



Published May 1, 2006

Chicago Public Schools Evaluate Teaching Methods

by Patricia J. Miller Gardner

The Chicago Public Schools System is evaluating four approaches to teaching language and literacy skills this school year. Preschoolers (ages 3–5) enrolled in the Head Start programs at eight of its schools are participating in a unique, year-long research project called the Language and Literacy Enrichment Teaching (LET) Program, which is funded by the Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust. Based on the data obtained from LET, CPS hopes to determine which of the four language-learning techniques best provides its preschoolers with the skills they need to learn to read and achieve in kindergarten and beyond.

The architects of LET are Chicago-based Leap Learning Systems, Inc. (Leap; Web site is www.leaplearningsystems.org) and ASHA's Communication Sciences and Disorders Clinical Trials Research Group (CSDRG). Leap is an educational, nonprofit organization with almost two decades of experience in developing and implementing language/literacy infusion and professional-development training programs for children and educators. Its staff of speech-language pathologists is working on-site at the schools to implement LET. The CSDRG is the data center for the program.

Helping Children Learn Language

LET is a randomized clinical trial being conducted in Chicago's public schools, and by necessity, it's a community-based research initiative. Children are considered an especially vulnerable research population, as are members of ethnic minority groups. More than 97% of the children and families involved in LET are African Americans and all of them qualify for free or reduced school lunches.

Research shows that children are most at risk for reading failure when they have limited exposure to language, and that children from low-income families, such as those participating in LET, are particularly at risk, according to testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce (1997). By age 4, a child from a low-income family will have heard a total of 13 million words, compared to the 26 million words heard by children from working-class families and the 45 million words heard by those from professional families. Moreover, the actual words that a child from a low-income family hears tend to be the most commonly occurring words (Hart & Risley, 1995). By the time that child sets foot in the classroom, his or her spoken vocabulary is significantly less than that of more affluent peers.

Research also shows that literacy is a good predictor of a child's success in school and in the workforce. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, the literacy skill levels were lowest for adults who did not complete high school, and highest for those who pursued education after obtaining a high school degree (see sidebar for more statistics from this report). Moreover, 56% of the adults with the lowest literacy level were either not in the workforce (51%) or unemployed (5%), according to the U.S. Department of Education (2003).

Against this backdrop, LET attempts to level the playing field for its preschool participants. A critical part of LET is teacher participation. Eighteen hours of professional development training are being offered to the teachers and their aides. During these sessions, teachers and aides will learn about current best-practice techniques to help children learn new vocabulary words during classroom reading and pre-writing activities, as well as other techniques to help prepare the children for kindergarten. LET also makes lending libraries available in each classroom. In a few randomly selected classrooms, Leap's staff will provide teachers with more extensive training and mentoring.

A Community-Based Initiative

Leap has made every effort to obtain and successfully maintain the support of the school administration, school principals, teachers, and families of the students. "Pulling together a major research project with any public school system is a significant challenge in itself," said Perry Gunn, Leap's executive director. "The community support for this project has been unprecedented. All but two families [of 346] have chosen to participate and we've forged strong alliances with teachers, parents, and administrators."

At the outset, Leap needed to convince school administrators that LET could provide them with data to evaluate properly the four teaching models being used in the program, one of which is based on the Chicago public school curriculum and three others, one based on Leap's curriculum, and two other computer-based programs which use public school and Leap curricula.

"We needed to implement replicable language and pre-literacy programs that were mindful of the needs of the school system, such as costs and professional development training for teachers," said John Lybolt, Leap's research director. "Our outcomes had to be meaningful to the lives of the teachers, parents, and children we serve. As such, Leap has paired the use of standardized assessments of children with much needed continuous classroom monitoring and assistance in curriculum development."

Once the school system approved LET, Leap sent letters to the principals of every school with a Head Start program and all Head Start teachers and teacher's aides informing them about LET and inviting them to participate. Leap staff also worked closely with Barbara Bowman, Chicago Public Schools chief staff officer for Early Childhood Education, to address any concerns held by the principals, teachers, and their aides. In the end, eight schools with a total of 24 Head Start teachers and aides agreed to participate in LET. The schools then were randomized to one of the four classroom interventions.

In September 2005, when the families of preschoolers arrived to enroll their children in these Head Start programs, they were greeted not only by the teachers, but also by Leap representatives. The teachers and the Leap staff met with the parents and explained what LET was, how participation in the program would affect them and their children, and how the school system and Leap intended to use the data obtained on their children. More than 99% of the families signed up to participate.

LET demonstrates that SLPs have the knowledge and training to be effective community and academic partners in promoting emergent literacy skills. The program should enable Chicago public schools to determine the most effective professional development program formats, meeting the needs of teachers, parents, and children.

***Patricia J. Miller Gardner** is the project manager for ASHA's Communication Sciences and Disorders Clinical Trials Research Group clinical trials. For information on the LET Program or clinical trials at ASHA, contact her by e-mail at pgardner@asha.org.*