In a second-grade classroom of a popular teacher there is a large group of children participating in a math lesson. Everything seems to be going great: The teacher is energetic and the children are engaged and excitedly answering questions. This is exactly what a principal wants to see when entering a classroom. You couldn’t ask for a more successful lesson, or could you?

On the far side of the room there’s a boy sitting at a table all alone. He isn’t involved in the math lesson; he isn’t even paying attention. He has some worksheets on his table but they are pushed to the side. He is slouched down in his chair peeling the paper off of a crayon. By the looks of it, he had been doing that for quite some time because there were several naked crayons in front of him.

Unfortunately, that little boy isn’t sitting in the back of the room because he’s in trouble. He isn’t back there because he was a distraction to the other children in the classroom. He is back there because he cannot perform academic tasks in a traditional manner. This little boy is a “slow learner.”

This boy displays many of the common characteristics associated with slow learners. He is fairly immature and has little confidence in his ability to master new skills. He is only concerned about what he is doing right now; he doesn’t worry about anything else. He usually has success with tasks that require hands-on manipulation, but even then, he is slow to complete assignments. He also frequently makes silly jokes and rarely seems to be paying attention.

Sadly, the classroom teacher is at her wits end with this child. Rather than identify the true issue at hand, she dismisses his carefree, lackadaisical tendencies as pure laziness.

Ensuring Student Success

Meeting the needs of all learners is a complex task; however, classroom teachers may find that the needs of slow learners aren’t that different from the fundamental needs of any student. Just what is it that a student needs to succeed in a school? What should all teachers and principals do every day to make sure that all students succeed?

First and foremost, value each child who is in your building. Every child has something to offer to the school. Children need to feel comfortable in order to try new things and attempt academic tasks that are challenging. A slow learner often needs a number of opportunities and many different methods to master a new skill. Imagine how intimidating it would be to know that you are the only child who needs things done differently in order to learn.

A principal can do many things to help build the self-worth of slow learners:

- Frequently point out positive attributes about the student;
- Take as many opportunities as possible to build self-esteem by praising a job well done or complimenting work skills; and
- Allow students to help perform special tasks.

Principals can also assist slow learners in their quest to learn by ensuring that teachers are meeting their specific needs in the classroom. Here are five things principals can do to promote meeting the needs of all learners in the classroom:

- Encourage teachers to provide multisensory experiences when teaching lessons;
- Promote the practice of presenting several short lessons, rather than one long lesson;
- Provide time for collaboration between special and regular education teachers to brainstorm new interventions and strategies;
- Encourage teachers to participate in professional development opportunities that focus on teaching slow learners and differentiation; and
- Create a small budget that teachers can use to purchase...
appropriate materials to meet the needs of slow learners, while not compromising the content.

There are several interventions that can be easily implemented in a regular classroom that would greatly help slow learners succeed. A principal can easily identify a teacher who is using these interventions by looking for specific things during an observation or walkthrough. A principal should make it a priority to consistently check that all teachers are meeting the needs of all students in every classroom.

The physical environment of a classroom should:

- Be as clutter-free as possible—excess materials and supplies should be put away;
- Have desks or tables arranged in a manner in which the slow learners are seated closest to the area where the teacher is presenting lessons and interacting with students most frequently;
- Offer a quiet area that is somewhat secluded to use as a study area when needed; and
- Provide close proximity between the slow learner and necessary educational tools (e.g., Smart-Board, blackboard, educational charts, and guides).

The classroom materials should:

- Provide multiple opportunities for different learning styles;
- Be differentiated to meet the individual needs of all students;
- Be simplified to contain only the material that must be mastered—extraneous material should be removed so the slow learner can concentrate on necessary skills; and
- Provide opportunities to use graphic organizers to assist the slow learner in organizing information.

The assignments should:

- Be simplified to contain pertinent information only;
- Be shortened;
- Provide specific instructions;
- Provide variation of skill practice;
- Allow for use of manipulatives whenever possible; and
- Provide opportunities to create verbal answers rather than written.

The assessments should:

- Test relevant information only;
- Be orally read to the student;
- Be given in a form that is the least stressful for the student (e.g., oral, multiple choice, etc.); and
- Allow for a chance to take the test again if needed.

The student groupings should:

- Be heterogeneous;
- Allow for cooperative learning experiences; and
- Be positive experiences for all students.

The classroom teacher should:

- Have high, but attainable expectations;
- Have clear rules and consequences;
- Steer clear of abstract concepts;
- Provide hands-on practice with manipulatives when possible;
- Make lessons meaningful and direct; and
- Shorten the length of all activities.

First and foremost, value each child who is in your building.

Employing all of the above interventions is a great start to providing an appropriate and differentiated educational experience for each child. However, these are only basic interventions and can be modified to meet the specific needs of teachers and students according to grade level and ability.

While the classroom teacher is primarily responsible for the educational advancement of all the students they teach, the principal must also be aware of the progress that is being made by students identified as slow learners. Ultimately, the principal is in charge of ensuring that each child, regardless of how he or she learns, is making significant academic progress. We can no longer let these children slip through the cracks. These students are capable of learning and deserve the opportunity to excel, even if it does take a little longer than average.

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