

Belief in learning styles myth may be detrimental

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Many people, including educators, believe learning styles are set at birth and predict both academic and career success even though there is no scientific evidence to support this common myth, according to new

research published by the American Psychological Association.

In two online experiments with 668 participants, more than 90 percent of them believed people learn better if they are taught in their predominant learning style, whether that is visual, auditory or tactile. But those who believed in learning styles split evenly into an "essentialist" group, with more strongly held beliefs, and a "non-essentialist" group, with more flexible beliefs about learning styles, said lead researcher Shaylene Nancekivell, Ph.D., a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan.

"We found that some people are more likely to believe that students inherit their learning style from their parents and that learning styles affect brain function," she said. "We also found that educators who work with [younger children](#) are more likely to hold this essentialist view. Many parents and educators may be wasting time and money on products, services and teaching methods that are geared toward learning styles."

In their responses to survey questions, the essentialist group members were more likely to state that learning styles are heritable, instantiated in the brain, don't change with age, mark distinct kinds of people, and predict both academic and [career success](#). The non-essentialist group held looser beliefs about learning styles, viewing them as malleable, overlapping and more determined by environmental factors. The research was published online in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Psychological essentialism is the belief that certain categories of people have a true nature that is biologically based and highly predictive of many factors in their lives. People with essentialist opinions about learning styles may be more resistant to changing their strongly held views even when they learn that numerous studies have debunked the concept of learning styles, Nancekivell said.

Previous research has shown that the learning styles model can undermine education in many ways. Educators spend time and money tailoring lessons to certain learning styles for different students even though all students would benefit from learning through various methods. Students study in ways that match their perceived learning style even though it won't help them succeed. Some teacher certification programs incorporate learning styles into their courses, which perpetuates the myth for the next generation of teachers. Academic support centers and a plethora of products also are focused on learning styles, despite the lack of [scientific evidence](#) supporting them.

The first experiment included participants from the general U.S. workforce, including educators. The second experiment was weighted so that at least half of the participants were educators to provide a better understanding of their views. The small percentage of participants who didn't believe in learning styles weren't included in the analysis because the study was examining differing beliefs about learning styles. Demographic factors such as race, gender, parental status and income level didn't affect people's views on learning styles in the study, but educators of young children were more likely to have essentialist beliefs.

"My biggest concern is that time is being spent teaching young children maladaptive strategies for learning," Nancekivell said. "It is important that children from a very young age are taught with the best practices so they will succeed."

Previous surveys in the United States and other industrialized countries across the world have shown that 80% to 95% of people believe in learning styles. It's difficult to say how that myth became so widespread, Nancekivell said.

"It seems likely that the appeal of the learning styles myth rests in its fit with the way people like to think about behavior," she said. "People

prefer brain-based accounts of behavior, and they like to categorize people into types. Learning styles allow people to do both of those things."

More information: "Maybe They're Born With It, or Maybe It's Experience: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Learning Style Myth," by Shaylene Nancekivell, PhD, Priti Shah, PhD, and Susan A. Gelman, PhD, University of Michigan; *Journal of Educational Psychology*, published online May 30, 2019.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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