Kids Write and Create:
A Service Learning Project in North Philadelphia

by Rena Krakow, Brian Goldstein, and Megan Dunn Davison

Located a mile apart from each other in North Philadelphia, Temple University and the Frederick Douglass Elementary School in ways seem worlds apart. Temple is a public research university with one of the most diverse student bodies in the country; Douglass, a local public school, is almost uniformly a school of children of poverty (89% qualify for reduced or free lunch). Moreover, literacy achievement at Douglass is woefully inadequate; fewer than 10% of its fifth-grade students achieved a score of “proficient” or better on the state reading assessment in the 2007–2008 school year (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009).

Research on inner-city adolescents and adults reveals correlations between reading failure and dropping out of school, unemployment, and poor health outcomes (Craig, Connor, & Washington, 2003; Rudd, Colton, & Schacht, 2000). Although it is imperative to focus on the later school years and beyond, it also is critical to recognize that children living in poverty typically start school at a significant disadvantage in terms of their emergent literacy development (Foster & Miller, 2007).

One approach to overcoming these challenges is to provide one-on-one mentoring/tutoring. Considerable evidence attests to the value of such programs on children’s literacy development, self-esteem, and motivation to stay in school (Moore-Hart & Karabenick, 2007). Hence, many programs recruit volunteers, providing them with varying amounts of training and supervision, resulting in varying degrees of effectiveness (Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

Service Learning

A unique way of addressing the need for skilled tutor/mentors, especially in communities that have both universities with speech-language pathology programs and public schools serving children who live in poverty, is to make service learning part of the curriculum for the speech-language pathology students. Indeed, literacy and serving a diverse client base are included in the scope of practice for SLPs (ASHA, 2007).

The “Kids Write and Create Program,” developed in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Temple University, provides young students at the Douglass School with literacy mentors. Every second-year master’s student participates for two consecutive semesters in this project, which is integrated into a two-course sequence: “Written Language Development and Disorders” (fall) and “Assessment and Treatment of Diverse Populations” (spring). Temple students are paired one-on-one with kindergarten or first-grade students who attend an after-school program at Douglass. Pairings remain the same throughout the year unless a child leaves the school or after-school program.

Mentorship through service offers benefits for both the mentor and the mentored (Eyler & Giles, J., 1999). Temple mentors repeatedly express their feelings of enhanced learning about education and literacy development in an inner-city public school through participation in this program. The experience also fills a gap in the programs of some speech-language pathology students, whose school practicum may lack a literacy component. “Kids Write and Create” targets the youngest students because of evidence that children who do not read at grade level by the end of first grade are unlikely to ever catch up (e.g., Torgesen, 1998). The program is designed to be highly motivating to children of this age. Research shows that children who are engaged in pleasurable literacy activities are more likely to persevere when learning tasks become more challenging and, thus are more likely to be successful at reading (Paris & Oka, 1986; Schunk, 1985). We build on notions at the core of “kid writing” programs: that young children recognize differences between spoken and written language (Sulzby, 1996) and have the desire and ability to communicate through writing, well before they have mastered the mapping of orthography to speech and the mechanics of handwriting (Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999). Such programs demonstrate that it is possible and desirable to use “writing as a gateway to literacy” (Kucer & Harste, 1991).

Individual Attention

Our program differs from most children’s writing programs, however, in the use mentors who work with children one-on-one (as opposed to a teacher circulating around the room) and who have the knowledge and skills to scaffold the children’s developing writing and reading (as opposed to volunteers). “Kids Write and Create” also provides continuity with buddy pairs matched and working consistently for the entire school year. Mentors help their buddies plan, compose, revise, finish, and read their own books at levels best suited to each child. The children write personal narratives in the fall term and expository works in the spring. In spring 2009, the topic for the expository texts was famous African Americans; children chose, among others, Barack Obama, Frederick Douglass, Beyonce, Rosa Parks, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Although many writing programs have children write as best they can, our program allows children to dictate their sentences. SLP mentors take dictation but also scaffold the children’s oral language to facilitate growth in written language skills. Mentors...
type the text and scan into digital files the accompanying illustrations that the children make. In addition, each book has a cover, title page, and an “about the author” page with a photograph. At the end of each semester, books are bound and presented to the authors, who are recognized at a special celebration held in their honor attended by parents/guardians, teachers, and the Temple mentors. Many children express amazement that their own ideas and words are worthy of being “published.” For some, it is the first book they have ever owned.

Outcomes

“Kids Write and Create” has operated at the Douglass School since fall 2007. In 2008–2009, we began to assess program effectiveness using the Test of Early Reading Ability (TERA-3; Reid, Hresko, & Hammill, 2001) along with questionnaires administered to the children and their mentors about their experiences with the program. Pre- and post-test data (reading quotients) from the Test of Early Reading Ability on the 30 children assessed in 2008–2009 showed a significant increase in literacy achievement over the academic year \[t(1/30) = -2.13, p = .04, d = .29\]. Moreover, at pre-test, 53% of participants were performing significantly below the mean on the TERA (i.e., > 1 s.d. below the mean) compared to 30% at post-test.

It is important to note that the population at Douglass is highly mobile and many children do not complete a full academic year at the same school or even in the same neighborhood, making it impossible to post-test some children for our analyses. Nonetheless, the decision was made to include even those Douglass children who live in the local homeless shelter; recognizing that they were most unlikely to attend the entire year, we placed the service part of the program ahead of the desire to obtain the most robust statistical outcome. We will add to the numbers pre- and post-tested as we continue the program.

When asked what they learned from participating in the program, the children responded with the following comments:

- “It felt good because I know how to write a book.”
- “To be a better writer.”
- “It is important to read.”
- “About sounding words out.”
- “I learned that I can sound out the words if I want to read to someone.”
- “I learned about putting periods and question marks at the end of the sentences.”
- “I learned to read it by myself.”
- “I learned how to put my sentences in order in my story.”
- “It is fun that you can write something that you want.”
- “It was great.”

Temple mentors also valued the experience, providing some measure of ecological validity based on their responses:

- “I think my students gained ownership over their knowledge and words. When I brought in the first draft of their book, and they started reading their own words, their eyes lit up.”
- “[Student] was very excited to see his book by the end of the program. I think he was almost in disbelief that it was his creation. This may be presumptuous, but I don’t think he previously experienced creating and owning something. An adult hadn’t previously said, ‘what we make is yours, I’m a helper, but you are the boss.’ Maybe that sounds lame. The kids all loved the one-on-one time with adults.”
- “[Student] seemed to gain confidence and pride in creating his story. He really put a lot of effort into it.”
- “I think that this experience showed the children that there are people from the community who care about them and are willing to help them in any way possible.”
- “Keep doing the project! The experience really meant a lot to [student] and I’m so glad that I could share it with him.”
- “I think [student] was extremely proud of what he accomplished.”
- “[Student] gained the experience of learning how to use his imagination to create a storybook. He learned the different components of a story. He also gained ownership of creating and receiving the finished book.”
- “I liked seeing [student] get so excited about my presence—he couldn’t wait to get started.”

According to the National Commission on Service Learning (see Fiske, 2001), service learning is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (p.3). We believe that this definition aptly characterizes what “Kids Write and Create” is doing and we believe that SLPs in training have much both to offer and to gain through their participation.

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Selected References


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