Reading Styles:
High Gains for the Bottom Third

Reading Styles succeeds because it places the instructional focus where it should be: on the student's individual strengths.

By Marie Carbo

At present, only one-third of U.S. students read at levels that are likely to assure them academic success and good jobs. Nearly the same number of students cannot function even at the most basic level of literacy. Further, the reading abilities of U.S. students in general have declined in recent years, according to the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Education Department 1994). Though slight, this decline comes at a time when the nation desperately needs a highly literate population for a much more demanding and internationally competitive workplace.

Ample evidence suggests that business as usual—the traditional teacher-directed classroom with its lectures, board work, and worksheets—has not worked for youngsters who are in the bottom third academically, many of whom are poor, minority, or immigrant students.

During the past decade, however, teaching grounded in the Reading Styles model *has* demonstrated the power to bring about rapid results with these youngsters. Consider these examples:

■ Within two years, Margil Elementary School, an inner-city school in San Antonio, rose from 61st place to 9th academically among the district's 65 elementary schools. The following year, Margil surpassed district averages in all basic subjects. As a result, Reading Styles spread to 37 San Antonio elementary schools—on a voluntary basis.

■ In 1985, Bledsoe County, Tennessee, schools averaged a stanine score of only 3 in reading—not unusual

Students who learn best through physical activities can improve their reading by playing floor games, as these Uvalde, Texas, 4th graders are doing.

for a rural school in a poverty area. Three years later, Bledsoe schools rose by two stanines in reading, equaling state and national averages. For its progress, the district received the Governor's Award for Educational Excellence (Snyder 1994).

■ At Tucson's Canyon del Oro High School, 33 special education students made average gains of nearly 2 years (or 12 NCEs) in reading comprehension in just four months (Queiruga 1992).

What improved these students' achievement so dramatically? At all of the schools involved, teachers based their styles of reading instruction on each student's strengths and needs. In other words, *students drove instruction*—not an outside system of teaching or a set of commercial materials.

This paradigm shift is critical. We are losing millions of students trying to fit them into systems that actually *prevent* them from learning. Although some students have been able to adapt to our instruction, our track record (and common sense) offer ample testimony that a great many cannot.

Reading Styles is ideal for inclusion programs for two primary reasons. First, it helps teachers to recognize that *everyone*—not just students labeled handicapped—has varying strengths and weaknesses. Second, it facilitates collaborative instructional planning that places the focus where it should be: on the individual strengths of the youngster. In most cases, Reading Styles training takes place on site, and core groups of people at the school or in the district become trainers in Reading Styles theory and strategies. These core groups, in turn, train and coach other teachers.

Students have shown the greatest gains in their reading abilities when teachers have used three key Reading Styles strategies—consistently and intensively:

■ Identify students' strengths;

■ Match reading methods, materials, and strategies to those strengths; and

■ Provide sufficient modeling and demonstration of reading.

Reading Styles teachers also

■ Use well-written, high-interest reading materials; and

■ Encourage students to read and learn in comfortable, relaxed environments in a variety of individualized and group settings.

The relaxing environment and emotional support help to make youngsters open and receptive to learning. Reading Styles research indicates, however, that it is the instructional methodology and materials used that play the biggest role in improving reading (Barber and Carbo 1994).

Capitalizing on Strengths

Why do some young people learn to read fluently while others in the same reading program struggle? One reason is that our individual reading styles predispose us to learn easily by using a particular reading technique (see Fig. 1). The problem is that different reading methods and materials demand different reading strengths of the learner. If a student has the strengths, a match occurs, and he or she learns to read easily and enjoyably. If, however, there is a mismatch between the student and the approach, the instruction itself will hinder that youngster's learning to read.

It follows that teachers need to identify their students' strengths to capitalize on them. To do this, we use observation techniques and the Reading Style Inventory or RSI (Carbo 1982, 1994). The inventory produces a profile describing a child's strengths and the best way of teaching that child to read.

In the example in Figure 2, Melinda, a 4th grader, reads on a 2nd-grade level. She is a poor speller, reverses and omits letters, and has great difficulty sounding out words. She also has minimal analytic, auditory, and visual strengths. She does, however, have strong tactile and kinesthetic strengths. She also has what we call strong *global* tendencies (see Fig. 1). That is, she is spontaneous and

inventive, and tends to make decisions based on intuition rather than logic.

To capitalize on Melinda's tactile and kinesthetic strengths, her teacher can use hands-on materials, manipulatives that involve the large muscles, and word-tracing methods (such as the

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Fernald reading method). She can also use modeling to compensate for and help reverse Melinda's visual and auditory weaknesses. In addition, because Melinda is strong globally, she will do best with information that is presented in an interesting or humorous story, with many examples.

Now, let's see how these strategies might work in an actual classroom. Suppose Melinda and her classmates are writing stories. Her teacher circulates around the room providing guidance and support. Melinda needs help with the spelling of a word. Because she is strongly tactile, her teacher uses the Fernald method: she writes the word on a card, pressing down heavily with a crayon. Melinda then traces the crayoned word with her index finger a few times, feeling its contours as she says the word (tactile and auditory input). She repeats this process several times (reinforcement).

Next, Melinda writes the word into her story (practice). When she finishes her story, she listens to a peer read it (modeling). Then, they read it aloud in unison—that is, choral-read it (simultaneous modeling and practice) until Melinda feels confident enough to read it alone (performance). Melinda has learned the correct spellings of the words needed for her story. And note that she reads her story only after her reading style has been accommodated with tactile input, reinforcement, practice, and modeling.

Before they read, youngsters like Melinda need to repeatedly see and hear the words as a good reader reads them

aloud. This modeling process is especially important for youngsters who cannot easily remember words, as well as for those with limited English (Carbo and Kapinus 1995).

Unfortunately, most struggling readers simply do not receive the amount and kind of modeling they require. Students who are barely able to read often spend too much time in either of two useless activities: in paired reading, where reading may be modeled by another child who cannot read well; or in sustained silent reading, trying to do what they are not yet able to do: independently read books that interest them. What's more, they are given boring, low-level books that often insult their intelligence.

Following are six effective modeling methods for teaching reading. As we move down the list, each method provides the student with less and less modeling, leading to independent reading.

1. *Shared reading*—The teacher reads an enlarged book to students while pointing to the words. After a few readings, the teacher encourages the youngsters to read along.

2. *Carbo Recorded-Book*®—A student listens to a tape recording of small portions of challenging, highly interesting books at a slightly slower than normal pace. While listening, the student looks at the words two or three times, then reads the passage aloud.

3. *Echo reading*—The teacher reads aloud a small amount of text (as little as a sentence or two) while the student follows along. Then the student reads back the same material.

4. *Choral reading*—Two or more students read a passage in unison.

5. *Paired reading*—Two students (or an adult and a student) take turns reading a story.

6. *Sustained silent reading*—The student reads alone.

Sustained silent reading is our goal. At this point, the student receives no modeling of the text.

Note that the modeling methods of storytelling and reading aloud are not on the list. If they were, they would be

FIGURE 1

Accommodating Reading Styles

Visual	Students with Perceptual Strengths Can Easily:	Enjoy/Learn Best By:	Learn to Read Best:
	■ Recall what they see ■ Follow written or drawn instructions ■ Learn by observing people, objects, pictures, etc.	Using computer graphics; performing visual puzzles; looking at or designing maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, cartoons, posters, bulletin boards	With sight methods, dissimilar words, silent reading, words accompanied by pictures or slides, stories in filmstrips or videos
Auditory	■ Recall what they hear ■ Follow spoken instructions ■ Learn by listening and speaking	Talking, interviewing, debating, participating on a panel, asking and answering questions, memorizing, making oral reports	With phonics, choral reading, by listening to stories and recordings of books, discussing stories, reading orally
Tactile	■ Recall what they touch ■ Follow instructions they write or touch ■ Learn by touching or manipulating objects	Doodling, sketching, playing board games, building models, constructing dioramas and relief maps, setting up experiments, writing, tracing	With writing/tracing methods, such as Fernald, language experience. By playing games or reading instructions, then making something
Kinesthetic	■ Recall what they experience ■ Follow instructions that they perform or rehearse ■ Learn when engaged in physical activity	Playing floor games, assembling and/or disassembling objects, building models, participating in fairs, setting up experiments, acting, role playing, hopping, running, scavenger hunts	By pantomiming; acting in plays; riding a stationary bike while listening to a book; recording and reading, reading instructions and then building/doing something
Global	**Tendencies** Often: ■ Make decisions based on emotions and intuition ■ Are spontaneous, random ■ Focus on creativity and inventiveness ■ Care less about a tidy environment	**Enjoy/Learn Best With:** Information presented in an interesting or humorous story, with examples, interesting materials, group work and activities	**Learn to Read Best:** With holistic reading methods, such as recorded books, story writing, choral reading, with books, computer software, audiovisual materials, projects and games
Analytic	Often: ■ Make decisions based on logic or common sense ■ Plan and organize well ■ Focus on details and facts ■ Like a tidy environment	Information presented in sequential steps, with rules and examples, structured materials, teacher-directed lessons, clear goals and requirements	With auditory phonics, programmed materials, puzzles, some worksheets—reinforced by strategies appropriate for global learners

placed at the very top. Storytelling models oral language through stories, and reading aloud familiarizes students with the sound and sense of written language. In general, when working with less able readers, spend more time using the first few methods on the list. As reading fluency improves, move down the list, using those methods that provide less and less modeling.

But be creative. Combine modeling methods when it makes sense to do so. For example, before students choral-read a passage, they might listen to a recording of it to improve their fluency. Or, a teacher might conduct an echo reading session with a small group, having group members read a passage back after it is modeled.

Modeling methods are particularly valuable for high school students. They

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help older students to not only read more fluently, but also master content and pass their courses. With older students, you might

■ Have students take turns reading sections of a poem aloud, with some sections read by pairs of students (paired reading) or groups (choral reading).

■ Have a good reader model the poem first, then ask other students to join in (echo reading and choral reading).

■ Ask students to read passages aloud as a group or in pairs.

■ Play a tape recording of the reading material.

■ Record stories and texts for students to listen to on their own.

At Tucson's Canyon del Oro High School, students may purchase a blank tape at the media center for one dollar, then have material copied for home use. During the first year of this program, 10 percent of the student body used the tapes.

Approaches That Work

You can begin improving reading right away by adapting your existing system to your students' reading styles. Following are some Reading Styles recommendations that have, in a relatively short time, helped tens of thousands of children—especially those who are severely at risk of failure—to become better readers (Carbo 1995).

■ Try to schedule reading instruction when students are most alert. Many underachievers have more energy in the later morning than in the early morning.

■ Create small informal reading areas with rugs, pillows, and comfortable chairs. A corner of the room usually works well.

■ Simplify directions.

■ Provide many examples.

■ When explaining a rule to a global child, present the example *first*. He or she will understand it better that way.

■ Provide adequate structure and some step-by-step skill work, especially for analytic students.

■ When one reading strategy isn't working, try one that matches the student's strengths and interests.

■ Encourage students to be aware of different ways to learn to read—for example, have them draw pictures showing where they would like to read and with whom.

■ For strongly global students, deemphasize or eliminate activities that require highly analytic abilities (for example, crossword puzzles or word searches; or exercises that require students to identify missing sounds, words, or letters).

■ When assigning a book report, allow students to choose from a variety of approaches—for example, pantomiming, making dioramas, dressing up as a character, creating book jackets, writing a report, and making a mobile or game.

■ Have older children create reading games (including phonics games) for younger ones. Use the games instead of worksheets—often.

■ Let students decide—at least sometimes—with whom they wish to read.

■ If two students learn best by discussing the information, make sure they do so quietly, away from classmates who learn best in a quiet setting.

■ Sufficiently model reading before having children read in pairs (or alone).

■ For students who are not motivated to read, provide short reading assignments and lots of encouragement.

■ For students struggling with sustained silent reading, play recordings of challenging and highly interesting materials. Also guide them frequently to help them progress in comprehending the material and reading with fluency.

■ For students with visual problems, try placing colored overlays over a page of print. If this makes the words seem clearer or more stable to them, continue

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FIGURE 2

Reading Style Profile

Student Name: Melinda
Teacher:
Date of Profile: 11/14/95
Grade: 4 **Birth Date:** 10/04/87

Global/Analytic Tendencies
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
Writing materials, such as writing books, typewriters
Hands-on activities

Recommended Teaching Strategies
Combine reading with building, doing, floor games
Include writing, drawing, games
Teach holistically with humor, stories, games
Provide colored overlays; use large print
Limit routines, rules, directions, details

using the overlays.

■ When assessing performance, use both open-ended questions and questions with right and wrong answers. Global students tend to respond well to open-ended questions, whereas those who are more analytic tend to like items with right and wrong answers.

Economic and Social Imperatives

We must stop wasting our money and energy shifting from one teaching theory to another. Instead, as educators, we need to learn a wide variety of instructional techniques, adapting them to individual students' strengths. We must also help young people feel relaxed, receptive, and open to learning. And we must manage the classroom changes that are required to build smooth-running reading programs with active, engaged learners.

In an analysis of demographic trends several years ago, Harold Hodgkinson (1989) made these dismal observations: A decade of educational reform had done little to help the bottom third of our students academically; and the rates of students from minority and impoverished backgrounds who were high-achievers and who went on to graduate from high school and college remained as low as ever. Current demographic projections suggest that the number of students who fail to measure up to the most basic standards of literacy will continue to grow rapidly for the next two decades.

Increasing the reading ability of the bottom third of our students lies at the heart of our nation's most pressing educational and social imperatives. Unless we learn how to teach these youngsters to read well, the United States will face an ever more difficult battle economically and socially.

We must motivate and challenge these students, but at the same time make learning to read as easy and risk-free as possible. Our reading instruction must be so powerfully effective that it reaches through to the intelligence and learning capacity these youngsters have. ■

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