

Helping Slow Learners Succeed

In this *Principal Leadership* article, McGill University professor Steven Shaw focuses on slow learners, many of whom, he says, fall through “one of the largest and most pervasive cracks in the educational system.” Students with borderline intelligence, who make up about 14 percent of the student population, don’t qualify for special education but often do poorly in regular classrooms and high-stakes tests. “Standard systems and supports are often ineffective – even counterproductive – because they fail to meet students’ specific learning needs and instead create a cycle of failure,” says Shaw. “By the time many of these students get to high school, their academic difficulties and related self-perceptions and attitudes toward learning are entrenched.” They are disproportionately kept back, get in trouble, drop out, and are underemployed, unemployed, or incarcerated.

Still, many slow learners graduate from high school and complete postsecondary education. Shaw lists some keys to success:

- Making sure they have close relationships with one or two staff members;
- Maximizing academically engaged time and providing extra time on task;
- Breaking down lessons and tasks into manageable chunks;
- Presenting information concretely versus abstractly and relating it to real-world experiences;
- Using hands-on activities and computer-assisted instruction to reinforce learning;
- Helping students relate new material to previous learning and organize it for effective memory storage;
- Providing repetition and frequent practice of discrete skills applied to different challenges;
- Helping students generalize skills and knowledge and apply them to new situations;
- Providing a variety of ways to demonstrate competence;
- Pairing students with peer mentors;
- Helping them set long-term goals and manage their time;
- Helping them develop academic motivation by getting them involved in activities they enjoy and in which they are successful;
- Maintaining high expectations and rewarding genuine effort.

It’s a myth that slow learners need slow-paced instruction, says Shaw. “Slower-paced instruction is a sure-fire recipe for falling further behind,” he says. “Students with borderline intellectual functioning require more practice opportunities in the same amount of time as their average-ability peers. An appropriately paced classroom is one that is well organized, that uses computer-assisted instruction, and is taught by a teacher who has high expectations for rapid work completion. This type of environment enables slow learners to learn the discrete facts they need to know to overcome their limitations in generalization. Computer-assisted instruction makes learning basic skills automatic, which is essential to gaining fluency.”

“Rescuing Students from the Slow Learner Trap” by Steven Shaw in *Principal Leadership*, February 2010 (Vol. 10, #6, p. 12-16), no e-link available