Developing Great Teachers of Reading - Part 3

By Marie Carbo, Ed.D.

Parts 1 and 2 of this series focused on teachers' perceptions of at-risk readers and the importance of focusing on reading comprehension and enjoyment. In Part 3, we will look at why we should and how we can teach to students' reading styles to create strong reading programs that prevent reading failure, decrease discipline problems, and increase reading achievement.

Teach to Natural Learning Strengths

Place two children of similar backgrounds, intelligence, interests, and motivation in the same reading class. One learns to read easily and the other fails. Why? It is highly likely that the reading program matched the reading style of the successful reader and mismatched the reading style of the child who failed.

But learning to read does not have to be a gamble. By placing the focus where it needs to be—on the individual student—great teachers of reading effectively differentiate instruction and improve the odds for all students.

What Are Reading Styles?

Each of us has a distinctly different reading style. Your reading style determines how well you concentrate and read with particular reading methods, materials, and activities, and under certain conditions. Research tells us that matching students' reading styles makes learning to read easier, increases student motivation, and greatly improves reading achievement. Some struggling readers make reading gains many times greater than their previous progress (Barber, Carbo, & Thomasson, 1998; Catalog of School Reform Models, 2006; *ECS's programs and practices*, 2002; Hodgin & Wooliscroft, 1997; Killion, 2002; Oglesby & Suter, 1995; Schacter, 2000; Skipper, 1997; Snyder, 1994, 1997).

The Reading Gamble

For over a century, every 20 years or so the reading pendulum has swung back and forth between global and analytic approaches to teaching reading (see Figures 1 and 2). Today, that pendulum has swung strongly in the direction of analytic reading approaches, often making learning to read difficult for students with a global, tactile, and kinesthetic reading style—which happens to be the predominant style of at-risk readers (Atchinson & Brown, 1988; Duhaney & Ewing, 1998; Dunn, Griggs, Gorman, & Beasley, 1995; Mohrmann, 1990; Sudzina, 1993; Thies, 1999-2000; Wilson, 1993). As a result, many of today's at-risk readers are incorrectly taught and tested with skills exercises designed for analytics.
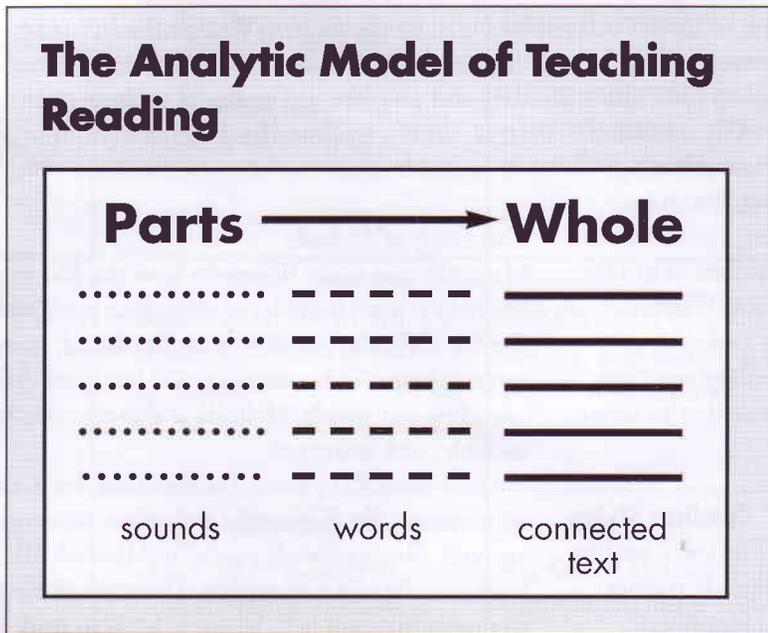
Improving the Odds for All Students

Great teachers of reading make important, necessary adjustments so that their instruction focuses on the two most important goals of reading instruction: comprehension and enjoyment. These teachers read aloud and discuss high-interest stories frequently with their students. They also reduce the number of worksheets, allow students to work together in pairs or small groups, skip or replace stories that students find boring, reduce the amount of phonics for low-auditory students, and supplement their program with high-interest, recorded reading materials, modeling of reading methods, and hands-on games that help children master important reading skills quickly.

In other words, each student's reading style plays an important role in *determining the instruction*—not just an outside system of teaching or a set of commercial materials. This paradigm shift is *critical*. We are losing millions of students by trying to fit them into systems that actually prevent them from learning. Although some students have been able to adapt, the low reading abilities of the great majority of our students offer ample testimony that many cannot.

Figure 1. Analytic reading methods (i.e., phonics) teach the sounds letters make, then practice words containing the sounds taught, and proceed to stories.

Figure 1

The Analytic Model of Teaching Reading

Parts ⟶ Whole

sounds   words   connected text

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Figure 2. Global reading methods (i.e., recorded stories, shared reading) start with a modeled story, practice words from the story, and teach phonics skills.

Figure 2

The Global Model of Teaching Reading

Whole ⟶ Parts

connected text   words   sounds

© National Reading Styles Institute, 1997.

> "We are losing millions of students by trying to fit them into systems that actually prevent them from learning."
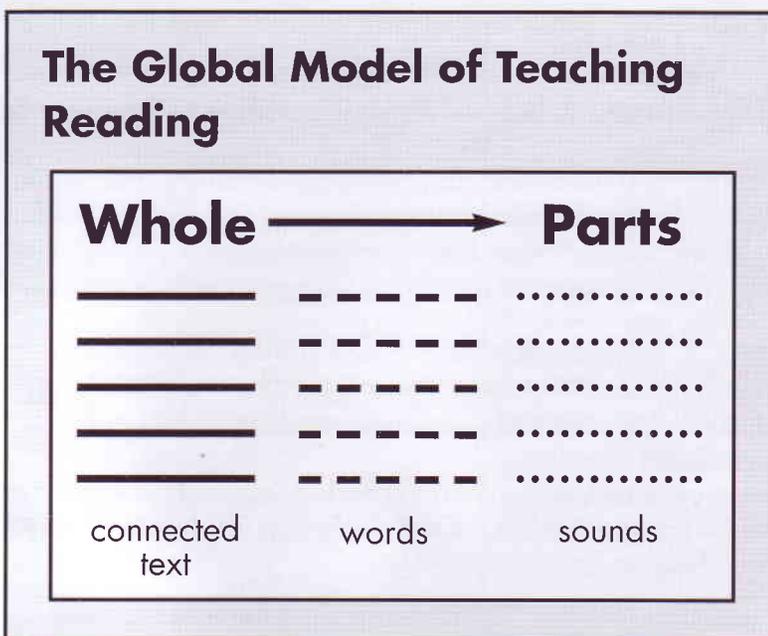
Important Research on Reading Styles

Two research findings are worth repeating here:

• Reading programs and interventions that accommodate students' reading style strengths have brought about substantial improvement in reading achievement and enjoyment in short periods of time.

• Reading experts have identified negative reading practices, many of which are used extensively today. These practices include: over-emphasizing skills instead of comprehension, using too many worksheets and boring stories, teaching skills in isolation, providing few or no choices of reading materials, making reading a contest with points and prizes, and following teacher editions faithfully instead of responding to the needs of students (Flippo, 1998; Reutzel & Smith, 2004). Note: Part 2 of this series (November 2007) contained a listing of reading practices that make learning to read difficult and those that facilitate learning to read.

Identifying and Teaching to Students' Reading Styles

There are many techniques for identifying students' reading styles. Figure 3 provides a chart that describes six learner characteristics (i.e., visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, global, and analytic), and lists compatible reading methods, materials, and strategies for each characteristic. We can see, for example, that tactile learners recall what they touch, are often doodlers, and learn better when they can touch or manipulate objects (such as a reading game).

A complete analysis of students' reading styles is provided by the *Reading Style Inventory®* (*RSI*)—a diagnostic questionnaire that assesses a youngster's reading style and provides instructional recommendations (Carbo, 1992, 2007). Student checklists and printouts of the *RSI* are available at no cost at www.nrsi.com.

Case Study of Melinda

Melinda's case study illustrates how the *RSI* can be used. Melinda is a sixth-grader reading four years below level. She has difficulty copying from the board, poor spelling, reverses letters in her writing, and has great difficulty sounding out words. Melinda is also creative, outgoing, sociable, and animated.

Melinda's *RSI* printout reveals that she is a child of extremes. She is strongly global but only minimally analytic. She is strongly tactile and kinesthetic, but weak both visually and auditorially. There are many good strategies that will help Melinda learn to read.

Melinda's *RSI* Profile recommends effective reading

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Figure 3

Accommodating Reading Styles

	Can Easily:	Enjoy/Learn Best by:	Learn to Read Best:
Visual	• Recall what they see • Learn by observing	Using computer graphics, puzzles, charts, graphs, diagrams, cartoons, posters, bulletin boards	With sight methods, dissimilar words, words accompanied by pictures
Auditory	• Recall what they hear • Learn by listening and speaking	Talking, interviewing, debating, participating on a panel, oral reports	With phonics, choral reading, recordings of stories
Tactile	• Recall what they touch • Learn by touching or manipulating objects	Doodling, sketching, playing board games, building models, writing, tracing	With writing/tracing methods, such as Fernald, language experience. By playing games
Kinesthetic	• Recall what they experience • Learn when engaged in physical activity	Playing floor games, building models, participating in fairs, setting up experiments, role playing, scavenger hunts	By pantomiming, acting in plays, recording and reading, reading instructions and then building/doing something
Global	**Tendencies** Often: • Make decisions based on emotions and intuition • Are spontaneous, random, creative	**Enjoy/Learn Best with:** Interesting or humorous stories, examples, group work, and activities	With holistic reading methods, such as recorded readings, story writing, assisted reading methods
Analytic	Often: • Make decisions based on logic • Plan, organize • Focus on details	Information presented in sequential steps, rules, structured materials, teacher-directed lessons, clear goals and requirements	With Phonics (if auditory) programmed materials, worksheets—reinforced by strategies appropriate for global learners

Source: © Marie Carbo, 1995

Figure 4

Condensed RSI Individual Profile

Student Name: Melinda W.   **Grade:** 3rd
Date: 2004-12-13   **Teacher's Name:** Ms. Tillman

Global/Analytic Tendencies
Very strong global tendencies
Minimal analytic tendencies

Perceptual Strengths
Minimal auditory strengths
Minimal visual strengths
Good tactile strengths
Excellent kinesthetic strengths

Recommended Reading Methods
Fernald Method
Carbo Recorded-Book Method
Modeling Methods

Recommended Reading Materials
Manipulatives w/large-muscle movement, floor games
Index cards, writing notebook, dark crayon, word box
"Hands-On" activities, manipulatives, games

Recommended Teaching Strategies
De-emphasize decoding
Allow student demonstrations, use floor games
Include writing, drawing games
Try colored overlays and large print
Use humor, stories, games

Source: © Marie Carbo, 1995

methods, materials, and strategies compatible with her reading style strengths. For example, her recommended reading interventions include recorded readings (ideal for global learners), colored overlays (to reduce her visual problems), floor games (she's kinesthetic), hands-on games (she's tactile), and the use of cursive writing to lessen her "b" and "d" reversals. By increasing these reading practices Melinda will have a better chance of making up lost years and becoming a good reader.

The Power of Teaching to Students' Strengths
Great teachers of reading perceive students in terms of their strengths rather than their disabilities. By focusing on their students' reading style strengths and interests, these teachers help to make learning to read easy and fun. And when that happens, students enjoy reading, take more books out of the library, and spend more of their free time reading. Further, discipline problems decrease, and reading achievement increases substantially. Great teachers of reading change the lives of their students by enabling them to perform well in school.

Author

Dr. Marie Carbo is the founder and executive director of the National Reading Styles Institute, which has empowered thousands of educators nationwide to greatly improve reading instruction. She has written three ground-breaking books, including "What Every Principal Should Know About Teaching Reading."

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