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Slow learners need lots of support

Slow learners need empathy, not sympathy. A bit of extra attention from the teachers will see them through.



Suresh Rao Aroor, Director and Chief Neurologist, Parijma Neurodiagnostic and Rehabilitation Centre, Bangalore. — Photo: Sampath Kumar G.P.

The new aim of education is to help the child to develop his intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, moral, spiritual being and his communal life and impulses out of his own temperament and being.

— **Sri Aurobindo**

TEACHERS AND often other students term them "backward" or "weak." But this is definitely not by birth, but because of their inability to keep up with the rest of their class in learning.

We are talking about the slow learners who, by sheer chance, have been in this process that can be said to be one of negativity.

In fact, one has to say that such a child/person just needs a little bit of personal attention and nothing more. The education system should look at the students in a manner that generates empathy rather than one that focusses on sympathy.

The parents of such children find themselves unwanted and wallow in pity, which is not the need of the hour. Sulatha Shenoy, a Child Psychologist who works at various locations to help the slow learners, is of the firm belief that "a good number of slow learners can be brought back to a great amount of normalcy if society helps them to live as normal individuals; they have enough of potential to reach the top and live like normal human beings."

"The motivation that these slow learners have has made us experiment. We run educational programmes for these learners through the National Institute of Open Schooling and a good number of them are in the process of completing Standard X and XII," says Dr. Shenoy.

Identification vital

A Professor who did not want to be identified says that "slow learners are found at all levels, schools and even colleges, but the difficulty is that the teacher or the parent is not in a position to identify the process and feel that the student is useless." The Professor further suggests that the teachers and the parents should be able to identify rather than speak of the mundane and the esoteric.

The characteristics of a slow learner are:

- Functions significantly below grade level.
- Is prone to immature interpersonal relationships.
- Has difficulty following multi-step directions.
- Lives in the present and does not have long-range goals.
- Has few internal strategies (i.e. organisational skills, difficulty transferring and generalising information.)
- Scores consistently low in achievement tests.
- Works well with "hands-on" material (i.e. labs, manipulative activities.)
- Has a poor self-image.
- Works on all tasks slowly.
- Masters skills slowly; some skills may not be mastered at all.

How should the teacher behave? Is the routine normal? Should one adopt special techniques? Where should the focus be?

Cold-shouldered

M.M. Swamy, Principal, GEAR Foundation for teacher-educators, says that the teacher education system in India does not incorporate any facets to highlight the plight of the slow learner.

These words are echoed by Ramesh, Principal, Al-Ameen College of Education, who is of the firm belief that "the education system should augment a curriculum which is specific to the slow learner and develop the teacher-educator to identify such students and help them to perform better."

The efforts that the so-called slow learners have made in today's competitive world to learn and understand the functioning of the world environment is something of a motivation to the parents, who otherwise would have been saddened.

Israr, Manager at the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) located on the Al-Ameen educational campus, says "a number of persons, whom our society unfortunately designates as slow learners, join the courses of NIOS and benefit. In fact, their ability to grasp things is better than regular students as they are committed to the cause of learning, and in fact, are making the best of efforts to learn, if not unlearn."

Guidelines

Here are some tips on how to work with slow learners:

- Reduce distractions by providing a quiet, private place to work.
- Emphasise strengths. Use lots of praise and reinforcement frequently.
- Make lessons short. Limit the working time and have several short work periods rather than one long one.
- Add variety to the academic routine. Do active things and use educational games, puzzles, and other techniques as much as possible.
- Work on material that is somewhat challenging but allows success. Work that is too hard or too easy is a turn-off.
- Make learning fun and comfortable. Your positive attitude is very important.
- Encourage your child to talk to you. Ask what he did in school. Ask what was the best part of his/her day. Ask questions about the TV shows he/she watches. Talk about what he/she has heard, done, and plans to do. Communicate with your students.
- Go over his/her daily work to reinforce the learning. Slow learners need repetition.
- Provide meaningful, concrete activities rather than abstract ones.
- Give short, specific directions and have your child repeat them back to you.
- READ! Set an example by reading yourself. Read to the student and have the student read to you.
- Work closely with the teacher to help strengthen academic areas that are weak in school.
- Stress the importance of education.
- Encourage the student to explore an area of interest to him/her.

Wrong notion

Suresh Rao Aroor, a Paediatric Neurologist who runs the Parijima Neurodiagnostic and Rehabilitation Centre (PNRC), Bangalore, says that "if the students are not able to cope up with the syllabi, then it is a problem for the parents and the teachers. Because, the parents consider this as a social stigma, and in this competitive world, these students face the brunt and lose out in the long run. The society, instead of rectifying the mistakes, is creating a void within itself."

Practically speaking, education demands highly conscious and developed teachers who help bring in change in the learners' mindset, lest they get left behind. For Kireet Joshi, psychologist, "the role of the teacher is to put the child on the right road and encourage him to follow it, watching, suggesting, helping, but not imposing or interfering."

Dr. Suresh Rao says slow learners are part and parcel of our system, and we have to live with them and help in their growth. We should not sympathise but learn to empathise.

Ideal curriculum

He says that parents, by requesting the promotion of their wards even if they have not passed in a class, are creating a negative situation. All this is part and parcel of the social stigma attached to such students. He suggests that those who do not pick up the strings join the NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling). The flexible syllabi and the facet of picking and

choosing subjects of interest will help us to help the students hold on to the interest and develop academically.

Some of the traits of slow learners are inability to cope with the syllabi and academic activities; inattentiveness in class; behavioural problems; short attention span; and lack of academic activities.

The PNRC is trying to sensitise the teacher-educators of Bangalore every two months so that they are able to identify the students with these traits and will be in a position to help them rather than admonish them. PNRC has trained about 5,000 teachers to help slow learners.

The PNRC has a multidimensional team — a neurologist, a psychologist, a social worker, a speech therapist and a physiotherapist. The team does not tackle the subject in isolation, but does it together. Each one of the specialists contributes to the building up of knowledge. After discussions, they decide how to look after the student.

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