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Rethinking child care policy

Recent media attention to rethinking child care policy and funding is well overdue according to ACER's Research Director, Early Childhood Education, Dr Alison Elliott. This article was first published in the opinion section of The Canberra Times on 18 January 2006.

As early childhood experts and commentators have often said, much current child care and early childhood policy is based on outdated ideas of parents' workforce participation, family and workplace mobility, and what constitutes a 'working week'. It also largely ignores the long discredited distinction between 'child care' and 'early childhood education'.

There is a myriad of legislation, regulation, providers, and funding bodies. In some places child care is a real dog's breakfast. And like a dog's breakfast, it is often stripped to the bone. Despite national quality assurance processes there is huge variation within and between states in child care provision and quality. Many children miss out altogether.

Since the current twin system of child 'care' and preschool 'education' developed about one hundred years ago much has changed. Family dynamics are very different. Most women and mothers work outside the home and their jobs are quite different from those of the mid and even late Twentieth Century.

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Women are employed across all areas of the workforce; they can work all hours and seven days a week; they attend meetings and travel on business. But they want to balance work and family in ways that aren't yet realistic, except for the well off. While telecommuting has altered the nature of the workplace for some women, most still commute to work- often from one end of the city to the other.

Along with the changing family and work patterns we know a lot more about children's developmental and educational needs in early childhood. Research points to the impact of preschool experiences on adjustment to school and on longer term educational and social outcomes. A concern for schools is the alarming differences in young children's language, cognitive and social development at school entry. Many children, especially from the most vulnerable families, have little opportunity for sustained participation in rich preschool learning environments. Unfortunately, the developmental gaps that are apparent by age five or six are difficult to close, even with well targeted school interventions.

Essentially, the Commonwealth funds child 'care' largely as a labour force measure and the states fund preschools to provide 'education'. Closing this 'care' – 'education' gap is looming as a major challenge for the early childhood field and for the wider community, including schools. Developing a new approach to early childhood care and education is about providing for families' work-related child care needs *and* optimising early learning and development. To date though, a national approach to seamless provision of early education and care is a long way off. There is little agreement on what is needed, which developmental and early learning models and approaches work best and in which contexts, and how to fund more integrated services.

New conceptions of child care and early education must consider the complexity of changing family structures, roles and responsibilities, plus the reality of families' home and work arrangements. Rethinking child care provision must acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all model will not work.

Meeting the child care and early education needs of working – and non-working- families in Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane is very different from meeting education and care needs of families in Katherine, Broken Hill or Taree.

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The idea of struggling to work-based child care on peak hour public transport with a stroller and toddler is more than even the fittest supermum- or dad- can manage. Work-place child care is certainly not the answer for all working parents. But nor is Family Day Care, or neighbourhood-located child care centres or preschool or kindergarten.

Clearly, the current early childhood system is not working well. Despite record spending and record numbers of child care places nationally, thousands of children miss out on child care and preschool places. Many more are under served or shunted between caregivers. When families do find a child care or preschool centre with a vacancy, it often costs as much as the most elite private school. Yet, child care workers are poorly paid and often poorly qualified.

The need for skilled early childhood practitioners is critical. Internationally, it is recognised that quality staff and quality development and learning outcomes go hand-in-hand. When early childhood educators have inadequate or incorrect knowledge, especially in early language and literacy, they cannot adequately support learning. And children suffer.

Only in Queensland must all child care practitioners have some, however minimal, qualification. Only in New South Wales must child care centres employ a qualified early childhood teacher- and then, only if they have more than 29 children.

The basic structure of early childhood care and education has changed little in the last hundred years. The legacy of the historical care-education divide still frames much current policy and practice. Developing an early childhood care and education system to take us well into the present century will be tough. But, the complexity of our family and work lives, expectations of continuing social change, and new knowledge about the importance of early brain development to later social and academic outcomes, means there must be a strong and focused commitment to a national early childhood vision and action plan. And we need to decide *how* we will fund this. The current 'care'- 'education' divide must be closed but quality early childhood provision is very expensive.

There is an urgent need to create more holistic early education and care services for children that are appropriate, accessible and affordable. Unless action is taken now, the twin system of care and education will continue. Affluent families will avoid child care altogether.

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Families eligible for the *Child Care Benefit* will cluster in services where fees, and often quality, are kept low to maximise affordability.

Clearly, child care must be elevated on the public agenda to more than quiet news-day rhetoric. It's something for a nation to address in a thoughtful and sustained way. Of course, families need and welcome more child care places, but child 'care' needs to be part of a broader early childhood package that nurtures children's development and provides strong early education in the preschool years.

The 'care' aspect alone is insufficient to build the understandings and skills that provide sound foundations for early school success. Optimal social, intellectual and physical development in early childhood is dependent on both care and education. These are inseparable and must be dealt with in a bi partisan way. It's about investing in our children and their futures.

Dr Elliott is Research Director, Early Childhood Education with the Australian Council for Educational Research.

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Applying but missing out on university

This is the time of year when newspapers feature stories on Year 12 students who apply to go to university, but miss out. Recent ACER research has looked at the number of young people in this group, their background characteristics, and what happens to them after they do not get into university.

The study, *Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place*, was released by ACER in December 2005 as part of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). It included almost 8000 young people who were in Year 9 in 1998. Most completed Year 12 in 2001. A relatively small proportion of the group, around 5 per cent, applied to enter university but were not offered a place. This amounted to about 10 per cent of all Year 12 university applicants in 2001. These unsuccessful applicants are commonly referred to as indicating 'unmet demand' for university places. The study followed members of the unmet demand group from 1998 until 2003, which was two years after Year 12 for most of them.

Membership of the group of students who applied to university but did not receive an offer was slightly higher among women than men, higher among those from metropolitan than non-metropolitan areas and higher among those from non-English speaking backgrounds. It was lower among those whose parents had professional backgrounds and more highly educated backgrounds. However, overall there were only small differences in demographic and social background between the students who applied to university but did not receive an offer and the other students enrolled in Year 12 in 2001.

Students in the unmet demand group had expressed clear intentions to go to university. In years 9 to 11, about 70 per cent of the group indicated that they wished to attend university. However, the study's analysis suggested that the unmet demand group was substantially less academically able than those who were offered a university place and subsequently enrolled. Their average ENTER score was only 54 compared to over 80 for those who enrolled at university.

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In addition, they showed substantially lower mean scores in Year 9 literacy and numeracy achievement.

The findings also indicated that some members of the unmet demand group may have been unrealistic in their expectations by applying for courses with cut-off ENTER scores well above what they had achieved or they did not perform as well in Year 12 as they had hoped. On average, the courses that unsuccessful applicants had chosen as their first preference had a cut-off ENTER score of 20 points above what they had achieved.

The study also examined how the unmet demand group fared in the immediate years after missing out on going to university. About 45 per cent were engaged in some other form of education or training two years after completing Year 12. Around 24 per cent were enrolled in a TAFE diploma course, 11 per cent in a Traineeship, 6 per cent in a TAFE Certificate course and 5 per cent in an Apprenticeship. A total of 37 per cent were working full-time. Seven per cent were unemployed. The report concluded that these relatively high levels of participation in other forms of education and training suggest that credit transfer arrangements may enable some of the unsuccessful applicants to enter university at a later stage of their lives, if their interests are still in that direction.

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, [*Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place*](#) by Gary N Marks. The study is research report number 46 in the [*Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth \(LSAY\)*](#) research series, a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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Time out of the labour market a common experience for Australian youth

The majority of young Australians experience at least a short period of time outside of full-time education and the labour force in the early years after leaving secondary school, research has found. A report released by ACER in November 2005 identified the characteristics, activities and later destinations of young people who had spent time outside of the labour force.

Annual interviews were conducted with a group of 10,700 young Australians who were tracked from 1997 (average age 16) until the end of 2003 (average age 22). It focused on a group of young people who were not in full-time education or the labour force, that is, they were not studying full-time, nor were they working or looking for work for at least one month during that time. The analyses were prompted by the concern that relatively little is known about young people outside of the labour force and how their experience affects their future employment or study prospects.

The study found that spending some time outside the labour force and full-time education is a common experience and can generally be seen as part of the transition process from school to work or further education. However, there are some groups of young people for whom the experience of time outside the labour force and full-time education may be more disruptive.

Overall 64 per cent of the study's participants spent some time outside the labour force and full-time education over the time they were surveyed. For the majority of these young people, their time spent outside the labour force was relatively short, between one and three months, after which they moved back into the labour market or full-time education with little apparent difficulty. Most saw their state as temporary and planned to enter full-time education or look for employment in the near future.

Those more likely to report extended periods of time outside the labour force and full-time education included young people who had not achieved highly at school, did not have a Year 12 certificate, were female, or who had a health problem or disability.

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In contrast, characteristics associated with not spending any time outside the labour force and full-time education included high achievement at school, coming from a family in which both parents had a degree or diploma, and not having left school prior to completing Year 12.

The activities undertaken by young people during a period outside of the labour force or full-time education varied between young men and women. Most young women who were outside the labour force and full-time education at the time of each annual surveys reported that they were caring for children or involved in home duties. Young men who were not studying full-time or in the labour force were involved in some other form of study or training in the early years, but in the later years tended to be on holiday or travelling.

The report concluded with a warning of possible serious implications for some young people who spend extended periods outside the labour force and full-time education. It warned these young Australians may be missing out on employment experience, the development of work skills and familiarity with new technologies, all of which appear to decrease their chances of finding employment in the future. It cautioned young Australians who find they are not achieving well at school against leaving without a qualification as they may find themselves in a labour marked with few openings for young people without formal qualifications. Their chances of entering the labour force or full-time education appear to decline even further as time passes. The challenge for future research and policy development lies in identifying early on those young people for whom spending time outside the labour force and full-time education is a negative experience that may lead to further disadvantage over time and develop strategies aimed at helping these young people make a smooth transition from school to further education or employment.

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *Young people outside the labour force and full-time education: activities and profiles* by Kylie Hillman. The study is research report number 45 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). [Download the report.](#)

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International trends and employment in Australia

Australian jobs will tend to be more qualified in future, and there will be a need to increase the proportion of new and existing workers with qualifications according to a presentation at a conference about responding to economic trends and social needs in Australian education and training.

The paper presented by Gerald Burke and Phil McKenzie at the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) annual conference argued there is also a need to increase the qualifications of those underemployed or not employed, including older people, to increase their employability.

Of the job growth projected between 2005 and 2013 (about 1.1 million extra jobs), more than half are expected to be professional and associate professional positions. Nearly two-thirds of job openings (nearly 3 million jobs in total) are expected to be in professional, associate professional, elementary and intermediate clerical, sales and services occupations. (There will be more job openings than total growth in jobs because people leaving their jobs need to be replaced.)

In the same period, the projected employment growth is 1.4 per cent per annum, while the projected labour supply is only 0.6 per cent per annum, depending on immigration and participation rates.

Dr McKenzie told the conference that international trade is helping some low income countries narrow the gap with wealthy countries. For example, China is set to double GDP in 7 years. In contrast it will take Australia 21 years to double its GDP at current rates. He said there is also an association between opening up your country to trade and greater income inequality in developed countries.

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These changes have considerable implications for the supply and demand of skills, services and goods. The manufacturing share of employment has fallen in recent years while business services have gone up.

Australia is a relatively low trade country. During the 1990s, countries that were more open to international trade and investment grew at twice the rate of less open countries. However, rising trade does have some potential losers. Not surprisingly, those who lose out are usually poorly educated, older workers, especially in manufacturing. However, international trade is only one of the factors leading to employment changes: changes in technology and consumption patterns are generally more significant.

International trends and employment in Australia: key findings was presented by Phil McKenzie and Gerald Burke at the Monash-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) National Conference in October. Further information on CEET is available on the centre's website at www.education.monash.edu/centres/ceet/

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Using data to evaluate student achievement in secondary schools

Research conducted on VCE data over the past ten years illustrates the flawed general statement that 'girls outperform boys' at VCE level, and draws attention to the dangers associated with referring to differences between classes as *the class/teacher effect* or as *the teacher effect*. These patterns are interpreted quite differently when both the data and the statistical analyses are verified and interpreted in context.

School performance evaluations based on students' unadjusted (raw) marks favour schools with higher intakes of bright and advantaged students. The learning gains of middle and lower ability students are overlooked and the achievements of students and schools in disadvantaged areas are not valued when the focus is concentrated solely on those achieving the highest marks. With ability-adjusted analyses of school data however, each student who achieves higher marks than similar ability peers is recognised as having performed well, and this is a fairer method of evaluating school performance.

For this project, extensive quantitative and qualitative research was undertaken within more than one hundred schools in 2005, as part of ACER's Data Interpretation Service. Since 2000, ability-adjusted information for each student, class and subject is provided to participating schools via user-friendly graphs and tables on a CD, to allow flexible access to their data throughout the year. A Professional Learning Seminar is conducted with senior staff, so that the patterns in the data are interpreted both statistically and educationally. Teachers like the detailed visual presentation of both the raw and ability-adjusted data, as they can verify the scores, and integrate relevant background information when interpreting patterns in their results.

The broad statement 'Girls are outperforming boys in VCE' is misleading because of the wide range in marks for boys and girls at each level of ability. The typical pattern is that bright boys generally achieve as well, if not better than bright girls, but more lower-ability boys perform worse than lower-ability girls. The mean gender effect at class and school levels, in both this 'within-schools' and 'across-schools' VCE research, is accounted for largely by the poor results of some lower ability boys, and not because all boys are performing worse than all girls.

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More useful questions in relation to gender are: 'Which boys are performing better than similar ability boys within each school?' and 'What factors in schools influence some low ability boys to perform well, while other low ability boys do poorly? The relevant focus ought be 'which boys' and 'which girls' when gender differences are quoted in research reports.

Results of this research indicate that the difference between ability-predicted and actually achieved VCE scores can not be solely attributed to the class teacher. In some schools, two classes in the same subject taught by the same teacher had significantly different results, indicating that other un-measured factors were affecting student performance.

Consequently, the commonly repeated statement that around 30% of the difference between classes is due to differences between teachers was not supported in this research, when interpretations of VCE results were validated in discussions with senior staff in schools. Few researchers have analysed data on which teacher effects are calculated authentically, because appropriate measures of verifiable teacher behaviours explicitly linked to improvement in student achievement are just not available. Until such measures are produced and validated, current claims regarding teacher effect sizes in educational research, whether calculated from multi-level models of students in schools, or even students in classes, remain questionable.

However, this does not mean that teachers, and the quality of teaching, are not vitally important factors influencing student achievement. It is just that research has not yet accurately and independently measured the specific teacher behaviours and attitudes that positively impact student performance across all ability levels yet. Similarly, while research has measured the effects of individual and class ability on student achievement, as well as calculated student gender and year level effects, there have been no measures of other equally important, contributory factors. For example, we have yet to calculate the effects of student motivation and aspirations, time on task, private tutoring, illness and personal trauma, all of which affect student performance. All student and class factors need to be taken into account, as well as subject, school and community factors, before it is possible to speak definitively about the teacher effect. This may never be totally possible, given all the above-mentioned variables that affect student achievement are interdependent, not isolated factors.

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However, in some cases where classes had strong, positive differences between their predicted and achieved VCE scores year after year, colleagues in these schools attributed these results to 'high-performing' teachers. Research could be usefully focused within such schools where successful ability-adjusted performance had been validated, so that successful teaching and learning strategies could be shared across schools. Similarly, verified factors that positively influenced boys and girls' achievements, and those of low, average and high ability students could be identified and promulgated. These variables need to be investigated at student, class, subject and school levels, as well as within regions, systems and at state level.

Current government and system-level monitoring of education still over-emphasises teacher and school effectiveness, but fails to take into account the multi-level structure within which teaching and learning operate, that is, they fail to measure the relevant factors at each significant and interacting levels in education.

Ms Carmel Richardson is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research and presented a paper at the ACER Research Conference. The full conference paper is available on the ACER web site.

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ACER UPDATE

Australian students among the highest users of computers at school and in the home: OECD report

A new analysis of 2003 results in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has found that Australian students are among the world's leading users of computers in education both at school and in the home. The study, *Are students ready for a technology-rich world?* was released by the OECD in Paris on 24 January. It is a previously unpublished analysis of data collected during the 2003 round of PISA testing. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) led the international consortium that conducted the PISA 2003 assessments and collected the data used in this new analysis. The report is now available from the [OECD website](#).

The implementation of Improvements to the National Testing Strategy and Assessment System for Basic and Secondary Education

ACER has a consulting project to evaluate the national assessment system in Jordan, suggest improvements and then conduct training to enable the Ministry in Jordan to be able to implement the suggestions for improvement. The project team is being lead by Professor Jim Tognolini, Research Director, System and School Testing. The project will commence early in 2006 with a visit to Jordan to interview key educators and educational groups regarding the current situation. The Project is expected to be completed by the beginning of September 2006.

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Mediasphere

ACER Assessment Services has signed an agreement with the multi media, software company Mediasphere. Under this agreement ACER staff, Prue Anderson and Mark Butler are developing units of assessment to accompany the already developed e-learning module for beginners. In the longer term it is anticipated that ACER will provide paper scripted assessment objects that can be converted into multimedia objects, by Mediasphere staff, for other levels of reading and mathematics.

Global Achieve tests in India and the Gulf States

ACER conducted the *Global Achieve* tests of English, mathematics and science in India and a number of countries in the Middle East including UAE, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar in November 2005. *Global Achieve* is a pencil and paper test for students in Years 3 to 10. It was first administered in English and mathematics in 2004 in schools in Dubai and India. Science was tested for the first time in 2005 at Years 6, 7 and 8.

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