

Children drowning in a sea of blah

By Linda Doherty

The Age (Melbourne, Australia)

November 1, 2004

Teachers talk too fast and bombard students with excess words, leaving them struggling in a "sea of blah" and possibly contributing to unnecessary referrals for behavior disorders.

This is the finding of a four-year study, which also revealed that a back-to-basics teaching style of slower speech and steady eye contact improved literacy and reduced behavioral problems.

Auditory testing of 10,000 Victorian children showed that 30 per cent of students aged from four years and seven months to six years could not accurately process sentences longer than nine words. For children aged nine to 10, sentences longer than 13 words often did not compute.

Ken Rowe, research director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, says most of the children studied did not have hearing problems but were bamboozled by rapid-fire, lengthy instructions from teachers.

Often the students' boredom, confusion or bad behavior meant they were unnecessarily referred to doctors for either hearing testing or assessment for problems such as attention-deficit or hyperactivity disorders.

"Teachers speak far too quickly," Dr Rowe says. "There is too much information going through the (students') auditory gate. Either nothing goes through or what goes through is garbled."

Dr Rowe's study, with his wife Kathy, consultant physician at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, and audiological specialist Jan Pollard, led to a training package for teachers to improve students' auditory processing. It was presented at the annual conference of the Australian Council for Educational Research in Adelaide last week.

Boys in particular are treading water in this "sea of blah", a phrase coined by educational psychologist John Edwards.

Evidence presented last year to a federal parliamentary inquiry into boys' education noted that the ears of boys as young as four process sounds more slowly and send less information to the brain than the ears of girls.

When teachers were trained in the technique recommended by the study, student literacy development in 34 trial schools improved and the children became more attentive.