

PALS: Peer Assisted Learning Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Strategies) for students who struggle with reading in first grade. Two groups of children were compared in terms of their reading fluency. The groups included English language learners (ELL) well as native English speakers. One group was instructed using the teacher directed PALS along with PALS partners. The other group was instructed on basal readers, leveled reading books, and one on one phonics instruction. The two groups were instructed by the same teacher, but in different years. There were twenty-one students in the PALS instruction, compared with 19 other students who were not given PALS instruction. The results show that after a complete rotation through PALS partners (56 days) and teacher directed PALS (56 days) there were significant differences between the increases in reading fluency along with the rate of increase in reading fluency. Results show that students participating in the PALS program make significant gains in their reading fluency, confirming the usefulness of the PALS program to reduce the gap between adequate and inadequate first grade readers. All schools with a first grade program should have PALS available for intervention of reading fluency.

PALS: Peer Assisted Learning Strategies

After teaching at a school that had failed AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) two years in a row, there was a program purchased to help younger struggling readers learn to read better. This program was called PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Strategies). The program has three parts, K-PALS for kindergarten, PALS for first grade, and Sound Partners for second grade. As a first grade teacher, PALS is what is implemented in the study.

The first year of teaching first grade was overwhelming. There were students on all different reading levels. As a teacher, one of the most challenging tasks is getting every student engaged on every learning level in the classroom. As a first year teacher, I found this almost impossible. The main focus was getting the lower level students to where they needed to be by testing time. Future teachers are taught not to teach to the test, but when a school's AYP depends on test scores, it seems as if it is the only way. So the higher level students in that class were not challenged and fended for themselves for the most part. The lower level students required the majority of the attention and extra instruction. There were very little intervention strategies offered at the time. The school was under a new principal who was completely new to the system. She was learning the school system her first year and was unable to do very much as far as providing us with resources and materials that were needed. It was a hard but successful year with only one student out of nineteen failing the standardized test.

The PALS material was received as the beginning of the second teaching year. It was handed to the first grade teachers with the instruction of here are some intervention materials for you to use. There were no trainings on how to use it and it was pretty much put on a shelf along with several other resources that were never used. Teachers are jammed packed with regular instruction and have very little time to read and learn about a new program. It was decided over Christmas break the second year that the material was going to be learned

because there were some students that desperately needed the help and the higher students were not going to be left out in the cold this year. The material was easy to learn and gathering the materials needed to carry out the instruction required some copies and notebooks to be made.

The intervention program was implemented when the students returned from Christmas break. The partner portion of PALS required all students in the class to participate. A list was made of students in the class in the order of their reading ability, one being the highest and nineteen being the lowest. The list was then cut in half and matched so that reader one was paired with reader eleven, reader two was paired with reader twelve, and so on. The last group contained three students due to the odd number of students in the class. The higher reader was called the coach and the lower reader in the pair was called the reader. Each student was responsible for teaching their partner individual letter sounds, phoneme segmentation, blending, sight word recognition, and reading fluency. The students loved the responsibility and learned at a rapid rate because not only were they teaching, they were learning at the same time. It was decided from that point on that the program would be implemented from the beginning of the year the next school year.

The second portion of the PALS program is teacher directed. This can be implemented individually or in a small group, but is not for the entire class. It is only for the lowest readers in the class. It was very similar to the partner activities, so there was nothing new the students had to learn for the teacher directed portion. The teacher led them in letter naming and sound practice, blending, sight word recognition, and fluency. The students were eager every day to go to their small group because the activities were fun and interesting. It was like watching a light bulb go off after the first few lessons were completed. Their reading fluency levels took off and they made twice the gains they had made from the beginning of the year until Christmas.

Study

A study was conducted to compare the year with no PALS implementation to the year where PALS was implemented from the beginning of the school year. Student fluency levels at the beginning of the both school years were similar, so there was no advantage in either class.

The site where the study was conducted was a Title I school. Over 90% of the school is on free and reduced lunch. The school is widely diverse with over 65% of the population consisting of Hispanic students who have a home language of Spanish, and approximately 58% are served in extra language instruction. About 3% of the school is African American, Asian, and other diversities. The remaining percentage of the population is Caucasian. Communicating with parents is difficult due to the language barrier. Parent involvement is one of the main focuses on the School Improvement Plan due to the lack of parent participation in parent-teacher conferences, after school events, and PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) events.

Class 1, the non-PALS class, contained 11 Hispanic children receiving second language services. There were 10 girls and 9 boys. Twelve students were served with an EIP (Early Intervention Program). Sixteen out of the nineteen students in the class were on free and reduced lunch.

Class 2, the PALS class, contained 12 Hispanic students and 11 of them received second language services. The class consisted of 11 boys and 10 girls. Fourteen of the students were served with an EIP. Eighteen of the twenty-one students were on free and reduced lunch.

The two classes were compared in reading fluency scores. These scores were obtained through three benchmark assessments. Class 1 was assessed with the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) testing. The ending goal was 50 wpm due to the

difficulty of the passages. DIBELS was given in the fall, winter, and spring with the benchmark scores increasing each time. The test assessed letter naming fluency, letter sound fluency, phoneme segmentation, non-sense word fluency, and oral reading fluency.

Class 2 was assessed with the AIMS (Academic Improvement Monitoring System) testing. Although a completely different benchmark test, AIMS tested the same literacy concepts as DIBELS and in the same format. The difference is that there is a math component to the AIMS testing that was not available through DIBELS.

Once all the benchmarks were in, the two classes were compared. The students in Class 2 scored significantly higher on their benchmarks than those in Class 1.

Results

By Christmas the non-implemented year, about 42% of students were reading at 60 wpm (words per minute). This is the requirement for first graders in the state of Georgia. In the implemented year, 66% of students were reading at 60 wpm. There was a 24% increase in fluency rates from the beginning of the school until Christmas break. The remainder of the year mirrored the results. Class 1 had 89% reading 60 wpm by the end of first grade while Class 2 had 100% reading 60 wpm by the end of first grade. It is evident that the intervention program works.

Conclusion

K-PALS, PALS, and Sound Partners are highly effective in teaching struggling readers how to read. It is also challenging for higher readers because they must teach the lower level readers how to read. It is a well rounded program covering all of the benchmarks that are tested. It teaches them the individual sounds, diagraphs, and blends needed to read the majority of the words that are in their reading books.

This program is so effective that the teacher who took the initiative to learn the program was asked to deliver a training to other teachers in the school. The training was

attended by one of the county psychologists. Once the training was over, the teacher was asked to travel to other schools in the county and deliver the training. One school had the materials but didn't know how to use them. A different school did not have the materials and was debating on whether or not to purchase it. After the training, the materials were purchased and is now being implemented.

Recommendations

PALS is a highly recommended program. Its effectiveness has been experienced first hand and the benchmark results show that it truly does work. This is an intervention program for struggling readers and any school who is struggling with finding interventions for their struggling readers should highly consider this program.

References

Ary, D., Jacobs, L., Razavieh, A., and Sorensen, C. (2006) *Introduction to research in education*. Thomson Wadsworth. Belmont, CA.