

# ***UNDERACHIEVEMENT - THE UNNECESSARY DISEASE***

## ***Could Learning Styles be the cure?***

*For those not yet familiar with the concept of Learning Styles, Barbara Prashnig, author of 'Diversity is our Strength' explains why the Learning Styles approach in teaching and learning seems to hold the answers to underachievement and school failure, to homework stress, parent despair and teacher burnout, and why it is a 'must' for everyone to know how their style preferences influence any learning process.*

One phenomenon, more than anything else, seems to puzzle teachers and parents alike: Why do some children begin to fail when they enter primary school; why many survive into intermediate school but experience severely decreased motivation; and why even more high school students are frustrated, utterly bored, find it extremely difficult to achieve good marks in several subject areas and finally give up, convinced school and learning is not for them. Such inability to succeed in school is often accompanied by behavioural problems in class and at home, which lead to truancy, criminal records, involvement with gangs, alcohol, drugs and antisocial behaviour towards others and themselves.

As this particular problem is growing (especially among Maori and Polynesian student population) in New Zealand, we have to examine why these young people become at-risk, drop-outs, and special education candidates, and what can be done to help them.

Research in Learning Styles from around the world and case studies from Learning Styles schools suggest that educators can alter this negative pattern of underachievement by preventing it.

### **ANALYTIC VS HOLISTIC/GLOBAL STYLES**

Analytic students with a left-brain processing style learn very differently from the way students with a right-brain processing style learn. Analytics learn sequentially, building details into the understanding and often prefer a quiet learning environment, bright light, formal seating arrangements and prefer to continue their task until it has been completed.

Holistics/globals, however, learn holistically and compared to analytics often 'backwards'. They need to understand the concept first and are then able to concentrate on the details. They prefer learning with what most teachers would describe as distracters: music, conversation, soft illumination, informal seating design, snacks, social interaction and with lots of mobility. In addition, holistics often are not persistent, it is not their way to focus on one thing until they reach understanding - they function much more like a 'scatterbrain'. Only if something makes sense to them, they can clue-in on details, they also get easily bored and need frequent breaks. Usually they return to their assignment, work on it for a short period of time and then need another break. In addition, holistics don't like working on one thing at a time; instead, they prefer to work on multiple tasks simultaneously and enjoy them most when permitted to choose their own sequence and the time frame.

The younger children are, the more right-brain dominant they are; therefore they need more holistic, right-brain teaching methods because their analytical brain-processing skills are not yet developed and in many people (research estimates approximately

two thirds of the Western population) holistic brain-processing remains the preferred thinking style throughout life. Most people can apply analytical thinking processes if they have to, but this makes learning harder and information storage much more difficult for them.

However, if a school system, which is based on analytical teaching methods, forces young people to do all their learning analytically (as this is the preferred teaching style, especially in academic subjects in most of our high schools) the result is that such a system sets up students for failure - especially those whose brain-processing is strongly holistic, as seems to be the case with our Maori and Polynesian students.

Another factor which contributes to the mismatch between teaching and learning styles is the well researched fact that teachers are strongly analytical in their approaches, more so in high schools than in primary schools (and even more in tertiary education) and cannot imagine that their specific subject area could be studied and presented holistically, in a more right-brain way. It is just not in their thinking! Such teachers also seem to have great difficulties in accepting that there is more than one way to learn anything, because due to their own sequential thinking processes, analytics believe 'their' way is the best and the only one.

And that false belief causes holistic students to fail, mainly in analytical subjects such as mathematics, science, economics, etc, which causes boredom and frustration, has a negative effect on their overall performance, and seems to be the main reason for behaviour and learning problems, which then lead to the above mentioned social problems among young adolescents.

## ***UNDERACHIEVEMENT - THE UNNECESSARY DISEASE cont'd***

Apart from the basic differences between holistics/globals and analytics, studies in the United States have clearly shown that the learning styles of drop-outs were significantly different from those students who remained in school. According to the Dunn & Dunn Learning Styles Model, eight learning style elements statistically differentiated between highly at-risk or drop-out students in comparison with their counterparts who remained at school ("Do Mismatches Between Instruction and Style Create 'Dropoutism'?", St. John's University, N.Y., 1989).

The eight strong needs in drop-out students are:

1. Mobility at frequent intervals;
2. A variety of instructional resources from which to learn (to match students' low auditory and low visual modalities and their strong preferences for tactile/kinesthetic learning - hands-on activities - and their strong need for variety rather than routines and patterns);
3. Learning difficult content at other times, not in early morning classes;
4. Recognition of their high motivation despite their inability to learn through conventional methods; positive feedback instead of put-downs;
5. Collegial rather than authoritarian teachers;
6. Resources which introduce new and difficult information through multi-sensory methods (kinesthetic, tactile, visual, auditory) to make learning easier and more appealing;
7. Informal seating arrangements in classrooms to respond to their inability to sit on plastic or wooden chairs for more than 10-12 minutes and their strong need for mobility;
8. Soft illumination which means avoiding fluorescent lights in classrooms.

From the work we are doing here in New Zealand with Learning Styles we can already see that the same features apply to our underachievers, which inevitably become at-risk students and drop-outs when their learning needs are not matched over longer periods of time.

If schools had their students' learning styles assessed, trained their teachers to become more aware of diversity in the classroom and teach with matched instruction methods, as well as educate parents in their children's true learning needs, fewer students would experience frustration and the inability to succeed in academic classes. This could well be the cure for underachievement.

*We at the Creative Learning Centre in Auckland are committed to helping schools eliminate underachievement by introducing the 'School of the Future Programme Based on Learning Styles' and offer a wide range of services.*

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