

Valencia, S.W., & Buly, M.R. (2004). **Behind test scores: What struggling readers *really* need.** The Reading Teacher, 57(6): pp. 520-531.

It is about elementary students (4th graders), but the basic idea applies to all grades: we need a more in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of students who fail to meet the standard in order to provide responsive instruction that addresses those students' needs. Valencia and Buly say they tried to understand the "garden variety" of kids-- those typically found in regular classrooms who are experiencing reading difficulty but have not been identified as needing special services or intensive interventions.

So, Valencia and Buly basically selected 108 of these "garden variety" of kids (who did not meet standard) and did a bunch of diagnostic assessments:

- for Letter Word ID & Word Attack, they use Woodcock-Johnson (revised) and the QRI-II;
- for Reading Accuracy, Rate, and Expression, they use the QRI-II and passages from the State 4th Grade Assessment;
- for Vocabulary, they used the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised, and
- for Comprehension/Meaning, they use the QRI-II & the Peabody Vocab.

In any case, after they examined all the students' relative strengths and weaknesses, they found that the 108 students fell into roughly 6 clusters. They used the clusters to develop profiles--descriptions of readers in each cluster who demonstrated similar areas of strength/weakness in the categories of word id, meaning, and fluency.

These are the 6 profiles they describe: 1) Automatic Word Callers; 2) Struggling Word Callers; 3) Word Stumblers; 4) Slow Comprehenders; 5) Slow Word Callers; 6) Disabled Readers. They give a detailed account of a prototypical student for each profile to show what the assessments revealed and to propose needs-based instructional plans [see attached table].

The basic points they make are:

- Students fail state reading tests for a variety of reasons—testament to individual differences.
- We need to provide varying instruction to meet their varying needs.
- A phonics or word identification program would be inappropriate for nearly 58% of the students in the sample.
- An instructional approach that didn't address building reading stamina for longer, more complex texts or did not provide sufficient reading material at a range of levels would miss almost 70% of students who demonstrated difficulty with fluency.
- We need to be cautious about over generalizing students' needs based on state assessments.
- We need to go beneath the scores on state tests by conducting additional diagnostic assessments to identify students' needs.

- Without in-depth and individual student assessment, distinctive and instructionally important patterns of students' abilities are masked.
- Even the clusters do not tell the full story; there are variations within each cluster, which points once again to individual differences and to the hugely complex nature of reading performance and reading instruction.
- These students not only need support in the different aspects of reading, they also need materials that differ in difficulty, topic, and familiarity.
- Multi-level, flexible, small-group instruction is crucial ...given that although these students might be able to participate in whole-class instruction on whatever strategies the teacher demonstrates, they clearly need guided practice to apply the strategies to different types and levels of materials and they need attention to other aspect of reading, as well (that might not be addressed in the whole-class instructional context).
- All teachers must have access to a wide range of materials that are intellectually challenging yet accessible to students reading substantially below grade level.
- Struggling readers need access to grade-level material through a variety of support structures--partner reading, guided reading, read alouds, etc.

# Patterns of Performance Among 4<sup>th</sup> Graders Who Did NOT Meet the Standard

## Description of Prototypical Student in Each Cluster

### Cluster #1: Automatic Word Callers

#### **Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses:**

Can decode words quickly and accurately, but failed to read for meaning (comprehension at 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level)

Strong scores on fluency

Generally excellent word identification skills but may be reading too fast to attend to meaning, especially deeper meaning

Comprehension difficulties are more complex than individual word meanings since vocab score ok

Literal comprehension quite strong, but has difficulty with more inferential and critical aspects of reading

#### **Instructional Response:**

Needs additional instruction in comprehension—would benefit from explicit instruction, teacher modeling & think alouds of key reading strategies (i.e., self-monitoring, summarizing) using variety of materials at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level

Help student understand that purpose for reading is to understand & that reading rates vary depending on type of text and purpose for reading; Tell student to slow down and focus on meaning

Self-Monitoring Strategies are key so student checks for understanding, adjust reading rate to meet demands of text

Would benefit from read alouds and additional independent reading to develop understanding of genre features, text structures, figurative language, concepts & support in acquiring academic language

### Cluster #2: Struggling Word Callers

#### **Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses:**

Reading of isolated words on WJ-R is at grade level, but struggles with word identification skills when reading connected text

ELL student—low performance in vocabulary and on writing portion of state assessment suggests that language may be contributing to comprehension problems

Struggle with meaning: Word ID problem & language barrier contribute to comprehension problem

Reads words quickly whether reading words correctly or incorrectly; Doesn't stop to monitor or self-correct

Rate is fast but expression and phrasing were uneven and consistent with comprehension difficulties

#### **Instructional Response:**

Decoding instruction is important but teacher would need to gather more information using such tools as miscue analysis or decoding assessments to determine specific decoding needs and how they interact with student's

knowledge of word meaning

Cannot be instructed with 4<sup>th</sup> grade material, so begin with 2<sup>nd</sup> grade material that is familiar and interesting but student also needs exposure to content and vocab of grade level texts through teacher read alouds, audio tapes, partner reading so conceptual understanding continues to grow.

Needs instruction and practice in self-monitoring (with fix-up strategies) and decoding while reading connected text to improve his comprehension and awareness of reading for understanding

Needs lots of support in background-knowledge building, word meaning (vocab)

Needs read alouds, lots of experience with independent reading at his reading level, small-group instruction and activities aimed at building academic language

### Cluster#3: Word Stumblers

#### **Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses:**

Has strong quest for meaning but substantial difficulty with word identification

Surprisingly strong comprehension—stumbles on so many words yet comprehends what she reads

So focused on reading for meaning that she spontaneously self-corrected many of her decoding miscues or substituted words that preserved the meaning

Student attempted to read every word, working until she could figure out some part of word and then using context clues to help get entire word

Over-rely on context because decoding skills so weak

Slow rate, choppy, lacked flow—low fluency a function of decoding difficulty

Spent enormous amount of time self-correcting, re-reading

Student understands that reading and writing should make sense, has self-monitoring, stamina, and strong language and vocabulary abilities

#### **Instructional Response:**

Needs systematic instruction in word identification and opportunities to practice those strategies when reading connected text at her reading level

Since student is beyond the early stages of reading and decoding, teacher will need to determine through a more in-depth analysis precisely which decoding skills should be focus of instruction

Critical not to sacrifice intellectual engagement with text while student receiving decoding instruction and practice in below grade-level material

So student needs supported experiences with texts that will challenge and feed the her drive for meaning

Student needs to develop automaticity with word identification and would benefit from assisted reading (choral reading, monitored reading with audio tape, partner reading) and unassisted reading practice (repeated reading, reading to younger students) with materials at her instructional level

## Cluster #4: Slow Comprehenders

### Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses:

\*Accounted for ¼ of students in sample

Scored above grade level on all measures of decoding—so relatively strong decoders

Comprehension on level; Vocab & writing average for age

Within 2 points of passing the state assessment, so he doesn't seem to have a serious reading problem

Slow rate, but comprehension quite strong

Has good word knowledge and understands that reading should make sense

Has decoding skills to attack multi-syllabic words but not yet automatic

Significant problem with rate and some difficulty with automatic decoding of multisyllabic words

Seems unlikely that student enjoys or spends much time reading

### Instructional Response

Needs fluency-building activities like guided repeated oral reading, readers' theatre, partner reading using grade-level text.

Important to find reading material that is interesting and short at first that can be completed in relatively short time ... then move to extended text to build stamina

Student would benefit from instruction and practice in strategies for identifying multi-syllabic words so he can deal with them automatically

## Cluster #5: Slow Word Callers

### Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses:

Similar to automatic word callers but slow

Well developed decoding skills when reading words in isolation and in connected text

Even with strong decoding, student has difficulty with comprehension

Difficulty with both individual word meanings and text-based understanding when reading paragraphs and longer selections

Slow reading rate, not reading with expression or meaningful phrasing

Is slow rate and lack of prosody contributing to lack of understanding or is slow rate and lack of prosody a response to lack of understanding? Teacher would need to tease that out—use text where material and vocabulary are familiar and if rate still low, instruction should focus on both fluency and meaning

Would benefit from attention to vocabulary building (through extensive independent reading and teacher read alouds and through more explicit instruction in word-learning strategies and new words he'll encounter in specific texts)

## Cluster#6: Disabled Readers (Not Classified as Special Education)

### **Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses:**

Severe difficulty in all 3 areas—word identification, meaning, and fluency

Smallest group—9%--and yet this is the profile that most likely comes to mind when we think of children who fail state reading tests

Most-telling characteristic: very limited word identification abilities—has few decoding skills beyond initial consonants, basic consonant-vowel-consonant patterns & high frequency sight words

Knowledge of words meanings=average

Decoding ability at 1<sup>st</sup> grade level ... not surprising that fluency and comprehension also low...just not reading enough words to understand text

### **Instructional Response:**

Student needs intensive, systematic word identification instruction targeted at beginning reading along with access to lots of reading material at 1<sup>st</sup> grade level and below

Alternative materials in content areas will be necessary

Challenge to keep student engaged and to have opportunities for success

Classroom teacher and reading specialist will need to work together to build comprehensive instructional program in school and at home to help student develop the skill and will to progress