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Research Conference special edition

The articles in this edition of ACER eNews are based on papers presented to Research Conference 2011 on the theme Indigenous Education: Pathways to success, held in Darwin from 7-9 August.

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Respect and research key to Indigenous educational success

Australia can achieve sustainable education outcomes for Indigenous students through changes in attitudes and teaching practices, Charles Sturt University's Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies Professor Jeannie Herbert told the Australian Council for Educational Research annual conference on Monday 8 August 2011.

Professor Herbert said that all Australians needed to make a concerted effort to create more positive attitudes toward education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

"We need to overcome the long-term, compounding effects of what has been persistently perceived as 'Indigenous failure' in education," she said.

"The picture presented has been one of doom and gloom, but there are firm foundations in place to construct a different picture, a paradigm for a better future built on a strong foundation of sustainable education outcomes for the descendants of this nation's First Peoples," she said.

Professor Herbert presented research into the educational success of Indigenous Australian students. She identified effective teaching practices that build relationships, engagement and personal agency, cater for the specific learning needs of individual students, and support students to become highly motivated, autonomous learners.

"Many Indigenous students are achieving educational success. The education system needs to build on the strategies that work for Indigenous students, and to create more positive mind-sets in both teachers and learners," Professor Herbert said.

She will also discuss the capacity of the Australian educational system to live up to its promise of quality education for all students.

"When this nation can transition its peoples into a harmonious, democratic society where all people are treated with respect regardless of their cultural values and beliefs, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will achieve their rights and ensure that their success is a matter of their own choice," Professor Herbert said.

"This is a transition that has the power to change this nation's history," she said.

Professor Herbert's presentation paper is available from

http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/8august/2

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Closing the gap not enough

Closing the current gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes is not enough, and planning must prevent a future digital divide from developing, Adelaide University Dean of Aboriginal Education Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney told delegates to the ACER Research Conference in Darwin earlier this month.

“Current education policy, with good cause, is firmly fixed on closing education gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Meanwhile, however, schools which already teach 21st-century skills are moving further ahead,” Professor Rigney said.

“Indigenous students also need these 21st-century capabilities in order to participate in society. Schools have a responsibility not only to close the gap, but also to develop in students a deep understanding of technologies,” he said.

Professor Rigney said that technology provides modern options for Indigenous communities to connect with oral and cultural traditions, as well as master English literacy and numeracy. It also offers greater opportunities for those in remote communities to work remotely and access online banking, health and welfare services.

“Information technology has the potential to overcome some of the symptoms, and causes, of the crisis in education for Indigenous Australians,” Professor Rigney said.

“And although the digital infrastructure rollout is underway, most Indigenous communities have had a decade of lag time in accessing and effectively using online services. Significant support is needed to ensure that digital literacy in these communities is developed now and into the future,” he said.

“Policymakers need to act now or risk condemning Indigenous Australians to digital ghettos,” he said.

The ACER Research Conference 2011, on the theme Indigenous Education: Pathways to success, took place in Darwin from 7 to 9 August.

A new book, [Two Way Teaching and Learning, Toward Culturally Reflective and Relevant Education](#), published by ACER Press and featuring a chapter by Professor Rigney, was also launched at the conference.

Professor Rigney’s conference presentation is available from

http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/8august/11

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Education systems must bridge Indigenous and Western worlds

Education for Indigenous students must complement, not overwrite, Indigenous wisdom and values, a Canadian expert told delegates to the ACER Research Conference on 9 August.

Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning Professor Lorna Williams, of the University of Victoria, British Columbia, drew parallels between the education of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia.

“When an individual is embedded as a member of a dominant culture everything is designed to fit that cultural world. From this position of relative comfort, it is difficult to even notice that there are people who might have a different approach,” Professor Williams said.

“The challenge for education systems, which are built on Western perspectives of teaching and learning, is to create spaces within these foreign and alienating environments that provide an opening to the Indigenous world,” she said.

Professor Williams said education systems should:

- incorporate Indigenous ways of learning and teaching, such as songs and stories
- reconsider attitudes to time and assessment practices that exclude Indigenous ways of learning
- develop Indigenous students’ identity through programs that promote the cultures, knowledge, values and languages of Indigenous people
- establish support networks for Indigenous students, including peers, mentors and elders
- support Indigenous students through transitions between year levels, transitions to post secondary and from post secondary back to the communities
- offer experiential learning, practicum and apprenticeships, and
- connect learning to the community so that it is seen as purposeful and meaningful.

“Students must perceive their school learning as adding to their knowledge, not obliterating their own Indigenous wisdom and values,” Professor Williams said.

Professor Williams’ conference presentation is available from

http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/

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Education key to improving Indigenous health and life expectancy

Collaboration between education and health systems is necessary to break the cycle of disadvantage for many Indigenous Australians, experts told delegates to the Australian Council for Educational Research annual conference in Darwin on Tuesday 9 August.

Professors Jonathan Carapetis and Sven Silburn of the Menzies School of Health Research spoke on the factors influencing educational outcomes for Indigenous students and their implications for planning and practice in the Northern Territory.

Speaking ahead of the conference, Professor Carapetis said there was a strong link between health and education.

"Increased educational levels are associated with better health, social and economic outcomes across all populations," Professor Carapetis said.

"Improving the current poor levels of school participation and academic achievement of Indigenous children is the most important step towards breaking the inter-generational cycle of poor health and disadvantage of Indigenous Australians," he said.

Professor Silburn agreed, and said that improving education for Indigenous children in their early years would reduce the likelihood of their developing chronic disease as adults, as well as reduce infant mortality rates and increase life expectancy for future generations.

"Children's early education experiences shape their brain growth and the development of the skills they need throughout their lives," Professor Silburn said.

"Better education also contributes to better health through improved income, health literacy and health behaviours, and greater access to health care when needed," he said.

Professor Silburn said that significant long-term investment was needed to support families and communities in strengthening early child development, improving the effectiveness of school education and creating new training pathways into employment.

"Education is one of the most effective means presently available to governments for eradicating poverty and advancing societal wellbeing. It is the key to closing the gap within a generation," Professor Silburn said.

The ACER Research Conference 2011, on the theme Indigenous Education: Pathways to success, took place in Darwin from 7 to 9 August.

The paper delivered by Professors Carapetis and Silburn at the conference is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/9august/1

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Community input needed to improve Indigenous student engagement

A focus on engagement, attendance and retention could help improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) researchers Dr Sarah Buckley and Ms Stephanie Armstrong told delegates to the ACER Research Conference on 9 August.

"We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on average have a lower level of participation in education than non-Aboriginal Australians, but we need to know more about why," Ms Armstrong said.

"Attendance is the end result, but it's only part of the story. We need to know why students go or don't go to class," she said.

"We need to better understand what engagement and success look like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students," Ms Armstrong said.

Dr Buckley said that while there are some programs in place that aim to improve engagement, attendance and retention, few of these have been formally evaluated, and that more community input was needed.

The researchers aim to spark community discussion about proposed strategies to improve engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including:

- whole-school and whole-community approaches to education
- linkages between agencies responsible for education, health and housing, and
- comprehensive, ongoing professional development for teachers.

"We're seeking the input of teachers and community leaders who are engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education, so we can better understand what works. This community input will inform directions for research and new strategies," Dr Buckley said.

"We need to look at education through different cultural lenses to find solutions," Ms Armstrong said.

Further information about this presentation is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/9august/5/

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Successful post-school transitions for Indigenous youth

Approaches to improving education for Indigenous students should take a bottom-up approach, building on successful classroom and community programs to inform policy, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) researchers Justin Brown and Gina Milgate told delegates to the ACER Research Conference on Monday 8 August.

Brown and Milgate, whose presentation to the conference focused on successful post-school transitions for Indigenous youth, said that community engagement and input were vital.

"We're taking a strength-based approach," Ms Milgate said.

"We've put the statistics about Indigenous student underperformance to one side for a while, to listen to what people in the community have to say about what is working," she said.

Brown and Milgate will present series of case studies which show that effective programs to smooth the transition from school to work or further study for Indigenous students:

- make student success the responsibility of everyone in educational organisations
- support student, family and community engagement
- introduce work concepts, job information and work experience prior to post-compulsory schooling years
- have strong partnerships with industry and philanthropic organisations, and
- embed cultural awareness and understanding.

"It is important to monitor progress and report against targets, to make sure programs are effective, and to inform planning and policy," Ms Milgate said.

"But it's also vital to recognise the additional obligations and needs of Indigenous young people without diminishing the importance of high expectations, engagement and achievement in the learning and working environment," she said.

She noted that the research has informed some recommendations that have been implemented by the Victorian government.

The ACER Research Conference 2011, on the theme Indigenous Education: Pathways to success, took place in Darwin from 7 to 9 August.

Further information about this conference paper is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/8august/7

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Focus on primary school key to closing the gap

Understanding why some Indigenous students perform well in primary school and others do not could be the key to improving education for all students, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) research fellow Dr Kate Reid told delegates to the recent ACER Research in Darwin.

Dr Reid reported on the Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study for Indigenous Students.

"On average, in the first year of primary school, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students achieve similarly in literacy and numeracy, but by the start of Year 3, there is a gap in average achievement between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers," Dr Reid said.

"From Year 3 on, Indigenous students improve at a similar rate to their non-Indigenous peers, but the gap remains until the end of primary school," she said.

"For this reason, it is important to focus on the early years of education," she said.

Dr Reid said that it was also important to note that, while there is a gap overall in average achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, there is profound variability between students and schools.

"In some schools, Indigenous students are performing as well as or better than their non-Indigenous peers," she said.

Some of the underlying factors present in schools in the study which supported growth in achievement for Indigenous students include:

- a good start, attendance and engagement for students
- strong leadership and supportive teaching strategies
- strong links between schools and their communities
- Indigenous staff members and volunteers in the school, and
- recognition of Indigenous cultures.

The ACER Research Conference 2011, on the theme Indigenous Education: Pathways to success, takes place in Darwin from 7 to 9 August.

Further information about this conference paper is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2011/8august/16

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ACER Update

Two way teaching and learning key to educational equity

A new title from ACER Press, *Two Way Teaching and Learning: Towards culturally reflective and relevant education*, was officially launched at the ACER annual Research Conference in Darwin on 7 August.

Research Conference 2011, on the theme *Indigenous Education: Pathways to success*, was a fitting place to launch the book, which focuses on policy issues, strategies to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, and ways in which people of different cultures can learn from each other.

In *Two Way Teaching and Learning*, co-editors Hannah Rachel Bell, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Nola Purdie and ACER Indigenous Liaison Officer Gina Milgate highlight the overriding need for Australian people and educational systems to better engage with communities and elders in order to address the underlying issues that face Indigenous people from socially and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Two Way Teaching and Learning is published by ACER Press (2011). Print copies can be purchased from the ACER Online Shop at <https://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/product/A5207BK> or by contacting customer service on 1800 338 402 or via email on [.\(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](#)

Conference proceedings available online

Research Conference 2011 focused on what we can learn from research about creating and sustaining positive educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Presenters highlighted the conditions, contexts, curriculum, pedagogy and practices that establish pathways to success for Indigenous students. The full proceedings from the conference as well as presentation slides from some speakers are available from the Research Conference website <http://www.acer.edu.au/conference>

Research Conference 2012

Research Conference 2012 will take place in Sydney on the theme of *Teaching and Learning Literacy in the 21st Century*. The conference will take place from 26-28 August at the Sydney Convention Centre. Further information about Research Conference 2012 will be posted to the conference website as it becomes available.

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