The Lesson of Jonah

The character of Jonah in Summer Heights High provides an example of how poor management of children with literacy problems can develop into behaviour problems, writes Professor Stephen Dinham.

In the final episode of Chris Lilley's Summer Heights High we saw Jonah, the smart-ass Tongan break-dancer, dragged from the school. School was the source of much of Jonah's identity and his problems.

Like many, Jonah was always up against it. His family background was literacy poor. Reading material was lacking in the home and Jonah wasn't read to as a young child. Jonah didn't attend preschool and by the time he entered primary he was already two to three years behind some of his peers in literacy development. This gap widened. Jonah moved from school to school and each transition had a negative effect on his learning. Jonah was one of many and his teachers, well meaning and under pressure, didn't diagnose or deal with his literacy problems. Jonah didn't receive the individual attention, explicit teaching and feedback he needed. Jonah's lack of progress was attributed to his poor behaviour and attitude but his behaviour and attitude were largely a product of his lack of academic achievement.

Jonah couldn't master literacy and because so much of schooling is literacy based, he struggled in all curriculum areas. He knew he was failing behind and covered his inadequacy with bravado and over-confidence, Jonah avoided engaging with schoolwork as much as possible. He discovered he could make people laugh.

By the time he entered high school, Jonah was five years behind some of his peers. By Year 8, he was seven years behind many in his year and found basic school work beyond him. His reading and writing skills were at Year 5 level, lower than they had been in Year 6. Jonah was going backwards.