The child who is a slow learner
THE CHILD WHO IS A SLOW LEARNER

A child may be a slow learner for various reasons, including: heredity, inadequate brain development due to lack of stimulation, low motivation, attention problems, behavior problems, different cultural background from that which dominates in the school, or distracting personal problems.

Is this what you are seeing in the classroom? 
(Teacher’s informal diagnostic profile)

When you are SETTING UP THE LESSON

√ Child cannot find his or her materials (book, pencils, papers).

√ When you remind the child about the last lesson, he or she doesn’t seem to remember anything.

√ Child appears to have low “bank account” of general knowledge and experiences. When you say, “Think of a zoo animal,” the child comes up with nothing.

When you are PRESENTING THE LESSON

√ Child does not seem to understand what you are saying.

√ Child cannot follow the steps, for instance in math, science, or history.

When there is INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

√ Child cannot remember how to do what you taught the class.

√ Child is upset and gets all the answers wrong, at least in the way you are asking them to demonstrate understanding.
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When the class is REMEMBERING THE LESSON

√ Child does poorly on tests or on other evaluations.

√ Child cannot explain the lesson.

√ Child cannot relate and apply previous learning to new lessons.

During THE SETTING UP

¶ After each lesson, have the child put his or her materials together with a clip, a clothespin, with a rubber band, in an envelope, --somehow together. Perhaps you will have to keep his materials on your desk, near your desk, in a file rack, somehow! They have to be kept together after each lesson for this child.

¶ Move the child close to you so you can keep an eye on what’s going on.

¶ Put the desks of the slow learners near each other so when you are offering help you can get to them easily. This only has to be done for the lessons where some of your students are having difficulty. Otherwise multi-ability grouping is more natural.

During PRESENTING THE LESSON

¶ Present your most important points first. These should be the points you will test at the end of the week [This means you need to know the content of your end-of-week tests before you teach the lesson.] For the slow learner, whose attention might wander further into the lesson, these essential points need to be presented clearly and concisely right at the beginning of the lesson.

¶ At the ending summary of the lesson, make sure your slow learner’s attention has returned. Restate the essential points of the lesson aloud and in writing. [You might even want to put these points on paper to be posted in the classroom. This is a cue for you and for the student.]
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¶ Use eye contact.

¶ Use eye-catching materials such as colored chalk or magic marker for key words or key steps in the lesson.

During INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

¶ During the practice session, visit the group frequently, especially to catch early errors (so they don’t go too far off the track). Nip problems early on!

¶ Set up independent practice so it is time on task, not amount. The slow learners might not complete as much as others. All children get to go to recess!

During REMEMBERING THE LESSON

[This is the tough part. Slow learners will have difficulty remembering what you taught them--as you know!]

¶ Provide a quiet place, away from classroom distractions if possible.
¶ Restate the questions, so the child understands them. Best if written.
¶ Provide drawing materials (crayons, pencils, rulers, paper) for diagramming.

Planning SETTING UP THE LESSON

¶ While you are setting up the lesson, state the changes you want to see in the slow learners.

¶ Plan informal questions that will remind the students about the Knowledge base that is needed.

¶ Plan to make a quick check on the various skills needed for the lesson: vocabulary, pronunciation, math, locations, etc.
Plan to write on a chart or blackboard the skeleton points of the lesson: vocabulary, diagrams, math, measuring, etc.

Planning PRESENTING THE LESSON

Plan a few points (the skeleton of the lesson) that everyone must learn, including the slow learner. Present those points first. Elaborate later for the other learners, with more examples.

Plan to present information by category name first, then specific examples.

Plan the lesson in an orderly sequence. Present the lesson with at least one movement activity. Make sure it is multisensory. For instance, if you are presenting the idea of a long vowel in a word but with a silent “e” at the end (i.e., l-a-t-e), have one child the long “a” and another child act out the silent “e” (e.g., child puts hand over mouth, since it is silent). Don’t pick the most exciting item to start with. This will confuse the slow learner. The slow learners cannot handle time-sequence reorganization; it complicates learning the main point of the lesson.

Review your planned lesson to be sure you don’t have more than five Things the slow learner has to remember. Clearly restate the five items at the end of the lesson.

Planning INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Plan the practice in two sections: 1) the basic skeleton part and 2) the More elaborative part. The slow learners must complete only the basic Part correctly. They can always try the elaborative part, but the basic part is essential.

This should be as clear, concise as possible. These are the essentials of the lesson.

The practice should be exactly in the form of the test. This is critical.
Planning REMEMBERING THE LESSON

¶ For the slow learner, adapt your expectations. One way would be to allow more time to learn the material; while another way be to limit the amount of material to be learned. More time during testing would probably be essential.

¶ For short-answer questions, create a word bank or picture bank of possible answers.

¶ For essay questions, create hints to guide organization.

¶ For diagrams, create the outline, and provide scrambled items for placement.

¶ If nothing works, provide alternate ways for them to show learning during this time.

Why is it important to keep information to no more than five pieces at one time? Short-term memory is generally limited to 5 to 9 items. For the slow learner, 5 is most likely. Sometimes one has to present one item, have it demonstrated, then the next, and so on, one step at a time.

Why is eye contact important? This is to focus the child on what you are saying.

Why should some materials be in color or somehow dramatic? Attention is enhanced. This is stimulating to the senses, and elicits attention.

Why write directions and questions for the child? To compensate for short-term memory limits.

Why limit the amount we say? Too much information confuses the slow learner. Also, be as concrete as possible. For a slow learner pictures help solidify the important points. A child can remember the picture and then can retrace the importance of the picture. A good example of this is learning the alphabet by using picture clues.
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Why restate information? Generally, in a series of items, we remember the beginnings and endings better than the middle. By repeating, you are working to keep the middle “alive.”

Why use diagrams? Graphic presentations use a part of the brain different from the language center. It uses the right side of the brain, while language is on the left. You are using both sides if you use language and graphics.

Why use a word bank or picture bank? Retrieval of information can be a problem for some slow learners. The information might be stored, but finding it is the problem.

Why have parents work with the child? Learning is a change in parts of the brain, but repetition is needed for the changes to occur. Parental involvement helps the changes occur. Also parents help impart an attitude. You want it as positive as possible. Make the parent an ally.

Parents need to be involved in their child’s progress in school. Some parents do not feel connected to the school. Some don’t know what to do to help their child (this is most). Some have so many other demands for their attention.

The least probable reason for noninvolvement is that parents don’t care. This may seem like the case, but it seldom is. The challenge is how to involve them. The most important factor in parent involvement is developing a partnership with them.

First, let parents know you need their help. This means you are working together. “We both want Michael to succeed, Ms. Carillo. I need your help to make this happen. I think that if we work together, your son will improve immensely. I have some ideas that might make this partnership work. I wonder if you might consider some of them. I know I can count on you.”

“It would help Michael if you look over his work from school. This is what he needs: Going over the day’s lesson, asking him what the main points were (it’s fine--good--if he refers to his notebook!). Praise him for
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what he is able to tell you. This let’s him know you that learning isn’t easy but that you’re proud of him for what he’s doing.”

“If he brings his textbook home, going over the summary of the chapter or the main points would help tremendously.”

“Michael needs a place to do his homework. Get the whole family involved in the idea that Michael needs time, a place, and quiet to do his work, because we expect great things from Michael.”

If the parent had a summary of the basic points of the lesson(s), Michael could be asked to explain them. The parent does not need high reading skills for this to occur. Naturally, the parent might be learning something from listening to the child going over the day’s activities. “That’s interesting what you’re learning. Tell me more; I’m learning a lot from you.”

“What do you need for tomorrow, Michael?”

Send notes home when Michael has done well, or at least better, in school today. These “happy grams” can be preprinted, with a little space for your comment. Thank the parent for their support. They need to hear this.

Community-social activities involving parents and teachers bring parents into the school setting and help them to feel more connected. Plate-to-pass suppers for classrooms or grade levels, interesting speakers, craft activities that parents and children do together (e.g., making Christmas decorations), and having a school fair are some examples. Anything that gets the adults in the school, along with the teachers and children, is going to have a positive effect.

When starting out:

When starting out with a plan for slow learners, it is best to start with one child. If you are working with five slow learning children in your room, keeping track of all five will drive you crazy in the beginning. Once you get in the pattern of keeping track, believe it or not, it becomes routine, and you can track five. Work with the child who has the most likelihood of
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improvement. You will get results, and this will give you confidence that your efforts are worth the investment.

**Tracking:**

Both you and the child will benefit from a graphic representation of the progress being made. If you can use a chart (I use graph paper, and I’ve supplied reproducible graph paper in the office binder), all the better. Then, as the child’s progress comes along, there is a line that’s going up on the graph. The child will often say, “My line is going up,” indicating he or she understands progress is being made. Nothing succeeds like success, but we often have to have a record of it to know it is happening. And you will have a clear record!

**Weekly running record:**

Each Friday, tally up the instances of whatever it is you are working on and get a summary. Small steps should be emphasized instead of needing to see the entire package change all at once [if ever]. This is called “successive approximations” in psychology, but perhaps “baby steps” or “small improvements” would be better.

**Keeping a daily log:**

It is necessary to keep a daily record of the focus performance information for the child. For instance, if you are striving to increase involvement in mathematics lessons for a student, you should note how many minutes that student was actively engaged in the math lesson each day.

To do this, it is important not to focus on too many objectives at one time. Make yourself a little chart. Put the child’s name at the top, the child’s name, Monday through Friday one under the other. Use a stop watch, your watch, or a small clock to keep time. Each day, write the number of minutes has attended to the lesson. Note when the child first stops attending to the lesson. For the slow learner, you have only so-many minutes to teach the kernel of the lesson to the student! If you have five points in the lesson, two of which will be tested, be sure to get the two essential points in at the beginning, before the window of opportunity closes.
Look for patterns if things aren’t going as planned.

If things are not going as expected, look for what’s going on during the time there’s a lack of progress or when instances of negative patterns occur. Often you can detect some relationship. Ideally, you might alter the interfering situation.

Tests or other forms of assessment:

The bottom-line for progress is, of course, test results. A concern that we all have is adjusting the assessment to the needs and style of the child. This adaptation concern will require some discussion and work.

Web sites:

The following web sites have quick tips as well as thorough, in-depth information. They will certainly fulfill your quest for valuable information.

va.essortment.com/teachingthes_rkmz.htm
http://www.foundationosa.org/slow.htm
http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/ss/disability.pdf

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