

Ellie Hallett is a retired teacher with many years of teaching in all sorts of classrooms and with all sorts of children.

This book is the result of researching for her own pleasure the sorts of topics that she didn't have time to do when at the coal face. Once started, it took on a life its own.

If just one child benefits from a more highly informed and able teacher, or just one teacher feels better equipped to meet the considerable demands of the job, this work will have been well worth its several years of effort.

## Books in this series

- **Getting to the Heart of Learning Problems**
- From Bully to Model Citizen
- Fixing Bad Behaviour

## **Enhancing teacher effectiveness in the classroom**

This series of books offers teachers practical ways to help make the school day much more productive and a lot more enjoyable.

Specialist research findings on all sorts of topics have been coupled with decades of the author's classroom experience to give the busy classroom practitioner a multitude of workable solutions to make high-quality teaching a reality.

In a nutshell – within these books is the reassuring voice of experience ready to guide the classroom practitioner with tried and true ways to effectively manage the hazards of the typical school day – and come out shining.

The result is a very readable, helpful and practical professional resource.

The school day can then be something to look forward to – for you the teacher, and for the children in your care.



# Getting to the Heart of Learning Problems

Maximising potential for all learners.

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*Time and the hour run through the roughest day ... (Macbeth).*

This book has been written to help make your dark days sunnier  
and your rough moments fewer.



# Getting to the Heart of Learning Problems

## *Why do so many children fail to thrive at school?*

The statistics are frightening. Surveys in Australia, the UK and the USA consistently show that between 10 and 16 per cent of children are thought by their teachers to have learning difficulties and therefore are in need of additional support in literacy and numeracy in order to reach average-standard learning milestones. This number does not include children who have a specific learning disability such as dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, dyscalculia or language problems because of unfamiliarity with English.

Can the cause be solely the fault of the children who fail to progress at a rate commensurate with their age and peer group because they aren't working hard enough, or are other factors at work? Is poor parenting to blame? Could it perhaps be the traditional classroom structure and the *en masse* learning climate that is causing so many children – and the teachers who are fighting the same battle – to feel as if they are pushing a very heavy rock up a very steep hill?

Another thought to consider is society's value placed on teaching as a profession. As writer and twice-winner of the Booker Prize and three-time winner of the Miles Franklin Award Peter Carey says, teachers are 'the only profession that can save us from a deep, dumb future'. He imagined a 'totally literate society where teachers were paid as much as investment bankers for loving Charles Dickens and passing that on to students.' His fear was that current methods of teaching English analysed books to such an extent that it was to blame for young people not reading. Carey has also voiced a wish that 'every 14-year-old child would understand and adore Shakespeare.' But as we all know, (and these are now my words), the balance on whether or not a child will love literature – or anything else for that matter – is in the hands of the teacher.

When it is done well, learning is glorious, momentous and life-changing. Done poorly and it is destruction of a most grievous kind. Ignored or by-passed completely and it becomes missed opportunities verging on neglect.

But, I hear you cry – there's no way I can 'pretty up' my teaching any more than I'm doing now because the timetable is already crammed to overflowing and the paper-work is never-ending. There's only so much a person can do to survive today's classrooms. Added to this are the myriad learning and social problems that confront teachers every day in so many schools.

Perhaps an analysis of the ratio of actual teaching time to non-teaching 'fixing problems' time would be a very useful exercise to do over any given day.

Sadly, it would be found that in many classrooms quality teaching and learning are not happening, and instead schools are becoming places where it is survival rather than education.

Poor Education – Poor Future August 9, 2011

Here in the U.K. there are riots on the streets and there is much debate about why they are occurring. There are helicopters up in the air, shops being looted and several major places are on fire; the police are out on the streets in their thousands trying to handle the situation.

In the absence of reliable data it is difficult to say why anyone in particular is rioting. However, one thing is clear; the majority of those rioting want something but do not know how to earn it; they simply do not believe they can compete effectively for a meaningful future.

If the riots in London tell us anything, it is that in a shrinking world, the best education matters. Top grades matter. More than ever, your child needs a quality education.

[www.topgradestudent.com/poor-education-poor-future](http://www.topgradestudent.com/poor-education-poor-future)

It's now time to look at some of the reasons why so many children are failing to thrive at school.

### ***Classrooms – what truants and suspended students say***

Studies of truants and suspended students discovered some interesting reasons for what could be called the Big Bad Two: poor behaviour and learning difficulties.

The symptoms of school failure are the usual ones, and unfortunately seen by teachers every day in far too many schools:

- not paying attention
- misbehaving
- damaging school property
- disinterest
- an active unwillingness to make an effort
- bullying
- playing truant
- hating the teachers and school discipline
- resenting authority
- purposely and constantly breaking school rules.

The comments collected and examined by the study make interesting reading.

**Overcrowding and noisy classrooms** were cited to be major causes in many students' learning decline. The constant and unrelenting distractions and noise made it 'impossible to think and get on with my work'. In other words, noisy and crowded classrooms cause distress and stop children and students learning.

Another major issue was the harassment, taunting, teasing, bullying and actual physical harm that was invited if someone appeared to like school or show that they wanted to improve themselves.

Is this attitude problem so endemic in schools that it is becoming a culturally embedded one, evident across more than one generation? How can it be changed? What are some specific measures that can be taken to reverse this attitude?

Here are some possible answers to these questions ...

The 'tsunami' of peer pressure dictates, as it has always done, that it is bad form to be better than your peers because it will be asking for trouble. This is the attitude more instilled in some cultures than others. In places where education is revered as being something where you aim high and to do one's utmost to achieve the best possible outcomes, there is a lower incidence of this type of negative peer pressure.

However, even in 'tall poppy' cultures, if a child is taught well in their K-6 years and, regardless of home background, has been given the self-belief that they 'have the goods' to reach their goals and thus be successful as a contributing member of the community, peer pressure of the negative kind will have far less impact. It seems that if this self-belief hasn't happened before puberty, it has far less chance of happening at all.

Dan Usher (1997) in *Education as Deterrent to Crime*, Canadian Journal of Economics, vol. 30, 1997, pp 367-84 says that education 'perpetuates the values of society, acculturates people to serve their communities, and promotes the virtues of hard work and honesty.' (p. 386).

Paolo Buonanno (Ass. Professor, Dept of Economics, University of Bergamo, Italy) in his paper *Crime, Education and Peer Pressure* says that 'education may alter individuals' behaviours and in particular may be particularly helpful in reducing or enhancing the influence of peer group components.'

In other words, if education promotes the virtues of hard work and honesty it is likely that even an individual living in a 'bad' neighbourhood will, as a result of this education, be influenced in their decisions and will therefore be more likely to resist negative peer group pressures. On the other hand, if an individual lives in a context where honesty is a shared value it is likely that education may enhance and bolster an adherence to the prevalent social rules.

Buonanno goes on to say that 'the role of socioeconomic background is relevant in affecting individuals' decisions, but ... the role of education may be important in modifying some 'bad' attitudes coming from the peer group.'

[www.dipeco.economia.unimib.it/pdf/pubblicazioni/wp64\\_03.pdf](http://www.dipeco.economia.unimib.it/pdf/pubblicazioni/wp64_03.pdf)

Children need praise the most when they appear to deserve it the least.  
*Dr Vincent Fortanasce, psychiatrist, author and former Olympic athlete*

### ***Learning problems linked to youth offenders***

A report by Rebecca Todd in the Christchurch, New Zealand paper, *The Press*, on January 11, 2010, cites a Canterbury University study which is worth pondering. It could cause some educators to consider how schools could become centres of learning for young adults who have missed out on basic education and life lessons, or to at least organise classes that would help save teens and young adults and their children from the road to self-destruction.

Points made in the study:

- Dr Julia Rucklidge, a psychologist and co-author of the study, said '92% of youth offenders had at least one learning disability.'
- Dr Rucklidge also said that the 'she'll be right' attitude to children struggling to learn to read could have a major long-term impact.
- It was important to help children early, as 'by the time they hit their teens it was an uphill battle'.
- The longitudinal study interviewed 60 people in youth units, and then checked them four years later. Ninety two percent had at least one learning disability, and 42% had difficulties in all three learning areas examined – reading, maths and oral language.
- Those with the worst reading comprehension 'generally committed more serious offences and were repeat offenders'.
- A quarter of young offenders had had head injuries when young, while almost 60% said their mothers used medicines, cigarettes and alcohol during their pregnancy.
- Youth offenders were receiving 'inconsistent educational programming', and when compared to a general group of young people, 'the rates of learning disabilities were 30% higher'.
- Research in the study showed that many rehabilitation programmes involved a lot of reading material 'that was not much use if offenders could not understand it'.
- Learning disabilities contributed significantly to the possibility of future anti-social behaviour in incarcerated youth.

**Inference:** Schools play an imperative role in protecting vulnerable children as a minimum prevention strategy from going down a path to crime and social havoc as their parents may have done, or to the horror of law-abiding parents, because of educational neglect.

Three imperatives stand out for Primary schools:

Teach every child to read

Teach all children to express themselves in words

Teach all children to be numerate.

Teachers of Years 3 to 6 may suppose that their job is not to teach these basics because it was meant to be the job of the K/Prep/Foundation, Year One and Two teachers. But, if any child has missed out, that child's whole future is affected, and affected very badly.

To help teachers of Years 3 to 6 better understand the intricacies of what is involved in teaching reading, oral language and numeracy, a course of demonstration lessons presented by K-2 teachers could help rectify this serious deficit.

Teaching the youngest three grades is the area where the very best of excellent teachers should be placed. Unfortunately, this is not always possible nor is it always school policy.

Schools should of course do everything possible to ensure that every child, especially if from a dysfunctional or damaged home background, has the best of care, nurturing, guidance and teaching to save them from a future filled with distress and unhappiness.

The real cradle that holds the baby is the emotional climate between new parents. Many significant social problems [like violence] in our society can be traced back to a negative emotional climate in families. *John Gottman*

### ***Let's talk about the crowded classroom***

**Having too many people in the room** in a confined space can cause the following problems, resulting in a weakening of a favourable learning environment:

- constant confusion, physical discomfort and feeling overwhelmed
- too much crowd control required by the teacher
- not enough room to be alone to think or work quietly
- forever trying not to collide with others because of having too little personal space
- frustration as a result of perceived and real violations of this personal space
- overhearing conversations in spite of wanting to 'tune out'
- too little space for books and writing materials
- not being able to see the teacher or the board easily.

These are just some of the reasons why a crowded classroom can make it very difficult for many children to feel at ease or to concentrate.

Constant noise all day, every day, can be particularly hard to take for teachers and students alike, yet so many teachers have either given up trying to keep the noise levels down, or they don't think noise is detrimental to learning.

Noise = unwanted distraction = poor learning = feeling powerless for many children.

**Solution:** Create quieter classroom environments naturally and without draconian tactics. This can be done by:

- i) redesigning the timetable
- ii) altering lesson structures