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A Survey of Contexts for Successful Literacy Tutoring

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Effective tutoring is key to successful literacy learning for at-risk children. This report provides an overview of answers to the question: "What are the contexts for effective literacy tutoring?" The research shows that successful reading tutoring is commonly found in four contexts: home, school, professional/community, and university settings.
WITH THE CALL FOR literacy tutors increasing around the country, it is important to know the contexts for effective literacy tutoring. Children who have difficulty mastering the reading process are more at-risk for future academic failure (Rimm-Kaufman, Kagan, & Byers, 1999). The pressure is on to find ways to help these students “catch-up” to their peers in reading development (Klenk, 2000). It is our intent to provide the reader with a sampling of effective tutoring programs offered in four different contexts: home, school, professional/community, and university settings. Each of these contexts builds on the importance of one-on-one tutoring in order to remediate reading difficulties of students considered at-risk for school failure. Clay (1993a) stresses the importance of one-on-one tutoring because the instruction is individualized for each student’s needs. One-on-one tutoring allows the teacher or tutor to immediately respond to children’s reading difficulties.

Home

It is commonly acknowledged that parents are the child’s first teacher and primary influence in academic achievement. It is important to recognize programs that involve parents and family members helping children with reading. Programs that weave school instruction with involvement by parents and family members are some of the most successful programs. Collaboration from multiple and diverse resources creates a strong partnership on behalf of children. One example of a successful home-focused program is found at the Kelly School in Portland, Oregon. This program, called “Parent Partners,” uses an effective approach for involving parents in their children’s literacy (Ian, 1996) by bringing parents and school personnel together once a month to discuss ways to support their children’s learning at home and share reading activities, projects, and books they successfully use at home with their children. “Family Stories” is one element of this program where parents and children work together to explore family histories by talking and writing on this important topic once a week.

Another program, called “Storymates,” invites nine, ten, and eleven-year-old students to pick books in school, practice reading them, then bring the stories home to share with a younger sibling, neighbor, or
cousin (Fox & Wright, 1997). The trade books used in this program provide predictable language patterns and recount simple, uncomplicated stories with illustrations that intentionally describe and extend the text. The success children have reading these books helps them perceive themselves as better readers, thus making them more willing to participate. At the conclusion of their study, Fox & Wright found that students had made gains in reading fluency and comprehension with the extra reading they did at home.

School

A classroom teacher, reading or intervention specialist, classroom aide, or adult volunteer usually delivers tutoring during the school day. The context for classroom tutoring, whether pullout or in-class settings, has been shown to be an influence on what can be accomplished (Bean, Cooley, Eichelberger, Lazar, & Zigmond, 1991).

Reading Recovery

One of the best-known early intervention programs used in schools today is Reading Recovery, a program designed by Marie Clay and introduced in the United States in the mid 1980's (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 1998; Gunning, 1998; Santa & Hoien, 1999). Reading Recovery, as an early intervention program within schools, is successfully helping young first grade readers who are experiencing difficulty in reading. The major requirements in a reading recovery program include:

- first grade children
- one-on-one tutoring
- daily 30-minute instruction
- a specially trained teacher
- tutoring done in addition to the regular classroom instruction

Due to the success of Reading Recovery, many tutoring programs are based on this model and its components.
In a typical Reading Recovery lesson, there are seven activities that the Reading Recovery teacher will go over with the student each day. The activities are done in the following order:

- rereading two or more familiar books
- rereading the new book from yesterday and taking a running record
- letter identifying and/or word-making or word-breaking
- writing a story
- cutting up a story to be rearranged
- introducing a new book, and
- attempting to read the new book

This order is a natural progression, moving the child from successfully reading familiar books to tackling the challenges of the new book (Clay, 1993b).

Although Reading Recovery programs are more effective with first-grade reading achievement than traditional remediation (Mounts, 1998; Pinnell, et al. 1994; Pollock, 1998), they have also run into some criticisms (Graves et al., 1998; Juel, 1998; Santa & Hoen, 1999). Juel points out that Reading Recovery programs are expensive and that it is possible to develop more effective and cheaper programs with the same money. Santa and Hoen also indicate that Reading Recovery programs ask all children to do the same number of designed lessons and so it becomes “less effective for children with the most severe reading difficulties” (p. 54).

Countering the criticisms, the Reading Recovery Council has issued a booklet documenting its success. Looking at the 17-year results in the United States shows that “60 percent of all children served can read at class average after their lessons, and 81 percent of children who have the full series of lessons can read at class average. No other intervention in the United States has such an extensive database and such strong accountability” (Council, 2002, p. 1). Although there are criticisms of the Reading Recovery program, its many accomplishments in the area of student literacy should be applauded. James Cunningham questions why
there are so many attacks on this program that is "the only widely implemented program of any kind that documents impressive rates of learning in real reading for struggling students" (Cunningham, 1998, p. 446). Thus, most schools strive to create a Reading Recovery type-tutoring program.

Student Tutors

Some very successful tutoring programs encourage peer tutoring within the school. Several studies have shown the value of cross-age and peer-tutoring (Taylor, Hanson, Justice-Swanson, & Watts, 1997). Both reading ability as well as reading attitude benefit from this strategy. We examined results from cross-age tutoring by fourth graders of second grade students meeting three times a week for seven months. Activities focused on reading and rereading books with discussion and writing activities provided to improve comprehension. One group of these students also received tutoring twice a week to read and complete a comprehension activity with their fourth grade tutor. We found that the second graders that met twice a week with their peer tutors made the most significant gains in reading when compared to the group that attended only the intervention class and control group.

In another study, Thrope & Wood (2000) found that seventh grade students' reading ability improved when they developed lessons to tutor third grade students. Compared to other seventh graders in a comparison school, the effects of cross-age tutoring made a significant difference. The unique aspect of cross-age tutoring is that the older tutors also make gains in reading achievement.

Reading Specialists

Another well-known program for first through eighth grade students who have difficulties in literacy is Title I. Johnson (1998) noted that "the purpose of Title I programs is to provide assistance to selected underachieving pupils in grades 1 through 8 so that they might more fully attain their potential by improving their language and reading skills" (p. 4). Gunning (1998) indicated that Title I programs are designed to eliminate the gap in literacy achievement between
economically disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. Rubin (1997) mentioned that Title I programs are now provided not only for children from low-income families, but also for children who have severe basic skills deficits, regardless of their family status. Based on information in Reading Today (IRA, 2001), Title I programs failed to achieve their original goal—to help poor children achieve at the same level as their better peers. These programs might have helped, but were too weak an intervention to bring students on a par with their classmates. Based on Johnson's report, many underachieving students cannot complete this reading program, and it is not considered effective or efficient.

Professional and Community Programs

There are many professional and community contexts for tutoring. Several popular programs are based on the Howard Street model. The Howard Street Tutoring Program, which began in a low income Chicago neighborhood in 1979, is a "grassroots, community-based initiative" that uses adult volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring for children (Morris, 1999). Under the supervision of a reading specialist, volunteers meet twice a week for approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The Howard Street tutoring concept is currently being used in rural North Carolina schools as a follow-up tutoring program for second graders. Darrell Morris, who instituted a similar program in North Carolina, outlines a typical tutoring lesson to have the following components: "Contextual reading at the child's instructional level, word study, easy reading, and reading to the child" (Morris, 1999, p. 8). A positive component of this model of tutoring is the ongoing support and supervision that each tutor receives.

Another successful community organization, Start Making A Reader Today (SMART), is an Oregon-based volunteer tutoring program that has proven cost-effective as well as successful in improving reading skills among first and second grade participants (Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000). SMART is mostly funded by community businesses. Tutors receive training before meeting to read with one child 30-minutes, twice a week, for six months out of the school year. In a two-year study, Baker compared students in the SMART program with students who
received no additional instruction, outside of the classroom, in reading. He found that the students who participated in SMART made significant statistical gains in word reading, reading fluency, and word comprehension when compared with the control group.

Other volunteer programs use retired community members, (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 1999) and students at-risk for school failure receive intensive (three to four sessions per week) after-school tutoring from those retired members. Many schools across the nation are using the services of AmeriCorps workers as tutors (Moss, Hiller, Moore, & Gamse, 1999). Often used in conjunction with the America Reads Challenge, those serving in schools are trained as tutors and work with students of all ages throughout the school day and during after school programs. This cooperative program provides schools with tutoring assistance while also enabling the AmeriCorps members to receive educational grants to help defray the cost of higher education. Proponents of this program claim that both schools and the AmeriCorps members benefit from this partnership.

**University**

There are a variety of programs where universities send students into elementary schools to be tutors and mentors to young students. It is common for preservice teachers to go into schools and tutor students as a requirement for one of their methods courses. Although literature evaluating the success of this type of reading tutoring program seems to be scarce (Klenk, 2000), there are many reports of successful reading tutoring programs.

**Trained University Students**

Many universities send students into elementary schools to be tutors and mentors to young students. Many of these programs pair at-risk students who are struggling in reading with a college student one-on-one. Juel (1996) studied one such program to identify what makes literacy tutoring effective. This program was unique in that it paired thirty struggling first-graders with college students who were themselves poor readers. Juel asked whether these relatively untrained college students
could successfully help the struggling first graders. Each elementary student was tutored for 45 minutes twice a week. Tutors attended a seminar once a week where tutoring activities and literacy development were discussed and books written for the children by those tutors. Each tutoring session contained three to four of the following seven components:

- reading children’s literature
- writing short stories or messages
- reading My Book, the short books tutors created in seminar
- writing in a journal
- alphabet recognition
- phonemic awareness activity
- letter-sound activities

Juel found 15 of the tutor-student teams to be especially successful at the end of the year-long intervention. These pairs had three characteristics in common. First, they displayed obvious affection toward one another, with tutors frequently reinforcing the child’s progress, both verbally and non-verbally. Next, their sessions contained many scaffolded reading and writing experiences where the tutor enabled the child to complete the task by providing a piece of information and/or segmenting the task into smaller, clearer components. Finally, in the most successful pairs, tutors modeled specific reading and writing strategies so that the children understood the strategies more clearly.

Hedrick (1999) studied a university program called Reading One-One. In this program, pre-service teachers (working on a specialization in reading) tutored third, fourth, and fifth graders in reading four times per week for 30 minutes each session. The tutors designed individualized plans for each child, which consisted of a balanced approach between reading, writing, and working with words. Results of the study showed that 60 percent of these students made an accelerated gain of more than one year in reading at the completion of the one-year program. This type of program seems ideal, for it benefits everyone involved. The students are receiving tutoring at no charge by trained individuals, and the university students are acquiring experience.
America Reads

Perhaps one of the most well known tutoring programs that use university students as tutors is that which grew from the America Reads Challenge Act. Initiated by President Clinton in 1996, the America Reads tutoring program is "an effort to insure that all children will read independently and well by the end of third grade" (Ross, 2001, p. 500). Using work-study funds, this program provides much needed tutoring services to low income school districts while also allowing university students to acquire experience working with students. University faculty members and school site coordinators, preferably reading specialists, train the tutors. Tutoring sessions are scheduled for at least two, preferably three, days a week for 20 to 30 minutes a session.

Stetson Reads

Stetson Reads is another example of an after-school reading program. This program pairs second and third graders with undergraduate work-study students (Heins et al., 1999), trained by a Reading Recovery teacher and monitored by a graduate student. Students in the program receive tutoring twice a week for one hour. A typical lesson plan in the program consists of:

- reading familiar text aloud
- manipulating letter cards to make words
- writing one or two sentences in a journal
- reading a new book aloud

Heins found that 81 percent of students in the program made gains in their ability to read text at the end of one year. We suggest that elementary students would benefit from more instruction in reading comprehension and that overall results of the program may be heightened if undergraduates from the university's education department were used.
Figure 1. Overview of Tutoring Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Who are the tutors?</th>
<th>What do the tutors do?</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Partners</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Support literacy through reading activities, projects, books, and family history projects</td>
<td>Provides extra help at home and time with family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Mates</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Help 9, 10 and 11 year-olds pick out books at school to practice and bring home to read to younger children</td>
<td>Motivates children because they help younger children read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Age Tutoring</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Plan and carry out activities to help younger children in school</td>
<td>Gives both older and younger children practice in reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Give lessons everyday for improving reading and writing skills</td>
<td>Provides under-achieving pupils in grades 1-8 extra help during the school day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Recovery</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Give struggling 1st grade readers 30 minutes of focused instruction in reading and writing</td>
<td>Provides students with individual lessons to practice reading and writing every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard Street, SMART, AmeriCorP</td>
<td>Professional/Community trained teachers</td>
<td>Work with students twice a week for 30-60 minutes on contextual reading at the student's level, word studies, easy reading, and reading to the child</td>
<td>Gives students individualized help in reading and writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America Reads, Stetson Reads</td>
<td>University trained university students</td>
<td>Provide literacy instruction two to three times a week for 30-60 minutes of reading familiar and new texts, journaling and making words</td>
<td>Gives students extra help in literacy while university students gain experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading One-One</td>
<td>University trained pre-service teachers specializing in reading</td>
<td>Work with students 4 times per week for 30 minutes, tutors design a balanced approach of reading, writing, and working with words</td>
<td>Students receive practice in literacy skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

Chances for success for both children and their reading tutors are great. Helping students catch-up in reading development in order to avert academic failure is a realistic goal. There are a myriad of tutoring programs being implemented today, and while the context in which they take place may differ, the goal of helping children learn to read better is the same for each program. Tutoring resources and people available include specialized teachers, parents, volunteers, national and state service members, community organizations, and university students. It is the combination of these resources along with quality tutoring programs that will help our schools to reach that important goal of helping each student become a successful reader.

References


Ian, E. (1996). We are a family of learners. Teaching K-8, 27(1), 54-58.


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