

10 FALSE BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING Cause HIGH STRESS and BURNOUT in TEACHERS

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Traditional teaching methods and educational practices have made the school system in New Zealand strong and successful over the first half of this century and brought world recognition for achievements particularly in the primary school sector. The mainstream secondary system was also quite adequate for the needs of the time. These days, however, the same system has to service such a diverse group of students like never before.

Only 25 years ago, divorce and drug abuse were uncommon in our New Zealand society, violence in primary schools was unheard of, and teenage pregnancies were something that only happened to uneducated, undisciplined, stupid girls from certain family backgrounds.

Today it is generally accepted that unless we educate every single child and its parents, the whole society suffers. At-risk students and school drop-outs put society at risk by what they do to us, the citizens of this nation, to our children, our property, our social and our educational system.

Discipline problems in class, negative attitudes towards school in general, and so called learning disabilities can be eradicated, as research shows, if teaching methods are used that make young people more responsive. These student centred methods are particularly useful for students who cannot learn and retain information in ways traditional education provides.

Research findings worldwide challenge these 10 popular, but old-fashioned beliefs. When teachers respond to students' individual

learning styles, it takes as little as six weeks to see positive results: increased academic achievement and a decrease in discipline problems. As Drs. Dunn & Dunn and many practitioners have experienced, even at-risk students begin to learn and feel better about themselves, and teachers no longer despair having them in their classes.

Fallacy No 1: *Students learn best when seated upright at a desk or table.*

Research shows that many human beings perform better in an informal environment. Almost all classrooms have wooden or plastic chairs and desks for students. When a person sits on a chair constructed from those materials, approximately 75% of the total body weight is supported by only four square inches of bone. The resulting stress on the tissues of the buttocks often causes fatigue, discomfort, and the need for frequent postural change.

Making youngsters sit upright on their seats does not necessarily

make them more responsive to learning.

Studies on high school students in the USA have shown significant improvement in maths and English when taught and tested while seated on pillows, lounge chairs and small carpets, if informal design was their preference.

Fallacy No 2: *Students learn best in well illuminated areas and damage their eyes when they read and work in low light.*

Research shows many students perform significantly better in low light environments, and bright light makes them restless, fidgety and hyperactive. Low light calms these youngsters down and helps them relax and think clearly. The younger children are the *less light* they seem to need! They only need that amount of light for reading in which they feel comfortable, but their need for light seems to increase every five years.

Teachers who permitted students with low light needs to sit and work in low light corners were surprised by their improved



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behaviour, attention and grades within six weeks. It was particularly good for underachievers!

Fallacy No 3: *Students learn more and perform better in an absolutely quiet environment.*

Research shows that many adults think and remember best when studying with music and 20% of one elementary population scored significantly higher in reading in a noisy environment.

As there are also a few students who need absolute silence while they are learning, each classroom should have quiet sections for those who cannot concentrate with noise, and should also have areas where students can learn with music in the background.

Fallacy No 4: *Students learn difficult subjects best in the early morning when they are most alert.*

Students who do learn well in the morning are those we call "early birds" - but what about the "night owls" and "afternoon learners" of the population? When a student is on-task, the time preference is likely to be far more important than the subject or the amount of time spent on it! Research has shown that when students were allowed to learn at their preferred time of the day, their behaviour, motivation and maths scores improved. When they're allowed to take tests at their preferred time when their energy level is highest, their scores are significantly higher.

Fallacy No 5: *Students who do not sit still are not ready to learn.*

Many students need mobility when they learn. One American study revealed that half of one school's seven grade students needed extensive mobility while learning. When they were allowed to move from one instructional area to another while learning new information, they achieved statistically better than when they had to remain seated. Most students who are actively involved are likely to learn more, pay closer attention, and achieve higher test

marks than when they just sit and listen!

Fallacy No 6: *Whole group instruction is the best way to teach.*

The best way to teach is to allow for the variation in sociological preferences among students. Some students work well in teams or groups, but many prefer to work in pairs, and others cannot work with others present. Gifted students tend to prefer to work alone. Some students prefer to work with adults rather than peers. The small percentage who cannot concentrate with others present yet do not have the skills to work independently may work well with media rather than people.

Fallacy No 7: *Effective teaching requires clearly stated objectives followed by detailed, step-by-step, logical, sequential explanations until all students understand what is being taught*

While global/holistic learners grasp large concepts and then deal with the related facts and details, analytical learners pay attention to the facts that finally build up to the concept. Globals and analyticals learn equally well, but achieve higher scores when taught in the correct style for them. Many, probably most, teachers use an analytical style, others teach only globally. Teachers should include elements of both styles in their teaching.

Fallacy No 8: *Eating should not be permitted in classrooms.*

Many students concentrate better when they can eat, nibble, drink, chew, or bite while learning.

One study showed that students who were allowed to eat while taking a test scored significantly higher than those who needed intake but were denied it!

Fallacy No 9: *Generally, the older the students the easier it is for them to adapt to the teacher's style.*

While older students require less teacher authority and less structure, they continue to learn differently from one another, and have varying

needs. They do tend to need more independence, as they grow older, so giving them options for completing assignments and for learning required objectives is appropriate. This gives them a chance to show their maturity and responsibility.

Fallacy No 10: *Truancy is related to poor attitudes, home problems, lack of motivation, and other factors which have nothing to do with students' preferred learning time*

A study of secondary school truants revealed that when their learning time preferences were matched to their academic schedules, their learning motivation and attendance improved dramatically. Their attendance also increased when they were given a teacher different from the one with whom they had been truant!

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