

Teaching the Way Children Learn

reviewed by [Mary C. Markowitz](#) & [Jessica M. Dunn](#) — May 22, 2009

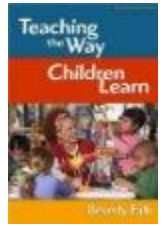
Title: Teaching the Way Children Learn

Author(s): Beverly Falk

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In the introduction to the book, Beverly Falk states that “the developmental theories, pedagogical understandings and reform strategies” (p. 8) she describes throughout the book are not new. Nor are her arguments for encouraging the adoption of these theories, understandings, and strategies. Since the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 through the past eight years of intense standards-based reform initiatives tied to No Child Left Behind, many teachers, students, teacher educators, boards of education, parents, policy makers, and communities have questioned the purposes and efficacy of public schools, especially urban schools, and the manner by which public education can be improved. In that regard, Falk is probably preaching to the choir – those who already have qualms about the standards-based approaches being used to address the current performance of public schools and those who would agree with the child-centered approaches she helped implement and study at the Bronx New School.

On the other hand, her work is a refreshing reminder that child-centered education does work to meet not only students’ cognitive development, the overarching focus of standards-based initiatives, but also their social and emotional development in rich learning environments, the foundation of a progressive approach to education. Overall, we agree that the most beneficial aspect of *Teaching the Way Children Learn* is its contribution to the growing body of literature about schools and districts that have success with child-centered, progressive forms of education, and it offers practitioners some ideas about how to operationalize the principles she promotes, especially in urban elementary schools. It is a book full of hope and encourages teachers and building administrators not to give up their dreams for a system of public education that offers ways to promote cognitive, social and emotional development for all students without sacrificing two for the sake of one; yet, it is also pragmatic in describing the many challenges involved with major systemic school reform.

Falk’s is a passionate account of the disappointments and triumphs of developing and running the Bronx New School when it was founded in 1987, but she also supplements her personal story with subsequent research studies supported by the American Education Research Association and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching after her personal association with the school had ended. Her personal involvement and her research were defined by several guiding principles, including the desire for school equity, the development of authentic, experiential learning environments, and incorporating the concept of a community of care in schools that promotes a love of learning, empathy and a sense of social responsibility. The ultimate goal of the book is to argue for the need to create an assessment and accountability system that truly reflects these principles. The standards-based, one-size-fits-all, heavily-academic focus of our current system does not capture all that schools do and should be doing to advance the development of children. The story of the Bronx New School indicates social and emotional development do not have to be sacrificed to achieve cognitive development. The school has an alternative perspective, not an either-or mentality, and seems to have successfully integrated the guiding principles Falk and the other school founders had envisioned.

Falk describes significant ways in which the Bronx New School has utilized progressive, child-centered approaches in educating a diverse group of urban children. The chapters range in scope from the motivation underlying the school’s creation and the theories on which it was designed to chapters that describe theory-into-

practice in the Bronx New School. Falk cites a veritable who's who list of child-centered, progressive theorists combined in a manner rarely seen in actual practice. For example, she references Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey to promote experiential education practices. Piaget and Vygotsky are present in the explanation of psychological and social constructivist theories. Heidegger, Gardner, and Ladsen-Billings round up the group who challenge behavioral (read "standardized") teaching practices and promote a call to focus on individual student's learning styles. Nel Noddings is cited when referring to a nurturing environment in a community of care.

From a teacher educator perspective, whether working with pre-service or in-service teachers, Falk does a wonderful job not only of explaining the theory and identifying the theorists but also providing real-world examples of how these theories can be conceptualized in an actual classroom. Too frequently, we hear teachers say, "Yeah, that's nice in theory, but" This book gives enough examples to make the "yeah, but-ers" pause to contemplate different ways to meet the cognitive, social and emotional developmental needs of their students. Additionally, the combination and breadth of the theories utilized in the school is impressive.

From a classroom teacher perspective, the book reinforces that one does not have to cave in to the notion that teachers are confined to teaching to the test. Nurturing a child's curiosity, creativity, and sense of social responsibility, while simultaneously promoting cognitive development, is not only possible, it is preferable for enhancing a student's cognitive ability in any number of areas. The bulk of the book provides detailed chapters full of examples of how the Bronx New School addresses topics like creating communities of learners, the active nature of learning, critical thinking, curriculum integration, assessment for supporting learning instead of punishing students, teachers and schools, culturally relevant teaching, and creating a community of care. Falk demonstrates how the Bronx New School addresses the needs of the whole child and involves all school personnel, the family and the community in the process as equally important stake-holders in a child's development. As classroom teachers, we are not alone. In fact, *Teaching the Way Children Learn* is a perfect book for teachers to pick up and read mid-year when they feel discouraged about their work as a teacher. The stories of success that the Bronx New School has experienced remind classroom teachers of the great things education can do for children.

Considering the benefits of the book has also led us to consider a possible limitation. We believe the audience for this book might be fairly narrow since the study focuses on an urban elementary school. While many of the theories and practices can be modified and adapted for other elementary settings, the special restrictions imposed by the size, scope, and purpose of secondary schools would require much greater consideration of systemic reform, especially school culture and structure. We are currently working on a project in which a heavily researched special education practice, Response to Intervention, is to be implemented in general education high school math classrooms. RTI has been successful in many different settings, most notably in elementary reading intervention, but translating successful examples of theory-into-practice from one level of education to the next is difficult; however, it is not impossible. Some recognition of the challenge of transferring the knowledge gained by the Bronx New School to other possible settings and grade levels would garner a larger audience who might otherwise dismiss this work as being only a vision for elementary school reform. That would be a shame, because the unique and successful combination of concepts and principles on which the Bronx New School was formed apply to all levels of education.

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So, why do we not teach them the way they want to learn? Instead of standing in the front of the class and talking why not asking them, engaging them in the process? By this, we can make learning a game, just like we showed them that learning it is. A game through questions and answers, choices, failure and success! Allow them to use resources, ask for their opinion, challenge them to support and sustain their theories.Â Same is in parenting or teaching. You can choose the way you do it to get the end results. The goal is the same: get the best education to our kids, that serves their future! We can choose: do it our way/ might some learning happen / or matching it to the way they want to learnâ€¦when learning will happen anyway! Children learn naturally when they are having fun. Flashcards are a great way to teach and revise vocabulary and there are many different games which you can play with flashcards, such as Memory, Kimâ€™s game, Snap or Happy Families. You can find free downloadable flashcards on a wide range of topics on our website. There are many other types of games you can play with your children to help them practise English.Â Videos, quizzes and games help kids to learn in a fun, relaxed way. It can be very useful for older children to teach their siblings or other family members. Explaining how to use grammar to someone else helps you to master it yourself. Which words and phrases should I teach first? Children learn best when multiple senses or areas of development are included. Thatâ€™s why hands-on learning produces longer retention and more meaningful application. Once your child has shown an interest in letters and you have already begun to utilize natural settings for identifying those letters, begin implementing activities that incorporate as many senses as possible. Keep in mind that learning letter names isnâ€™t nearly as important as learning their sounds!Â Obviously, you canâ€™t implement all of these suggestions with children of all ages, so use your judgement about what is the best way to teach your child to read. Read to your child every day! Ask your child questions before, during, and after reading.