

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Peer Tutoring: A Strategy to Help Students with Learning Disabilities

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Introduction

With the reauthorization of the IDEA and passage from No Child Left Behind, teachers are required to use research-based practices and instructional arrangements or strategies in their classroom (Odom et. al., 2005; Damore & Murray, 2009). This is very crucial especially when teaching students with disabilities because their population needs reinforcements in reading skills, note taking, math skills and organizational skills (McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006; Jameson, McDonnell, Polychronis, and Tim Riesen, 2008).

Peer tutoring is one instructional arrangement that has been used extensively to increase student's engaged time (Stenhoff and Kraft, 2007). Vocabulary review can be incorporated through the use of peer tutoring where each student is paired with another student alternating roles of tutor and tutee to learn the provided content (McDuffie, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2009).

Peer Tutoring

One way to incorporate additional vocabulary review is through the use of peer tutoring where each student is paired with another student alternating roles of tutor and tutee to learn the provided content (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009, p.494).

What is peer tutoring? Does it really aid in the achievement of students with significant cognitive disabilities? If peer tutoring is effective, how can we make sure that this effective intervention can be used in teaching students with disabilities? A review of pertinent literature will seek answer to these questions.

With the statement of No Child Left Behind, education professionals are aiming to find research-based supported practices that can be used in classrooms and aid students with disabilities to have access to general curriculum. Since then, policymakers have placed an emphasis on students' needs, including those with disabilities to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge that they need (Damore & Murray, 2009; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006; Matt-Jameson, McDonnell, Polychronis, & Riesen, 2008).

Peer tutoring is considered as instructional strategy that consists of students working together with or without disabilities to increase their achievement levels (Stenhoff, Kraft, 2007; Kroeger, Burton, Preston, 2009; Hashimoto, Utley, Greenwood, Pitchlyn, 2007; McDuffie, Mastropieri, Scruggs, 2009). In pursuit of promoting student achievement, educators and researchers have examined that collaborative teaching can aid in the successful implementation of peer tutoring (Damore et al., 2009; Hashimoto et. al., 2007). Peer tutoring can also be used to motivate the students to be engaged in the lesson and minimize behavioral problems during instructional time (Stenhoff & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2007; Matt-Jameson, McDonnell, Polychonis, Riesen, 2008).

Models of Peer-Assisted Strategies

ClassWide Peer Tutoring (CWPT)

As discussed by Hashimoto et. al., (2007), the oldest and most widely researched model for peer tutoring is the ClassWide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) which was developed in Kansas City during the 1980s and designed to initially improve basic reading skills, mathematics and spelling skills of low performing students in both general and special education classes. CWPT helped in increasing students' active participation during instructional time and as well reduced the number of students who needs special attention, and reduced the number of students dropping out (Harper, Mallette, & Harper, 2006; Pitchlyn, Greenwood, Utley, & Hashimoto, 2007). Retention and generalization of ideas and thoughts in completing writing activities were addressed when CWPT was implemented and resulted to be effective if skills will be acquired before using the said strategy (Hashimoto, et. al., 2007).

Peer assisted learning strategies (PALS)

Peer assisted learning strategies (PALS) was developed by Fuchs and Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons (1998) and aided in increasing reading behavior, reading fluency and comprehension by offering specific programs in math and reading (Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005; McMaster 2006; Calhoon, Otaiba, Greenberg, King, & Avalos, 2006). The use of PALS was developed to aid in the strengthening general education capacity to meet different academic needs of a diverse population. Currently they are three models of PALS that we can use. The first one was used to aid in developing skills in mathematics and reading for second to sixth grade students (Fuchs et. al., 2005). The second model was used to assess kindergarten and first grade who were just beginning to read (Maheady et. al., 2006). Lastly, is the high school pals, which is used to students who are in high school level but still struggling in reading (Fuchs et. al, 2005).

One implication of using PALS is that it can be an effective tool to promote an increase the comprehension level of student who are English language learners (Saenz et. al., 2005; Avalos, King, Greenberg, Otaiba, & Calhoon, 2006).

Cross-Age Tutoring

Cross-Age Tutoring is a peer tutoring approach that partners students of different ages with older students portraying the role of tutor and younger students portraying the role of tutee (Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006). Student pairing may include a variety of combinations such as elementary students with high school students or older students with disabilities with younger students with disabilities (Kroeger, Cathy, & Preston, 2009). When teachers collaborate in planning on how they can make peer tutoring useful and participate in a rigorous training, the students will be the primary beneficiary (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009)

Benefits of Peer Tutoring

Mastropieri and Scruggs (2009); Calhoon (2005); Calhoon et. al. (2006); Kroeger et. al. (2009) had emphasized that in order to enhance the vocabulary skills of students, they should be paired with another student to assist each other in learning the new skill. The same authors revealed in their researches that peer tutoring can result to positive effects on different content areas including reading, spelling, math, social studies, science and health. This is in direct support or correlation to the works of (Mathes, Fuchs and Fuchs, Henley and Sanders, 1994; Delquadri, Greenwood, Stretton, and Hall, 1983; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2001; Mastropieri, Scruggs, Spencer and Fontana, 2003; Mastropieri, Scruggs and Graetz, 2005 and Utley et. al., 2001) on related subject.

Upon the initial implementation of peer tutoring in some researches, students made significant improvements in spelling acquisition (Hashimoto et. al., 2007), phonological skills, word attack, and word identification (Calhoon, 2005) to middle school students with reading disabilities. Results also indicated that students in peer tutoring condition outperformed students in traditional instruction on academic unit tests (McDuffie et. al., 2009, p.504). Students in elementary settings and English Language Learners (ELL) were able to increase their scores in reading comprehension after peer tutoring strategy was used (Saenz et. al., 2005; Stenhoff & Kraft, 2007).

As mentioned by McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs (2006) peer tutoring can be one of the best resources we can have in school that can effectively increase the reading comprehension of students in general education and special education classes. Peer mediated instruction is an effective way to attain knowledge and use it to learn how to combine complex ideas into a concept that can be applied to everyday life situation (Preston, Burton, & Kroeger, 2009; Scruggs et. al., 2009; Stenhoff et. al., 2007).

In order for peer tutoring to become effective, instructional behaviors should be used than just pairing a student to any individual (Stenhoff et. al., 2007; McMaster et. al., 2006). Establishing expectations with tutors and tutees, modeling instructional-presentation, providing feedback right away, and practicing problem-solving strategies are some of the important elements of effective peer tutoring (Hashimoto et. al., 2007, Lignugaris/Kraft et. al., 2007).

What Should Be Done?

If students are to reach higher levels of engagement and reflect on scientific concepts and processes, then teachers must find ways to support student engagement. (Kroeger, Burton, Preston, 2009, p. 6)

As educators, we have to consider today the different activities we provide in our classroom to engage our young thinkers to become independent thinkers. As Preston et. al. (2009) & Calhoon (2005) stressed in their paper, peer mediation is effective because it involves high-order thinking, question asking, attentive listening, giving constructive or corrective feedback and encouragement.

With the wide range of students we have in our class, Mastropieri and Scruggs (2009) indicated that teachers still feel unequipped to accommodate the diverse instructional needs of students with and without disabilities in their classrooms. As Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) mentioned in their paper, the problem might not be due to the unavailability of the effective intervention (such as peer tutoring). Perhaps, it is owing to the inaccessibility of different strategies and not knowing the effective strategies on how to implement them. Teachers should be given opportunity to attend trainings and workshops to become proficient in using such intervention like peer tutoring. Teachers should be trained in implementing peer-assisted strategies if they want to bridge the gap in the learning achievement of their students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

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