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Slow Students

A few decades ago the classroom dunce, capped in a peaked paper hat and perched uncomfortably on a stool facing the wall, was a familiar figure in almost any elementary school. Punishment and public mockery was the regular method in those days of handling the dull pupil.

Last week in New York City thousands of "non-academically-minded" boys and girls, who would have been plain dunces 30 years ago, were hard at work on special subjects, in special classes and under special teachers. No longer a subject of contempt and scorn, the slow student of today is one of the educator's most important problems. Study of his needs has produced a whole new theory of teaching.

Groundwork for the new methods now in use in New York was laid by a committee of six teachers from Seward Park High School. One of their first tasks was to define the type of student they had in mind. The committee's slow student lacked self-reliance and needed constant help, urging and praise from his teachers. He found it difficult to grasp abstract subjects—he was "thing-minded" rather than "thought-minded." All his interests centered in the immediate present. He was impulsive and unable to work long at any one task.

The greatest need of this sort of student, the committee decided, was an improved method of English instruction. The traditional type of English course had little value for him. His "thing-mindedness" made rules of grammar and composition almost useless. His lack of ability to concentrate and work by himself detracted greatly from the value of textbooks. His interest in the present made classical literature worthless to him.

Accordingly, Seward High School threw overboard most of the old methods of English instruction as far as the slow student was concerned. The school's new English classes now stress informal conversation, prepared discussions and reading out loud. To avoid teaching an artificial and unnatural type of expression, "reasonable" slang is permitted. Material for study is taken exclusively from the newspapers, periodicals, radio, etc.

Instruction for slow students in subjects other than English has not reached the stage of wide practical use. The Seward school committee has pointed out, however, that the emphasis on practicality and current events can easily be used in such subjects as history and science.