

# **Addressing Diversity in Ontario Classrooms**

by

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## **Background**

Canada is a nation that has embraced multi-culturalism in its social, political and economic policies and practices. The practice of welcoming a wide range of immigrants and refugees, combined with a commitment to accommodating its citizens with unique cultural practices and special needs in mainstream community institutions, has demanded that organizations and companies accommodate a very diverse population. In Ontario, educational institutions, health and social service systems and employers are consistently challenged to work with diversity and do so in an effective and efficient manner. Progressive organizations adopt a proactive approach to this challenge, but the job is ongoing.

In education, the challenge of managing diversity in schools has been a major one. In addition to cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, social trends are such that more and more students are identified as having special social, emotional, physical and learning needs. In the context of the past decade of economic constraint this had been very difficult for Ontario schools to do well, as funding has not supported this expectation. The high levels of stress and disenchantment in classroom teachers resulting from the political situation, has lessened in the past year. However, teachers are still faced with classes of 30 students or more, from diverse cultures, with a variety of types and severity of special needs, as well as a normal variety of learning needs. Schools are seeking solutions that will assist students who are at risk of school failure.

Students falling between the gaps, disenchanted with learning or being taken through intensive and demoralizing special needs procedures show up at health and social service agencies with their deflated or angry parents, desperate for emotional and mental health support. As private school registrations have burgeoned over the past 4 years, and parents have lobbied for the capacity to direct one's education taxes to the school of choice, concerns are being expressed about the erosion of the Ontario public school system. Public education being sacred in Ontario, there has been great pressure on the school system to address the issues and achieve better results with students. One way of looking at this challenge is that, underneath it all lays the need to better accommodate the broad diversity of students' learning requirements.

## **The Learning Styles Project**

kidsLINK, an Ontario children's mental health service, studied the situation and some the casualties of the system – children and youth being referred to special schools and classrooms for “disturbed” and “hard-to-serve” students – and sought a means of intervening sooner in the cycle and of reducing, if not preventing, “school failure”. The field of education is rich with information on how students learn best and the conditions for effective learning. The research now demonstrates that a holistic approach to learning is essential to maximize students' success. It has been demonstrated that teachers who translate this information on effective learning into their practice and classroom routines,

enable the best results in their students academically and actively contribute to their overall well-being. kidsLINK, which operates a specialized school/treatment program with a long waiting list, sought a proven means of helping the education system sustain these potential casualties in their home schools, by making it easier for teachers to manage their diverse groups of students.

The work of Ken and Rita Dunn in expanding the concept of Learning Styles has contributed significantly to the body of information on how people learn best. Its applicability to the school classroom makes it a valuable resource. Its foundation in years of research places it in the category of “demonstrated best practices”. It is clear that a holistic approach to learning styles, reflective of the knowledge about what facilitates learning, will be beneficial to both students and teachers. The Learning Styles Analysis (LSA), based on the Dunn’s work and developed by CLC in Auckland, NZ, is an easy-to-use and affordable on-line tool for assessing and facilitating the use of learning styles in the classroom. The learning profiles from the LSA are also of value to parents and the students themselves.

kidsLINK, therefore, decided to promote and facilitate the adoption of a learning styles approach in Canadian schools as a strategy to assist teachers maintain students in their classrooms, maximize their learning, and hopefully enhance students self-esteem and self-confidence in relation to school and learning. It aspires to prevent some of the behavioural problems that eventually result in students dropping out, being moved out of regular classrooms, and/or being referred for services to deal with social, emotional and behavioural problems. It introduced the LSA to selected school systems in Ontario in 2002 and, subsequently, undertook a two-year demonstration project in partnership with 2 public school boards in southern Ontario.

The demonstration project in the first year involved seven schools, from three cities and surrounding rural areas 1000 students from Grades 3 to 11, and 50 teachers. Two special education programs were included: one for students who had been expelled from their community schools and a school for students with emotional and behavioural challenges that the community schools could not accommodate. The purpose of the project was to implement the LSA and its accompanying Teaching Style Analysis™ (TSA) tool and demonstrate its value as a resource for teachers that contributes to improved student performance, as well as to determine what is involved in its broad application. All schools voluntarily entered the project with the agreement of their Principals, encouraged by enthusiastic teachers who had prior introductory training in the approach to learning styles reflected in the LSA and TSA.

Key goals were to implement the LSA in a variety of classrooms and determine its impact on students’ study skills, self-knowledge and self-esteem, attitude to learning, behaviour in classroom, parent cooperation regarding student learning and teachers’ management of classrooms, teachers’ feeling better equipped to teach a diverse group of students. The other administrative goal was to identify what is needed for successful, affordable implementation of the LSA in Ontario classrooms, e.g. training, support, technical assistance.

### **Key Results**

The first year of the project ran largely according to plan. Training and discussion sessions were all conducted as planned. Varying technical capacity and know-

how between schools resulted in some significant delays in completing and producing the students' LSA profiles. Schools with the highest degree of compliance with the project plan experienced the best results for both students and teachers.

Most teachers did not begin to use the LSA in their classrooms in any consistent manner during the first year of the project, and only a few used it individually with students as a tool for student empowerment. Many teachers needed more time to become thoroughly familiar and comfortable with the concepts, the tools and the strategies for teaching within the context of learning styles. Both the post-tests and anecdotal information suggested that students of teachers who had completed the introductory 2-day training on the LSA, gained more insight into their learning styles and needs, and became more empowered to direct their own learning.

Another key result was that the LSA and TSA raised teachers' awareness of their teaching styles and stimulated a process of questioning and discussing teaching styles in relation to students learning styles in an unprecedented way. This was the main benefit of the first year for most of the schools involved.

Positive impact on student's self-esteem and interest in learning was observed in the Expulsion Program, where the project was fully implemented within the timeframes by teachers with the privilege of small classes. The LSA proved to be a valuable tool in conjunction with the other methods being employed. Across the project, where teachers were most comfortable with the LSA, students grasped the learning style concept more rapidly and showed increased understanding and tolerance for each other's differences, which had a positive impact on classroom behaviour.

By the end of the first year, most of the teachers introduced to the LSA and TSA for the first time were beginning to grasp the concepts and to make small changes in their classroom management. They were enthusiastic about the potential of the tool but still seeking understanding of how to best administer the LSA for most reliable results, how to adapt manage the class, how best to present the profile to parents, etc. These teachers focused on their teaching methods and expanding their knowledge in relation to classroom management, rather than on the use of the LSA with individual students. High school teachers, further, struggled with classroom management with the rotary system, based on subject. The class profile (LSA Group Profile) was the most useful report. Outside of the Expulsion Program, the individual profiles being lengthy, were not used much given large classes and the time limits of the project, although they became a part of the students' school records.

Ten percent of elementary parents responded to the invitation to participate in the parent information session. High school parents were not involved. Where parents were engaged, there were mixed responses: some found the LSA profile very helpful in understanding their children's learning needs and a helpful parenting tool; others queried the validity of the results where the profile challenges their view of their children and did not perceive much value.

Significant learning occurred about the logistics of such a project and the type of resources and supports required for the LSA to be successfully implemented. As this information is specific to the school environment in which the project took place, they are not presented here.

Overall, there was much enthusiasm about the LSA and TSA by the vast majority of teachers. All schools principals were keen to continue the project in their schools for a second year.

For a variety of reasons related to administrative and political issues, only 3 of the 7 schools continued with the project in the second year: one elementary, one secondary and the Expulsion Program. This year, the professional development time related to the LSA focused on implementation in the classroom, primarily using class profiles. Twenty-seven teachers were assisted in determining their own learning styles and how these styles are reflected in their teaching while building an awareness of stylistic preferences and what they may be missing in their teaching repertoire. Time for reflection, discussion, sharing and modeling best practices was provided to build confidence and encourage collaboration.

Teachers found it very helpful to focus on application of the LSA in the classroom, linking their own practices and resources to it, as well as experiencing new activities. They valued the training for increasing their awareness of how they taught and challenging their habitual practices. They used class profiles for planning more effective lessons and class groupings. Only the teachers in the Expulsion Program who were working with smaller groups of students used the LSA to plan each learner's Individual Education Plan and create personalized programming for each student; they also used it for 1:1 counselling sessions and personal goal-setting.

All secondary school teachers accepted the accuracy and value of the LSA, while some of the elementary teachers with the younger students struggled with their students' understanding of their learning styles, and were frustrated by the time and logistics for them to complete the questionnaires. The teachers of older elementary students were interested in encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning, but were frustrated by students who insisted upon "learning in their preferred way all the time" and by "designing individual learning spaces". Generally, students improved their understanding of their own learning styles and increased their tolerance for learning diversity.

### **Key Learnings**

A key finding was that one academic year was not sufficient duration to permit an effective introduction of the LSA to teachers and implementation of its accompanying teaching interventions, as well as meaningful change in students study skills or performance. When first introduced to the LSA and TSA, teachers need sufficient time e.g. six to eight months, to become thoroughly familiar with and proficient in the LSA prior to implementation with students. For many, it is a step outside their comfort zone, so time to try on the ideas before being held accountable for working that way would be helpful. During this teacher orientation and learning time, students would benefit from being introduced to the concept of preferences and language of learning styles.

Younger students (Grades 3 and 4) struggled with completion of the LSA questionnaires to the degree that there was little confidence in the results by teachers, students or parents. Students, especially the younger ones, benefit from becoming familiar with LS and the behaviours referred to in the questionnaire, prior to completion. 1:1 support and time to assist young and special needs students in the completion of the questionnaire is essential – it does not have to be done in one sitting. A shorter junior

questionnaire in simpler language would be helpful, as would profile reports geared to varying ages and levels of comprehension. [The instrument has been simplified in the meantime. Sic] For older students, online completion was easy and the simplicity and speed of the results was very helpful in sustaining their interest and enthusiasm.

Parent education about the LSA and how it may be of value outside of school would assist in engaging more parents in the process. Teachers will be better equipped to discuss the LSA with parents once they are thoroughly comfortable with the profile themselves, and parents have been introduced to the LSA and its realistic benefits. However, the LSA profile helped students and parents, as well as school personnel, understand students' patterns of behaviour socially and emotionally, as well as academically.

A simple and reliable method for measuring the impact of the LSA implementation on students' study skills and performance is urgently needed.

Training and facilitated discussion time provided for teachers throughout the project was sufficient – teachers needed a longer period to explore working with the LSA profiles. Dedicated, release time from the classroom was and will be important throughout the first year of teachers working with the LSA. For those more experienced with it, ongoing attention to the value of the LSA for accommodating diversity and discussion of the concept of teacher versus learner roles and responsibilities would be helpful.

### **Conclusion**

The LSA pilot project was certainly beneficial for teachers and students who participated. Teachers' awareness of diversity of learning styles increased, as did a willingness to try other ways of teaching and learning. They appreciated adding to their repertoire of skills and having research that validated their own experience. Students were interested to learn about their own unique LS and how it related to others. Often pressured by curricular demands, teachers and students need permission to do less and focus on new ways that will assist them to do more and better. Work still needs to be done to address the interaction between the roles and responsibilities of teachers versus those of learners, and to provide supports for teachers to make the shifts required to accommodate diverse learners in their classrooms. The value of the LSA for the individual student with exceptional needs was clearly demonstrated in the Exclusion Program, and points to its potential as a key tool for use with at-risk learners. In fact, such careful application of the LSA, with accompanying focus on learning styles, may be considered a "best practice" with all learners.

**kidsLINK helps children, youth and their families to overcome social, emotional and behavioural challenges through innovative and effective solutions. kidsLINK established Discovery Learning Solutions to assist learners of all ages to succeed and realize their potential, while honouring their own uniqueness.**

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