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Research Conference special edition

The articles in this edition of ACER eNews are based on papers presented to ACER Research Conference 2012 on the theme *School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?*, held in Sydney from 26-28 August.

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1200 minds meet on school improvement

Teachers, policymakers and researchers gathered in Sydney earlier this month to review not only what schools can do to improve outcomes for students but also how they can do it most effectively, at the 17th annual conference of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). With more than 1200 delegates attending, it was ACER's largest conference to date.

ACER chief executive, Professor Geoff Masters, said the theme of Research Conference 2012 was chosen to highlight that school improvement is an area of high priority in Australia.

'School improvement is a key objective of all education systems and school leaders who share a common drive to deliver improved outcomes for students,' Professor Masters said.

'We know a great deal now about what it is that schools do to make a difference to the quality of teaching and learning. This conference discussed the particular practices that research is revealing to have a powerful effect on school improvement endeavours,' he said.

The conference featured four keynote addresses and 17 concurrent sessions. Speakers included:

- ACER chief executive, Professor Geoff Masters;
- Cambridge University Emeritus Fellow, Professor David Hargreaves;
- NSW Department of Education and Communities Director-General, Dr Michele Bruniges AM;
- Innovation Unit (UK not-for-profit) Board Director, Ms Valerie Hannon;
- Educational Transformations Managing Director, Professor Brian Caldwell; and
- University of Auckland Professor of Education Helen Timperley.

Presenters highlighted the conditions, contexts, curriculum, pedagogy and practices required for school improvement to occur.

High-impact practices discussed at this conference included an explicit improvement agenda, creating a culture that promotes learning, an expert teaching team, effective teaching practices, differentiated classroom learning, analysis and discussion of data, and targeted use of resources.

The ACER Research Conference 2012, on the theme *School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?*, was held in Sydney from 26 to 28 August.

Further information is available from www.acer.edu.au/research-conference

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School improvement needs 'no excuses' approach

Schools that make significant improvements in student achievement invariably are led by people who believe in the possibility of high performance regardless of a school's circumstances or students' socioeconomic backgrounds, according to the chief executive of ACER, Professor Geoff Masters.

In his opening keynote address to the 17th annual ACER Research Conference in Sydney, Professor Masters told more than 1200 delegates that school leadership teams are in powerful positions to influence the quality of classroom teaching and learning.

'Effective leaders are clear about what kinds of changes they wish to see and what it will take to bring about that improvement, and work to create a culture of high expectations,' Professor Masters said.

'These leaders adopt a 'no excuses' policy and drive a strong and explicit agenda to improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school. They also surround themselves with colleagues who share their commitment to improvement,' he said.

Professor Masters told delegates that school improvement depends on a commitment and belief that performance can be further improved; a clear understanding of what improvement would look like; a way of establishing current levels of performance as starting points for action; a familiarity with evidence-based, differentiated improvement strategies; and ongoing processes for monitoring progress and evaluating improvement efforts.

'These are the characteristics of schools that are really punching above their weight: that are achieving excellent results for students, that are promoting high quality teaching, high quality leadership, and high quality practices and processes within the school,' Professor Masters said.

Professor Masters believes that system-level leadership is equally important for continual improvement.

'Improvements in systems' practices and processes depend on a belief that, no matter how well a school system is performing, it can always do a better job of supporting and promoting quality teaching and learning,' Professor Masters said.

'However, using appropriate strategies is as important to system improvement as it is to student learning, the professional development of teachers and school improvement. Research into the world's most improved school systems shows that the most effective forms of action to improve systems with low levels of student achievement are quite different from those needed to further improve schools with high levels of student achievement.'

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Professor Masters' conference paper is available from research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2012/27august/

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Personalising learning for school improvement

School improvement can be supported through a clinical approach in which teachers 'diagnose' individual student learning and provide appropriate 'prescriptions' for improvement, Professor Stephen Dinham told delegates to the annual ACER Research Conference on 27 August.

More than 1200 teachers, policymakers and researchers gathered in Sydney for the 17th annual ACER Research Conference. Addressing the theme *School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?* the conference covered not only what schools can do to improve outcomes for students but also how they can do it most effectively.

The conference featured four keynote addresses and 17 concurrent sessions. A number of these sessions addressed school improvement in terms of customised or personalised learning.

In his address to the conference, Professor Dinham from the University of Melbourne explained why educators need to take a clinical approach to teacher pre-service education, and why they need to ensure school leaders have a thorough grounding in instructional leadership for clinical teaching.

'Teachers have been told for decades that they need to cater for individual student differences and to 'personalise' learning yet, generally, have not been shown or taught how to do this,' Professor Dinham said.

ACER's Dr Michael Timms discussed a possible solution to this issue, presenting research on how computer technology can assist teachers in personalising learning for every student. Dr Timms reported on the development and trialling of simulation-based science assessments that monitor student learning against established instructional goals and produce informative reports to both the learner and teacher.

'Computer-based assessments can help teachers to provide differentiated instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners,' Dr Timms said.

Also at the conference, Professor Helen Timperley from the University of Auckland presented a model of inquiry that can be used to personalise learning for improved individual student outcomes, and can be used for whole-school improvement. In her address, Professor Timperley demonstrated why school improvement depends on building the professional capability of all those involved in the education system at all levels so that all, from policy makers to students, understand the part they need to play in the improvement effort.

The ACER Research Conference 2012, on the theme *School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?*, was held in Sydney from 26 to 28 August.

Full conference papers for each of the speakers are available from research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2012/

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School improvement driven by culture and collaboration

When responsibility for professional development and school improvement lies with schools and school leaders, the building block of the school system is no longer a free-standing school but a cluster of schools in partnership, according to a UK academic.

Cambridge University academic Professor David Hargreaves explained to delegates to the annual ACER Research Conference how such clusters are pursuing school improvement in England.

The 17th annual ACER Research Conference addressed the theme *School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?*, and featured four keynote addresses and 17 concurrent sessions. A number of these sessions addressed the importance of a shared learning culture and collaborative approaches to school improvement.

'For many schools the task of establishing and maintaining deep partnerships and strategic alliances with other schools is proving to be a major challenge,' Professor Hargreaves said.

'Some of the prerequisites of a self-improving school system are being established, but other features of the education service are inhibiting this project,' he said.

Professor Hargreaves said the shift of responsibility for professional development and school improvement is a profound change for the teaching profession, for local education authorities, for inspection systems and for university schools of education and research centres.

The role of strong school–community engagement in school improvement and the way such engagement benefits students and teachers and the wider community was discussed in a session co-presented by Dr Michele Lonsdale, Ms Sharon Clerke and Dr Michelle Anderson from ACER. Together, they presented research evidence and practical tips for developing strong and productive school–community partnerships that ultimately support better outcomes for students.

One such example of successful collaboration, presented by Professor Brian Caldwell and Dr Tanya Vaughan from Educational Transformations, is the powerful impact of an arts program on student wellbeing and on achievement in other areas of the curriculum – including a gain in achievement in reading of approximately one year. Professor Caldwell and Dr Vaughan also identified the social and economic consequences of sidelining the arts.

Also at the conference, Mr Brian Giles-Browne from Principals Australia Institute 'Dare to Lead' and Ms Gina Milgate from ACER shared parent and carer community voices in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in school communities.

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Good evidence supports school improvement

Effective use of data by teachers is the crux of school improvement, Dr Michele Bruniges told delegates to the annual ACER Research Conference.

More than 1200 teachers, policymakers and researchers gathered in Sydney for the 17th annual ACER Research Conference. Addressing the theme *School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?*, the conference covered not only what schools can do to improve outcomes for students but also how they can do it most effectively.

The conference featured four keynote addresses and 17 concurrent sessions. A number of these sessions addressed how evidence-based approaches to planning support school improvement.

In her address on 28 August, Dr Bruniges from the NSW Department of Education and Communities said that while data is one of the most important diagnostic tools for teachers and schools it has become entangled in the ideological debate about school accountability.

'The significant risk of this is that data per se become devalued, particularly in the eyes of teachers. This is a danger because data is – and always has been – at the heart of the educational process,' Dr Bruniges said.

By way of example, ACER's Dr John Ainley told delegates how results from international comparative studies of student achievement, such as the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), provide perspectives on potentials for improving learning outcomes among Australian students.

According to Dr Ainley much, and possibly more, can be learned from studying changes over time as from studying high achieving countries. He highlighted a decline in average achievements in Australian lower secondary-level reading and mathematics over recent years, and said this indicates that improvement initiatives in Australia need to be broadly based.

Also at the conference, Dr Kathryn Glasswell from Griffith University reported on research that shows how teachers in professional learning communities are using assessment data to make evidence-based decisions about what to teach, to which students and how. Dr Glasswell told delegates that using data in meaningful ways means a commitment to 'keeping it real'.

'When teachers see data as providing critical information about individual students, they engage with it differently and are keen to learn more about what it means and how they might best use it,' said Dr Glasswell.

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School improvement not enough, expert warns

School improvement initiatives should occur within an innovative 'learning ecosystem' that engages a wide range of providers and partners, and would locate learning in a new variety of spaces and places, an international expert told delegates to the annual ACER research conference.

In the final keynote presentation of the conference, Board Director of the London-based not-for-profit, Innovation Unit, Ms Valerie Hannon said the pursuit of school improvement is insufficient to address the challenges facing the world if it is to provide equitable, effective learning systems for all its citizens.

'School improvement is not enough. It is necessary, but not sufficient,' Ms Hannon said.

Ms Hannon suggested system leaders and policy makers take a 'split screen' approach whereby, while school improvement continues to be pursued, simultaneously they create the conditions in which an innovative learning ecosystem can flourish. Such a mutually supportive system would involve existing and new education providers operating in both formal and informal contexts.

'Some innovators in education are questioning the idea of schools as the solution to the challenge of educating their young people,' Ms Hannon said.

Ms Hannon said a number of factors are forcing a change in the shape of schooling, including:

- Digital technology – the increased volume of knowledge; the ease of access to it; and transformed communication, collaboration and connectivity.
- Economic recession – education budgets across the developed world are contracting, while developing countries have no possibility of the kind of investment in public services historically enjoyed by the developed world.
- Globalisation – communities, economies and education itself are now globally connected.
- Demography – rapid population growth in developing countries is increasing demand for education, while the developed world's ageing population will require lifelong learning.

'Conventional education systems are, on current trajectories, unlikely to be capable of the kind of change that is urgently needed,' Ms Hannon said.

'A thriving, innovative learning ecosystem would enable systems to strike a balance between improving today's schools for today's children with more radical shifts for the future,' she said.

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Ms Hannon's conference paper is available from research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2012/28august/

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ACER Update

Conference proceedings and podcasts

ACER Research Conference 2012 focused on the particular practices that research is revealing to have a powerful effect on school improvement endeavours. Presenters highlighted the conditions, contexts, curriculum, pedagogy and practices required for school improvement to occur. Audio podcasts and presentation slides from some speakers will be available on the [ACER Research Conference website](#) from mid-September. The conference proceedings, including full conference papers for each of the speakers, are available from the [ACER research repository](#) now.

Research Conference 2013

ACER Research Conference 2013 will take place in Melbourne on the theme *The Science of Learning: What lessons are there for teaching?* The conference will take place from 4-6 August at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre. Further information about ACER Research Conference 2013 will be posted to the conference website as it becomes available.

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