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Conference on Primary School English

Last August a group of some twenty people—representing, in the main, the six state curriculum branches—met in conference at ACER to discuss the primary English syllabus. The initiative for the conference had come from the Directors-General of Education, acting on a joint recommendation from their curriculum officers.

There was, in fact, a precedent in the conference on primary school mathematics held at ACER in 1964. Although the need for revision may not seem as urgent as it was in the case of mathematics, the calling for a conference does indicate that there has been change in, and perhaps some uncertainty about, the way English is taught in schools. At the same time a new set of disciplines has emerged in the studies of psycho- and socio-linguistics, and their implications for the classroom are just beginning to be understood. It was in an atmosphere generated by such research, by the publication of books like Clegg's *The Excitement of Writing* in 1964, and by events such as the Dartmouth Conference of 1966, that the recent conference was called.

In addition to having representatives from the six states and from ACER, the conference was attended

by Dr Paula Menyuk, a psycholinguist from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and by Mr Bernard Newsome, from Goldsmiths College and the University of London Institute of Education. Dr Menyuk, who is well known for her books *Sentences Children Use* and *The Acquisition and Development of Language in Children*, has worked for some years as a member of the team headed by Naom Chomsky. Her paper for the conference dealt with the implications of her own and others' research for the way language is learned in the classroom.

Mr Newsome is the director of the Schools' Council curriculum project 'English in the Middle Years, 8-13'. He is also a member of the group working with Dr James Britton on a project which studies, in a developmental fashion, the written language of 11 to 18-year-olds.

The central theme of the conference was the way in which the learning of language and learning through language pervaded the whole curriculum. One task of the conference was to spell out what this implied in terms of statements about the curriculum, in terms of teaching practice and of classroom organization. Some people felt it to be misleading to think in terms of an

English syllabus at all, because the learning of language, in the sense of development of a capacity to use the resources of language, could not be isolated from the other activities that made up the school day. Bernard Newsome's paper, 'The Nature of English and the Strategies and Priorities within It', and papers by Mrs Connie Rosen and Mr Terry O'Connell took up this theme.

Out of this theme there also arose, even before the conference began, a concern with the question of curriculum implementation, of how changes are made to the curriculum. This question had been aired in papers by Dr Gregor Ramsey, 'Some General Issues in Curriculum Development', by Mr Hugh Campbell, 'Introducing New Curricula', and by Mr Warren Loudon, in a paper entitled 'The School Architect as the Agent of Curriculum Change'.

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The role of the administration, it was generally agreed, should be one that facilitated rather than prescribed. This view was embodied most clearly in this statement from the Tasmanian position paper: 'The English curriculum is due for



revision. In view of the growing respect for the right of the teacher in the classroom to make decisions about what her class should do, and the tendency to present some curricula as commentaries on the subject rather than as courses of study in it, there is considerable doubt as to whether the syllabus should be re-drafted in its present form.'

The major theme of the conference was, essentially, the way in which language and the development of language pervade all that goes on in the primary school. A second theme that underlay most of the discussion was the need to consider the place of research findings in the learning of language. It was of course for this reason that Dr Menyuk had been invited to attend the conference. For this reason, too, that papers had been obtained from Mr Norman Alford, who is directing the Van Leer Language Development Project in Queensland; from Mr Don Novick, who talked about his project 'How Children Talk in School'; from Dr Milton Clark,

whose paper dealt with cognitive functioning in reading and listening; and from Mr John Fitzgerald, who presented a paper on research in spelling.

The conference recognized—particularly in the light of Dr Menyuk's paper—that the child entering school at five or six years of age is, in linguistic terms, a very sophisticated speaker-listener, having already acquired the basic grammar of his language, with a capacity to generate an infinite number of sentences that follow the normal speech patterns of his community.

One of the implications of this, spelled out in conference, was that the teacher must accept the language used by the child as a *valid means of communication* even where it differs in detail from that perceived as normal by the school. A second implication, already apparent before the conference began, was the primacy of oral over written language. One of the contributions of the conference was to say what this meant, not only in relation to the

way in which children learn to express themselves in writing, but also in relation to how they learn to read. Dr John Vaughan's paper, 'Initial Literacy', had taken up this issue in discussing the teaching of reading in New South Wales schools.

It also became apparent that a better understanding of how language develops in children might lead to a different way of structuring the school day, by using a different kind of activity from that traditionally covered by the term 'English'. Mrs Dawn Anderson's paper on school drama discussed the need for opportunity for children to explore a whole range of expressive behaviours involving movement, gesture, and speech. In fact it was at this point that the papers on research and the papers on curriculum development came together, in the conclusion that a great deal of the work load not only in learning language but in learning generally must fall on children talking, children writing, children reading, and perhaps even listening!

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

The demand for pre-school education is an expanding one in Australia. The increasing numbers of women in the work force have created a need for child-minding facilities, while on the other hand more parents want their children to spend a year in kindergarten before beginning school.

Child-minding has been viewed as an economic and not an educational issue. Kindergartens provide training for four half-day sessions per week, and they are not in a position to cater for the full-time care required by children of working mothers.

In November 1970 the Minister for Labour and National Service announced a long-term federal government plan to establish a wide network of child-care centres to be 'of considerable help to working mothers, their young children, employers and the community at large'. There has also been considerable discussion about the pros and cons

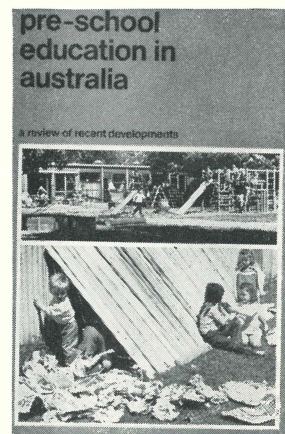
of separating young children from their mothers and about the value of early education. Dr de Lemos's study *Controversy in Pre-school Education* (ACER, \$1.20), published in January 1971, recounts some of the theories involved.

PRE-SCHOOL FACILITIES

The Australian Pre-school Association maintains that since a great deal of learning takes place during the pre-school years, the day centres should be concerned with the education as well as the health and welfare of the children.

Any extension of child-care and pre-school facilities, in line with these principles, depends essentially on the training of sufficient numbers of qualified staff. In ACER Occasional Paper 5, *Pre-school Education in Australia*, Mr R. T. Fitzgerald and Mrs J. Crosher examine the varying pre-school provisions throughout Australia. They consider staffing,

salaries for staff and bursaries for students in training, enrolments of children in the kindergartens, new policies being implemented, and problems of finance.



Indications for future policy are that there should be a more equitable pre-school provision from state to state and locality to locality.

Pre-school Education in Australia will be published in December at \$1.00.

CSSE Research Study

When introducing the scheme of Commonwealth Secondary Scholarship awards in 1964, Sir Robert Menzies said: 'I believe that many children of ability will be encouraged by this scheme to stay on at school for a longer period than they might otherwise have done, to their own benefit and that of the nation.'

Since the purpose of the CSS awards is to encourage able students to stay at school longer, investigation of the effectiveness of the scheme is essentially a question of the extent to which award winners are led to remain at school as a result of success in the CSSE.

In a 1965 research study based on two-year awards at the 1964 CSSE in Victoria, the ACER investigated, among other things, the effect of the scholarships in retaining pupils at school. In a questionnaire sent to heads of schools the question was asked: 'How many pupils in your opinion who otherwise would have left school have stayed at school because they were awarded a scholarship?'

Twenty-four such children were reported out of 2,151 scholarship winners in the 246 schools which responded to the questionnaire.

The fact that, in the opinion of heads of schools, only slightly more than one per cent of CSS winners continued with their schooling because of the award suggests that the scheme was not achieving its purpose.

1968 STUDY

In order to investigate more thoroughly certain effects of winning a scholarship, particularly the effects on retention at school beyond Grade 10, the ACER conducted a research study* based on the 1968 CSSE in Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne. A report on this study (*Some Effects of Winning a Commonwealth Secondary Scholarship Award*, by R. E. Wilkes, T. E. Noble, and W. T. Renahan) was released recently by ACER.

Information was obtained from award winners and, as a comparative group, from candidates who nar-

rowly failed to win an award at the 1968 CSSE in the three capital cities. The study examined the financial and motivational effects of the award and family plans for the further education and occupational future of the winner.

Random samples of 100 CSS winners and 100 non-winners from metropolitan schools in each of the cities Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne were selected. The samples were stratified to ensure due representation of boys and girls and also government, Catholic independent, and non-Catholic independent schools.

Either late in 1969 or early in 1970 the CSS winners and their parents were interviewed and a questionnaire was sent to the parents of the non-winners.

In only 2 cases out of 300 did parents report that the CSS winner would not have stayed on at school to complete secondary education had he not won a CSS award, although in an additional 10 cases they reported that the student probably would not have stayed on.

The majority of award winners reported that the scholarship win had boosted their confidence about future academic success. Slightly less than half of them said that more was expected of them scholastically since they won the award.

About one fifth of the non-winners had been expected to win a CSS award. There was some evidence that failure to do so might have affected the confidence of these students about future academic success.

Eighty-seven per cent of winners and 81 per cent of non-winners in the samples had definite plans for tertiary studies, mainly university.

Parents of almost 40 per cent of the award winners reported that failure to win an appropriate tertiary-level scholarship would or might affect tertiary education plans, for financial reasons. The biggest problem appeared to be the financing of a university course.

As far as occupational future was concerned, there was no evidence to suggest that the CSS award affected the career chosen by the winner, the level of the career (as defined by academic requirements for the career), and the time the career was chosen.

IMPLICATIONS

Whatever need there may have been in 1963-64 to provide scholarships to keep able children at school, it appears that, except for a very small proportion of the students represented by the study, this is no longer necessary.

The authors of the report conclude: 'there appear to be reasonable grounds . . . for suggesting that a more effective use of the funds at present devoted to the scholarships might be either in adding to the number of tertiary-level awards, or in using some form of means test to ensure that awards at the secondary school level go to families likely to be in real need'.

*The study was funded by a special research grant from the Department of Education and Science.

ANNUAL MEETING

The ACER Council met in Melbourne on 25 and 26 October under the chairmanship of its president, Professor P. H. Partridge. It had hoped to meet this year with the prospect that a substantial increase in annual grants from governments would give it the opportunity to devote greater funds to its planned program, and that it would be free of the nagging frustration of having to balance its budget by reduction of activities. The states had agreed to raise their grants by 40 per cent, but this was conditional on similar Commonwealth action, which did not eventuate.

Nonetheless the Council approved a comprehensive program for the next three years which included work in each of the ACER's four main operational areas: comparative education, surveys, test development and research, and developmental studies, and a continuation of its testing services and advisory work. If bigger grants are received, a small number of projects in the test development area will be given high priority. The program approved is expected to take longer than three years, unless additional 'real' income is available.

REPORT: IEA SCIENCE PROJECT

In a previous issue of the *ACER Newsletter* (no. 5, winter 1970) the planned testing program of the IEA Science Project was described. (IEA is the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement—an international educational research organization.) This article sets out some of the first results from the testing program.

The IEA Science Project is a large, complex project to investigate relationships between students' science 'output' and various 'input' factors on which this output depends.

The output factors which were measured were mainly concerned with the amount of science the students had learned, but also included science attitudes and interest.

It is not usually meaningful to make direct comparisons between such output factors. For example, it is quite invalid to compare the efficiency of various schools solely on the basis of the test or examination results of their students. Such comparisons make no allowance for differences which existed between the students before they received any instruction, etc., from the school.

For this reason the IEA Science Project collected data on various input factors which would help to explain differences in output of students and schools:

- (1) *student data*—amount of time spent on science classwork and homework, expected occupation, amount of expected education, etc.,
- (2) *home background data*—father's occupation, father's and mother's education, parental assistance with homework, literacy of the home, family size, etc.,
- (3) *teacher data*—qualifications, training, teaching methods, etc.,
- (4) *school data*—size, staffing, financial resources, etc.

POPULATIONS TESTED

In Australia, testing was carried out on pupils from two main target populations:

- (1) *Population II* was defined to include all students aged 14.0

years to 14.11 years on 1 August 1970;

- (2) *Population IV* was defined to include all students in the last year of secondary school.

From each of these populations, large samples were drawn to include students from government, Catholic, and independent schools in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in all six states.

The following table shows the number of students in the samples:

State	Number of schools	Number of students
<i>Population II</i>		
NSW	38	925
V	39	932
Q	38	898
SA	38	909
WA	37	888
T	32	755
Total	222	5307
<i>Population IV</i>		
NSW	39	828
V	37	824
Q	37	847
SA	32	737
WA	31	722
T	18	244
Total	194	4202

These samples represent 97 per cent (for Population II) and 93 per cent (for Population IV) of the students originally approached to be included in the testing program.

This response rate is very high for a large-scale survey, and is also among the highest of all the countries tested in the IEA Science Project.

It means that we can confidently describe, in statistical terms, the relationship between the samples and the populations from which they were drawn. In other words, the sample results are good approximations to the results which would have been obtained if the whole population had been tested.

Of course this high response rate could not have been achieved without the co-operation of the many schools, teachers, and students involved in the testing program, to whom our appreciation is expressed, and for whom special reports are being prepared.

HOME BACKGROUND

One set of results which we have shows differences between the home backgrounds of lower secondary (Population II) and upper secondary (Population IV) students.

A key index of home background is the occupation of the father of the student. The following table shows that a larger percentage of the fathers of secondary students have occupations of 'higher' status.

Father's occupation	Popn II	Popn IV
Labourers, rural workers, service workers	16.0	7.8
Process workers	18.1	7.7
Craftsmen	17.2	11.4
Clerical workers	11.5	14.0
Managers	24.8	33.2
Professionals	12.4	25.9
Total (number of students)	100.0 (5271)	100.0 (4151)

Later analyses of data from the IEA Science Project will attempt to *explain* these differences, and investigate the extent to which all lower secondary level students are receiving an equal opportunity to continue their studies at the upper secondary level.

Mr Ian Fraser, officer in charge of the Council's publishing activities, returned to ACER in September from two months recreational leave overseas. During this time, he visited on behalf of the Council: the National Foundation for Educational Research; the Scottish Council for Research in Education; a number of leading educational publishers with whom ACER has arrangements or agreements (among them, Harrap's, Longman's, Ernest Benn, Penguin, Oliver & Boyd); and Angus & Robertson's Singapore office. A&R are ACER agents in SE Asia for the Council's books, and represent us in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Mr Bernard Rechter (chief research officer Test Development) resumed at ACER on 8 November after a rewarding overseas trip which took him, in the main, to the USA, Canada, UK, Hungary, and Japan. Our last *Newsletter* provides some details of his activities in those countries.