

Strategies for Teaching Slow learners in an Inclusive Setup.

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Abstract. Every classroom contains students with varied backgrounds, interests, attitudes, and learning styles. Some of these students carry to the classroom not just textbooks and other learning tools but also a lot of personal and learning problems. These basic differences in learners often cause variations in their academic achievements and classroom behavior. Hence, there would be always some students in every class who struggle to keep pace with the rest of the class. In most situations, such slow learners are not given enough support by their teachers. How can teachers accommodate all students with different backgrounds and interests in their classroom and help them thrive and grow, academically and personally? How can they deepen their knowledge and expand the professional practice to enrich the learning experience for all students? How can they address the needs and tackle the learning difficulties of slow learners? The learning and behavioral problems of slow learners should be handled on two levels, intellectually and emotionally. In other words, teachers must deal with them using their brains and hearts. With proper methods, techniques and strategies slow learners can be motivated to produce good work and develop a positive attitude towards classroom behavior and learning.

Keywords: Inclusive setup, Slow learners, Teaching and strategies

1. Introduction

Teaching is a challenging profession that requires a lot of patience, innovation and motivation from the teachers in order to bring about an all round development among their students. Every classroom has that one student (or perhaps more than one) that just needs “extra attention.” What joy it would be to have a classroom filled with super organized, eager-to-learn, over obedient, little angels who can't wait to get started diagramming sentences and long division,

but that is not the true classroom. The true classroom is a Hodge Podge of little faces. Some eager to learn, some wanting to learn but struggling, some who find it impossible to stay seated for more than five minutes, and some just watching the clock. Hence here comes the greatest challenge for a good teacher to guide and help all these categories of learners improve in fetching good grades and come out with flying colors. A good student can always get good grades on his own merits which require very little effort on the teacher's part. But to help a slow learner fetch a good and suitable grade is a challenge that marks the qualities of a good teacher.

2. Slow Learners: Definition

A child may be a slow learner for various reasons including: heredity, inadequate brain development due to lack of stimulation, low motivation, attention problems, behavior problems, different cultural background from that which dominates in the school, or distracting personal problems.

Proper understanding of what is slow learning and a slow learner is a major step towards coming up with a strategy to address slow learners issues in class. Muppudathi (2014) defines a slow learner as a student with the ability to acquire all necessary academic skills, at a rate and depth below that of the average student.

Slow learning is not a learning disability that can be classified as a diagnostic category. It is simply a term used to describe a student with the ability to acquire all necessary academic skills, but at a rate and depth below that of the average student. In order to grasp new concepts, a slow learner needs more time, more repetition, and often, more resources from teachers to be successful. Reasoning skills are typically delayed, which makes new concepts difficult to grasp. In today's world, unfortunately, 'learning' has become a

one-size-fits-all process that is not tailored to suit a person's abilities. This conformation of learning is especially true of our conventional school systems. The problem, however, is that not all children can adapt to such a rigid style of learning. Some children just cannot cope with the fast-paced and rigid approach that is characteristic of conventional teaching. Due to this, a gap forms between their true ability and their performance level and such children are then dubbed 'Slow Learners'.

Slow learners are students with borderline intelligence and they often struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom. According to Lowenstein (2003), "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" (p. 1). Students who take longer time than their peers to understand a new concept and need extra support to do their schoolwork are sometimes referred as to as slow learners. Mercer, (1996) defines slow learners as children who are doing poorly in school, yet not eligible for special education. Griffin (1978) defines slow learners as students who learn more slowly than their peers. At the same time, they do not have a disability requiring special education. Although slow learners may have special educational needs, they do not fit neatly into the special education system.

According to Borah (2013), students with below average cognitive abilities whom we cannot term as disabled are called slow learners. Learning is understood as a relatively permanent influence on behavior, knowledge and thinking skills that come about through experience (Santrock, 2001). While fast learners will move faster than moderate learners, a slow learner may easily be ignored in a class by the teacher as well as peers. Borah (2013) states that slow learners are normal students but the problem is that they are simply not interested in studying under traditionally accepted system of education. What teachers ought to know is that slow learners can learn all that is required in their course as long as they put an extra effort to help them. Teachers must therefore be innovative in course management to facilitate learning of slow learners as well as moderate and fast learners.

Slow learners differ from reluctant learners. A slow learner initially wants to learn, but has a problem with the process. A reluctant 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.

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.

2.1 Characteristics of Slow Learners

To avoid falling into errors where students who have other learning problems are classified as slow learners, scholars have compiled specific traits of slow learners. Borah, (2013) gave five characteristics of slow learners. First, slow learners are recurrently immature in their relation with others in school and do poorly in school. Secondly, slow learners cannot do multifaceted or complex problems and work very slowly. Thirdly, slow learners lose track of time and cannot convey what they have learned from one task to another. Fourthly, slow learners do not easily master skills that are academic in nature such as the times tables or spelling rules. Lastly, slow learners exhibit an inability to have long-term goals. It ought to be noted here that each learner is unique and hence the characteristics offered by Borah above do not necessarily appear in all slow learners equally.

They have great difficulty in learning abstract concepts that are presented without proper contexts. If the lesson being taught does not have direct relevance to their day to day activities or is at least linked to previously taught information, then the instruction become ineffective (Singh, V.P. 2004). They learn better when the material is presented concretely. However, they are not usually poor in their motor skills or performing other actions such as shopping, playing ball, or any other social or mechanical activities in their day to day life.

The most obvious trait of slow learners is that they are extremely poor in word analysis skills, using context clues and abstract thinking. Other common characteristics include poor coordination, poor memory, lack of concentration, poor communication, emotional instability, restlessness etc. They also dislike the direct method of instruction. Their attention span is short, so they cannot concentrate on one topic for long. They react slowly to learning tasks than the majority of students in the class. It is also difficult for them to figure out things themselves, if the task requires multiples steps or instructions.

Their self-esteem is low and they are prone to immature interpersonal relationships. They are more likely to have behavioural issues and social skills deficits. Slow learners also have great difficulty in transferring information or applying knowledge and skills to other situations. They do have the mechanisms or techniques to apply the already learnt skill to a new situation. A good number of students are unmotivated and gradually become slow learners due to lack of attention and support given by teachers and parents. When parents do not have enough time to discuss their children's day today events in the classroom, monitor their food habits, sleeping schedule, extracurricular activities and other personal needs or difficulties, the child may feel neglected and lose interest in learning. Parental care and emotional support are crucial to the academic progress of their children.

Slow learners have limited cognitive capacity. They fail to cope with learning situations and to reason abstractly. Rational thinking becomes practically difficult. They have the capacity to succeed in rote-learning. These children show interest in learning where relationships are clearly demonstrated. With regard to retentive memories they require more practice and revision in comparison with normal children. One of the relevant characteristics of slow learners is poor memory. It occurs due to lack of concentration. It is impossible to say how much a child can learn and retain although he is motivated externally and internally. Experimental evidences reveal that very often the slow learners can recall facts about their local football team as well as its players.

Classroom situation include distraction and lack of concentration of slow learners. This typical behavior is also associated with poor motivation. Again different studies also report that when the learning materials are presented through concrete situations, the slow learners concentration and attention do not differ significantly from that of a normal child. Their ability to deal with abstract and symbolic materials

i.e. Language, Numbers and concepts is very limited and their reasoning in practical situation is inferior to that of average students.

Research works reveal that the attention span of slow learners is relatively short. They are also unable to deal with relatively complex games or school assignment. They need much external stimulation and encouragement to do simple type of work. They are capable of competing in school in most areas, except in strictly academic areas in which performance is below average.

Slow learners are frequently immature in their relations with others and do poorly in school. They lose track of time and cannot transfer what they have learned from one task to another well. They do not easily master skills that are academic in nature, such as the time tables or spelling rules. Perhaps the most frustrating trait is their inability to have long-term 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.

2.2 How can we help a slow learner in a class?

Teachers are first required to find out the main reason behind the learner's weak performance and also to study those areas where they need to work upon in order to guide the slow learner to perform well. They need to interact with the slow learners more often so that they can keep a record of every movement of the learner and adopt ways in which the slow learner can be guided.

Slow learners are very sensitive and self conscious as they are very well aware of their weakness in comparison with the fast learners. So the first responsibility of the teacher is to build up confidence among these learners and make them believe that they are no less than others. Encouraging words and phrases may bring about a positive impact on the slow learners and will boost them to perform better.

2.3 Motivating Slow Learners

Motivating slow learners is a task that teachers cannot ignore. Muppudathi (2014) states that to help a slow learner fetch a good grade is a challenge that marks the qualities of a good teacher. Student's motivation is optimized when teachers provide them with challenging tasks in a mastery-oriented environment that includes good emotional and cognitive support, meaningful and interesting material to learn and master, and sufficient support for autonomy and initiative (Wentzel, 2008).

Muppudathi (2014) outlines responsibilities of the teacher on slow learners as; building confidence among slow learners, finding out the main reason behind the learner's weak performance, interact with slow learner more often, pay equal attention to slow learner in class, arrangement of special learning resources, maintenance of cumulative records, maintaining a friendly relationship, repetition, arranging for peer tutoring among others. All the foresaid interventions call for constant revision of the entire course management process.

3. Interventions for slow learners using environment, assignments and assessment.

Borah (2013) on the other hand provides examples of interventions for slow learners which touched on environment, assignments, assessment, what not to do and finally what to encourage. On environment, Borah (2013) recommends the reduction of distractions and change of setting to promote attentiveness and have a peer student-teacher while allowing breaks. On assignments, Borah (2013) recommends shorter, varied, repeated in various forms and more hands-on assignments. Formative assessment, which is assessment during the course of instruction rather than after it is completed can be a good option for any teacher. Borah (2013) recommends shorter tests, oral testing, redoing tests, shorter feedback times and avoidance of competition among students. Borah (2013) discourages cooperative learning that isolates the students and places him or her in no win situation. Borah (2013) asserts that grouping a slow learner with a patient student is beneficial to a slow learner. Teachers cannot be dispensed from the task of learning the interests of their students. Such knowledge can guide how to place slow learners in charge of their learning process.

3.1 Inside the classroom

Inside the classroom the teacher must never make the slow learner feel neglected or unwanted as it might create a feeling of inferiority among these learners which might lay an effect on their grades. Teachers must pay equal attention to these learners and make them sit in the first row if possible. Special programs with the help of the audio-visual aids, graphics displays, reference books and worksheets must be created for these slow learners and also cumulative records must be maintained by the teachers in order to keep a track of the learner's progress. This cumulative record is mandatory for the teacher to maintain as she/he will know how the slow learner is

responding to his/her ways of teaching. If she/he finds any area where the learner has not made much improvement then she/he can change his/her ways of teaching and try out another way that might prove comfortable for the learner.

Helping a slow learner in class attest to good teaching. According to Santrock (2001) being an effective teacher requires commitment, motivation, and caring, qualities that include having a good attitude. On the other hand, Muppudathi (2014) asserts that a slow learner needs more time, more repetition, and often, more resources from the teachers to be successful. The teacher needs to be convinced that a slow learner can learn. According to Muppudathi (2014) it is possible to draw strong academic performance from slow learners through steady application of practical strategies. Muppudathi (2014) observes that although efforts from teachers end are simple, the results make teacher and student who have overcome their weakness proud. Teachers have to select interventions that work better for their course.

3.2 Maintaining Friendly Relationship

A teacher needs to be a friend to these learners on whom they can fall back upon. These learners cannot express themselves fully to their peers or to their parents and hence needs somebody whom they can rely upon. Hence it is up to the teacher to fill up that vacuum and enhance these slow learners' all round development. Although the effort from the teacher's end is simple, yet the result at the end of the day is great enough to make a teacher feel proud of his/herself as well as his/her learners who had managed to overcome their weakness and come out with flying colors.

3.3 Extra care and practice

Extra care and practice should be given to the slow learners as compared to their peers. If need be the teacher can take extra classes or may allow the learner to come to his/her place so that he/she may work out the areas of concern along with these learners. The teacher may utilize some of his/ her time to do a good deal of research in order to find out simple ways of helping these slow learners to study in an easy and simple way. She/he might set mock tests for the learners or give them simple home assignments which are interesting and related to the lessons completed inside the classroom. Slow-learners are not averse to learning, and have no limitations for learning, but in fact have their own psychology for learning. Hence the challenge for the

parents or guardians or teachers is to understand the student's areas of interests and develop a teaching plan to cover syllabus in a given time frame.

3.4 Differentiated Instruction

With this approach, teachers change and switch around what students need to learn, how they'll learn it, and how to get the material across to them. When a student struggles in one area, the teacher creates a plan that includes extra practice, step-by-step directions, and special homework.

3.5 Scaffolding

This is a method that breaks learning into chunks. The chunks follow a logical order and move toward a clear goal. Teachers form a bridge between what students already know and what they cannot do on their own. These bridges are referred to as "scaffolds." They can include charts, pictures and cue cards. Teachers often use this method by presenting a model of high-quality work before asking students to work on their own. Just as they're used when constructing buildings, scaffolds are removed when they're no longer needed.

3.6 Graphic Organization

Using this method, a teacher draws a picture to map out thoughts and ideas. Graphic organization can help younger students with activities like identifying the characters in a story they've read. This can also help them plan and organize a story they'll write. Older students can "map out" history, like the events leading up to World War II, or compare and contrast people or topics.

Mnemonics

Students use special phrases to help them remember information. Here's an example: This strategy can also help with learning vocabulary. For example, a child can learn the scientific name for the common frog, *Raindaea*, by using rain as the keyword along with a picture of a frog sitting in the rain.

Multisensory Instruction

This method links what students see, what they hear, how they move, and what they feel. When students learn using all of their senses, they remember the material better. Drawing might help students learn new vocabulary by capturing the meaning of a word and sketching it. Each child learns differently. Teachers will use many creative methods to teach your child—and the students around him—so they can all learn.

3.7 Using Innovative Strategies

Several innovative strategies to deal with such slow learning students to learn and enhance memory like: Involve students with a practical model or case study of short time span and relaxed environment so that they can visualize or feel the situation. Proceed in steps once the students are comfortable and involved in looking for solutions. Involve them in activities discrete from routine home chorus like sports and excursions to motivate such students to learn without cramming monotonous textbooks. Provide a variety of activities for learning such as painting a picture of a reading assignment. Provide them ample opportunity for success. Fortunately nowadays resources are available in libraries as well as online to develop learning habits to create interest for slow learners.

3.8 Affective Teaching

Although the concept of affective teaching is not a new issue in education, it is not widely utilized by teachers in the regular classroom. In modern education, due to corporate interventions, there has been a shift in focus from the inculcation of basic values in life, to the development of knowledge and skills required for the current market. A close inspection of some existing instructional practices shows the disturbing extent to which we are caught in the tentacles of mechanization (Llewellyn & Cahoon, 1965). Some institutions do not give any importance to the human denominator of learning; rather they try to equate men with machines. Educational institutions must be humanizing centres for learning and all learning activities must reflect an intrinsic valuing of the learner as an individual. Hence, the use of affective strategies in teaching is important to rediscover and maintain the dignity of the individual and to restructure the learning process from automation to humanization.

Affective teaching is the democratic process of interacting with students in a caring, conscious, and committed way. In other words, it is a way of teaching on two levels; intellectually and emotionally, using both brains and hearts. An effective strategy in language education is the integration of cognition, emotion, and language in the learning process. It serves to manage emotions, attitudes, and motivation to create a positive attitude towards learning. Developing and exploiting affective strategies helps to create a positive learning atmosphere in class. It can be done by encouraging learners to identify achievable aims and work towards autonomous learning, through personalizing

activities and collaborative tasks. Teachers should use some relaxation techniques to lower the anxiety level and to create interest in learning. But today, most curricula overemphasize intellectual and cognitive tasks by pouring energies and resources for the sake of cultivating a crop of scientists and technicians. As a result, affective elements are not given any significance in the classroom leaving the slow learners and other marginally disabled students unattended.

Slow learners, who have low self esteem and no motivation, need an affective stimulation to foster interest in studies. By activating the affective domain, teachers can awaken their curiosity and interest in learning. In most classrooms, the majority of teacher's efforts typically go into the cognitive aspects of teaching and learning and all the activities are designed for cognitive outcomes. When a purely cognitive approach is used in class, the low proficiency learners may face some affective roadblocks which are neither recognized nor solved. Therefore, there is significant value in realizing this potential to improve student learning by tapping into the affective domain. In the words of Smith and Ragan (1999), "any cognitive or psychomotor objective has some affective component to it, if at no deeper level than a willingness to sufficiently interact with learning resources to achieve the learning" (p.250). According to Krathwohl et al (2002), the affective domain describes the learning objectives that emphasize a feeling tone, an emotion, or a degree of acceptance or rejection. Affective objectives vary from simple attention to selected phenomena to complex but internally consistent qualities of character and conscience.

An important aspect of affective teaching is respecting students. Teachers with traditional concepts might frown at the idea of respecting students. It means to value and accept their different socio cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs, listen to them, sincerely ask for their opinions and learning preferences, and truly value their previous knowledge. Teachers should allow students to express themselves in class and accept the fact that all are capable of learning. When the uniqueness and dignity of each student is recognized, it frees the growth forces within the individual for self fulfilling pursuits. It also raises the motivation level and creates in them a positive attitude towards learning. As Edwards and Porter (1972) argue, "a student's attitude toward a given course or subject area can be a contributing factor to his achievement" (p.107). Thus, teachers should direct their focus on the individual development of students. When the

learning has personal significance, they can see use for it and will try to search for new realms of knowledge.

The proponents of affective teaching argue that teachers should listen to their students to have a smooth interaction in class because affective education is concerned with the beliefs, feelings and attitudes of students. When they listen to students, they will be able to understand their expectations, anxieties and worries, dreams and passions, and learning preferences and difficulties. When students and teachers share their feelings and thoughts in an atmosphere of mutual trust, their behavior becomes spontaneous, authentic, and flexible. This will help teachers to understand their students better and make necessary changes in the planning of future lessons. Although the cognitive and affective domains interact significantly in instruction and learning, any behavior that has an emotional component lies within the affective domain (Martin & Briggs, 1986). So it is important to promote emotional literacy and self esteem to enable slow learners to open the line of communication with their teachers and peers.

Affective teaching requires an open and free communication with students to facilitate authentic interpersonal relationships. When teachers interact with students in an atmosphere of openness, the emotional base of students is honoured and accepted without any prejudice. A lot of students may have various problems that prevent them from focusing on their studies. So teachers need to have a concern towards such students and provide adequate guidance and support. Teachers must act like their mentors and their guidance should be open minded and friendly enough for students to approach them at any time without any hesitation. It is also important to promote a healthy interpersonal relationship among peers because social skills are necessary for a person to function well in life. When a student has a healthy relationship with peers, s/he develops a sense of belongingness that helps to eliminate social awkwardness and antagonistic behaviour towards other students. A positive peer relation helps students to respect other students' ideas and interests and participate well in collaborative activities that facilitate good communication and language learning.

Affective elements can be expressed not only through words, but also through the tone of voice, volume, and body language. Teachers can use positive signs of patience, acceptance, partnership, and faith to create an impression in class that they are receptive to all students' needs. Affective elements are necessary for

effective student learning because language learning is not just limited to the accumulation of factual information. In the words of Llewellyn and Cahoon (1965): Learning is more encompassing; it includes not only factual content but the pupil's positive feelings about what is learned. It seems, moreover, that the affective element, such as the learner's delight with what he is doing; actually establish the basis for meaningful and autonomous learning. (p.471).

The emotional impact of teachers' behaviour can influence learning because it helps to instill in students a love for the subject they teach. When the teacher provides warmth, acceptance and empathy, the learners feel free to regard their emotions and personal meanings as legitimate content in learning. But when language is used in an alienated way, without any emotional and personal significance, students lose their motivation to learn because it is dissociated from their lives. An easy way to make learning more affective is to foster curiosity in class. It makes learning more interesting and funny. Curiosity can be enhanced by introducing novelty and variety in instructional techniques.

Involving students in decision making or sharing power in the classroom is also a way of fostering affective teaching and learning. When the teacher makes decisions with the students about the content, assignments, deadlines, class tests, and future learning, they feel empowered and it makes the whole process more democratic. It helps in making their attitude towards their teacher and learning more positive. It dispels the wrong notion that a teacher is just an authoritarian, whose job is to make students do things, allow or prevent actions, and make judgments in class. On the other hand, they begin to feel that the teacher is a facilitator, who is receptive to their problems and who takes great interest in their learning.

4. Conclusion

Teachers need to be aware of the specific learning and personal problems that can cause a child to become an underachiever or a slow learner. It is up to the teachers and parents to provide the help needed for slow learners to progress. As there are no special services available for slow learners, teachers need to take a leading role and keep the lines of communications open with parents to effectively meet the learning needs of such students. The ultimate aim of helping slow learners is not to get them perform at grade level, but to make them do at their level best.

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