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Published August 2005

In this issue:

- [Introduction](#)
- [Growth not benchmarks the key to school success](#)
- [What is the nature of evidence that makes a difference to learning?](#)
- [Teacher intuition still important as schools swamped with data](#)
- [Using student performance data effectively](#)
- [ACER UPDATE](#)

Introduction

The following articles are based on papers presented at the ACER Research Conference 2005, held in Melbourne, 7-9 August 2005 on the theme of 'Using data to support learning.' The conference was ACER's tenth annual research conference and the largest undertaken to date. Three keynote addresses and 16 concurrent papers were presented at the conference attended by more than 700 delegates.

Growth not benchmarks the key to school success

The mark of a school's success is how effectively it causes growth for students and not just how many students it helps over a particular 'proficiency hurdle,' according to a visiting US education expert.

Professor Gage Kingsbury of the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) visited Melbourne recently to deliver the opening keynote address to ACER's Research Conference 2005, *Using Data to Support Learning*.

Professor Kingsbury is critical of the approaches taken by systems such as the US No Child Left Behind (NCLB) which relies on proficiency tests and does not take individual growth into account. He said a more complete accountability system would reward schools for the growth they nurture in students.

Published August 2005

"The percentage of students who happen to be able to clear a single proficiency hurdle on a single test on a single day of the school year might be a useful piece of information, but it isn't the most important element to look at when measuring school success," Professor Kingsbury told delegates.

"We can't judge student growth by looking at a student's current level, and without knowing anything about student growth in a school, we can hardly judge whether that school is successfully educating its students," Professor Kingsbury said. "To the extent that students are growing as much or more than expected and growing towards or beyond proficiency, the school can be judged a success."

In his presentation, Professor Kingsbury discussed research concerning US attempts to use student proficiency standards to identify struggling schools and describe the Kingsbury and Houser Hybrid Success Model that combines growth and standards to improve the ability to identify successful schools. He also outlined the use of an assessment system that fosters improvement in education.

Professor G. Gage Kingsbury is the Director of Research for the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). He has designed adaptive achievement tests that are currently in use by over 1000 agencies throughout the United States and has published or presented over 60 studies dealing with item banking, item response theory and computerised adaptive testing.

Benchmarks and growth and success... Oh, my!

Dr Gage Kingsbury, Research Director, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), USA

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What is the nature of evidence that makes a difference to learning?

The move to collecting more data from schools needs to be stopped and the move to making defensible interpretations about teaching and learning upgraded to priority level a leading educationalist Professor John Hattie of Auckland University recently told delegates at the ACER Research Conference 2005, *Using Data to Support Learning*.

"Schools are awash with data, and I have yet to find a Department or Ministry of Education which does not have so much data that debate is more concerned with issues of collecting and storing data rather than how to effectively return the data to schools," Professor Hattie said. "While volumes of data are extruded from and about schools, teaching continues without the benefits of this data."

Professor Hattie believes many current models of data collection for the purposes of accountability are flawed and outlined an alternative model developed in New Zealand. The *asTTle* model is based on target setting, ensuring the implementation of the curricula and comparisons to appropriate national and local standards of performance. The evidence collected is centred on three major questions: Where are we going? How are we going? Where to next?

"We must develop an accountability system that directly involves and influences the teacher and principal. Such a system is more likely to have major effects on the quality of teaching and learning," Professor Hattie said. "By locating evidence in the classroom we can also improve the quality of information and interpretations sent to students, parents, ministries, ministers and thence the community."

He argued that the evidence collected can also be used to contest deeply held beliefs about what should be undertaken in the name of curriculum reform, including where the curriculum needs to be reformed and where it should be left alone.

Published August 2005

Professor John Hattie is the Head of the School of Education at Auckland University. He holds a recognised place as a keynote speaker and commentator on New Zealand educational issues and has a recognised reputation as an educationalist in New Zealand and overseas.

What is the nature of evidence that makes a difference to learning?

Professor John Hattie, Auckland University, New Zealand

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Teacher intuition still important as schools swamped with data

Using data in school decision-making does not have to be a mechanical or technical process that denigrates educators' intuition, teaching philosophy and personal experience, according to Dr Lorna Earl, Associate Professor and co-director of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto .

Dr Earl spoke recently at the ACER Research Conference 2005, *Using Data to Support Learning* in Melbourne where she delivered one of three keynote addresses.

"Having data is a beginning, but it is not enough. Schools need to move from being data-rich to being information-rich and knowledge-rich as well. Information becomes knowledge when it is shaped, organised and embedded in a context that gives it meaning and connectedness," Dr Earl said.

School leaders are the ones who are accountable for the work of the school. High-stakes accountability systems can create a sense of urgency and provide 'pressure' for change. However, real accountability is much more than accounting (providing information of justifications in an annual report or a press release or even student report cards). It is a moral and professional responsibility to be knowledgeable and fair in teaching and in interactions with students and their parents. It engenders respect, trust, shared understanding and mutual support.

Educators are trying to come to grips with the vast deluge of new and unfiltered information, and to find ways to transform this information into knowledge and ultimately into constructive action.

Educators need to use data in many different contexts - to establish their current status, to determine improvement plans, to chart effectiveness of their initiatives and to monitor their progress towards their goals.

There was a time when educational decisions were made with a combination of intimate and privileged knowledge of the context, political savvy, professional training and logical analysis. Very little data was available about schools.

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We are now in an era of informed professionalism, where leaders will need to: develop an inquiry habit of mind; become data literate; and create a culture of enquiry in their school community.

"Using data to make decisions is hard work. When schools engage in ongoing school improvement, they find themselves in a continuous cycle of change. It gets easier as they internalise and embed the technical skills, organisational processes and values into routines in the culture of the school," Dr Earl said.

Dr Lorna Earl is a teacher and researcher with a background in psychology and education and has a doctorate in Epidemiology and Biostatistics. Her active involvement in executive positions with local, national and international organisations has brought her in close touch with educational issues throughout the world.

From Accounting to Accountability: Harnessing Data for School Improvement

Associate Professor Lorna Earl, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

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Using student performance data effectively

The education community could benefit from learning to use data about student performance more effectively to support both student and teacher learning, according to educational researcher Dr Ken Rowe. Successful learning support depends on the extent to which schools are provided with an opportunity to claim 'ownership' and 'control' over their own data.

Dr Rowe is the Research Director of ACER's Learning Processes research program, and spoke at ACER's Research Conference 2005, *Using Data to Support Learning* in Melbourne .

According to Dr Rowe outcomes-based educational performance indicators provide specific details of what we expect children to learn. In developmental assessment, this is expressed using progress maps that describe different skill levels. Such "maps" provide a framework for measuring, describing and monitoring growth over time at individual and group levels.

"Performance indicator data can and should be used AS learning, FOR learning, as well as OF learning,' Dr Rowe said. "Regretfully, these key elements of 'using data to support learning' are not well understood throughout all levels of the local and international education community."

Assessment results provide an assessment OF learning, describing what students have learnt. But assessment data is also important AS learning - both students and teachers learn a great deal from test results. The diagnostic nature of the assessment items provides teachers and parents with valuable information in terms of assessment FOR learning by highlighting interventions suitable for individuals or groups.

"Parents appreciate descriptions of what their child has achieved and are yet to achieve because it helps them, with the teacher's guidance, to know how best to help their child at home."

"Teachers also respond positively to the use of progress maps, as they can monitor the learning progress of each child in the class, as well as the whole class, against the norms for their age and grade levels. They can then identify what they need to do to help those children who are not progressing as well as they should," Dr Rowe said.

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Evidence for the kinds of feedback data that support both student and teacher learning

Dr Ken Rowe, Research Director, Learning Processes, ACER

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ACER UPDATE

Conference proceedings available online

The full conference proceedings containing all conference papers or abstracts are now available for download online. Each paper is also available as an individual document. To access the proceedings and individual papers please click here to visit the 'Workshops' section of the website.

Research Conference 2006

Research Conference 2006 will examine recent research and practice directions in the area of science education both locally and internationally. This conference will address what it will take to boost science teaching and learning.

Conference speakers will include:

- Professor Jonathan Osborne, King's College London, England
- Dr Rodger Bybee, Biological Sciences Curriculum Studies, Colorado Springs, USA
- Professor Leonie Rennie, Curtin University, Western Australia
- Professor Mark Hackling, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
- Professor Russell Tytler, Deakin University, Victoria
- Professor Barry McCrae, ACER

Further information on Research Conference 2006 will be posted on this website as it becomes available.

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