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IN BRIEF

The creator of reading styles describes some successful instructional methods, including modeling, hands-on activities, and exposure to a wide range of reading materials, designed to encourage and assist struggling readers.

Even the slowest and most reluctant readers can learn to read well when taught according to their individual learning styles.

# Achieving with Struggling Readers

by Marie Carbo

*James, August 1995: "I hate to read. You will never make me read."*

*James, May 1996: "I read every night before I go to bed. I especially like to read Sports Illustrated. Before this class, I hated reading. Now I want to read everything that interests me, especially sports."*

**L**ike so many struggling readers, James believed that he would never learn to read. Years of failure and embarrassment had left him feeling inwardly stupid and outwardly angry. But life changed for James in eighth grade, when he gained three years in reading and moved from a fourth-grade to a seventh-grade reading level. His anger fell away and he became excited about reading.

Research tells us that once children fall well behind in reading by second grade, it's very difficult for them to catch up. Yet we have found that below-level readers are routinely given far too many worksheets, boring stories, and difficult texts. They are required to sit still and listen passively for long periods of time, or to work alone for long periods. Such demands make learning to read unnecessarily difficult.

Often, struggling readers like James are perceived in terms of their disabilities rather than their strengths. Yet more than 20 years of research clearly indicates that when struggling readers are taught through their reading styles—their strongest learning pathways—they do learn. (Oglesby and Suter 1995; Skipper 1997; Snyder 1994, 1997).

James' life changed when his eighth-grade teacher began to teach her 42 struggling readers through their individual reading styles. That year, her students, who had been reading four to seven years below grade level, averaged a reading gain of 2.6 years—with some gaining six grade levels (Anglin 1996).

### **Schoolwide Programs that Work**

O'Connor Elementary School in Victoria, Texas, is an excellent example of the long-term effects of in-depth, schoolwide reading styles teaching. In 1993, only 19 percent of O'Connor's low socioeconomic, predominantly Latino population passed the Texas state reading test. But after only one year of reading styles teaching, that figure was 80 percent.

Today, under the leadership of principal Sherry Gorsuch, O'Connor Elementary has received an "Exemplary" rating from the Texas Education Agency and has been named a National Model Reading Styles School. Today, 98 percent of O'Connor's 530 students are passing math, reading, and writing at all tested grade levels, and their English proficiency has improved dramatically (Carbo 2000).

## **Recommendations for Principals**

Below is a short list of some of the key strategies used in our reading styles schools that have enabled struggling readers to achieve high gains in reading and oral language, while sharply reducing discipline problems (Carbo 1997):

### ***Help students become familiar with rich, well-written language.***

Have your teachers read a variety of literature aloud to their classes for 10 minutes or more, two or three times daily.

***Help students associate reading with pleasure.*** Encourage teachers and parent-support groups to provide cozy reading areas with lots of high-interest books, soft furniture, rugs, and pillows

### ***Support/ development of a library of specially recorded books***

(slowed pace, special phrasing, small amounts per tape side).

Encourage struggling readers to listen to an audiotape and follow along with the text a few times before reading aloud.

### ***Provide recorded textbooks and a tape dubber in the media center.***

Provide blank tapes that students can purchase to record and take home chapters of texts. This procedure enables struggling readers to become familiar with the content and can raise reading levels substantially.

***Become familiar with a variety of reading methods.*** When one method isn't working, teachers need to try an alternate method.

***Encourage teachers to allow students choices,*** such as accepting different ways of completing a book report (dioramas, rap games), or allowing students to decide with whom they wish to read.

***Make skill practice fun.*** Allow students to work with peers and provide some skill practice in the form of hands-on games.

Not only do struggling readers learn to read and speak well in reading styles schools, they also become actively engaged in the learning process—and they carry these skills with them. At Grand Caillou Middle School in Houma, Louisiana, where poor students from the bayou region are taught according to the Carbo Reading Styles Program, principal Judy Gaspard reports that graduates stand out in high school. High school teachers tell her that Grand Caillou graduates "like to read more than other kids, take more interest in their classes, and know what they need to do to learn."

Many other schools and districts that have turned to reading styles instruction have reported high reading gains, sharply lowered discipline problems and retentions, and more effective teachers. In an extensive two-year

study published by Phi Delta Kappa, students of teachers trained in reading styles achieved higher reading scores six times more frequently than their controls (Barber et al. 1998). The Kentucky Department of Education has recommended the Carbo Reading Styles Program for "its consistently high student performance results" and the U. S. Department of Education has named it as one of seven approved research-based reading programs.

### **Focusing on Students' Needs**

Our data and those of others strongly suggest that the predominant reading styles of struggling readers are global, tactile, and kinesthetic. Global learners are emotional, intuitive, and spontaneous. To do their best, they must be vitally interested in what they are reading. Tactile and kinesthetic learners need to touch, move, and

experience to learn easily. Struggling readers also generally prefer to work in groups and concentrate best in environments that include soft light and comfortable furniture. They learn most easily with small amounts of direct instruction combined with larger amounts of modeling and such hands-on, experiential activities as games and role playing.

Like all readers, below-level readers have a variety of reading interests. In training teachers in the Carbo Reading Styles Program, we emphasize the need for a range of reading choices that includes large amounts of high-interest short stories that provide mystery, adventure, surprise, humor, and/or action. In addition, we spend considerable time helping teachers to internalize and creatively use a variety of modeling methods, such as choral reading, echo reading, and recording. All of these methods enable students to follow along while listening to a small portion of a story before reading the portion aloud.

### Closing the Reading Gap

Unfortunately, there is ample nationwide evidence that what schools are doing to help struggling readers is simply not working. Reading results reported by the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (Zernike 2001) indicate that our overall reading scores have not improved and that the gap between our best and worst readers continues to widen. Unless we change the ways in which we teach our children to read, that gap can become a chasm.

Currently, only one-third of fourth graders read at grade level or above, and only 12 percent of black fourth graders, many of whom live in low-income school districts, reach this standard. Low reading ability has a devastating effect on our nation and on our people, especially the poor. A much larger percentage of our students will need to achieve at least a ninth grade reading level if they are to rise above poverty.

We must teach these struggling readers with a deep and powerful belief in their abilities. And we must be focused on helping them learn to read through their strongest learning pathways—their reading styles—with reading materials that interest, engage, even fascinate them. We must, during these times of great stress in our schools, *put the children first*.

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## Web Resources

The National Reading Styles Institute offers a number of free resources, including the Carbo Reading Styles Program Research Update; a video demonstrating reading styles strategies; information about the Carbo Recorded-Book Method; and five *Reading Styles Inventory* profiles.

[www.nrsi.com](http://www.nrsi.com)

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform provide a downloadable PDF version of *The Catalog of School Reform Models*, including reading and language arts models.

<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/index.shtml>

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