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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Practical Peer Learning

St. Paul, MN • April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Schedule Peer Learning

Highlights

- Use of peer learning throughout the day
- Peer-assisted learning strategy in reading instruction—"turn to your partner"
- Peer-assisted learning strategy in math instruction—"bottoms up, heads together" team work in problem solving
- Pairing strategies
- Benefits of peer-assisted learning to ELs
- Protocols and routines for working with partners

About the Site

Riverview Elementary School (K-6)

St. Paul, MN

Demographics

45% Hispanic, 27% Black, 15% Asian, 10% White

88% Free or reduced-price lunch

51% English Language Learners

Riverview utilizes a research-based comprehensive school reform program as a base of literacy education for all students. This program supports peer-learning strategies. Highlights include:

- Focus on pair and small-group work
- Widespread use of strategies such as “Think Pair Share”

Full Transcript

My name is Elizabeth Heffernan. I’m the Principal at Riverview Elementary, West Side School of Excellence in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Throughout the day, our teachers incorporate peer-assisted learning in every way possible. From the moment they walk in to the moment they leave, one of the methods that we use—one of the strategies that we use—is peer-assisted learning. How we do that is whatever the content of the curriculum is, that is a purposeful strategy. For example, if it is during reading, the teacher, let’s say, is reading aloud to the students a story. In order to make sure that the comprehension is following along with the story being read to them, the teacher will stop and think, and she will model that, “Let’s stop and think,” and then she will also say to the students, “Talk to your partners about what you think is going to happen next.” In math, we call it “Bottoms Up, Heads Together,” where the groupings of the students are such that they are working together during group time to solve a problem, and it’s called “teamwork.” That’s one way of doing peer-assisted learning, and the other way would be the partnering, which we also call “Think, Pair, Share.” That refers to “turn to your partner,” and kindergartners love it because it gives them an opportunity to talk when they are supposed to talk. It gives the teacher an opportunity to see how the students are comprehending whatever is being taught, and it also gives the students an opportunity to be involved in a way that might not be as intimidating as if they were called on by name, one at a time.

We do try to pair students that are either pretty much at the same level of comprehension, or we try to pair one that is stronger with one that is weaker. What I mean by that is, for example, is we have a native English speaker, and we try to pair them with a student who is a non-native speaker to help with that comprehension and to help with that vocabulary.

The peer-assisted learning is particularly beneficial to our second language learners, because of the modeling that we ask the students to use when speaking to each other, which would be using complete sentences. If I say to you, “Tenley, what did you think about that story?” you would respond, “Well, Liz, I think that the bobcat will not bite the girl because the bobcat is actually a kitty cat, instead of a bobcat.” (Or whatever.) The students are asked to respond in complete sentences using vocabulary that is appropriate that a lot of our second language learners have difficulty with.

They also model the academic language that our English language learners are missing. They might have language skills, and they might know how to speak English, but many times the nuances of English are lost, especially when you are reading a story, or you are listening to a story being read to you. When you are working with a peer, peers have a way of reaching in with each other, you know,

they connect a little bit better, they can see. It's amazing how kids can clue in to their partner or another child in their group who might be struggling with a concept and rephrase it for them to the point where the child will be able to understand it.

All of the students know that we are always respectful when working with each other. In particular, when working with a partner, there is a protocol that is taught, which means many times the students will be identified. One partner, for example, some of the teachers here use the word "Jellies," and the other partner will be considered "Peanut Butters." So, each child knows whether they are identified as a "Peanut Butter" or a "Jelly," or whatever it might be that the teacher might come up with. She will say to the students, "I want all the Peanut Butters to concentrate on making sure that you are listening to your partner, and that you are doing the strategies that good readers do. For example, following the line with your finger, tracking the line with your finger as you read, using your notes for writing down words that you might not understand, and then reading page one, two, and three, and at the end of each page, that the Peanut Butters turn to the Jellies and say, "Did you understand what you read?" Jellies, your response will be, "Yes, I understood what I read." She would model how this strategy is supposed to be. This is how we start the year, every year, whether you are K, or whether you're fourth and you've had it for four years.