

# MODALITY STRENGTHS: A REPLY TO DUNN AND CARBO

February's *Educational Leadership* had an open letter to Walter Barbe, Michael Milone, and Raymond Swassing from Rita Dunn and Marie Carbo. Responding to Barbe and Milone's "What We Know About Modality Strengths," Dunn and Carbo said:

1. Teachers should adjust for individual learning styles from the beginning.
2. Students can accurately identify their own preferred modalities.
3. Research indicates younger children learn better through visual and kinesthetic experiences, not through auditory modes as Barbe and Milone reported, but more research is needed.

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We would like to thank Dunn and Carbo for taking the time to respond to our article. We respect the work they have done in the area of children's learning preferences, and agree that we are "... exploring an emerging theory."

We are also of the opinion that the dialogue approach to educational journalism is worthwhile. Inviting a response to a published article is the best way to encourage the open discussion of current issues in education. Our profession can only benefit as a result of the public exchange of ideas.

Unfortunately, Dunn and Carbo changed the rules of the game. We are sure many of the readers of *Educational Leadership* were just as confused as we to find that Dunn and Carbo failed to address exclusively the content of our article, but instead chose to focus on one of our earlier works. Moreover, they misrepresented what we said in *Teaching Through Modality Strengths* (Barbe, and others, 1979).

In responding to Dunn and Carbo, we shall touch on each of the criticisms they leveled at our work. We hope we are accurate in interpreting their intended meaning.

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1. We never suggested anywhere, or believe, that "teachers should initially lecture to their classes." The lecture method as an initial teaching strategy is warranted neither by teachers' nor children's learning styles. What we stated was that teachers should conduct initial instruction in the manner with which they were most comfortable and that they knew best. We concur with Dunn and Carbo that children would learn best if instruction were individualized according to learning styles. Given the current state of education in America, however, we do not believe that individualization is possible without diminishing time on task to such an extent that student progress would be hindered. We are not alone in this belief (Medley, 1977).

2. In testing more than 50 college-educated adults, we found that fewer than half could identify their modality strengths. Similar results obtained with a sample of 29 musically talented adolescents: only 12 recognized their strongest modality.

Based on these data and our experience testing hundreds of children and adults, we drew the distinction between modality strengths and preferences. We recognize full well, however, that some individuals know the perceptual channels through which they learn best. We have stated that: "With individuals who are sufficiently perceptive to observe their own be-

haviors objectively the preference approach is useful" (Barbe and others, 1979, p. 4).

Our comments concerning differences between modality strengths and preferences were not intended as a criticism of the Learning Styles Inventory. The psychometric properties of this instrument seem acceptable, and we have used and are currently using it in our research.

3. The points concerning the comparative development of the modalities are well made and professionally presented. All we can say is that Dunn and Carbo may be right. The literature we reviewed and the data we gathered led us to the conclusions we published. For us to have reported otherwise would have been unethical. The data presented by Dunn and Carbo suggest an alternative conclusion that we as responsible researchers must consider. We shall replicate our study, and if conflicting results emerge, report them and modify our conclusions. It matters not to us what the sequence of modality development is. What matters is that our knowledge of modality strengths or preferences be applied in classrooms to help children succeed in school. ■

## References

Barbe, W. B.; Swassing, R. H.; and Milone, M. N. *Teaching Through Modality Strengths: Concepts and Practices*. Columbus: Zaner-Bloser, 1979.

Medley, D. *Teacher Competence and Teacher Effectiveness*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1977.

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