Effective approaches to tutoring young readers

A preliminary look at factors affecting tutoring success

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Prepared by:
Jennifer Lee Schultz and Dan Mueller

Wilder Research
1295 Bandana Boulevard North, Suite 210
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55108
651-647-4600
www.wilder.org

Background

Recent government initiatives have renewed interest in tutoring programs and have encouraged their proliferation. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Bush administration's standards-based accountability legislation, underperforming Title I schools are required to provide supplemental services, including free tutoring, or the option for eligible students to transfer to higher-performing local schools. As a result of NCLB and earlier policy initiatives such as the Clinton administration's America Reads Challenge, there are plethora tutoring programs operating across the United States.

While tutoring is perhaps the oldest form of instruction, the creation and re-creation of tutoring programs seems endless, especially when the education arena is full of interested stakeholders as it is now. Given all the options, how does one choose which program to implement or which elements to combine in the creation of a program? What does research tell us about the effectiveness of tutoring and the components that are essential to its success?

Research has consistently shown that tutoring programs can effectively improve students' reading skills. Tutoring also appears to prevent reading failure, as demonstrated through reductions in grade retentions and special education referrals (Wasik and Slavin, 1993). While the effectiveness of tutoring is well-established in the literature, there are fewer studies that have examine *why* tutoring is effective, or in other words, what components or factors contribute to the success of tutoring.

Literature reviews and meta-analyses that synthesize the available literature and compare program impacts and features provide some of the best insight as to which program features produce the largest results. This report summarizes some of the major findings from the available reviews.

Program components

Tutors

In their review of five adult-delivered one-to-one tutoring programs for first graders, Wasik and Slavin (1993) found that programs using certified teachers produced larger impacts than programs using paraprofessionals. On the other hand, a meta-analysis of 29 studies showed that programs using college students as tutors produced the largest impact, followed by programs that use paraprofessionals, certified teachers, and community volunteers, respectively (Elbaum et al., 2000). Although there were more studies of programs using certified teachers and only a few studies of programs using

college students and paraprofessionals, the evidence in favor of adult tutors who are not certified teachers (college students, paraprofessionals, and community volunteers) is promising and important given the high cost of hiring certified teachers.

Training

The importance of tutor training is highlighted in both the research literature as well as the literature based on conventional wisdom. Research has shown that programs which produce the largest impacts tend to be those in which tutors received more extensive training (Wasik and Slavin, 1993; Abt Associates, 2001). Extensive training includes more time spent on training prior to tutoring, as well as ongoing training and feedback during the course of tutoring.

Despite the importance of training, research also shows that even tutors who receive minimal training can make a positive impact, and the amount of training needed likely depends upon the skills and expertise of the tutor, as well as the materials used and structure of the program. It appears that less training is needed in highly structured programs that use "tutor-proof" materials and emphasize basic skills, whereas more training is needed in programs that emphasize higher level reading and writing activities and require tutors to use informed judgment (Wasik, 1998b).

Supervision

Several sources cite the importance of having a qualified supervisor to design lesson plans, coordinate tutoring dyads, and provide tutors with feedback and advice.

Intervention fidelity

Intervention fidelity, or adherence to the intervention protocol or model, is another factor that can distinguish successful and unsuccessful tutors. For example, one study showed that consistent tutors who attended each session and tutored for the full amount of time produced larger effects than inconsistent tutors (Elbaum et al., 2000).

Tutees

Programs typically target students in the early elementary grades, and particularly in first grade, when students learn to read for the first time. The reason behind targeting young learners is to intervene at the first sign of reading difficulty in order to prevent reading failure. In fact, nearly all the children represented in the meta-analysis conducted by Elbaum and colleagues (2000) were first graders. Of the 29 studies included, only five of the samples included students in higher grades.

Not only does it make sense to target young learners from a prevention standpoint; research also indicates that students in early elementary grades (1-3) tend to benefit more from tutoring than do students in later elementary grades (4-6). On average, programs had a medium sized effect on students in grades 1-3 and no significant effect on students in grades 4-6 (Elbaum et al., 2000).

Quality of the tutor-tutee relationship

In a qualitative examination of video-taped tutoring sessions, Juel (1996) found that successful tutoring dyads shared "obvious affection, bonding, and verbal and nonverbal reinforcement of children's progress" (pg. 282). The successful tutors identified with the children and made special efforts to communicate to the children that they could succeed in reading and writing.

Curriculum

Wasik (1998b) found that the most successful programs typically share the following components: (a) reading of new material by the student, (b) reading books with familiar words or stories, (c) actively emphasizing word analysis and letter-sound relationships, (d) and writing activities emphasizing composing (pg.282).

Wasik and Slavin (1993) indicated that the following key components were emphasized in the programs they reviewed: perceptual analysis of print, knowledge of print conventions, decoding, oral language proficiency, prior knowledge, lexical access, syntactic analysis of sentences, and prose comprehension. Rather than addressing or focusing on only a few components, programs that produced the largest effects tended to be those that were based on more comprehensive models of reading and consequently had more complete instructional interventions.

Elbaum and colleagues (2000) found that programs that focused on reading comprehension produced the largest effects, followed by programs that had a mixed or balanced focus and programs that focused on phonemic awareness, respectively. Programs that focused on visual-perceptual skills and programs which did not adequately describe their focus produced, on average, close to no impact.

Juel (1996) showed that the most successful dyads spent significantly more time engaged in direct letter-sound instruction and reading My Book (which provides repeated exposure to words and word parts) and spent significantly less time on My Journal and reading literature than did the less successful dyads. In other words, the successful dyads tended to spend more time on activities that better engaged the child as an active participant and that teach vital skills.

Integration with classroom instruction

Although integration with classroom instruction is a feature that is commonly cited as essential in the literature based on conventional wisdom, there does not appear to be enough research evidence to support this claim, and the issue needs further exploring.

In their review of five programs, Wasik and Slavin (1993) identified only one program that was integrated with regular classroom instruction. This program produced some of the largest effect sizes, but the authors noted that more research is needed to determine the importance of this component. In a later article, Wasik (1998a) cited coordination with classroom instruction as an essential component to success, although once again, only one of the programs she discussed included this component. In another review completed in the same year, Wasik (1998b) noted that the programs reviewed consistently lacked coordination with classroom instruction and that it would be helpful to further explore this issue.

A study of AmeriCorp tutoring showed that students who were tutored in programs that coordinated with classroom structure actually made *less* gains in reading comprehension than did students who were in programs that lacked classroom coordination (Abt Associates, 2001). The researchers hypothesized that this finding might reflect tutor skill level if skilled tutors tended to rely more on their own judgment rather than coordinating with regular classroom instruction. They acknowledged that this issue needs further exploring.

Delivery methods

Juel (1996) found that the most successful dyads used two delivery strategies significantly more frequently than did the less successful dyads: scaffolding and modeling. Scaffolding was defined as "enabl[ing] the child to complete a task that the child couldn't otherwise do…by providing a piece of information and/or segmenting the task into smaller, clearer ones" (pg. 283). Modeling was defined as "walking the child through a process – showing the child how reading and writing work so that the processes are clearer, more accessible, and less mysterious" (pg. 286).

In addition, research shows that more successful programs use a larger variety of delivery methods than do less successful programs (Wasik and Slavin, 1993).

Program structure

In her reviews of tutoring programs, Wasik (1998a, 1998b) noted similarities in the basic components presented in tutoring sessions and that it was common for programs to have structured sessions. On the other hand, Wasik and Slavin (1993) found that programs in

which certified teachers used flexibility and judgment in program delivery tended to produce larger impacts than highly structured programs. These findings suggest that the need for structure may depend upon the skill of the tutor, and it is likely that other components, such as training and delivery methods, are also interdependent.

Dosage

Wasik and Slavin (1993) found that more time spent in tutoring was associated with larger gains in reading (e.g., full year versus semester, 30 minutes versus 15 minutes/ day). On the other hand, Juel (1996) did not find any significant differences between successful and less successful dyads with regard to the number of tutoring sessions, and Wasik (1998b) noted that the relationship between number of sessions and program effect appeared to be inconsistent across the programs she reviewed.

Elbaum and colleagues (2000) provided a potential explanation for these seemingly inconsistent findings. They found that total instructional time (hours spent in tutoring) was *not* significantly associated with impact, while program duration was *inversely* associated with impact. Although shorter interventions (up to 20 weeks) produced larger impacts than did longer interventions, total instructional time did not differ based on the length of the program, leading the researchers to conclude that it is the intensity of the intervention that tends to have more powerful effects. In other words, the same amount of instructional time delivered over a shorter period produced the largest impact.

Group size

Counter to what conventional wisdom suggests, two studies which compared one-to-one tutoring to small-group interventions showed that the small-group interventions achieved comparable outcomes despite serving 3-4 times the number of students per instructor (Elbaum et al., 2000). Small groups may be preferable given that they appear to be more cost-effective, and this possibility deserves further attention.

Evaluation issues to consider

Evaluations tend to measure outcomes that are directly related to the specific skills taught in tutoring. Depending on the measures used, it is at times unsurprising that tutored students tend to perform better than non-tutored students, given that tutored students should be more familiar with the assessment measures used. Results tend to be less promising when evaluations assess reading skills using measures that are not directly addressed in tutoring (Wasik and Slavin, 1993; Elbaum et al., 2000).

References

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Appendix

List of programs that have evaluation results

Book Buddies

Books and Beyond

Early Identification Program

Helping One Student To Succeed (HOSTS)

Howard Street Tutoring Program

ICARE

Intergenerational Tutoring Program

Juel's (1996) program

Prevention of Learning Disabilities

Programmed Tutorial Reading

Reading Connection

Reading One-One

Reading Recovery/AmeriCorps

Reading Together/VISTA

School Volunteer Development Project

Standard Reading Recovery

Success for All

TEACH

Wallach and Wallach tutorial program

Wallach Tutoring Program