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Recommended Citation

ACER, "ACER eNews 11 November 2004" (2004).
https://research.acer.edu.au/enews_archive/103

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Published November 2004

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Introduction

Research Conference 2004 special edition

The following articles are based on papers presented at the ACER Research Conference 2004 that was held in Adelaide on 25-26 October on the theme Supporting student wellbeing.

Published November 2004

Student goals and interest important for university success

Developing interest is critical to long-term success in university studies, according to a visiting US psychologist.

Professor Judith M. Harackiewicz delivered a keynote address at the ACER Research Conference, Supporting Student Wellbeing, in Adelaide in October.

Professor Harackiewicz is researching why some students become involved and interested in their studies, and why they continue in a particular academic discipline. She also raised the issue of whether highly motivated students learn more and obtain higher grades in their courses. The research involved survey studies with college psychology students in the United States.

Professor Harackiewicz's theory relates to two kinds of goals: mastery and performance. When pursuing mastery goals, an individual's reason for engaging in an activity is to develop competence. In contrast, when pursuing performance goals, an individual's reason for engagement is to demonstrate competence relative to others.

The study concluded that it is optimal that both mastery and performance goals are adopted because both kinds of goals promote important educational outcomes. Students who adopted mastery goals reported more interest in the class. However, mastery goals had no effect of any measure of academic performance. Success in college and university contexts depends on both performance and interest.

The research also looked at students' interests. Two types of interest are identified: interest that resides with the individual over time; and interest that emerges in response to situational cues.

There is not much that educators can do about individual interest, but they can have an enormous impact on the development of situational interest. After situational interest is aroused, it may or may not last. If situational interest endures, it can eventually become a deep, individual interest, according to Professor Harackiewicz.

Considering students' goals and interests gives a richer understanding of motivational dynamics that can promote academic success and lifelong learning as adolescents enter university, take courses and make academic choices.

Published November 2004

Understanding values education

Teachers and students need to think more about the frameworks underpinning their values education, according to Emeritus Professor Brian Hill of Murdoch University, who delivered a keynote address Research Conference 2004 in Adelaide.

Referring to the values education packages adopted in schools, Professor Hill said busy teachers understandably welcome ready-made products, and many have been drawn to packages developed outside our school systems, and even outside Australia. "But what makes values hang together are larger world-views. No package is neutral. Many people using such materials are unaware of their ideological origins."

Professor Hill suggested opportunities could be built into the school curriculum for students to examine:

- the logics and functions of pre-suppositional frameworks;
- the assumption underlying the frameworks governing each of their school subjects; and
- the religious (and 'anti-religious') frameworks that have been most influential.

The study of the logics and functions of frameworks call for a specific focus on philosophical issues and competencies, which do not have a natural home in the 'Key Learning Areas'.

"Australian state schools have been encouraged to factor the religious variable out of the curriculum, thereby leaving values education in free-fall. If a balanced education is our goal, this is counterproductive," Professor Hill said.

In addition to *moral* values, there are also other value domains: cognitive-intellectual, technical-vocational, political, economic, socio-cultural, physical-recreational, aesthetic, interpersonal-relational and religious-spiritual.

Published November 2004

According to Professor Hill, *educational* values should be added to the list of value domains. This may relate to the subject matter taught, the methods used, or the kind of classroom climate created. Educational values are the priorities at the core of the school's mission.

"One of the obligations of the school is to clarify what these are for the benefit of all stakeholders, including teachers, parents and students," Professor Hill said.

Published November 2004

Literacy, behaviour and auditory processing

Just one hour of professional development training for teachers in communicating with children with auditory processing difficulties can have 'significant positive effects' on their literacy achievement progress and attentive behaviours, according to Drs Kathy and Ken Rowe, and audiologist collaborator Jan Pollard.

Children's auditory processing (AP) capacity (i.e., *the ability to hold, sequence and process accurately what is heard*) has been linked strongly to their initial and subsequent literacy achievements, as well as to their attentive behaviours in the classroom. Dr Kathy Rowe, a consultant physician in the Department of General Medicine at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, stressed that AP difficulties were **functional, developmental** difficulties rather than a diagnosis of *hearing impairment and/or central auditory processing*.

Speaking at *Research Conference 2004* Drs Kathy and Ken Rowe presented findings from an ongoing study into the prevalence of auditory processing difficulties among children and adolescents, and the positive impact on students' literacy progress and attentive behaviours when appropriate classroom management strategies for auditory processing difficulties are used.

Evidence from more than 10,000 children indicates that approximately 20 per cent of children in each of the age groups 5-6, 6-7, 7-8, 8-9 and 9-10 years are unable to accurately process sentence lengths of 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 words, respectively.

"However, children with auditory processing difficulties have minimal difficulties learning if material is presented in appropriate ways", Drs Rowe said.

The study has found that students of teachers who had undertaken a one-hour professional development program presented by an experienced professional from the Audiology Department at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital had lead to "significant improvements in both literacy achievement and behaviour."

Published November 2004

The professional development program raised teachers' awareness of the auditory capacity of students and provided practical intervention strategies for use in the classroom. Teachers were instructed in ways to better communicate verbal instructions to students such as: speaking slowly, 'chunking information', pausing between sentences, maintaining eye contact, and waiting for compliance.

"These simple techniques have strong positive impacts on children with auditory processing difficulties, and lead to fewer learning and behavioural problems," Drs Kathy and Ken Rowe said. Teacher training and in-service professional development in this area is **vital**, since the research evidence shows that such training has the effect of "building fences at the top of the 'cliff'" by reducing the need for "belated and costly 'ambulance services' at the bottom".

Rowe, K.J., & Rowe, K.S. (2004). [Developers, users and consumers beware: Warnings about the design and use of psycho-behavioural rating inventories and analyses of data derived from them.](#) Proceedings of the International Test Users' Conference July 2004 (pp. 24-34). Camberwell, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research ISBN 0-86431-699-2.

Published November 2004

The mental health and wellbeing of young people in Australia

A leading authority on adolescent mental health warned delegates at Research Conference 2004 that a combination of falling birth rates and increasing rates of adolescent mental health problems has the potential to adversely affect Australia's growth and development.

Dr Michael Sawyer, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University of Adelaide and Head of the Research and Evaluation Unit at the Women's and Children's Hospital in Adelaide said in his keynote address that it is essential we take the necessary steps to guarantee the quality of children's living and educational environments to ensure that new generations of children achieve their maximum potential.

Dr Sawyer told delegates that there is recent evidence from Great Britain that successive cohorts of adolescents are experiencing increasing rates of mental health problems.

"Reducing rates of adolescent mental health problems in the community is a difficult task and it is essential that we build systematically on our knowledge of effective interventions over the next decade," he said.

He reviewed results from the child and adolescent component of the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, the most recent national survey of the mental health of children and adolescents in Australia, and a study conducted in Great Britain of mental health problems experienced by adolescents over the last 25 years.

The Australian survey found that 13-14 per cent of children and adolescents had some form of mental health problem. The most common mental health disorder was Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which had a prevalence of 11 per cent. The prevalence of depressive disorder and conduct disorder was 3 per cent. Males had a higher prevalence of ADHD and conduct disorder than did females. Children living in low-income families with single or step-parents were more likely to have mental health problems and mental disorders.

Published November 2004

The study in Great Britain showed that rates of conduct problems have increased substantially among male and female adolescents over the last 25 years. There was also evidence of recent increases in rates of adolescent emotional problems.

"There is a great need to identify the optimal mix of promotion; prevention and treatment interventions that can provide the most cost-effective help for young people and their families in Australia," Dr Sawyer said.

Published November 2004

Yelling at students does not improve behaviour

Teacher aggression and, to a lesser extent punishment are ineffective in fostering student responsibility, whereas hinting, discussion, recognition, and involvement may be helpful in this regard.

Dr Ramon Lewis of La Trobe University examined the relationship between Australian students' responsibility in classrooms and their teachers' discipline strategies.

Speaking at Research Conference 2004, Dr Lewis presented findings from a study involving almost 600 teachers and over 4000 students from 21 primary schools and 21 secondary schools in North East Victoria that investigated the kinds of discipline styles associated with greater levels of responsibility in students.

More responsible classes are associated with teachers who are less abusive and punishment oriented and who are seen as more likely to discuss misbehaviour with their students, involve students in decision-making, hint when students misbehave and recognise appropriate student behaviour.

"It can be argued that the greater use of strategies such as discussion, recognition, hinting and involvement has resulted in less student misbehaviour and more responsibility," Dr Lewis said.

"Teachers who use more punishment, more aggressive techniques such as yelling in anger and class detentions, and fewer inclusive techniques promote more misbehaviour and less responsibility in their students."

Dr Lewis said student behaviour may also be influencing teacher behaviour. "When students have more self discipline, teachers may use more hinting, discussion and involvement to provide them a voice since that voice can be trusted. There may be little recourse to aggression because as more responsible students do not confront teachers' authority. In such situations, teachers may consider themselves to be choosing discipline techniques suitable for their clientele."

Published November 2004

"There is a need to support teachers, so that they can avoid becoming coercive in the face of increases in student misbehaviour and instead respond calmly and assertively while rewarding good behaviour , discussing with students the impact their misbehaviour has on others and involving them in some of the decision making about rules and consequences,"

Dr Lewis said.

"If teachers do not do this, it may mean less student time on tasks, less schoolwork learnt and, possibly more significantly, less responsible students."

Further Information:

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Conference proceedings

The conference papers by each speaker are included in the Conference Proceedings.

[Download Full Conference Proceedings](#) (PDF: 2.23MB)

A school system perspective on strengthening student wellbeing

The conference paper by Peter Hamilton of the Department of Education and Training, Western Australia is now available for download from the ACER website in PDF format. [Read Full Report](#)

Opening and closing addresses

ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters delivered opening and closing addresses to the conference. Both are available for download in PDF format from the ACER website. Download the [opening address](#) including a range of facts about young people in Australia. Download the [closing address](#) including observations from the conference and factors influencing student wellbeing.

Research Conference 2005

Research Conference 2005 will take place at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Melbourne on 7-9 August 2005 on the theme of *Using data to support learning*. Further details of the conference can be found at [Research Conferences](#) section.

Published November 2004

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