's youth lives there. The seminar series began in Sydney on 19 November with seminars to take place in Darwin, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth in coming days.

"At a time in their lives when identity is the central issue of their entire psychological development, our teenagers and children are citizens in a cyberworld where identity means nothing and things are rarely as they seem," Dr Carr-Gregg says.

"In Cyberia, what feels like a game may be a trap. What sounds like a friend could be a predator. What looks like a bank could be a thief."

Dr Carr-Gregg's one-day intensive seminar focuses on the impacts and outcomes of young people's use of social networking sites, cyberbullying, internet addiction, filtering software and online games.

ACER launched its leadership centre in July this year with the goal of delivering best practice professional learning in teaching and leadership.

According to Leadership Centre Director, Dr Neil Carrington, the student is at the heart of all leadership development activities.

"We know that young people are very sophisticated in using technology to access information. It is of the utmost importance that they can do so safely," Dr Carrington says.

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"The ACER Leadership Centre is delighted to partner with world experts, such as Dr Michael Carr Gregg, to bring important issues such as cyber bullying to the attention of leaders in education, health and the wider community."

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg is Australia's best known adolescent psychologist and one of the country's leading authorities on teenage behaviour.

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## ACER UPDATE

### Student Aptitude Test for Tertiary Admission

ACER has been contracted to conduct stage one of the Federal Government's pilot Student Aptitude Test for Tertiary Admission (SATTA). ACER will use *uniTEST*, which was developed in conjunction with Cambridge Assessment, during the trial. The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) will subsidise universities' participation in the trial by providing funding for universities to test up to 20 000 students, as well as providing up to \$10 000 to each university to promote the scheme. The pilot of *uniTEST* will provide universities with additional information on prospective students and provide alternative pathways to university for some students who may otherwise have not gained a university place.

Further information is available on the [uniTEST website](#). For information about participating in a pilot program or attending uniTEST information sessions please contact Ms Tanya Williams, Project Director, ACER on (03) 9277 5736 or [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address.](#)

### AJE special leadership edition

School leaders need to recognise emotional resistance and the importance of forming effective relationships when implementing change, as revealed in the latest issue of *Australian Journal of Education*. The special issue, published by ACER in November, is dedicated to providing an insight into the complex issue of effective leadership and ways in which school leaders can successfully implement renewal and change. Featured authors are some of the world's leading authorities on educational leadership. For more information or to purchase a copy of the Australian Journal of Education, please visit the [AJE website](#).

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## Primary schools 'in the balance' report

ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr John Ainley was part of the research team led by Max Angus and Harriet Olney of Edith Cowan University to work on the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) 'In the Balance' report, released in October. The report, initiated by APPA and funded by the Federal Government, found that large numbers of Australian government, independent and Catholic primary schools do not have the capacity to fully achieve the goals set for them by governments, and points to the fact that many of the schools serving low socio-economic communities are acutely under-resourced. The report is available from the APPA website at [www.appa.asn.au/](http://www.appa.asn.au/)

## Student social and emotional health examined

ACER researchers recently worked in conjunction with Professor Michael Bernard of the University of Melbourne to produce the Australian Scholarship Group (ASG) commissioned Student Social and Emotional Health Report. The report, released in October, shows that large percentages of students experience social and emotional difficulties. It outlines the methodology, key findings, recommendations and actions that parents and educators can undertake to help improve student social and emotional well-being. The ASG Student Social and Emotional Health Report is available from the Australian Scholarships Group website at [www.asg.com.au](http://www.asg.com.au)

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Australian Council for Educational Research  
Private Bag 55, Camberwell, Victoria Australia 3124  
Tel: + 61 3 9277 5555  
Fax: + 61 3 9277 5500  
Web: [www.acer.edu.au](http://www.acer.edu.au)

