

MEDIA RELEASE

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A balanced approach needed for students with learning difficulties

A new review of research into the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills to students with learning difficulties asserts that there is no one single instructional method that deserves sole claim to being ‘best practice.’ Instead, the common wisdom of research points to the need for balanced approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of students.

The latest Australian Education Review, *Balancing approaches: Revisiting the educational psychology research on teaching students with learning difficulties*, released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), examines what contemporary research, largely *meta-analyses* from the field of educational psychology, says about the often controversial and much debated field of how best to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to students with learning difficulties. It identifies current limitations in Australian research and calls for some changes in teacher training.

The review clearly shows that using a balance of *strategy* and *direct instruction* teaching methods is most suitable for working with children with learning difficulties. Direct instruction, sometimes referred to as explicit teaching, is an approach to learning characterised by structured practice, explicit performance expectations, systematic prompting, monitoring of achievement, reinforcement and corrective feedback. Strategy instruction focuses on the learning of a number of strategies that are applied to different situations rather than on the acquisition and retention of specific skills.

It calls for an end to the ‘either/or’ debate regarding which methodology works best, asserting that teachers should choose aspects from both methodologies taking into an individual student’s age, ability and aptitude.

In releasing the review ACER’s chief executive Professor Geoff Masters said its findings indicate that *direct instruction* is currently under-researched and under-resourced in Australia. Few Australian studies have been specifically designed to compare the effectiveness of direct instruction with strategy instruction or inform educators how best to combine them in the classroom.

“In view of the findings presented in this review, it is worrying that greater numbers of teachers in Australia are not being exposed to training and research in direct instruction,” Professor Masters said. “In order to move towards the adoption of ‘best practice’ for students with learning difficulties, it is critical that teachers be trained in the use of all teaching practices that have been shown to be effective.”

The review concludes that once further local research into the comparative effectiveness of the different methods of instruction in Australian classrooms is conducted, the findings can be properly documented and used to strengthen ‘best practice’ for these students.

Australian Education Review number 48, *Balancing approaches: Revisiting the educational psychology research on teaching students with learning difficulties* by Louise Ellis, is available for download from the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au. Print copies can be purchased from ACER Press. Contact customer service on (03) 9835 7447.

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Media enquiries:

Louise Reynolds

Corporate Publicity and Communications Manager

Phone: (03) 9277 5582 Mobile: 0419 340 058 Email: reynolds@acer.edu.au