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Evaluating Literacy Advance and its effects over five years

Research undertaken by ACER for the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) has highlighted the importance of a good foundation to literacy beginning in the preparatory year or even earlier in the pre-school years, with benefits flowing through to the later years of schooling.

This is among the findings contained in a report, *Five Years On: Literacy Advance in the Primary Years*, by ACER researchers John Ainley and Marianne Fleming published by the CECV in April. The report describes Phase Three of the Literacy Advance Research Project (LARP), which evaluates Literacy Advance, the CECV strategy to improve the literacy development of students in Victorian Catholic schools.

The Literacy Advance Research Project investigates the implementation over time of key elements of the Literacy Advance strategy in schools; evaluates the effectiveness of approaches to literacy in the early years of schooling; and examines various school, classroom and student background factors and their effect on the development of literacy.

A cohort of students who were in Year 1 at the beginning of the study in 1998 has been followed to the end of Year 5. A second cohort of students who were in Year 1 in 2000 has been followed through to the end of Year 3. Comparisons between the two groups have been drawn and the factors influencing their literacy development have been examined.

The report on Phase Three of the study concluded that after five years of Literacy Advance there is evidence of a strengthening of the foundations in literacy. The process of implementation of the strategy has continued, with the steady update of key elements already introduced.

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The report examined the uptake of elements of the Literacy Advance program over time. It operates through a whole-school approach to program design, mandated professional development for teachers, designated blocks of time for literacy in schools, intervention programs for students needing additional assistance and the systematic evaluation of student learning.

The Children's Literacy Success Strategy (CLaSS), which incorporated these elements most explicitly, was found to be the most popular program operating in schools and has grown in popularity over the course of the study. By 2002 almost 80 per cent of the schools in the study nominated the CLaSS approach as their focus for the teaching of literacy in Year 1. Only 14 per cent did so in 1998, the first year of Literacy Advance. Schools progressively allocated more staff time to the coordination of literacy programs and supporting the work of teachers. The provision of Reading Recovery, the individual intervention program for Year 1 students, increased from 50 per cent of schools in 1998 to 90 per cent of schools in 2002.

Findings in the new report indicate that the Literacy Advance strategy has benefited students who have taken part in its programs. Phase Two of the study found that students who began Year 1 in 2000 had a reading proficiency about one quarter of a year ahead of their counterparts who had begun Year 1 in 1998. The latest study found that the 2000 cohort maintained this advantage through to the end of Year 3.

According to co-author of the report Dr John Ainley, these findings indicate that several years of Literacy Advance has provided substantial benefits for the second cohort. "It can be concluded that the increased emphasis on literacy development in the early years, including the preparatory year, has had lasting beneficial effects for these students." he said.

Analysis of the effects of Reading Recovery, a program for students identified as requiring additional assistance, was found to provide benefits during Year 1 for those students who participate in this program. However, the results indicate a need to ensure that a higher percentage of students on the program maintain their gains in subsequent years.

In assessing factors influencing literacy achievement, the study found that what happens in the preparatory year and earlier is influential for progress in later years.

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For both the 1998 and 2000 cohorts there was a strong influence of Year 1 initial achievement on the student literacy growth with those achieving higher reading scores in Year 1 maintaining their advantage through to later years.

"We have found throughout the study that Year 1 achievement has the strongest influence on literacy growth in later years. This reinforces earlier conclusions that a good start in literacy is crucial for later development," Dr Ainley said.

Other factors identified as influencing reading growth include student attentiveness and engagement. Those students who were more attentive and engaged in reading and other literacy activities progressed to a greater extent than their peers. The gender of students did not have a significant influence on growth in literacy achievement.

School factors that influenced reading proficiency included the approach to literacy development during Year 1 and the socio-economic context of the school. Students who experienced the CLaSS approach in year 1 grew more rapidly during Year 1 than other students and maintained the gain over subsequent years. There was an effect of both student socio-economic background and school-level socio-economic context on literacy achievement. Students from enriched backgrounds, in schools with other such students, developed higher levels of achievement than other students.

The report concluded that the introduction of Literacy Advance has been successful not only in increasing attention on student literacy development, and promoting strategies and good teaching practices in literacy, but also in bringing about its aim to improve the literacy achievement of students in the early years. However, there are some areas that provide challenges for the future if all students are to be good readers before they finish their primary years of schooling. These include a consideration of strategies to lessen the gap between low and high achieving students. A challenge remains to find effective strategies with which to assist students who are experiencing difficulties in literacy beyond Year 1, and to reduce the extent to which the gap widens between low and high achieving students as they move through school.

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Enjoyment of activities involving literacy is a further element vital for continued growth in literacy according to Dr Ainley who said, "The challenge for schools is to encourage and foster a love of reading beginning in the early years and continuing through primary school. Providing a range of materials and literacy activities that interest and engage students and that are both suitable for the students' capabilities whilst challenging them are essential.

"Building a strong foundation in literacy in the earliest years of schooling is crucial to the growth in literacy in later years. There is a window of opportunity in the first two years of schooling that can make a difference to the literacy development of children."

The Literacy Advance Research Project was a collaborative venture of the Australian Council for Educational Research, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and the University of Melbourne's Centre for Applied Educational Research.

The findings from Phase One (1998) and Phase two (1999) of the study have been published in two reports: *Learning to Read in the Early Primary Years* and *Three Years On: Literacy Advance in the Early and Middle Primary Years* .

Additional findings and information are contained in the report, *Five Years On: Literacy Advance in the Primary Years*, John Ainley and Marianne Fleming, which is available from the Catholic Education Commission in Melbourne.

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What makes a good teacher?

ACER Chief Executive Professor Geoff Masters examines what the research tells us are the characteristics of highly effective teachers.

The Australian Government's 10-point agenda for schooling begins by recognising the importance of strengthening the status and quality of teaching as a profession. Proposed strategies for achieving this objective include the development of agreed professional standards that make explicit the knowledge and skills underpinning outstanding teaching practice; the introduction of ways of assessing high standards; and the recognition and reward of highly accomplished teaching, including through increased remuneration.

The question of what it means to be a highly accomplished teacher is currently being addressed by professional bodies and statutory authorities around Australia. This question also has been addressed through international research into the characteristics of effective teachers and their teaching. The findings of much of this research were summarised by Professor John Hattie at ACER's *Research Conference 2003*.

Hattie notes that, while almost every initiative taken in education can be shown to have a positive influence on student learning, excellent teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement. In contrasting expert teachers with merely 'experienced' teachers, Hattie observes that expert teachers are better at relating lesson content to prior lessons, other school subjects, underlying principles and students' interests. They also are more flexible and opportunistic in pursuing the learning needs of individual students.

Expert teachers work harder at collecting and analysing feedback on the effectiveness of their own teaching, and they make better decisions when planning lessons: developing general plans but allowing detail to be shaped by students' performances and reactions.

Outstanding teachers create classroom climates in which risks are encouraged and errors accepted. They are more able than merely 'experienced' teachers to deal with complex situations while maintaining a focus on student learning.

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In guiding learning they seek more information about students-their abilities, experiences and backgrounds-and want to know more about the contexts in which they will be teaching.

Importantly, Hattie reports that expert teachers are more adept at monitoring student problems and assessing students' levels of understanding and progress, and they provide more relevant, useful feedback to learners. They more often develop and test hypotheses about individuals' learning difficulties and they have the ability to do all these things more or less automatically.

The picture that emerges from research into highly effective teachers is a picture of individuals who are passionate about teaching and learning, who respect students as learners and as people, and who demonstrate care and commitment. They are more inclined than 'experienced' teachers to establish a closeness to students.

Outstanding teachers also work to enhance students' self-concept and self-efficacy as learners. They set challenging goals and encourage a shared commitment to achieving those goals. And while both 'expert' and 'experienced' teachers are successful in promoting surface learning of facts and procedures, expert teachers are more successful in promoting deep understanding of concepts and principles.

Finally, Hattie concludes that, while both 'expert' and 'experienced' teachers possess deep content knowledge of their subject areas, expert teachers have deeper understandings of how learning occurs and can be supported in a subject area (ie, deeper pedagogical content knowledge).

There is no single formula for outstanding teaching, but the many thousands of research studies that have investigated the characteristics of highly effective teachers provide a firm base on which to build world-class standards for the teaching profession.

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By Professor Geoff Masters.

This article was originally published in *Education Review*, Vol 7, No 3 April 2004.

Download Paper:

Hattie, John (October 2003). [Teachers Make a Difference, What is the research evidence?](#) .

University of Auckland, Australian Council for Educational Research

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ACER UPDATE

Third Wave Intervention Strategies

ACER has been awarded the contract to investigate effective 'Third Wave' Intervention Strategies for Students with Learning Difficulties who are in Mainstream Schools in Years 4, 5 and 6. The two-year project is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). It will be conducted by ACER's Learning Processes research program led by Dr Ken Rowe.

School non-attendance research paper

ACER has been asked to prepare a short paper on school non-attendance by the Dusseldorp Skills Foundation (DSF). It will update an earlier paper prepared by John Ainley and Michelle Lonsdale in 2000 entitled Non-attendance at School. It is hoped to capture changes in patterns of absences and suspensions since then, alongside some general information about participation rates, focusing mainly on the middle years of schooling. There will also be comparisons of patterns of non-attendance and participation in schooling between Australia and whatever overseas countries can be found to publish such data, and review the central policy implications arising from these findings.

International Test Users' Conference 2004

ACER is conducting the International Test Users' Conference 2004: Assessing Intelligence, Emotion and Behaviour at the Hilton on the Park in Melbourne on 19-20 July.

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