

The Power of Reading Styles: Accommodating Students' Strengths



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At the end of third grade, after four years of intensive phonics instruction, Tom could read only a few words. He was convinced that he was 'stupid' and 'bad,' and began to have recurrent stomach pains.... [In fourth grade], when his teacher's approach to teaching matched his reading style, within eight months he was reading at a second-grade level. (Carbo 1987).

American children must and can achieve much higher levels of literacy. Only one-third of today's students read at levels that can bring them academic success and good jobs in today's ultra-competitive, technologically advanced international marketplace. Nearly the same number cannot reach even the most basic level of literacy. Now, more than at any other time in American history, we need clear guidelines for accelerating the ability to read.

First, let's stop wasting precious time repeating past mistakes. Our children lose no matter which reading approach "wins" the century-old "Great Debate." They fall victim to the dangerously faulty presumption that there is something wrong with any child who cannot learn with the prevailing approach. Inevitably, children and families suffer unnecessarily, reading failures persist, disillusionment spreads, and the pendulum swings to yet another approach.

Second, let's agree on these simple goals: We want all of our children to enjoy reading, to read with ease and fluency, and to understand what they read on the deepest levels possible. As one teacher told me, "I want reading to be as easy as breathing for my students."

How, then, do we achieve our goals? Twenty years of reading styles research tell us that the path that leads children to reading is not the same for every child. Students have different learning styles for reading, or "reading styles," that predispose them to learn easily with particular

reading techniques. When a reading method accommodates a youngster's reading style, a "match" occurs and learning to read becomes easy and enjoyable. A mismatch blocks the child's innate ability to learn. When the process of learning to read becomes laborious, boring, and

difficult, children avoid for most of their school years every practice that would help them to become good readers.

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Let's agree that what is important is bringing children to literacy as quickly, happily, and effortlessly as possible—not which reading method gets them there. There are more than a dozen legit-

imate reading methods, any one of which is "best" if it helps a particular child learn to read. Our Tom, whose travails were described at the beginning of this article, could read only a dozen words after four years of intensive phonics because he was not an auditory learner. He could not hear subtle differences in letter sounds, associate those sounds with letters, and blend letter sounds quickly to form words. When Tom's reading program matched his strengths, he gained nearly two grade levels in one school year! Make no mistake, if Tom were beginning school today, he might fail again with phonics, especially in states mandating phonics for all. The simple truth is that phonics, like any other reading method, should be used only if it enables children to read easily and well and is enjoyable. Phonics is a method, not a goal.

Certainly, sound research should drive instruction. But research is often difficult to interpret. For example, an interesting investigation from the National Institutes for Health (NIH) indicates that, compared to children who perform phonics tasks easily, youngsters who have difficulty with phonics have less blood flow to the language centers of the brain during phonics tasks.

These findings may indicate that the poor phonics performers need intensive phonics instruction. But they may not. The truth is that we don't know enough about what these physiological phenomena actually mean to base educational practice on them. Far more relevant to practitioners who work with children every day is what we have found actually works in classroom experience.

My colleagues and I have brought the Reading Styles Program (RSP) to tens of thousands of teachers across the United States.

Recently, RSP was selected by the Kentucky Department of Education for “consistently high student performance results,” and included in an initial listing of some of the nation’s most highly regarded research-based school reform programs compiled by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the U.S. Department of Education.

We have seen district-wide reading gains of two stanines in rural Appalachia, a school in Harlem move from 17 percent of its students passing state reading tests to 53 percent in six months, a six-week summer school program cause a drop in first-grade retention from 8.9 percent to 1.7 percent, a rural school in Alabama awarded a National Blue-Ribbon status, and a bilingual school that rose from 61st of 65 schools in its district academically to ninth. We have seen RSP increase literacy by accommodating students’ strengths, thereby making the process of learning to read so easy and enjoyable that youngsters become motivated, confident, fluent readers in short periods of time.

Students have shown the greatest gains in reading motivation and ability when teachers have used these four key components of the Reading Styles Program consistently and intensively:

1. Administer the Reading Style Inventory and checklists to identify students’ strengths and best reading methods, strategies, and materials.
2. Master and use a variety of reading methods (including phonics), depending on students’ identified reading styles.
3. Provide sufficient modeling and demonstration of good reading.
4. Teach skills with many games and hands-on materials to accommodate the tactile/kinesthetic child.

Reading Styles teachers also use well-written, high-interest reading materials and encourage students to read and learn in comfortable, relaxed environments so that students become receptive to learning. Reading Styles research indicates, however, that the instructional methodology and materials used in the classroom play the most important role in improving reading.¹⁷

¹⁷ L. Barber, M. Carbo and R. Thomasson, *A Comparative Study of the Reading Styles Program to Extant Programs of Teaching Reading* (Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa, In Press).

As early as 1923, an article in the *Elementary School Journal* advised educators to “cull the truth from many [reading] systems, study the needs of the different pupils, and then experiment to find the best method for the particular problems encountered.” We’re well beyond the experimenting stage with the Reading Styles Program. Now let’s move past the never-ending debates and focus on the individual child’s strengths and needs. Teachers must become more confident, competent, and masterful teachers of reading.

Let us, then, reach one final agreement: that teachers need to understand their students’ reading styles, and use a wide variety of effective reading strategies to accommodate those differing styles. Then every child will be a winner.