



Research Based Strategies for Special Needs Students - Peer Assisted Learning Strategies

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In this era of NCLB, high stakes testing, teacher accountability and research-based learning strategies, the special education community is as involved as other areas of education in assessing what works and how we can improve teaching and learning in our classrooms to benefit the special population that we serve.

One learning strategy, pioneered by Doug Fuchs, PhD and Lynn Fuchs, PhD of Vanderbilt University's Kennedy Center, is Peer Assisted Learning Strategies or PALS. Field trials were conducted in six of the poorest counties in south Texas; Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Bloomington, MN, and in Nashville, TN. Originally PALS research and program development focused on grades 2-6 but has expanded to kindergarten, first-grade and high-school in both reading and math. What did the studies determine? Over the past ten years, evaluations of PALS Reading and Math indicate that mainstreamed students with learning disabilities, low-achieving students without disabilities, average-achieving students, and high-achieving students make greater progress in PALS Reading and Math classrooms than their respective counterparts in non-PALS classes. "...results provide evidence that PALS helps children get off to a stronger start in math, regardless of whether they began the year low-, average-, and high-performers."(Fuchs, L.S., Fuchs, D., & Karns, K. (2001) *Elementary School Journal*, 101, (5), 495-510).

What exactly is PALS? It's a version of classwide peer tutoring where teachers evaluate and identify students who need help with specific skills and determine the most appropriate students in the class to assist them with those skills. The students are paired as "coaches" and "players" but rotate roles as activities change and students are required to work on a variety of skills. PALS is designed to *complement*, not replace, the existing math or reading curriculum by providing opportunities for students to practice what the teacher has taught. Research supports that the use of pairs in the classroom provides more focus on individual student needs rather than a teacher-directed activity that may address the needs of a few students but not be able to meet the needs of all student. Some benefits attributed to the PALS program include:

- Actively involves all students in tasks they can perform successfully.
- Increases student opportunity to read and practice basic math skills.
- Motivates students to do better in reading and math.
- Expands instructional resources in the classroom.
- Provides for positive and productive peer interaction.
- Creates opportunity for lower functioning students to assume an integral role in a valued activity.
- Allows students with disabilities to spend more time in least restrictive environment and increases their access to the general education curriculum.
- Helps teachers accommodate academic diversity.
- Accelerates student achievement in reading and math.
- Is affordable and easily implemented.
- Is found to be an enjoyable activity by teachers and students.

Based on research that supports this program, the U.S. Department of Education has identified the following characteristics as necessary for the successful use of pairs.

- Clear instructional activities are planned in advance by the teacher and based on material that has been taught;
- Procedures and routines for working in pairs are taught by the teacher in advance of peer work;
- Members of pairs differ in reading ability or English proficiency; and
- Peers work together approximately 90 minutes per week in reading and language practice.

For additional information, the USDOE maintains a website, the What Works Clearinghouse that contains some excellent resource material for teachers on peer learning. One important aspect they provide is the following list of key actions research has proven to be necessary components of an effective peer learning program.

- 1. Develop a plan for using structured partner work school-wide and throughout the day.**
Using partner work school-wide is efficient. Once students learn the routines of pair work, they can quickly engage in practice opportunities in a wide variety of subjects. Using similar peer routines throughout the day allows teachers to augment the number of practice opportunities for all students.
- 2. Use research-based techniques and strategies for structured partner work.**
In addition to teaching students peer-assisted learning procedures, teachers need to structure the learning activities to maximize productive practice, including a product or way to check on the accuracy of responses. Research indicates results from about 90 minutes a week of peer practice.
- 3. Prepare students to work with partners, including building on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.**
To get the most out of practice together, procedures for working together need to become routine for students. Preparation includes providing training in appropriate discourse, including prompts and feedback, as well as teacher modeling of the intended learning activity.
- 4. Provide professional development and support for teachers to use partner work.**
Teachers may require in-class support (coaching) to help them get started with peer-assisted learning in addition to training in establishing peer routines as well as structuring assignments to maximize learning.

Further information on peer learning strategies can be found at the following websites.

- PALS - pals@valderbilt.edu or 615-343-4782.
- U.S. Department of Education - http://dww.ed.gov/practice/practice_landing.cfm?PA_ID=6&T_ID=13&P_ID=24
- NICHY - <http://research.nichcy.org/whatworks.asp>

This series is based on a presentation by Charles A. Hughes, Ph.D. and Marisa A. Macy, Ph.D. of Penn State University, who find these to be research-based best practices. The findings of this study are under review and have not been released by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The information provided here is not endorsed by IES.