

Can Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) Improve the Reading Levels of Struggling First Graders?

Abstract

Students who struggle with reading in early grades may continue to fall behind. Peer Assisted Learning Strategies PALS, is one approach that may assist students in improving their reading using a class wide peer tutoring model. This action research examines whether PALS improved the reading of a group of first grade struggling readers in Miami Dade County Public Schools.

Statement of the Problem

The reading gap between the successful and struggling readers can grow to an unattainable measure. In order to minimize or close this gap, educators of beginning readers must be aware of the statistics. According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2014), studies show that by the end of 1st grade, students' proficient at reading will have seen an average of 18,681 words of running text, whereas those who are struggling will have only seen 9,975. This suggests that struggling readers are reading about half of the amount of words that successful readers are which may be the reason why they're underdeveloped in reading skills.

In addition, research shows that first grade lays the foundation of reading skills. According to Brown, Morris and Fields (2005), "An emphasis on first grade intervention stems from evidence that students who do not experience reading success in first grade are likely to continue as poor readers" (p.62). Reading is also necessary to attain good outcome in all other subjects such as science and social studies. This suggests that early intervention for reading skills during first grade is essential to ensure success in the following grades.

Research Question

PALS provides the use of automatic feedback and possesses many beneficial features that are essential for lower achieving readers that may be otherwise unattainable in a whole group classroom setting. This study examined the following research question: Will the use of PALS improve the reading levels of struggling first graders?

Literature Review

PALS is a peer tutoring program used in elementary through high school classrooms to improve student's proficiency in reading (What Works Clearinghouse, n.d). Specifically, PALS focuses on essential reading skills. According to Whatworksclearinghouse.com (n.d), students working in PALS pairs practice with reading activities used to improve reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension skills. These students listen to their partner read, and provide feedback during various structured activities.

Researchers tested the effectiveness of tutoring for reading skills after first grade. According to Brown, Morris and Fields (2005), supplemental tutoring can increase the amount of time that a student spends reading with immediate and necessary feedback. Also, a tutor can adapt the level and pace of instruction to the child's needs. Although PALS isn't a form of tutoring from a professional, it will increase the time that students spend reading and receiving feedback. In addition, this study found that one to one tutoring can help at risk first graders get off to a more successful start than peers who only receive small group instruction (Brown, Morris & Fields, 2005). These results suggest that small group instruction may not be enough for a student who is considered "at risk."

PALS may also be infused into the intervention model that is already taking place in the classroom, called response to intervention (RTI). According to Rafdel, McMaster, McCornell,

Fuchs, and Fuchs (2011), RTI involves early identification of students who are at risk by providing intensive intervention and progress monitoring. In a study where the efficiency of the RTI model with struggling readers in first grade was researched, they found that students who are at risk for reading difficulties because of unresponsiveness to tier 1 classroom instruction benefit from supplemental tutoring (Gilbert et.al, 2013). This research suggests that struggling readers may benefit from the PALS intervention in reading.

Research Methodology

Twenty two first grade students participated in this research, 11 of whom are struggling readers and the other 11 are high achieving readers. These students will be grouped into dyads for the application of PALS. These groups will meet three times a week for 30 minutes through an 8-week period. Prior to the research, I will be conducting two pre-tests: Dolch words reading test and the FAIR progress monitoring test. Through these two baseline assessments, I will receive the information needed for the implementation of PALS. Specifically, through the Dolch words testing I will determine what level of reading the lower achieving readers are on (pre-primer, primer, kindergarten, first grade, etc.). Through the FAIR assessment I will determine the definitive skill they're lacking in. For example, some skills they may be inadequate in is blending in the initial/ middle, or ending sound, vocabulary, fluency, etc.

After the pre tests are given and analyzed, I will determine the specific skills that the groups will target during their sessions. During each session, the dyads will target the goals of the lower achieving students through reading a passage and answering questions, blend sounds, and practice their sight words. After each session, they will complete a child friendly score sheet which will present whether the lower achieving student is reaching their goal. These score sheets

will also assist in recognizing whether or not the goal is being met and adjusting the implementation accordingly.

Findings and Results

Research is currently underway and should be concluded by March 2015. Findings will be available in time for the conference. It is anticipated that the struggling readers will show improvement from this intervention

Implications

PALS can possibly be a class wide peer tutoring model that can assist in the reading gap that most schools are now facing. A student's reading may affect all other subjects in school. First grade is usually the determining grade of success or deficiency in reading. Implementing PALS into general education classrooms may ultimately close reading gaps and improve the reading levels of struggling readers. Through the use of structured activities that PALS provides, students can improve their reading skills to ensure a long term academic success.

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