

# Dying on the Vine

*Far from being late bloomers, struggling readers usually just wilt without intervention.*

By Joseph K. Torgesen

For 30 years, the idea of “late bloomers” was widely believed among researchers and educators alike. Late bloomer was the endearing term for a child who was slower than his peers in learning to read. The idea, so well captured in the term, was that these children would bloom in their reading – they would just do it a bit later than their peers.

This common view, known among researchers as the “developmental lag” theory, was the reasonable basis for teachers’ patience with students who didn’t catch on to reading quickly – and it justified the common practice of delaying the diagnosis of reading problems until they were quite severe.

But more recently, long after many teachers ended their formal education training, researchers have been able to put the developmental lag theory to rest. It has been replaced by an alternate theory of early reading weakness that defines the problem as a skill deficit.

The main difference between the two theories is that the developmental lag theory posited that difficulties in learning to read would fade as the brain matured – early, urgent intervention was not necessary.

In contrast, the skill deficit theory claimed that waiting wouldn’t work; children wouldn’t pick up these skills unless they were taught directly and intensively. In fact, waiting would be harmful, as it condemned children to failing further behind.

Three new studies have put the weight of research squarely behind the skill deficit theory and against the developmental lag theory. Each study tracked the reading development of children beginning in grade 1.

In the simplest terms, these studies ask if struggling readers catch up. The data from the studies are clear. Late bloomers are rare; skill deficits are almost always what prevent children from blooming as readers.

This research may be counter-intuitive to elementary teachers who have seen late-bloomers in their own classes or heard about them from colleagues. But statistically-speaking, such students are rare. There is a nearly 90% chance that a poor reader in grade 1 will remain a poor reader.

One study tracked 54 children in Texas from the beginning of grade 1 through the end of grade 4. To see if those who were behind in learning to read did or did not catch up, the researchers split the students into two groups based on their scores at the end of grade 1 on a standardized comprehension subtest. Those who scored in the bottom quartile were labeled “poor readers”.

Over the next three years, the poor readers, on average, never caught up to the average and good readers on any measure of reading ability.

Of course, group averages don’t reveal individual results. Were there some late bloomers hidden behind these averages? Not many. Of the 24 students who were poor readers in grade 1, 21 of them were still at least six months behind in reading at the end of grade 4.

The study that finally put to rest the developmental lag theory among researchers tracked 403 students from 12 communities in Connecticut from grades 1 to 9. Students with IQ scores below 80 in grade 3 were excluded from the study.

When the students reached grade 3, they were designated “low-achieving”, “not-reading-impaired” or “reading-disabled-discrepant”.

- The low-achieving group consisted of students whose reading scores were below the 25 percentile.
- The reading-disabled-discrepant consisted of students whose reading scores were well below what their IQ scores predicted.
- The not-reading-impaired group consisted of the remaining students.

With students broken into these groups, the researchers analyzed the reading scores from grades 1 to 9 looking for evidence of either a developmental lag or a skill deficit. If the developmental lag theory was correct, students who were behind would eventually catch up, while if the deficit theory was correct, students would not catch up.

The data clearly demonstrated that, on average, neither the low-achieving nor the reading-disabled-discrepant students ever caught up to their not-reading-impaired peers.

Researchers also analyzed the scores of individual students to determine whether the average scores could, as they sometimes do, be masking different achievement patterns among individual students. That is, could the average scores be hiding the fact that many low scorers in grade 1 actually went on to be fine readers, while many high scorers in grade 1 went on to be poor readers?

The researchers determined that no masking was happening. Rather, they determined that the group averages closely reflected what was happening with the vast majority of individual students.

In the late 1990s, the study of Connecticut youth was extended to grade 12. On average, students who were behind in reading in elementary school never caught up to their peers.

It’s important to note that in each of these studies, the poor readers’ failure to catch up indicates only that here is no evidence for the developmental lag theory, not that it is impossible to rescue struggling readers.

*(Adapted with permission from “Waiting Rarely Works: Late Bloomers Usually Just Wilt”, in the Fall 2004 issue of American Educator, the quarterly journal of the American Federation of Teachers. Dr. Torgesen is director of the Florida Center for Reading Research, [www.fcrr.org](http://www.fcrr.org).)*