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A Challenge for Teachers in Class: How to Cope with Slow Learners

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Abstract:

Slow learner: "It is a student with the ability to acquire all necessary academic skills, at a rate and depth below that of the average student" Muppudathi, G p.98 2014. Currently, there are many ways to diagnose the kind of students that teachers have in class. But there is also lack of experience in identifying slow learners, and sometimes they are considered as disable learners. This article tries to explain the concept about this diagnosis category, and also how to differentiate it from a disability. Taking into consideration that learning began in the preschool years, the period where the children assimilate the fundamental issues of the scientific knowledge, abilities and values; the researchers can give examples of how to take care of this kind of student, through the observation among others and from their own experience in teaching and growing up children. To support and confirm the validity of this work the document analysis of updated scientific literature related to this topic was developed. Finally, to corroborate its notion, experts' opinions were taken into consideration.

Keywords: *slow learners, normal students, standard students*

1. Introduction

Classrooms are a magic trip to knowledge. How do teachers drive children though? It is a long hard journey. Teaching is a very demanding task, although it is beautiful and it is also considered not hard working, it is. This profession requires of large imagination for creating new ways of motivating student every day, and to be quite tolerant in order to facilitate the development of the teaching-learning process.

Nowadays teachers have to face a big challenge in the teaching learning process. In the classrooms there are students with diversities of intelligence, motivation, learning styles, necessities, aspirations and cognitive requirements. That is why the role of the teacher is to identify the mixture they have in class and prepare themselves for teaching taking into account all those characteristics. Among the students there are some that are hiding; it means that it is very hard to identify them because of their specific personality. Those are the slow learners; this is just a tem not a diagnostic category to identify a disability, as Muppudathi, G. pp.98 2014 define slow learning.

There are many methods and techniques to diagnose the diversity in a class. But the teacher has to select the most appropriate one to get to an accurate result. For an adequate development of the teaching and learning process, a correct management to the diversity in and out the classroom is essential. There are prerequisites for beginning a course as: to determine the most appropriate way to motivate, to grasp the students interests, aspiration and necessities, to know their learning styles and knowledge capacity with an exact identity of the diversity in a classroom.

According to the study these researchers have developed, they consider there are some characteristics of slow learners that the teachers must know. It is a good reason to give wide information about all the analysis made, related to learners' behaviour and teachers' way of acting. Slow learners need time to achieve the curriculum aims, in order to develop habits and abilities and fix the contents. They need that teachers and parents work together in helping them to organize their work, priorities, getting materials they need to answer their homework.

This article tries to give an analysis of the slow learners' concept, since the point of view that they are normal students. The differences can be managed among the diversity of each group. It also deals with the teacher responsibility on preparing themselves to provide a good teaching learning process in and out the classroom, that not only the teachers are involved in this process, also parents have the commitment on educating their children.

The authors of this paper also give a wide connotation to the diagnosis and the different characteristics and needs of the slow learners. Finally, they include some example of exercises that can be developed in the classroom with standards or average and slow students; the fact is on the way the teacher manage each activity in order to help the slow learners without discriminating them.

2. Analysis of the Concept: Slow Learning

Slow learning has not been a very polemic topic; most of the authors have the same opinion in many facts. For example: Carroll pp.205 1998 stated that "...students with below averages cognitive abilities and who struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classrooms..." Houk, K. pp.1 2012 assured that "Slow learners are not non-learners! They must be taught and they so want to learn and succeed! A few adjustments in their learning process can make a big difference!" Borah, R. pp.139 2013 said that "...students with below average cognitive abilities whom we cannot term as disabled..." "...students but the problem is that they are simply not interested in studying under traditionally accepted system of education..."

Muppudathi, G. pp.98 2014 considered that "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".

It is important to point out that the writers of this paper use the term "standard" to refer to the students that are not slow learners. Martin, Ruth and Martin, William (NA) used the term normal to refer to them. There is a contradiction when it is said that slow learners are normal children. After the authors of this paper analyzed all the previous definitions, they coincide that slow learners are normal children, without any disability. They only go at a slow pace through the learning process. That is why they need more time to figure things out than the standard ones to get the contents. They also require of more persistence to cope with academic demands.

Martin, Ruth and Martin, William pp.8 (NA) stated that "Most of the educational materials available are prepared on the basis of the needs of the normal child, and must be modified before they are suitable for slow learners."

Sometimes slow learners are not concentrating in learning under the education regulations and the teaching materials designed for them (textbooks, workbooks, etc). As Borah, R. pp.139 2013 said "they are simply not interested in studying under traditionally accepted system of education". For that reason teachers have to create new materials and techniques to motivate and help them to understand.

Slow learning is just a term to define those students that have the capacity to learn all the knowledge that correspond to their age according to the curriculum, but at their own pace. It is absurd to suppose that they accomplish the same standards of the standard ones. They need more time to acquire new concepts and solve problems. They not only have problems in learning but also with habitual actions like: games, social relationship, habits and abilities.

As Borah, R. pp.139-140 2013 expressed "Often they are quiet and shy, and they have trouble making friends. They may have a poor self confidence... All of these problems cause them to have a poor self esteem"

3. Learners' Characteristics

According to different authors there are peculiar characteristics to identify slow learners. "First, slow learners are recurrently immature in their relations with others and do poorly in school" said Borah, R. pp.140 2013. Among the most common characteristics that allow the teachers to recognize this element, there are: poor vocabulary, sometimes inferior motor skills and coordination, dislike of school, mood of inferiority, susceptible, confused and shay. "Secondly, they cannot do multifaceted or complex problems and work very slowly" affirm Borah, R. pp.140 2013.

But it is due to their delay intelligence quotient(IQ), as Martin, R. and Martin, W. pp.4 (NA) stated this retardation varies from six months to two years. "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 time tables or spelling rules"

According to Borah, R. pp.140 2013, that is because knowledge is not kept in mind for so long in order that they could apply it in a given situation. All these authors agree that slow learners have a short attention span and poor concentration; they are not able to have long-term goals.

Martin, Ruth and Martin, William (NA), Borah, R. (2013) and Muppudathi (2014) have made a deep study and have proposed good ideas to cope with slow learners, like that it is important to take into consideration that although they have difficulties in developing abstract thinking, they have greater interest in the concrete things. It means that experiences are very important for them; they imitate plans, thinking, reasons, experiments, they generalize and transfer knowledge from past experiences to new situations. As their critical thinking does not achieve the same level as the standards students, they are less imaginative and able to solve problems. They arrive at conclusions without a sufficient analysis of other options, admitting any practical solution or estimated effect. They are disposing for the activities that are going to be useful for them, and with an urgent desire of getting to the end, another way they lose interest. They need a good rapport to be motivated towards knowledge in order to achieve the relation between the cognitive and effective categories.

Taking as a starting point the reason that they can develop the same abilities as the standard students but in a longer period of time; it is essential to admit that their learning is going to increase by stages. But, they learn and keep in mind just the things that are meaningful to them. As a result of this, they need to be given part of responsibility; it means that they have to develop autonomy towards their duties in schools as well as at home. It allows them to develop certain self-confidence while interacting in any environment, with good relationships and feel equal as the others.

Instruction is very important too, they need to know how to use tools for school and daily life. They have to be very well oriented on how each machine operates and they need a clear explanation on what every heading means; when defining the terms read, write, count, find, define, summarize, compose, etc. Specific situations must be explained, described, narrated, and illustrated.

Slow learners have a great need to be trained in both oral and written communication. They demand opportunities to explain, describe, express, ask questions and say answers. They also have to participate in group discussions and interviews. As grammatical relationship requires abstract reasoning and it is not within slow learners' ability, they possibly dislike language abilities. Learning the

rules by heart can be used, but if they don't know how to apply the rule, the effort is unsuccessful. But in the case of slow learners the repetition is successful, that is why the teacher has them exercise on writing sentences, paragraphs and any kind of written exercise more than the standard students.

4. Diagnosis: The Starting Point

There are teachers that have been teaching for long period of time, and have years of experience. It is believed that experience teacher it is possible to recognise the psychological framework of an individual and it is not necessary to diagnose them. There are also teachers that have been training the same learners for more than a course, and they assume they already are familiar with them, but the problem is that at the same time children have been growing up, each of them in a different content.

The teacher has the responsibility to select the appropriate way to make a diagnosis in order not to confuse a slow learner with a disable one or a standard one. As the education of slow learners differs from the education of the standard ones, the first thing a teacher has to do is a diagnosis to identify the students according different categories, slow learners is just one of them.

As slow learners learn at their own pace the teacher should use different strategies and approaches to follow their advances and be continuously evaluating the diagnosis according their IQ. This control requires a constantly update of the teacher, in order to create new ways to exercise and motivate them to learn and fix their knowledge. Sometimes these kinds of students have been confused, because there are some teachers who don't know how to differentiate them from the standard ones taking into consideration they often have similar nature, it includes physical appearance, intellect, education, and emotional characteristics. It is so superficial to try to distinguish them by just the observation method.

Martin, R. and Martin, W. (NA) stated that slow learner must be identified by a careful analysis and diagnosis from several sources. They included IQ and other standardized tests which indicate a competence below the expected age level. And they also quoted Don Eastmead, M.D pp. 1 2004.

"Being a slow learner is a lifelong problem. A Slow Learner is a child whose IQ is low enough to cause considerable difficulty in keeping up in the classroom. An average IQ is 100. Slow learners score between 70 and 90 on IQ tests. Less than 70 is considered Mentally Retarded. Slow Learners are not Mentally Retarded"

5. Teachers and Parents Point of View

"The best of materials: the finest of classroom, the most proficient administration, the best designed curriculum, the most active F.T.A. will not replace a quality teacher." Martin, R. and Martin, W. pp.7 (NA)

In growing up and educating slow learner the school and the family has a huge responsibility, because first of all they need extra time and systematic care to fulfil their tasks. Both sides must be prepared to enhance the learner possibilities. Taking into consideration that the process of learning begins since children are preschooler, they need a friendly and warm environment, but also appropriate incentive; where the family plays the best role building an adequate model.

As it was previously stated the first thing that a teacher must do when starting with any class is a diagnosis in order to recognise the diversity. After a classification according to motivation, interests, learning needs, learning styles, learning levels and other aspects the teachers want to know; the teachers should adapt their teaching methods and approaches, curriculum and teaching material to each specific student. They must be flexible to have control of the class and the ability to adapt the lesson planed to any circumstances originated in the classroom.

Motivation comprises psychological and educative desires that have to be present along the whole lesson. It's the teacher's responsibility to wake up the cognitive interest of the students; it means that when there is a cognitive motive there is an intrinsic motive. Most slow learners are lack of intrinsic motivation they are not interested in determining knowledge, as these contents are not among their priorities. The right didactic way to motivate the students since the intrinsic point of view is providing an enthusiastic environment to demonstrate them that the topic they are dealing with is important and how it is going to be useful for them. If the learners realise that they have learned something helpful, they will be disposed to go on learning. Then, it is possible to state that the intrinsic motivation is an important psychological element in the slow learners' teaching-learning process; so the cognitive interest is considered a motivating aspect.

To establish a good rapport with the class, the teachers should have a good sense of humour; it is an exceptional characteristic to carry out this task. They also require of large imagination for stimulating the students and get the class out the routine. But at the same time teachers of slow learners require a big amount of responsibility and professionalism. They have the responsibility of carrying out a competent teaching-learning process. To accomplish this purpose, they need to be constantly investigating and updating their knowledge about teaching methods, didactic, psychology, pedagogy, and some other sciences.

Another important source to learn about the learners is interaction. Each student is a different word, and during curricular and extracurricular activities the teacher is constantly getting familiar with the world of each of them. Teacher-parent's relationship is also helpful; sometimes parents know details of their children that facilitate the teacher's work and on the other way around. The teacher should know the environment of the community and the social relations in which the learners are involved, and make use of all of them. And of course, other colleges' experiences are also very useful.

6. Helpful Tips

There are many features to take into consideration to cope with slow learning, that's why it's a big challenge for teachers nowadays. It requires time, patience, creativity and a very wide imagination to stimulate the teaching-learning process in a classroom. The teacher can develop the same general activities for all the classroom, but taking into account the diagnosis. The diversity of the class has to be

treated using specific features, roles, assignments, tasks for the students. For instance the activities that require critical thinking should be given to the standard ones; activities concerning practical application or simple reasoning to get to an easy and fast conclusion should be for slow learners.

Martin, R. And Martin, W. pp.11-12 (NA) provides these ideas to take into consideration when planning activities focused on slow learners:

- Provide opportunities for success (accomplishment, achievement, give opportunities to be good at something)
- Present knowledge that can be put to practical use quickly
- Provide activities that satisfy a present need, interest, or curiosity
- Develop projects in which many senses can be used (solve a math problem using different ways)
- Demonstrate rather than verbalize (show rather than tell, as they learn slowly and forget quickly)
- Keep activities simple, avoid the complex
- Maintain a continuity of experiences
- Drill, motivate, drill, motivate, and drill again
- Evaluate, teach, evaluate, teach, re-evaluate (use feedback to motivate)
- Avoid being overly critical, (try to establish a feeling of confidence to avoid afraid or tension)
- Use films, pictures, and other visual aids whenever possible.
- Whenever possible use first hand experiences
- Use variety
- Move slowly, but move
- Use short units
- Dramatize
- Use games

7. Example of Exercises

7.1. Listening

- ✓ Listening to recorded materials, watching films or short stories and after that discussing about it. It also helps to integrate abilities.
- ✓ Listening to a story and draw a picture about it.
- ✓ Tape recorders: Use tape recorder to record class conversations, oral reports, reading, and dramatizations.
- ✓ Find unfamiliar words in the dictionary by listening to the sounds from a recorder.

7.2. Speaking

- ✓ Story telling: The teacher begins to tell an imaginary story and ask a student to continue it, then another student will add something else till all of them have created a piece of the story and get to the end of it.
- ✓ Art work by describing pictures on the textbooks, workbooks, real ones, etc.
- ✓ Oral reports
- ✓ Dramatization
- ✓ Game: "Family words". One student is going to say a word and the next is going to say another one that belong to the same group, like: colours, animals, vegetables, etc.

7.3. Reading

- Story reading:
 - Materials: Written stories divided into chunks
 - Organization: Groups of 5 or 6 students
 - Procedures: the teacher is going to hand out the stories, giving one to each team. Each member of the team will have a piece of paper with a part of the story. He/she is going to read it in order they decide the order of the story. When they finish organizing it they will stand up and read the story in the correct order.
- Associating words with pictures:
 - Organization: Group activity. This is excellent to provide independent work values.
 - Materials: A big picture that contains many objects, appliances, parts, places, etc. Also small cards that contain words with the name of each object, appliance, part, place, etc.
 - Procedures: The teacher is going to put the big picture on the wall and distribute the small cards to the students. As they identify the word they have in the card with the part into the big picture they will race their hands. The teacher is going to send them by turn to stand up, go to the wall, point the correct content and read the word they have in the card.
- Bulletin boards on the wall of the classroom with the right spelling of words or phrases, grammar rules, etc.
- Write a summary.
- Complete forms.
- Games also help them to stimulate their imagination. In reading, the teacher can use puzzles.

7.4. Writing

- ✓ Diary: Have the students write a diary about their daily life.
- ✓ Parody: teaches will have them to write a parody using a sequence of picture.
- ✓ Create familiar situations with places, objects, activities they like in order ask them to write a composition.
- ✓ Have the students to write a poem, short stories, tells, etc
- ✓ Dictation
- ✓ Have them to fill forms, envelops, etc
- ✓ Write different kind of letters

8. Mathematic

Slow learners need to incorporate mathematic vocabulary related to: numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division; also units of measurement among others. Most of the mathematic problems are very hard to understand for slow learners. As it has been said, practical activities, repetition, use of experiences, daily life necessity are helpful to fix knowledge in slow learners. There are some examples of exercises teachers can use to train mathematic abilities. There are some enjoyable games that stimulate the student's interest such as:

- Arithmetic Tag by Martin, Ruth and Martin, William (NA)

Choose a child and have him stand outside a circle made by the other pupils. Let him run around the circle, chanting a multiplication combination, addition or subtraction fact, as "six, times three, six times three, and six times three." The runner stops behind someone and touches him. The one touched must give the correct answer or go into the centre of the circle. If the one touched gives the correct answer to the combination, he runs about the circle, chanting the combination he gave correctly, as "six times three' are eighteen." When he stops behind another player he gives a new combination. The one he touches must give the answer correctly or go into the centre. Players who go into the centre can get out by giving the answer before it is given by the one who has been touched.

- A Number Game by Martin, Ruth and Martin, William (NA)

Divide flash cards into two piles and the class into two teams. Each team lines up behind a desk with a pile of cards on it. Each team has half of the blackboard to work on. At a signal, the first person in each line takes the top card, goes to the blackboard, and works the example. He carries the card back and puts it on the "Used" pile before the next person goes up. The teams move along as fast as they can. As soon as one team finishes its pile, the game stops. The examples are corrected, and points are taken off for the number of unused cards of the other team.

The team having the most examples correct is the winner

9. Conclusions

Slow learners are normal students that just need more time than the standard ones to get knowledge. The first thing to identify them is to diagnose. The teachers have to distinguish all the characteristic of slow learners in order not to confuse them with the standards. They also have to be patient, with good imagination and creativity to cope with all the slow learners' features. Using appropriate methods and techniques with the adequate activities and exercise will provide a successful learning process to slow learners.

Finally, these researchers considered that it is not a task of teachers alone; it is also the students' autonomy and the family responsibility. Every human being has the right to be educated and instructed for living in a society.

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