

An exploration of how using best practices curriculum with tutoring affects kindergarten literacy: a literature review by Cay Collins (Psychology)



Abstract

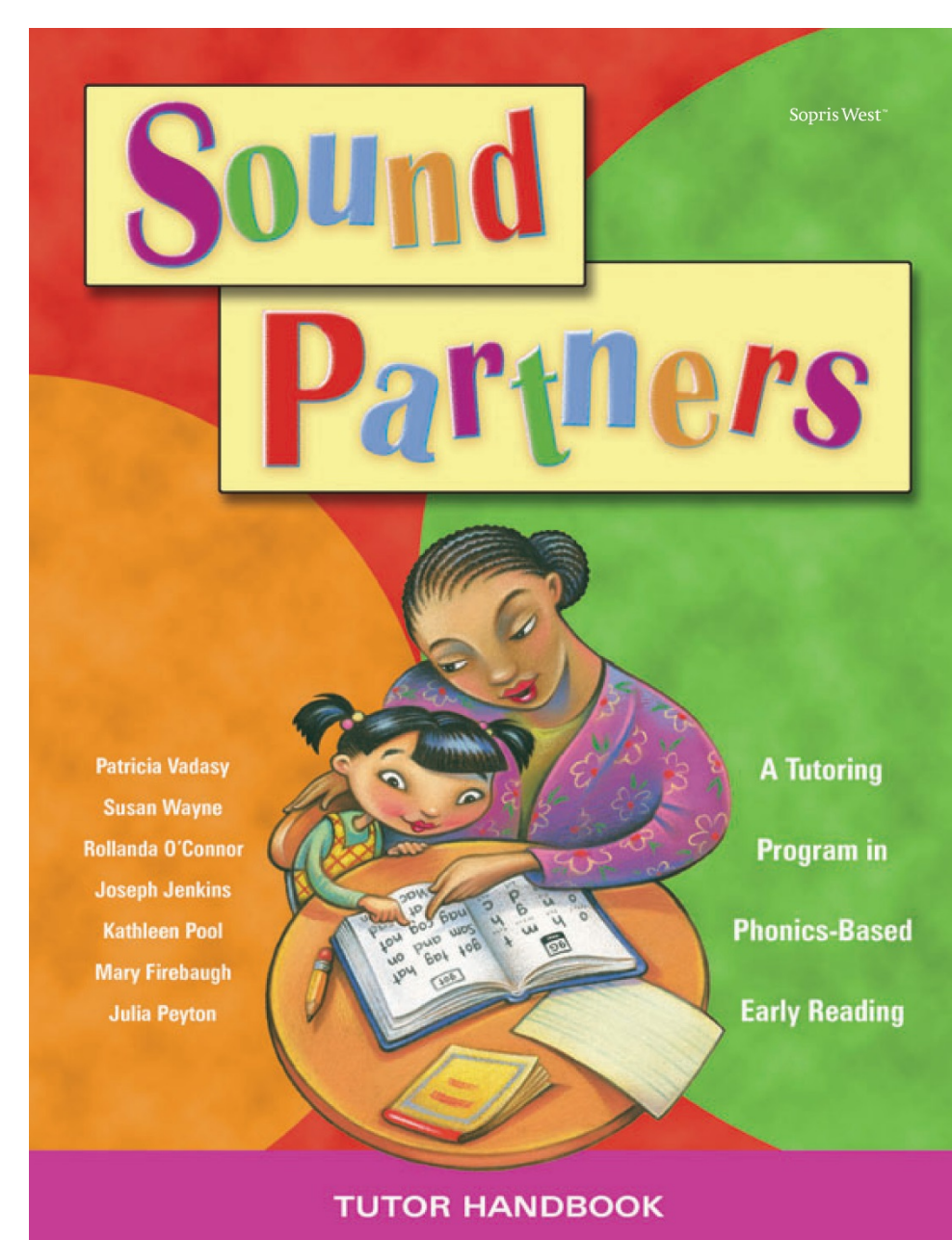
- Early interventions are being used to improve reading skills in children. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the best practices used in kindergarten literacy. The review will look at some of the current tools used in schools that have produced positive results. It will also examine the Wildcat Buddies tutoring program at Central Washington University, which uses the Sound Partners curriculum. The review will focus on how using current programs with tutors may positively impact literacy outcomes for early learners.

Background

- Children entering kindergarten vary in literacy ability at the onset of school. These variations can continue with some students struggling to catch up in later grades. Children who fall behind in literacy may enter subsequent grades without the skills necessary for reading and become labeled as needing special education services (Lennon & Slesinski, 1999). Identifying children in need of literacy interventions early is vital to assist children remain on target with their peers. At increased risk are students from lower socioeconomic and minority groups (Callaghan, & Madelaine, 2012; Vadasy, Sanders, & Peyton, 2005). Additional concerns arise as teachers and school districts find it is not easy to add in more programs and differentiate instruction for children at risk of low literacy proficiency. Teachers must find ways to maximize instruction for all students at different levels, which may leave some students falling even further behind (Bingham, Hall-Keynon & Culatta, 2015). This is leading to more implementation of paraeducators and volunteer tutors working the schools with small groups of students. Evidence suggests that segmenting words into phonemic units can be taught to children as young as four or five years old (Lennon & Slesinski, 1999), which is beneficial in early interventions. Phonemes are the smallest unit of speech, for example the sounds represented by the letters 'b' and 'c' are different phonemes.

Objectives

- Examine the best practices used in kindergarten literacy
- Examine the Wildcat Buddies tutoring program at Central Washington University
- How using current programs with tutors may positively impact literacy outcomes for early learners



Current Best Practices

- In an effort to catch early learning difficulties Response to Intervention (RTI) has been developed. RTI incorporates a Tier system in which Tier 1 is classroom instruction and depending on student need moves up through Tier 3 (Little et. al, 2012). RTI models are evolving to incorporate both individualized interventions and structured research based programs. Much of the research is moving in the direction of direct, early instruction (Lennon & Slesinski, 1999). This type of instruction offers the explicit instruction in phoneme awareness, coding and alphabetic principles, while still underscoring reading connected texts and writing. This type of program can put students on the right path to obtain early reading skills. Difficulties arise with these added on programs, usually in the form of scheduling and funding. The use of paraeducators can alleviate some of these difficulties. Many schools are either hiring paraeducators or using volunteer tutors to support teachers by working with children either one on one or in small groups. There has been concern regarding proper training for paraeducators, however it is not always possible for paraeducators and tutors to have the years of education some feel necessary (Bingham, Hall-Kenyon, & Culatta, 2015). However, Bingham et. al noted positive effects on students reading achievement has been found when paraeducators use explicit phonics instruction (2015). In addition research suggests (Callahan & Madelaine, 2012; Hagan-Burke et. al, 2011) tutors working with small groups or individually is more beneficial than larger groups.
- Incorporating engaging activities provides motivating and salient exposure to children while learning early literacy (Bingham, Hall-Kenyon, & Culatta, 2015). Activities such as using hands on play incorporating sounds being taught, offer more exposure to the phonemes and maintains children's attention to facilitate better retention.
- Reading also helps to reinforce lessons as well as offer children ways to relate concepts and spark imagination (Roskos, & Neuman). While digital textbooks are offering an interactive lesson for students, the most promising portion of them is the built-in tutors that offer feedback and assistance.

Wildcat Buddies

- The Wildcat Buddies program at Central Washington University builds on many of the best practices for early literacy. The Wildcat Buddies program utilizes the Sound Partners tutoring package. Sound Partners allows tutors to work with students individually or in small groups and utilizes a scaffolding system in which each lesson builds upon the previous (Vadasy, Sanders, & Peyton, 2005). Lessons run 20 minutes per student three days a week and offer letter recognition, phonemic awareness, sound blending and book reading. Tutors are working with students identified by teachers as needing more assistance in literacy skills. The program uses phonemes, sound blending, segmenting and reading practice.

Discussion

Understanding that phonemes while necessary for literacy success are not sufficient on their own, identity tasks (e.g. what sound does moon start with) are also predictors of later decoding (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012), Sound Partners incorporates these identity tasks with each phoneme lesson. In addition Wildcat Buddies use tutors to work with students individually as supplements to classroom instruction allowing for individualized work. Use of paraeducators or tutors can offer explicit, engaging instruction to students.

Early interventions that focus on phonemic awareness in individual tutoring sessions can help to close the gap in literacy skills.

Sound Partners

The Sound Partners reading program used by Wildcat Buddies is an evidence based intervention as reported on the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) website (Institute of Education Sciences, 2010). This program was found to be effective for alphabetic, fluency, and comprehension.

A typical Sound Partners lesson begins with a new letter sound being introduced. The letter sound is practiced orally and the letter is traced and written. Instructions such as "Write the letter that makes the /m/ sound." Words are then segmented into syllables, "Listen to how I break this word into two parts. Snowman: snow-man. Now you break these words into two parts..." The lesson moves on to blending with the tutor stretching out words such as "/mmmaaap/" and having the student say the word being stretched. The student then reads words by stretching them out and then saying them quickly. The lesson also includes alphabet practice and spelling. Each lesson ends with the student reading a Bob book. Every other lesson is a short review of the previous lesson.

As the program progresses new elements are added such as sentence reading, sight words, and sound blending of made-up words. About every 11 lessons is a mastery test the students need to pass before moving on to the next set of lessons.

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