Working with Slow Learners

**Definition**

Slow learners are students with below average cognitive abilities who are not disabled, but who struggle to cope with academic demands in the regular classroom. These students are typically not eligible for special education services because they do not have a discrepancy between their cognitive abilities and their achievement scores (both are very low).

**Characteristics of Slow Learners:**

- Functions at ability which is significantly below grade level.
- Is prone to immature interpersonal relationships.
- Has difficulty following multi-step directions.
- Short attention span and poor concentration skills.
- Poor time management skills.
- Has a poor self-image.
- Scores consistently low on achievement tests.
- Works on all tasks slowly.
- Masters skills slowly.
- Easily loses track of time.
- Can't transfer what they have learned from one task to another.

**What can teachers do?**

- Student needs 3 to 5 times as much repetition as the typical student.
- Concepts need to be reinforced through practical and familiar activities.
- Give shorter class and homework assignments, or break assignments up to avoid overwhelming the student.
- Use demonstration and visual cues. Do not distract with too much verbalization!
- Reduce distractions in working environment.
- Work on material that is challenging but allows success.
- Provide meaningful concrete activities rather than abstract.
- Give short specific directions and have student repeat them back.
- Make learning fun and comfortable...your positive attitude is very important!
Helping Slow Learners

Characteristics of slow learners:

1. Functions at ability but significantly below grade level.

2. Is prone to immature interpersonal relationships.

3. Has difficulty following multi-step directions.

4. Lives in the present and does not have long range goals. They live in the present, and so have significant problems with time management probably due to a short attention span and poor concentration skills.

5. Has few internal strategies (i.e. organizational skills, difficulty transferring, and generalizing information.)

6. Scores consistently low on achievement tests.

7. Works well with "hands-on" material (i.e. labs, manipulative, activities.)


9. Works on all tasks slowly.

10. Masters skills slowly; some skills may not be mastered at all.

11. They lose track of time and cannot transfer what they have learned from one task to another.
## Interventions to meet the needs of the Slow Learner

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<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Management Techniques</th>
<th>Miscellaneous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>change seating</td>
<td>use a variety: calculators,</td>
<td>simplify and/or shorten</td>
<td>employ direct, positive contact</td>
<td>refer to the Student Study Team for alternative ideas</td>
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<td>typewriters, learning games, etc.</td>
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<td>reduce distractions – find a quiet place to work (e.g. study carrels)</td>
<td>incorporate all learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic)</td>
<td>make individual contracts</td>
<td>provide immediate feedback</td>
<td>discuss ideas with other school personnel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allow more breaks</td>
<td>use materials available from Chapter I and other sources</td>
<td>try alternative instructions and testing (e.g. art work, use of tape recorder, verbal vs. written responses, &quot;show me&quot; techniques, mapping and clustering)</td>
<td>circulate around the room</td>
<td>review cum folder</td>
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<tr>
<td>cross-age tutors, aides, and peer-tutors</td>
<td>incorporate computers as a tool for instructions, drill, and reinforcement</td>
<td>require shorter tasks</td>
<td>call student's name or touch them before giving directions</td>
<td>restructure expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>allow for grouping with other classes</td>
<td>use advance organizers</td>
<td>give specific instruction</td>
<td>write directions on board or give each student a sheet of directions</td>
<td>provide opportunity for built-in success</td>
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<td>compensate for physical problems of classroom</td>
<td>use heterogeneous grouping</td>
<td>have student repeat assignment directions orally</td>
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<td>reduce the length of school day</td>
<td>use cooperative grouping</td>
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<td>give the student time out of his seat to let off energy</td>
<td>provide guided practice for skills taught</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
WORKING WITH SLOW LEARNERS

- Reduce distractions by providing a quiet, private place to work.
- Emphasize strengths. Use lots of praise and reinforcement frequently.
- Make lessons short. Limit the working time and have several short work periods rather than one long one.
- Add variety to the academic routine. Do active things and use educational games, puzzles, and other techniques as much as possible.
- Work on material that is somewhat challenging but allows success. Work that is too hard or too easy is a turn-off.
- Make learning fun and comfortable. Your positive attitude is very important.
- Go over his/her daily work to reinforce the learning. Slower learners need repetition.
- Provide meaningful, concrete activities rather than abstract.
- Give short specific directions and have your child repeat them back to you.
- Use oral testing.
- Encourage grouping with a patient partner.
"Slow Learners" in the Regular Classroom
A Handout for Teachers

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Background

_Slow learners_ are students with below average cognitive abilities who are not disabled, but who struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom. Their slower learning rate typically requires accommodations to insure their success in school. These students are typically not eligible to receive special education services or included in Section 504 regulations. Comparatively, because they learn more slowly, they are "handicapped" in the regular classroom to approximately the same degree as students with average abilities when competing with gifted students. Statistically, these children comprise about 15% of the population and a far greater proportion of the enrollment in some schools.

"Slow learners" can be easily misidentified, so it is critical that teachers and parents consider a variety of sources of information before they assume that poor school performance is due to a slower rate of learning rather than to a real disability or situational factors. Results from intelligence tests alone should not be used to confirm that a student has "below average" ability, but should be confirmed or disproved with other information about the student's ability to learn—such as observations in familiar settings, review of school records and test scores, interviews with parents, etc. Students who are significantly behind their classmates academically, and who have not responded well to teacher and parent efforts to stimulate achievement, should be referred for a comprehensive evaluation to rule out a disability (such as learning disability, cognitive impairment) that would qualify the student for special education or accommodations under Section 504. Poor motivation, lack of consistent instruction (due to frequent moves or absences), limited English proficiency and a variety of health factors should also be ruled out as contributing to slow academic progress.

What can I do as a teacher?

The following accommodations may be helpful for not only "slow learners" but for other students who are performing below grade expectations:

1. Expect this child to require 3 to 5 times as much repetition of content as necessary for the "average" students. Basic facts may be adequately covered in the regular classroom but depth and breadth of content will not usually be absorbed unless the concept is reinforced through practical and familiar activities that foster generalization.

2. Slow learners who are underachieving in the basic academic areas may benefit from tutoring at school or privately. The goal of tutoring is certainly not "to get him to grade level" but to help her optimize her abilities, to meet the highest, realistic expectations.

3. It is perfectly reasonable and justified to give the slow learner shorter class and homework assignments, or to break up assignments in order to avoid overwhelming the student.

4. Strive to help the child develop a basic understanding of new concepts rather than require rote memorization of meaningless materials and facts.

5. Use demonstration and visual cues as much as possible. Do not distract with too much verbalization. Often, the use of multisensory approaches is beneficial.
6. Do not force the slow learner to compete with children of higher ability. Try to provide less competitive academic programs that will not cause negative attitudes and rebelliousness towards learning. Cooperative learning groups can foster optimal learning for both low and high achievers while encouraging appropriate social interactions in a heterogeneous group of students.

7. It is important that key, simple concepts be presented to children at the onset of any instructional unit to help provide "advance organizers" of the material that follows. The slow learner may encounter difficulties if too many concepts are presented at one time — keep it simple and focused. Materials, language, directions and verbal information should all be within the child's comprehension. This might require some modification or restatement for the slow learners in the classroom.

8. The slow learning child should be given assignments, particularly in social studies and science, that are highly structured and concrete. Large projects requiring mature organizational and conceptual ability should be eliminated (or substantially modified) and the child should be expected to perform within his capabilities. When working on cooperative learning projects, slow learners should be encouraged to assume responsibility for the more concrete, focused tasks while high achieving students assume responsibility for the more abstract components.

9. Emphasize over-learning and use a variety of incentives and motivators.

10. Provide many opportunities for the child to experiment and practice new concepts with concrete materials in real or simulated situations.

11. At the beginning of any instructional unit, the child should be presented with familiar material. This should facilitate new learning and generalization.

12. Simplify directions given to the child and be sure that directions are understood and remembered by having the child repeat the directions back. Maintenance of eye contact is very important.

13. Some children respond well to the guidance of a friendly but higher performing "buddy" in the class to remind them of page numbers, assignments, tests, directions, etc.

14. Be sure to hold appropriately high expectations for all students. This does not mean that you should expect the same performance from all students, but that you should encourage all students to "reach" a bit higher each time. Student achievement goes up for all students when teacher expectations are relatively high and clearly stated.

15. Encourage parents to be involved in their child's education, through supporting homework, attending school functions, communicating with teachers, etc. Send home frequent notes about the child's accomplishments. Parent involvement enhances performance of all students.

Resources

