

# Extending Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies for Racially, Linguistically, and Ability Diverse Learners

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## Abstract

This article discusses a research-based reading intervention called peer-assisted learning strategies in reading (PALS) and includes practical suggestions for educators concerned with literacy as a tool to reposition and empower students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities in schools and society. Following a rationale informed by historical oppression related to learners' race, language, and ability, the article describes PALS methodology along with specific extensions for incorporating students' lived experiences, considering disability as an important element of student diversity, and focusing on students' progress and cooperation beyond their reading problems and competition.

## Keywords

race, disability, diversity, inclusive education, Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies

It is nothing new to report that students with high incidence disabilities, students of color, and students from other minoritized groups experience negative educational outcomes with increasing incidence and severity of impact. Moreover, students of color and English learners with disabilities experience inequitable educational access, participation, and outcomes with greater frequency and severity than their White counterparts with the same disability labels (U.S. Department of Education & Office for Civil Rights, 2012). Accordingly, interventions that address educational inequities at the intersection of race and ability must account for the complexity of such inequities (Bal & Trainor, 2015). Typically, these troubling experiences have been expressed as gaps in academic achievement, school completion, school discipline policies and practices, and post-school outcomes between student groups. Much of the literature on interventions for such students of color and/or English learners with disabilities implicitly and/or explicitly center on closing such achievement or outcome gaps (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012). Such focus is important, yet simultaneously and more extensively, interventions must be geared toward disrupting marginalizing conditions in schools and society that undergird and contribute to such inequities in the first place. This article provides a rationale for and illustrates ways to disrupt such marginalizing conditions related

to race, language, and disability through extending the curricular goals, methods, materials, and assessments of a popular research-based reading intervention for students with disabilities, peer-assisted learning strategies in reading (PALS; Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997; IRIS Center, 2008). The PALS extension draws from work by Waitoller and Thorius (2016), who articulated and described the cross-pollination of two distinct curricular frameworks (i.e., culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) and universal design for learning (UDL; Rose & Meyer, 2002) on the basis of the historical relationship between race and ability and students' related educational and life experiences.

Several components form a rationale for PALS extensions with students who experience inequitable learning opportunities at the intersection of race, language, and ability. The first is the historical relationship between literacy and the oppression of historically underserved groups, including people of color and those with disabilities, which

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magnifies the relevance of interventions that support struggling readers to engage in literacy as an empowerment tool. The next component is a critique and extension of the very notion and goals of intervention itself as related to students of color, English learners, and those with learning disabilities (LD). Key ideas from Waitoller and Thorius's (2016) work on CSP/UDL cross-pollination complete the rationale.

### *Literacy as a Tool to Address Intersecting Oppressions*

Histories of oppression for people of color and with disabilities are longstanding, complex, and consequential (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Thorius & Tan, 2015). Further, the intersection of racialized oppression with English learner status has long been acknowledged in literacy research (Jiménez, 2004). In a 2000 landmark volume of *Reading Research Quarterly* dedicated to the future of literacy in the new millennium, Editors Willis and Harris cautioned, "it is problematic to discuss literacy without taking into account the contexts of language, culture, and power, among others" (p. 1), asserting literacy must be considered beyond a skill-based concept. For example, Willis and Harris cited slave codes of the antebellum South through which enslaved Africans were prohibited from and punished for learning to read and declared a primary reason for entering into literacy work: "to advance the cause of black liberation" (p. 58).

These discussions illustrate the potential for literacy as a tool to stimulate Freire's (1998) notion of *conscientization*, the awareness of the historical, sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and subjective reality that shapes our lives and our ability to transform that reality (Willis & Harris, 2000). Those realities are especially troubling for people, including students with disabilities, who experience multilayered cultural, political, and economic forms of oppression (Charlton, 2006). Race and ability were tangled during the eugenics movement when people of color and with disabilities were described by White non-disabled scientists as unintelligent, ugly, and unsightly and subject to sterilization and worse. At the same time, designations of intellectual and physical fitness were reserved for White, non-disabled individuals and groups (Mitchell & Snyder, 2003). Today still, dominant medical definitions of disabilities emphasize diagnostic criteria, individual and group deficits, and stereotypical characteristics of people with particular disability labels (Hehir, 2002). Alternatively:

[We write] dis/ability with a slash to denote dis/ability not as an individual trait, but rather a social construction—the product of cultural, political, and economic practices (Davis, 1995). This understanding does not deny biological and psychological differences, but emphasizes such differences gain meaning, often with severe negative consequences (e.g., segregation),

through human activities informed by norms (Davis, 2013). Dis/ability is also an identity marker, which includes ways notions of ability are relied upon and constructed in tandem with other identity markers (e.g., gender, race, and language) (Gilborn, 2012). (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016, p. 367)

### *Troubling and Expanding Intervention in Schools*

Professional roles and identities of educators who work with students with disabilities have emphasized diagnosis and remediation. In a recent study of a researcher-facilitated professional learning community (Thorius, 2016), special educators expressed that their primary responsibilities were to locate students' holes and fix gaps. As an alternative to suggesting students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities need remediating, understandings of disability prevalent in fields outside special education are useful toward remediating systems and contexts (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011) beyond students' discrete reading skills. From this stance, the goal of intervention extends beyond improving students' learning efficiency, accuracy, and understanding through manipulation by the researcher of "psychological, medical, or educational variables" (Swanson, 2000, pp. 4–5). The extended goal becomes building students' agency to examine and question the world around them, including ways in which they may develop innovative solutions (Engeström, 2011) to educational and other forms of marginalization.

Recent work on a cross-pollination between culturally sustaining pedagogy and universal design for learning (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016) stressed that pedagogies must simultaneously work to abolish both racism and *ableism*. Waitoller and Thorius (2016) synthesized elements of the separate approaches to inform curricular goals that nurture creation of expert learners who interrogate multiple forms of oppression and apprentice to be key participants in a pluralistic democracy. Borrowing from the longstanding debate between the fields of reading research and literacy studies (Snow, 2006), the cross-pollination is illustrated in the difference between literacy intervention goals that improve students' capacity beyond "reading the word" toward "rewriting the world" (Au & Raphael, 2000, p. 139). That is, of central concern are aims of student empowerment and dismantlement of histories of marginalization via educators' positioning learners as experts in and about their schools and communities. Concurrently, a CSP/UDL cross-pollination requires that curriculum explicitly counters ableist and racist barriers that interfere with collaborative learning structures that do not account for students' historically unequal status (e.g., segregation of students of color and disabled students from White non-disabled peers) (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). These and other practices implicitly and explicitly teach some students their superiority and others their inferiority (Hehir, 2002). Educators

must ensure methods, materials, and assessments artifacts, including student roles and responsibilities, in collaborative learning structures reposition traditionally minoritized learners to signal the values, histories, and differences they bring are worthy of representation and of sustaining rather than remediating or assimilating (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

Encouraging research on PALS participation with English learners with disabilities has shown student progress in reading comprehension (e.g., Sáenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Generally, researchers who have engaged PALS with English learners who are struggling with reading or who have been identified with learning disabilities recommend peer interactions around texts, small group instruction, learning reading skills in isolation then practicing them in context, and building word recognition and phonological skills through direct instruction and/or explicit training (Scull & Bianco, 2008; Vaughn et al., 2006). Simultaneously, PALS has potential to:

- validate and sustain students' dynamic, diverse, and unique identities, including learning differences;
- position students of color and English learners with disabilities as expert learners alongside their higher-achieving PALS peer;
- empower students to challenge school and societal inequities that may contribute to challenges in reading performance in the first place.

What follows is a description and suggestions for educator practice to extend PALS, a popular and well-researched special education intervention that has been shown to be effective with students with disabilities across racial and linguistic groups, albeit to different extents, as an empowering literacy intervention for students of color and/or English learners with mild disabilities. Descriptions of how goals, methods, and materials as well as assessments of learning may be engaged by educators enacting PALS toward the three identified goals, in addition to improvement in discrete reading skills, are provided.

## Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies and Extensions

### *Peer-Assisted Strategies in Reading*

Peer assisted learning strategies in reading is a cooperative instructional practice, the goal of which is to increase and improve students' reading fluency and comprehension (Hoover, 2013). Specifically, PALS focuses on improvement of students' foundational reading skills, including phonological awareness, decoding, reading comprehension, and fluency (Fuchs et al., 1997; Mathes, Howard, Allen, & Fuchs, 1998). Peer-assisted learning strategies draw from class-wide peer tutoring (CWPT), a dyadic structure of frequent

interactions "between teacher and/or classroom antecedents and student(s) responding" (Delquadri, Greenwood, Whorton, Carta, & Hall, 1986, p. 536). Peer-assisted learning strategies are meant to complement existing reading curricula through research-based learning strategies enacted within peer-mediated instruction such as peer tutoring. Peer-assisted learning strategies are implemented through highly structured activities and scripted prompts (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000; IRIS Center, 2008) used by a teacher-paired, high-performing reader with a low-performing reader based on ranking the class from "strongest to weakest on reading competence" (Fuchs et al., 2000, p. 86). Students' tutoring roles are reciprocal, and the higher performing reader models for the lower performing reader by reading first for each PALS activity (Maheady, Mallette, & Harper, 2006). Students take turns reading a text at the low-performing reader's level during structured reading activities that include (a) partner reading with retell, (b) paragraph shrinking, and (c) prediction relay (Fuchs et al., 2001). The PALS model has contributed to improving reading achievement among students across performance levels, including students with disabilities (Fuchs et al., 1997; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2007).

The remainder of this article focuses on existing PALS activities for Grades 2 through 6 wherein the intervention is structured to increase reading fluency, comprehension, and strategic reading behavior (Sáenz et al., 2005). Three highly structured activities focus on teaching and reinforcing reading skills, (a) partner reading with retell, (b) paragraph shrinking, and (c) prediction relay, and have demonstrated effectiveness in improving learning among low-performing students (Hoover, 2013). Partner reading with retell consists of having the higher performing student reading for 5 minutes as a model for the other lower performing student. Then, the lower performing student reads the same text for 5 minutes to the higher performing student. Finally, the lower performing reader retells the story in 1 to 2 minutes. Paragraph shrinking consists of four steps in which the higher performing student, and the lower performing student take turns reading paragraphs to one another, summarizing the paragraph, and identifying the main character. Prediction relay requires readers make predictions about what will occur on the next half page to improve reading comprehension (Fuchs et al., 2001).

### *Extensions*

To maintain the integrity of PALS, educators should not eliminate elements of the intervention; rather, PALS is extended through planning, team activities, and post-intervention follow-up. Such extensions are described in terms of intervention goals, materials, methods, and assessments.

**Goals.** Along with teaching discrete reading skills and explicit comprehension strategies, goals of PALS for multiply

minoritized students must be focused on how educators make literacy personally meaningful to the students they teach (Thorius & Skelton, 2016). This means that explicitly, goals of PALS extend toward repositioning students of color and English learners with mild disabilities in social interactions with peers in order to examine and question historical oppressions. This requires that in introducing the intervention to students during the four weeks of student PALS training, the educator communicates PALS goals to students. The following are example PALS goal extensions for second through sixth graders: (a) Grow as readers, (b) grow as friends who use texts to learn about and appreciate our similarities and differences, and (c) grow as problem solvers who use texts to learn to change things we think need to be changed.

**Materials.** Peer-assisted learning strategies allow teachers to select reading material as long as it reflects the reading level of the weaker reader in the student pair, providing teachers choice in their selection of PALS texts. Beyond concern with reading level, however, reading materials should accurately depict experiences of diverse groups, demonstrate appreciation of student pairs' cultural and linguistic heritages, and signal value of their lived experiences (Thorius & Skelton, 2016). Moreover, aside from the extrinsic motivator of student competition featured in PALS, educators select from texts that model students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities engaged in problem solving about real-world experiences. Selections can also serve as powerful reading motivators and in turn position learners as powerful in the development of innovative solutions to real-world problems that involve them and their communities.

To accomplish these tasks, educators explicitly ask students what it is they want to read about for PALS, selecting from the following questions or developing their own: (a) What are some of your favorite things to do and why? (b) When was the last time you read about someone who reminded you of you, why, and who was it? (c) What are some of the things you love about your family and community? and (d) Are there things about our school, our classroom, our community that are unfair and need fixing; why, and what are they? Educators may choose to elicit student input in a variety of ways, from student dyad discussions, whole group sharing, or online questionnaires.

Descriptions of children's books, authors, and themes are found on various websites and blogs, including the blog of Scott Woods on *28 Black Picture Books That Aren't About Boycotts, Buses or Basketball* (<http://scottwoods-makeslists.wordpress.com>). Other sources include Multicultural Children's Book Day (<http://multicultural-childrensbookday.com/>) and Goodreads (<http://www.goodreads.com>; search for books with disability/accessibility themes). Further, in a 2014 study about exploring issues of disability with students through text, Adomat provided

examples of many relevant and asset-based disability-related children's books, including those by Condra (2006), Fraustino (2001), Lord (2008), and Strom (2002).

As a final point, it is important to critically review and revise pre-made PALS materials such as coaching tips, rules, and correction cards found online in a variety of places, including the IRIS Center: <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/pals26/cresource/q3/p08/#content>.

For example, pictures on an IRIS PALS Score Board sheet show two White cheerleaders, which may be revised to include photos of the actual students in each pairing. This example illustrates how without critical reflexivity (Paris & Alim, 2014), opportunities may be missed for aligning materials to students' multiple identities.

**Methods.** Multiple PALS methods hold promise for extensions toward accomplishment of the three PALS goals articulated previously. Two in particular, pairing students and competition as an external motivator, contribute to the likelihood that students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities have equitable opportunities to participate meaningfully in literacy-based instructional activities.

Peer-assisted learning strategies require teachers to partner a higher performing reader with a lower performing reader and reassign pairs every three to four weeks, both of which are important to the integrity of the intervention (IRIS Center, 2008). When teachers view student differences as assets, they begin to see opportunities for learning that before may have been perceived as problems (Harry, 2008). Traditional PALS pairings rely on educators' ranking students based on their reading skills from highest to lowest then dividing the list in half to create two groups. The lists are moved adjacent to one another to pair the higher performing students with the corresponding lower performing students. Departing from this approach would interfere with the integrity of the intervention, but intentional student pairings outside of PALS activities extend this way of grouping students in classrooms. For example, a low-performing reader may be an excellent artist and take interest in the illustrations in PALS texts. Teachers may pair students with artistic interest and/or talent to draw scenes depicting the plot of the book in which they are engaged in their respective PALS pairings. Alternatively, within PALS pairings but outside the three central PALS activities, the artistically inclined lower achieving student can illustrate a comic strip interpretation of the PALS text while the higher achieving reader writes the dialogue.

Beyond pairing students by reading performance, however, goals of facilitating communication and learning across demographic groups (e.g., race, disability, gender, primary language) are of equal importance, as is considering the historical access to curriculum, assets, and interests of each member of a student pairing. Educators explicitly ask themselves and have a rationale for their decisions with

regard to the following questions: (a) What student pairings will be most helpful to elicit meaningful conversation and engagement parity? (b) In what ways will I assign student pairings on the basis of interests and assets? (c) How do pairings account for both diversity of and similarity in students' demographic memberships, language, and interests?

One method for motivating students in Grades 2 through 6 to engage in PALS is to assign student pairs to teams and award points for teams' successful completion of PALS activities and for partner/team cooperation. The IRIS Center (2008) provides a point system. Points are tallied, and first- and second-place teams are announced and posted on the Score Board. With regard for PALS team activities, teachers must recognize that some students have been brought up in value systems where greater emphasis is placed on collective, cooperative learning rather than competition (Rogoff, 2003). For example, research indicates U.S.-born children with mothers who have extensive schooling often engage in pairs or individually, whereas children of indigenous Mexican heritage and mothers with limited schooling generally engage in tasks nonverbally and collectively in groups (Mejia-Arauz, Rogoff, Dexter, & Najafi, 2007). Recognition of how different cultural groups interact and learn provides insight into why and how certain students may or may not respond (Delquadri et al., 1986) to reading tasks.

Peer-assisted learning strategies are predicated on the belief and practice that children learn best in pairs, and again, educators should be mindful not to interfere with PALS' reliance on points and friendly competition. However, a PALS extension could also address students' collectivism by valuing group-supported interactions centered on promoting success for all. For example, educators may equally recognize pairs of students who make reading skill progress as well as cooperate and support each other rather than win by earning the most number of points. Educators' focus on collective class benefits determined by the winning team, such as the option to select a fun activity for the class, shifts emphasis of team activities from competition to community. In line with experiences of some historically underserved groups, working cooperatively toward a common goal may provide greater extrinsic motivation for certain students than actively competing against one another for individual or team points (Arzubiaga, Rueda, & Monzó, 2002). Whereas competition creates the implicit binary classification of winner/loser in traditional PALS' team activities, collectivism encourages students to work together, advocate for one another, and attain reading goals for the good and fun of the entire class.

**Assessment.** Equitable assessment practices for multiply minoritized students reduce and eliminate bias in tools used to evaluate students' literacy achievement (Thorius & Skelton, 2016). In addition to educators' strategies to prepare and analyze assessments prior to implementation,

consideration of racial, linguistic, and learning diversity in assessment is also important. Finally, with regard for PALS assessment, educators must assess and challenge their own internal biases, which may be reflected in PALS implementation, including their formative assessment of students' progress. Educators may ask themselves the following questions.

- Are my expectations of student outcomes in reading different for students with disabilities? Students from racially and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds? What assumptions about students' backgrounds and capacities shape my expectations?
- Do I spend more time on certain reading tasks with some students over others? How do I do this? Why do I do this?
- Do I consider the different ways in which students demonstrate "successful" reading behaviors? What behaviors do I expect? What behaviors do I view as high-achieving, average, low-performing, and unresponsive?
- Are there racial, linguistic, and disability patterns in who I find to be unresponsive to the intervention? Which students in my class do I tend to categorize as unresponsive or low-performing? Why?
- In what ways do I consider students' strengths and interests as I enact PALS, even if they struggle with reading?

As a final recommendation, educators should observe students' behaviors and ask questions to determine their interests, passions, and strengths during the PALS intervention. For example, simple notes such as:

Jorge and Geneva work well together during PALS-R main activities. When Jorge struggles with remembering a word in English, Geneva asks him to draw a picture or describe what word he is searching for. Jorge helps Geneva stay focused. When Geneva works with Jorge, she is less distracted and seems to comprehend the story better.

These observations, when done over time, can assist teachers in grouping students in learning activities. In Table 1, an example of these extensions is provided to demonstrate one way to implement PALS activities in consideration of relevant, asset-based materials; student-centered engagement; and demographic memberships, language, and interests.

## Discussion

The suggestions throughout this article have only extended rather than challenge PALS procedures. Yet, some researchers within and outside the field of special education have expressed concerns with categorization of students as nonresponders to

**Table 1.** Example of Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) With Extensions for Students in a Fourth-grade Classroom.<sup>a</sup>

Overall goal	Using concrete details, students will describe events and characters from the story in relation to their lived experiences.
Objectives	In pairs, using question cards, students will ask each other at least five questions about their lived experiences in connection to the events and characters in the story. Students will write at least three facts they learned about their partner. After the student-pairing activity, students will share aloud to the entire class or in small groups at least two facts about the partners who they interviewed.
Activities	In one class period of about 45 minutes, a rotational student-pairing configuration is implemented. Student-pairings are intentional and provide students with opportunities for meaningful dialogue and engagement parity to account for both diversity of and similarity in students' demographic memberships, language, and interests. For the first 5 minutes, the teacher describes the structure and purpose of the activity. The book used for this activity will have already been read and discussed by all students during the traditional PALS activities. For approximately 12 minutes, students will pair up with partners to whom they have been assigned. They will use question-card protocols (described in the following) and write down at least three facts they learned about their partner. If a student is having difficulty writing down facts, they may use a graphic organizer or elicit assistance from their peer. Students will change partners according to predetermined student-pairing configurations. The process will be repeated. During the last few minutes of class, students will share aloud at least two facts about their partners to the entire class or in small groups (also determined by the teacher).
Materials	<i>Listen to Me and I will Listen Between the Lines</i> , by Karen English; illustrated by Amy June Bates; Interest Level, Grades 3–5; Grade Level Equivalent 3.5; questions cards; graphic organizer (if needed)
Protocols	During the activity, students use student-made “question cards” to help guide their actions during this activity. Questions may include: What are some events in the story that are similar to your own? What characters do you relate to and why? What strengths do the characters have that are similar to yours? What character do you admire and why? What are some of the characters' experiences that you have questions about? What events in the story were particularly interesting to you and why? What would you like to know more about? In thinking about the story, what else would you like to share about yourself so I can know and understand you better?

<sup>a</sup>For the purposes of this example, the fourth-grade class has 24 students. Fourteen students are White, 6 students are African American or Black, 2 students are Latina/o, and 1 student is biracial (Chinese-American). Five students in this classroom are emergent multilingual learners.

interventions, medical terminology used to indicate patients who do not respond to treatment (Gulbrandsen, Hjortdahl, & Fugelli, 1997) and which *medicalizes* students' reading challenges. This terminology is not limited to PALS and is used in response to intervention (RTI) frameworks, for example, where nonresponsiveness to research-based instruction and intervention is justification for consideration of special education eligibility (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012).

The history of treatment of people of color and with disabilities requires that educators do better and are more mindful in the ways in which (often White, non-disabled) researchers and educators talk about historically marginalized groups, including their own students. This requires that conceptualizations of student pathologies be challenged (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) through consideration of successful outcome measures not limited to scores on standardized reading assessments, beyond conceptualization of response success as mastering discrete reading skills as it pertains to PALS, or academic or behavioral skills more generally. Certainly, development of these skills is important, but at the same time, it is devaluing to

categorize already marginalized and struggling students by what they cannot do rather than focusing on assets they contribute. At the most basic level, educators may resist the use of such terms, opting instead for language such as *striving* or *promising* instead of *nonresponsive* and *progressing* instead of *responsive*. Changing such language leaves the intervention itself intact but challenges underlying assumptions about students and their capacities.

With specific regard for PALS, students who are struggling with reading must be well served by supports that provide them with the tools to engage in an activity that historically has been withheld and even punished, particularly in response to readers' racial memberships. There is promise in PALS as a research-based intervention that also accounts for such histories of marginalization and larger goals of literacy for promotion of a pluralistic society as well as facilitation of students' critical consciousness and the power to change their world. Educators who consider PALS extensions in light of the rationale presented in this article for doing so situate themselves not only as

remediators of students' skills but as contributors to a larger inclusive education effort in schools and society.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The first author is grateful for the support of the Great Lakes Equity Center, under the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's Grant S004D110021. The funding agency's endorsement of the ideas expressed in this article should not be inferred.

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