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Recommended Citation

ACER, "ACER eNews 09 September 2005" (2005).
https://research.acer.edu.au/enews_archive/93

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Published September 2005

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Grading your child's report

Following complaints from some parents, the Australian government has insisted that schools throughout Australia now provide 'plain English' reports that parents can understand. But aspects of the government's proposals, particularly the proposal to report each child's performance against others in their class, have failed to win widespread support among schools.

What should parents expect of the reports schools provide? If the report your child brings home is difficult to understand, or if it is like the report you yourself took home from school, then it almost certainly falls short of today's best practice. Below we identify six features of highly informative school reports.

1. Is your child's report easy to understand?

A report is a piece of communication-like a letter-and you should expect to understand it as well as you can understand most letters. Teachers, like other professionals, have a specialised language for communicating among themselves about what children are learning and about the difficulties children are experiencing. But, as a parent, you should expect a plain language explanation. You also should expect to understand any graphs included in your child's report.

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2. Does the report show what your child is now able to do?

A fundamental purpose of a report should be to summarise where your child is up to in his or her learning. What skills and understandings do they now demonstrate? Knowing that a child learned 60% of what a teacher taught is not good enough. As a parent, you have a right to objective information about what the teacher taught and about your child's current levels of knowledge and skill. In the past, this information often was hidden behind vague written comments and scores and grades that were difficult to interpret. It sometimes took parents years to discover the truth about what their children were *unable* to do. Many schools now make an effort to show parents what their children are able to do-in a written report, by assembling examples of a child's work for discussion at a parent-teacher interview, or by placing samples of the child's work on a confidential web page.

3. Does the report show what is expected of students in this year level?

A useful report will indicate the achievements expected of students in your child's year level. There are two ways of doing this. The first is to identify the standard of performance expected: for example, what level of reading ability is expected of children by the end of Year 3? The report then indicates how your child is performing in relation to this expectation (eg, well below, below, at, above, well above). The second is to show how your child is progressing in relation to other children: for example, how does your child's performance in mathematics compare with the achievements of other children of his/her age? This information may be especially useful in key areas such as reading, social development and mathematics.

4. Does the report show your child's progress?

In any given year level, children are at very different stages in their learning. For example, by late primary school in reading and mathematics, the highest achieving 10% of children are about six years ahead of the lowest achieving 10%.

Published September 2005

The best school reports give an accurate picture of where each child is up to in his or her learning and allow parents to monitor a child's growth across the years of school. However, some reports do not show progress at all; they simply record how well a child has learned what has just been taught—often as a percentage or a grade. Under this approach, a child can be awarded a 'D' this year, a 'D' next year, and a 'D' the year after, giving no sense of the progress they are actually making. There is also a risk of children interpreting reports of this kind as a reflection on their learning ability ("I'm a D-student"). Watch for reports that provide judgements about your child, rather than judgements about their work and progress.

5. Does the report tell you about more than school subjects?

Schools not only develop children's understandings of subject matter; they also develop personal skills such as planning, organising, working independently, dealing with frustration, and completing tasks with concentration. Schools teach children to respect the contributions of others, to learn from others, to cooperate in joint activities, and to live and work together, sometimes putting the needs of other children ahead of their own. As well as telling you about your child's achievements in their school subjects, school reports should provide information about how your child is progressing socially and emotionally.

6. Does the report suggest how you can help?

Although some reports provide general information about what a child will learn next, or information about gaps in a child's learning, schools often leave it to parents to work out how they might assist. Many parents are now asking for more specific information. Exactly what might they do to help? And schools are responding. For example, if a child is having difficulty with number concepts, suggestions might be made for ways of using number concepts when shopping. If a child is having difficulty completing assignments on time, suggestions might be made for developing supervised work plans or timetables. It is likely that future school reports not only will show parents what a child is able to do and what progress they are making over time, but also will suggest ways in which they might support their child's further learning.

Published September 2005

If the report your school provides has all six of these features, it definitely deserves an 'A'.

This article was originally published as an invited opinion piece in *Education Age, The Age*, 2 September 2005.

Published September 2005

What makes a teacher education course effective?

Teacher education is high on the political agenda in Australia, with several parliamentary inquiries on the topic underway at federal and state levels. These inquiries reflect, in part, dissatisfaction among many school principals with the preparedness of graduates.

University faculties of education, for their part, are clearly stretched in terms of resources, particularly in terms of providing strong links between course components and school experiences. Most universities are having difficulty in finding schools and teachers who are able and willing to provide quality practicum experiences for their students and in ensuring that those experiences link productively with the theoretical components of their courses.

ACER conducted a survey in March 2004 for the Victorian Institute of Teaching of all teachers who had graduated from teacher education programs in 2002. The teachers were just beginning their second year of teaching. This meant they had the experience of their first year of teaching on which to make a judgment about how well their teacher education program had prepared them for the demands of teaching.

Major differences were found in the effectiveness of different teacher education courses on a range of measures. The measures were based on the VIT standards for teacher registration.

On a four point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = to a minor extent, 3 = to a moderate extent and 4 = to a major extent) teachers generally rated their courses slightly below a 3, except for working with and reporting to parents and guardians, which scored near 2 on average. Teachers who completed a four-year undergraduate course generally reported more favourably on their course than teachers who completed a post-graduate degree.

School experience was rated higher than other elements of teacher education programs, but teachers from most courses made frequent mention of unsatisfactory arrangements, including the selection and preparation of teachers supervising the practicum experience in schools.

Published September 2005

The feature of teacher education programs that had the strongest and most consistent effect on reported outcomes was the extent to which the course had a strong focus on the 'content to be taught'. Courses with a strong content focus enabled future teachers to:

- a) gain a deep understanding of the content knowledge they were expected to teach
- b) make clear links between content or subject matter units and units about how to teach the content
- c) make clear links between theoretical and practical aspects of teaching
- d) develop a sound understanding of how students learn the specific content that they were expected to teach
- e) learn how to probe students' prior understandings of content they were about to teach
- f) learn how to present content in ways that built on students' existing understanding
- g) learn methods of teaching specific to the content they were expected to teach

Opportunity to learn '*how to assess student learning and plan curriculum units*' was also strongly associated with preparedness in the areas of professional knowledge and knowledge of students in the first year of teaching. However, less than 20 per cent of teachers said their courses had prepared them, to a major extent, in this area.

Opportunity to *receive feedback* was also significantly related to the reported effectiveness of courses. Students in the most highly rated courses were much more likely to mention the opportunities they had for gaining timely and useful feedback from lecturers and practising teachers as helpful features. Feedback on practice has long been recognised as a vital requirement for professional learning but teachers reported receiving little feedback from university staff as they were learning to teach.

Published September 2005

It is understood that current levels of funding for teacher education do not make it easy for university staff to provide feedback to students about their developing practice. However, the low level of feedback about practice may point to a significant weakness in current approaches to teacher education.

Given the context of initial teacher education, which is preparation for professional practice, it is surprising that feedback is not at a much higher level. One of the key elements in linking theory to practice is feedback.

Differences in practicum arrangements were not related to the reported effectiveness of teacher education programs. This is not to say that the practicum is unimportant - rather it appears that links are generally poor between the practicum and what students are learning in the university component of the course. It is hard for universities to find supervising teachers with the training to be an effective student-teacher supervisor in a school.

Teachers who reported that they felt well prepared had completed courses that gave them deep knowledge of what they were expected to help students learn, and how students learned it, as well as skill in diagnosing students' existing levels of understanding of the content to be taught, planning activities that would promote further development and assessing the extent to which development had taken place.

These professional capabilities appear to remain the necessary, though not sufficient, foundations in preparing teachers to meet the wider demands of the job, from establishing a productive learning environment to working effectively with parents.

The findings of this study do not provide support for those who think that making teacher education "practical" and "school-based" is the answer, absent efforts to ensure substantive content related professional knowledge. The kind of content knowledge identified in this study has pervasive and generative effects on teachers' capacity to manage the complex demands that teaching presents. Pedagogical skill, classroom management, and the capacity to provide a challenging and supportive learning environment depend fundamentally on possession of this kind of professional knowledge.

Published September 2005

The reverse does not apply. Teacher education programs that might be highly "practical", in the sense of giving heavy emphasis to skills in classroom management for example, will not make up for a deficiency in the aspects of content knowledge identified in this study.

The results of this study, though perhaps unsurprising, do say that teacher education matters. In a field where some have questioned the impact of, or need for, professional preparation programs, this is a significant finding. While we found wide variation in the reported quality of teacher education programs, we did not find that teacher education is unnecessary; quite the opposite.

by Dr Lawrence Ingvarson, Research Director, Teaching and Leadership, ACER

Published September 2005

Improving attitudes may increase participation in schooling

The nurturing of positive attitudes to school could be the key to increasing participation in education beyond the compulsory years. New research has found that intentions to complete or leave school formed early in secondary school are powerful predictors of participation in the latter years of school and attitudes to school strongly influence these educational intentions.

These were among the key findings of the latest research report in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). In *Attitudes, Intentions and Participation* Siek Toon Khoo and John Ainley examined the relationship between students' attitudes to school and intentions to participate in education and training and the influence of these attitudes and intentions on participation. Findings were based on analyses of the educational and occupational activities of a nationally representative sample of 13 600 young Australians who were in Year 9 in 1995.

Participants in the study were asked by survey in Year 9 what year they expected to leave school and their plans after leaving or completing school. Students were also surveyed on their attitudes toward school. The five domains of attitudes to school were students' general satisfaction with school, their motivation, their attitudes to their teachers, their views on the opportunities their school provides and their sense of achievement.

A strong relationship was found between intentions at Year 9 to complete Year 12 and later participation in Year 12. The strength of the relationship between intentions and participation can be seen in the report's observation that 87 per cent of students who planned to proceed to Year 12 did continue to Year 12 while 79 per cent of students who intended to leave school before Year 12 did so. Overall, 33 per cent participated in university study; including 52 per cent of those who intended to enter university and 12 per cent of those had not planned university study.

In turn, attitudes to school strongly influenced the intention to complete school. This link prompted researchers to conclude that nurturing positive attitudes towards school in the middle years of schooling could help to increase participation in the latter years.

Published September 2005

ACER's deputy chief executive and co-author of the report, Dr John Ainley, believes that student attitudes are formed in response to curriculum, teaching practices and organisational arrangements and increased participation in post-compulsory education will be supported by attending to those aspects of earlier school experiences. Furthermore, students' attitudes to school are relatively independent of proficiency in literacy and numeracy. It is possible for students who are not necessarily the most proficient in these areas to hold positive attitudes to school just as it is possible for highly proficient students to hold negative views about their school.

"Other things being equal, students who are positively oriented to their schools and are actively engaged in its academic work and other activities are more likely to develop an intention to continue through to the end of secondary school and beyond," Dr Ainley said. "Once students intend to continue with their education it is highly likely that they will."

The report also noted that proficiency in literacy and numeracy has a direct influence on participation in post-compulsory schooling. "Previous LSAY studies have shown consistently that students who have acquired mastery in literacy and numeracy are more likely to complete Year 12, continue in education and find jobs with higher incomes. These latest findings suggest that if we can enhance engagement with schooling in addition to building a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy we can assist more students to continue with their education, Dr Ainley said"

The report concluded that attention to the extent to which students develop positive attitudes to school and a sense of proficiency in foundation skills will influence their intentions to continue with formal study and become manifest in their actual continued participation in education.

Further information and additional findings are contained in the report, [*Attitudes, Intentions and Participation*](#), by Siek Toon Khoo and John Ainley, research report number 41 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

Published September 2005

Using online assessment to inform teaching and learning in primary and secondary classrooms

The latest developments in the *iAchieve* online assessment program were presented to delegates at the recent ACER Research Conference 2005, *Using Data to Support Learning*.

iAchieve is an online testing program in mathematics and English for students in Years 3 to 10 that can be tailored to the individual needs of children. Instant feedback is provided through student reports and progress maps to help teachers and parents monitor progress made over time. All test items assess an outcome of the national curriculum; have been reviewed by experienced teachers and test developers and trialled on samples of samples of students.

In his conference presentation Professor Jim Tognolini, ACER's Research Director, System and School Testing, described the *iAchieve* instrument and demonstrated how the feedback can be used to inform teaching and learning as well as describing planned future developments. He explained that the development of *iAchieve* combined internet technology with the latest advances in assessment theory to provide schools and students with a powerful tool to support learning at school and at home.

According to Professor Tognolini, *iAchieve's* focus on learning growth is in keeping with developments in assessment theory since the 1980s.

"In the 1980s there was a conscious effort around Australia and in many other countries around the world to shift the focus in assessment from notions of passing and failing to those of monitoring growth," he said. "Assessment methods now focus more on determining what students know and can do at particular stages of their learning development and using this information to help diagnose strengths and weaknesses to help improve learning."

The home version of *iAchieve* was originally launched in 2004 with the release of two suites of assessment items for mathematics and English. A third suite of new test items was added in early 2005. It is Australia's first online assessment program for children and parents at home.

Published September 2005

Students who enrol in the *iAchieve at home* program can complete an online test in English and/or Mathematics at the beginning of the year (pre-test) and another at the end of the year (post-test) and receive an indication of how they have progressed during the year. When students complete the test, it is marked online and students receive immediate feedback regarding their performance in the form of three reports.

The first report provides information on which questions were answered correctly or incorrectly and gives an indication on how the student performed relative to a national sample of students of a similar year level. A second report shows what a student knows and can do in relation to the construct being assessed by the test. The third report shows where a student is along a continuum that represents the program's view of growth in the subject. These reports are designed to help students and parents understand areas in which they have struggled with on the assessment tasks and help them to identify potential strengths and weaknesses.

Through the *iAchieve* portal ACER also provides online administration of the Attitudes and Values Questionnaire and the Online Placement Instrument (OPI).

The Online Placement Instrument offers a series of tests designed to assist schools with placing students at the appropriate level when they arrive at the school. It measures the generic skills that underpin the teaching of English and Mathematics for students from years 3 to 10.

The Attitudes and Values Questionnaire gauges how effectively students make process in non-academic areas of their education such as social and emotional growth, conscience and compassion.

Download by [Using online assessment to inform teaching and learning in primary and secondary classrooms](#) Professor Tognolini.

Further information available at [Online Placement Instrument \(OPI\)](#) and the [Attitudes and Values Questionnaire \(AVO\)](#) sections of ACER website.

Published September 2005

ACER UPDATE

Senior secondary school students' perceptions of the world of work

A new report conducted by ACER for the Smith Family into the perceptions of work held by senior secondary school students provides a valuable insight into the current skills shortage and youth unemployment rate by uncovering a significant mismatch between student career aspirations and the reality of the labour market. The survey of 3,018 year 10, 11 and 12 students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds has found that a majority of students are identifying preferred career paths based on their skills and personal interests with little to no understanding of the availability of these jobs in the current labour market. Most (80%) expect to get the job they would most like at age 25 and few have considered the possibility of compromise should employment in their chosen field be hard to come by. The study, *What do students know about work?* funded by the AMP Foundation also found that a quarter of students were planning insufficient education for their preferred job.

[Visit the Smith Family website to read more.](#)

[Download the report \(PDF: 2.9MB\)](#)

Literature review on accreditation of teacher education

ACER's Teaching and Leadership research program has been awarded a contract with the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) to prepare a literature review and issues paper on the development of a national system for the accreditation of teacher education. It is the third project to be undertaken by ACER for NIQTSL. The project is to be completed in December 2005.

Published September 2005

CEET Annual Conference

The Annual Conference of the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) will be

held in Melbourne on Friday 28 October. The conference theme will be "The New Federalism in Australian Education and

Training". Questions to be addressed at the conference include

Where are the good job prospects?

How do we measure skills shortages?

Are high-skill jobs moving off-shore?

What is happening in migration?

What is happening to participation in work by youth and older persons?

What are the responses in education and training?

Further details are available from [Monash University](#) website.

Published September 2005

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