

Slow Learners: Role of Teachers and Guardians in Honing their Hidden Skills

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Students with below average cognitive abilities whom we cannot term as disabled are called slow learners. They struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom. Actually slow learners are normal students but the problem is that they are simply not interested in studying under traditionally accepted system of education.

Slow learners should not be confused with students in need of special education or reluctant learners who are non-cooperative. A student may fail to excel in some classes or in some subjects but it does not imply that he or she is a slow learner. The teachers and guardians may resort to some of the teaching aids available to special education students that may enhance interest of slow learners and help them get involved in the learning process.

Every child is special. As every child is different, there is every possibility of improvement, sooner or later. The source of energy is lying within them but the only thing is to stretch the hand of confidence towards them which will solve their problem and improve their quality.

Several students in a class fall under this category, but most parents or guardians prefer to remain in mute mode, which worsens the situation.

The objective of my paper is to understand the characteristics of a slow learner and the role of teachers and guardians to improve them in achieving new heights.

Children learn at different rates, and, according to some published research, children learn only when they are ready. Other research gives importance to intrinsic rewards, differentiated curriculum, and motivation by personalizing lessons. However, the bottom line for most educators is that some children are slow to learn, but don't have a learning deficiency.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to an educator is a child who is a slow learner. These children do not fall into the category of special education, they do well outside the classroom, and show no evidence of having a medical problem. They simply do not do well in school or a particular subject.

Slow Learners may have problems not only with math and reading but also with coordination such as penmanship, sports, or dressing. Often they are quiet and shy, and they have trouble making friends. They may have a poor self confidence. They

have trouble with abstract thinking such as in social studies or doing math word problems. They often have a short attention span. All of these problems cause them to have a poor self esteem.

In the days before formal schooling, these students would carry on productive lives working at tasks that did not require extensive reading, writing or math. However, nowadays the emphasis is less on occupational learning and more on academic preparation. Thus, to provide them the best possible opportunities in a changing world there is a growing need to help remediate these children. There are basically two commonalities emerge with slow learners. First, they need more or extra time to complete tasks. This means parents or guardians must be willing to augment what happens at school regardless of the fact how fruitless it might appear. Secondly, the child must be offered appropriate incentives. Depending on the child, the best incentives are family projects or activities, such as building a model or attending a concert or game. The incentives should require delayed gratification, so the child learns patience.

The next area which is very important is proper nutrition, like children need good breakfast. Research suggests a quality breakfast and proper sleep are the two best ways to improve student performance.

Finally, a teacher or parent must seek lessons and other resources that make it easier to differentiate the curriculum and make learning more vital and relevant. To this end, special education sites on the Internet have some great ideas. Although slow learners do not qualify for special education classes, the concepts teachers use with special education students are ideal for helping a slow learner once the student's weaknesses have been diagnosed. Having a slow learning child is not unusual, about 10 percent are slow learners in a classroom.

Characteristics of slow learners

In general, slow learning students may exhibit some or all of these characteristics, depending on their age and degree of problems acquiring knowledge at school.

- First, slow learners are recurrently immature in their relations with others and do poorly in school.
- Secondly, they cannot do multifaceted or complex problems and work very slowly.
- They lose track of time and cannot convey what they have learned from one task to another well.
- They do not easily master skills that are academic in nature, such as the times tables or spelling rules.
- Perhaps the most exasperating trait is their inability to have long-term goals. They live in the present, and so have considerable problems with time management perhaps due to a short attention span and poor concentration skills.

One thing which we should remember is that, just because a child is not doing well in one class does not make that student a slow learner. Very few children stand

out in all subject areas unless there is great deal of grade inflation at that school. So it's fundamental that the parent or teacher examine in depth standardized tests scores to look for trends.

Also, slow learners vary from reluctant learners. A slow learner to begin with wants to learn, but has a problem with the process. A reluctant or hesitant learner is not motivated and can also be passive aggressive, creating more problems for teachers and parents through non-cooperation. Reluctant learners seldom have learning disabilities.

Proven ideas to help slow learners

- High school opens the door to vocational training where they often excel. Work study programs give them a purpose for going to school.
- Work with your school's M-Team (Management Team) to develop an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) for the child.
- Do not spend the entire time making the child's study. Don't nag. Let them have a life outside of school with activities they enjoy.
- A Slow Learner might repeat one grade level for academic or social reasons. Repeating more than one grade is a disaster for their self esteem.
- Some schools will place these children in a "slow track" where the work is easier. However, the other students may make fun of them. And the concepts in math and social studies may still be too difficult for them.
- The least desirable alternative is a non-graded program where the child works at their own pace and is graded for their effort.
- Another way is to use their IQ to compute a passing grade. For example if passing is 70% and their IQ is 80 then a passing grade would be $.8 \times 70 = 56\%$.
- The child deserves pre-vocational training in social skills and independent living. These children should be taught life-related courses like shopping, managing money, and job preparation.
- Look at their problem areas and focus on them with extra tutorial help. This could be during the last period of the day or after school. Allow by-pass strategies such as calculators, or let them do oral or visual reports.
- Provide a quiet place to work, where the child can be easily observed and motivated.
- Keep homework sessions short.
- Provide activity times before and during homework.
- Add a variety of tasks to the learning even if not assigned, such as painting a picture of a reading assignment.
- Allow for success.
- Ask questions about the assignment while the child is working.
- Go over the homework before bed and before school.
- Read to the child.
- Some researcher use "Three Transfer" form of learning, in which the student must take information and do three things with it beside reading. For example,

read it, explain it to someone else, draw a picture of it, and take notes on it.

- Be patient but consistent.
- Do not reward unfinished tasks.

Challenge the child

Have the child do the most difficult assignments first and leave the easier ones to later. Call it the dessert principle.

Parents/Guardians should not be overprotective. Parents who frequently intercede at school are teaching that they do not respect their child's abilities. If any parents do call a teacher, they should make sure that they seek a positive outcome. Because we should not forget most teachers have worked with numerous slow learners and have plenty of experience. However, sharing one's child's strengths and weaknesses could make the school year more beneficial for all concerned.

Parents may contact the teacher if there is a concern. Calling an administrator solves nothing, as the teacher is the sole legal judge of academic success.

The parents should take their child to exciting places where they can see academic success is important. A trip to a local university or community college, a walking tour of city hall, a visit to the fire station or a behind-the-scenes tour of a zoo is highly motivating.

Examples of interventions for slow learners

- Environment: Reduce distractions, change seating to promote attentiveness, have a peer student teacher, and allow more breaks.
- Assignments: Make them shorter and with more variation, repeat work in various forms, have a contract, give more hands-on work, have assignments copied by student, have students use "three transfer" method.
- Assessment: Use shorter tests, oral testing, redoing tests, short feedback times, don't make students compete.
- What to avoid: Don't use cooperative learning that isolates the student and places him or her in a no-win situation or standardized tests. Definitely don't ignore the problem.
- What to encourage: Grouping with a patient partner. Learning about the child's interests. Placing the student in charge. Mapping, graphic organizers, and hands-on work. Using Bloom's taxonomy of tasks to make the assignments more appropriate.

Conclusion

This objective of the paper is to create greater awareness and discussion about slow learners. Learners in this category will exist in almost every class, yet at present a systematic way of identifying and supporting them does not exist. There is no doubt that the individual teachers have developed many effective techniques for supporting

those learners who need additional help. It would be valuable therefore if opportunities could be created for teachers to share and discuss their work with slow learners. It is also important for further research to build on this initial study to develop guidelines to assist teachers in supporting slow learners.

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