Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

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4-2004

ACER eNews 04 April 2004

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Research results and news from ACER

Published April 2004

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Supporting English literacy and numeracy learning for Indigenous students in the early years

Indigenous Australian children begin school with similar levels of literacy and numeracy to their non-Indigenous classmates but fall behind as they move through the early years, new ACER research shows.

A longitudinal study conducted by ACER has been monitoring the growth in English literacy and numeracy achievement of a group of 152 Indigenous students in 13 schools through the early years of primary school. A report detailing the findings of the first two years of the study was released on 21 April.

Indigenous students' developing English literacy and numeracy skills were assessed at five points over the first three years of school using tasks developed for the ACER Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Survey (LLANS). In general, for both the English literacy and for numeracy the achievement of the Indigenous students began at a similar level to that of the main LLANS sample but by the time of the fifth assessment in the third year of school substantial gaps had emerged.

ACER's Deputy CEO Dr John Ainley said that the findings reinforce the importance of a strong start in the early years of school and measures must be taken to engage Indigenous children with learning in these vital early years.

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"Once at school students need to be engaged in interesting and challenging lessons to stimulate learning and hopefully reinforce attendance and desire to come to school," he said.

The study identified initial achievement, attendance, attentiveness in class, language background, region and school as factors influencing achievement. Students who attended schools from metropolitan and regional areas generally achieved at a higher level than schools from the more remote and very remote areas.

As for students in general, initial achievement was found to be the strongest predictor of achievement in later years. Those who achieved the best results in the first assessment also achieved the best results in the later assessments.

Students who spoke standard Australian English at home performed better on these tests than those who did not. Students who were rated as being more attentive in class and those who had higher attendance rates at school also achieved higher.

There was some indication that students attending schools that had successfully identified and addressed the specific learning needs of their Indigenous students achieved higher results.

The study is an initiative of ACER's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Committee and funded by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and is now in its fifth year.

Supporting English Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Indigenous Students in the Early Years by Tracey Frigo, Matthew Corrigan, Isabelle Adams, Paul Hughes, Maria Stephens and Davina Woods is ACER Research Monograph number 57 published by ACER Press.

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Examining post-school plans and aspirations

A study completed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Smith Family has found that family wealth has a weak affect on students' post-school plans. Gender, ability and vocational orientation are the most important factors influencing post-school plans.

The study, *Post-School Plans: aspirations, expectations and implementation* forms part of the Smith Family's research program into understanding how children and young people from low income families overcome financial disadvantage in making a successful transition from school into the world of work.

The Report describes the post-school plans of a group of young Australians in the late 1990s; the factors associated with the development of these plans; and associations between the types of post-school plans and a student's predisposition towards lifelong learning. The study used data collected by ACER for the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) projects.

Students participating in the LSAY study were surveyed in Year 9 and asked what their plans were for their first year after leaving school. Most young people (around 60 per cent) planned further study. A fifth of students did not know what they would do in the first year after leaving school while 40 per cent of students did not know what their parents had planned for them after leaving school.

Family wealth or socio-economic status was found to have a weak effect on post-school plans. However, young people from low-income families find it harder to realise post-school plans for university study. A little over 60 per cent of students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds who planned to go university had achieved their goal. This compares with 80 per cent of students from the highest socio-economic backgrounds. Financial disadvantage was not seen as a barrier to post school study when students opt to study at TAFE or pursue other vocational options.

Published April 2004

Girls were more likely than boys to plan post-school study - either full-time or part-time - and nearly twice as many boys (40 per cent) as girls (20 per cent) had no plans for any study.

A student's vocational orientation also had an affect on their post-school plans. For example, a high proportion of students who enjoyed working with their hands had no plans for post-school study. In contrast nearly all students who had a preference for abstract thinking, particularly of a scientific nature intended to study full-time.

Family wealth also does not appear to be associated with having an orientation towards lifelong learning. No association could be found between the wealth of the family and levels of effort and perseverance by students at school. There was some suggestion that where material resources are needed to support an orientation to lifelong learning, family wealth has some impact, but it is otherwise not an important factor.

The results from this study indicate that young Australians have a good understanding of their own interests and abilities and make their post-school plans accordingly. Policies designed to enhance student outcomes, by encouraging the development of a positive lifelong learning orientation and encouraging students and their families to formulate post-school plans, may need to consider the gender, interests and abilities of young people. This may mean acknowledging that, typically girls have different interests from boys and that most young people have a good idea of their abilities and what they expect that they can reasonably achieve.

In response to these findings, the Smith Family has called for the establishment of a national mentoring strategy to ensure students from low income families have the skills, role models and personal support they need to go on to TAFE or university. More effective career counselling in schools to ensure that students are well informed when it comes to making decisions about their post school options is also needed.

Further findings and information can be found in the report, *Post-School Plans: aspirations, expectations and implementation,* by ACER researchers Adrian Beavis, Martin Murphy, Jennifer Bryce and Matthew Corrigan. The Report is available through The Smith Family's website.

Published April 2004

What parents want

ACER's Research Director of Early Childhood Education, Alison Elliott recently contributed the following opinion article to t*he Australian* newspaper regarding the reasons that some families choose independent schools for their children.

The trend for increasing numbers of families to select independent schools for their children should come as no surprise in socially, culturally and linguistically diverse Australia.

For decades research has said that educational outcomes are maximised when family and school are in harmony and work together for the benefit of children.

Policy statements from education authorities in each state highlight the importance of close home-school connections and stress the need to "involve parents, caregivers and local communities in all aspects of the public education system." But in a large and diverse state school population it's not easy to involve everyone.

In schooling, as in most other enterprises, there is no one-size-fits-all model.

Families want a learning environment that is in tune with family values, expectations and aspirations. Most parents want learning environments where family values will be celebrated, supported and reinforced

Australian communities are so culturally and socially diverse that many groups, small and large, support their own schools- first Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic and Jewish. Later Islamic, Greek Orthodox, Buddhist and others.

Groups seeking ideologically coherent approaches aligned with their philosophical or cultural views run Montessori schools, Italian, Greek, Japanese, French and International schools, Rudolf Steiner schools, fundamentalist Christian schools, "alternative" schools, schools for children with disabilities, performing arts schools and so on.
Gone are the days when most parents enrolled children in the local school without considering a range of education options.

Published April 2004

University of Western Sydney researcher Dr Ros Elliott says that parents spend months, even years, searching for preschool care and education. They consult friends, interview teachers, and visit centres. She reports that parents want to be "connected" with their children and want meaningful, two-way communication with teachers. They want educational partnerships that reflect their cultural values and ideals.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that "quality and reputation" are the main reasons for parent choice of early childhood service.

Other research on beginning school shows that parents want schooling that fits with both children's needs and their work and home commitments, including services such as out-of-school hours care.

The myriad of early childhood services means that parents think as education consumers. They are used to comparison shopping- to considering locations, facilities, curricula and teaching quality, communication, atmosphere, child/teacher ratios and fees.

Later they apply their consumer skills to selecting primary and high school education.

Results from a recent parent survey at one private school showed that parents most valued ability to turn out a well rounded individual, quality of staff, academic performance, school spirit and atmosphere, pastoral care, co-curricula activities, equality and egalitarianism, and a small, friendly setting.

What parent wouldn't want these things? Parents have their children's best interests at heart and take education very seriously.

Community and sense of belonging come from shared understandings about the world, common aspirations, and continuity of beliefs and practices. Schools that reflect, articulate and celebrate shared values and culture and promote shared educational expectations are successful. Public or private, these schools appeal to individuals and groups with strong identities and commitment. And they tell their friends.

Published April 2004

A sense of community and belonging is more than sharing a Post Code. School boundaries don't make a community and families will travel to find a like community.

Instead of seeing the shift to independent schools as a threat, we might better look to why independent schools are attracting so many children.

Perhaps we need a new system of smaller, "community schools" that more closely match the needs and desires of communities and families.

Slowing the drift to independent schools will have to involve more than money and big sticks. There will have to be a radical change from the rhetoric of "community" to the reality.

by Professor Alison Elliott

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First published by the Australian, 1 March 2004

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ACER UPDATE

International School Bangkok

International School Bangkok has engaged ACER as consultants to help the school in developing curriculum, assessment and pedagogy of writing. In the first phase of the project ACER has critiqued and refined the existing curriculum design. The second phase will be devoted to preparing resources aligned with the revised framework for use across the school.

Pre-service teacher education project

MCEETYA (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs) has awarded ACER's Teaching and Leadership Research Program a contract to map pre-service teacher education courses in Australia. This project strengthens our research expertise in this area, with a similar Victorian project already underway for the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

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