One size doesn’t fit all: Slow learners in the reading classroom

Kathleen S. Cooter
Robert B. Cooter, Jr.

In the ancient Greek legend of Theseus there was a sinister fellow called Procrustes, whose name means “he who stretches.” Procrustes kept a house by the side of the road where he invited travelers in for a satisfying meal and a night’s rest in his “magical” bed. If the guest asked what was so special about the bed, Procrustes replied, “Why, it has the amazing property that its length exactly matches whomsoever lies upon it.” What Procrustes didn’t reveal was the method by which this “one size fits all” was achieved—as soon as the guest lay down Procrustes went to work, stretching him on the rack if he was too short for the bed or chopping off his legs if he was too long.

Theseus, while traveling to Athens to claim his inheritance, encountered Procrustes, and, living up to his “do unto others” credo, cut off the evildoer’s head to make him fit the bed in which his many “guests” had died.

For some children in the United States today (a surprising number really), many urban schools have become their Procrustes. Such schools appear warm and welcoming but have what could almost be called a sinister agenda: They force every learner into a one-size-fits-all reading program, without regard to ability or need. Though having a reading program as a “core” may be a good first step in attempting to stabilize instruction across large, urban school districts (Cooter, in press), such programs should be resources rather than substitutes for informed teacher judgment and decision making. It is well-trained reading teachers who make the difference for urban students, not programs. Indeed, implementing basal and supplemental reading programs (including those purporting to be research based) without alternatives can result in stretching some urban students to academic death—failure, dropping out, stunted potential—by not providing “beds” that fit them best.

In the wake of the current No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), a Procrustean insistence on curriculum conformity has developed. Federal guidelines state that all children can and will achieve defined end-of-year reading benchmarks at each grade level. The implicit assumption, then, is that all learners are basically alike and simply need the same instructional bed to lie upon. As one official of a leading basal reading series once told us, “If urban kids fail to succeed in reading with our program, then the problem must lie with the teacher for not implementing the program correctly.” Nowhere is the damage of such thinking more evident than with students labeled “slow learners.”

Who are slow learners?

The term slow learners strikes us as a politically incorrect form of reference, and it certainly runs counter to “people first” language commonly used to identify learners with special needs. However, that designation is the only one currently found in the professional literature. So, who are these children referred to as slow learners? In psychometric terms, slow learners have a measured intelligence quotient (IQ) between 70 and 85. Because this is well below the average range of ability (i.e., measured intellectual scores between 90 and 110), these students have relatively diminished potential and acquire reading abilities at a much slower rate. Incidentally, IQ scores should
not be (and typically are not) used as the sole indicator of diminished potential for slow learners. That determination is usually accompanied by myriad assessment evidence including behavioral, academic, and formal and informal measures. Slow learners score low on both norm- and criterion-referenced achievement tests.

In a typical U.S. classroom of 25 students, one would expect to find three to four slow learners. In areas of poverty and many low-income urban areas, the children per classroom who could be characterized as slow learners might be twice that number (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Causes of lower intelligence are many, and it is often difficult to pinpoint a single origin. Premature births, familial or genetic factors, literacy-deprived home and caregiver environments, fetal alcohol or drug exposure, and poor or nonexistent prenatal care are common risk factors.

Slow learners tend to function at their cognitive ability, which necessarily means they are significantly below grade level in school tasks. For example, a fourth-grade student with an IQ of 75 would be expected to read at a first-grade level at the beginning of the school year if he or she were developing normally. Following multistep or novel directions is often difficult for slow learners, and they typically have few problem-solving strategies (i.e., they lack organizational skills and have difficulty transferring and generalizing information). These students tend to work on all academic tasks slowly (Lowenstein, 2003; Shaw & Gouwens, 2002).

In spite of the prevalence of slow learners in the U.S. population, there is an amazing paucity of scientific research on them. Perhaps it is because most slow learners act like normal students in most situations and go unnoticed; hence, the appellation “shadow kids.” Lowenstein (2003) noted,

The slow learner is usually normal in appearance and is able to function satisfactorily in many situations. This is precisely why he/she is difficult to understand and identify. While the slow learner usually possesses common sense and adequate memory, is physically adept and has normal dexterity, this does not mean that he/she has normal ability for schoolwork. It is not unusual to hear parents of a slow learner state that they are puzzled over their child’s school difficulties since “he/she seems to understand so well at home.” (p. 1)

Teachers often notice, however, that slow learners lack “future” thinking abilities and live very much in the “now.” Thus, they do not work well with tasks requiring long-term planning. Because daily school tasks and the pace of instruction in a one-size-fits-all reading curriculum are difficult for them, slow learners often develop a poor self-image and make self-deprecating remarks. They are prone to immature, interpersonal relationships and sometimes act inappropriately both socially and verbally at school. Over time, their sense that they do not fit in at school, particularly in reading instruction, can have devastating effects on these students.

The “school-to-prison pipeline”

One serious consequence of inflexible reading curricula is that students become discouraged and drop out of school. In Dallas, Texas, for instance, we noted in 2001 that some 43% of ninth-grade students were reading below the 25th percentile on standardized measures. That statistic was appallingly similar to the school district’s dropout rate. So what happens when urban students drop out of school? Some turn to gang activity, crime, and other negative outlets.

The Civil Rights Project researchers at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have studied this alarming societal path, but their findings are not yet published in scholarly journals. However, a series of articles in a Boston newspaper offers a chilling preview, referring to this all-too-predictable cycle as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Iafolla, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). In the prison population of 1997, 68% of the inmates had not completed high school (Iafolla, 2003a). State planners in Ohio, recognizing the correlation between slow learners and reading failure in U.S. schools, project how many prison beds will be needed in the future on the basis of how many children are reading below level in third grade (Iafolla, 2003c). The connection between reading failure for slow learners and potential consequences is both clear and frightening.
Why “shadow kids” have been left behind

Parents and teachers have wrung their hands about the “literacy-failure track” trodden by the many children whose intellect limits them. Special education and other remedial programs have frequently shut these children out, because several decades ago a “discrepancy model” was adopted for identifying students to receive special education and other federally funded services. In simple terms, if there is a significant discrepancy between students’ intellectual ability and their school performance, then they can qualify for special education services. But slow learners frequently perform in school at the level one might expect for students with diminished mental capacity; thus, there is no significant discrepancy and so these students cannot get extra help, even if they are reading several years below grade level.

Whether one ascribes wholly to the notion of the “normal curve” or not, it is only logical that some children will have inadequate intellectual potential for academic success. Some children have mental retardation and require special educational services to reach their potential. There is, however, a much larger group of youngsters who are not mentally retarded but who are seriously endangered in schools due to intellectual deficits. Educators label them as “shadow kids,” “gray-area children,” “kids who fall through the cracks,” “slow learners,” “dull,” “borderline,” and use other terms that leave them in educational and programmatic limbo. Their problems are not severe enough to put them in special education or other compensatory programs, but they are failing nonetheless. And while it is certainly respectful to speak of children as having diverse minds (Levine, 2003), the reality is that schools and schooling are not designed for such children who, despite good teaching and personal effort, simply do not achieve academically at the same rate as their peers.

Hopeful signs on the horizon

The Academic Improvement component of the NCLBA requires that states set a minimum performance threshold on the basis of the lowest achieving subgroup or the lowest achieving schools within the state. This threshold must be raised at least every three years with the long-term goal of 100% proficiency. This component is operationally much like Title I (a federally funded program for at-risk students), except that it focuses funds not on low-income students but rather on low-achievement students. Thus states, districts, and schools will be forced to focus on their lowest achieving subgroup, which is invariably that of the slow learner.

Other aspects of NCLBA could be of assistance to the slow learning child. Early Reading First in poverty areas for children ages 3–5, Reading First for grades K–3, and Rural Education initiatives may help identify and serve these needy youngsters. States have a good deal of latitude as to the use of the Academic Improvement funds, and there are dollars specifically assigned to teacher education, after-school programs, intensive tutoring, parent education initiatives, and early childhood academic preparation programs. All of these could benefit the slow learner (Shaw & Gouwens, 2002).

Children are not usually identified as slow learners until they reach school age, thus many have had no systematic early intervention like that offered to children with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While the reauthorization of IDEA is not complete, proposed changes in the identification of children with learning disabilities may have tremendous impact on the child who is a slow learner. The much maligned (and deservedly so) discrepancy formula for identifying children with learning disabilities will probably be replaced by a more curriculum-based measurement system for identifying students with special needs, including slow learners. This should also increase reliance on professional judgment in placement decisions (Shaw & Gouwens, 2002). It is obvious that adding slow learners to the special education system could have a dramatic effect and overburden services in some areas. In sum, the paradigm so long defined as “learning disabilities” could and probably will change drastically with this sweeping legal change in definition.

One caveat should be mentioned: Special education outcome studies have historically had very mixed results. But surely the thorough study of a child by professional educators and researchers in cooperation with parents is better than what is currently provided.
Helping slow learners succeed as readers

Regardless of their limitations, slow learners do learn. They can make progress in the classroom if the teaching and materials used are at the appropriate level of learning. Perhaps the most important factor is this one: Slow learners master reading skills only after massed and distributed practice over time. The following are proven strategies for adapting instruction for slow learners in the reading classroom (Balado, 2003; Shaw, 2000a).

- Reduce distractions by providing students with a quiet, private place to work.
- Emphasize strengths and use legitimate praise and reinforcement frequently. Slow learners crave positive feedback.
- Make lessons short. Limit the working time to several short work periods rather than one long one.
- Add variety to the academic routine. Use active learning experiences such as educational games, puzzles, and other techniques as much as possible.
- Work on material that is somewhat challenging but allows success. Work that is too hard or too easy is a turnoff for slow learners. Ongoing assessment can help teachers keep students in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986).
- Encourage parents to talk to their child to build language and vocabulary. Coach parents to ask about their child’s day at school, the best part of his or her day, or even about the TV shows the child watches. Language development is critical.
- “Marinate” students in new learning by providing a great deal of repetition in your instruction. Slow learners need to overlearn reading strategies and skills—an urban teacher friend of ours calls this “marinating” students. Learning new vocabulary for children with intelligence quotients from 70 to 85, for example, may require far more repetition than is often provided (i.e., 35–40 learning encounters). Shaw (2000b) estimated 3 to 5 times more repetition may be necessary for mastery by slow learners.
- Provide meaningful, concrete activities rather than abstract ones. Making cognitive connections to what is already known is important for all learners, and even more so with slow learners. Concrete learning activities help make that possible.
- Give short, specific directions and have students repeat them to you.
- Read! Set an example by modeling reading yourself.
- Use buddy reading or dyads in class to help slow learners build fluency. The research on the use of dyads with struggling readers is quite positive (Eldredge, 1990; Eldredge & Quinn, 1988).

Final thoughts

As we prepared this column, we were surprised at the dearth of educational and classroom-based research regarding slow learners. Despite their surprisingly high incidence (about one in six students) and the obvious difficulties these youngsters have in reading classrooms, they have received scant attention from educational researchers.

Interviewing urban teachers was also surprising; slow learners and their difficulties are not new to them. Many compassionate teachers reported that they literally suffered with their slow students and wanted more techniques and ideas to truly meet their needs. They felt frustrated by referrals that led nowhere and the realization that their pace of teaching—partially test driven—was leaving these learners even further behind.

Great classroom instruction is not enough. Children who are slow learners have educational needs that require alternative educational interventions and curricular designs. These programs need not be markedly different than programs offered to other learners with reading disabilities or delays; indeed, research indicates that focusing on their needs can put these learners “together” instructionally (Lyon, Gray, Kavanagh, & Krasnegor, 1993). It will take acknowledgment, creativity, curricular modification, and compassion to truly serve these victims of the Procrustean school. As Shaw and Gouwens (2002) explained, “Slow learner is not synonymous with no learner” (p. 4).
References


Kathleen S. Cooter teaches in the College of Education at The University of Memphis (412-A Ball Hall, Memphis, TN 38152-3570, USA).

The department editor welcomes reader comments. E-mail rcooter@memphis.edu or write to Robert B. Cooter, Jr., The University of Memphis, Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership, 4th Floor, Ball Hall, Memphis, TN 38152-3570, USA.