

A Two-Tiered Approach to Supporting Pupils with Reading Difficulties in Primary 3 Mainstream Classrooms

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- The classwide peer tutoring programme, known as Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies-Modified (PALS-M), can be integrated into the mainstream English Language curriculum.
- Teachers in primary schools would benefit from having the knowledge and skills to provide targeted reading support, monitor progress and engage in academic problem solving.

BACKGROUND

Students with reading difficulties are identified for the Learning Support Programme (LSP) through a universal screening of pupils which only occurs in Primary 1 (P1). However, there are also other pupils who are not in LSP but have not shown adequate reading progress at the end of P2. Hence, there is a need to implement a process that can systematically identify these pupils at the end of P2 and provide targeted interventions to these pupils beyond P2. The problem is exacerbated by the limited resources in the schools. In any primary school, for example, there is usually one or two Allied Educators (Learning and Behavioural Support) or AEDs (LBS).

FOCUS OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to develop a process that would systematically identify and

support P3 pupils with reading difficulties in two schools in a targeted manner using a two-tiered approach. It was created based on a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. RTI is used to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention on student achievement (Christ, Burns, & Ysseldyke, 2005). What is unique about the current study compared to other learning support programmes available in schools in Singapore is the application of academic problem solving. The LSP and Reading Remediation Programme uses a standard protocol approach. While the standard protocol approach is generally effective, the data-based decision-making component of academic problem solving allows teachers to provide interventions that are targeted to address individual students' reading difficulties based on their progress monitoring data.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify and support pupils with reading difficulties;
2. To raise the reading ability and self-perception of pupils with reading difficulties through a two-tiered approach; and
3. To increase teacher efficacy in supporting pupils with reading difficulties.

In the first phase, universal screening of all P2 pupils in six classes in an experimental school and a comparison school was conducted

in November 2014. Thirty pupils with the lowest oral reading fluency scores were identified in the experimental school. They were matched with 30 pupils with similar oral reading fluency scores in the comparison school. The reading progress of these struggling readers in both schools was monitored before and after the implementation of the two-tiered approach in the experimental school.

During the second phase, the classwide peer tutoring programme known as the PALS-M programme was implemented in six P3 classes. This involved 240 pupils and six teachers during English Language lessons in the experimental school. Based on the progress monitoring data of the 30 pupils, 18 pupils did not make sufficient progress and they received Tier 2 interventions, as determined by the academic problem-solving process, over three months. The problem solving approach is a systematic analysis of instructional variables to isolate target skill deficits and design targeted interventions (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, 2004). Tier 2 interventions were conducted in small groups of three, three times a week after school with each session lasting 30 minutes. Professional Learning Community meetings were used to discuss pupil progress. Based on the progress monitoring data, Tier 2 instructors were able to ascertain the difficulties faced by these pupils and if they were responding adequately to interventions used.

In the third phase, only Tier 2 interventions were implemented in the comparison school upon the school's request. Nine pupils received Tier 2 interventions for three months.

KEY FINDINGS

The classwide peer tutoring programme had a positive effect on pupils' reading comprehension. The effect of the intervention on reading comprehension is notable as it suggests that PALS-M not only provides opportunities for all students to read aloud but also requires them to actively negotiate the meaning of what had been read—a critical skill in reading comprehension. The emphasis of PALS-M on reading comprehension and the use of differentiated questions may have contributed to the gains. While PALS-M may have a positive impact on reading skills among struggling readers, it appeared to have affected their perception of their reading competence. This could be because for a struggling reader, having to read to a peer may have surfaced his reading difficulties. Prior to the current study, pupils were used to choral reading and might not have been aware of their reading difficulties.

While the Tier 2 interventions seemed to have a limited impact on students' reading skills, it had a small positive effect on their perception of reading competence and attitude towards reading. Students

may have benefitted more if they had received reading support from school personnel who had prior experience in working with struggling readers.

Results from the study revealed that teachers were not familiar with the skills of monitoring pupil progress and needed assistance in designing intervention plans to address specific reading difficulties. Teachers reported that participating in the study helped to improve their ability to identify pupil's reading difficulties, assess pupils' instructional level using curriculum-based assessment, design an intervention plan to help pupils who had difficulties with spelling, help pupils increase their vocabulary, and guide pupils who were not motivated readers.

We may need to encourage teachers to embrace the philosophy that all students can learn and empower them with the skills to achieve this. In addition, prior to the current study, many teachers were not familiar with how to monitor each pupil's reading progress using curriculum-based measures and interpret progress monitoring charts. This study suggests that teachers would benefit from gaining knowledge and skills related to literacy strategies, formative assessment and academic problem solving which will help them to remediate the problems faced by struggling readers in their classroom.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDING

Implications for practice

PALS-M can be integrated into the mainstream English Language curriculum. It could supplement current approaches (such as Shared Book Approach) by providing greater opportunities for students to read to each other. The use of differentiated worksheets could also cater to students with diverse reading abilities within a class.

Implication for training

Currently the focus of English teachers is on the average student in the class, leaving the responsibility of supporting weak readers to the AEDs. This has led to the fragmentation of support for weaker readers. The problem has been compounded by the fact that AEDs is a scarce resource. We may need to review on what can be done to encourage teachers to embrace the philosophy that all students can read and empower them with the skills to achieve this.

In addition, teachers in primary school would benefit from gaining knowledge and skills related to literacy strategies and formative assessment which will help them to remediate the problems faced by struggling readers in their classroom.

Implications for research

PALS-M can be scaled up to involve a greater number of schools. The current research suggests PALS-M provide teachers the opportunity to informally assess their students' reading when they hear individual students read aloud. However, the down side is it appears to have a negative effect on students' self-concept of themselves as readers. Further research is needed to look at ways the PALS-M programme can be modified and integrate elements which could enhance student self-concept as readers. This could draw from research on student agency, students' attributions and beliefs, motivation and self-concept.

PARTICIPANTS

Pupil participants for this study were identified based on their performance on universal screening of all Primary 2 pupils in the experimental school and comparison school. Thirty pupils with the lowest oral reading fluency scores in the experimental school were identified for the study. They were matched with thirty pupils with similar oral reading fluency scores in the comparison school.

Seven teachers from the experimental school as well as two teachers and one Allied Educator (AED) in the comparison school participated in the study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A wait-list-control research design was used in this study. In the first year, the intervention using the two-tiered approach was conducted on the experimental group. In year 2, only Tier 2 strategies were implemented with nine pupils in the comparison school. Impact was assessed based on investigation of students' reading ability and pupils' self-perception as readers. Feedback on the PALS-M approach was obtained from the students in the experimental school using a survey form. Teachers who implemented the PALS-M were interviewed on their views on the effectiveness of the peer tutoring. Interviews were also conducted with school personnel who had provided Tier 2 interventions.

REFERENCES

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