

Would you like to try something different?

Apparently, a useful counselling technique to deal with a problem is to ask the client: Is what you are doing working? If not, would you like to try something different? Recent data on educational performance in Australia indicates that this may well be an approach that teachers and other educationalists could adopt.

Mathematics

As recently reported (SMH 8/7/21), *Maths experts reaffirm support for curriculum changes as leading group sounds alarm*, there is a major rift in the approach being taken to the curriculum for, and teaching of, mathematics. With mathematics results in international tests showing decline in Australia, there is every reason to believe a change in curriculum and pedagogy is needed to bring about a performance change. Is this a case for *would you like to try something different?* However, some of the forces preventing change are the inherently conservative nature of teachers who intrinsically resist change. Also the fear that the recommended change is just a current fad and unproven, and the uncertainty that a change that has worked elsewhere will not translate directly into the Australian context.

It seems that the core of the current divergent opinion centres on problem solving and how the curriculum has been changed to provide this focus. In its statement, the Australian Academy of Science said: *In order to help deliver students to society who have knowledge and are able to problem-solve, mathematise (the process of seeing the world using mathematics by recognising, interpreting and representing situations mathematically), hypothesise, and model, this fundamental mathematics knowledge should also be combined with application to problem solving.* In response the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute said: *the proposed changes over-emphasised problem solving at the expense of teaching students to master basic maths skills.* It also objected to changes pushing back the teaching of key concepts to students in later years.

There is a significant number of students who do not like mathematics and who seek to leave it out of their HSC program. The pedagogy to teach and reinforce mathematics learning through homework has long dominated secondary schools leaving students with a belief in the importance of mathematics, but for many a dislike of the subject. Similarly, in primary schools, mathematics is not popular and improvement is elusive as measured through NAPLAN, the setting of school targets and international testing.

As Christian teachers we are concerned for all students that each will reach their potential and come to know more about God through the curriculum, including mathematics. If it's not working, would you like to try something different?

Reading

In 1992, I was asked for a briefing on the Department's position on the teaching of reading. The Literacy Consultant prepared a draft which started with the sentence *The Department's position is eclectic* (deriving ideas, style or taste from a broad and diverse range of sources. Oxford Dictionary). It was greeted with derision. The then Director of Curriculum wanted to support a push directed at the Minister by some academics to implement phonics as the preferred and universal program to teach reading. The debate about the best way to teach students to read has continued with believers in their preferred option advocating its superiority. Each side could produce research that supported the option they recommended. Is it any wonder that many teachers were confused about the best way to teach reading?

While not completely resolved, the K-6 English syllabus of the mid 1990s provided both a variety of methodologies and a new emphasis on phonics to assist any teachers who might have been persuaded to limit their approach. From experience, especially in English medium Indian schools, where learning English was usually a third language after the preferred local state language and national language Hindi, my view is that students don't all learn in the same way.

In India, the dominant way of teaching English is by spelling. Students recite the name of each letter as the teacher uses a pointer. Students, except the very bright ones where any method would work, don't learn to read this way. When writing a word on the board and asking a student: *What is this word?* they will usually name the first letter. They lack any confidence to try and pronounce the whole word or even the first letter. They cannot distinguish between the sound of the letter and the name of the letter. Hence, reading a whole word, especially if previously unseen, is very challenging. When these students reach secondary school, their English reading levels are very low and study in all subjects in an English medium school is very difficult. This disadvantage is compounded by the lack of use of English out of school, including in the playground where the local language dominates. It takes a lot of effort and discipline on the part of students and teachers to speak English only within the school.

But there are always exceptions. In the 100 schools that I was working with, a Canadian group provided a phonics program for the early years of schooling and trained teachers to use this program. In schools that fully implemented the program there was a huge improvement in reading skills and students had both more skills and confidence to tackle new words. But the program became increasingly complex and rule driven, with teachers having little understanding of the more sophisticated aspect of learning using phonics alone. However, this program was a success when compared to the previous teaching of reading.

A second success was to use the Indian teaching style of teaching everything by rote, but to drop the spelling and have students recite small lists of words relevant to each lesson. Many, but not all, students had the capacity to build up a large vocabulary of English using this

method of whole word recognition and because they could visualise the word, they could write it when requested.

A third success came from teaching word attack skills. First the students learnt the sound of each letter as opposed to its name. Using these sounds, they were encouraged to combine them with breaking up new words into little words or syllables. A personal highlight was when a 3rd Grade girl came out to the board where the word *antidisestablishmentarianism* was written, read it and then used the chalk to show how she had broken it up, anti/dis/es/tab/lish/ment/arian/ism. This girl had little difficulty in reading English because of these skills which included knowledge of phonics and attack skills. Unfortunately, English has a lot of words with silent letters or unusual roots, like knee, physics, thumb, etc which were outside this method of learning and needed whole word or more sophisticated phonics.

In summary, exposing students to a variety of methods to teach them reading has merit. Not all students prosper with any one method. To capture all students in the reading process, teachers are well advised to use a variety of approaches and to try and identify how each student best learns and to use that method, but not exclusively, to bring their reading to the appropriate standard for their grade. This is especially important when students identify as having a learning difficulty or just achieve outcomes a bit later than other students do due to maturity or natural ability. Many special education teachers have long advocated phonics for these students but phonics may not be the best focus for all students to learn quickly to read.

As Christian teachers we are very concerned about the ability of students to read. Reading opens doors to understanding more about God, the world we live in and how humans act and have acted in relation to God. Reading provides a basis for learning, especially to the reading of the scriptures and consideration about how the Word of God displays all that God has done for us in Christ and how that affects our lives. When it comes to reading: Is it working? If not, would you like to try something different?

John Gore

Who is the Child?

Throughout human history, the natural progression of life has been birth, ultimately followed by death at some point in time. During these trying times it might be worth looking at the importance of parenting and teaching.

When we observe the wonder of birth, we are immediately struck by the complete and utter helplessness of a newly born child. The life and the future of the child are completely in the hands of adults. Children are the most vulnerable of all human beings and are totally dependent on the hopefully, caring and loving adults around them for their physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Sadly, this is not always the case.

Research now shows that how a child is nurtured (or not nurtured) in early childhood, will have a significant impact on how that child will behave and survive in society as he or she comes of age. This includes all aspects of a child's life.

Justin L. Barret’s book, *Born Believers* reveals some extraordinary facts about the ability and the capacity for very young children to believe and have faith. His work as a noted developmental psychologist and anthropologist at Oxford University, about the value of religious faith, has found that we are all predisposed to believe in God from birth. This would be consistent with the Scripture in Ecclesiastes 3:11 *“He has also set eternity in the human heart....”*

Theos, an English academic think tank, notes that evidence from nearly 140 academic studies conducted over the last three decades examining the relationship between religion and well-being in a wide range of countries and contexts, suggests that overall, holding a religious worldview contributes positively to a person’s wellbeing (Spencer et al, 2016). This position is also supported by research from the World Health Organisation.

Research conducted by Rosemary Aird in 2007 as part of her studies at the University of Queensland’s School of Population Health is worth considering. Aird conducted a survey of the effects of spiritual thoughts and behaviours with more than 3,000 21-year-olds looking at two different belief systems; belief in God as associated with traditional religions and new spiritualities with no recognition of God.

Aird’s research demonstrated that the newer non-traditional beliefs were linked to higher rates of *anxiety, depression, disturbed and suspicious ways of thinking and anti-social behaviour and traditional religion tends to promote the idea of social responsibility and thinking of others’ interests, whereas the New Age movement pushes the idea that we can transform the world by changing ourselves.*

What God says about children

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| The Child is made in His image | <i>Genesis 1:26 “Let US make man in our image.”</i> |
| The Child is wonderfully and fearfully made | <i>Psalms 138:14 “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that well.”</i> |
| The Child has eternity in his or her heart | <i>Ecclesiastes 3:11 “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to the end”.</i> |
| The Child is a reward from God | <i>Psalms 127:3 “Sons are a heritage from the Lord; children are a reward from Him”.</i> |
| The Child is to be instructed by his or her parents about God | <i>Deuteronomy 6:6-7 “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Teach them diligently to your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up”.</i> |
| The Child is to be instructed to tell his or her children about God | <i>Psalms 78:6 “so, the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born and they in turn would tell their children.”</i> |

What Jesus says about children

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| The Child is precious in His eyes | <i>Matthew 18:5</i> <i>“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”</i> |
| The Kingdom of God belongs to little children | <i>Mark 10:14</i> <i>“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”</i> |
| The Child is the example of how to enter the Kingdom of God | <i>Matthew 18:3</i> <i>“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”</i> |
| The Child should not be ignored or under-estimated for their value | <i>Matthew 18:10</i> <i>“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”</i> |
| It is God’s will that none of the little ones should be lost | <i>Matthew 18:14</i> <i>“In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”</i> |
| Death is preferable to causing a little child to sin against Jesus | <i>Matthew 18:6</i> <i>“But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”</i> |

The incident in Mark 10: 13-16 demonstrates Jesus’ great concern for the children. As people were bringing the children to Jesus the disciples, those closest to him, were admonishing the people for bringing the children. Jesus was indignant and rebuked the disciples. Then Jesus himself took the little children in his arms and blessed them.

Each of the statements recorded above about children are Jesus’ actual words, which demonstrate his concern and great value placed on the children.

Do we value the children as Jesus values the children?

Would we be confident to say that in our schools, family and church, children are highly regarded and nurtured in the ways of the Lord?

Often acknowledging the **true value** of a child involves a humbling of ourselves before the child and before God. Is there a generation growing up in Australia who do not know the Lord or what he has done in the development of this great country?

Graham McDonald
Founder the DIDUNO Network.

Prayer Points

- give thanks for the time given to TCF by committee members.
- pray for those making vital decisions about Covid.
- pray for continual support of new and young Christian students in schools especially with limited opportunities to meet together.
- pray for parents and students as on-line learning and home schooling continues, both here and overseas.

Update from Colin and Cathy McKay

The last 7 months have been a roller coaster ride for us as we grappled with Colin teaching online, family issues and the uncertainty that COVID has brought to all our lives. MSG finished the school year in May with students at home and classes all on Zoom. This means Colin is able to have time away from teaching and to begin to prepare for the next school year, which starts on August 23rd. Although we should be fully vaccinated by then, we still cannot see a way forward to return to our country of service. So, the September classroom week may be delivered via Zoom.

Praise

- For God's amazing plans, that have meant we have been in Australia for the difficult situations.
- For God giving us a sense of his presence, an understanding of his love and a feeling of being where he wanted us to be.
- For some time away from teaching for Colin.
- For being privileged to see God saving people here in Dubbo.

Pray

- While we have been encouraged by stories of God at work in Laos, we have also been praying for those still experiencing persecution for their faith in Jesus.
- Although we want to serve and support God's servants in Laos, we submit to Him rather than trying to force God's hand. We await His leading.
- Trying to prepare school work for something unknown.

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