

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## *Literacy research must look to the past*

An overly negative view of literacy and reluctance to take account of history has limited research and led indirectly to the advancement of some unproductive ideas about literacy, according to a new review of research on literacy education released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

Written by University of Sydney Professorial Research Fellow Peter Freebody, Australian Education Review 52 aims to expand our understanding of literacy at a time when public and private lives have become increasingly literacy dependent, and literacy demands more complex and sophisticated.

The review brings together a rich variety of past and current research and encourages policy makers, researchers, and practitioners not to exclude a historical perspective of literacy education research, arguing that from the past we can learn lessons that can lead us forward.

However, many young researchers have been taught to distrust any research that is more than a decade old and as such many valuable lessons from the past have been omitted in recent studies which are often simplistic and repetitive.

“Many of the studies encountered while reading for this review are conceptually trite, repetitive, to all intents and purposes, of earlier studies, or so limited in their theoretical scope and practical benefits that they yield little for educators working with a concept of literacy beyond letter or word reading,” Professor Freebody says.

The review argues that a false dichotomy has developed in literacy theory between “code” and “meaning-emphasis”, a dichotomy sometimes wrongly equated with the debate between “phonics” and “whole language” approaches to teaching. This leads teachers of early literacy to believe that they must choose between the two methods, when in fact effective teachers use elements from both, as well as additional strategies.

Professor Freebody is also critical of the media portrayal of the teaching and learning of literacy as being in a state of crisis despite the high levels of performance on the part of Australian students in international literacy tests.

Professor Freebody is concerned that the idea of literacy is sometimes simply used as a form of punishment, saying “The effects of research are less productive when the primary function is to cut ‘underperforming’ teachers, students or target demographic groups out from the herd for naming, branding or punishment.”

He argues that future research into literacy education must include a focus on observational study of teaching in actual classrooms.

Australian Education Review number 52, *Literacy Education in School: Research perspectives from the past, for the future*, by Peter Freebody with a foreword by Professor Barry McGaw, Director, Melbourne Education Research Institute, is available for download from the ACER website at [www.acer.edu.au](http://www.acer.edu.au). Print copies can be purchased from ACER Press. Contact customer service on (03) 9835 7447 or via email on [sales@acer.edu.au](mailto:sales@acer.edu.au)

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