Helping Parents Help the Slow Learner

Principals can provide much-needed support to parents of struggling learners.

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he role of the principal in the lives of students and their parents cannot be overestimated. When children feel that the principal is their friend and parents know they are accepted, a mutual trust and respect develops. A relationship built on open communication and respect can be particularly valuable when working with the parents of children who do not learn as quickly as their same-age peers. Often these parents are frustrated, do not know what to do to assist their children, and feel vulnerable because they think the system does not support or provide for them.

When principals understand these fears and learn as much as they can about slow-learning children, they are able to provide support to parents. Having accurate knowledge, empathy and compassion, and the willingness to assist parents in knowing what they can do in the home, helps sustain the kinds of relationships that parents—and teachers—want from administrators. Strong parental and educational support provides slow learners with the greatest likelihood of educational, social, and emotional success with the fewest frustrations and discouragements.

**Gaining Accurate Knowledge About Slow Learners**

About 23 percent of the general population falls into an intellectual range labeled low average to borderline (Warnemuende & Samson, 1991). Their score on an intelligence scale is typically between 70 and 90. Students in this category function two or more years below grade level. They are neither developmentally delayed nor learning disabled, so they do not qualify for special education (Warnemuende & Samson, 1991). They are unable to receive the full benefits of regular classroom instruction because the material is too difficult and the competition is too great.

Slow learners cannot be picked out of a group of children by their looks or behavior. As preschoolers, they may learn more slowly than some children but not enough to cause concern. During kindergarten and the primary grades, parents and teachers begin to suspect something is inhibiting the learning process. These students score low in all areas on achievement tests, have difficulty with both reading and number concepts, and do not grasp most abstract material. They are concrete thinkers and learn best with hands-on activities. They do not retain material as well as most of their peers. They work more slowly than their classmates, and with each successive grade, the learning gap between them and their peers widens.

The attention span of slow learners is short. They are not self-starters and they have not internalized effective study skills. They have difficulty following multistep instructions and need monitoring to ensure that they understand expectations. Frequently, the children’s self-esteem suffers and they experience negative feelings about school. They may be unmotivated to involve themselves in extracurricular activities.

Knowing and understanding the characteristics of this population offers the best opportunity for developing a meaningful classroom experience for the students. Principals who effectively articulate pertinent characteristics to parents can provide insights about how the children learn and how classroom modifications assist in the learning process.

**Assisting Parents with Home Strategies**

One of the most effective ways that principals can support the parents of children who learn slowly is to provide them with information. When they understand the children’s needs, their anxiety diminishes. Share the characteristics of slow learners. Listen to the questions this information elicits. Answer to your best ability and seek further information if necessary. “The desire to be a ‘learner’ is one of the most important traits of a good principal,” reports Helene Dykes, a principal in Laguna Niguel, California (Hopkins, 2006). Parents appreciate and trust administrators who are willing to admit that they don’t have all the answers.

Parental understanding and genuine acceptance pave the way for greater self-acceptance and school success. Offer the following suggestions to parents on how they can assist their youngsters at home.

**Develop patience.** Show support and encouragement by learning the art of patience. This is not easy when children do not live up to parental expectations; however, it is a necessary asset in working with slow learners. They need to know that their parents have faith and trust in them and their capabilities regardless of their learning ability.

**Accept and expect best efforts.** Indicate parental respect by not pushing for achievement beyond children’s abilities. On the other hand, accepting less than what they are capable of accomplishing is not in their best interest. School personnel can provide information on reasonable academic expectations.

**Allow extra time.** Provide the time necessary for the accomplishment of academic and nonacademic tasks. Slow learners take longer to complete most activities than their peers and siblings. Providing the necessary time requires patience and good time management on the parent’s part. These are skills that can be learned with practice.

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**IN BRIEF**

Parents of struggling learners are often unsure of how to assist their children at home. The author provides useful strategies and tips for principals to help parents support and encourage their children who are slow learners.
Recognize strengths. Pay attention to what the children do well. Help them build on those strengths. Some parents of children who are slow learners become overprotective. Overprotected children recognize that their parents don’t respect or trust their abilities. Allow them freedom to succeed, and support and teach them during failures.

Keep the doors of communication open. Be available to discuss school, friendships, or other aspects of life without insisting on such sharing. Recognize academic and social success, and show appreciation for good judgment and careful choices. Increase awareness of appropriate behaviors by specifically labeling what has been done correctly. With older children, explore academic and career options. This assists with effective decision-making.

Be involved in the educational process. Be aware of homework assignments, and structure homework time into the evening schedule. Attend school functions with the children. Communicate with the classroom teacher personally or through notes and telephone calls. Arrange for daily or weekly take-home reports to remain apprised of successes and potential problems.

Developing Empathy and Compassion
Imagine the stress slow learners experience. No matter how hard they try, they cannot achieve as well as their classmates. Keeping slow learners interested in school and motivated to learn is a difficult task. Providing opportunities for success so that they feel good about themselves and their ability to be effective in life offers a greater challenge. Parents and teachers receive the brunt of this frustration so they need someone with whom they can share their concerns; someone they think might be able to help. In a survey of K-8 teachers, emotional support from the principal was the most prevalent theme expressed (Richards, 2004). One might guess parents feel the same.

Empathic communication need not take hours of a principal’s time, but using a few effective strategies will help provide support to parents—and teachers—of slow learners.

Use eye contact and focused attention;
Reflect on what you have heard them say;
Take full responsibility for what you communicate. This means non-defensively saying how you perceive the stated concern and what may or may not be done about it;
Use a respectful tone and posture; and
Be clear about the amount of time you have. When parents and teachers know up front that you can allot them
a certain amount of time, and when you respectfully hold those boundaries, they usually comply.

People are generally satisfied when they feel that they have had your full attention and that you have understood their concerns. While these strategies seem to be a natural part of communication, it takes awareness to bring them to everyday interactions.

A team approach for working with slow-learning children makes the educational process lighter for everyone.

When principals play an integral role on the team, children feel the principal is their friend, parents feel respected, and classroom teachers feel supported.

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References