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The Slow Learners



What are slow learners? According to a study by school psychologists Steven Shaw and Donald Gouwens, slow learners is a term that encompasses “children with borderline intelligence, low achievers, children with developmental delays, ‘gray area’ children, ‘shadow’ children, and ‘kids in the cracks.’”

However you define them, slow learners have become a major focus of remedial intervention because of their impact on school test scores in this era of accountability.

Shaw and Gouwens estimate that they make up approximately 14 percent of school populations, which translates to three or four slow learners in every K–8 classroom. Although they perform below grade level in most or all subject areas, they rarely qualify for special education. So what can be done to help them?

The goal, according to most educators, is to get them to perform at the highest level possible. As Shaw and Gouwens point out: “The phrase ‘slow learner’ is not synonymous with ‘no learner.’ These students can and do learn, just not as quickly as others.” Their recommendation: “...When teaching slow learners, make information as explicit and concrete as possible. If they can see it, touch it, or do it, then learning will be easier.”

Carl Balado of the University of Central Florida, who has done extensive research on slow learners, agrees. He offers these intervention recommendations:

- Reduce distractions by providing a quiet place to work;
- Incorporate auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles;
- Use educational games, puzzles, and techniques as much as possible;
- Work with material that is challenging but allows success;
- Require shorter tasks and restructure expectations; and
- Provide meaningful concrete rather than abstract activities.

In this issue, Jim Wright describes a number of research-based strategies that can identify and assist struggling students, including slow learners. Kay Woelfel emphasizes the importance of extending and redefining learning time for slow learners and other at-risk students, and cites five programs that have successfully incorporated this approach.

You will also learn about efforts to apply effective interventions to assist physically disabled, Latino, and ADHD students, as well as measures to prepare troubled foster children for kindergarten.

This month, we’re piloting a new feature in *Principal*. It’s a four-page Special Section designed to address an important topic not covered by the Effective Intervention theme. We call it a “mini-theme,” and for this issue it focuses on hands-on science. For the January/February issue, the topic will be school uniforms. Let us know if you like the Special Sections and if there are other mini-themes you would like to see.

Interested in submitting an article for *Principal*?

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