tion of the effectiveness of each member of the committee he worked with. The following was written about Sammy by the members of his committee:

"During our work, Sammy was always trying to mess things up.

"All Sammy did was stick people with pins and tacks. He didn’t do any work at all.

"Sammy was no help at all. Every day we went to work on it, but all he did was throw pins at us and bother us.

"Sammy did everything he could to wreck the committee."

About himself, Sammy wrote:

"Did a pretty good job, but could have done better."

In private conference the teacher discussed group roles with Sammy and showed him how the other members of his group felt about his contribution. Further investigation revealed some of the reasons for his ineffectiveness.

Providing a classroom atmosphere wherein students can feel at home and can be themselves is important. Then when the teacher makes meaningful activities available within this atmosphere he is setting the stage so as best to discover and treat individual differences. If the teacher will look for individual needs he will discover many of them. If he will make an effort to meet these needs he will benefit many young people under his care.

The Challenge of the Slow Learning Child

ANNA M. ENGEL

"The plight of the slow learner," says the author of this article, "is a challenge to teachers who believe that all children need a chance to succeed." She makes a realistic appraisal of the problem of the slow learning child and suggests a positive approach to its solution.

In every schoolroom there are children that vary in learning ability. Just as no two pupils look exactly alike, so they differ in their attitudes, in their learning and in their adjustment. When these differences are extreme, the pupil requires special consideration and attention.

The slow learner is of special concern to the teacher. He has great difficulty when he is expected to perform in the same way and at the same rate as do the brighter pupils. He does respond to teaching if some modifications are made in the program, if he is given more time to complete a task and if he receives sympathetic understanding rather than pressure and disapproval.

Usually the teacher has no difficulty in identifying the slow learning child, but various objective tests will give additional insight into the child’s learning problems. The slow learning child
has difficulty in following directions; he usually needs more explanation. He cannot readily apply what he has learned to new and more difficult situations. He is easily confused, he is easily distracted.

But slow learners profit from good educational practices as do average children. They need tasks within their ability. They need approval and praise and they need acceptance by the pupils and the teacher. They need to be contributing members of the group, although this may be at a very simple level.

Each slow learner presents an individual problem. His immaturity may be due not only to lesser mental ability but also to a lack of experience, poor health or poor speech habits that further retard his growth. Home conditions and moving from place to place may also play a part in his lack of development. Teachers will find that they can help slow learners if they give them tasks within their ability so they may achieve some success. They will need to provide for more experiences with concrete materials and for more purposeful repetition than is necessary with brighter pupils. They will need to make certain adjustments in terms of the child’s limitations so as to prevent failure and discouragement.

Some slow learners do fairly well in some subjects and these should be given as much prominence in the program as is possible. Emphasis should be put on what they can do—not on what they cannot do. Simplified readers on various subjects are now available, and children can make a contribution from a book at the second grade level as well as from a fifth grade book. In arithmetic, where there are reading difficulties, the teacher or some pupil may read the thought problems so the pupil may be able to do the figuring. This should be done unobstrusively, not as if it were something unusual or blame-worthy.

Some children learn more through their ears than through their eyes. They are the poor readers whose general intelligence is beyond their reading age. Ella Mae was such a pupil. She had good social intelligence but could not read. Her teacher made her class secretary of the reading groups and she learned more from the reading done by her classmates than did the class members themselves. She was accepted by the group and respected by them because she could remember the details of the stories.

There is great variation in child growth and development and some children mature very slowly. It is important that slow learners be recognized as early as is possible even at the kindergarten level. Some do not have the muscular development to do school tasks. Others have a combination of physical as well as mental and environmental handicaps to limit their performance.

A World of Confusion

Many of these children are living in a world of confusion. They know they don’t know but not “what they should know.”

Jimmie was like this. He had moved two or three times; and because he

Anna M. Engel is a former supervising director of special education, Public Schools, Detroit, Michigan.
seemed average in intelligence, each school took his ability for granted. In the third grade he got into some behavior difficulty and was removed from his group for intensive study. It was found that he had almost no ability to read or write. Pathetically he explained, “I didn't know anything, but they always passed me.”

Some schools like to have slow learners repeat grades but surely this is not necessary when the curriculum has been adjusted so that they have learned all that they could at a certain grade level. They may need to be kept back at the kindergarten level and in the readiness programs until they are ready to do school work, but after that they ought to proceed with their groups as normally as is possible. Of course seriously retarded children, those three years or more behind in their learning, are usually placed in some type of special classes where they can receive the help of a specialist.

To help children, teachers will want to know more about them—their abilities and their disabilities. They will want to keep them in mind when planning activities. A slow learner can take care of an exhibit although he may find it difficult to give a good oral or written report. He may be a leader of the ball team although he is far behind the other boys in his school work. Children accept these differences much more readily than do adults.

The Teacher's Attitude

It is important that the slow learner be a challenge to the teacher rather than an annoyance. The attitude of the teacher makes it possible for him to function as a member of the group or to become the “different child.” Sometimes the teacher personally has to do considerable adjusting to a problem she cannot change. Take for instance the slow moving child. There is no use in repeating commands, one must only wait until the child slowly moves to perform the errand. Take the slow writer, like Frank, whose copy book writing was so meticulous and so perfect that he never completed a single lesson. The teacher tried speeding Frank up a bit—putting on a little pressure to hurry him with his work. She tried to hold back the rest of the group, but the outcome was the same—a few beautifully written words and much space left on the paper. The problem was solved by having one of Frank’s pals dictate his spelling lessons and accepting what Frank could accomplish in other ways. Urging this boy to work beyond his motor conditioning would have resulted in discouragement and failure.

Teachers are much more frustrated by children’s inability to do good school work than are the members of the class. Pupils seem quite ready to accept individual differences except when it keeps them from making some kind of record. In a game, they choose those who can help them win. But they can be taught to accept limitations, and it is very important that they learn that lesson early in life.

To help individual children to achieve success requires study and observation. Many lack a continuity of development due to absence, moving about, or not being ready for school training. Some have faulty procedures. Many just guess from day to day—a sort of trial and error method. One little girl did not know for a long time
that a combination of two numbers needed a certain answer. She considered the whole matter as one does a game. Written work often will provide clues for the teachers, and they will be able to see what the pupils had in mind when they prepared the papers. They will find that many boys and girls never get above "carrying one" in arithmetic no matter what the addition amounts to; that the smaller number is always taken from the larger whether it be in the subtrahend or the minuend; that in many processes pupils have no real conception of the method nor were they ready for much of the learning which has been presented to them.

Teachers of slow learning children can have many interesting experiences if they are constantly aware of children's understanding of lessons being discussed in class. Many have most confused ideas, like the little girl who wrote in her science notebook, "Rain is Mr. Fog near the earth." The word "mist" was not in her vocabulary. Slow learning children need more explanation, demonstration and experience to bring about true understanding. They need to be shown again and again various processes in arithmetic, and they need to meet words in several settings before they can recognize them with certainty. Some slow learners know the word if it is written in small letters, but they have to have special training to recognize it at the beginning of a sentence when written with a capital letter. Some have great difficulty in transferring from printing to cursive writing.

On the other hand, the teacher must not let the child continue with simple materials when he is ready for the next step. Some children continue to use concrete materials for problems when they should lay them aside and remember the combinations. Concrete materials may be used as unthinkingly as may the abstract symbols. Just as these pupils take longer to learn a process, so unlearning takes even more time. The sooner his errors and confusion are discovered, the more apt he will be to learn the right way. Slow learners can have their learning reinforced by having a "pal" work with them on review problems. Sometimes children have more patience and "know how" than the teacher, and patience is surely needed.

There are of necessity many factors that must be taken into account for effective teaching of the slow learner. There is the child himself, his physical condition, his maturity, his receptive attitude. Then there is the teacher, the class, the equipment and materials at hand. And there are the various teaching techniques and procedures which are used in teaching and learning. The task is easier if recognition is made in the beginning grades. Then there will be less confusion in the child's mind and readier acceptance of his limitations.

Parents Need Reassurance

Parents need to be reassured from time to time that their children are making the necessary progress in terms of their ability. They need to know that there are many other types of worth-while experiences in school besides the academic training, and that depriving children of their play-time to study only makes it more difficult to learn. They need to be prevented from bringing undue pressure for higher
standards of achievement; and they need to be helped to better understand their children. Many youngsters are unhappy because they know that they have failed to fulfill the family's expectation, and teachers must not add to their unhappiness by failing to make them feel wanted and needed.

Slow learning children have a contribution to make in the classroom. They will respond to teaching methods designed especially for them and they will make progress. If they feel comfortable and wanted, they will enjoy school and will take part willingly in endeavors within their comprehension. They will be loyal members of the group if they have a part in the class activities. A slow learner may only move the furniture, water the plants or feed the rabbit, but his classmates can be taught to consider such contributions as commendable as reading aloud.

There is no one best method of teaching slow learners; some learn by one method, others need an entirely different approach. Teachers will have greater success if they try various methods. Drill and repetition are necessary but these should be meaningful and varied. Through games and dramatizations, the child will develop motor coordination as well as poise. Music, art and science activities give enjoyment and opportunity for self-expression and self-realization. In the music class, for instance, Marie was the only one who could repeat a rhythm on the zither; and although she was very retarded, she achieved a new and elevated standing in the room. The rest of the group crowded around her and asked to be shown how to play the tune.

Teachers should always be sure that there are no physical conditions that prevent the child from learning. Clyde was a nuisance in the classroom. He was considered a “bad boy” by his parents because he was so unruly. He was constantly on the offensive or defensive, was saucy and impudent, and once he even mimicked the principal. Clyde had ear trouble—his ears were always discharging and sore, but the parents would not consent to an operation. During the summer vacation, the family was involved in a serious automobile accident and the boy was kept in the hospital for several weeks. When he returned to school in the fall, he was a changed boy. He was minus his tonsils and his irritability. He made friends with everyone and made such excellent progress that he became one of the best students in the class.

The plight of the slow learner is a challenge to teachers who believe that all children need a chance to succeed. They will seek to understand individual limitations and abilities. They will try to plan tasks that are not beyond the pupil's comprehension; they will be willing to repeat instructions kindly, not in exasperation; and they will put emphasis on what the child can do and at the same time give opportunity for growth and development.

It is not an easy task but a very worthwhile one to make every child feel comfortable, wanted and secure. Teachers must be very skilled to provide activities for a wide range of interest and ability so that each pupil can make a significant contribution. Most slow learning children are keenly aware of their shortcomings. They want success, they want approbation. Teachers can make this possible.