

The Slow Learner in the Academic High School

HOW to individualize instruction effectively has troubled educators down through the ages. One of the attempts to solve the problem, and one still in practice, has been the elimination, either by repeated failures or by encouragement to withdraw, of those who could not keep up with the class. Providing for the slow learner or the unsuccessful student at the secondary level is still not being given the attention needed to meet satisfactorily the needs of these young people.¹ Shop or homemaking programs plus "social promotion" in the required academic subjects enable school administrators to "graduate" these pupils. This practice falls far short of contributing to the goal of American education for citizenship and self-realization.

Much attention in the past several years has been given by elementary and secondary schools to the development of challenging programs for the academically talented students. Honors sections,

¹ The term "slow learner" does not refer to the mentally retarded or mentally deficient child but to the boy or girl who, for one or more reasons, has met with little success in school. Generally these are students who cannot meet with success in the normal classroom situation because of reading retardation, low intelligence, an emotional block, and/or differences in cultural background.

acceleration, independent study, the Advanced Placement Program, and other arrangements have captured the attention of educators and lay citizens across the country. At the same time, the elementary school for years has worked hard to provide for all pupils, including the so-called "slow learner." By upgrading, sectioning, remedial classes, retention, tutoring, clinics, carefully graded materials and generally hard work, teachers have attempted to give all pupils a successful and satisfying school experience. In spite of these Herculean efforts, however, the slow learner often fails to gain the satisfaction of normal achievement. Many students who have enjoyed little success in the elementary grades move into the secondary schools where more attention has been given to the normal and talented students.

In a community where 82 to 87 percent of the graduates go on to college and the program tends to be traditionally academic, it is sometimes easy for the slow learner to become "lost in the

Marguerite B. Slack is a Teacher, and Mark A. Boyer is Principal, The University City Senior High School, University City, Missouri.

shuffle." In University City, a residential suburb of St. Louis, population 55,000, attempts to meet the needs of unsuccessful students were limited to sectioning. These students were placed in "C" sections in the required subjects of history, English, and mathematics. The content was somewhat diluted but the same texts and methods were used with these as with other students. The responsibilities for teaching the class were "passed around." The result in many cases was frustration, repeated failures, and drop-outs.

The concern on the part of teachers, counselors and administrators led to the establishment of the English-History block program for tenth grade students. A teacher who had a major in both history and English volunteered to pioneer in the program. This teacher had met with success in both regular and advanced sections of English. Her sympathetic and understanding attitude toward all boys and girls was of prime importance to a successful first year. The Board of Education employed this teacher on a half-day basis for one month during the summer to develop plans and materials for the program. With the help of the junior high schools' teachers and counselors, 50 students were selected for the program.

Parent Cooperation

It was recognized that the success of the program also depended upon the acceptance of it by parents. Prior to the opening of school each parent would receive a copy of the following letter:

Your child has been selected to participate in our English-Social Studies block program which is offered to some sophomores at the Senior High School.

This class has been designed to meet the needs at the high school level of students

who have found school work difficult. Our counselors have worked closely with the junior high school in selecting students who are deserving of this opportunity.

Mrs. _____ will be the teacher. She is well qualified to teach both History and English. Your child will be with Mrs. _____ two continuous periods for the entire school year and will receive one unit of credit in History and one unit of credit in English, if requirements are successfully met.

If you have any questions please feel free to call me. I am available in the high school office daily.

Several important points were implied in the letter. First, the word "selected" was used. It was agreed upon at the outset of the program that it was not to become a "dumping ground." It was to be an opportunity for "qualified" students to meet with genuine success at the Senior High School. In short, it was a program designed for "strugglers," not "stragglers." Too often programs of this nature had been unsuccessful because they were used as places to put students whom other teachers did not want in their classes.²

Second, the letter reflected the recognition and acceptance of the fact on the part of the school that the child had been unsuccessful in school. It was important for parents to realize the school was interested in these young people and wanted to do something for them. Also, the directness of the approach would make some parents accept the fact that their child was not a potential scholar. The success of the program depended upon this understanding.

Third, the parents and student had to look upon the program as an opportunity. If strong objections to the pro-

² The "straggler," the child with high intelligence but low motivation, is also of concern to the authors; however, this is another problem beyond the scope of this article.

gram were met, the child would be placed in a regular section.

While the program was being planned during the summer of 1960, it became apparent that the block had intrinsic advantages for the slow learner. The correlation of literature with history could enrich both areas for the student who came to them with a limited background. Also, having a two hour period would make it possible to plan more field trips for these students who were visually rather than verbally oriented. Moreover, the study of grammar and usage, which seems so unnecessary to most non-academic students, could be made much more meaningful to them in the block program. In this way, both errors and strong points could be detected in their written and oral composition and used as a basis for drills and for further learning; grammar would be taught when needed for the understanding of correct usage. Most important of all, since the teacher would have these students for ten hours a week, she would be in an excellent position to exercise the guidance function.

In selecting materials for the program, certain distinguishing characteristics of the slow learner were recognized: (a) a short attention span, (b) a visual rather than verbal learning process, (c) a lack of ability to generalize or deal with abstractions, (d) a slow learning process, and (e) poor retention. The texts, therefore, were on a low reading but high interest level for this age group; they were well illustrated and contained concrete, practical material. Films, slides and charts were selected to supplement the texts. In addition, a small library of historical novels and supplementary history on an easy reading level for the tenth grade was selected for use in the room.

One exception to these guidelines for the selection of materials was made when it was necessary to decide between the use of classics or of adaptations of literature. Adaptations of most of the classics in world literature were available and were written on an appropriate reading level. However, much of the beauty as well as the meaning of the original work was usually lost and there remained only a simple narrative without any implications for the understanding of human values. It was decided, therefore, to use the originals and read them in the classroom. Fewer books would be read but the student would have an opportunity to become acquainted with some of the masterpieces of world literature and, above all, to acquire some understanding of universal truths and human values.

Meeting Individual Problems

Some preliminary thought was also given to methods, although many changes had to be made in this area after the class had started. Again, keeping in mind the distinguishing characteristics of the slow learner, the following guidelines were formulated for classroom method: (a) to accommodate the short attention span, short units of work were planned with frequent changes of pace during the class period; (b) to provide more concrete experiences in reading, daily assignment sheets were prepared giving the student definite things to look for in his reading of history; (c) to aid in visual learning, films, charts, slides and cartoons were to be used whenever possible; (d) to accommodate the difficulty in retention, frequent tests were to be given over short periods of work.

Whether or not to grade on the basis of ability was a most difficult decision to

make. The entire school was involved since college entrance depended upon class rank and the rank of college bound students might be lowered if ability grading were used in the slow sections. A consultant from the department of educational psychology at Washington University met with the Committee on the Slow Learner. The subject was subsequently discussed in both English and History Department meetings. The decision was finally made to grade as realistically as possible. Students who did not work were to be given failing grades and it seemed improbable their grades would ever be high enough for them to compete with abler students.

Although careful plans had been made, it was impossible to be prepared for many of the problems confronting the teacher when school opened in the fall of 1960. There were so many different manifestations of student resentment against a school in which they had been unable to succeed. Roger, a non-academic pupil with some mechanical ability, carefully and stealthily unscrewed knobs on cabinets and doors; Ronnie, a very heavy boy and naturally noisy, laughed uncontrollably at incidents in which there was scarcely a trace of humor for anyone else; Marshall wrote so carelessly that it was impossible to read his work, which he always handed in with a defiant air; little Leta giggled constantly, always glancing around to see whether she was being noticed; and Sheila, extremely shy and conscientious, refused to speak even when she had something to contribute. Some of the boys talked about dropping out of school to enter the service or to get a job. They would be absent for several days and then return, having been rejected by the Navy or having been unable to find a job.

Along with this feeling of resentment and frustration, there was evident in many students a very deep feeling of inferiority because they had been placed in a slow learner section. During the five minute break which was taken when other students were passing between classes, the word "retard" could often be heard followed by some noisy laughter. This coinage was actually a type of bravado—"We're in a slow learner group and we don't care."

As the program progressed in the first year, a need to take a closer look at the problem was recognized. With the appointment of a Committee on the Slow Learner, a study revealed the few courses in other departments suitable for the slow learner and pointed up the difficulty the counselors were having in planning programs for these young people. It was concluded that opportunities for study in all academic fields except foreign language should be made possible. Based upon this recommendation additional courses including a junior year American Literature-U. S. History block were offered.

As the students worked with materials they could understand and with methods adjusted as much as possible to their needs, their resentment against school and teachers noticeably decreased. However, the feeling of inferiority and the resulting lack of self-confidence were much more difficult to cope with. Fortunately, the two hour period made it possible for the teacher to learn a great deal about the special interests and abilities of each student and to try to find some activity that would give him a feeling of achievement and help him to gain status among his classmates. Several had artistic ability and illustrated quite well some of the episodes in history and literature; others who read un-

usually well for this group liked to forage in the library and bring in material to enrich the work in history and literature; one girl who was rather capable in grammar and usage helped score the English exercises; another who was extremely neat and methodical kept a chart of the scores and drew graphs to show each student's progress.

Building Self-Confidence

There were other efforts to cope with this lack of self-confidence which seemed to bring results. Some group activity was especially helpful to the slowest students. They were often unable to compete individually even in this selected group, but, when they worked in a small group or committee, they usually participated and were proud of the work accomplished. Also, by having each student work for a short time each period on a form of programmed learning, the teacher was able to help individually those who needed it most. As time went on and student-teacher relationships improved, more and more students dropped in before school to chat informally, making it possible for the teacher to show interest in their progress both in and out of the block program and to give encouragement or praise when needed and deserved.

The changes in student attitude were gradual; in fact, they were barely perceptible in the group as a whole during the first semester. A few individuals, however, had made great improvement even at this early stage. For example, the shy girl who could barely speak in class, was now making oral reports and was glad to volunteer. An unexpected change came about in the boy who had laughed so unexplainably and who had caused many disturbances in class. In private

conferences with the teacher, he had always insisted that the cause of the trouble was the teacher's dislike for him. One day when parts were being assigned for the reading of *Julius Caesar*, on a sudden "hunch," the teacher gave him the part of Brutus. He was obviously pleased, worked hard and gave a good performance. Most important of all, he became a cooperative student after that, earning average grades and making the football team.

At the beginning of the second year, the teacher found it difficult to believe that these were the same students she had worked with the previous September. The atmosphere in the classroom was friendly and relaxed; almost all of them were enjoying school. The frustration and resentment had disappeared and each student, in his own way, seemed to have acquired an image of himself as a worthwhile person.

Not all of the group had acquired that special niche for themselves within the block program; however, because they were able to keep up with their required subjects, they were able to find a place in some other part of the program. Roger, for example, who, in the beginning, had had the habit of unscrewing knobs on cabinets, had now become a dependable and capable worker in the audio-visual department. He had a great deal of mechanical ability and could be counted on to fix projectors and repair screens. His work in the block was not outstanding but it was conscientiously done. He was determined, now, to graduate from high school and to take a course in electronics.

There were other examples of students who had found their forte outside of the block program. Sheldon, one of the boys who had threatened so often to drop out of school and join the Navy, was very ac-

tive in chorus. He had a fine voice and thoroughly enjoyed the singing. He could often be heard before class giving a few excerpts from a concert they were preparing. Marshall, another potential dropout, had become an outstanding student in architectural drawing; in fact, his teacher felt that his work showed great imagination and originality.

Sharon was probably the best example of a student who found a special place for herself within the block program. She was a very quiet girl with the lowest ability in the group as measured by intelligence tests. Yet she had great sensitivity for good literature and a very deep understanding of human nature and the basic problems of living. She was a very slow reader but she followed class discussions carefully and was able to give an interpretation to ideas that the teacher had thought she would have to interpret for the class herself.

At the present time, it is possible for a slow learner to carry a well balanced academic and elective program. Courses available are:

<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Required</i>	<i>Elective</i>
Sophomore	English-History	Natural Science General Mathematics
Junior	Am. Lit.- U.S. History Safety * Health *	Physical Science Record Keeping
Senior	None required	Basic English for Seniors Senior Social Studies Practical and Fine Arts

* Required of all students

Two teachers devote full time to the sophomore and junior block programs. Each is responsible for 50 students (25 per section for two periods), and the teacher remains with them for two years. The block of time, both horizontally and

vertically, provides the advantages of knowing the students, guidance opportunities, and flexibility. Time for the teacher to plan and to confer with students and parents is of key importance. The job is not an easy one. It requires a teacher who is willing to give of himself.

It must be recognized, of course, that it is not always possible to reach every child in this program. Some of them realize too late that credits are not being given to them and that they must really apply themselves. Two percent of the original group dropped out of school before the end of the second year and, in the group that remained, there were some failures resulting from a lack of application. However, these credits are now being made up either in summer school or in the regular session. The attitude of the students is confident and optimistic; they are looking forward to their senior year and to graduation.

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