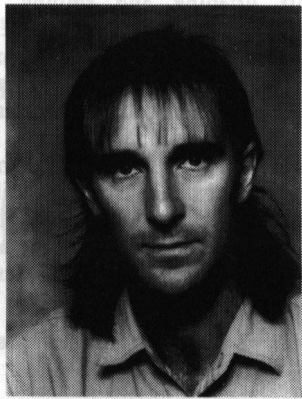


'Bored Witless'

Roger Rees & Bill Young

The article is one of a number of articles stemming from a Ph.D research project researching learning and emotional difficulties amongst year eight students at a State High School in Adelaide. Twenty students identified as having learning and behaviour difficulties are participating in an alternative program for two days a week. The program involves camping, outdoor education and a good deal of intensive 'direct instruction' in basic literacy and numeracy. It is anticipated that this program will serve as a model for other state schools developing alternative programs for disaffected adolescent students.



Bill Young

Three hundred Australian children enter their first year of a suburban high school. It is the start of a new school year. Some children feel stranded long before they reach the school. It is a suburban high school with a population of 1500 students. Demographers describe the suburb as 'predominantly working class with persistent high levels of unemployment'. Politicians make the same comment! In many families, whole generations have not known employment. Paint peels from the school in a hot summer. Noise, dust and weeds on an unkempt yard greet the new arrivals. 'Education is about planning for the future, your children's future!', states a multi coloured education department brochure. For many of the

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children just keeping their wits about them is the priority because, often exhausted, hurt and angry they have little conception of 'preparing for their future'.

Education is about planning for your child's future

Laslo aged 13 comes from Serbia. Sally aged 12 is from down the road and has a boyfriend of twenty - 'Lots of boy friends,' says Sally. Billy is 12 and the third child of six, and his dad has been out of work for seven years. 'Always looking he is,' Billy says, 'though these days he spends most of the day watching tele.' Jim is 13, blond, thin and short and lives, 'in the trust house with me Mum and her partner.' Angie is 13, an Aboriginal girl with a nervous smile, whose dad has long since disappeared and whose mother has three other children as well as 'odd cleaning jobs.' Angie cowers when spoken to. Brian is a fighter, he's a loner even though he is only 12, 'no friends much,' says Brian. 'I can thrash Brian as much as I like but I have no control of him,' says his mother.

Owen is sickly and somewhat frightened. He feigns illness. 'Me mum has had three husbands and me and me two step sisters live with her now- I'm the middle of the three children and me mum works part time as a waitress.' Owen stays away from school to do household chores - he had 70 days absent from school last year. Lisa is 12, her mother has five other children by three different fathers. Lisa's mum's current partner is a stepson of one of the fathers. Jo's dad works shifts at a factory and comes home when Jo and his two brothers and a sister go to school. Mum leaves when Dad comes home. 'Most of the time she's frightened of him, he pulls

her by the hair.' Mick aged 13 is the second eldest of a family of five. Mother is Polish and dad Australian. Mick leads a cat and dog life. Father abuses the mother in front of the children and for periods disappears to live with other women. Mother has custody of the children. Mick is particularly attached to his father and is angry with his mother. Mick truants, rebels and is defiant, '....but when you get to know him, and can calm him, he writes well', says a counsellor/teacher. Laslo's school was once in the middle of a forest.

He truants, rebels, is defiant but when he is calm he writes well!

All of these children have behavioural and emotional difficulties. That is a prediction as well as an observation. They are a sample of at least thirty children who, when they left the feeder primary schools were classified as 'severely learning disabled.' There is general agreement that many of these children are disturbed. They have high absenteeism, low tolerance for frustration and are often very angry. They have chronic reading and writing difficulties and find formal school learning almost impossible. A conservative estimate is that, 'ten per cent of all children in this school are so learning disabled that, they don't really fit into the school'. In fact, often the school doesn't regard them as registered students. They just 'don't fit!'. As if to reinforce this view, school records make clear that the children in this sample '.....have diagnosed emotional difficulties, are learning disabled and, find no motivation from the regular curriculum'. 'It's a relief when they don't come to school', says a senior teacher.

There is a clear and well honed perception among staff that these children do not

wish to participate in regular school life. Both children and staff are trapped, or think they are. 'Not participating in regular school life' means that a minimum of thirty children in the first year of secondary education cannot engage at all with the school curriculum. Furthermore, it is estimated by the school that another one hundred children in the first year 'experience severe learning difficulties learning anything very much'. They have 'low IQ and achievement scores', says the visiting guidance officer. Scores around the 70+ mark, he says. 'That's the problem, they are slow learners who are poorly motivated.' In many respects the school cannot cope with them. They are stranded and so is the school. And Laslo's school was once in the middle of a forest.



They just don't fit into the school but ...when nurtured they have spirit

These children are magic. Nurtured they have a spirit. They shout and gesture, run, play and in their way support each other. You don't need to be an anthropologist to observe that. But in the noise and mayhem of the school yard, on the street, at the petrol station, in the deli, outside the Social Security Office, the children's apparent indifference and depression is observed, and reinforced. 'They don't cooperate, don't want to learn, and certainly don't want to attend school,' says the senior teacher. Everyone seems to agree about the latter comment.

Learning is an active process, Jerome Bruner, and many others, make that clear. Laslo and Brian climbed onto the wagon and Laslo held the reins of the old Clydesdale. They shifted in their seats and Laslo flicked the reins gently as instructed. Learning also requires order. There is no order in a weed strewn garden. No gentleness and dignity either. No calm wisdom and manageable relationships. The

instructor in charge of the farm wagon spoke quietly and only spoke when there was silence and full attention. Laslo, Brian, Angie and Sally looked and listened.

The instructor spoke when there was silence and full attention

There is no dignity if you don't learn. Previous perceptions of self and others are reinforced. Failure follows negativity. Dignity comes with learning. There is no dignity in constant noise, endless noise, noise at pain level, screeching, assaulting noise. No calm, no manageable relationships, no formula for poetry. But Laslo's school was once in the middle of a forest - Laslo's lifeline.

What is now the lifeline for Laslo, Lisa, Mick, Billy, Owen, Angie, Brian and Jo?

Space to roam, fields to run in, skies to shout at, places to renew enthusiasms and self worth. To be regenerated? In these places time and space are ordered, gentle and managed so that Billy, Angie, Owen, Jo, Lisa and their friends can run, jump, dodge, be still, hide, laugh, feel and learn. They are after all twelve years old on average.

Space to roam and fields to run in

We have two days at a farm camp. None of these children have been to a farm camp. But why would you take them to a farm camp if they are noisy, semi literate, disturbed, angry,

sometimes violent and always antisocial? Why take them to a farm camp when their parents can't afford or won't pay the fee?

The farm camp has large paddocks, old barns, outhouses and cottages. Children's noise fades on the farm. The braying donkey sees to that! Horses, dogs, cats, goats, pigs, kangaroos, wallabies, geese and ducks have all been brought up with children. It is a children's farm. Donkeys and kangaroos and a black lamb don't know what it is to fail. There is no threat here. The children feel comfortable. A simple wisdom prevails. Enveloped and encouraged by all that is happening, the children attend and persist. They interact and learn almost overnight.

They attend, persist, interact, learn and also dream

The children approach, touch and cuddle the animals. Under supervision they ride the horses. 'It's high up here', says Brian the fighter, astride a 15 hands pony. Sally, with four kittens crawling through her jumper exclaims, 'I don't believe this,

they're so cuddly,' Jo with the attitude problem, quietly holds a baby kitten in his arms. 'We don't have pets in our house.' Jo cuddles and gently caresses his kitten, nurturing and responding to its warmth. Owen pats and talks to the old bull headed, salivating farm Labrador, 'You're a lovely old fellah'.

In the school yard or in the classroom these same students, Billy, Sally, Brian, Owen, Angie and Jo are competing, conflicting and making, 'as much damn noise as is humanly possible.' Not on purpose, but shouting and making noise just to be heard is what they know, 'like always swearing under me breath', says Brian. Here there is no competition or pressure, no threats, just time to enjoy and be. Do they need more of this, much more? Students talking, laughing, and enjoying each other's company. Strange, here there are few barriers, no hostility, positive responses and much activity.

The gentle touch, the intelligent question, students listening and smiling as an experienced, committed instructor describes the skills of horseriding. For some, the children's behaviour is a revelation. The children stand alongside the horses, each child holding a rein and sharing a saddle. They face the instructor and her horse a few feet away. There are responsibilities too, but readily the children comply - no drama. Responsibilities in this place are part of its ethos, everyone seems to understand that.

Responsibilities are part of the ethos of learning

The reason for absenteeism, poor achievement and learning difficulties are supposedly complex. In the classroom there is little writing and reading, much absenteeism, endless noise, brutish often repulsive interaction, and, of course, indifference. The classroom itself appears under stress. It is noisy and visually shambolic. It is neglected. There is no ownership here. This is not Laslo's forest. Is this what is wrong? Is this why these energetic children are 'emotionally disturbed and learning disabled?' Is their notoriety what shapes and reinforces their failure cycle within the school system? Does the school somehow feed off this notoriety and in so doing forget the actions which could stimulate and challenge dulled minds? Are these children just bored - 'bored witless' because appropriate physical and intellectual demands are not made? Physical, action oriented demands being made as well as intellectual demands? Does being bored witless have a Pygmalion effect? After all, in another context the children demonstrate their capacity to be curious, co-operative, involved, engage in physical exertion, and perhaps above all to persist at tasks. They also have a capacity to dream.

A script of failure constantly rewritten

Their life is a script, a script of failure constantly rewritten. The failure script surely guides the children's unfolding internal drama. They balance perilously on a social tightrope with no safety net. But when they are not embraced by the failure script, then other children, other learners evolve. Are their perceptions a response to a script that they have written, or is it another dramatist who establishes their identification as, 'disturbed, uncooperative, unmotivated and perilously close to crime, albeit petty crime?' They are also children in their first year of secondary education 'preparing for their future'.

Capacity for constructive relationships and effective learning

The answer to the difficulties these children experience is not simple. But surely as teachers we accept too easily the scripts

we are given? We have so far failed to intervene in order to identify the potential richness of these children's lives, their capacity for constructive relationships, their positive response to interesting and challenging activities. Have Governments, education bureaucracies and teachers given these children cause to celebrate, to effect transformations? Here in the forest, and on the farm, the children's dilemma is which activity to choose and talent to engage. Sure there is drama, and resistance, but they have surprised us already, and slothful, indifferent and bored witless they are not.

You teach until momentum builds and ennobles the learner

We have to make things happen. This means doing things with these children. 'Doing things' means walking, talking, throwing, discussing, camping, listening, riding, demonstrating, writing, canoeing,

looking, drawing, wondering, correcting, painting, holding, being rewarded, until momentum builds and their school and class room are, 'in the middle of a forest'. A place that ennobles and rewards.

Make things happen - a type of magic

It was near midnight as they stood looking at the stars with the full moon lighting the river. They gazed and wondered in gentle silence. What they saw in those stars they said was, 'a type of magic' - their magic. The magic of children participating, wondering and learning. Given this setting, in or out of the classroom, there could be no limit to what they do and learn. 'I could live here, yeah it's great I could live here,' said Brian gently as we ducked under the fence paling and climbed the hill back to the cabins. 'What are we doing tomorrow?'

Bored Witless - The research context

Born to fail: Children at risk for severe learning difficulties

Bill Young & Roger Rees

This paper is about children with severe learning difficulties in their first year at a state high school. At the end of seven years primary education, following their transition to high school, it was observed that they had severe reading, writing and numeracy difficulties, poor social skills and severe difficulty, if not an inability, to participate in classroom learning. These children are not intellectually handicapped in the traditional sense of that category (Grossman 1993), nor do they fit entirely the broad based terminology of learning disabilities (Gearheart & Gearheart 1989). Such children are likely to be referred to as 'minimally brain damaged, or slow learners, or perceptually disabled' (Hallahan & Kauffman 1989), yet even these descriptions fail to describe and/or account for the learning difficulties these children experience.

In their turn, each of these labels could fit any children in Australia who commence

their high school careers without the prerequisite skills and behaviours necessary for effective participation and learning in the multi-classroom, multi-curricula world of high schools (Cole & Chan 1990). Labels and categories can be made to fit children (Rees & Young 1995). Once labelled, it is difficult for such children to achieve another identity (Center & Wascom 1986). They can spend their secondary education in a situation in which few people have expectations that they can learn and achieve - failure is anticipated.

There is general agreement that, upon entry to high school, these children experience considerable difficulty with learning. Closer examination reveals that they are also socially deprived and at risk. This form of adversity extends into almost every aspect of their personal and social life, their family circumstances and their educational development. A micro study of children with diagnosed learning difficulties from ten primary schools in

outer suburban Adelaide in 'housing trust territory' demonstrates the enormous inequalities of life for this group of children, compared with 'ordinary' non learning disabled children (Westwood 1995).

Research Process

The learning difficulties demonstrated by these children on entry to high school are evaluated by: 1) standardised assessment; 2) recorded observations of individual behaviours achievement. A year long intervention is designed to facilitate student participation and learning. Evaluation takes place at repeated intervals. Intervention has a strong social component in that co-operative activities are organised in their school and beyond. The research process is interactive and involves examining some of the priorities and perspectives in education programs which appear to result in so many children experiencing severe learning difficulties, especially as

there is no reported organic basis for these difficulties (Kameenui 1991).

Sample and Intervention

Twenty five children - 14 boys and 11 girls (mean CA 13.2 years) were assessed as having severe learning difficulties on entry to high school. They had assessed mean reading ages of 8.2 years and spelling ages of 9.8 years. They had assessed Weschler IQ Scale mean scores of 77.8-SD 14.7. However, of particular significance is that these children experienced severe difficulty following directions, they had poor friendship making skills, and found attending and persisting at tasks for more than a few minutes at a time almost impossible. Observation demonstrated that any skills acquired in one situation rarely transferred to other situations. In short these children failed to generalise. In addition, they had primary school records of high absenteeism and reported 'destructive social behaviour' comparable with those reported by Argyle (1985). Given the lack of skills and motivation that these children brought to high school, they were characterised as children who: 'fail to learn', 'fail to behave', and 'do not experience success'. These students experienced a recurring failure cycle (Gerber 1993; Miller 1990; Westby & Rouse 1985).

swimming. There is a focus on co-operative activity to enable them to survive as well as succeed. In the classroom there is a focus on model building, puzzle making and completion so that manual dexterity, self awareness, spatial orientation are developed. Motivation is enhanced because completed tasks, such as models, are displayed. There is much direct teacher instruction and guidance and a focus on participating in simple manageable tasks which have clearly defined 'beginnings, middles and ends'. This intervention is described as an 'enriching curriculum' to the extent that there are more of those activities and teaching that enhance student participation and learning than would ordinarily be expected in a regular high school classroom.

Conclusion

The intervention lasts for one school year with a follow up in the following year. It is designed to guarantee student participation and success. 'Success' criteria includes: zero absenteeism, attainment of reading ages comparable with chronological ages, and development of co-operative behaviours which can be transferred to other school activities and to the students' family life and wider community.

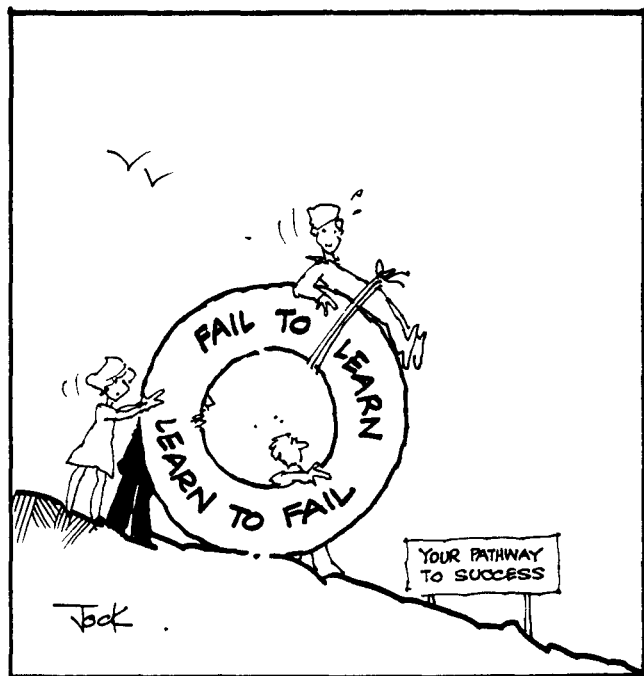
There are 7,000 plus high schools in Australia. On this basis a conservative estimate is that there are approximately 250,000 children experiencing some type of severe learning difficulty, in suburbs with high rates of unemployment and a social fabric and community networks which are fragile if not broken (White 1990).

Already this project demonstrates that the children are highly motivated and can achieve. An interesting, motivating and unexpected outcome is that the children's parents are corresponding with the school and the teach-

ers involved because they too, perhaps for the first time in their children's school life, are recognising that their child's success at school has considerable benefits for the most important stakeholders - the parents and families. Even at this stage, it is valid to claim that some aspects of the children's failure cycle has already been broken.

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Central to breaking the 'failure cycle' and addressing negative attitudes and hostility to school, are interventions which facilitate student participation and success (Bandura 1986). In the intervention developed for these children in this project, they are required to undertake much outdoor physical activity involving bush walking, orienteering, camping, and

Children learn through play

Lessons of sharing, caring, creativity and parental participation.

Playgroups provide the necessary creative outlet for children to enable social, cognitive and tactile development. In essence, Playgroups encourage children's HEALTHY minds, bodies and relationships, both with other children, with their parent or carer and with other adults.

There is little understanding of what Playgroups are and why they have evolved. Simply speaking, Playgroup is an informal gathering of people with young children (aged 0 - 6) held at a local venue (house, hall, park, community centre) usually once a week for about two hours. It is a place where children learn through play, meet and enjoy the company of other adults and children.

Playgroups encourage cooperation, tolerance and the enjoyment of simple things and is the ideal atmosphere for adults and children to learn about each other. Young children learn best in the presence of happy, interested carers of family members and become more aware of other young children. The family grows from the Playgroup experience - by assisting with craft ideas; fundraising; welcoming new members and informally organising their group so the session works well for everyone involved. The community benefits from the Playgroup movement and involvement with it - through interaction with and between media, councils, community organisations and local businesses.

Playgroups can provide a welcome respite from the geographical or emotional isolation faced by parents and carers of young children. It's a social network that can for some provide the only opportunity where one is able to discuss freely the trials, tribulations and joys of caring for young children with other similarly interested people.

One of Playgroup's strengths is its informality. There is no fixed procedure for Playgroups, each group is different depending on the needs of its members and their children. Some groups organise craft every week, storytelling, painting or singing. Others are more fluid, some groups even go on excursions with each other,

usually to 'family friendly' destination. Fees are minimal, and cover membership to the Association, insurance, a quarterly magazine, usually morning tea etc.

The Playgroup Association has been established for over 20 years, predominantly supported by volunteers and specialised field and office staff able to refer new members to existing Playgroups via a database, assist in establishing new Playgroups and provide support and education to existing Playgroups.

Celebrating the International Year of tolerance, the Playgroup Association is pleased to promote the diversity of affiliated Playgroups. We have many Playgroups catering to specific needs:

- Weekend Playgroups for parents or carers unable to attend weekday sessions. It may be argued that during weekends time is usually spent with one's children anyway. Playgroups however, provide the opportunity for 'quality time' removed from the pressure of normal weekend activities/chores, and the ideal environment to socialise with other adults with young children.

- Multiple birth Playgroups
- Baby Playgroups
- Ethno-specific Playgroups
- Multicultural Playgroups
- Deaf Playgroups and many more!



In summary, Playgroups provide the opportunity for parents and carers to meet and provide mutual support to one another - healthy families! Children under school age who attend benefit from social interaction, and their

parents/carers desire to encourage and enjoy their creativity.

For more information about Playgroups and how to maintain a healthy relationship with your young child (or how your Playgroup may join the Association and the benefits of doing so) please call the Playgroup Association of NSW Inc. on (02) 644 9066.

Professional members wishing to be more informed about Playgroup families and receive a copy of our magazine, Totline, each quarter can also call the Association.