

MEDIA RELEASE

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Report reveals socioeconomic differences among Australian schools

A new study of test scores achieved by Australian 14-year-olds in reading comprehension and mathematics between 1975 and 1998 has revealed growing differences between Australian schools along socioeconomic lines.

Socioeconomic status, as measured by parents' occupation, had a significant effect on the scores achieved by students. Throughout the 1975-1998 period, students whose parents were employed in professional and managerial occupations had the highest average scores and students whose parents were production workers or labourers had the lowest. Between 1975 and 1998, the gap between these two groups of students at an individual level narrowed. However, at the same time, the gap in scores widened between schools with high concentrations of professional parents and all other schools.

The report, released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), examines student achievement scores on tests of reading comprehension and mathematics from five studies that tested the literacy and numeracy levels of young people in Australian schools conducted between 1975 and 1998. The study examines trends for all students and for smaller groups of students, with results reported by socioeconomic status, language background, gender and location.

"Although the overall achievement levels of students remained stable between 1975-1998, there are notable differences between students by socioeconomic status, both between individual students and between schools," said Deputy Director of ACER, Dr John Ainley.

"We found that within the same school a student who comes from a higher socioeconomic group will achieve better test results than a student from a lower socioeconomic group.

"Likewise, students attending a school that has a higher concentration of students from higher socioeconomic groups will also achieve higher scores in both reading and mathematics than students attending schools with lower concentrations of students from higher socioeconomic groups. It is important to note that this school-level influence has increased since 1975," Dr Ainley said.

The report also found that there is a strong indication that, as a group, students from homes where English is not the main language spoken have improved their achievement both in reading comprehension and in mathematics. While the average achievement on tests of reading comprehension for students of a non-English speaking background was lower than the average for students from English speaking backgrounds, their achievement levels improved significantly over the period and the gap was narrowed substantially.

Other results include no significant differences recorded between students from non-metropolitan schools and students from metropolitan schools in both reading comprehension and mathematics; female students have higher achievement scores in reading comprehension but male students scored higher in mathematics; and the widest gaps in average test scores remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students for both reading comprehension and mathematics.

The new report, *Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy by Australian 14-year-olds, 1975-1998*, by ACER researcher Sheldon Rothman, is Research Report Number 29 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) research program jointly managed by ACER and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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