Peer Supports to Enhance Reading for Understanding

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Introduction

In today's diverse classrooms, instruction must focus on meeting students' wide-ranging needs. Under a teacher's guidance, peers are often enlisted to support each other in academic tasks. Subsequently, instructional efforts can culminate in improved student outcomes in reading and access to content knowledge, as well as a greater capacity to engage in appropriate and productive interactions. In contrast to whole-class instruction, peer and small-group activities allow students to better understand content while actively engaged in reading for meaning and using the academic language associated with the content. To be most effective, students must be taught to take on instructional roles. Specifically, students need exposure to modeling and instruction to prepare them to be systematic, elicit responses from their peers, and provide feedback.

Peer pairing or grouping can benefit all students and provides opportunities for them to work cooperatively to use strategies to improve reading comprehension and to facilitate content acquisition. This brief will (1) describe peer supports and their benefits, (2) highlight the research on peer supports for struggling readers, and (3) provide classroom-specific examples of peer supports.

What It Is

Peer supports involve students of the same age tutoring each other, whether working together as partners or in small groups to complete assignments (Maheady, Harper, & Sacca, 1988). Students are taught to instruct and support each other while the teacher monitors and facilitates.

What It Looks Like

Peers assist each other in reading, thinking, and talking about concepts in print or presented in another medium. Students may discuss and debate literary and historical figures or trending news and how those topics relate to their own lives and to their background knowledge. Students also can solve complex problems by working in dyads to find solutions and/or review them with their classmates.

Benefits

- Ongoing, timely, corrective feedback
- Increased opportunities to respond and practice (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)
- Increased instructional time
- Effective use of teacher and student time
- Increased peer interaction
- Opportunities for students to improve generalizability of skills (Vaughn et al., 2001)

What the Research Says

1. **Provides opportunities to differentiate instruction** and support students who struggle (Regan et al., 2015)
2. **Effective at improving academic outcomes** for students receiving special education services in both general education and special education settings (Okilwa & Shelby, 2010)
3. **Feasible for teachers to implement** and enjoyable for students (Elbaum, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1997; Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997; Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998)

Examples

Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)

PALS is a peer tutoring program. It was developed to promote reading fluency and comprehension. It can be applied in elementary and secondary classrooms by using existing instructional materials to support understanding in reading and mathematic tasks. Before beginning PALS, all students are placed into a tutoring dyad. These pairs are changed regularly over a period of time as students work on a variety of skills. Next, students receive instruction on using specific prompts, corrections, and feedback. All partners serve as tutor and tutee during each session. An important feature of this instructional strategy is structured, frequent communication between tutors and tutees. Lastly, peers are trained to implement four structured activities including partner reading with retell, paragraph shrinking, and prediction relay (see below).

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PALS Activities

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Partner reading with retell. Each student alternatively reads aloud for 5 minutes from the same connected text (i.e., words that are linked in sentences, phrases, and paragraphs as opposed to words in a list). For 2 minutes after the text has been read, both readers alternate retelling the main ideas that happened in the story. The more proficient reader goes first. Text selection should match the less-proficient student's reading level. Students use corrective procedures to help the student reading. Error corrections include: "Stop, you missed that word. Can you figure it out?" If the reader does not figure out the word within 4 seconds, the tutor states, "That word is_____. What word?" The reader says the word and continues reading.

Paragraph shrinking. Develops comprehension through summarizing and identification of the main idea. Students use questioning techniques, such as "Name the who or what" and "Name the most important thing about the who or what."

Prediction relay. Requires students to make predictions and confirm or disconfirm them. The steps include the following:

- Predict: What do you predict will happen?
- Read: Read the next half page.
- Check: Did the prediction come true?
- Shrink: Name who or what the page was about. Tell the most important things discussed.

Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)

The goals of CSR are to improve reading comprehension and increase conceptual learning in ways that maximize students' involvement. Structured peer discussion and collaborative activities are included throughout the before-, during-, after-reading processes so together, students use reading strategies to monitor their own comprehension, review and synthesize information, ask and answer questions, and take steps to improve their understanding (see CSR activities below). An important aspect to CSR is that students work in groups of four, with each member assigned a specific role and responsibility (see group roles below) as they put the CSR strategies into practice as part of a reading assignment (see sample lesson below). The assignment of roles during CSR guarantees that each member has something specific to do and accomplish. Each member of the group is expected to complete a learning log while peers assist each other in completing different parts of the log and checking its accuracy and quality (see sample learning log below).

CSR Activities

Preview: Activate background knowledge and generate predictions.

Click and clunk: Monitor understanding and use strategies to assist with unknown words and concepts.

Get the gist: Determine the main idea of a passage.

Wrap-up: Think about what was learned and make connections.

CSR Roles

Leader: Guides the group through all the steps of CSR. Tasks include monitoring time, keeping everyone working together and on-task.

Clunk expert: Makes sure group members document clunks (i.e., words or concepts that are unclear) in their learning logs. Helps students use strategies to figure out unknown words or ideas by rereading, using content clues, analyzing word parts (i.e., roots and affixes), or connecting with cognates (i.e., words in two languages that share a similar meaning).

Gist expert: Guides the individual members' development and sharing of a gist statement and determines whether the gist contains the most important ideas (main idea and supporting details in 10 words or less).

Question expert: Guides the students in their development of questions that address important ideas from the text and checks that all members write questions and answers.

CSR Sample Lesson

CSR–Sample Lesson Plan	Supplemental Reading: Science	Grade 3
Time Allotment: 30 minutes	Text: Level 5.0	Title: Sharks

Rationale

Develop skills for enhancing comprehension of informational text by using strategies before, during, and after reading.

Standards

- Know and use various text features to locate key facts or information in a text.
- Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- Identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.
- Ask and answer questions to help determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases in a text.
- In life science, students recognize the interdependence of organisms in the natural world.

Student Materials	Teacher Materials
• Learning log • Assigned text	• Assigned text • Learning log for modeling • Photo of shark(s) for previewing • Timer

BEFORE READING (2–3 minutes)

Direct students to today's text, *Sharks*.

- **Read:** Title, subtitles, and key words.
- **Brainstorm:** What do I already know?
- **Predict:** What might I learn?
- **Optional:** Highlight photo of sharks (use photo from books or online).

Explain that some believe that sharks are terrifying and dangerous creatures, but in today's lesson students will discover that sharks have more to fear from humans.

Remind students that an important aim of CSR is for the students to work together to used CSR strategies as they read and learn about sharks.

DURING READING (10–12 minutes)

Tell students they will read the passage (or part of the passage, depending on difficulty level) with their group members and work through CSR strategies by completing the learning log and fulfilling their assigned group role.

AFTER READING (10–12 minutes)

Tell students that they will collaborate to do the following:

- Generate questions and discuss the questions and answers with their group members
- Review what they just learned after reading and write a short summary that includes the main idea and key supporting details

TEACHER CLOSURE (2–5 minutes)

After the review is completed, highlight what was accomplished during the session and facilitate any connections students can potentially make between the day's reading, other readings, and the real world.

- **Restate the purpose of the day's reading.** "In today's reading, we learned that there are many species of sharks around the world and that most of them are harmless."

- **Remind students of what they accomplished during the session.** "Using CSR today, you worked together to read about sharks and learned that they have a long existence that precedes dinosaurs. You also learned that there are more than 400 species of sharks in the oceans and rivers today."

- **Provide brief feedback** about student performance and behavior during the lesson.

CSR Sample Learning Log

Learning Log Topic: _____

Before Reading

Brainstorm: What do I already know? I know that _____ and _____.

Predict: What might I learn? I think I might learn that _____ or I think I might learn about _____.

During Reading

Identify clunks: Note words or concepts that I don't understand and fix them to make sense.

Text section	These do not make sense	The definitions or meanings
1		
	Gist statement: Who or what section 1 was about in 10 words or less:	
2		
	Gist statement: Who or what section 2 was about in 10 words or less:	
3		
	Gist statement: Who or what section 3 was about in 10 words or less:	

After Reading

Question generation: Write questions and their answers.

Questions	Answers

Review: Write about the most important ideas in the text.

Implications for Practice

- Organize instructional activities to include flexible grouping, such as peer tutoring, partner reading, small cooperative groups, or student-led groups, to practice and extend learning.

- Group or partner better readers with struggling readers for reading activities and practice.

- Partner students to check each other's work.

- Ask pairs or small groups of students to answer comprehension questions, create a summary, or complete a graphic organizer about a commonly read passage.

Conclusion

A variety of instructional practices (i.e., whole, small, teacher-led, peer-led, and one-on-one groups) are needed to meet the needs of all students and increase the number of engaged reading opportunities that support reading growth and development. Grouping practices for reading instruction play a critical role in facilitating effective practices and inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Vaughn et al., 2001). The findings suggest that using peer supports for instruction can lead to positive outcomes in reading when teachers carefully monitor student progress to ensure that all students benefit.

References

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