



Whose Cognitive Style Makes the Difference?

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What goes on in most classrooms depends on the cognitive style of teachers, not students.

Cognitive style can be defined as the way an individual acts, reacts, and adapts to the environment. This action/reaction/adaptation can be mapped well enough to provide insight into an individual's behavior (Hill, 1969; Witkin, 1965; Kuchinkas, 1974). We can study and even predict how a person will behave in a given situation. This term is often used synonymously with learning style, teaching style, administrative style, and so on.

Cognitive style is not a new term. Over 40 years ago, Allport (1937) referred to a style of living and adapting influenced by distinctive personality types—in fact he coined the term "cognitive style." This distinctive typical behavior pattern or mode is consistent and comparatively stable over time (Satterly and Brimer, 1971). A variety of approaches has been used to study

styles in adults and children (Scott and Annesley, 1976).

Several years ago I began observing students, teachers, and reading materials in elementary classrooms to determine the effect of cognitive style on the activities in the classroom. To accomplish this, I used a type of cognitive mapping developed by Hill (1969), which is rich in the number and types of elements studied. Hill looks at the ways in which a person handles theoretical symbols (words and numbers); qualitative symbols, which are perceived so individually (sensory input, aesthetic input, physical input, and so on); the cultural influences of family, self, and peer; and the ways in which a person reasons and makes inferences.

Over the course of a year, I visited 13 third- and fourth-grade classrooms interviewing teach-



ers and students, performing formal and informal tests, observing instruction, and studying records and student work. I determined the cognitive styles of the teachers and students and even determined, in a limited fashion, the cognitive style elements needed to use the instructional materials in the classroom effectively (Kuchinskas, 1974). However, the most revealing thing in those classrooms was the overwhelming effect of the teacher's style on everything and everybody else.

To date, cognitive style has had little or no influence on classroom instructional changes. It has little or no meaning for teachers. It is almost totally ignored in the preparation and use of instructional materials except for superficial attention to auditory or visual modalities. But, long before cognitive style even becomes a schoolwide tool to provide a better learning environment for children, as it should, we need to ask, "Whose cognitive style makes the difference in the classroom?"

- Mary J. preferred working by herself and making decisions in a rational, individual manner. Mary used an individualized reading program in her classroom. There was no group instruction. Mary acted as a facilitator and worked with her children on a one-to-one basis. Most of the student activities were paper and pencil tasks.

- Mark T. loved talking and listening. Radio and television delighted him. He was always with a group in the teachers' lounge at breaktime. He kept everyone laughing when he related all the funny and intricate things that always seemed to happen to him. In his classroom, Mark emphasized group discussions. He presented lessons to the whole class from in front of the room. You would have been amazed at the amount of time Mark interacted verbally with his class each day.

- Rick R. was an avid reader. As a child, he could remember reading under the covers at night when he should have been asleep. He still prefers to read the book rather than see the movie. Rick considers textbooks to be the most important part of the school program. He assigns chapters in the book and the questions at the end for homework. He believes all students should be able to read at grade level. He has little patience with poor or nonreaders.

- Susan W. and Deanna K. are sharing the same reading kit. They both like it very much. They have scheduled their reading instruction at different times of the day in order to share this material. It is very attractive, multileveled, and brightly illustrated, with each segment ending with suggested follow-up activities for students. Children may construct, paint, or draw in response to reading in the kit. They may work independently. Small group presentations may be prepared. Students may do wider reading or even work independently after they have finished the reading selections. Susan allows the children in her class to answer the questions, read more widely, or work independently. Deanna, on the other hand, encourages her children to construct, paint, or draw as a reading response. She has a wealth of art materials in her classroom. She displays the children's work and talks about their projects to her fellow teachers.

These alert, interested teachers spent a lot of time planning and implementing their instructional programs. They cared about their students. But they had never considered the effects of their own cognitive styles on the instructional decisions they were making for their students.

In the classrooms I visited repeatedly that year, I saw the same pattern at work—overwhelmingly, the teacher's cognitive style determined how students would learn. The teacher's cognitive style influenced the learning environment more than any other factor.

Is this consistent with what other research has shown about how children learn in reading? After an exhaustive review of the literature, Chall (1967) concluded that failure in learning to read seems to result when a child with a predisposition (cognitive style?) for learning is exposed to a method that ignores this predisposition. A number of attempts have been made to manipulate

these predispositions: psycholinguistics (Goodman, 1968); perception (Spache, 1962); environment (Austin, 1960); learning methodology (Gates, 1922); and behavior modification (Goss, 1961). Ten years after Chall's study, we still have no definitive answer to student achievement when we look at the student's predisposition.

In the 1960s, the United States Office of Education sponsored a series of research projects to determine which set of instructional materials or approaches to first-grade reading instruction would result in the most effective learning by students. The results of the study indicated that the teacher, rather than the materials or methods, made the difference (Bond and Dykstra, 1967).

Bennett (1976) examined teaching styles and pupil progress in Great Britain and found a strong relationship between teacher aims and opinions, and the way teachers actually teach. In addition, the effect of teaching style (cognitive style?) was statistically and educationally significant in all the attainment areas tested in his study.

The results of a conference, "Do Teachers Make a Difference?" sponsored by the Office of Education's Bureau of Educational Personnel Development (Superintendent of Documents, 1971) clearly indicated that of all the factors that constitute a school, the single most influential in terms of pupil performance was the impact of the teacher. However in a follow-up conference, "How Teachers Make a Difference," a number of alternatives were explored with no clearcut choice defined.

I am suggesting that, if we accept the premise of the teacher as the key to student achievement and progress, we should explore deeply the effects of the cognitive style of the teacher on the activities in the classroom. The first group who should explore this are the teachers themselves. They need to accept the fact that the answer to the question: "Whose cognitive style makes a difference?" is—yours, teacher!

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