

7-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Fitzpatrick, Carol S. (1999) "The Power of Two: A Study of the Integrated Reading Method of Peer Tutoring," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1236>

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The Power of Two: A Study of the Integrated Reading Method of Peer Tutoring

by Carol S. Fitzpatrick

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Every year, as I open my fourth grade classroom door on the first day of school, I feel the same touch of nervousness and excitement as I see reflected in the faces of the students coming through that door. I think they're wondering, "Will I be happy here?" And I wonder, "Will I be able to help them be successful here?" And at the end of every year I recognize that there are a few whom I feel I have not helped enough. No matter how hard we tried, there seemed to be an unassailable wall we couldn't breach when it came to reading.

In the past few years, a couple of questions have entered my mind, which I know are also on the minds of many teachers facing the new 'Goals 2000' legislation. "Will those of my bright students who have trouble reading still be able to pass the CIM (certificate of initial mastery) requirements?" and "Will their reading disabilities cripple them for life, as the CIM benchmarks make that wall between them and success even higher?" The last two years have brought some breakthroughs in that unbreachable wall to literacy that I wish to share.

Background

In October of 1997, I attended a workshop, given in Eugene, Oregon, by the local school district and co-sponsored by the University of Oregon, called "What Works in Reading." During the day-long workshop, Dr. Jill Schwimmer, Assistant Professor of Education at the Lane County Campus of Pacific University, introduced a simple peer tutoring technique she called "The Integrated Reading Method" (IRM). It is also referred to as "Reading Buddies." She made some fairly strong claims about how much it helped struggling readers to become competent readers. (For the purpose of this report, "struggling reader" will refer to students functioning at least one grade level below grade-level expectations.) Schwimmer stated that after fifteen hours of tutor contact, the children using her method would make over two years of growth. My first reaction was, "Oh, right! Sure it will!" I tend to be a little sarcastic. However, one of my friends with a severely learning-disabled son highly recommended the program.

Conveniently, my friend was teaching the fifth grade in the same school where I was teaching a fourth/fifth grade blended class. We decided to try Reading Buddies with our students. For the rest of the year, we pooled our classes twice a week for thirty-minute sessions using IRM. We weren't trying to do "research." We just thought it was worth a try. The results were astounding. In April 1998, we gave the district- mandated NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) Level Tests, (our standardized yearly assessment), to our students. Our struggling readers had made the two and a half years' growth Schwimmer had claimed. On a RIT (Rasch Unit) scale, where 5

points of growth is considered good for an average child on the fourth grade reading subtest, our learning-disabled students' mean gain was 12.2 RIT points for the '97-'98 school year.

Another benefit of the program, which cannot be measured in numbers, but which was very evident from our observations, was the affective gains made by both the tutors and the tutees (students being tutored). The tutors had a greater sense of accomplishment and being needed. They felt they were an important part of the school. The tutees enjoyed the contact with other students, as well as the budding success of their reading experience. It was obvious that both buddies valued Reading Buddy sessions. As soon as their teacher would allow them to go, they were out the door and on their way to our reading lab, a room specifically set aside for our program.

Joan Ziolkowski, (Networks, 2(1)) speaks of Reading Buddies in her article "It's Friendship, Developing Friendship":

"What is reading buddies all about?" In my opinion, there is no doubt that it's all about friendship, developing friendship. The development of reading skills is of great importance, but it is the development of friendships which motivates the students and provides opportunities for the successful development of literacy skills.

I agree completely with Ziolkowski, but I would take it one step further. By adding a research-based structure to the Reading Buddy program, she would not only see the development of new friendships but also be able to demonstrate the added benefit of significant growth in reading ability.

An Action Research Project is Born

Area of Focus

The purpose of this study is to describe the effects of using the Integrated Reading Method of peer tutoring to improve reading scores of learning-disabled students.

Research Questions

To what degree can a simply-structured, peer tutoring method help struggling readers measurably improve their reading ability?

How much benefit is gained in relation to the amount of time spent?

Review of Related Literature

I did an ERIC search on the Internet asking for simply-structured forms of peer tutoring in reading for children in the intermediate grades and found over twenty articles of interest. Some were overviews of several other research projects on this subject. A wealth of information includes these findings:

Peer tutoring has been proven to be beneficial in numerous studies over the past 40 years. Peer tutoring was found superior to traditional methods in every study except one that lasted only two weeks and used only one source of data.

Peer tutoring is at least as beneficial for the tutors as it is for the tutees.

Methods based on Repeated Reading and the Neurological Impress Method, such as Paired Reading and Duolog Reading, provide a simple structure and are highly effective.

Learning-disabled students make greater improvement when they are allowed to be tutors on the same basis as everyone else in a general classroom; this is possible if they are well-trained and the method is simple.

Students learn as much from peers as they do from teachers: they retain more from peers than from traditional classroom methods, unless the teacher is implementing a research-based intervention.

An abundance of good research supports our project, and almost all of it is positive in nature. I couldn't find any research on IRM, but since it is a combination of several of the methods listed above, I felt it was worth our time to implement it.

Intervention: The Integrated Reading Method

The intervention I used is called the "Integrated Reading Method." This name comes from its integration of two theories: Reading Theory and Learning Process Theory. Reading Theory comes from Frank Smith's work (1994) and suggests that reading is a complex process of sorting and making sense of information that comes to us all mixed up. Jean Piaget's work led to the Learning Process Theory, which states that when children learn something, they go through two processes: having a competent experience, and then practicing that experience over and over again until it is mastered and they become competent themselves. The repeated modeling of IRM allows struggling readers to be released from the shackles of decoding, which have imprisoned them from the beginning of their educational careers, and permits them to actually experience the reading process of making sense from those little squiggly back lines. IRM also integrates two opposing camps of reading instruction: phonics vs. whole language.

The actual method itself is simple. It has two phases: the experiencing mode and the experimenting mode. During the experiencing mode, the buddies follow a set routine involving modeling and practice. This mode lasts only a few minutes. Then they go into the experimenting mode for another minute or two. This mode involves the tutee reading alone with assistance if needed from the tutor. They rotate between these two modes for the rest of the tutoring session.

Setting Up the Program

On the basis of the higher-than-expected Level Test scores from our struggling readers, I entered the world of grant writing. To make a long story short, I received part of a grant for some aide time to run the Reading Buddy Program for the whole school. The funding did not come through

until the beginning of November, but we were able to start almost immediately after that. Initially, we were supposed to focus on intermediate grade students, but by the end of the year, we were working with students from all grades (K-6).

Membership of the Action Research Team

The members of the Action Research Team included two of the original members of the At-Risk Grant Committee, our principal, the two reading lab aides funded by the grant, and me. Responsibilities were varied:

The aides implemented the program as we designed it, but also gave a lot of input as to how the program should be implemented in the future.

The principal kept us headed in the right direction and dealt with the district at-risk office -- I think it was her perseverance that gave us this opportunity!

The two teachers that were original members of the At-Risk Committee acted as advisors and were very instrumental in designing, critiquing and brainstorming.

My job was primarily research and suggesting promising practices we might try in the future, as well as direct supervision of the program.

The program we designed included:

- Reading Buddies using IRM for 100 pairs of children
- A more intensive program for 26 "at-risk" students
- After school study hall
- First grade small group work

Setting

Our school has an attendance of over five hundred and fifty students in a middle-to-low socio-economic area. We almost qualify for Title I assistance, but not quite. The vast majority of the parents in our school must work outside the home. The twenty teachers in my school were supportive, based on the Level Test scores, my comments and their own observations of past students who were participating in Reading Buddies. The difficult part was not the rallying of support it was scheduling buddy times that were possible for all the students involved. To accomplish this, we put out a questionnaire where teachers checked any times during the day when they would cooperate with children leaving their room. We ended up with seven different times that we could put the buddies together. We endeavored to keep a teacher's pullouts limited to only the two thirty minutes sessions per week to cause as little disruption as possible.

Recruiting and Training

Most of the tutoring pairs were cross-age, an older child helping a younger child, although some were same-age. We never had a younger child tutor an older one for the obvious self-esteem

issues that such a situation would create. Tutors were selected from the fourth to sixth grades who were reliable students and competent readers. A competent reader was defined as one who has reached a level where oral reading sounds like natural speech and very little decoding is necessary; most words are recognized immediately so the reading sounds fluent and relaxed. They also demonstrated good comprehension of what they read. I personally trained the tutors for two forty-five minute sessions, stressing the importance of being a reliable buddy during the first session. I gave them the following guidelines:

A reliable buddy:

- doesn't talk about their buddy to other students
- comes on time and tries to be there every Reading Buddy day
- offers lots of verbal support
- stays on task
- understands that the reading process isn't easy for everyone

Tutors were also instructed in the Integrated Reading Method of peer tutoring. During session two, we practiced the tutoring method on each other. This was all the training necessary other than quick refreshers at the beginning of buddy sessions a few more times during the year. It truly is a method simple enough that "even a child can do it."

IRM with Reading Renaissance

It should also be mentioned that our school is implementing the Reading Renaissance Program (RR), which includes Accelerated Reader (AR). One of the drawbacks of RR is motivating struggling readers to participate. They have had trouble reading for years and now they are expected to go select a book, sit down and read quietly for an hour a day, and then take a computer test that requires more reading, and a lot more anxiety if they don't feel comfortable about using the computer. It is easy to see why struggling readers might have trouble jumping in and getting their feet wet. Reading Buddies helped a great deal in getting them past the beginning anxieties. Buddies read the tutees' AR books together during the sessions, which were already marked as to difficulty so they could pick a book of interest while staying within the tutees' instructional level. In the beginning, tutors were allowed to take their buddies to the library to pick out a book together. When they finished reading a book during the session, the tutor was allowed to help the student through the mechanics of taking the computer tests until the tutee felt confident enough to do it alone. This extra assistance was all that most of our students needed to get going. It was not long before the fun and satisfaction of watching their level of difficulty rise--and getting more points--worked their magic. Kids who feel successful enjoy learning.

Although combining Reading Renaissance and the Integrated Reading Method is natural, it isn't necessary for the success of peer tutoring. I have observed schools that have the same success with IRM (Reading Buddies) using a series of one-page informational stories with graded reading comprehension of only one to two pages in length for the buddies to read together. The whole program was operated out of one file cabinet. In fact, the expense of implementing this program is minimal with regard to reading materials, which can be anything at the tutee's

instructional reading level. However, it works best if the book is reader-selected. The only real expense involves training and funding the supervisor, and finding a location for the buddy sessions.

Data Collection

Experiencing Types of Data:

Aides kept an anecdotal record of their observations.

Enquiring Types of Data:

A short teacher questionnaire was given to ascertain the kind of support we could expect, and to determine convenient times for children to participate.

Examining Types of Data:

District-mandated NWEA Level Tests were given in September to all third to sixth grade students. They were also given to all fourth and sixth graders in the spring. At the last minute, the district exempted the third and fifth graders from taking the tests because they had just finished several days of statewide assessments. This took away a major data source for many of our 100 pairs of students. We will investigate the possibility of giving the reading portion of the test to all students participating in peer tutoring next spring.

Accelerated Reader (AR) offers formative data in the "At-Risk Reports" that we have readily available. AR also offers summative data that is standardized in their "S.T.A.R. Test."

Findings for '98-'99

Level Test results for thirteen fourth and sixth grade students showed:

Time spent with peer tutors directly affected a rise in percentile ranking.

- 5-9.5 hours = mean gain of +8%
- 10-14.5 hours = mean gain of +8.5%
- 15-15+ hours = mean gain of +13.2%

The mean gain in RIT points for students with fifteen or more hours of working with a Reading Buddy was: +12.8 RIT points (Editor's note: It must also be noted, though, that there was substantial variability among individuals in the gains made).

(5 RIT points per year is the expected growth rate for "normal" students. These were struggling readers who usually make even less growth than 5 RIT points.)

Data Analysis

I tried to use data that would be easily understood by non-educators because I am hoping to present this report to the parents at our school. I used percentile rankings because it's easy to explain to parents that a rise in percentile means that the student has improved in relation to the

same group of students with whom they were compared initially. I used RIT scores because parents in our district are familiar with them, and the scores show growth effectively between the beginning and end of the year.

Collecting data on the Reading Buddy Program for two consecutive years was enlightening. As stated earlier, Dr. Schwimmer claimed more than two years' growth in fifteen hours of tutor contact, which is exactly what we found at our school for two years running.

Research seems to show that this program is effective and worth spending the time and energy for everyone involved. It was also very clear that the children with less than fifteen hours of tutor contact benefited, but to a lesser degree.

Action Planning

We ran into several obstacles in our data collection this year. None of us were experienced action researchers. Next year we will have a broader range of data collected, and we will get good pre- and post-test data on all children participating. Our program grew beyond our expectations, and we had no way of predicting how many children would eventually be tutored. Some of the teachers were seeing positive changes in reading ability after just a few months, and began to send more students. We were limited only by how many tutors were available, compatible times for tutors and tutees to meet, and the room's availability.

Next year we will be adding:

- Primary students right from the beginning of the year due to their poor test results on the District's Fluency Tests.
- The SORT-R test for word recognition.
- Another data source that will effectively measure comprehension for all grade levels.
- A reader attitude scale as pre- and post-test.
- A teacher referral form on each child, that contains a Likert Scale questionnaire.

Conclusions

One of the more interesting quotes I came across during my research was, "Recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal that two fifths of the 1994 sample of fourth graders (age 9 to 10) failed to demonstrate even a basic level of reading ability" (Taylor, Hanson, Justice-Swanson & Watts, 1997). More conservative estimates say that approximately one out of every three students comes into the intermediate grade classrooms struggling to read grade-level books. Therefore, there is an immediate need to explore any successful methods to help these children climb that wall of literacy standing between them and success.

The Integrated Reading Method of peer tutoring seems worth further investigation within our current educational setting. Research suggests that simply-structured, peer tutoring methods show promise for the future. The Integrated Reading Method seems to combine the best of the best. It provides the general benefits of peer tutoring: greater student time on task, more time

practicing the reading process itself in an enjoyable way, and developing lasting friendships with peers. Add to this its simultaneous, multi-sensory aspect, which has for years been proposed as a successful method for working with students exhibiting signs of learning disability, and this recipe for future success seems probable.

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