

# No Failure Learning: growing the skills and knowledge in every student

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**M**ost of the teachers and other staff in schools are motivated by the moral intent of doing good for the students in our care, and this has pushed our exploration of *no failure learning* in our schools. Firstly, we are concerned about the social justice inequities of the curriculum and pedagogy that seems designed to maintain the societal stratification. Reinforcing the lowly status of the 'have-nots' in the classroom is often unconsciously rubbed-in when teachers undertake formative open-forum questioning that still strikes fear into most students. Fear of public 'shaming' in classroom questioning has never been a motivator, and the initiating teacher doesn't know the family circumstances that affect students' ability to answer questions on any particular day.

As a result, we are driven to give all of the students the tools of learning. While representing only one part of the curriculum, this powerful statement from Castles, Rastle and Nation shows the connection between learning to read and success in life:

'Learning to read transforms lives. Reading is the basis for the acquisition of knowledge, for cultural engagement, for democracy, and for success in the workplace ... low literacy is a major contributor to inequality and increases the likelihood of poor physical and mental health, workplace accidents, misuse of medication, participation in crime, and welfare dependency, all of which also have substantial additional social and economic costs' (Castles, Rastle and Nation, 2018, p. 5).

The Castles quote applies to other learning areas being offered in most school curriculums and we need to stop and consider the consequences of failing to open the doors of opportunity for all of our students.

Reflecting on our own educational experiences, it seems that students' failure is written into the unconscious acts of many teachers. For example, classroom teachers for the last 50 years often start their new lessons by asking a question:

"Today we are learning about oxymorons. Who can tell me what an oxymoron is?"

Three hands wave, and the teacher picks the student she knows will give a sensible answer.

"Yes, Jane, what do you think the answer is?"

"It's a funny saying that has two opposite meanings."

"Yes, almost. Can you give the class an example?"

"Mum said that my brother getting into the gifted and talented program is an oxymoron."

"Hmmm, I am not too sure about that one, Jane".

So, the teacher's first act in this lesson (as it is in almost every lesson) is to identify and communicate with the top students, and therefore unconsciously signal to the others their places in the classroom learning hierarchy.

What we propose in *No Failure Learning (NFL)* is to take out the untidy attempt to identify prior learning ("Who can tell me what an oxymoron is?") and to start the teaching lesson with a teacher statement defining oxymoron. That way the

students all start from the same place, and the "have-nots" are not identified to other students.

The development of the lesson in NFL looks different to that seen in most classrooms because the students are constantly engaged in actions, responses and they experience the palpable joy of success and learning.

Mastery is a term we apply to the key, essential knowledge and skills that enable all students to grow.

## Strategy 1 – Daily Review

In our Daily Review the teacher flicks the written definition of a prime number onto the Interactive White Board (IWB): A prime number is a number that can only be divided by itself and 1.

"What is a prime number class?"

The students read the definition.

"And again, what is a prime number?"

Students repeat the definition.

"OK, here are the first four prime numbers".

Flicks: 2, 3, 5, and 7 onto the IWB.

"Let's look at these numbers. Each one can only be divided by itself and 1".

Teacher explains each prime number.

"Working with your partner discuss whether 4 is a prime number?"

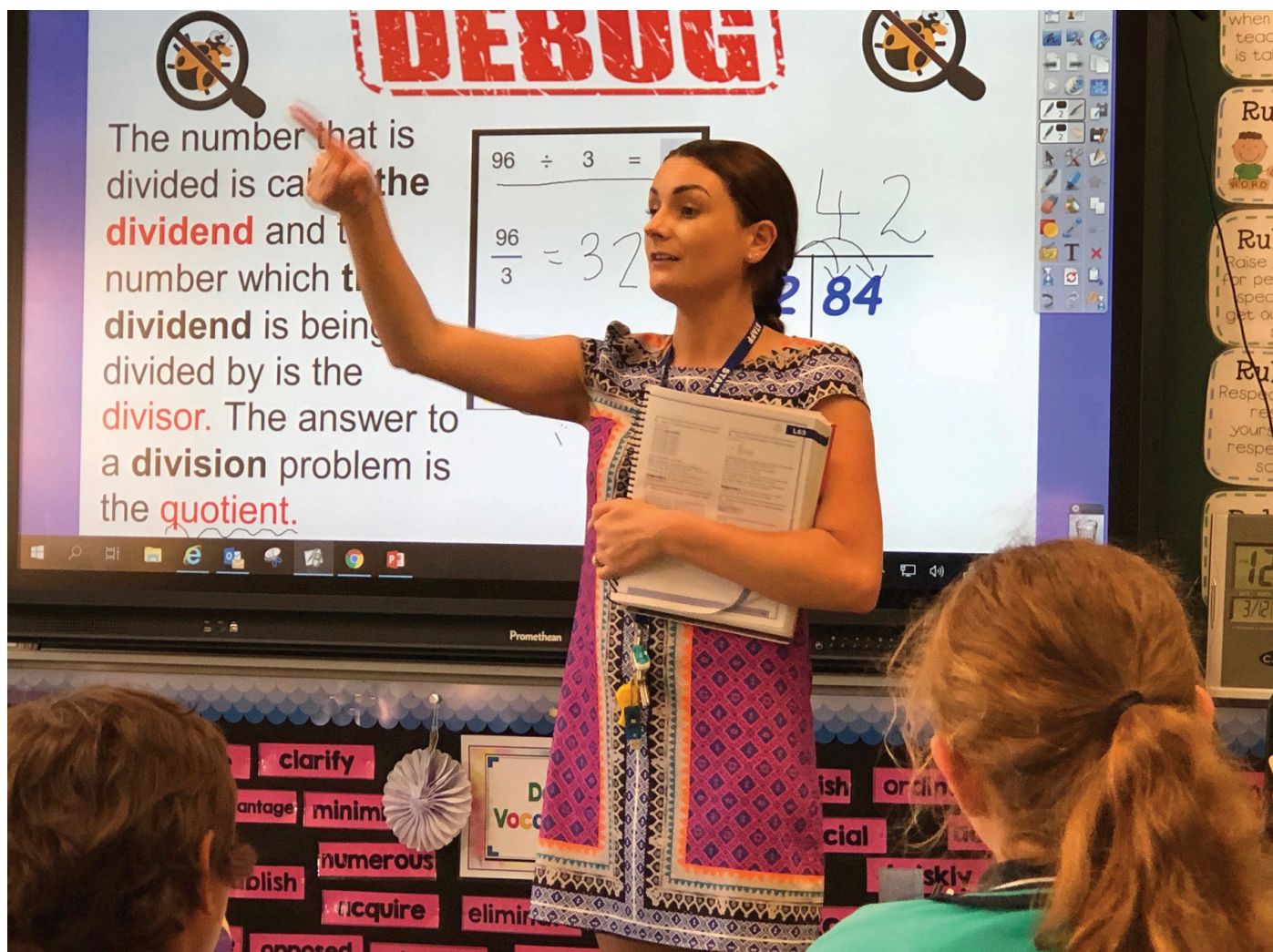
Partner discussion.

Then the teacher repeats the question and asks for a thumbs up ("Yes") or thumbs down ("No").

The lesson continues in a supportive, encouraging manner.

## Strategy 2 – The Rule of Two

Drawing on the work of Ybarra and Hollingsworth when introducing a new



Teacher Anna Baker giving positive feedback during JEMM+ Maths debugging

concept, the teacher applies the *Rule of Two*.

In this strategy the teacher models how to solve a problem, working through the example in small sequenced and incremental steps. Providing very clear explanations of each step and engaging in high levels of self-talk.

After the teacher has worked the example, the class is provided with a similar problem to work through. The teacher then calls on individual students to work through their example using similar vocalised self-talk.

The process is then repeated with the teacher working through another problem using vocalised self-talk. Again the students work through a problem modelling the same approach.

Once the teacher has established that the students have grasped the concept, they are challenged to solve a similar problem but this time working individually.

The teacher then moves around the class correcting at the point of error while also assessing the level of mastery that has been attained by the class in deciding whether to go over another worked example or move forward with the next concept within the sequence.

Through this approach each building block is put into place before adding another step and so limiting the potential gaps that may appear in a when students are left to develop their own understandings.

### Strategy 3 – Checking for understanding

Every teacher wonders whether students are actually learning while they are teaching. In fact, as Hattie (2008) argued engagement does not ensure learning is actually taking place. A third strategy that NFL employs combines the strategies to check for understanding. Like the previ-

ous two strategies it follows a logical and sequenced progression. After the teachers have taught a concept, they ask the class a question. At this point they do not elicit an answer but rather have the students share their answer and thinking with their partner, this is referred to Pair-Share. The next stage in the sequence has the teacher asking a non-volunteer for a response and encourages them to share their partner's response. The teacher then provides feedback to student in a number of forms. The teacher may call for another response in order to compare them and encourage further thinking from the students or they may instead have them self-talk their partner's response. This provides an opportunity for the teacher to engage with the partner and draw out more information pertaining to the response.

The teacher would then repeat the question and, this time use the student's

## No failure checklist

- 1 Strategy 1 – Daily Review**  
 Teacher introduces a question followed by discussion and then a review of understanding
- 2 Strategy 2 – The Rule of Two**  
 Each building block is put into place before adding another step and so limiting the potential gaps that may appear
- 3 Strategy 3 – Checking for understanding**  
 After the teachers have taught a concept, they ask the class a question. At this point they do not elicit an answer but rather have the students share their answer
- 4 Strategy 4 – Debugging**  
 The emphasis is on learning at the point of error. Fast paced, inclusive and fun, there is a real joy in learning in this class!
- 5 Strategy 5 – Think Aloud and Self Talk**  
 Think-aloud is a powerful scaffold which provides thinking strategies that are stated out loud as the teacher reads through the text

answer as the response to the question. The teacher would then reverse the statement by providing the students with the answer and having them rephrase the question. For instance, if we use strategy one as the example the teacher might ask “What is a prime number class?” and the class responds with “A number that can only be divided by 1 and itself” The teacher would then say “Well done, so a number that can only be divided by 1 and itself is?” and the class responds “A prime number”.

### Strategy 4 – Debugging

In formative assessment the emphasis is on learning at the point of error and in our use of the Maths Mastery Series (EMM, JEMM, JEMM+) written by the Australian researcher, Rhonda Farkota, the classroom teachers have developed classroom cultures that welcome the learning in the Debugging exercise.

Even in the debugging process Mrs Baker makes sure that she, first, re-teaches the key concepts and methods of what is being learned, as can be seen on the IWB. That is always the starting point, and then she can ask questions, in a supportive manner, such as pair-share. For the students this learning is fast paced, inclusive and fun. There is a real joy in learning in this class!

### Strategy 5 – Think Aloud and Self Talk

Many students have difficulties learning higher order concepts and strategies.

Teaching students to apply comprehension strategies to make meaning from a text is a challenge for many teachers. The think-aloud strategy is used to model to students how an effective reader constructs meaning from a text. Think-aloud is a powerful scaffold which provides thinking strategies that are stated out loud as the teacher reads through the text. The teacher identifies that an author of persuasive text has used *compare and contrast* to highlight two opposing beliefs.

In modelling this to the class, the teacher would say, “I can see that the author has provided contrasting views. In paragraph 3 the author has presented a very positive view that supports this position. However, when I read paragraph 4, the author has a number of points opposing this position.”

Through this process the teacher is identifying the key elements of the contrasting views. While implementing this strategy, the teacher can also model previously taught self-talk. With practice, the students will begin to use this style of analysis when reading; applying self-talk and think-aloud strategies that have been modelled by the teacher.

### Conclusions

There is a perception that the major enemies of teaching are time and the curriculum press, which is because in the crowded curriculum essential learning is not identified and sequenced. The au-

thors (and others) are working their way through complex issues that do not have one answer. In the first instance we are attempting to remove the subtle put-downs and let students experience success through mastery. Secondly, we have all grown up with Vygotsky and his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and *No Failure Learning* is where it fits because it advocates the scaffolding of learning into manageable parts. And thirdly, modelled, safe, student-student and student-teacher dialogue is essential in this learning process.

*No Failure Learning* is Work in Progress and we are continually driven by the educational and social justice needs to try to get this right.

### References

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