



MENTORSHIP AND THE STRUGGLING READER

Will training students with reading disabilities as peer fluency tutors lead to increased reading engagement and growth as a reader?



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Introduction

Many problems present themselves when thinking about how to support struggling readers. For my study I chose to focus on the fact that upper elementary and middle school students do not get the amount of time needed for explicit reading instruction and practice reading simple texts, at their independent reading level, because of the demand of the general education curriculum. One piece of evidence that points to this is that in our school district, on the CSAP/TCAP 72.01% of third graders are proficient or advanced. This percentage lowers, with some fluctuation, through the older grades and reaches a low of 66.52% of eighth graders that are proficient or advanced. In our school, on the CSAP/TCAP 21.6% of 6,7, and 8th graders with IEPs (Individualized Education Plan(s)) caught up with their peers in reading assessments, as compared to the 33.7% 4th and 5th graders with IEPs who could do so. These numbers suggest that, as the grade levels increase, there not only is there a decline in the ability to reach those struggling students, the number of struggling students increases, as well. This may be because there are no Common Core Standards that address Foundational Reading Skills, such as phonics, word recognition, and fluency past grade 5. One can read through the standards and see the after grade 5, the focus turns to close reading and comprehension fictional and informational texts.

In addition, my early research indicated that students with reading disabilities struggle more than their peers to read fluently. This may be due the fact that their decoding and automatic word recall is not as strong as students who learn to read at a normal rate. One article I read, titled "Balanced, Strategic Reading Instruction for Upper-Elementary and Middle School Students with Reading Disabilities: A Comparative Study of two Approaches" (Mansett-Williamson, Nelson, 2005) studied the importance of explicit instruction when teaching reading strategies and skills to struggling readers. Another article, titled "Literacy Learning Cohorts: Content-Focused Approach to Improving Special Education Teacher's Reading Instruction" (Brownell, Kiely, Haager, Boardman, Corbett, Algina & Urbach, 2017), studied a professional development model; the results of which also pointed to the benefits of explicit instruction. Both articles have not only confirmed the fact that fluency is an important and learned skill that is difficult for struggling readers to attain, but also that instruction needs to be explicated and targeted for students to reap full benefits. These will, therefore, be the areas that I hope this study will be able to address. I believe that in conduction this study, I will be able to examine the effect that being placed in a mentor position has on struggling readers. I am hoping that it affects not only their fluency, but that it also positively affects their reading engagement. Students learn more from teaching others, my hope is that by monitoring and providing feedback to younger students on fluency passages, they will be more aware of their own accuracy and fluent reading.

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Research Questions

The questions that I am hoping my research will answer are:

- How can struggling readers in fourth and fifth grade, and middle school get regular reading practice and instruction in addition to grade level content?
- What is the best way to increase decoding, word identification and fluency in fourth, fifth and middle school readers with deficits in these areas?
- Will being a peer tutor increase fluency and reading engagement in struggling readers?
- How can peer tutors be used to increase reading instruction time?

Literature Review

In the book, *Teaching Reading to Students Who Are At Risk or Have Disabilities*, the authors, William D. Bursuck and Mary Damer, have compiled years' worth of data and teaching methods to help teachers who are trying to reach "at-risk" readers. The authors claim that students with reading disabilities are generally disfluent readers. They either struggle with decoding, remembering high-frequency words, blending sounds together, or exhibit any combination of these problems. Bursuck and Damer point out that the need to read fluently increases as students get older, because they are required to read more text, at a higher level, to gain information (188). Therefore, there is a great need to get students to achieve fluency.

In one of the peer-reviewed articles I read, titled "Balanced, Strategic Reading Instruction for Upper-Elementary and Middle School Students with Reading Disabilities: A Comparative Study of Two Approaches", researchers Genevieve Manset-Williamson and Jason M. Nelson, compared two different methods of instruction. Both methods included research-based approaches in phonemic awareness/analysis, decoding, fluency and comprehension. The difference was how explicitly comprehension strategies were taught. The results of the study showed that both interventions were beneficial for the participants. During a time when most students regress, summer break, the majority of the students showed gains in comprehension, fluency and phonemic awareness. Interestingly, the group that received explicit comprehension instruction did not show growth in passage fluency. The researchers attributed this to possibly being tied to their increased comprehension. To explain, as the students read and realize, based on context, that they are reading the wrong word so they slow down to self-correct, which affects their words correct per minute. This is further proof of the complicated relationship of all the elements that go into fluent reading.

I also reviewed a book called *Collaborating with Students in Instruction and Decision Making: The Untapped Resource*, by Richard A. Villa, Jacqueline S. Thousand, and Ann I. Nevin. In this book, there is a chapter dedicated to peer tutoring and partner learning. This source taught me that the kind of peer tutoring I will be studying is known as "cross-age" tutoring and has been successful in many different subject areas. I also learned the importance of purposefully training students to be tutors. According to Villa, Thousand, and Nevin, there are six essential ingredients for successful peer tutoring to happen. The help the tutor provides must be relevant, appropriately elaborated, timely and understandable to the tutee. In addition, the tutor must provide a chance for feedback to be practiced and the tutee must practice it (63). The authors also provide a checklist, or guide, to establishing a peer-tutoring practice to ensure that the essential ingredients are being thought about and included. Areas that are to be

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considered include identifying students to participate, recruiting and training those students, supervising tutoring sessions, evaluating the progress, reinforcing and recognizing the hard work put in by both the tutor and the tutee, analyzing and redesigning, and sharing results with colleagues.

Methods and Participants

The study took place at my school and the participants were students in fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. There were seven tutors and seven tutees. Of the tutors, three were female and four were male. Of the tutees, two were female and five were male. The tutors were all students who have been identified with reading disabilities. The tutees were in first and second grade, and were identified by their teachers as needing support in fluency practice. All the students whom I asked to participate, were willing to do so and all signed and returned parental permission forms.

The methodology that I used was a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection. I used fluency assessments to count words correct, and errors made at three different points during the study (at the beginning, middle and end). I compared those numbers at the end of the study to see if there was any growth. I also used percentages to keep track of how many steps the tutors were able to do on their own throughout the study. As for qualitative data, I conducted student and parent surveys to get data on reading engagement from different points of view. I also conducted a student interview at the end of the study to get their perspective on the study and to ask if they would be interested in tutoring again.

This methodology made sense because I needed to use quantitative data to show growth in reading fluency and qualitative to show increased reading engagement. This is the logical way to track this simply because fluency can be counted, but engagement is more a matter of interest in something and cannot be counted numerically.

Data Collection

I used several data collecting forms throughout this study. I started the study with a brief student survey and a fluency assessment. I sent a short parent survey home with each tutor, one at the beginning and one at the end of the study. The end-of-study survey also included a few short answer responses. I also used a tutoring session checklist to track each tutor's ability to conduct a session. Half-way through the study, I conducted a second fluency assessment and a brief interview to see how students felt the study was going. At the end of the study, I conducted a final fluency assessment, a survey and a brief interview.

In addition to parent and student surveys, I also sent a survey to the classroom teachers. To make it as easy as possible on teachers, I only sent a survey at the end of the study, although we informally touched base on interest and progress during the study.

I would like to note that I did not use one my forms because it was not feasible. It was an observation form so I could observe the student in the classroom during independent reading time to gauge reading engagement. The problem was that not all classes have independent

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reading time, and those that do, do not have it on a consistent basis. I feel that this is further evidence that older students do not get the time they need to practice reading at their reading levels.

Results

To analyze the data and determine the results I did the following:

- I compared fluency scores from the beginning, middle, and end of the study (words per minute and errors made).
- I counted the sessions completed and divided by the number of weeks to determine how many sessions per week were done.
- I determined how well each component was completed by each tutor during their sessions and indicated it with a percentage.
- I compared engagement survey questions from the beginning to the end of the study and indicate those with a score that matches the score on the data collection form.
- I analyzed each student's interest in the study and share their desires to either continue or discontinue tutoring younger peers.
- I summarized teacher, parent, and participant responses to engagement-based survey questions and interviews.

Summary of Session Components

118 Total Sessions

Component	Yes
Tutor was prepared with the correct folder and passages.	100%
Tutor turned on audio recorder at the start of the session.	99%
Tutor directed tutee to follow along as they read the passage aloud.	97%
The tutor read the passage with only random error (<98%).	96%
The tutor corrected errors and provided unknown words on the first two read throughs to at least 90% accuracy.	96%
The tutor administered a one-minute probe on the third read through.	100%
The tutor marked the errors on the probe	100%
The tutor wrote the correct words-correct-per-minute on the probe.	97%
The tutor recorded the correct words-correct-per-minute and errors per minute on the data recording form.	100%
The tutor gave the tutee a sticker if all components were completed within the 20-minute time frame.	99%

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Summary of Reading Fluency Assessments

Category	How many students showed improvement?
Passage level	0/7
Words Correct Per Minute	5/7
Errors in a Minute	7/7

Summary of Engagement Survey

Statement	Higher	Lower	Same
I like reading out loud.	5	1	1
I like reading to myself.	1	1	5
I want to understand more of what I read.		1	6
I want to read faster.	2	1	4
I want to read harder words and books.	4		3
I think I can help others become better readers.	1	1	5

Explanation of Charts

Each student has three tables that show the tutors' growth in different areas in the study. The first table shows their accuracy in carrying out the different components of the tutoring sessions. The second table shows the difference in their responses to the reading engagement questions. The third table shows their fluency scores from the beginning, middle, and end of the study. At the end of the tables, there are three summary tables that include data from all seven students.

Implications

When I started this study, my purpose was to see if peer tutoring was a feasible intervention for struggling readers. I found research to support the need for additional fluency practice, and I found research that indicates peer-tutoring is an untapped, potential resource – that there has been success using peer-tutors to help struggling readers. However, my study takes peer-tutoring one step further than the previous research did, by asking what happens if the tutor is a struggling reader.

The study took place over 9 weeks; the first week was spent giving fluency assessments, training students to tutor younger students, and conducting surveys. We discussed the importance of fluency, and, per one of my research articles, explicitly discussed the need for fluency instruction and the steps that go along with it (modeled reading, re-reading, and one-minute probes). For the rest of the study, the tutors conducted fluency sessions with their younger partners.

I learned a lot during the study. First, as I expected, all of the tutors showed growth in one way or another – either their words read per minute increased, or their errors made in a minute decreased. In some cases, both areas improved. Second, according to their survey answers, most of them indicate that their reading engagement has increased, as well. They want to read faster, or they say they enjoy reading aloud more, or they are interested in continuing as a peer tutor to help younger readers. Third, this study helped their confidence and it was fascinating

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to watch those students to whom teaching comes naturally. For example, I had one student who was so comfortable and confident as a tutor that she seemed like a different student. She used her own corrective language, and after a couple of sessions, realized that her partner kept getting lost and continued to keep watching her as she read aloud – supporting her as needed. I also received positive feedback from teachers who had different points-of-view than I as the researcher, or the participants had. I was told that several students showed an increased confidence in their ability to read aloud in class, or to help another student in class. I also had one student whose teacher reported he has branched out as far as who he works with in class. She said it was almost like he realized “I can help other people” and “I can initiate conversation.” This is an added bonus – one that I had not even considered, but one that the teacher attributed to the study.

The results of this study show that there are indeed other options for getting older, struggling readers to practice reading appropriate texts aloud. Teaching students how to teach other students, and supporting them while they do it, can be a valuable method for learning. The students who really enjoyed tutoring did very well completing the sessions with fidelity and showed a definite increase in reading engagement. I would like to continue this practice next year with those students who I know enjoyed it and who were solid with their methods. However, I would plan these sessions for a quarter at a time, and would only have four, possibly five, tutoring sessions a day.

As successful as I feel that study was, there are definite limitations. First, planning times with first, second, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh graders was difficult and I had to adjust my schedule more than once to accommodate other class schedules. For example, several sessions were missed because of field trips or class parties. Second, seven tutoring sessions a day was somewhat repetitive and because the sessions were so close together, often felt rushed – even though they all managed to conduct their sessions in the allotted time. Third, I happened to get lucky with the partnerships that I made – which made me realize that pairing personalities is as important as pairing reading levels and the next time I have these sessions, I will be sure to keep this in mind.

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