

The Myth of Learning Styles

It is futile to match children to reading programs according to their so-called learning styles.

By Steven A. Stahl

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Consider the following from the web site of the National Reading Styles Institute, a major proponent of the application of learning styles to the teaching of reading.

“Some people are very analytical, and they think in a logical, sequential way. Some students are visual or auditory learners; they learn best by seeing or hearing. These students are likely to conform well to traditional methods of study.

“Some people (we call them ‘global learners’) need an idea of the whole picture before they can understand it, while ‘analytic learners’ proceed more easily from the parts to the whole. Global learners also tend to learn best when they can touch what they are learning or move around while they learn. We call these styles of learning ‘tactile’ and ‘kinesthetic.’

In a strictly traditional classroom, these students are often a problem for the teacher. She has trouble keeping them still or quiet. They seem unable to learn to read.”

www.nrsi.com/about.html

This all seems reasonable, but it isn’t.

Five separate research reviews published in well-regarded journals, beginning in 1978 and ending in 1992, all found the same thing. One cannot reliably measure children’s reading styles and, even if one could, matching children to reading programs by learning styles does not improve their learning.

In other words, it is difficult to accurately identify children who are ‘global’ and ‘analytic.’ So-called global children do not do better in whole language programs than they would in more phonics-based pro-

grams. And so-called analytic children do not do better in phonics programs than they do in whole language programs.

This is an area that has been well researched. Many other approaches to matching teaching approaches to learning styles have not been well researched, if at all.

I could not find studies in refereed journals, for example, documenting whether the use of Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Model improved instruction. This does not mean, of course, that the use of the model does not improve achievement, only that I could not find studies validating its use. The same is true of other learning style models.

One cannot prove a negative. Even if all of the studies failed to find that matching children by learning styles helps them read better, it is always possible that another study or another measure or another something will find that matching children to their preferred learning modality will produce results.

But in the meantime, we have other things that we *know* will improve children’s reading achievement. We should look elsewhere for solutions to reading problems.

The learning style model assumes that different children need different approaches to learn to read. Children are different. They come to us with different personalities, preferences, ways of doing things. However, the research so far shows that this has little to do with how successful they will be as readers and writers.

Children also come to us with different amounts of exposure to written text, with different skills and abilities, with different exposure to oral language. The research shows that these differences *are* important.

Rather than different methods being appropriate for different children, we ought to think about different

methods being appropriate for children at different stages in their development.

Children differ in their phonemic abilities, in their ability to recognize words automatically, in their ability to comprehend and learn from text, and in their motivation and appreciation of literature. Different methods are appropriate for different goals.

For example, approaches that involve the children in reading books of their own choice are important to develop motivated readers. But whole language approaches, which rely largely on children to choose the materials they read, tend not to be as effective as more teacher-directed approaches for developing children’s word recognition or comprehension.

- A language experience approach may be appropriate to help a kindergarten child learn basic print concepts.
- The child may learn some words using visual cues, such as might be taught through a whole word method.
- With some degree of phonological awareness, the child is ready to learn letters and sounds, as through a phonic approach.
- Learning about letters and sounds, in combination with practice with sequential texts, will develop children’s ability to use phonetic cues in reading, and to cross-check using context.
- With additional practice in wide reading, children will develop fluent and automatic word recognition.

None of this has anything to do with learning styles; it has to do with the children’s current abilities and the demands of the task they have to master next.

(Adapted with permission from “Different Strokes for Different Folks,” in the Fall 1999 American Educator, the magazine of the American Federation of Teachers)