Reading intervention:
The benefits of using trained tutors

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In recent years there has been a greater willingness for schools to utilise the availability of parents, para-professionals and peer tutors to assist developing and struggling readers. As a consequence, a number of research studies have focused on the many benefits of tutoring, and have also identified critical elements that have contributed to successful home and school intervention programs. This paper discusses the most recent findings on literacy tutoring intervention practice and its application to the appropriate training of skilled tutors.

Tutoring could be defined as a learning interaction between a tutor and a tutee that focuses on an area of curriculum content needing improvement or strengthening in the tutee (Roe & Vukelich, 2001). Often the purpose of tutoring is to provide an educational intervention to meet the needs of children who are having a difficulty. In particular, Vaughn, Gersten and Chard (2000) contended that the most effective instruction that teachers can provide for any student is one-on-one. This requires that teachers ‘decentralise’ some of their instruction if they are to appropriately meet the needs of the students with reading difficulties. One method aimed at facilitating this one-on-one reading intervention for students with reading difficulties is the use of trained reading tutors who are either community volunteers, parents, other students or teacher aides (Cairney, 2000; Glynn & McNaughton, 2002; Rohrbeck, Ginsburg-Block, & Fantuzzo, 2003; Topping, 1987).

Parental involvement at home and volunteer involvement at school
A substantial body of research has demonstrated that parents can be effective tutors and help their children make substantial gains in various academic and non-academic areas (Collins & Matthey, 2001; Elias, Hay, Homel, & Freiberg, 2006; Hewson & Tizard, 1980; Morgan & Goldstein, 2004; Mayfield
Ollila, 1996; Nichols, 2000). Stanovich (1986) in his study of parental home reading and tutoring found that once parents began to interact with their children around reading activities, the children reciprocated with eagerness. The parents intuitively seemed to follow the child’s learning interests and curiosity, sensitively responding to requests for aid. Vygotsky (1962) maintained that the fundamental elements of the child’s learning are the interactions of the child with a supportive other.

In the United Kingdom, Hewison (1988) conducted a study over a two-year period called the Haringey Reading Project, in which parents were encouraged by teachers to listen regularly to their children’s reading for a short period every evening. At the end of the two-year period children whose parents regularly listened to them read were reading at a significantly higher level, compared to children in the control groups from the same schools where home reading and parental support were not as encouraged by the children’s teachers. Hewison also identified that the differences between the two student groups (one group with home reading support and one group with less) were maintained three years after the end of the project. This finding, that the intervention results were maintained over time, is important: some reading intervention studies have been criticised for failing to maintain the children’s reading gains after the intervention has discontinued (Chapman & Tunmer, 1991; Robinson, 2001). To provide information on the differences in home tutoring styles for reading, Elliott and Hewison (1994) investigated families from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Differences in the tutoring styles were identified and these were linked to reading performance. Without training, the middle class family group outperformed the low socio-economic and Asian family groups in terms of their children’s progress on reading achievement. The middle class families tended to emphasise story content and meaning, rather than merely trying to assist children in acquiring the correct word recognition and decoding skills. The middle class parents favoured feedback strategies that focused on the context using semantic-based prompts, such as reviewing the meaning and development of the story at the end of a section. The middle class children were encouraged to take cues from the pictures and the text context, as well as phonic cues. Their parents tended to avoid interrupting the reading flow and ignored minor errors. Interesting books were also made available by these parents to motivate the children and encourage reading for pleasure rather than reading to gain word-reading skills, and reading miscues was regarded as a source of learning. In Australia, the Richardson (1994) study had similar results, in that Asian and working class parents had fewer books in the home and their children did not generally understand the concept of reading for pleasure. Rather than using semantic-based prompts, parents from Asian and working class backgrounds tended to have their children read every word correctly. They tended to view reading as an exercise in pre-
cision with an emphasis on word accuracy, rather than meaning. This approach resulted in more children from these homes exhibiting poor comprehension and showing little interest and motivation for reading.

**Investigating parent reading tutor styles and children with reading problems**

Collins and Matthey (2001) identified that mothers of children with reading difficulties used a tutoring/interaction style with their children that included more negative feedback, compared with the tutoring styles of mothers of children without reading difficulties. Further, Collins and Matthey noted that inadequately trained parent tutors were too critical of their child’s mistakes, and could not provide partial reading clues and supportive comments to their child. As a result, reading-related anxiety levels of their children remained high. In terms of what Australian parents want from tutor training programs, Kemp’s (1987a, 1987b) research found that parents’ over-riding desire was to be shown how to give reading assistance to their children without generating other kinds of emotional and educational problems. Kemp reported that before parental training started, home reading sessions frequently ended in strained parent-child relationships and negative attitudes toward reading by the children. Topping and Wolfendale (1995) also reported that before parental tutoring training programs were introduced, the reading sessions in many of the homes investigated developed into tantrums, frustration, and confused interactions between the parents and their children. Such observations have helped researchers to better identify effective tutoring strategies.

There is a considerable body of literature documenting the effectiveness of interventions involving trained adults and peers as tutors (Cairney, 2003; Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Collins & Matthey, 2001; McNaughton, Glynn & Robinson, 1981). For example, Cohen, Kulik and Kulik (1982) in a meta-analysis of 52 tutoring research studies, reported that tutored students performed better than their classroom peers who did not receive tutoring. Similarly, Topping (1987) analysed ten interventions and suggested that participants had also made significant gains from paired tutoring using trained tutors. Elliott and Hewison (1994) maintained that tutors who participated in home reading training projects became better informed about reading, the reading process, and how to interact with their child during reading tasks. The reasons behind the powerful effects of one-on-one tutoring programs using trained volunteers are not fully clear, although one can look to the tutor, the student, the program, the resources, the environment and, to some degree, a combination of interactions among all of these elements for answers (Juel, 1996; Kemp, 1987b). Grimes (1981) stated that when children are in an environment of mutual support and where co-operation, shared goals and a sense of responsibility for the reading process are promoted, a
sense of belonging, accomplishment and increased motivation will be achieved. The one-on-one nature of the reading-tutoring situation may also heighten the engagement of the student and maintain their attention to the text for longer periods of time. The immediate feedback that the individual tutee receives during the tutoring sessions also guides the student toward effectively using more strategies (Coleman & Bornholt, 2003; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

Peer tutoring is considered a form of tutoring based on co-operative learning, where students of a similar age work together, although one of the pair typically has a greater mastery of the targeted skill (King, Staffieri & Adelgais, 1998; Rhodes, 1993). Duran and Monereo (2005) claimed that usually one of the pair needs to have more ability than the other, but suggested that students of similar skills and age may mutually help one another, if they are given a structure within which to work. Pagett’s (1994) research with reading also suggests that this is the case. Pagett investigated tutoring using pairs of same-aged students and pairs of students who were either of unequal reading ability or of similar reading ability and identified that both groups made improvements in reading. The reasons for student improvement are based on research: student relationships with peers influence students’ motivation and academic progress (Rohrbeck et al., 2003; Hay, Ashman & van Kraayenoord, 1998a). Rohrbeck et al. also identified that the use of self-management procedures, individualised evaluation, and reward contingencies enhanced the benefits of the peer intervention.

In peer tutoring the students are normally matched using tutors from their age grouping or class, while cross-aged tutoring arrangements utilised tutors from higher grades (Gautrey, 1990; Scruggs & Osguthorpe, 1986). Scruggs and Osguthorpe (1986), however, used tutors and tutees with reading difficulties across Years 1 to 6 in a cross-age tutoring program, resulting in reading performance gains for both the tutee and the tutor. Thus, a diverse range of tutors has been used effectively in reading tutoring programs. In a study of cross-age tutoring Juel (1996) reported that at-risk elementary school children gained much from being read to regularly by older students who were at-risk readers themselves. Cohen et al. (1982) noted that one of the other benefits of cross-age tutoring was that both readers helped each other.

The quality of the training and supervision of tutors
Tutors, whether they are peer tutors, cross-age tutors, parent tutors or adult to student tutors, may have several roles, from encouraging tutees, to modelling and explaining skills, but the critical issue is the training of tutors (Roe & Vukelich, 2001). The indications are that trained tutors are more effective than untrained tutors (Fresko & Chen, 1989), and that one-on-one is more effective than group tutoring (Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk & Seltzer, 1994).
Wasik and Slavin (1993) reviewed five interventions that compared students’ academic gains under two learning conditions. One condition involved certified teachers and the other condition involved para-professional tutors, such as teacher aides. The findings from this review supported the notion that one-on-one tutoring by para-professionals can be extremely effective, although teachers generally had a greater impact on the students’ reading development than did the para-professionals, because of the teachers’ greater knowledge of the reading process. In terms of the effectiveness of tutors, Topping (1998) maintained that it depended on what the tutors actually did in the sessions. He contended that when teachers and tutors used exactly the same techniques there were no significant differences in regard to the effectiveness of the reading interventions. Furthermore, Wasik (1998a) studied a number of tutoring programs and identified that well-trained tutors with adequate support were even more beneficial to children who were struggling readers than their teachers. Wasik’s (1985b) study also reinforced the idea that children assisted by trained adult tutors outperformed children assisted by untrained adult tutors. This reinforced the notion that the most effective one-on-one tutoring programs utilised either teacher aides, volunteers or peer tutors, and had the elements of first, being highly structured, and second, having a high degree of tutor training (Collins & Matthey, 2001; Duran & Monereo, 2005; Rohrbeck et al., 2003; Topping, 1998; Wasik, 1998b).

In particular, findings from experimental studies have identified that children who are experiencing some difficulty with learning to read and who are tutors are unlikely to be effective in the tutor role without training (Kemp, 1987a; 1987b). Generally, tutors require explicit information on how to implement instructional strategies when tutoring children (Neuman, 1995; Roe & Vukelich, 2001). Furthermore, Collins and Matthey (2001) argued that tutors needed a range of resources, ongoing assistance, and regular feedback. Collins and Matthey warned that those considering implementing tutoring programs to keep the intervention manageable. They argued that if the tutoring program was too complex or too large, the resulting administrative problems had a negative impact on the effectiveness of the programs and their goals were not achieved. Roe and Vukelich (2001) claimed that the tasks assigned to the tutors must be consistent with what they can easily and willingly accomplish. Fresko and Chen (1989) have also argued that tutor satisfaction was a major indicator to the success of tutoring programs; satisfaction was strongly related to the extent to which tutors felt they had achieved their intervention goals.

The relationship between the tutors and the person conducting the training session has an effect on the tutors’ motivation and performance (Roe & Vukelich, 2001). Wasik (1998a) contended that for tutors to be effective they have to be given adequate supervision by specialist teachers, adequate feed-
back and training. Roe and Vukelich (2001) added that volunteer programs must have a unified commitment from the school staff as well as the tutor cohort. Wasik (1998a) noted that the more successful reading tutoring programs used significant levels of tutor scaffolding and explicit modelling of comprehension skills to students, and that these techniques required ongoing training and supervision.

When designing tutor programs teachers should find ways to ensure that tutors are able to attend regularly. Neuman (1995) argued that tutors working in schools have support needs that also have to be considered. She suggested that making the volunteer tutors feel valued and welcomed was important, and maintained that the school ought to provide the tutors with facilities, such as a quiet place to work, somewhere to put their things, and access to a kitchen so they can have refreshment. She proposed that an evaluation of the tutoring program should consider the needs of the tutors as well as the tutees, so that the tutors feel a part of the regular classroom program. Topping (1987), however, cautioned teachers not to see the tutors as doing the classroom teaching or to have the tutors working only with the students with the most problems, but to integrate the tutoring into the total literacy program.

The assessment of the tutoring program has to be ongoing, with adequate feedback given to tutors and tutees (Roe & Vukelich, 2001). When Roe and Vukelich investigated the role of the tutees in the *America Reads* program, they found a number of inconsistencies in the performance of the tutors, and argued that effective tutoring programs required a cooperative staff that embraced a commitment to fulfilling a program’s goals. Added to this, a sense of partnership should be well established between teachers and tutors. The concern is that tutors may go their own way, and while having an enjoyable social time, may fail to produce any real performance change in the children they are expected to help. Tutors also need to know how well the tutees are performing and what their learning needs might be.

**Tutors monitoring progress and working at the readers’ instruction level**

In terms of the roles of tutors in literacy, tutors need to monitor readers’ task difficulty by assisting students to select text materials that are at the students’ appropriate level of difficulty (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Gunning, 2003; Woolley & Hay, 2004). Furthermore, tutors have to be able to help tutees locate reading materials that are suited to the students’ interest and motivation levels, and to enhance their choice of reading material (Cooney & Hay, 2005; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). For readers who have struggled for years and have developed a resistance to reading, the evidence shows that literacy tutoring interventions are most effective when incorporating a personalised and responsive relationship-based
approach to reading combined with student choice of interesting and appropriate material (Cox & Guthrie, 2001).

Well-trained tutors foster positive student reading self-concepts and help students satisfy psychological needs related to motivation, competence and relatedness to others and to the reading materials (Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003; Krapp, 2005). Tutors are instrumental in fostering positive thoughts, perceptions and beliefs that promote engaging behaviours with print. Tutors are able to provide supportive environments when they share students’ thoughts, beliefs and use of strategies (Glynn & McNaughton, 1985; Juel, 1996; Wasik, 1998a). By receiving informed feedback students develop positive motivational beliefs as well as a self-regulating focus (Guthrie, Cox, Knowles, Buehl, Mazzoni & Fasulo, 2000; Hay, Ashman & van Kraayenoord, 1998b; Schunk, 2003; Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005). This gives greater meaning to the notion of ‘balanced reading instruction’, as personal beliefs about the value of reading and intrinsic motivation are strengthened by fostering students’ interest and control of the selected text material (Bong, 2004; Gaskins, 2003; Pressley, 1998; Spencer & Hay, 1998).

In terms of tutoring strategies, McNaughton, Glynn and Robinson’s (1987) Pause, Prompt and Praise strategy has been shown to be effective in New Zealand (Glynn & McNaughton, 1985), Australia (Houghton & Bain, 1993; Houghton & Glynn, 1993) and the United Kingdom (Wheldall & Mettem, 1985; Wheldall, Merett & Colmar, 1987). The two most important tutoring elements of this approach are first, that reading materials must be at an appropriate level of student difficulty, and second, that tutors provide feedback as the children read the text (Colmar & Wheldall, 1996). These procedures have also been included in other programs, such as Reading Recovery (Neal & Kelly, 2002). Hattie (1992) maintained that effective feedback adds to the student’s sense of security, but also encourages the student to take risks and attempt new tasks. Overall, the aim of tutor feedback is to guide the student’s learning and reduce the need and amount of feedback, as the student becomes more capable, confident and in control. When providing corrective feedback it is also important to focus on the student’s strengths rather than only his/her weaknesses or errors in performance (Roehler & Duffy, 1984). The claim is that negative or unrealistic tutor expectancies and poor use of feedback can be harmful to the student’s academic and social development (Wigfield, 2000). Well-trained tutors are particularly effective at enhancing students’ sense of self-efficacy and confidence (Quandt & Selznick, 1984), and they also encourage students to solve problems, participate, use specific and general reading strategies, develop independence and build metacognitive awareness (Neal & Kelly, 2002; Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). When students encounter reading difficulties, tutors may facilitate the reading process by giving feedback, which could include: (a) identifying the inadequate use of reading strategies; (b) relating
failure to insufficient effort; and (c) reinforcing the notion the reader has sufficient ability to do the task (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003). When designing reading tutoring programs one of the most important elements is to try to enhance the students’ use of metacognitive skills, particularly their ability to understand when and how to use relevant repair strategies (Alfassi, 1998; Hay, Elias & Booker, 2005; Kinnunen & Vauras, 1995). The more students understand and take ownership of a strategy, the more likely they are to retain and employ that strategy in the future (Palinscar & Brown, 1987).

Summary

Research demonstrates that reading intervention programs using trained tutors can have positive effects on students’ reading performance. Successful reading tutoring programs have utilised significant levels of tutor scaffolding and explicit modelling of reading skills to students, and these techniques require ongoing tutor training and supervision. When tutors provide appropriate feedback on students’ reading strategy performance, they can assist less able readers to know how and when to apply the strategies and develop their self-regulatory and self-efficacy reading behaviours. Consequently, tutors should be able to enhance students’ engagement with text, use of strategies and motivation, by fostering the students’ reading competency, autonomy and reading self-concept. Thus, the learning environment for students with reading problems should have social supports that provide positive language and vocabulary experiences within a framework of problem solving and choice.

References


