

Ten Myths regarding Alternative Education

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Alternative Education (AE) caters students aged 13 - 15 years who are alienated from mainstream schools. This may be due to multiple suspensions, exclusions, long-term truancy or non-enrolment. Secondary schools are funded by the Ministry of Education to contract providers to deliver AE to 1820 students nation-wide. The AE policy has been in effect since the year 2000 and it is currently under review by the Ministry of Education.

However, the AE sector is becoming as marginalised as the students it caters for. Due to no funding increases to providers for 9 years (including no adjustment to inflation for this period) the system is being strangled, unable to pay its workers a decent wage and provide equipment and resources to meet the needs of these 21st century learners. Furthermore, access to support systems (such as GSE) for AE students is minimal. It is a miracle that AE has many success stories and this can only be attributed to those passionately involved in the work.

I have heard a series of myths regarding AE which help to obscure the sector. These myths reflect our prejudice to value traditional approaches to education and barely tolerate anything 'alternative.' Perhaps we fear saying that there is a need for an alternative because what does this tell us about the current system?

Myth #1: AE will keep students out of mainstream

AE is not optional for students. It is a specific educational intervention for alienated students for whom formal schooling is not suitable for a particular time. Mainstream education is the preferred learning environment for almost all students.

The education system in developed countries needs a non-formal education sector. By non-formal education I mean education provision that is outside of the mainstream. In a report to the European Parliament in 1995 the Committee on Culture and Education declared that formal edu-

cational systems alone cannot respond to the challenges of modern society and therefore welcomed its reinforcement by non-formal educational practices.

Myth #2: AE was set up to help behaviourally troubled students

The second myth concerns the nature of those who attend AE programmes. AE was not initiated to help behaviourally troubled students; it was developed by community groups because some of their young people had trouble assimilating into the mainstream system. These students may have been excluded, had multiple suspensions, were truant or never enrolled in the first place. Approximately 70% of students in AE are of Maori or Pasifika descent.

A student can be in AE for up to three years receiving support and educational skills to enable them to either return to mainstream, gain employment or move on to further training.

Myth #3: Alternative Education is about Alternatives to Education

There is a play-on-words about AE providing 'alternatives to education.' This is simply not true. Many providers are NZQA accredited, access the Correspondence School or have relationships with their contracting school that enables students to gain qualifications. Therefore AE is a non-formal setting able to provide formal qualifications, which is a remarkable feature of the New Zealand system.

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The approach to education in AE is alternative and individualised. The chalk-and-talk pedagogy will simply not work with most AE students who need an approach that centres on the warm and trusting relationship between the teacher and the student.

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