Mildly Handicapped Students Can Succeed with Learning Styles

Since teachers at Frontier Central High School in Hamburg, New York, began using a learning styles approach, the number of special education students earning regular high school diplomas has grown dramatically.

At Frontier Central High School in Hamburg, New York, students identified as mildly handicapped are enjoying high rates of success. Indeed, most are now earning high school diplomas based on their unprecedented attainments on both local examinations and New York State Competency Tests. The secret of their success is a well-researched, faculty-developed curriculum that takes into account the needs and strengths of individual learners.

Laying the Foundation
The groundwork for the program was laid over the summer of 1987. During those months, six special education teachers and a coordinator worked together to develop units of instruction in social studies, mathematics, and language arts for special education students in grades 9–12 (Shands and Brunner 1989). Our goal was to provide these students with a program closely aligned to regular education. Since the students would be expected to cover additional, more difficult content, the project writers wanted to include many helpful instructional strategies. The learning styles model developed by Rita and Kenneth Dunn (1978) appeared best suited to our needs. Five stimuli—environmental, emotional, sociological, physical, and psychological—serve as the framework for the model's 21 elements.

We were, of course, excited about the prospect of improving our students' academic achievement by teaching them in ways they learn best (Dunn et al. 1989), but we also wanted them to learn new and difficult material at a faster pace with increased retention. And, as practitioners, we wanted to reduce discipline problems. Tough nut to crack, but the reports on the model were so strong, we thought we'd try it.

Beginning in the summer of 1987, we provided staff development in learning styles for special education teachers and administrators, including
Because many of our students do better when working cooperatively with their peers or as a member of a team, teachers developed and taught students many small group techniques.
Something wonderful is happening—and it’s only just begun. Learning styles is the ingredient we needed to make many of our kids “come alive!”

References


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**The Learning Styles Project for Potential Dropouts**

The learning styles approach offers at-risk youth a second chance—just ask students in Amityville High School’s successful program.

“I probably would have dropped out of school, and now I’m graduating.”

“I never would have believed I’d be going to college, but I am!”

“For the first time, I really felt my teachers cared about me.”

Those reactions are from 12th graders who, for the past two years, have participated in the Learning Styles Project for potential dropouts at Amityville High School in New York. Students were selected for the program at the end of 9th grade, according to three criteria: failure in two or three subjects, scores in the fifth stanine or below on a standardized reading test, and excessive absences.

During the summer of 1987, their teachers were trained in the Dunn and Dunn model (1978) of learning styles. Then, at the beginning of the year, the school used block scheduling to group the students together for 10th grade math, social studies, English, reading, and science during the regular school day. During the first few weeks, the teachers introduced the concept of learning style. Soon the classes began to experiment with alternative groupings, varied instructional strategies, and individualized response activities. They discussed personal study habits and different environments for learning. Then they took the *Learning Style Inventory* (Dunn et al. 1982, 1987) and received individual printouts indicating their learning strengths and weaknesses. Teachers conferenced with each student on how to interpret the results.

At weekly staff meetings, administrators and guidance counselors used the printouts to plan counseling strategies and intervention techniques. At the same time, teachers consulted with each other to plan instructional strategies for students working alone, in small groups, or with the teacher, to develop activities suited to the various environments for learning. Then they took the *Learning Style Inventory* (Dunn et al. 1982, 1987) and received individual printouts indicating their learning strengths and weaknesses. Teachers conferenced with each student on how to interpret the results.

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