



# Ross Morrison McGill

## 20 Years of educational fads

Ross is the Managing Director of @TeacherToolkit and was nominated as one of the '500 Most Influential People in the Britain' by Debrett's for his influence on education. Ross is also an award-winning teacher, author and blogger. He is frequently asked to speak at national conferences across the UK and is asked to reflect on educational developments in various newspapers about education policy.



Over the last 20 years teachers in the UK have been exposed to so much education hearsay – information received from other people which cannot be substantiated – and gimmicks, fads and myths we've all had to endure in our schools. What follows is a list of 20 fads, in no particular order and sadly, not exhaustive!

## Definitions

- **Hearsay:** A member of the school leadership team attends a conference led by the government or a watchdog organisation. After hearing what the apparent organisation was looking for to a) raise achievement or b) improve teaching, the aforementioned senior leader would race back into their school and instruct all teachers to do the following the very next day! This meant an entire change of pedagogy and approach in the classroom for every teacher.
- **Myth:** Once the above 'hearsay' had caught on and was performed in military precision for observations and the like, visiting teachers would observe what they see, read or hear and return to their own institution and say: "You should see what they are doing at X school, every teacher is teaching/marking/planning/analysing in this way and it looks great. Several months later, the school is inspected and OfSTED like what they see; published their report and quote "X school marks books effectively and all students respond to feedback in a way that aids rapid progress." Before you know it, what was said at the original meeting becomes one person's interpretation and has now become a myth that travels up and down the country.
- **Fad:** As a result of the above mentioned myth, the trend soon catches on and schools, school leaders and all teachers are now jumping through hoops, performing teaching/marking/planning/analysing in a particular way for the observer or for student progress. This has now become a 'fad' that everyone must be able to do.
- **Gimmick:** Soon the fad because over-egged and flaws in the idea are exposed in inspections, from peers, online or in publications. What was once known as an 'OfSTED fad' has now become a 'gimmick' and less than half the number of schools have stopped wasting time on ideas that a) have teachers jumping through hoops or b) have no correlation to research, effect size or evidence on student progress.

### 1. Learning styles:

... audio, visual and kinaesthetic learning styles. Research from both ends of the spectrum state that there is no such thing as 'learning styles' (Riener and Willingham 2010).

**The result? Gimmick.**

### 2. Lesson objectives:

The framing or copying of lesson objectives is still commonplace today; "All students will; most students will; some students will ..." meant that

teachers had to record three variations of their lesson aims on to lesson plans and on to the blackboard/whiteboard (depending on how long you have been teaching). The intention meant that you were planning to 'predict' differentiation from various outputs from groups of students, despite having 20-30 students in every class that would produce that number of varied results. Debra Kidd recently renounced this as a waste of time in her book.

**The result? Fad.**

# 20 Years of Educational Fads

www.TeacherToolkit.me/Education-Fads



### 3. Learning outcomes:

... once the lesson was taught, students were required to write what their learning outcome was. This was further proof for the observer and for the inspectorate that teaching and learning were synchronised in perfect harmony. However, there is nothing wrong with sharing with students where they should be going. After-all, which one of us would start out on our degree or driving lesson, not knowing what the desired outcome should be?

**The result? Myth.**

<b>Learning Styles</b> 	<b>Lesson Objectives</b> 	<b>Learning Outcomes</b> 	<b>Rapid Progress</b> 	<b>Assessing Pupil Progress</b> 
<b>Chinese Teaching</b> 	<b>Personal Learning Thinking Skills</b> 	<b>Textbooks</b> 	<b>iPads</b> 	<b>Sitting in Rows</b> 
<b>Group Work</b> 	<b>Zero Tolerance</b> 	<b>Brain Gym</b> 	<b>Four-part Lessons</b> 	<b>Lolly-pop Sticks</b> 
<b>Teacher Talk</b> 	<b>Detailed Lesson Plans</b> 	<b>Verbal Feedback Stamps</b> 	<b>Triple Marking</b> 	<b>Starters, Middles and Plenaries</b> 

### 4. Rapid progress (OfSTED):

... stipulated in the School Inspection Handbook, that students must show rapid progress, before this myth was busted, school leaders were interpreting the handbook and teachers were expected to show 'students making rapid progress' in lesson observations. This soon became a requirement to show in a 20 minute observation! Why? Because this was the period observers – school leaders and OfSTED inspectors were anticipated to be in any classroom.

**The result? Hearsay.**

### 5. APP (Assessing Pupil Progress):

When I first came across Assessing Pupil Progress in 2008, an enthusiastic teacher demonstrated how assessment was measured using a fancy piece of software. I looked on in horror at the countless sub-levels of data, entered into a database to record knowledge and skills demonstrated by a single child. APP was developed for use in schools to enable them to apply Assessment for Learning (AFL) consistently across both the secondary and primary National Curriculum. The coalition government got rid of it in 2010. Good riddance.

**The result? Fad.**

### 6. Chinese teaching:

The television series 'Are Our Kids Tough Enough?' was entertainment and was never going to provide us with a true perspective. Despite research, high-profile celebrities and politicians proclaiming the wonderful work of our Shanghai counterparts, at no point does anyone proclaim that in order to achieve these high-standards, teachers only teach two lessons a day. Over the past 18 months, I have received frequent invitations to events, marketed by teaching alliances, MATs and corporate organisers to attend schools hosting Chinese teachers, teaching in their schools. The promise of 'maths teachers and Shanghai teaching methods showcased to UK teachers in a school near you.' I kid you not, they all appeared in my work 'inbox' on several occasions throughout the year. I eventually did attend one event. I also sent my maths teachers to 2 or 3 events and we did nothing to change the work we are already did. 'We [are] blindly following the Chinese approach to teaching maths' said The Guardian. Oh, and each of these supported by exemplar text books, already hand-crafted for subject teachers waiting to consume another promised silver bullet.

**The result? Fad.**

### 7. PLTS (Personal, Learning, Thinking Skills):

Consigned to the National Archives – that says it all really – PLTS provided a framework for describing the qualities and skills needed for success in learning and life. If only we knew the secret for adulthood, teaching and successful relationships too? Nice idea, but impossible to put a framework in place to determine the skills a child needs to become successful. Maybe now replaced by 'character education'?

**The result? Gimmick.**

### 8. Textbooks:

Nick Gibb is obsessed with textbooks being used more widely by teachers in classroom, but it was advocated long-before the not-missed-at-all Elizabeth Truss was given her marching orders. She made a number of speeches in 2014 in which she advocated a return to the regular use of the textbook. The problem is, the knowledge-base of most subjects has now become so extensive, that it has become increasingly difficult for teachers to cram everything in to the limited number of periods a week they have with each class! You only need to take a closer look at the publishers and their relationships with those that promote them to find this ideology is all a little incestuous.

**The result? Fad.**

### 9. iPads:

I've yet to find myself working in a school that uses iPads extensively in all subjects with all students, but that's not to say I don't advocate technology in the classroom. It has a place, but it certainly should not replace the role of the teacher. Using iPads in the classroom is expensive and I have seen it work well, but I've also seen it lead students down the 'garden-path' and have seen teachers get frustrated with the technology and students turn to 'Google' for the answers all-too-often. Show me the research please.

**The result? The jury is still out...**

### 10. Sitting in rows:

I have seen teachers sit students in rows in all sorts of subjects. Maths, technology, art and English. Some are great, some not-so much. Either way, whatever works for those teachers and their students is what's best. It is the duty of colleagues observing/coaching to intervene if they believe the techniques a teacher is using in their classroom – even the seating plan – is detrimental to the teaching and learning of the class.

**The result? Fad.**

### 11. Group work:

Every subject requires collaboration. To say a teacher should always have students working/sitting in groups to explore and discover has a place in the classroom, but it certainly should not be the default method for teachers. Direct instruction and teacher clarity has the greatest impact on student progress. To allow students to discover learning for themselves in project-based learning serves its purpose, only if students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills in order to do so. If you first achieve this objective with students working in rows or groups, that is the teacher's prerogative.

**The result? Fad**

## Educational Fads

### 12. Zero-tolerance:

Every school should have a behaviour policy that is rational, flexible and simple enough to cater for all students. Most work on the basis of a 'ready, respectful, safe' methodology which is simple and offers clarity for everyone. In schools where I have seen over-complicated policies, even teachers are confused by the rules and the series of consequences to action! In every school, when not imposing appropriate sanctions, students will find the gaps and sift out teachers who bend the rules and undermine colleagues.

If a school promotes a 'zero tolerance' approach, how confident are these institutions in helping young people to learn from their mistakes? How do their permanent exclusion figures read? Every school should have a behaviour policy which promotes learning and aims to cull disruption or defiance. To say you do have a 'zero tolerance' approach, or something quite the opposite such as an 'inclusive approach', is just lip-service for parents and visitors. Every school requires students to learn in a safe and respectful environment. To promote that a school is tough on discipline, and better than any other, is in-line with ideologies promoted by those that look to commercialise education via the academies and free school movement.

Every school wants good behaviour.

**The result? Fad.**

### 13. Brain Gym:

The program, designed by Paul Dennison who worked as a public school teacher in the 1960s, researching more effective ways to help children and adults with learning difficulties. It has been criticised as pseudoscience. The studies themselves have received polemic feedback from supporters and critics. The consensus is Brain Gym activities are poorly designed and that the work is not supported by peer-reviewed research. When questioned, Dennison said that he "leaves the explanations to the experts."

**The result? Gimmick.**

### 14. Four-Part Lessons:

Including 3 and 7 parts or whatever number of parts you've been told! There is little or no evidence to suggest any suitable model works other than quality first teaching from the outset.

**The result? Gimmick.**

### 15. Lollypop-stick questioning:

It is absolutely essential that you ask the correct question in the first place, and then use a mechanism to find a student to answer. If you do it the other way round, first, all the other students can relax, and second, you will probably merely replicate your existing expectations of the student. Used by many teachers in their fast-track induction, lolly-sticks are a neat little trick to ensure that every child takes part in the lesson to appease observers. But, what are they learning and what is the teacher assessing by doing so? Overall, whatever mechanism you use to ask questions, it's the quality of your question – who it is targeted to and why – and the quality of feedback that counts.

**The result? Gimmick.**

### 16. Teacher talk:

I once blogged about teacher-talk; traditional versus progressive methods, false dichotomies or otherwise, might make for an interesting debate when it's underpinned by evidence, but in most classrooms teachers do a bit of both these days. Put another way, children need facts but also need to develop the skills to use those facts. We know that it is the quality of direct-instruction and teacher-clarity that has significant effect on student progress. Talk badly for a long or short period of time, and you'll leave your students with no direction.

**The result? Myth.**

### 17. Lesson planning:

Yes, believe it or not, teachers were required to write detailed lesson plans (2-3 A4 pages) for every lesson and submit them to their teams and/or the inspectors for lesson observations. Although the myth of writing detailed lesson plans is largely debunked, there are strong rumours that 1,000s of primary schools still ask their teachers to submit weekly lesson plans to their headteachers. The result, teachers spend their entire Sundays writing weekly planning sheets, to submit on the Monday morning for people who won't be in the lesson!

I'd say stop doing it; focus on long-term curriculum plans and let teachers get on with their job.

**The result? Hearsay.**

### 18. Verbal feedback stamps:

Stamping in a student's book to indicate that verbal feedback has taken place, adds no value to learning. It has little or no impact! If the stamp is merely to serve as an indication to an observer when looking through students books, then those teachers have lost their way in the classroom. To evidence that some sort of verbal feedback has taken place, is undermining the value of a teacher's work. We know verbal feedback serves an important purpose, but let's keep the verbal feedback for what it is intended: teachers having quality conversations with their students.

**The result? Fad.**



### 19. Triple marking:

This idea was originally designed to reduce marking and make more of key assessments. Step 1: students check work and eliminate the mistakes. Step 2 – teacher marks! Step 3 – students act. The triple of TIM came from it being three parts. The other bit came from 2 parts student to 1 part teacher. Triple marking may have stemmed from some senior leaders interpretation of the School Inspection Handbook.

After posting this blog, the origins of the idea have come to light and have been clarified by the person who claims to have promoted the idea. Thankfully, OfSTED have started to publish their own misconceptions and they could not be clearer. "OfSTED does not expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders." Acting on feedback is yet to stand the test of time and for now, it may have replaced triple-marking.

**The result? Fad.**

### 20. Starters, Middles, Plenaries:

We've all created them, acted them out for observations and inspections, when in reality we'd rather just get on with teaching! Why? Because we have so little time and starters, middles and plenaries stemmed from OfSTED preferences to engage students in learning from the start and checking what progress had been made 20-minutes later, or at the end of the lesson. Typically, teachers use resources that works well time and time again, and to avoid wasting time planning, often magpie another person's resource so that they can satisfy observers. I'm not going to say anything else here.

**The result? Fad. Although the jury could still be out on this ...**