The Effect of Peer Tutoring on the School Engagement of At-Risk Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to determine if tutoring primary students could improve the behavioral and emotional school engagement of intermediate students at-risk of academic failure. The ten participants in this study were 4th and 5th grade students selected on their scores on behavioral and emotional portions of The School Engagement Scale. The participants acted as tutors for primary level students each morning for three weeks, spending around 15 minutes each morning reviewing basic reading and math skills. At the conclusion of the three-week program, the participants completed the behavioral and emotional portions of The School Engagement Scale a second time. The results of this study failed to reject the null hypothesis which was that there would be no difference in the behavioral and emotional school engagement of intermediate students after acting as peer tutors for primary students. Further research on this topic would be worthwhile to determine if a peer tutoring program would benefit the behavioral and emotional school engagement of a school's at-risk students.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Students who are at-risk of academic failure are a common issue in schools. Students who are at-risk are likely to face grade-level retention, suspensions, frequent absences, and low testing scores (Good, 2008). Determinants of students becoming at-risk include his or her poverty status, English proficiency, and learning disabilities. Students who belong to these subgroups have an increased chance to be at-risk for school disengagement, which leads to academic failure. These students tend to experience economic, social, and psychological conditions that greatly impact their ability to succeed in school.

An important factor of a student's success in school is school engagement. School engagement is comprised of three components: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Students engaged in school are likely to attend to instruction, complete schoolwork (Connell, Spencer & Aber. 1994), become involved in activities, and are willing to attempt complex tasks.

According to the most recent data from National Center for Educational Statistics (2017), the percentage of all 16 to 24-year olds who have not completed high school or earned a high school diploma equivalency is 5.9%. The dropout rate of Hispanic youth is most significant at 9.2% as compared to Black youth at 6.5% and White youth at 4.6%. In 2013, students from low-income families dropped out at a rate of 7.2% while students from high-income families dropped out at a rate of 3%. Students who drop out of high school will likely face unemployment and lower earnings than high school graduates. In 2015, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

(Vilorio, 2016) produced data displaying the unemployment rate and the median weekly earnings of groups according to their educational degree. Of those who attained a high school diploma, 5.4% were unemployed and of those who have less than a high school diploma, 8% were unemployed. On average, those who attained a high school diploma earned $678 a week and those who have less than a high school diploma earned $493 a week.

This researcher observed that students who had general poor academic performance and frequent behavior issues were not engaged in school. These students didn't participate in extracurricular activities, did not show interest in school events, and did not seem to have valuable relationships with peers or adults in school. After completing professional development courses and workshops, ranging from differentiation to restorative practices, this researcher noted a commonality among all topics. This common thread was the idea that students perform better in school when they feel they have an essential role to play and positive group experiences (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). A key component of restorative practices is the idea that students build community when teachers give them the opportunity to make a difference outside of the classroom (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015). The concept of a peer tutoring program in which at-risk students tutor younger students was born from the idea that these students need an opportunity to feel like an essential part of the school community, thus improving their school engagement.

Statement of Problem

Students who are behaviorally engaged in school are actively engaged in their learning, paying attention in the classroom, and staying on-task. Students who are emotionally engaged feel a sense of belonging to their school and an attachment to people in the school (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Without these types of engagement, students are less likely to academically

succeed. Peer tutoring is an opportunity for students to form those necessary emotional connections that will increase engagement. The purpose of this study is to determine if tutoring primary students can improve the behavioral and emotional school engagement of students at-risk of academic failure.

Hypothesis

At-risk fourth and fifth grade students will show no difference in the behavioral and emotional school engagement after tutoring primary students in basic reading and math skills.

Operational Definitions

At-risk is defined as students being at risk of academic failure. Such students have below average test scores, frequent Ds and Es on report cards, frequent absences, and negative behaviors that impact relationships with peers and adults as well as their academic performances.

Peer-tutoring is defined as a three-week program in which intermediate students tutor primary students in basic reading or math skills for 15 minutes each day.

School engagement is defined as being behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively engaged in school. Students' behavioral and emotional school engagement will be measured with an identical pre-and post-test designed by the researcher.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review examines the topic of school engagement, at-risk students, and peer tutoring. The first section includes a brief overview of the three types of school engagement and the importance of students' engagement in school. Section two provides information about at-risk students. Section three highlights various types of peer tutoring and the benefits of this type of intervention.

School Engagement

School engagement can be defined as "adolescents' school-related behaviors, thoughts and feelings" (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011, p. 1649). School engagement is comprised of three components: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Parris, 2004). Examples of behavioral engagement include paying attention, completing schoolwork on time, attendance (Connell and Spencer, 1994), involvement in academic or social activities, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Emotional engagement is characterized by the sense of belonging students feel towards their school and the attachment towards people in the school (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Lastly, cognitive engagement involves "willingness to exert effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, p. 60). Cognitive engagement involves students' level of investment in learning and self-regulation strategies (Fredricks, 2011).

Studies show that engaged students are more successful in school. Hirschfield and Gasper (2011) conducted a study among inner city Chicago students to see if school engagement

predicts school and general misconduct. The findings of the study suggest that when students are disengaged in school, they have an increase in school and general misconduct and when students are emotionally engaged there is a reduced risk of delinquency. Studies have shown that increasing student engagement is a way to increase academic achievement, interest in school, and graduation rates.

At-Risk Students

The term "at-risk" has come to be understood as students who are likely to fail or drop out of school (Good, 2008). The issues that at-risk learners may face include frequent absences from school, grade-level retention, low scores on standardized tests, suspension from school, and dropping out of school.

Many different factors can be attributed to the likelihood of a student becoming at-risk for academic failure. One factor is a student's poverty status, which is said to be the most likely factor to place children at risk of school failure (Newman & Dantzler, 2015). Poverty has shown to be a determinant for delayed cognitive development and challenging behavior (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). When identifying factors that may be attributed to the at-risk status, race and ethnicity must be addressed. According to the American Community Survey (2014), the percentage of children living in poverty in the United States is higher for Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders as compared to the percentage of White and Asian children living in poverty. Also playing a large role in poverty status is household structure. Almost half of households headed by single female parents with children under the age of 18 live in poverty (Good, 2008).

English language learners and foreign-born students are also at-risk of academic failure. There is growing evidence that suggests students who are learning English or have limited English are at a higher risk of dropping out as compared to English speaking students (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011).

Another population at-risk of academic failure are students with learning disabilities. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004), there are 13 disabilities in which students can be identified. Included in these disabilities are autism, emotional disturbance, language impairment, intellectual disability, specific learning disabilities, and other health impairments (IDEA, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), two-thirds of students with disabilities do not graduate high school.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring is the process by which students help each other learn content and concepts (Bowman-Perrott, Davis, Vannest, & Williams, Greenwood & Parker 2013). Major advantages of peer tutoring include the reduced amount of responsibility on the teacher and the implementation of individualized instruction to many students simultaneously (Menesses & Gresham, 2009). Various types of reciprocal and nonreciprocal peer tutoring can be utilized in educational settings. Reciprocal tutoring differs from nonreciprocal tutoring in that the roles of tutor and tutee alternate between two peers. A familiar model of nonreciprocal peer tutoring is one in which a higher-achieving peer acts as a tutor for a lower-achieving peer.

Another effective model of reciprocal peer tutoring implemented by Hughes and Frederick (2006) is class-wide tutoring in which students with learning disabilities tutored each other in the area of vocabulary acquisition using a constant time delay procedure. The results

demonstrated that students with learning disabilities performed similarly to students without learning disabilities on the posttests.

Leung (2015) conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate the effect of peer tutoring on academic achievement of tutees. The study concluded that peer tutoring has a positive effect on the achievement of tutees. The degree of the effects was most significant in secondary schools, followed by college-level, and then elementary level schools. In looking at the ability levels of the participants, researchers analyzed the effects of peer tutoring on the tutees and found that academically low-performing students demonstrated greater positive effects as compared to students who academically perform at a high, average, or mixed-ability levels. A similar meta-analysis was conducted by Bowman-Perrott et al., (2013). In this analysis, the researchers analyzed 26 studies on peer tutoring that were published between 1984 through 2011. Similar to Leung's (2015) analysis, researchers found that "greater academic gains were achieved by students engaged in peer tutoring interventions than non-peer tutoring instructional arrangements" (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013). Also notable, is that the positive effect size was larger for students with or at risk of disabilities as compared to peers without disabilities.

Many studies clearly show the positive impact peer tutoring has on students. Studies on nonreciprocal peer tutoring show the benefits for the tutee while studies on reciprocal peer tutoring show the benefits for both the tutor and tutee. Few studies have been found that examine the impact of nonreciprocal peer tutoring on the tutor.

Summary

Studies show that when students are engaged in school, there is a reduced risk of delinquency, low achievement, and dropout rates. Academically at-risk students can benefit from increased school engagement. Acting as peer tutors is one way to help at-risk students feel a sense of belonging and purpose within the school, thus improving their thoughts and feelings toward school.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to determine if at-risk students' behavioral and emotional school engagement improved after participating in a one-on-one tutoring program in which they tutored younger students. The academic benefits of peer tutoring for those being tutored have long been cited, but there are few studies that have sought to assess the impact tutoring can have on the tutor's behavioral and emotional engagement.

Design

This study was a quasi-experimental design. The independent variable was peer tutoring. This can operationally be defined as students who are trained to tutor either basic math facts or sight words using a simple game with their tutees. The dependent variable was the measure of a student's behavioral and emotional engagement in school. This was measured using a rating scale administered before beginning the study and then after the completion of the tutoring sessions. The Behavioral Engagement and Emotional Engagement portions of the School Engagement Scale (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris 2005) was administered to a sample of at-risk fourth and fifth grade students at an elementary school. Students selected for the sample were determined by fourth and fifth grade teachers, special area teachers, special educators, and the school counselor. Each question on the rating scale was worth five points, one being the least engaged and five being the most engaged. Students with the lowest overall score were selected as peer tutors. The treatment (tutoring of primary students) was applied for three weeks and then the same portions of the School Engagement Scale were administered again. The

success of the treatment was determined by comparing the scores of the rating scales before and after treatment. There was no control group.

Participants

Fourth and fifth grade classroom teachers, special educators, special area teachers, and the school counselor had input on who they believed were disengaged from school based on academic performance and behavioral issues. The 20 students recommended by teachers completed the behavioral and emotional portions of the School Engagement Scale to determine their levels of behavioral and emotional engagement in school. Table 1 contains the selected students' race, gender, custody arrangement, special education status, and their School Engagement Scale scores. The primary level students who were tutored were recommended by the first-grade classroom teachers, special educators, and reading specialist. They selected students who needed additional practice with grade-level sight words and basic addition and subtraction math facts.

Table 1

Student	Race	Gender	Custody arrangement	IEP or 504	School Engagement Scale Score
1	mixed	Male	divorce, custody of mother	none	19/50
2	African American	Male	divorce, shared custody	none	22/50
3	Caucasian	Male	deceased parents, custody of grandparents	504	23/50
4	Caucasian	Male	custody of grandparents	none	27/50
5	Caucasian	Male	divorce, shared custody	IEP	30/50
6	mixed	Male	custody of foster mother	IEP	30/50
7	mixed	Male	custody of grandparents	504	33/50
8	Caucasian	Female	divorce, custody of father	none	34/50
9	African American	Male	divorce, custody of mother	none	36/50
10	Caucasian	Male	custody of grandmother	none	38/50

Instrumentation

The School Engagement Scale was administered to fourth and fifth grade students prior to the peer tutoring program and immediately after the program. The scale consisted of ten questions with rating scales. Questions 1 through 4 of the survey measured behavioral engagement and questions 5-10 measured emotional engagement. Each question required a response of never, on occasion, some of the time, most of the time, and all of the time. A score

of 1 through 5, respectively, was given for each question. A score of one represented the least engaged and a score of 5 represented the most engaged.

Procedure

Prior to administering the School Engagement Scales to students, teachers and the school counselor were consulted to identify students they believed to be at-risk of academic failure. Once students were identified, they completed a 10-question rating scale about school engagement. Students whose rating scales showed low emotional and behavioral engagement were asked to participate in a three-week peer tutoring program. Each tutor was paired with a first-grade student who would be one's tutee for the program. Tutors and tutees were paired up according to their arrival times.

The tutors and tutees came to the tutoring room each morning at arrival time for three consecutive weeks. During this time, the tutors worked one-on-one with first grade students on sight word or math fact activities. When the activity was completed, the tutors rewarded their tutees with a small prize for completing the activity. The activities lasted no longer than 10 minutes. At the end of the activity, the tutor walked the tutee back to his or her classroom.

At the end of the three-week session, the tutors were given The School Engagement Rating Scale a second time. The results were analyzed to determine if participating in the tutoring program improved the behavioral and emotional engagement of the tutors.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine if at-risk students' behavioral and emotional school engagement improved after participating in a one-on-one tutoring program in which they tutored younger students. Intermediate level tutors were selected based on the results of The School Engagement Scale measuring their behavioral and emotional school engagement. Primary level tutees were recommended by teachers based on their needs for additional basic reading and math skills practice. The tutoring program extended over a three-week period where the tutors and tutees worked together on primary math and reading skills. At the conclusion of the tutoring program, tutors were administered The School Engagement Scale. Participants rated themselves on a scale of 1 through 5 with 1 = never and 5 = very true. Item numbers 2, 4, and 6 were reverse coded with 5 = never and 1 = very true.

Table 2 contains the results of the School Engagement Scale before the tutoring program and after the tutoring program. Ten at-risk students completed the scale before participating in the tutoring program and then after participating in the program. The total possible points a student could receive was 50. The pretest scores ranged from 19 points to 38 points. The posttest scores ranged from 20 points to 35 points. Of the 10 at-risk students who were selected for this study, five students' scores increased, four students' scores decreased, and one student's score remained the same.

Table 2

Overall School Engagement Scale Results

Student	Pretest School Engagement Scale	Posttest School Engagement Scale	Difference
1	19/50	20/50	+1
2	22/50	25/50	+3
3	23/50	24/50	+1
4	27/50	22/50	-5
5	30/50	32/50	+2
6	30/50	34/50	+4
7	33/50	31/50	-2
8	34/50	21/50	-13
9	36/50	36/50	0
10	38/50	35/50	-3

Table 3 contains the individual test questions and the mean scores for before and after the tutoring program. Items 1 through 4 measured behavioral engagement. Items 5 through 10 measured emotional engagement. The mean score of four of the items remained the same for the pretest and posttest. The mean score for one survey item increased from the pretest to the posttest. The mean score for five survey items decreased from the pretest to the posttest.

Table 3

Summary of the School Engagement Scale

Question	Mean Score Pretest	Mean Score Posttest	Difference
1. I pay attention in class.	3.4	3.4	0
2. When I am in class I just act as if I am working.	3.3	3.3	0
3. I follow the rules at school.	3.5	3.7	+.2
4. I get in trouble at school.	2.3	2.2	-.1
5. I feel happy in school.	3	2.5	-.5
6. I feel bored in school.	2.4	2.4	0
7. I feel excited by the work in school.	2.2	2.2	0
8. I like being at school.	3	2.9	-.9
9. I am interested in the work at school.	2.5	2.4	-.1
10. My classroom is a fun place to be.	3.3	3	-.3

Table 4 contains the overall mean scores of The School Engagement Scale before and after the tutoring program. Before the program, the mean score of the scales was 29.2 points with a standard deviation of 6.3 points. After the program was completed, the mean score of the posttests was 28 points with a standard deviation of 6.2 points.

Table 4

Measures of Central Tendency of the Pre and Post Test Scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	10	29.2	6.3
Posttest	10	28	6.2

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if at-risk students' behavioral and emotional school engagement improved after participating in a one-on-one tutoring program in which they tutored younger students.

The null hypothesis stated that there would be no difference in the emotional and behavioral school engagement of at-risk students after tutoring primary students in basic reading and math skills. The findings of this study failed to reject the null hypothesis.

Implications of the Study

When evaluating the pre- and post-test scores of The School Engagement Scale, there was limited evidence to show that acting as tutors for primary students would improve the school engagement of at-risk intermediate students. However, the researcher did note positive behaviors exhibited by the tutors that were not measured by The School Engagement Scale. Prior to the start of this program, two of the participants who were selected as tutors would often roam the hallways of the school during arrival time or gather with other students in the bathrooms. When these students became involved in the tutoring program, they came to the tutoring room on time and when the session was through, they walked their partners back to the classroom and then reported to their own homerooms. Often, the intermediate students who came to the tutoring room earlier than their partners would voluntarily assist other tutors or work with primary students whose tutors hadn't yet arrived. One tutor brought in stickers to help motivate his partner. After the three-week session had ended, several of the tutors requested to continue the program. The impact on the tutees, while not formally measured, was believed to

be positive. Tutors practiced new sight words with their partners each day, helping their primary partners master unfamiliar sight words. On one occasion, a peer-tutor was called down to his partner's classroom during the school day to help him with staying on task during independent work time. While the results of this study did not show an impact on behavioral and emotional engagement, a peer-tutoring program could be beneficial in providing students with an important job within the school.

The implementation of a peer-tutoring program can be a challenge for many schools. If the program is conducted during the school day, a teacher or staff member would have to be available to plan learning activities and facilitate the sessions. This can be difficult in schools where all staff are assigned a morning and afternoon responsibility outside of their instructional tasks.

Threats to Validity

Several threats to validity can be cited in this study. One factor that impacted the internal validity of this study was the arrival time of students. This program took place in the morning at 9:05 through 9:30. On several occasions during the three-week period, tutors and tutees arrived at different times, leaving unstructured gaps of time for the students. Another threat to internal validity was student absences. Some participants were absent for more than two consecutive days. When this occurred, the tutor or tutee was placed with another pair. In addition, a threat to the internal validity of this study was the selection of the primary students who worked with the at-risk tutors. Some of the students had severe academic needs that were difficult for the intermediate tutors to understand and this led to a degree of frustration for the tutors.

One factor that impacted the external validity of this study is the validity of the population sample. Of the 10 students chosen, only one was female. In terms of race, two were African American, five were Caucasian, and three were mixed race. Four of the students had either an Individualized Educational Plan or a 504 Plan. This is representative of the elementary school in which the study was conducted, but not necessarily representative of the general population. The results of this study could be extremely different with a different population of students.

Connections to Previous Studies

Success in school is largely dependent on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Of the three types of engagement, this study focused on behavioral and emotional engagement. Examples of behavioral engagement include involvement in academic activities (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) while emotional engagement is characterized by the attachment toward people in the school (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Peer tutoring provides at-risk students the opportunity to take part in an academic activity while forming relationships with people in the school. Hirshfield and Gasper (2011) conducted a study to see if school engagement predicts school misconduct and found that when students are disengaged in school, there is a higher risk of delinquency. The researcher observed that at-risk students who participated in this study had less unstructured time during arrival because they reported to the tutoring room once they entered the school and they stayed in the room until the start of instruction in the classrooms. This eliminated negative hallway behaviors that often occurred during arrival time.

Leung (2015) conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate the effect of peer tutoring on the academic achievement of tutees and found that there was a positive effect on the achievement of

the tutees. Based on informal activities conducted in the peer tutoring groups, it was evident the primary students made progress with reading basic sight words.

Implications to Future Research

The researcher found limited information about the impact of peer-tutoring for at-risk students who tutor primary students. Future research could include studies with specific at-risk populations, such as special education students, or English language learners. This study could also be conducted in either a before or after school program with more time for individualized activities for the primary students. Acting as a tutor for a younger student is a type of mentorship for at-risk students that can help develop a positive attachment with others, which could lead to a greater connection to school. This study could be expanded to include activities beyond academics. For instance, intermediate at-risk students could have regular lunches, play games, or engage in sports activities with younger peers.

Future research could also focus on having a typical intermediate peer tutor work with an at-risk primary student. Leung's (2015) analysis supports the idea that academically low-performing students demonstrated greater positive effects from peer tutoring as compared to students who academically perform on high, average, or mixed-ability levels. Evaluating the effectiveness of tutoring on at-risk primary students could yield similar results.

Conclusions

This study did not provide sufficient evidence that at-risk students' behavioral and emotional school engagement would improve after participating in a one-on-one tutoring program in which they tutored younger students. Positive effects were noted, such as decreased misbehavior during an unstructured time of day, and a willingness to teach younger peers.

Further research in the area of peer tutoring and its impact should be conducted in order to determine if this type of program could benefit at-risk students.

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