



HELPING GREAT TEACHERS MAKE GREAT STUDENTS

**How empowering students with a positive mindset for learning improves
their reading achievement**

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An evaluation project funded by the Australian Scholarships Group

Summary and overview

Executive summary

Research funded by the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) and conducted by Professor Michael E. Barnard, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne in 2010 has demonstrated that preparing students for learning, by teaching specific attitudes and behaviours needed for engagement and learning, results in improvements in reading ability.

This research is an Australian first and is significant in that it provides empirical evidence that teaching behaviours for learning helps teachers improve the learning ability and engagement of their students. This allows the teachers to be more effective and improves the academic performance of their students.

The research calls for a new approach for educating students and for promoting literacy outcomes of all young Australians. Professor Bernard says: “For too long has education largely ignored the evidence that teacher effectiveness is determined by the mindset of students towards their learning. Specifically, research shows the key factor that determines the extent to which students achieve to their maximum ability or under-achieve are the strength of their positive attitudes and behaviours for learning. If we want to raise literacy standards, all teachers need to not only be highly competent in delivering the academic curriculum, they also need to be as talented in strengthening the positive mindset and behaviours for learning of all students; especially those who are struggling in their reading.”

What the research showed

Students whose teachers had been trained in an innovative Australian classroom program called “Attitudes and Behaviours for Learning” (AB4L) developed by Professor Bernard showed:

- Significant increases in their behaviours for learning
- Students in the lower 50 per cent of their classes in reading achievement showed significant improvements in comprehension
- The program was equally effective for boys and for girls
- Feedback from teachers was positive about the impact of AB4L on the effectiveness of their teaching
- Feedback from students revealed students appreciated the program and how it helped them to better manage their schoolwork.

Background – What is the missing piece?

Recent research has revealed that students with challenges in reading lack the attitudes and behaviours required for effective learning. In the past there has been a strong focus on teaching teachers how to teach literacy, but this recent research illustrates that there needs to be more attention paid to helping teachers help students become better learners.

Helping Great Teachers Make Great Students is an evaluation project focused on how students go about their learning and the impact of a new, classroom program called Attitudes and Behaviours for Learning (AB4L).

What is AB4L?

AB4L is an innovative Australian designed and developed classroom learning program to improve attitudes and behaviours for learning and reading performance in school students.

It focuses on the skills and attitudes needed for students to be engaged in both individual and cooperative learning during classroom instruction, and is designed to be part of literacy lessons.

It provides teachers with explicit support in the use of five practices that they can use to teach students how to be more responsible for their learning. These are:

1. **Sharing** and reviewing with students the goals of the literacy lesson
2. **Preparing** students to begin literacy lessons with a positive mindset
3. **Identifying** and discussing behaviours for learning
4. **Discussing** positive (and negative) self-talk for learning
5. **Communicating** behaviour-specific feedback for learning.

A novel aspect of AB4L is that it is not a stand-alone program. It integrates the teaching of attitudes and behaviours for learning into normal literacy instruction and as such, is likely to produce a much stronger effect than a program taught in isolation.

How the study was conducted

This research was funded by the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) and conducted by Professor Michael E. Barnard of the Graduate School of Education at Melbourne University over a 14 week period in 2010.

School principals of two National Partnership primary schools in Ballarat, Victoria agreed to have the AB4L program implemented and evaluated in their schools.

Each school provided four classes for the study; two composite grade 3/4 classes and two composite grade 5/6 classes. Both schools had classes that participated in the AB4L program and classes that acted as a “control group”.

In school A, the grade 3/4 classes participated in the AB4L program, and the grade 5/6 classes acted as a “control group” for the grade 5/6 classes in school B.

In school B, the grade 5/6 classes participated in the AB4L program, and the grade 3/4 classes acted as a “control group” for the grade 3/4 classes in school A.

The teachers from both schools who would teach the AB4L program to their students received three half-day training sessions over a three and a half month period. This training was facilitated by an experienced primary teacher and literacy coordinator and involved how to implement the program during standard literacy classes.

After the training, the facilitator of the program made classroom observations of each teacher as they presented a literacy lesson. They then provided support, encouragement and feedback and suggested ways to best implement the program.

AB4L was integrated during literacy instruction: before lessons commenced: during whole class teacher-led instruction; during small group, paired and individual work; and at the end of literacy sessions.

The research asked the following questions:

- Whether the AB4L program was effective in improving student behaviours for learning
- Whether students who showed improvements in their behaviours for learning would show improvements in reading performance, and
- The effect of the AB4L program on the reading performance of students struggling with reading.

Key findings

The impact of the AB4L program was evaluated over a three and a half month period. At the beginning and at the end of this period, all students took a reading test and completed a survey of their own behaviours for learning. Their teachers also rated student learning behaviour.

The research found:

- Significant increases in student behaviours for learning
- Students in the lower 50 per cent of their classes in reading achievement showed significant improvements in comprehension
- The program was equally effective for both boys and girls
- Feedback from teachers was positive about the impact of AB4L on the effectiveness of their teaching.

Observations by students and teachers

- Many students who participated in the AB4L program said that they were more positive towards reading and were applying themselves better during literacy instruction.
- Many students expressed the view that others in their class were more settled and focused on learning rather than misbehaving.
- Classroom observations of teachers showed that all four participating teachers had effectively applied the various AB4L program practices throughout their literacy lessons. Comments by all teachers trained in the AB4L program indicated that both they and their students had benefited.
- Teachers commented that students took ownership of their learning and were more positive, confident and persistent in their approach.
- The teachers also indicated a shift from negative to positive behaviour in the class, and there was an improvement in the whole class wanting to be successful.

Quotes from teachers and students

See appendix

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the AB4L program is an excellent tool for training teachers and for helping students take responsibility for their learning. It can produce significant improvements in attitudes and behaviours for learning in a short period of time (three months) with resultant increases in reading achievement

Implications and recommendations

State education systems and schools are under increasing pressure to improve student outcomes in literacy and numeracy. We also need to provide the very best educational opportunities for all Australian students.

As a nation we require a highly literate and numerate society to continue to build on our status in a global economy. This is becoming increasingly difficult. Already, there is a crowded curriculum with less time to cover content and the new National Curriculum will provide further challenges (as well as opportunities) as implementation is undertaken in the next few years.

Schools are also required to implement a number of other initiatives such as specific boys and/or girls education strategies, middle school strategies, transition to school programs, etc.

All teachers want their students to be successful and we know that teachers have excellent content knowledge and delivery skills, that is they know *what* to teach, but many do not necessarily have the high level of knowledge and skills needed to teach their students *how* to learn. We believe providing teachers with this expertise should be a priority for both initial teacher training and professional development programs.

We recommend that teacher preparation and professional development programs should incorporate training and support for teaching AB4L.

As capabilities fundamental to good learning, all teachers need to enhance positive attitudes and behaviours in all students; especially those students at risk of under-achievement and subsequent educational failure.

Why Attitudes and Behaviour for Learning (AB4L)?

AB4L has a number of features that make it particularly suited as support for Australian teachers including:

- It is simple to implement in the classroom without placing many additional demands on teachers, and they are not required to teach more content
- It provides teachers with a tool they can use in every class with every student
- It can be used across Australia as it is not dependent on a particular syllabus or curriculum
- AB4L is not gender or age based (or biased)
- It provides students with attitudes and skills for learning, for life.

AB4L is Australian designed and developed and this research provides empirical evidence that illustrates its efficacy, and demonstrates the key link between the attitudes and behaviours for learning and improved reading ability.

Appendix – Quotes from teachers and students

“Before the program I felt my students didn’t understand what learning looked like or felt like. As they have experienced success their confidence has grown. The focus has moved from behaviour issues to learning behaviours and the talk is positive, not negative.”

- Teacher

“When I met this grade there weren’t many learning moments in our day. We couldn’t have a conversation about anything, let alone our learning and learning behaviours. Now, the kids really want to improve their learning. We have class meetings, everyone gets an opportunity to speak and be heard.”

- Teacher

“Children have benefitted in all areas. Their attitude to learning is great – they are keen and willing to try and so positive. Their confidence has also grown and they know so long as they try they have achieved success.”

- Teacher

“Now I have an I can do it attitude...I say to myself – ‘You can do it!’”

- Liam, Year 4 student

“I used to have a negative mindset. Now I say to myself I can do it...I’m not going to give up on myself”.

- Jayden, Year 4 student

“I think the class has settled down...they’ve actually got on with their work and been a lot quieter. It’s helped me because I don’t give up so easily anymore.”

- Blake, Year 6 student

“I didn’t really try to get my work done before, but now I give it a red hot go.”

- Jordan, Year 6 student