

## Filling the Language Gap

### Reports on New Models That Empower Kids to Read and Write

by **Susan Boswell**

With an increased emphasis on language development, literacy, and writing in the No Child Left Behind Act, speech-language pathologists are stepping to the forefront with innovative methods and models to help build these skills. At the Schools 2003 conference, Kate Gottfred and John Lybolt shared their experiences with LEAP Learning Systems in "Language Wellness: Turning Failing Kids Around," and Bonnie Singer and Anthony Bashir discussed their method of "EmPOWERing Students With Language Learning Disabilities to Write."

LEAP Learning Systems has its roots in volunteerism. Gottfred and Lybolt, directors of LEAP Learning Systems in Chicago, began volunteering with inner-city children in 1988. They later became interested in ways to fill the language gap of children in Chicago's Cabrini-Green Housing Development. In 1988, LEAP was born.

Sharing data from the first two years of a tutoring program begun in 2001 (one of many LEAP Programs), Gottfred and Lybolt explained how the program began by identifying 50 failing children in third to sixth grade from five schools serving the Cabrini-Green public housing development, where 70%–90% of students are 1–2 years below grade level in math and reading.

"From the teacher's standpoint, as long as these children sat quietly and didn't make too much noise, they were satisfied," Lybolt said.

On entry to the Kid's Club program, the third-graders scored below the 10th percentile and the sixth-graders scored below the fifth percentile on standardized language processing tests.

"Standardized tests showed the longer they had been in school, the relatively lower their language scores got," Lybolt said. "It's not a reflection on the school—it's a reflection of the continuing impact of poverty."

These children are not language-disordered—they just didn't have rich preschool verbal interactions, Gottfred explained. "They are coming from communication environments where dialogue and language are not emphasized. School was meaningless because they didn't understand the information presented." Research (Hart and Risely, 1997) shows that by the time these children enter school, they

have heard 10 million words in conversation; in contrast, children of parents with professional positions may have heard 50 million words before starting school.

To multiply the impact of the program, LEAP collaborated with a faith-based tutoring program and provided training to tutors and leaders. Tutors were oriented to the language needs of students and provided with lesson plans and academic strategies to implement an intensive, structured academic program. In addition to activities that supplemented the curriculum, tutors also engaged students in journaling, word-search and listening activities, role playing, songs, and debates. Activities also focused on the themes of family, character, choice, and responsibility.

Students participated in special enrichment events, field trips, and tours, Lybolt said. "Some kids have never been outside of their neighborhood and have not been to the museum, ridden a train, or been to Lake Michigan."

Environmental stressors and violence are staples in the lives of these children, Gottfred said. "We found that as kids learned more words to express themselves, aggression such as pushing and shoving decreased."

At the end of the program, the children's scores on standardized tests rose from the fifth to the 15th percentile, and 60% were getting grades of C or better. "The kids were more willing to engage in a learning dialogue that was apparent as they completed the post-test for the program," Lybolt said.

### **Mentoring in Writing**

Just as mentoring is critical in helping children from poverty make language gains, Singer and Bashir found that children with language learning disabilities (LLD) need to be mentored in writing.

"Your job as an effective clinician is to transfer your voice to your client," said Bashir, an associate professor in the department of communication sciences and disorders at Emerson College in Boston, during the session on "EmPOWERing Students With LLD to Write."

The session explored the constraints—language, cognitive, self-regulatory, executive, memory, social, affective, and motor—that affect the writing process, and introduced a method to support students with LLD in developing the underpinnings of language while mentoring them in the writing process.

"This method makes the writing process extraordinarily explicit," said Singer, who developed the method out of her work with school-age children as president of

Innovative Learning Partners in Massachusetts.

The method provides a consistent way to approach assignments and create an inner dialogue needed to write, she said. To EmPOWER their writing, students must Evaluate, make a Plan, Organize, Work, Evaluate, and Rework.

To help students with LLD evaluate the assignment, Singer asks them to circle the action words and then underline key words that tell the writer what to do. Students then make a plan for their writing by identifying their purpose for communicating, such as giving an opinion, comparing and contrasting, or providing information.

Once they understand their task, students need to organize their writing and map out their ideas with graphics. Many schools currently use a “semantic web” to organize writing, Singer noted. “This is an association strategy—it was meant for brainstorming, not writing.”

To scaffold the development of text, the graphic students use to map their ideas must serve as a visual representation of the underlying text structure. From sequencing ideas as linear patterns to writing a descriptive paragraph, clinicians can develop a handful of graphics that students will come to identify with the writing task.

While teaching the writing process, clinicians also must provide parallel tracks of intervention that address common problems for students with LLD, such as vocabulary acquisition, handwriting, spelling, morphology and syntax, and paragraph structure.

Lastly, students must evaluate and rework writing with editing and revision checklists. Clinicians can facilitate the process by asking students to share their writing with a group or evaluating anonymous writing, Singer said. “This must be a highly mentored process. We share responsibility in teaching and revising writing.”