

DES Teacher Education Project
Focus Books

Series Editor: Trevor Kerry



Teaching Slow Learners

in mixed ability classes

A self-instructional handbook of strategies
and suggestions for teachers

Peter Bell

formerly Senior Lecturer, School of Education,
University of Nottingham

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Macmillan Education

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INTRODUCTION

This is a workbook designed to help you teach slow learners more effectively. Interest in the education of slow learners in normal schools has been highlighted by recent national debates on mixed ability teaching and on pupil progress in formal and informal settings. The book is designed to serve the needs both of students and of qualified teachers who want to take stock of, and improve, their skills in this area. It falls into three parts.

Part 1 is a collection of exercises which can be carried out away from the classroom or as pre-experience activities. Part 2 gives the user scope for practising specific classroom skills, while Part 3 provides an opportunity for reflection upon experience and upon the literature of the subject.

In a survey of users of the trial versions of this workbook it was found to be useful not only for self-training or use as part of a course, but as a stimulus to discussion at departmental meetings, to help in formulating school or faculty policies towards slow learners, to act as guidelines for re-writing curriculum materials or to assist in writing a job specification for specialist teachers of these pupils.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks are due to Caron Robinson for the graphics, and to Susan Meakin, Carolle Kerry, Evelyn Towlerton and Anna Dennison who were concerned in various ways with background research.

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PART 1

FINDING AND HELPING THE SLOW LEARNER

TOPIC 1

IDENTIFYING SLOW LEARNERS

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION AND LABELLING

Whenever we begin to discuss the problem of children with learning difficulties we run into our own difficulties of definition and its associated problem of labelling. Any name which we apply to children who are falling behind in their school work (backward, educationally subnormal, less able, remedial or slow learner) tends to acquire some sort of stigma. Also, the act of labelling seems, inevitably, to lead to a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', whereby children who are clearly marked out in school as being 'dull and backward' conform more and more to the expectations which are presented to them.

It would be wrong to deny the proper educational opportunities to slow learners because they have been typecast by labelling. What is required is a positive approach to the identification and education of slow learners, coupled with a conscious effort on the part of staff and school to circumvent the inferior status which may be given to these youngsters.

Two facts are clear:

- 1 There are substantial numbers of slow learners in secondary schools. 14 per cent has been quoted as a conservative estimate, and a Department of Education and Science Survey¹ indicated a range of from 7 to 60 per cent in a representative sample of schools.
- 2 Not all teachers can spot the slow learners. Movement from class to class in large secondary schools makes identification difficult for teachers, and many pupils who seem slow in other ways have become adept at covering up their shortcomings. They move through school 'neither paying attention nor drawing too much attention to themselves'.

One of the purposes of this book is to help you to identify the slow learners in your groups.

Definition, Identification, Remediation

Some teachers haven't much time for the sort of jargon in this title. They are more concerned about what to do 'on Tuesday morning at 10.45 am'. There is something to be said for this point of view when so many books concentrate on defining problems and seem unable to present any solutions. Yet it is important to think about *who* we are teaching before we can decide *what to do*. We cannot identify individuals or groups of children who need special help until we have considered what we mean by 'slow learners'.

For our purposes let us take the view that slow learners are children who are failing in their school work. They have had difficulties in class for some time and give the impression that they may need special help over a lengthy period. The term 'slow learners' is only one, more recent, of a number of terms like backward, less able, educationally subnormal, which have been applied to the 'bottom' end of our classes and schools.

It is important to recognise two things about the term. One is that slow learners are only one sub group of a number of children who have learning difficulties.

In the past many secondary schools with remedial departments have recognised that there were two groups of children to be catered for — the less able and the 'remedial' (those who might respond to coaching and return to the normal timetable). We now think that there are more groups.

Ultimately, of course, there should be as many categories as individuals, but for practical purposes we should try to plan for four or five groups. One would be our slow learners, a second could be for children with specific learning difficulties, another might comprise children with behaviour problems, and in certain areas there will be a further group of children who may be thought to be socially or culturally disadvantaged. Another group, which is not often acknowledged, may be those whose educational history has been inadequate.

Secondly, the term 'slow' will not apply to all of a child's activities. Nor is slowness always a bad thing. Perhaps you could write down three or four examples of slowness being a desirable characteristic.

- | | |
|---------|---------|
| 1 _____ | 3 _____ |
| 2 _____ | 4 _____ |

Activity 1:
Identifying the slow learner

From within the spectrum of 'children with learning difficulties' mentioned above, you can now try to identify the slow learners — using informal procedures. *Think of a child* who is having problems generally with his/her school work. Write down as many observations as you can which seem to be related to his/her difficulties.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

Now, at the side of each observation put a word which seems to *classify* your comment, e.g. educational, social.

Activity 2:
Finding slow learners in your classes

Bearing in mind the things you wrote in Activity 1, think of a *particular mixed ability class*. Write down the names of all the children you would identify as slow learners.
How many have you noted?

When a group of teachers did a similar exercise, most of them recorded only two or three names per class. It is interesting to bear in mind that the recent Warnock Report² on Special Education summarising the results of

several surveys, notes that 'a teacher of a mixed ability class of 30 children even in an ordinary school should be aware that possibly as many as six of them may require some form of special educational provision at some time during their school life and about four or five of them may require special educational provision at any given time'.

Although we must expect figures to vary from class to class, and in different schools, if your estimate differs from the example above you may wish to consider what the reasons for this might be.

A comparison with another colleague who knows the class well could be interesting.

Activity 3:
Comparing notes with a colleague

Ask a colleague who also teaches the class you reviewed in Activity 2 to write down the names of any pupils he/she would identify as slow learners. To what extent do his/her names and numbers agree with yours?

IDENTIFYING THE SLOW LEARNER

Activity 4:
Finding out about your slow learners

So far you have attempted to consider what we mean by the term 'slow learner' and to clarify your own intuitive procedures for identifying such children by – writing down your comments, making comparisons with colleagues, categorising your comments and reflecting on the numbers of slow learners in your groups.

Now check off the characteristics of two of your 'slow learners' against the following list of observations, under the various headings.

Put the names or initials of two 'slow' children at the top of columns A and B and make one or two word comments under each heading (academic, intellectual, social, etc). The descriptions are a guide – use the actual words if they fit, or your own if more appropriate.

PUPIL PROFORMA (For confidentiality use CODES not names)

	A _____	B _____
1 Academic Performance		
<i>School Work</i>		
Has difficulty in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic. Avoids 'academic' tasks. Seeks out routine jobs – tidying up, copying from blackboard, doing 'sums'.	1 _____	_____
Prefers practical lessons. Not interested in books. Needs supervision. Always asks for help/doesn't ask for help. Makes mistakes copying. Slow to carry out task – never finishes piece of work. Finishes work quickly – very little done. Loses books, pencils, etc.	2 _____	_____
	3 _____	_____
	4 _____	_____
	5 _____	_____
	6 _____	_____

A _____ B _____

School Record

Poor in subjects other than your own: clumsy in PE, woodwork, domestic science. Skips lessons. Poor attendance/often late/truants. Poor attitude to school. Poor reports from other teachers, previous school(s). Subject of adverse staffroom comments. Several changes of school. Has been referred to School Psychological Service.

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____

2 Intellectual

Knows little about the world around, limited experiences. Not much originality in any work. Doesn't seem to have many interests. Unable to follow simple instructions. Doesn't see 'connections'. Needs a lot of help. Has difficulty in making himself/herself understood. Poor vocabulary. Uses single words rather than sentences. Rarely contributes in discussion (unless asked directly). Short responses. Conversation poor. Chatterbox — but talk inconsequential/repetitive. Hyperactive. Attends to stimuli other than task in hand. Short concentration span.

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
5	_____	_____
6	_____	_____
7	_____	_____

3 Physical

Seems small for age. Has speech impediment. Some evidence of deafness. Vision difficulties, rubs eyes a lot, peers at work, has spectacles — doesn't always wear them, lacks co-ordination, letters badly formed, writing messy, work disorganised/badly set out. Loses things, clumsy.

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____

4 Social

An isolate, mixes/plays with younger children. Aggressive towards other children yet seeks approval from peer group. Easily led. Excessively affectionate — uninhibited in addressing adults. No relationships with any teacher. Disruptive in class. Interferes in playground games. On the fringe of activities.

1	_____	_____
	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
	_____	_____

5 Emotional

Emotionally immature. Poor self-image — aware of inabilities, often says 'I am not very good at. . .', 'I can't do it'. Nervous, anxious. Very demanding on teacher's time. Does not like change (to new class, activity). Restless, distractable, cannot sit still. Easily upset. Stammers. Bites fingernails. Irritable. Uncooperative. Has temper tantrums. Dreamy, withdrawn. Moody. Tearful.

1	_____	_____
	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
	_____	_____

6 Family Background

Broken family. Unemployment, low income, on free meals. In care. No contact with home. Parents anxious. Compared unfavourably with other (younger) siblings. Family 'known' in school. Poor scholastic record of brothers and sisters. History of reading difficulties in family. Notes from home semi-literate. Plays with younger children at home. Seems to have few out-of-school interests. Lacks care and attention. Few possessions, no recognition of birthdays, not taken on holidays, trips, poorly clothed.

1	_____	_____
	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
	_____	_____

7 Assets

The lists on pages 7–9 concentrate on negative aspects of the child with the intention of trying to produce a profile which will identify children with learning difficulties to set against information from other sources (e.g. tests, records). But everybody has strengths as well as weaknesses. It will be important in planning a remedial programme to discover as much as possible about a child's interests, hobbies, ambitions, friends. Note and compare information from different sources.

Source		
Child	Parent	A.N.Other

TEACHERS' VIEWS OF SLOW LEARNERS

In a piece of research carried out by the Teacher Education Project over a hundred teachers were asked to list the main classroom cues which indicated to them that a pupil might have learning difficulties. Their resulting list of cues was circulated to about two hundred teachers, who, in turn, commented on whether a particular cue was commonly used in their classes. The major findings from this exercise were as follows. (Percentage figures refer to the proportion of the second sample listing the item quoted.)

A PROFILE OF THE SLOW LEARNER

teachers recognise slow learners as the pupils who . . .

%

95 . . . need specially clear, step by step, repeated instructions

93 . . . need extra explanations of subject matter

88 . . . need constant extra help

87 . . . have reading difficulties

87 . . . lack concentration

87 . . . have difficulty in comprehension

84 . . . do not absorb information

82 . . . have writing difficulties

82 . . . are easily distracted

81 . . . lack basic knowledge or skills

81 . . . do work of poor quality

80 . . . are slow workers and slow to respond

80 . . . are easily confused

In addition to the more informal identification procedures mentioned, schools may make use of standardised tests as part of a more formal process of identifying slow learners and for diagnosing their difficulties.

Some teachers are strongly opposed to the use of standardised tests. True, they *can* be badly administered and the results misinterpreted. The answer to this is to *choose appropriate tests* for particular purposes, *read the instruction manuals, follow the procedures carefully and interpret the results with caution*. Check conclusions against other teachers' opinions.

Having made this point, tests can be useful for:

- ... checking on children's progress,
- ... comparing children with others in a class or year group and with others of the same age in other schools (national standards),
- ... comparisons of attainments in different subjects.

A number of British publishers specialise in the production and supply of tests, e.g. the NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) Company Ltd. For a catalogue of Tests for Educational Guidance and Assessment write to 2 Jennings Buildings, Thames Avenue, Windsor, Berks, SL4 1QS.

NFER construct and publish reading, English and maths tests. A number of these are group tests enabling teachers to test groups of children all at one sitting and thereby quickly establish levels of attainment. In addition they have measures of intelligence obtained from verbal or non-verbal reasoning tests.

Another firm with a substantial catalogue of test materials is Hodder and Stoughton Educational, Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent.

Tests may be designed or used for different purposes.

Screening or survey

Here one hopes to identify, fairly quickly, individuals or groups of children who are needing extra help and a closer examination, or to assess the general progress of a group.

When you begin to fill in these details you are taking first steps in remedial work. Becoming more knowledgeable about and showing interest in a particular pupil are important first steps; this will be discussed in more detail later in the book.

N.B. You may have selected a pupil whose record of observations shows a very patchy or uneven pattern. For example, one child might be having difficulty in, say, English or maths – but otherwise has no adverse remarks on intellectual, social, emotional and family sections. He may have some queries in the physical section. Perhaps you have chosen one who could be categorised as having 'specific learning difficulties'.

Diagnostic tests

These tests pinpoint specific strengths and weaknesses in a child's performance. Diagnosis may point up possible remedies.

In the present assessment and diagnosis of learning difficulties, three aspects in particular have been the subject of test construction: intelligence, basic skills and social adjustment.

Intelligence

We cannot recommend any particular tests of intelligence with confidence. There are reasons for this:

- (i) Tests are often expensive, time-consuming to administer and mark, and results are often suspect.
- (ii) Children who are failing in school work may also do badly on 'intelligence' tests and not reveal their potential.
- (iii) Children with limited reading ability cannot tackle verbal reasoning tests. This is why non-verbal tests have been produced using figures, shapes, numbers etc. Unfortunately the mental processes involved in solving these may not bear much relationship to the intellectual skills involved in, say, learning to read.
- (iv) Many such tests need to be administered by qualified personnel to have validity.

It would be sensibly cautious, therefore, to assume that an IQ score from a 'failing' child is an underestimate. The opposite result may be more significant, i.e. if an apparently less able child scores well on an intelligence test. This could give us a more positive view of a child's potential. However, as previously suggested, if the IQ is derived from a non-verbal test, this may still be a poor indicator of a child's latent ability to master the skills of reading.

A much more useful pointer is to take a measure of a child's response to individual teaching.

Basic Skills

Most of these tests are concerned with attainment in reading, vocabulary, spelling and maths. There are now many commercially produced standardised tests available. They are listed and described in various books (Jackson, Pumphrey) and catalogues (NFER, Hodder and Stoughton, Macmillan, Heinemann, Gibson, Hart-Davis, Blackwell, Oliver and Boyd).

Most recent tests are well produced. They have been adequately standardised, are designed to be administered to groups of children and usually have marking keys to minimise the teacher's work. Their shortcomings lie in the fact that most can tell us very little about pupils. They will only produce a score – an attainment 'age', a standardised score or quotient – and are known as 'norm-referenced' tests. Such tests will not tell us what a child does or does not know, nor pinpoint what needs to be taught next. All these tests claim to do is to be able to provide a comparison between one child's performance and others in his age group. So, using a reading test as an example, a boy may be given a reading age of 8 years 7 months. If he is 12 years old we may regard him as being well below average for his age. We can also compare him with his classmates and with scores he obtains on previous or subsequent occasions. Such information could be useful to a teacher who cannot identify a backward reader by hearing him read from a book – or who has to make a quick assessment of a class.

Lists of test results can also be useful when giving information to third parties (as in presenting a case for more staff or books to a headteacher, adviser or education officer). In instances of this nature economy may be the keynote: which test is cheapest to use and simple and quick to apply. Some tests can be duplicated without infringing copyright or even supply spirit masters for duplicators (e.g. Daniels and Diack's *Standard Reading Tests – Test 12*, Hart-Davis). Others are quick to give and to mark (e.g. Young's SPAR tests – spelling and reading – Hodder and Stoughton).

Most teachers will be seeking guidelines for remedial teaching and should be looking to 'criterion-referenced' tests which will show up strengths and