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Rescuing Students From the Slow Learner Trap

Students who are slow learners frequently see school as a punishment, but classroom strategies enable teachers to tap into these students' strengths to enable them to succeed.

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Jessica has struggled with reading and basic math skills since first grade despite academic supports and after-school tutoring. In fourth grade, the school psychologist reported that although Jessica's test scores for intelligence and achievement were quite low and she had clear educational need, she was not eligible for special education services. Her intelligence test scores were not low enough for her to be considered a student with intellectual disabilities. Neither did the tests indicate that Jessica's academic skills were lower than would be predicted on the basis of her intellectual ability, so she did not qualify as a student with a learning disability. As a result, Jessica has remained in regular education classes and neither she nor her classroom teachers have received additional support. Instead, Jessica has been labeled a "slow learner" and has been left to struggle, even fail. Progressively, she has lost academic motivation, and now at age 16, she is considering dropping out of school.

Students at Risk

Jessica and her teachers have fallen through one of the largest and most pervasive cracks in the educational system—the slow learner trap. Slow learners (i.e., students with borderline intellectual functioning) represent one of the most challenging student populations for administrators and teachers. Standard systems and supports are often ineffective—even counterproductive—because they fail to meet students' specific learning needs and instead create a cycle of failure. By the time many of these students get to high school, their academic difficulties and related self-perceptions and attitudes toward learning are entrenched. The education system and the students themselves assume that they are destined to fail in school. This attitude results in serious consequences for the students—many of whom get held back, develop social and behavior problems, or drop out—and the schools suffer in terms of their student outcome measures.

Principals and teachers can help prevent this cycle and promote success for slow-learning students by recognizing that it is most productive to consider borderline intellectual functioning as a risk factor to overcome, not as a

sentence to fail. Like adolescents with other risk factors, students with borderline intelligence can develop resilience skills and overcome those risks. Many students with borderline intelligence achieve success in school, graduate from high school, and complete post-secondary education.

Characteristics of Slow Learners

Children and adolescents with borderline intelligence rarely meet eligibility criteria for special education services, although they have remarkably high failure rates in the general education setting. Changing models of special education, including response to intervention approaches, are improving access to academic supports, but most slow learners fall into the gulf between special and general education.

DEFINITION AND PREVALENCE

Students with borderline intelligence have intelligence test scores that fall significantly below the average score of 100 but above the range consistent with intellectual disabilities (that is, below 70). Nationwide, they make up approximately 14% of the student population, more than students in all special education categories combined.

They account for disproportionately high proportions of the students who drop out of school, are retained, are referred for special education, become pregnant, are incarcerated, use drugs, exhibit aggression and other mental health problems, and are underemployed or unemployed. Moreover, the failure rates for slow learners are rising as tolerance for social promotion decreases and passing standardized high-stakes tests is required for grade promotion and graduation.

LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS

Slow learners have several characteristics that make classroom instruction challenging:

- They perform at a higher level when information is presented in a concrete fashion. The more abstract a concept or teaching technique, the more difficult it is for them to learn.
- They do not transfer or generalize skills, knowledge, and strategies as well as their same-age peers. They tend to learn what is taught quite well but have difficulty transferring and applying the concepts taught to new situations.
- They have difficulty cognitively organizing new material and assimilating incoming information into previously acquired information.
- They have difficulty with long-term goals and time management.
- They benefit from increased academically engaged time. They often require extra practice and more time on task to develop the same level of academic skills as their typically developing peers.

- They nearly always develop academic motivation deficits.

Issues for Secondary Schools

When students who are slow learners move on to secondary school, their academic and social issues often become more severe and difficult to change. Moreover, organizational challenges in secondary schools present barriers to supporting this large population of at-risk students.

Secondary schools can be alienating environments for many students. A single teacher is no longer fully responsible for each student's success or failure. In secondary school, each teacher often sees 150 or more different students in the course of a week. Opportunities for close relationships between teachers and students are limited. For slow learners, having close relationships with educators and mentors is necessary for them to overcome academic motivation deficits and self-concept issues and to continue to develop study skills. In addition, students who are slow learners are at higher risk for behavior and mental health problems. A strong and cohesive adult support system at school is a requirement for slow learners' academic and social success.

Although there are multiple reasons that slow learners rarely graduate from high school, two systemic barriers to graduation stand out. First, most states and provinces require students to complete an algebra class to graduate. Algebra requires generalization of learned knowledge to new problems. The abstract nature of algebra and the requirement to generalize knowledge directly target the academic weaknesses of slow learners.

The second barrier is many of the tests that are required for graduation.



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Most high-stakes tests require inferential reasoning, rather than a simple recall of information learned. Complex reasoning and inferential reasoning on most high-stakes tests are significant challenges for most slow learners. Nearly all information that slow learners are taught, including study and test-taking skills, must be informed by the content and format of high-stakes testing. Although “raising the bar” sounds like educational improvement and reform, without significant supports, “raising the bar” simply means that more students will fail. This does not mean that slow learners cannot pass high-stakes tests, but rather that they must receive the concrete academic supports they need to succeed.

Interventions

Slow learners benefit from several general strategies that help build their academic resilience, including concrete or active instruction, generalization activities, advance organization strategies, increased instructional efficiency, and motivational strategies.

School psychologists can work with teachers to develop those strategies.

CONCRETE INSTRUCTION

High-ability children perform well in the abstract world of reading and lecture. Slow learners have difficulty with abstract concepts. They perform and learn more effectively with active instruction—a “see it, feel it, touch it, do it” approach. Experiential learning, laboratory experiments, acting out literature, and the like are extremely effective approaches for slow learners. Repetition and opportunities to practice discrete skills frequently are important, as is helping students develop basic time management skills.

GENERALIZATION

Difficulty with generalization is a hallmark of students with borderline intelligence. Although they tend to be nearly as effective at using rote memory as students of average ability, many instructional approaches involve teaching an overall strategy or rule that students are expected to apply to

new situations with minimal guidance. Students with borderline intelligence can learn and recite the strategy or the rule as taught, but they have an extremely difficult time knowing how, when, and where to apply that rule.

The most effective instruction for students with borderline intelligence is direct instruction of every specific needed skill, with extensive guided practice on how, when, and where to use each skill. For example, when most students are taught that $1 + 1 = 2$, they quickly generalize the concept of addition and figure out that $1 + 2 = 3$ without additional instruction. Because of their difficulties with generalization, students with borderline intelligence must be taught explicitly that $1 + 2 = 3$.

ORGANIZING INSTRUCTION

Pairing information learned with a variety of novel situations increases generalization, and tying newly presented information to previously acquired knowledge increases functional retention. For slow learners, a lesson is most

Strategies to Support Slow Learners

- Use concrete instruction
- Provide opportunities for repetition and frequent practice of discrete skills applied to different challenges
- Help students develop basic time management and organizational skills
- Break down lessons and tasks into short discrete elements
- Use a variety of hands-on activities and computer-assisted instruction to reinforce learning
- Expect and allow for success
- Reward genuine effort
- Provide a variety of ways to demonstrate competence
- Pair students with peer mentors
- Link academic learning to real-world experiences
- Encourage the students' involvement in activities that they enjoy and at which they can succeed

Characteristics of Slow Learners

Slow learners:

- Have low intelligence and academic performance but do not qualify for special education for either cognitive or learning disabilities.
- Perform at a higher level when information is presented in a concrete fashion. Abstract concepts and instruction are difficult for them.
- Have difficulty transferring or generalizing skills, knowledge, and strategies.
- Have trouble cognitively organizing new material and assimilating incoming information into previously acquired information.
- Have difficulty with long-term goals and time management.
- Benefit from increased academic engaged time. They often require extra practice and more time on task to develop the same level of academic skills as their typically developing peers.
- Nearly always develop academic motivation deficits.
- Suffer poor self-concept and can develop emotional and behavioral problems.
- Are at high risk for dropping out.

effective if it starts out with a review of related material that they have previously learned and mastered. Then, the teacher can explicitly connect the new material to the old.

INCREASING INSTRUCTIONAL EFFICIENCY

The term “slow learner” suggests that students with borderline intelligence learn more slowly than their average-intelligence peers. This is not entirely true. Students with borderline intelligence learn each discrete fact nearly as quickly and completely as their peers do because of their relative strength in rote memorization. But because they do not generalize well, they take much longer to fully learn, master, and apply broad concepts. They need to learn many more discrete facts

than their average-intelligence peers to fully understand a concept. By increasing instructional efficiency, teachers have the opportunity to close the academic skills gap between students with borderline intelligence and their average-intelligence peers.

Pace is an important variable in teaching. The widely held belief that slow learners need to be taught at a slower rate is simply wrong. Slower-paced instruction is a sure-fire recipe for falling further behind. Students with borderline intellectual functioning require more practice opportunities in the same amount of time as their average-ability peers. An appropriately paced classroom is one that is well organized, that uses computer-assisted instruction, and is taught by

a teacher who has high expectations for rapid work completion. This type of environment enables slow learners to learn the discrete facts they need to know to overcome their limitations in generalization. Computer-assisted instruction makes learning basic skills automatic, which is essential to gaining fluency.

ACADEMIC MOTIVATION

When students with borderline intelligence begin school, their academic motivation is rarely a problem. As they get older, however, a consistent pattern emerges. Strong effort in the early grades is met with academic frustration and failure. After some years, the cumulative effect of frustration and failure leads these students to simply stop trying. Their lack of academic motivation is learned. Students who have not learned the value of effort are frequently “punished” for not trying in school, making school itself an aversive place. This leads to a variety of future problems, such as increased truancy and likelihood of dropping out.

Reinforcing academic motivation is essential to building slow learners’ academic resilience. Doing so requires teachers to offer frequent rewards for students’ efforts, rather than their academic results alone. Although the value of effort appears to be self-evident to most teachers and students, its value is less clear to students whose efforts have not been rewarded with academic success. Linking learning to real-life experiences helps students see the practical benefits of learning, which is a significant motivator. In addition, student tutors or mentors can help motivate adolescents who sometimes respond more positively to encouragement from their peers.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Because slow learners often struggle with chronic failure, they can develop low self-concept and can disengage from the school environment, putting them at greater risk for social and behavioral problems. It is essential to identify and encourage activities that require different skills and tap students' other strengths. Connecting with peers and staff members through activities at which they succeed significantly contributes to slow learners' motivation and school success.

Summary

Regardless of the setting in which slow learners are taught—special education or general education—the

basics of instruction are to:

- Provide concrete and experiential instruction
- Teach for generalization of academic skills
- Pre-organize material to be presented
- Use efficient instructional strategies
- Explicitly teach academic motivation.

Those basics are challenging to implement. If the phrase “no child left behind” is to be more than empty public relations and rhetoric, then educational programming must be enhanced for the large population of children with borderline intelligence who currently are being left behind. **PL**

Resources

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