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## Teaching Reading - The report and recommendations from the Committee for the National Inquiry

The much anticipated report from the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Teaching Reading, was released on 8 December by the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson. The committee for the inquiry was chaired by Dr Ken Rowe, Research Director ( Learning Processes) at ACER. In this article Dr Rowe outlines the three key principles underlying the report and recommendations made by the committee. A slightly shortened version of this article was published in the opinion section of the Sydney Morning Herald on Friday 9 December 2005.

Three key principles underlie the report and recommendations from the Committee for the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. First, young Australians are the most valuable resource for our nation's social and economic prosperity. Second, the key to such prosperity at both the individual and national level is the provision of quality schooling. Third, because teachers are the most valuable resource available to schools, it is vital that teachers be equipped with evidence-based teaching practices that are demonstrably effective in meeting the developmental and learning needs of all children.

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Nowhere are these three principles more important than in the teaching of reading, since being able to read is foundational, not only for school-based learning, but also for children's psychosocial wellbeing, further education and training, occupational success, as well as for productive and fulfilling participation in social and economic activity. Moreover, the rapidly changing nature of computer-based technologies and global communication systems demand competence in increasingly complex multi-literacies, of which reading competence (together with writing) is essential.

While children enter school with varying degrees of competence in speaking their language(s), typically they have little knowledge about how to read and write. Because reading involves two basic and complementary processes: learning how to decipher print and understanding what the print means, the purpose of early reading instruction is to help children master the challenges of linking written and spoken language. These include acquiring knowledge about the alphabetic system that link written words to their pronunciations, learning to decode new words, building a vocabulary that can be read on sight from memory, and becoming facile at constructing, integrating, interpreting and remembering meanings represented in text in whatever form such representations are presented.

So what are the major messages from the evidence-based research that indicate which approaches are most effective in teaching children to read? For beginning reading during the early years of schooling (and later if needed), findings from a large volume of local and international evidence-based research consistently indicate that direct, systematic instruction in phonics makes significantly greater contributions to children's initial and subsequent progress in reading, writing, spelling and comprehension, than do alternative approaches involving unsystematic or no phonics instruction. When foundational phonics skills are taught early, the need for costly and often belated intervention programs is minimised.

These findings highlight a concern by the Inquiry Committee that the predominant whole-language approach to the teaching of reading in Australian schools is problematic. Essentially, the whole-language approach reflects a constructivist philosophy of learning (rather than a philosophy of teaching) in which children are viewed as inherently active, self-regulating learners who construct knowledge for themselves, with little or no explicit instruction.

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However, there is a strong body of evidence that exclusive use of a whole-language approach is not in the best interests of children learning to read, and especially for those experiencing reading difficulties. Nonetheless, whereas the systematic, explicit teaching of phonics is a necessary condition for the effective teaching of reading, it is not a sufficient condition.

That is, the evidence indicates that all children are provided with the best opportunities for success in learning to read when teachers integrate the following skills via explicit instruction in: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. Because these are essential skills for the development of competence in reading, writing and spelling, they must be taught early, systematically, explicitly and well. Parents and caregivers have a positive role to play by regularly reading aloud with their children, especially during the formative pre-school years.

The Committee learned much from the 453 submissions provided to the Inquiry and visits to schools across the country where some excellent examples of effective practice in the teaching of reading and writing were observed, together with evidence of children's success. In general, however, it was clear that teachers seemed unaware of the reasons for using particular strategies rather than others. Teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment for reporting to parents need to be more firmly linked to findings from evidence-based research indicating effective practices, including those that are demonstrably effective for the particular learning needs of individual children.

Similarly, the Committee found that many teachers do not use (and are not aware of) objective, standardised diagnostic tests that assess the essential alphabetic, decoding skills required for reading proficiency. Consistent with the findings documented in the report titled: *Assessment of literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling - An overview* (DEST, 2001), 1 assessments of reading in the early years need to be linked to formal assessments of reading undertaken during the subsequent years of schooling. These are important issues that the Committee recommends be addressed during pre-service teacher education, and especially through in-service professional learning.

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The Committee found that six key elements operate consistently in the successful schools visited. These are:

- a belief that all children can learn to read and write regardless of background and location;
- an early and systematic emphasis on the explicit teaching of phonics;
- a subsequent focus on direct teaching;
- a well-resourced print-rich environment, including fiction and non-fiction books, charts and computer programs;
- strong leadership and management practices, involving whole-school approaches to the teaching of reading and writing; and
- an expectation that teachers will engage in evidence-based professional learning and learn from each other.

Equipping young people to engage productively in the knowledge economy and in society more broadly is fundamental to both individual and national prosperity. This objective depends primarily on: the ability to read and write effectively; and the provision of quality teaching and learning by teachers who have acquired, during their pre-service teacher education, and in-service professional learning, evidence-based teaching practices that are shown to be effective in meeting the developmental and learning needs of all children. Our children and their teachers require no less.

Dr Ken Rowe

Committee Chair, National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, and Research Director, Learning Processes research program,  
Australian Council for Educational Research

1 I.e.,: DEST (2001). Assessment of literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling: An overview. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.

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## More emphasis on technical skills required

A greater focus on developing technical skills in secondary schools is required to draw more young Australians into apprenticeships, a recent research report by ACER recommends. The report, *Participation in and Progress through New Apprenticeships* released in mid-November also indicated that more effort is also required to attract Year 12 completers to the trades.

The study examined the characteristics and completion rates of participants in New Apprenticeships drawing on the experiences of a group of young Australians who were in Year 9 in 1995, focusing on those who had participated in a traditional apprenticeship or traineeship up until the end of 2003.

Twenty per cent of the group had participated in a New Apprenticeship (both traditional apprenticeships and traineeships) with most having completed their training. For example, by 2003, 74 per cent of traditional apprentices had completed their training, 16 per cent had discontinued their training while the remaining 10 per cent were continuing with their training.

Participation in a traditional apprenticeship was influenced by vocational interests, family background and gender. Males were more than three times as likely as females to be apprentices, those of an English speaking background were more four times as likely as other students to be apprentices and those whose father is a tradesman were nearly 60 per cent more likely than other young people to be an apprentice.

Releasing the report, Deputy CEO (Research) of ACER, Dr John Ainley said "we have seen a steady flow of people into trade apprenticeships in recent years, which is a positive development in meeting Australia's skills shortages. However, if we want to further increase the flow of young people into trades then we need to create more opportunities for young people to explore trades related experiences in the early years of secondary school."

The report also noted that there had been little change in the percentage of Year 12 completers entering traditional apprenticeships and more needs to be done to attract these students to the trades.

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The electrical and electronic fields currently draw the most Year 12 completers with more than 70 per cent of traditional apprentices in these fields completing Year 12. In contrast, fewer than half of the commencing apprentices in the food trades and hairdressing had completed Year 12.

### **Further information**

Further findings are available in the report, [Participation in and Progress through New Apprenticeships](#) by John Ainley and Matthew Corrigan. The study is research report number 44 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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## Busy young Australians get most satisfaction

Young Australians are highly satisfied with their life and careers according to recent findings from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) that suggests being fully occupied in work, study or a combination of the two is a major influence on satisfaction.

A study of over 6000 young people, released by ACER in late October, explored how their self-reported life satisfaction is related to educational activities and various labour market outcomes during the early post-school years. The participants were tracked for four years after completing secondary school from 1999 to 2002 when they were between 18 and 21 years old.

Overall, the study's participants were highly satisfied with their career and life in general. Those who had the greatest time commitments to study and/or work were the most satisfied.

Young people who were occupied full-time in education, training, employment or a combination of these activities reported higher levels of satisfaction, with both their careers and their lives in general, than those who were occupied only part-time. Those who were occupied part-time were in turn more satisfied than those who were not in education, training or employment.

Changing the amount of time dedicated to work and/or study during the four years of the surveys resulted in changes in satisfaction. Changes such as moving from full-time work or study into unemployment, led to decreased satisfaction levels. However, activity changes that resulted in an increase in time allocated to study and/or work led to greater career satisfaction but not necessarily to greater general satisfaction.

The report's findings suggest that the pathways taken from school to further study or the workforce do have an impact on young people's lives that go beyond having sufficient income or good career prospects. Connections with other people, through the workplace or classroom, and a sense of shared purpose are some important, although possibly unintended, benefits of involvement in work and study.

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The study also provided further evidence of the importance of a smooth transition from school to further study or employment and for policymakers to identify effective strategies for engaging and supporting young people at risk of disconnecting from education and work.

### **Further information**

Further findings are available in the report, [Life Satisfaction of Young Australians: Relationships between Further Education, Training and Employment and General and Career Satisfaction](#) by Kylie Hillman and Julie McMillan. The study is research report number 43 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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## Gold medal for ACER researcher's work in Kenya

ACER Research Fellow Dr Njora Hungi was awarded a Gold Medal for a presentation he delivered to the IIEP-UNESCO International Invitational Educational Policy Research Conference in Paris in September. The paper, Explaining differences in mathematics and reading achievement among Standard 6 pupils in Kenya: Emerging policy issues, was awarded the gold international research medal by a panel of experts on the basis of the paper's academic merit, potential for educational policy impact and quality of presentation.

The study examined factors at the pupil, class and school levels that influenced achievement in mathematics and reading of Standard 6 primary school pupils in Kenya and also examined performance of schools across provinces in Kenya. The data for the study was collected as part of a major project (known as Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality) that sought to examine the quality of education offered in primary schools in Kenya as well as in primary schools in another 14 Southern African countries.

Results show that age, home background and pupil-teacher ratio are important factors in the prediction of achievement in mathematics and reading at Standard 6 level in Kenya. When school effectiveness was examined, there was no significant difference in performance of primary schools across provinces in Kenya. The exceptions were schools in Nairobi Province, which appeared to perform significantly above average in reading, but not in mathematics.

## Further information

The full paper is available online at <http://www.sacmeq.org/conference.htm>

or

Download the full report in PDF format:

[Explaining differences in mathematics and reading achievement among Standard 6 pupils in Kenya: Emerging policy issues](#)

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## ACER UPDATE

### **National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy reports available**

The report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Teaching Reading, and accompanying reports are now available via the website of the Department of Education, Science and Training. The Report and Recommendations, Literature Review and A Guide to the Report and Recommendations for Parents and Carers are available for download.

[Full Report from DEST website](#)

### **Literature Review on Barriers to Employment for Indigenous Victorians**

ACER has been commissioned by the Victorian State Services Authority to write a review paper that will identify structural, cultural and other barriers to employment. The paper will also identify the drivers of participation of the Indigenous community in Victorian public and private sector employment. Sets of principles and policies will be derived to inform the Victorian Government's consideration of its Wur-cum barra strategy to increase employment of Indigenous Victorians.

### **Masters appointed to IBO research committee**

ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters has been appointed as a member of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), research committee under the category of external expert for a three year term from May 2006.

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