

# Paired Reading: The Use of a Cross-Age Peer-Tutoring Programme Between Transition Year Students and First Year Students

This article reports on the use of a cross-age peer tutoring programme between transition year and first year students in an all-girls secondary school. The benefits of a Paired Reading programme for the tutees (first years) and tutors (Transition Year (TY) students) are evaluated and practical suggestions for planning a Paired Reading programme in a secondary school are identified.

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of raising the standard of literacy in Irish schools is to the forefront of all educators' minds at the moment as *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) is being rolled out and will be implemented by 2020. The aim of this research was to promote an inclusive environment in an all-girls secondary school, by implementing and evaluating a peer tutoring intervention programme for improving literacy and self-esteem in first year students. The programme focused on cross-age peer tutoring (CAPT) and was based on Keith Topping's *Paired Reading* (PR) (1995). Low achieving/at risk first year students were targeted based on the results of reading tests and consultation with their english teachers while Transition Year (TY)<sup>1</sup> students volunteered to participate.

<sup>1</sup> Transition Year is a one year programme providing a bridge to enable students to make the transition from the more dependent type of learning associated with Junior Cycle to the more independent learning environment associated with Senior Cycle. It is compulsory in this school.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer tutoring “is the process whereby a student, with guidance from a teacher, helps one or more other students learn a skill or concept” (Department of Education and Science, 2007, p. 108). Ehly and Topping concur with this definition describing peer tutoring as “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (1998, p. 1). Westwood has remarked that “research over two decades has confirmed the effectiveness of peer tutoring for improving learning outcomes for students at all levels” (2007, p. 85). There are a number of variants to the peer tutoring approach, for example, CAPT and class-wide peer tutoring (CWPT). Much of the research in this field has been carried out in the USA but recently, research in Ireland has also emerged which examines the effectiveness of both CWPT (King, 2006) and CAPT (Nugent, 2001). The CWPT model is carried out on a whole class level with same-class pairings. In the CAPT approach, the co-ordinator matches the tutor and tutee and the tutor would normally be at least two years older than the tutee (Nugent, 2008). The CAPT approach was used for this intervention.

Since this intervention was in the area of literacy, it was based on Topping’s (1995) *Paired Reading*. While a number of similar programmes to *Paired Reading* exist such as Junior Certificate Schools Programme’s (JCSP) ‘*Reading Pairs*’ (2007), Nugent’s ‘*Reading Partners*’ (2001) and Davis and Stubbs’ ‘*Shared Reading*’ (1988), Topping emphasises that “paired reading is a specific name for a specific technique” (1995, p. 15). The term ‘Paired Reading’ was coined in the mid-1970s by Roger Morgan and while many variants have emerged, Topping’s model has remained true to the fundamental principle first described by Morgan (Coles and Harrison, 1992). The key to this principle is that Morgan and Topping’s model of paired reading does not attempt to instruct in the area of phonics and instead focuses on “surface reading behaviour” (Topping, 1995, p. 16). This affords the tutor and tutee the opportunity to succeed as the aim is simply to allow the tutee to develop whatever reading strategies they wish in order to foster a love of reading. The more recent approaches to improving reading listed above have contributed to our understanding of how children read and how they might improve, however Topping’s model is perhaps the most effective to use as a starting point due to its clear and concise aim of simply improving reading fluency. It is a tried and tested method and Topping has produced research to support its benefits as recently as 2011 (Conlin; McGavock; Miller; Thurston and Topping, 2011).

As a mainstream teacher of english in an all-girls secondary school, it became evident to me that many students expressed a preference for spending time on social

networking sites, computer games and/or flicking through the fashion/photo sections of magazines rather than reading long pieces of text in books/magazines. This changing trend in the area of reading can compound existing difficulties students may have in the area of literacy. Merrett points out that “children are given text books in history, physics, geography and, indeed, in almost any subject which are basically too difficult for a high proportion of them to read quickly and with understanding... [therefore] pupils begin to fail from the very first day” (1994, p. v). From a social perspective, the CAPT may work as a type of buddy system for the first years who often struggle with the transition from primary to secondary school and would benefit from the guidance of older students. Therefore, a PR intervention programme may not only improve reading ages but all the research points towards cognitive, affective and social improvements (Nugent, 2001).

Merrett points out that “by instructing someone else tutors will markedly improve their own skill in the subject” (1994, p. 13). Students who have an interest in education or working with young people would appreciate the opportunity to develop tutoring skills, as well as learning about commitment and responsibility. The nature of the TY programme allows for students to be withdrawn from class for training; and a key aim of TY is to increase self-esteem in students while also providing direction with regard to career choice. For some first years, lunchtime can be a lonely experience and so regular lunchtime sessions with an older student could improve students’ experience of school as well as improving literacy levels.

Paired Reading sessions follow a very structured pattern and fidelity to this structure has been shown to be an important aspect of its success (Ehly and Topping, 1998). Topping (1995) stresses that training should follow a strict format: (i) presentation, (ii) demonstration, (iii) practice, (iv) feedback, (v) coaching and (vi) questions and organisational details. Cassidy (2007) recommends that the programme is adapted over a school term of six to eight weeks with three to four, 10-15 minute sessions per week. However, Conlin et al. (2011) found that the frequency or intensity of the sessions made no significant difference to tutor or tutee, but cautioned that sessions should nevertheless take place more than once a week if the participants are to become fluent with the method. Topping emphasises that it is important not to go over twenty minutes per session as students will tire of reading rather than enjoy it. He also points out that it is equally important to ensure sessions take place regularly in order to establish a routine in which tutor and tutee are comfortable: Reading material is chosen by the tutee and as long as it is within the tutors’ reading ability, tutees are free to choose whatever interests them, even magazine articles (Cassidy; Conlin et al.). During a typical session, the tutor reads in unison with the tutee, pausing at difficult

words. The tutor must not get the tutee to sound out the word, rather wait for no more than five seconds then simply say the word, get the tutee to repeat it, say 'well done' and continue (Topping, 1995). Merrett (1994) and Nugent (2008) agree that regular encouragement and praise is vital to the success of the programme. Tutors should vary how they issue this praise by using Topping's "Dictionary of Praise" (1995, p. 134). Eventually the tutee may wish to read aloud without the tutor reading with her. In such instances, the tutor should explain some silent cues that the tutee may use to signal reading alone and when she wishes the tutor to join in reading again (Topping). The sessions must take place in an environment that is conducive to reading- comfortable, quiet and relaxed (Conlin et al., 2011) which may prove to be a challenge in a secondary school environment. Nevertheless, it is imperative that a comfortable reading space is established to ensure the emphasis is always on reading as an enjoyable experience (Ehly and Topping, 1998).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of St. Patrick's College, Dublin. Each TY class was approached (120 students), a brief explanation of PR was given and fifty-two students availed of the opportunity to volunteer. Those volunteers were then given a letter providing more details on PR, which both student and parent/guardian signed. The parents of first years with low reading ages were contacted by phone and then by letter. The letter conveyed the principle that tutors would be sharing their own love of reading rather than teaching the first year students. Parents explained PR to their daughters at home and if they felt comfortable with the idea, they signed the consent form, met with me and joined the programme. The voluntary aspect to the intervention was imperative, as well as emphasising reading as an enjoyable hobby, to ensure that the intervention was not regarded as stigmatising. All participants were assured of their right to anonymity and to withdraw from the study.

In line with Topping's (1995) recommendations on establishing a PR programme in a school for the first time and reflecting the "cyclical process" (Middlewood, Coleman and Lumly, 1999, p. 14) that is action research, the PR intervention was piloted with a small sub-group of students before being implemented with the larger group. All fifty-two tutor volunteers were trained and, of those willing to give up their lunchtimes, eight were randomly selected for the pilot. Four first year tutees were also randomly selected for the pilot. Each tutee was assigned a tutor and a substitute tutor. As a result of the pilot, some changes were made to the documentation for recording PR and the time of the sessions was changed to towards the end of lunch so students would have a chance to eat their lunch beforehand.

All volunteer tutors were taken out of class for a half day to undergo training namely; PowerPoint presentation, demonstration, practice, feedback, coaching and questions (Topping, 1995). Students were shown the books that would be used and the 'ten finger test' was explained. This test involves the student splaying her ten fingers across the two pages of the book. If she can read all the words her fingers touch, she may use that book if her tutee selects it (Topping). Following this, tutors and substitute tutors were randomly selected and matched with tutees. Those tutors who were not selected were encouraged to implement their skills outside school. A further meeting took place with tutees who were given an overview of what happens during PR and introduced to their tutors.

Timetables, a roll and room allocations were drawn up, books were purchased and stored in the main PR centre where student participants would meet before proceeding to their allocated room. The importance of a good relationship between tutor and tutee was emphasised. The first session simply involved exchanging mobile phone numbers so students could inform each other of absences and arrange for the substitute to attend, examining the different books available and explaining the purpose of a record sheet. Thereafter, tutor and tutee met for fifteen minutes at lunchtime from Tuesday to Friday for eight weeks and read together. Tutees were encouraged to use books but teen magazines were also available. Positive enforcement was emphasised (Nugent, 2008) and cues were agreed upon to indicate when the tutee wished to read alone, for the tutor to read alone or for them to read together. A record sheet was filled out in the tutee's presence signalling the end of the session.

## **FINDINGS**

Both tutees and tutors in this study indicated that the main benefits of PR related to literacy and to social development. Tutors identified several reasons for becoming involved, participants commented on the reading material provided and made some suggestions for future implementation of PR in the school.

Literacy experts contend that PR improves student attitudes to reading, which in turn increases literacy levels (Nugent, 2001; King, 2006; Cassidy, 2007). In this study, the four tutees surveyed believed that they benefitted from taking part in PR because it improved their reading. One student with dyspraxia claimed that she felt more comfortable reading aloud in class as a result of the PR programme. All ten tutors felt that their tutees' reading fluency and pace improved. However, in the interview, two tutees indicated that the only books they read before and after PR were schoolbooks for homework. They stated that they also read their

Facebook pages and text messages but their reading habits have not changed as a result of PR. Yet the same students said they would advise future students to take part in PR with one remarking, “Well I do like it because it’s a bit different to reading at home. You can pick out hard words and they [tutors] will tell you what they are”. Both of these students have been diagnosed with dyslexia. One student with no identified special educational need now reads more books for enjoyment while one other tutee reads more articles in magazines as a result.

From the tutors’ perspective, it is interesting to note that two of the students felt that their own reading improved as a result of helping the first year students (Table 1). This supports Merret’s (1994) finding that those who instruct often improve their own skill in the subject. Gilliland and King also found this to be the case in their ‘*Reading as Friends*’ intervention with almost seventy-eight percent of tutors seeing an improvement in their own reading (2009, p. 56). None of the tutors who volunteered had any identified SEN on file. The aim of this research was to focus on all the benefits of paired reading for both tutor and tutee and the results show that the main benefit for the tutor was social.

**Table 1: The views of the 10 tutors on paired reading (number of responses in parentheses)**

Reasons for volunteering for PR	Benefits of PR for tutors
To help the first year (8)	I enjoyed helping others (7)
To increase my chances of becoming a Meitheal <sup>2</sup> leader next year (3)	It increased my confidence (4)
To fill up my Gaisce <sup>3</sup> hours (1)	My own reading improved (2)
Experience for my future career (1)	Good experience for Meitheal (2)
I was curious to see how it would turn out (1)	Improved my time-keeping (1)
	Improved my patience (1)

*\*Note: As some tutors gave multiple responses to some questions, the number of responses may exceed 10*

<sup>2</sup> Meitheal: Meaning ‘work team’. A programme advertised for senior second level students to become mentors for incoming students at junior level.

<sup>3</sup> Gaisce: The prestigious President’s Award for community services carried out on a voluntary basis by 15-25 year olds.

Every tutor who participated in the intervention believed they benefitted. The main reason cited was the experience of helping others and working with a first year. However, a comprehensive list of benefits was provided by the tutors (Table 1).

This list may partially assuage the fears of parents and teachers who feel that tutors' learning and development may suffer as a result of taking part in peer tutoring (Mallon 2000, cited in King, 2006). Four of the ten tutors believed that their confidence improved as a result of paired reading. The results in Table 1 emphasise the point that both tutor and tutee benefit in CAPT. This finding is consistent with recent studies such as Conlin et al. (2011) and Nugent (2001).

Tutees appeared to benefit socially from the intervention. Two tutees formed a close friendship as a result with one girl stating in the interview, "That's the best part about it [PR]". Nugent (2001) had claimed that PR may work as a buddy system for the first year students and the results show some evidence of this with one tutee remarking "I see my tutor around and we say 'hi' and when we're working together we get on well". The two other students interviewed said they did not make any new friends as a result. Also, two tutees pointed out negative social aspects to the programme saying that they disliked leaving their friends at lunchtime to go to the sessions. One tutor concurred, remarking that it was not fair to expect students to give up time from their lunch for the entire year as, "First years are trying to make friends at this time" and felt that the sessions should be run for the first term only. These social drawbacks would need to be addressed in any future PR intervention. Conversely, another tutor stated that "if we could convince them to come a second term they would benefit more" and suggested trying to make PR "more fun by playing games" at the start as well as reading. One tutee also stated her favourite aspect of PR was, "That party at the end" referring to a Christmas get-together during the school day for tutors and tutees. This indicates that participants would like a wider social dimension to PR in future.

A common theme emerging from the data was dissatisfaction with the reading material. Topping (1995) had emphasised the importance of students completing a book early on in the sessions. This did not prove to be the case, with the record sheets indicating that tutees changed books quite frequently in the first few weeks. This seems to suggest that changes in reading patterns and preferences need to be taken account of when designing PR interventions. In the interview, tutees stated that, "The magazines were better than the books" and the majority did not like the books that were over fifty pages, "I liked the little skinny one I read because it was short". Four tutors agreed that magazines worked better, while three tutors felt that

shorter, easier books should be used. Only one tutee liked the book she read, “The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas”. Surprisingly, the Harry Potter series did not prove to be popular with tutees. The record sheets showed that the three tutees who had selected the first book in the series had changed by week two. One tutor remarked that this was due to the complicated names in the book as well as the length. The importance of current material was stressed by the tutee in the interview, “There should be magazines from this year, not from 2007”.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While seeking parental permission for any intervention involving students is essential, it is imperative that parents are aware of what PR actually is and its benefits. The importance of highlighting the personal benefits of the programme for the tutor during the training session should not be underestimated. Those students who acted as tutors to complete Gaisce hours, or ahead of their application for Meitheal in my intervention were very enthusiastic throughout. It is important that the training session is interactive. The organising teacher should be available to tutors for a few minutes after the sessions, to offer support, clarify any queries and for feedback. I found the feedback from tutors to be very insightful and helpful and many of the practical suggestions listed below came from suggestions made by the tutors.

One of Topping’s (1995) most important recommendations is that all those taking part in PR do so on a voluntary basis. This is particularly true for the tutees. As Nugent (2001) has pointed out, the overriding aim of the experience is to make reading enjoyable and if the tutees are taking part against their will this is less likely to be the case. This has implications for the selection process. Those students struggling the most with reading, and therefore most in need of assistance, will be less likely to volunteer to take part in PR. In this study, the selection process worked well because both student and parent were involved in making the decision. Some students did turn down the offer. This was completely acceptable and I did not feel disheartened as much of the literature had stressed the importance of students enjoying the experience and taking part voluntarily (Topping; Nugent; Conlin et al., 2011). I simply continued up along the list of those with low reading ages until all places were filled. At the end of the programme the tutees were more than willing to be photographed with their certificates for the school newsletter which appears on the school website. This highlights how they were comfortable to share their experience of PR with the wider school community.



## Practical Suggestions

There are a number of practical measures the co-ordinator may take to support a successful PR intervention, some of which are outlined below. These are additions to Topping's suggestions (1995):

1. Due to timetable constraints, lunchtime was the only time the sessions could take place in my school. It is advisable that other members of staff are consulted well in advance of the sessions. Holding sessions towards the end of lunch worked well as all students had time to eat but finished at least five minutes before lunch ends so students had a chance to go to lockers and prepare for class.
2. Try to encourage all students to attend four sessions per week but if they want to join and would benefit from it but have other commitments e.g. sport, perhaps allow them to attend three times per week. One of the major problems of this intervention was tutee absenteeism. This was frustrating for tutors. I would recommend the inclusion of fun activities and opportunities for social interaction in the sessions. At the start of term, time could be spent allowing tutors and tutees to bond using games and icebreakers and the term could finish with a party for those involved. Those tutees who said they benefitted from or enjoyed the sessions were the ones who had made friends during PR.
3. Magazine articles are a good way to start to capture tutee interest. However, Cassidy's advice (2007) was helpful as content needed to be checked carefully. There are many spelling and grammatical errors in the magazines recommended by Cassidy (2007), for example 'Kiss'. In the interview, one tutee said she enjoyed reading 'Hello' magazine. The spelling and grammar standards are certainly higher in this magazine but the articles should be carefully selected beforehand to ensure they are of interest to the tutee.
4. Revising Topping's "Dictionary of Praise" (1995, p. 134) regularly is helpful as students' comments on the record sheet are often repetitive.
5. It is advisable to run the programme during the first term only as first years will appreciate it more at this time. Once they have settled in the school and made friends they resent having to give up lunch times.

## CONCLUSION

This research indicates that secondary school teachers in all-girls schools can employ PR strategies using CAPT with the expectation that the majority of both tutees and tutors will show improvements in the areas of self-esteem and/or literacy development. Yet, the organisation of such a project is not without its problems. Commitment and dedication from all the agents in the education system, namely management, teachers, parents and students, are pre-requisites. All participants must volunteer rather than be convinced to take part, even if this means running the programme with fewer tutors/tutees. This ensures that the intervention does not result in the participants feeling stigmatised. The improvement may not be dramatic yet progress may be made in the areas of reading fluency, self-esteem, leadership, teamwork, patience, cooperation, gaining experience for a future career or simply the skill of making new friends. This list is not exhaustive. The road to achieving inclusion in schools across Ireland is paved with small triumphs such as these. Once commitment and dedication have been secured, all those involved can enjoy being part of a programme that has the potential to change learning experiences and promote inclusion in the school setting in a very realistic way. This is only one small method of partly realising that elusive concept of inclusion.

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