



MultiLit

A newsletter for parents and teachers

August 2014

moments

On Marx, parking fines and Positive Teaching

By Kevin Wheldall

Inscribed upon his tomb in Highgate cemetery in London are these words by Karl Marx:

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

Have you ever had the experience of being flagged down by a traffic cop and when you wind down the window, he says: “Mate, I just wanted to congratulate you on a great piece of driving back there”...? No...? Me neither. Mind you the other day, when I got back to my car, there was a note under the wiper that said ‘Parking Fine’ – so that was nice.

Why do we laugh at stories like these? Simply because society tends to work the opposite way around, most of the time. We don’t seek to approve and applaud desirable behaviour; we expect it, and when we don’t get it, when we become aware of behaviour

of which we do not approve, then we punish it with barbed comments, dirty looks, reprimands, penalties, social ostracism, deprivation of liberty and, in some countries, even death.

So we expect people to behave well, in a socially responsible way, and we punish them if they don’t. Almost certainly not the most effective way of controlling adult behaviour, it is a downright cruel way of treating young people – particularly children of school age – who are still trying to learn how to behave appropriately.



Continued page 2...

The right way to teaching spelling

MultiLit is expanding its product portfolio into the area of spelling instruction, with the upcoming launch of Spell-It.

Many students (and teachers) believe that spelling in English is random and that most words need to be visually taught. This is not the case. Spell-It is a resource for teachers that explicitly explains the way words work, and provides them with strategies and knowledge to assist students to understand the complexities of the English system.

Spell-It can be used for either whole class or small group instruction. Topics for teaching are based on detailed assessment of students’ current knowledge. Designed for upper primary and

secondary students, Spell-It provides teachers with knowledge about the rules, conventions, structure and logic of the English language, to enable them to plan and execute effective spelling lessons based on the needs of their students.

With a study by Loudon and Rohl (2006) showing that only 42% of Australian beginning teachers felt their teacher education training had adequately prepared them to teach spelling, Spell-It may help to close this gap.

The Spell-It Package comprises a one-day PD workshop, and the Spell-It Kit, which includes a Teacher Manual, including assessment tools; two Teaching Topic Manuals, covering 17 topics dealing with a variety of spelling patterns and concepts that students commonly find difficult; a sample Student Activity Book (which will also be available as a downloadable); Answer Book; and My Spelling Dictionary. Online resources to be used alongside the lessons will also be available from the MultiLit website.

Spell-It will be officially launched in October. Registrations are now open for the Spell-It PD workshop in capital cities all around Australia.

Visit our website at www.multilit.com/programs/spell-it for more information about pricing and PD workshop registrations.



...continued from page 1

Managing classroom behaviour

Over the years, I have been involved in a number of studies, carried out both here and in the UK, with both primary and high school teachers, that have looked at the ways in which teachers respond to students' behaviour in the classroom.

If you talk to teachers about their use of praise and approval in the classroom, they say that they use praise a great deal in their day-to-day interactions with students. And, to a degree, they are right; about 50% of the responses of primary school teachers to their students are positive comments offering approval and praise statements.

When we look more closely, however, at the types of behaviour that they are praising and reprimanding, a different picture emerges. For responses to student academic behaviour – answering questions, written work, completion of maths problems and so on – teachers typically give nearly four times as much praise as they give reprimands and disapproval.

But when we look at their reactions to students' classroom social behaviour – keeping to the rules, not disturbing others, getting on with their work quietly, for example – teachers typically give four times as many reprimands as they give praise and approval. In fact, they hardly ever praise students for behaving well; in some classes, it is a total non-event.

Sadly, this is particularly the case for boys. Even though the amounts of time boys and girls spend appropriately academically engaged, or 'on-task' as we call it, is not that dissimilar, with boys being a little less engaged, they receive twice as many reprimands for their perceived inappropriate classroom social behaviour. According to our calculations, boys in primary school are reprimanded for their behaviour about 40 times per week.

Most Australian primary teachers, then, while frequently praising academic work, hardly ever praise students for behaving well in the classroom. But they often reprimand students for behaving inappropriately, especially boys.

Identifying common challenges

When we look at what Australian primary school teachers think about children's classroom behaviour, there are a few unexpected findings. First, according to our research, about half of them feel that they spend more time on problems of order and control than they feel that they should have to. In an average class of 28 students, they typically report four (about 15%) to be behaviourally troublesome, of whom three are typically boys. In fact, over 90% cited a boy as their most troublesome student in the class.

But what was it that the students actually did that teachers typically found to be most problematic? Surprisingly, more serious misbehaviours such as physical aggression were cited by less than 10% as being a problem. Nearly 50% of teachers cited 'Talking out of Turn' (or TOOT) as the most troublesome behaviour in their classes, followed by 'Hindering Other Children' (or HOC). These findings replicate what we also found in the UK and what other researchers have subsequently found too.

To summarise, most Australian primary teachers are bothered by the behaviour of some of their students, but the most common and troublesome behaviours are relatively trivial, like TOOT and



HOC. They are not particularly serious, but they are time-wasting, irritating, stressful and, ultimately, exhausting for teachers.

Using Positive Teaching to manage behaviour

The good news is that these sorts of behaviours are relatively easy to manage using the methods and procedures of Positive Teaching, one of the foci of our research for many years now.

Achieving effective classroom behaviour management is as easy as ABC; that is, if we consider the Antecedents, the Behaviour, and the Consequences. By the careful control of the antecedents or the context in which behaviours occur and the consequences following behaviour, disruptive classrooms can be brought into a state where they are more pleasant and positive for both teacher and students, and where real learning at least has the opportunity to take place. When teachers become more positive in their interactions with students, everybody benefits.

A word on praise and reward

A great deal of damage has been done by educational critics such as Alfie Kohn by perpetuating the myth that praise and rewards are actually harmful. The key to the successful use of praise and reward is contingency: who is being praised by whom for what under which specific circumstances. Non-contingent and undeserved praise and reward, scattered like confetti with no thought to the contingencies, might indeed do more harm than good. But positive teachers know that to be effective, their use of praise and reward strategies has to be carefully thought through and delivered with skill, tact and subtlety. This is what our new course aims to do.

To conclude, it is almost impossible for effective classroom learning to take place where disruptive and inappropriate behaviour is frequently exhibited by students. Moreover, initial teacher training is commonly criticised for providing inadequate training in methods of effective classroom behaviour management. Teachers typically claim that they had to learn how to manage a class by trial and error 'on the job', having been given vast amounts of theory but precious little advice on what to do actually do.

As Marx chided us, it is not enough merely to attempt to interpret the world, the point is to change it. This is precisely what Positive Teaching aims to do: to change student behaviour by changing teacher behaviour.

For more information about the MultiLit Positive Teaching Workshop or to register, visit www.multilit.com/professional-development/positive-teaching-pd/.

Why Jaydon can't read

By Jennifer Buckingham

In his 1955 book 'Why Johnny Can't Read', Rudolph Flesch explained that quality of instruction was the key to improving children's literacy. Almost 60 years later, children's names may have changed but the story remains the same.

Billions of dollars have been spent in the last decade alone on programs aimed at improving literacy, yet thousands of children still struggle with basic reading skills. In the 2013 National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), 11.5% of Year 3 students achieved at or below the (very low) minimum standard for reading. This means that 32,000 cognitively-able children, the equivalent of 100 average-sized primary schools, are poor readers after four years of full-time schooling and approximately 1200 hours of reading instruction. There are thousands more non-readers in the higher grades.

The problem of low literacy is not one of funding and it is not intractable. The problem is an entrenched gap between research and practice; despite what we know about teaching reading, too many children are not receiving effective, evidence-based reading instruction. The scientific research is robust on how children acquire reading skills early and quickly. Effective evidence-based reading instruction has five essential components – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Each of these skills is necessary to produce proficient and engaged readers.

The so-called 'reading wars' are portrayed as an academic debate over phonics, which teaches children the alphabetic code, versus a whole-language approach, which encourages development of higher order literacy skills. This is a false dichotomy. Reading researchers do not claim that phonics is a complete approach to reading instruction. Phonics is one essential part of a high-quality, comprehensive reading program. It has been the focus of particular attention because it is the component most often neglected or poorly taught. High-quality phonics instruction is explicit, systematic and structured. Pointing out letter sounds during shared reading activities is not phonics instruction.

Why are children not receiving effective evidence-based reading instruction, including phonics? First, many teachers have personal literacy skills that are inadequate to teach reading effectively. Studies of trainee and practicing teachers in Australia (and in the US and UK) have repeatedly shown that a large proportion of teachers had insufficient knowledge of meta-linguistics – basic language constructs such as morphology and phonological awareness – to be able to use it in their teaching. For example, only 38% of pre-service teachers and 52% of in-service teachers in a Victorian study could identify the correct definition of a 'syllable'.

Second, teacher education degrees have not adequately prepared teachers in effective reading instruction. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) in 2005 found that less than 10% of time in compulsory units of primary teaching degrees was devoted to reading instruction (and less than 5% of time in half of the degree courses).

Subsequent surveys and inquiries indicate that not much has changed. The little time that is spent on reading in teacher education courses is weighted towards theories of literacy, especially whole language philosophies, rather than proven, effective practice.

The major influences on teaching methods in schools are the university education faculties that produce teachers and the government education departments that produce literacy policies and programs. There appears to be an ideological hegemony among these two agencies of influence that actively or passively works against implementing effective evidence-based reading instruction. For some people, there is a vested or professional interest in preserving the whole language status quo while, for others, whole language philosophies are inseparable from a broader economic and political ideology.

Another key factor is that scientific techniques are not privileged in education research, practice or policy. Few teacher education courses provide teachers with the statistical skills to evaluate and interpret data or to critically appraise research. Attitudes to scientific studies in education research and policy-making vary from disdain to indifference. Of the 137 papers published online from the 2012 Australian Association of Research in Education, only one was a study using scientific methodology, but even it did not use random allocation.

The problems in educational academia might be mitigated if government policies and programs were rigorous. Unfortunately, policy is often based on flawed information from people without expertise in the highly specific, scientific disciplines of initial and remedial reading research. Literacy policy has been consistently undermined by the vagaries of the political cycle, a reliance on non-expert 'experts', and misallocation of resources into ineffective programs, partly because of a failure to evaluate programs properly.

The cycle of poorly conceived policy and inadequate standards of teacher education must be broken. There will always be some children who struggle with reading, but with effective instruction and timely intervention, the number of children who miss out on the fundamental skill of literacy can be drastically reduced.

Jennifer Buckingham is a research fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. This article was originally published in The Australian newspaper, 30 September 2013 and is based on 'Why Jaydon can't read: The triumph of ideology over evidence in teaching reading' by Jennifer Buckingham, Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman-Wheldall, published in the journal Policy, Volume 29, Number 3, pages 21-32, 2013.



Sharing MiniLit success in Hawaii

Representatives of the Armidale Catholic Schools Office (CSO), NSW recently travelled to Hawaii to present an invited paper at an international conference on education.

The paper examined the impact of its MiniLit strategy on students and their families in schools across the Armidale Diocese, NSW.

MiniLit has been used as part of the Diocesan Learning Enhancement Strategy, a system approach to addressing achievement standards in literacy. The Armidale CSO has had 90 paraprofessionals trained to facilitate 145 MiniLit groups across its primary schools, and a further 155 Kindergarten to Year 3 teachers were also trained in the strategies employed in MiniLit to ensure teachers have the skills to teach literacy in the early years.

Students involved in the program have demonstrated significant improvements in letter identification, hearing sounds in words, and writing vocabulary. Student achievement levels in PM benchmarking showed a dramatic increase in the second six months of the groups, with several instances of students moving from a Level 4 to Level 25-30.

But according to Dale Cain, learning consultant with the Armidale CSO, the benefits go beyond improved literacy skills.

"Student attendance has improved for some as the parents and students realised the importance of the MiniLit groups. There was a noticeable change in the students' confidence and participation in class from very early in the program," Cain says.

"As students experienced success, they were eager to take a risk.



Parents commented on the changes in their children's attitudes to homework and a new willingness, even eagerness, to read."

Paraprofessionals play a crucial role in the implementation of the program. The conference presentation included video footage of paraprofessionals conducting MiniLit sessions and discussing how being involved in MiniLit training has affected students, their families and what it has meant for them personally. Several paraprofessionals also attended the conference and were able to answer questions and share their first-hand experience with the audience.

"They felt excited and proud to share the impact of the work they were doing with the groups in their care," Cain says.

The Armidale CSO team received a very positive response to the presentation, generating international interest in their approach and the MiniLit program.

"The audience were taken with the idea of a whole system approach, using a consistent scripted program, where everyone was trained, where teachers were trained to support in-class learning, and that parents were involved in the success of their children."

NAIDOC celebrations at La Perouse Public School



MultiLit directors Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Wheldall recently attended the NAIDOC Week celebrations at La Perouse Public School in the south of Sydney as the guests of principal Dace Elletson.

This year, MultiLit has worked in partnership with La Perouse Public School to improve the literacy performance of all of its students. Principal Elletson is an inspiring school leader and a keen advocate of MultiLit.

"The generosity of the MultiLit Directors has allowed us to blanket our school in the PreLit, MiniLit and Reading Tutor Program pedagogy. This is having a phenomenal impact on the reading outcomes of our students, some of whom have been disengaged from learning for years. Students across the school are excited about reading, are celebrating their achievements and are jointly setting their own meaningful targets," Elletson says.

"In direct correlation to this, attendance has seen a welcome spike

and incidences of unacceptable behaviour have decreased. Staff at the school are relishing new professional learning, are thrilled with the quality of all programs and have commented on numerous occasions about their effectiveness in making a difference to the lives of children who are struggling to read."

The impact MultiLit has had already at La Perouse Public School was clear during the student awards ceremony, where students received merit awards for their achievements on the MiniLit Program and Reading Tutor Program. It was truly inspiring to see how proud the students, teachers and their families were of their progress in literacy.

MultiLit commends La Perouse Public School's students and teachers on their hard work and progress this year, and will be proud to continue supporting the school and its community.

Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd
Professor Kevin Wheldall

Editor
Freya Purnell

Address
Suite 2, Level 3
75 Talavera Road,
Macquarie Park NSW 2113

Phone
1300 55 99 19

Fax
(02) 9888 3818

Email
multilit@multilit.com

Website
www.multilit.com

MultiLit® is a registered trademark. MultiLit is a research initiative of Macquarie University.
© MultiLit 2014.
Reproduction in whole permitted for distribution to your networks.