**Slow learners**

Why is it so important to be able to identify the slow learners in a class as opposed to those children with specific learning disabilities? After all, we have had the ill effects of labelling stressed on us ad nauseam. Everybody knows the old self-fulfilling prophecy experiments from college days. What you expect to get is exactly what you will get. Social justice and inclusive curriculum advances have also contributed to our awareness and sometimes even our wariness of special needs kids. What then can be possible benefits of identifying these two quite specific groups?

There is only ever one justification to labelling a child with a specific tag. That is to ensure that the level of service and support provided to that child is markedly improved. As the learning needs of these two groups are quite different, it is important to make correct identification for programming needs.

**Definitions**

*A slow learner* is a child of below average intelligence, whose thinking skills have developed significantly more slowly than the norm for his/her age. This child will go through the same basic developmental stages as other children, but will do so at a significantly slower rate. However, this development, while being slower, nevertheless be relatively even.

On the other hand, a child with *specific learning disability*, is one of average or above average intelligence who has specific difficulties which can make learning very difficult. There may be deficits in any of the basic central nervous system functions, which have to do with the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities ie attention, memory, language, auditory and visual perception, motor coordination and planning, spatial orientation, impulse control and sequencing. In short, if there is a discrepancy between the children’s potential and actual achievement.

Psychologists and educational researchers use a range of terms to refer to learners whose achievement is low. In this study I use the term slow learners, who are defined as “children who are doing poorly in school, yet are not eligible for special education” (Shaw, Grimes & Bulman, 2005: 11). As Lescano (1995) explains, it is important to distinguish between slow learners and those who are learning disabled:

The first is the student who does not learn successfully due to general socio-cultural problems, frustrating past language classroom experiences, inadequate use of strategies, or lack of interest. The second type of slow learner is the student formally diagnosed as “learning-disabled” by specialists in child psychology. A number of factors may account for slow learners. Khan (2008) lists several, such as a lack of emotional growth, the lack of a secure environment, limited opportunities for learning, absenteeism from school, untrained teachers and large class size. It is important for teachers to be aware of this range of problems that can cause a child to be considered a slow learner. In terms of language learning, slow learners may have had negative past experiences of learning and consequently lost interest; they may also be characterized by the inadequate use of learning strategies.

Of course, slow language learners’ problems are not solely related to language learning; more general problems listed above, and additional factors such as family problems at home, can also be influential.

**Characteristics of Slow Learner**

**1. Developmental**  
-- may have immature language patterns or speech problems

**2. Social**  
-- poor judgement, immature social behaviour, prefers company of younger children

**3. Personal**  
-- frustration, aggression, anxiety

**4. Academic**  
-- may show proficiency with particular tasks rather than a subject areas, poor memory, difficulties understanding several steps in a task

**5. Learning**-- needs to have new information linked to old, difficulties transferring information learned in one situation to other situations.

**Behaviour Issues that Slow Learners May Exhibit**

"Slow learners" are students whose pace lags behind that of their classmates. They don't qualify for special education, and they typically receive only limited accommodations. As years progress, these students fall even further behind. This results in frustration for students and teachers alike. In many cases, behaviour problems result. Before teachers can help these students, they must recognize the conduct issues that invariably surface. A teacher's preparedness and positive approach can help to keep such students from falling through the academic cracks.

**Off-Task**   
 Many teachers instinctively lean toward only one instruction mode, typically   
visual or auditory. When the approach doesn't suit a slow learner, his mind wanders and he becomes distracted and stops listening to the teacher. These students generally need interactive, hands-on experiences. Additionally, if a teacher has slow transitions between activities, distracted students lose focus and have trouble getting back on task.

**Self-Sabotage**   
 Many students who have fallen behind academically fear failure and embarrassment. When their self-confidence lags, they appear apathetic, even though this is not really the case. A self-preservation mechanism kicks in, causing them to give up before they fail.

**Peer Distraction**

Misery loves company. When boys and girls feel incompetent, they look for allies. They attempt to persuade peers to join them in mischief. They make jokes in an effort to get laughs and sidetrack the intentions of classmates.

**Uncontrolled Responses**

We all want attention. When slow learners don't get the positive attention they're seeking, they settle for negative attention. Rather than raising their hands to speak, they blurt out whatever comes to mind in order to get a reaction. Their responses are often inappropriate and relate in no way to the subject matter.

**Immature Interactions**

If a student has delayed academic skills, she may also lack the social presence expected of her age group. She could have trouble communicating with and being accepted by peers. She might resort to intimidation or bullying. Some students even destroy the property of their peers.

**Impulsive Reactions**

Boys and girls who are slower learners may spontaneously leave their desks. This generally happens at inappropriate times, such as when the teacher is engaged in a direct lesson. Their pent-up energy gets the best of them. They have short attention spans and can't tolerate a lengthy concept explanation.

**Refusal to Participate**

Slow learners often have trouble accepting authority figures. Due to prior negative encounters, they may view the teacher as the "enemy." Repeated reprimands that they may have received cause them to withdraw even further. I recall one extreme case in my class: a student flatly refused to do a thing -- he was very quiet, but wouldn't even pick up a pencil. My efforts to involve him were in vain. The principal's response to me was that he couldn't take action unless the boy "was disruptive or prevented others from learning." That was school district policy. We can't always help them if they don't want to be helped.

Of course, every slow learner is unique; they don't all fall into these behaviour patterns. If a teacher wants to help slow learners, she first needs to be able to recognize these behaviour patterns for what they are.