Leadership for Equitable Student Achievement: Peer Tutoring

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I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2017, about 20% of all 4th-7th graders at Ekuthuleni Primary School in KwaMashu, South Africa performed within weak and non-reader\(^1\) levels (Jenkins, Jenkins & Thusi, n.d.). By the end of 2017, following implementing Worldwide Access to Literacy’s peer tutor methods, the school saw nearly a 100% performance improvement for these students to regular reading levels (Jenkins, D. & Jenkins, J., 2017). Worldwide Access to Literacy’s peer tutoring program is not only effective, but it is simple and inexpensive and has the potential to provide high impact with minimal funding. The program can be used in any language and in any school, even those where there are no desks, chairs, or chalkboards.

Peer tutoring is a “bridge to equity and opportunity” by helping drastically improve student literacy rates, leading to better school performance and therefore increased possibility of secondary school admittance, and even college admittance. Peer tutoring methods have been proven effective in education by not only Worldwide Access to Literacy, but also by multiple other researchers in this academic field. In this paper, we seek to introduce the concept of peer tutoring, discuss the implementation and effect of peer tutoring at Ekuthuleni Primary School, and then outline Worldwide Access to Literacy’s proven methods for effectively implementing peer tutoring literacy programs.

II. WHAT IS PEER TUTORING?

Peer tutoring refers to students working in pairs or groups, regardless of age differences (Burnish, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Topping, 2008), focused on helping each other learn school material (Kunsch, Jitendra & Sood, 2007). Just as we saw at Ekuthuleni Primary School,

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\(^1\) Weak or non-readers for grades 4-7 read within 0-3 reader levels.
academic achievement increases when students of different ability levels work together (Kunsch, Jitendra & Sood, 2007) and when the tutors are trained specifically on tutoring (National Education Association, n.d.). Peer tutoring reviews (Topping, 2008) show that tutors experienced improvement in reading achievement as well as their tutees. From our observation and experience, within one year, almost 100% of weak and non-readers can become average readers in their language of focus. In addition to academic improvement, the National Education Association shares that other benefits of peer tutoring include, “improved relationships with peers, improved personal and social development as well as increased motivation.” (n.d.).

III. CASE STUDY: PEER TUTORING READING PROJECT AT EKUTHULENI PRIMARY SCHOOL IN KWAMASHU, SOUTH AFRICA

A. Before the Project

In December 2013, the library of Ekuthuleni Primary School library was created with books and supplies donated by The LEARN Project (Jenkins, Jenkins & Thusi, n.d.). In 2017, approximately 960 students attended the library (Thusi, 2017) for 30-minute classes twice a week, totaling about 400 students a day (Jenkins, Jenkins, & Thusi, n.d.). The librarian, Maureen Dudzile Thusi, evaluated students individually on a scale of 0-10, and then placed them into reading groups with leveled readers (i.e. reading levels 0-1 grouped and levels 2-3 grouped) (Thusi, 2017).

Thusi concluded that, in some classes, up to 40% of students read English within the 0-3 levels and were therefore considered weak or non-readers (Jenkins, Jenkins, & Thusi, n.d.). It is essential to note the environmental factors influencing these numbers. Two of the factors leading to this were a high percentage of students who spoke Zulu as their native language and as
the primary language in their home, as well as Zulu focused reading instruction in grades 1-3 (Jenkins, Jenkins, & Thusi, n.d.). In grade 4, class language instruction shifted to entirely English except for one Zulu language class (Jenkins, Jenkins, & Thusi, n.d.).

To further assist weak and non-readers, Thusi reached out to Worldwide Access to Literacy (Jenkins, Jenkins, & Thusi, n.d.). She implemented all ideas shared with only minor improvements, so we both traveled to South Africa as Worldwide Access to Literacy representatives traveled to personally assist her (Jenkins, Jenkins, & Thusi, n.d.).

B. Results of the Project

Worldwide Access to Literacy worked with the Ekuthuleni Primary School between February and October 2017 (Jenkins, Jenkins & Thusi, n.d.). When the project first began, 193 readers who were evaluated by Thusi at reading levels 0-3 in grades 4-7 (Jenkins, 2018). She worked in tandem with us to implement the peer tutor methods explained in Section IV.

After only five months of peer tutoring using these methods, more than 100 of these students, over 50%, graduated into a regular reading group (Jenkins, 2018) and all others had shown improvement (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). Students advanced by demonstrating level 4 reading efficiency through reading a level 4 reader at a comfortable speed, as well as knowing and being able to read all 100 of the most common English words. By the end of the school year, all but a few of the original tutee students had advanced into the regular reading group (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). This included a 7th grade student who progressed from not reading a single English word at the start of the program, to being able to read the 6th book of the level 3 Cub readers by the end of eight months of the school year (Jenkins, 2018).
In her reflection of the peer tutoring program, Thusi shared that she appreciated the format of the program with helping students practice words and progress between reading levels, as well as the structure of students helping other students (Thusi, 2017). She shared her observation that “even those who cannot read, now I see that they are reading through [this program] . . . You know what I like more about these tutors, it’s when they are helping each other. Then they get the work that they otherwise cannot,” (Thusi, 2017). The Ekuthuleni Primary School Principle, Salmbula Khalala added his appreciation of this program. He shared, “we appreciate very much what you did for the school, what you did for this community, and for us as teachers. You opened our eyes,” (Khalala, 2017).

IV. THE WORLDWIDE ACCESS TO LITERACY PEER TUTOR MODEL

For this project, students reading within the levels of 0-3, and therefore considered weak or non-readers, tutees, were each paired with a trained student tutor who helped them read leveled readers and play letter and word games.

A. Getting Started

i. Identify Reading Levels of Students

The first step of this method is to identify the reading level of all students in the class. Reading levels will determine which students should be asked to be tutors (the best readers in the class), and which students need to be tutored (reading within levels 0-3). This evaluation can be completed by the teacher or librarian through a one-on-one reading experience with each student while the other students are reading, etc. For the evaluation, the student should be asked to read out loud from an easy reading book and from the 100 Most Common English Word List (see
Appendix A) or from the 100 most common words in the language of focus; from these evaluations, the teacher will then determine the appropriate reading level for each student.

ii. Selecting and Maintaining Peer Tutors

Students who are evaluated to have the highest reading levels in the class will be asked to become peer tutors. Motivations for peer tutors may differ, but we have found two consistent themes in motivation (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). Some tutors desire to help their fellow students and get excited to see their tutee become a better reader, while others will do almost anything to have the privilege to wear a tutor badge (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). Tutor badges are important for tutors to wear so that they will feel recognized by other students, especially by weak and non-readers as someone with authority who is authorized to help them (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). We have found that wearing a tutor badge contributes to tutor longevity (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). In our work with eight different schools, we have never encountered a problem finding tutors to help.

iii. Tutor Training

A teacher or librarian can easily conduct tutor training. Tutors should follow the “Tutor Guidelines” listed below. Within these guidelines, students reading at levels 0 (can’t read any words), 1, 2, and 3, should start at the level of the reader directly above what they can comfortably read, and then move forward. At Ekuthuleni Primary School, we used Cub Readers. If these or other simple beginning reader books are available, then that is a good place to start and provides a natural path of progression for tutees to follow. If these type of readers are not available, then find the easiest, most accessible, basic leveled readers or books that are available and get started using those. Also, pick out the easiest words from the 100 word list (see
Appendix for the easiest 100 English words), and have the tutors start helping students to memorize the words and their meanings.

a. Tutor Guidelines

These tutor guidelines were created by Jenkins & Jenkins (2017)\(^2\) during their time working with the Ekuthuleni Primary School.

1. “Greet your student.

2. “Select an easy reader book\(^3\) that is at the student’s reading level (i.e. 0, 1, 2, or 3). Read the easy reader book with the student all the way through to help the student become familiar with the words. Read slowly and point at the words as you read. While reading the book the first time, let the student look at the pictures.

3. “Have the student read the book out loud so the tutor can hear. It is OK if the student can’t read. Make sure you do not read a sentence or word before the student tries to read:

   a. “If the student reads fast and knows almost all the words, give the student the book in the next level.

   b. “When a student stops on a word, wait 4-5 seconds and then tell the student the word or give clues.

   c. “Have the student say the word several times, and then write it on a piece of paper and hand it to the tutor.

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\(^2\) A similar version of Volunteer Tutor Guidelines is published on the Worldwide Access to Literacy website and is available under the “Downloads” tab.

\(^3\) If your school does not have access to simple readers, you can go to WorldwideAccessToLiteracy.org and download and print out some of their reading materials and/or you can create your own. A simple reader may only use 15 words that the student can read and memorize.
d. “When the tutor has five word papers, then the tutor should quiz the student on those words until the student can recognize and say all five words. The tutor should randomly select each word from the word papers. Afterward, the student keeps the word papers and can take them home to practice. The tutor should remember the words so that they can reference them for review in the next day or days.

e. “If a student knows the words but is very, very slow” in reading, then the student should read the book with the help of the tutor again and again to get faster (four times or more for each page or each sentence).

f. “If there is time left, make learning the words a game, with just the student or with another one or two students. If one student is always winning, then have that student be-in-charge of the game, so he is not playing.

g. “If a student can read all 100 of the most common words, then he should be a regular reader.

h. “There are a few students who do not know the alphabet. If so, the tutor should spend some time going over the alphabet letters. The alphabet letters sheets can be printed off the internet at WorldwideAccessToLiteracy.org., and cut up by alphabet letters, or the tutor can cut up pieces of paper and write an alphabet letter on each one. Also, as the student gets familiar with the 100 words, make word games out of it (five letters, 10 letters, etc.).

i. “If a student can read all 100 words fairly fast, then have the student become a regular reader.

4. “The Tutors should:
a. “NEVER CRITICIZE, LAUGH AT, RIDICULE, YELL AT, OR TELL OTHER STUDENTS, HOW BAD THIS STUDENT IS;

b. “AND COMPLIMENT FOR EVEN ONE WORD IMPROVEMENT;

c. “AND ENCOURAGE THE STUDENT TO KEEP TRYING AS HE/SHE IS GETTING BETTER.”

b. Supplemental 100 Word Card Game

The following supplemental activity assisted in improving tutee reading levels. We did not complete research on the distinction between success tied to this supplemental game versus the basic peer tutor structure listed above. Nevertheless, students who participated in this game showed an increased excitement for learning and practicing reading (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017). A similar version of this activity is published on the Worldwide Access to Literacy website under the “Downloads” tab:

“This game can be played one-on-one with a tutor and a student or played with teams, with each team having 1 or 2 or 3 students and a tutor to show the cards. Other tutors can help identify each winner.

“The tutor chooses 10 cards. Make sure everyone on the teams can see the cards as they are shown. The tutor will show a card and the students will try to be the first to say the word. After the first student says the word, then all the students will repeat the word several times, and the first person to say the word is given that word card for his team.

“If no one knows the word, then the tutor will say the word, and all the students will repeat the word. The tutor will keep the card to show later.
“When the tutor has shown all 10 words, he will then show each word that was missed. If they are missed again, the tutor says the word and has the students repeat the word and keeps the card. The tutor repeats this until all the cards have been won by the teams.

“The tutor collects the cards and shows the cards one at a time again, using the same rules and the same cards: If a student says the word first he gets the card for his team; if no one gets the word the tutor says it, has the students say it, and keeps using it again and again until someone gets the word.

“If there is a tie, the tutor keeps the card and shows it again later. Once the students are getting the words quickly and are not missing any words, the tutor chooses 10 new cards.

“If one student is always winning, have that student take the tutors’ place and show the cards instead of being on a team. This student may be ready to advance to a ‘regular’ reading level.

“The tutors who are not showing the words should be watching the students to determine who the first student is to say the word each time.” (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2017).

c. Recognizing Tutee Advancement

If a student can read a level 4 reader or book at a comfortable speed, and also can read the 100 most common English words, or words in the focus language, with only a few mistakes, then the student should be classified as a good reader and should advance to the regular reading group. As a student makes it to this level, then the student should be presented before the whole class as a regular reader, and all of the students in the class are invited to clap.

B. Materials Used
Each tutor and tutee pair used the following supplies:

a. Volunteer Tutor Guidelines
b. Alphabet cards
c. 100 Most Common English Words sheets and cards
d. 100 word cards
e. Leveled readers
f. Pencils
g. Pencil sharpeners
h. Papers
i. Scissors

i. Tutor Badges

Whenever possible, a tutor should wear a “tutor badge” while tutoring a student. A tutor badge is a card with the word “Tutor” spelled on it that is attached to a string that goes around the tutor’s neck. If the badge is written with marker, then the word “Tutor” should be bolded. The badges can be used over and over by different tutors during the day. Tutor badges are simple to make, or they can be purchased from an office supply store. Eventually, Worldwide Access to Literacy hopes to provide good quality tutor badges for free to all programs it works with internationally.

ii. Leveled Reader Books

Leveled reader books help students learn to read common words. For example, one leveled reader, book 1, only contains 16 different words and then prints a list of the words at the

4 All printed materials that were used for this project are available for free at WorldwideAccessToLiteracy.org.
end of the book. If your school doesn’t have access to leveled readers then look for the easiest reading books that are available. Many schools that we have worked with only had very easy reading books and these still worked well. Other successful reading materials can be printed off from WorldwideAccessToLiteracy.org.

iii. 100 English Word Cards

Two sheets containing the 100 Most Common English Words, can be printed off from “Downloads,” on our website, and then cut up so that you have each letter on a piece paper (card)\(^5\). “Word Cards” for other languages can easily be created. Worldwide Access to Literacy can assist schools that have this need. Scissors will be needed to cut up the paper into small pieces, and should be collected at the end of the card creation.

iv. Pencils and Pencil Sharpeners

Pencils should be available for each tutor. The tutor will share the pencil with the tutee as needed (like writing down words on pieces of paper to work on in class). A simple pencil sharpener should be available as well. Both pencils and sharpener will need to be collected at the end of the session.

v. Blank Papers and Scissors

Blank sheets of paper should be available so that tutors can cut up the sheets and make pieces of paper for the tutors and tutees to write words or alphabet letters on.

V. CONCLUSION

\(^5\) These can also be written on a piece of paper or card if your school does not have access to a printer.
Worldwide Access to Literacy has found great success using peer tutoring to help weak and non-readers in both Uganda and South Africa, including almost 100% advancement of weak and non-readers to average readers within one school year. We have seen comparable results to those discussed in this article from similar peer tutoring programs implemented at the following schools located in South Africa: Buhlebethu Primary School, Cata Crest Primary School, Kasturba Gandhi Primary School, Paul Sykes Primary School, Sizani Primary School, Sophunga Primary School, and Uthando Primary School.

Our approach to peer tutoring is simple and utilizes easy readers and the 100 most common words in the language of study. The program can be implemented at schools in as little as one day with minimum funding. Debbie Smith, the librarian at Sizani Primary School, shared her thoughts after one day of method adoption:

“As of most schools here in South Africa, we are under-resourced, under-staffed and really battle with the children learning English, which is the required language in order for them to complete their school studies. . .We’ve got lots of children that need to learn. And your system and your simplicity is just, it’s universal. It will appeal to anybody and everybody, yet it is so simple and easy to implement,” (2017).

Peer tutoring is a proven educational method to help both tutors and tutees improve their reading. Worldwide Access to Literacy representatives will visit schools and train teachers and/or librarians on these principles if they receive a formal request on official letterhead. Just as Smith shares, this method is universal and it works.
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the schools listed above.

REFERENCES


Program at Ekuthuleni Primary School [KwaMashu, South Africa]. Unpublished raw
data.

⁶ If you would like to communicate via telephone, please email your phone number and a preferred time to talk.


**APPENDIX**

**Appendix A - 100 Most Common English Words**

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