The Impact of Tutoring Younger Students on Third Graders’ Reading Skills and Perceptions of Themselves as Readers

By

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Abstract

Schools are constantly being pushed to cut budgets and yet have all students be proficient in academic skills. Cross-age tutoring could be a solution because it provides one-on-one interventions that can focus on specific skills that a student struggles with, at a minimal cost, while potentially boosting the tutor’s perception of himself or herself. In this action research project, cross-age tutoring was implemented with a group of third graders as tutors to kindergartners and first graders during breakfast time to determine if there is a change in academic self-esteem and overall reading abilities. The tutors received training in how to deal with situations that may arise and had lessons modeled for them before tutoring the other students. Tutoring was twice a week for fifteen to twenty minutes and the participants who were tutors met five times a week to do reflection and preparation with an instructor. The program lasted eight weeks. Pretests and Posttests were conducted with an additional interview. The results showed little increase in the reading skills given to both the tutors and tutees. However, observation revealed an increase in fluency and ability to apply the reading strategy: Asking Questions. There was also an increase in positive reading attitudes and feelings of self-confidence. Tutors felt that they had been valued and enjoyed working with the younger students. The younger students thoroughly enjoyed being read to and demonstrated an increased desire to read to the tutors. There was an expressed interest from both groups in continuing the tutoring process, though perhaps at a different time and location.
Introduction

Schools are constantly being pushed to cut budgets and yet have all students achieve proficiency in academic skills. In his 2010 Blueprint for Reform, The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, President Barack Obama states, “We must do better. Together, we must achieve a new goal, that by 2020, the United States will once again lead the world in college completion. We must raise the expectations for our students, for our schools, and for ourselves – this must be a national priority. We must ensure that every student graduates from high school well prepared for college and a career” (p. 5). Another initiative, Response to Intervention (RtI), strives to have students receive additional support at varying intensities. Educators need to have more programs available to students who aren’t at grade level and require extra support. Schools are looking for answers and ways to meet these tough standards on tighter and tighter budgets. Cross-age tutoring is one possibility as an answer.

The purpose of this study is to look at the effects of using struggling readers as tutors fairly close in age to the children they are tutoring. How will tutoring kindergartners and first grade readers affect third graders’ reading skills and perceptions of themselves as readers? The following subsidiary questions will also be examined: How will receiving cross-age tutoring affect the kindergartners and first graders’ reading abilities? Do the students enjoy being tutors and tutees? Are third graders who struggle with reading old enough and experienced enough to be effective tutors? Lastly, what impact will being a tutor have on students who struggle behaviorally?

Cross-age tutoring could potentially be one of the most successful formats for helping students who are at risk of early reading failure. Studies have shown that by
participating in cross-age tutoring, students (especially the tutors) may make significant
gains not only in the area of reading, but experience a boost in self-confidence and self-
esteem. This paper will first review literature related to the impact of tutoring and
various types of tutoring programs; then it will discuss the action research project design,
results, and analysis.
Literature Review

Background

Cross-age tutoring is one of the two types of peer tutoring. The alternative type is peer tutoring that involves students working with other students of the same age (often referred to as same-age tutoring). Same-age tutors often have an asymmetrical relationship—where one having more knowledge and supporting the other student (Miller, Topping & Thurston, 2010). Cross-age tutoring also has the asymmetrical relationship, but instead of being with a peer the same age, the tutor works with a tutee who is younger, under a teacher’s guidance. Significant research carried out the 1970’s and 1980’s shows that peer tutoring can have benefits for both the tutor and tutee. Since then, research appears to have focused on particular populations, such as grade level, gender, and ability levels (Puchner, 2003).

Tutoring allows one-on-one interventions that can focus on specific skills that a student struggles with, making it more effective than group instruction. Tutors can adapt instruction, feedback is immediate, and misunderstandings can be quickly corrected (Anderson, 2007; Fisher, 2001). Peer-tutoring allows students to engage in critical thinking skills (Jacobson et al, 2001) while allowing students to work at their own pace (Anderson, 2007). Wasik and Slavin (1993) state that “one-on-one tutoring has been found to be one of the most successful formats for working with students at risk of early reading failure” (as cited in Caserta-Henry, 1996, p.500).

Levin, Glass, and Meister (1984) claim that cross-age tutoring is not only successful, but cost effective. Their study compares the cost effectiveness of a few
different intervention strategies. They conclude that cross-age tutoring is two to four
times better at producing a gain in scores when compared to computer aided instruction,
reduced class size, and a longer school day (as cited in Tansy, de Barona, McWhirter and
Herrmann, 1996). Taylor, Hanson, Justice-Swanson, and Watts (1997) estimated for
their study that tutoring only costs about $30 per child (including books and supervision).
This is compared to the estimated cost of $400 per child (the cost of the reading teacher’s
time for the small group or one-on-one interventions) that are typically done when a child
is struggling in the area of reading.

Cross-age tutoring is not only beneficial in its ability to help tutees, but also in the
impact on the tutors. Cross-age tutoring provides students an authentic purpose to
practice reading texts written for much younger students, including picture books and
wordless books. Multiple studies have shown that reading these texts is beneficial to
adolescent readers (Fisher, 2001). Not only can reading these texts help increase a tutor’s
cognitive reading ability, but the tutor’s self-esteem may increase as well. Miller (2010)
found that only the cross-age tutors had significant gains in self-esteem, self-competence,
and self-worth when compared to two other groups (same-age tutoring and a control
group that did no tutoring). He went as far as to claim “this study indicates that primary
teachers can employ peer-reading strategies with a realistic expectation that self-esteem
gains may accompany any benefits in terms of reading skills” (p. 429).
Program Designs

Thrope and Wood (2000) provide guidelines for developing a successful cross-age tutoring program. A successful program identifies the area of need in which tutoring may be beneficial, what specific skills will be focused on, and what resources are available. Based on these needs, the program designers select the tutors and tutees. A variety of tutors from third grade to high school have been used to tutor students ranging from kindergarten to middle school.

Providing training for tutors is one of the most important parts of setting up a cross-age tutoring program. Many students, even older students, have never been explicitly taught teaching skills (Puchner, 2003). Tutors need to know how to best give feedback when working with younger students to keep the learning environment positive and how to deal with problems that arise in the tutoring experience, including behavior problems (Tansy et al., 1996; Caserta-Henry, 1996). When tutees struggle, tutors need the proper training to help them make timely decisions that will best help the student. One example in a study by Anderson (2007) suggests using the “three Ps-pause, prompt and praise” (which needs to be role-played multiple times) where tutors pause (giving the tutees some time), prompt (encourage them to use a reading strategy and help them), and praise (acknowledge and praise the student’s effort). Some tutors may need instruction on how to develop lesson plans if the lesson plans are not being provided for them. Others may need assistance to connect with the tutee’s classroom teacher to help create the lesson plans.
To help the tutors prepare and understand, teachers should model lessons (Fisher, 2001; Fox & Wright, 1997; Jacobson et al., 2001). Modeling, an instructional strategy where the teacher demonstrates a new concept or lesson while the students observe, is a crucial element to successful tutoring. If tutors are given lesson plans for the tutoring session, these should be modeled so tutors can be more successful when they teach them. They will be already be familiar with the lesson and how to teach it.

If there is a certain skill being focused on, such as analyzing the structural elements of the storybooks (Fox & Wright, 1997), this should be modeled until all tutors understand. Van Keer and Vanderlinde (2013) suggest using a sandwich model where the teacher introduces a new reading strategy, tutors practice the strategy, then the tutor practices/teaches this strategy during the tutoring session. As tutors move to be more independent in designing lessons, this time can be used to help tutors select appropriate books and decide where to stop and discuss the book with tutees (Labbo & Teale, 1990).

Text selection is an important part of the design because the appeal of cross-age tutoring is that tutors use easier books because these books support struggling readers by having less text, illustrations that help describe the text to increase comprehension, more predictable language patterns, and simple, uncomplicated stories. Cross-age tutoring allows these books to be deemed as worthy books to read. It is important to know the needs of each participant to assure selection of books that will help both tutor and tutee grow as readers. As helpful as the storybooks may be, research indicates that for the tutor to gain academically, the book should be closer to their instructional level or else it doesn’t challenge them enough to make significant gains (Wright & Cleary, 2006).
After the materials and lesson plans have been chosen and modeled, it’s crucial for the tutors to have time to practice with each other. This allows students to give feedback, plan, and increase their fluency with each repeated reading (Fisher, 2001; Jacobson et al., 2001). Students use this time to practice new skills or concepts. The tutors are then ready to do their tutoring session.

When the tutoring takes place, there are different models to follow for the reading portion. Wright and Cleary (2006) selected a model, Listening-while-Reading, that used a handbook outlining the steps for the design of their program. Each session includes steps where for the first time, the tutee listens and follows along silently as the tutor reads. Then the tutee reads the same passage over again, receiving help from the tutor. During the tutoring session, students start together and at the harder passages only the tutor reads and at the easier passages the tutee reads. If the tutee struggles, the tutor helps and then they read together until confidence is regained. Lesson plans include phonics work, comprehension strategy tasks, and activities to help support the book (Fisher, 2001)

To have a truly successful program, teacher observation and student reflection are imperative. Tutor journals provide a place for students to write about their experience and help them know what went well and what needs to improve (Labbo & Teale, 1990; Jacobson et al., 2001; Caserta-Henry, 1996; Fisher, 2001). Tutors can discuss what happened, talk through issues and continue to grow as tutors and readers. Teacher observations will give insight in determining if the program is going as expected and if there are approaches or practices that need to be modified.
One suggestion is to do cross-age tutoring in addition to a reading intervention for students who are struggling readers. Taylor et al. (1997) found a significant increase in skills for students who did both instead of just doing a reading intervention or not receiving any services at all. These small group or one-on-one reading interventions were provided by the classroom teacher with the support of the reading coordinator. They did an intensive intervention for seven weeks and then cross-age tutoring for twenty one weeks. Seventy five percent of the students could read a grade level passage at the end of the school year. None of the control group could and only two of the seven in the intervention-only group could read it.

**Cognitive Impact on Participants**

In a 1982 meta-analysis discussed in Puchner (2003), 33 of 38 studies found a significant effect on the tutor’s achievement, with the tutee’s achievement being similarly effected in 45 of 52 studies. According to Slavin (1996), these positive results occur “where one perspective is in the Vygotskian sense of children learning from teaching each other through interaction” (as cited in Puchner, 2003, p. 10). However, he adds that because of the responsibility that comes with the tutoring, cross-age tutoring may provide a “cognitive elaboration” effect. Information that is elaborated is easier to retrieve from memory because it has been restructured and related to existing knowledge. Cross-age tutoring provides the authentic reason to explain something to someone else, creating the elaboration. Cohen (1986) supports this by saying “planning instruction for others facilitates retention and comprehension” (as cited in Fisher, 2001, p. 234). Students with disabilities can also be participants and have been shown to make greater gains in reading if they are the tutor (Tournaki & Criscitiello, 2003).
In most studies, data shows an increase in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and overall reading ability (Fisher, 2001; Labbo & Teale, 1990). Due to repeated readings and the responsibility of reading aloud, there is an increase in participants’ fluency, rhythm, and intonation (Fisher, 2001; Wright & Cleary, 2006). This increase in fluency has been recognized by the National Reading Panel to be essential for higher-level comprehension. When student can decode with more automaticity, they can devote more cognitive resources to understanding larger ideas conveyed through the text (Wright & Cleary, 2006).

Labbo and Teale (1990) found that one of the tutors in their study finally found a book that fit not only readability, but interest. This was the turning point and the student became not only a better reader, but a more engaged student in all areas, which in turned improved his grades. In research designs that implemented writing, the writing scores increased due to the cross-age tutoring experience (Caserta-Henry, 1996; Fisher, 2001; Fox and Wright, 1997; Jacobson et al., 2001).

**Participants’ Perception and Attitude towards Reading**

Miller (2010) suggests that cross-age tutors may gain feelings of self-worth as a result of the demands of being a tutor and the value that is felt from tutees and teachers. However, accurately measuring students’ perception of themselves as readers has proven difficult to researchers. One test, the Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale, (used by Miller, 2010) has demonstrated high reliability and validity. Another test suggested by Tansy et al. (1996) is the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale which has the benefit of tutors only needing to complete one part of the test instead of completing it in its entirety. One other
option is the Piers-Harris test that suggested a gain in self-confidence in students who tutored (Labbo & Teale, 1990).

Teacher observation, interviews, and tutors’ reflection logs provide the most valuable information on perception and attitude. All studies indicated at least some sense of growth in the tutors’ perception of themselves and/or attitude towards reading. Students were also able to report on their personal reading improvements and with their improved positive attitude, they were more willing to attempt reading tasks (Caserta-Henry, 1996; Fox & Wright, 1997; Jacobson et al., 2001). Within the Storymates program (Fox & Wright, 1997), students became more engaged with books, especially the storybooks in the classroom. Students not only seemed to enjoy themselves as tutors, but went out of their way to help their tutee and make the tutoring as enjoyable as it could be (Fisher, 2001).

The impact of cross-age tutoring can extend beyond the tutoring session, as some tutors go above and beyond what is expected to truly get the most of the experience. They make games, talk with teachers, rearrange sports practice, and some have even decided to pursue the dream of being a teacher (Caserta-Henry, 1996). Cross-age tutoring even expanded outside of the school when some tutors decided to read to younger brothers, sisters, or neighbors. In some cases, these younger children turned around and tried to teach even younger children (Fox & Wright, 1997).

**Impact of tutoring on students' behavior.**

Cross-age tutoring has been found to have many positive effects on students’ behavior because it creates the opportunity to engage in meaningful peer interaction and
collaboration (Van Keer & Vanderlinde, 2013). Maher (1984) saw less absenteeism and fewer disciplinary referrals. Utay and Utay (1997) found that “cross-age tutoring resulted in students’ enhance enjoyment of working with partners, increased requests for help, expanded friendships extending outside the treatment setting, and better attitudes about engaging in writing activities” (as found in Thrope and Wood, p.239)

Sutherland and Snyder (2007) conducted a small study with students diagnosed with EBD (emotional/behavioral disorder) and tracked the number of disruptive behaviors each student had. The students’ disruptive behavior decreased during the intervention phase and their active responding increased. The study also showed reading gains for the students as well. In research conducted by Tournaki and Criscitiello (2003), participants also experienced a decrease in disruptive behaviors, especially during the time they were tutoring. Being a tutor gives students some responsibility and involves students in an activity that makes them proud. This eliminates the need for extrinsic motivators and provides an opportunity for leadership that students with EBD rarely get.

Lazerson (1980) conducted a study that investigated students who were withdrawn or aggressive. He found that when students who show these traits were paired with others that weren’t, they adjusted. The number of withdrawals decreased for students who were withdrawn and the aggressive students became less aggressive. He attributes this to the acceptance between the tutor and tutee and that they used the same language. Damon and Phelps concluded that “Being closer in knowledge and status, the tutee in a peer relation feels freer to express opinions, ask questions, and risk untested solutions. The interaction between instructor and pupil is more balanced and more lively” (as cited in Kalkowski,1989a, p. 138).
Action Research

Methodology-Participants

The study took place in a small, rural Wisconsin town. The school district has about 500 students (PreK-12) and is located in one building. This unique feature means that cross-age tutoring with all ages of students is possible. The school is a Title I School and has a high number of students from low-socioeconomic homes. Students overall are academically lower than the state average and surrounding districts. However, the community is focused around the school, which often is the center of community events since there isn’t a community center.

Fourteen third grade tutors (eight females, six males) were chosen to participate in this study. Of the fourteen tutors, twelve were below grade level expectation on the STAR reading assessment. Four students were also below on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Kit and were in intensive reading interventions. Five students (all male and two of whom were in the intensive reading interventions) were on point sheets for their behavior. Only one of these students was diagnosed with EBD, but the other four also struggled significantly in the classroom with behaviors. When studying the students on point sheets for behavior problems, the areas focused on were being on task, respectful language and actions, and following directions. These point sheets were created by the EBD teacher and the classroom teacher to provide documentation and feedback to the students, teachers, and parents about the students’ behavior. It was decided to use them since the students were familiar with them and it would provide meaningful data for the study.
The tutees were from kindergarten and first grade. When the tutoring program was designed, the intention was that the same tutee would always work with the same tutor. However, since tutoring was done over breakfast and for a short time frame, if children were late the tutors picked another student to work with. The normal tutees would then join when they arrived. Only 31% of the first grade was on grade level before tutoring (as measured by both the Renaissance STAR reading assessment and Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Kit). Only 21% of the kindergarten was on benchmark as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Kit.

Each grade level had one class that came down earlier to breakfast, and these classes were chosen to be the consistent tutees. The other classes could participate, but it wasn’t consistent due to the time constraints and uniqueness of the setting. Not all students in the class chose to participate as a tutee, preferring to eat breakfast by themselves instead. However, there were more tutees than expected due to their excitement about working with a tutor.

Methodology-Assessment

A variety of assessments were used in the pretest and posttest phase of the study. The Renaissance STAR Reading Assessment is a thirty-four question, computerized reading test that is designed to give the teacher information on the student’s ability in four major skill areas: foundational skills, reading informational texts, reading literature, and language. The teacher can see what skills and standards the students need to work on.
The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System is a one-on-one assessment that matches students' instructional and independent reading abilities to a guided reading level. This is done by students reading a leveled book orally while the teacher does a running record to document how accurately the student reads. Then the student answers comprehension questions and the teacher evaluates their answers and their fluency.

In addition to these academic assessments, each tutor was also given a Tutoring Questionnaire in order to gain information about their attitudes towards reading, and they had journals in which to record their experiences. In the posttest phase, an additional interview was completed with the tutors individually. Group interviews were conducted with the tutees in their own classrooms.

**Methodology-Procedure**

The action research project was presented to students as an opportunity to help the other group of students. The tutors were told they would be helping the kindergartners and first graders because they needed help with their reading and needed to hear more fluent reading. Tutees were told that the third graders were coming not only to help them read, but also so the third graders could practice their reading. Tutors were given a 30 minute training session in how to be tutors, what to expect from the tutees, and how to deal with some problems that may arise. The tutoring program was implemented for eight weeks, five days a week for thirty minutes each day. The program followed a consistent pattern:
Day 1 (Monday): Tutors meet with instructor for thirty minutes in the morning in the Title I Resource Room. The entire lesson, including reading the storybook, word work, pre-reading and/or post reading activities, was modeled by the instructor. Specific strategies that could be used were introduced as well as discussions about where to stop and discuss the text. Students then practiced reading the selected book with what time was left. At the beginning of the tutoring program, books were selected for students and they were explicitly taught where to stop for discussion and how to discuss. As the tutoring program went on, tutors were taught the reading strategy of Asking Questions and then were able to select a book of their choice. Teachers went around while tutors were practicing to make sure they knew how to apply the strategy into their choice book.

Day 2 (Tuesday) 15-20 min. Tutors meet with the tutees in the morning while their tutees ate breakfast in the cafeteria. Tutors started by reading their storybook and working with the tutee on a reading strategy. Then they did word work and finally tutees were offered books at their instructional level, and the tutors helped them as needed. For the last 10-15 minutes, tutors met with the instructor again in the Title I Resource Room to reflect on the tutoring session, first in their journals, and then as a discussion together.

Day 3 (Wednesday) Repeat Day 1 with a different book and lesson

Day 4 (Thursday) Repeat Day 2
Day 5 (Friday) Instruction fluctuated depending on students’ needs each week. Examples of different lessons that took place included group reflection time and modeling from the instructor on how to deal with behavior students. Tutors spent time making games that focused on specific reading skills their tutee needed. Tutors selected texts to use the next week. The instructor modeled reading strategies for the following week, especially if tutors would need more time to practice on Monday.

Modeling and reflection took place in the Title I room, but the tutoring took place in the cafeteria. Tutors selected picture books from the resource room, their own collection, or the library to use with tutees. The instructor selected books were also printed off of readinga-z.com, a website that has printable books. These were selected because students could write in the book or underline words. This helped them remember what strategy they were working on the next day. As other books were selected, the students used post-it notes to write down reminders.

Due to the limitations of having students read while eating, this peer-tutoring program was designed to focus on comprehension and vocabulary expansion of the tutee. The tutor did the majority of the reading for the first five to ten minutes while the tutee ate. The main reading focus was building comprehension through questioning. The tutor had to come up with questions for the tutee to answer to check for comprehension. This skill was selected as the initial skill to focus on because the pretest data showed that it was a weakness and it fit in well with the limitations of the program design. After the
tutee was finished eating, the tutor had them do word work/phonics work and read to them.

This study was conducted in a school where 70% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Many of the students don’t get read to at home and struggle with vocabulary because they aren’t hearing it at home. One other purpose of this study was to expose the tutees to more vocabulary by hearing texts above their instructional level (which at this level are very basic) and being able to talk about what those words meant with the tutor. The tutor in turn had to be able to know what those words are and how to explain them to the tutee. This built their vocabulary awareness as well. The vocabulary conversations between the tutor and tutee was more meaningful than just having the teacher tell the students what the word meant.

**Findings and Results**

**Impact on Reading Skills-Tutors**

At the beginning of tutoring, only one student read with expression while reading aloud (as documented by teacher observation.) Eight of the students thought that reading fluently only meant reading fast, and read this way orally. To them, the goal of reading aloud to an audience was to get through it as quickly as possible. Five other students were slower readers, but they didn’t add expression either. During the first few weeks of tutoring, tutors needed constant modeling and reminders to read with expression and often forgot in the midst of tutoring. However, as time went on, tutors started to add expression without any assistance. During practice time on Mondays and Wednesdays, tutors would read to each other and show off their expression abilities. Even after
tutoring was done, students continued to be more aware of reading with expression when reading aloud, as observed in the classroom.

The reading strategy that was the largest focus “asking/answering questions” also isn’t measured well by the STAR reading test or the Fountas and Pinnell test, since it is only one skill and those tests measure more than that. At the beginning of tutoring, tutors were asked to come up with comprehension questions as an instructor read a text aloud. Two tutors were unable to come up with anything. Ten tutors had very low level literal questions such as - What color is her hair? What is the name of the book? What is that? (pointing to a tree on the page) that didn’t contribute to the overall comprehension of the book. Two tutors had slightly higher level questions such as - What happened at the end? What is your favorite part? This inability to ask questions that lead to deeper comprehension as a third grader was surprising and prompted the instructor to highlight this as the main reading strategy. The instructor focused on this strategy for modeling and helping support the tutors as they created lesson plans. For some tutors, it was a quick transition to asking the next level of questions once it had been modeled. Two tutors struggled and needed a lot of support. Eventually, most tutors were able to come up with questions on their own or with minimal support that enabled their tutee to predict what would happen next, analyze characters and their choices, make connections, and check for understanding.

The authentic experience of being a tutor led to an increase in fluency and the ability to ask/answer higher level questions. The tutors weren’t working on these skills just because a teacher asked them to. They were working on them because they wanted to be a good reader for the kindergartners and first graders and wanted to help them
become better readers. They took the time to stop and think about how they sounded as readers. They took time not only to figure out what questions they would ask, but when they would stop and ask them. Reading became more than just pronouncing words on a page. It became a fun meaningful experience.

Although the tutors all showed growth in expression (when observed by the teacher) and ability to ask questions (as seen on their post-it notes), the quantitative data from the STAR reading test showed mixed results for growth in the participants’ reading scores. Of the fourteen tutors, eight students gained more than the amount expected (0.1 a month). Two students even gained over a year’s worth of growth during the eight weeks of tutoring (Tutors 3 and 10). However, four of the tutors went down on the test and two stayed the same. There was no significant difference in the students’ Fountas and Pinnell scores either that showed that students made more growth while tutoring vs. when they weren’t. Possible reasons for this include that the reading tests did not just test for expression and ability to ask questions. It tests a wide range of reading skills.
Of the two kindergarten classes, one class received tutoring every time while the other class only got occasional tutoring; they came down later to breakfast and weren’t paired up with a consistent tutor. They just joined once in a while if they were early enough. Of the class that received tutoring every time (thirteen students), six gained one reading level and seven gained at least two reading levels according to the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark system. In the other class where students only received very occasional tutoring, all twelve students only gained one level of reading. This difference was also found in the first grade. The class that received consistent tutoring gained an average of 4.2 levels while the class that rarely had tutoring gained an average of 3.3 levels. The data considered for the kindergartners and first graders included more than just the eight weeks of tutoring, since it was not possible to test all students on the F&P assessment before tutoring started.

Tutees also showed improvement on word work. Tutors worked with tutees on sight words and phonemic awareness. This was not a large focus of the lesson, but the tutees did show gains in both areas. Tutors had individual sight words to review with their tutee. They also worked on segmenting words and reading CVC words depending on the tutee’s needs. Once again, tutees received instruction on this in the classroom as well, so it is impossible to know the effect that tutoring had, but the increase of students’ abilities in these areas cannot be discounted.
Participants’ Perceptions and Attitude towards Reading-Tutors

Although the quantitative data doesn’t show significant growth that differs from the growth line of the students from the year, the observational notes show a growth in the self-concept of the tutors as readers. The first time they tutored, they were unsure of themselves, quickly tried to get through the book, and forgot some of the steps. The tutees did their best to follow, but as the lesson moved on, so did their attention span. As the tutoring sessions continued, this began to change. The tutors became more sure of themselves and confident in their reading. They made sure they knew the books before tutoring and really worked on asking questions and reading with expression. This helped engage the tutees who were eager to answer the questions and sometimes even tried to come with their own questions for the tutor. They experimented with letting the tutees help read. They became more aware of if their tutees were paying attention and tried to refocus them. Also, the amount of time it took the tutor to read his/her storybook seemed to shorten the longer they tutored. They got better at picking books and took their practice time seriously. Tutors also gave better feedback to tutees while they read at the end of the lesson. Instead of just sitting there like they did at first, they began to listen and prompt when needed. They had multiple lessons on prompting during the first few weeks, and it showed while observing.

The tutors’ notebooks reflect a need to have more teaching and modeling on how to deal with tutees’ behavior at times. The most frequent comments centered on the frustration with the lack of 100% engagement from the tutees. The notebooks did get used, but at times, tutors jumped right into discussions about the morning’s tutoring session because they were too excited or annoyed to write first.
The tutoring questionnaire and the interviews given to the tutors were designed to help give insight to their self-confidence. The tutoring questionnaire consisted of twenty questions. Ten questions were about their perception of themselves as a reader and ten related to the tutoring experience. The first ten questions were given before and after the study. (A copy of the tutoring questionnaire and summary of responses can be found in the appendix). Most of the answers didn’t change, except four students changed their answer to “Reading is always fun” from Never to Sometimes. There were also students who changed their answer to the question “I add more expression and try to read smoothly when reading aloud” from Rarely to Sometimes and two tutors changed from Sometimes to All the time when I read aloud. From the first ten questions, it is hard to say that the tutors’ perception of themselves as readers grew.

However, answers to the next ten questions showed that students really enjoyed tutoring and thought of themselves as readers. Only one tutor didn’t really like tutoring; the other thirteen liked it or loved it. Overall the favorite part of tutoring was reading and helping the younger children. The tutors’ responses were very optimistic. The most common response to what their least favorite part of tutoring was “nothing.” Only one tutor didn’t feel that he grew as a reader due to tutoring, although six were unsure. Nine of the students said that reading with the younger students made them feel good about their reading. Most students responded “Reading with younger students is fun.” A few students responded “Reading with younger students makes me feel good.” No one answered negatively. All except three tutors wanted to continue tutoring. The three tutors wanted a change from the consistent routine; although overall they enjoyed the experience. This indicates that although there is no formal way to show growth of self-
confidence with the evidence given, there seems to have been at least pride and some enjoyment when tutoring.

The third grade classroom teachers didn’t have a lot of feedback on the tutoring program since they weren’t involved as much. They did comment that students loved going, especially on Tuesdays and Thursdays and often hurried with their morning routine so they wouldn’t be late. They observed one or two students selecting books from their classrooms to read with their tutee and using reading workshop time to practice.

**Tutees**

Observation of the tutees and interviews after tutoring sessions revealed that the students who decided to participate loved the tutoring and were sad that the program was over. There was one tutee who was just okay with the program being over and never really seemed to flourish. She was a little withdrawn and so was her tutor. Next time, she should be paired up with a little more aggressive student in order to encourage her to participate more and gain more self-confidence. The tutees enjoyed being read to, but suggested a longer time than 15-20 minutes so that there would be more time allocated
for them to read because they were excited to show off their reading skills to the tutor. The few minutes each time wasn’t enough.

When interviewing the kindergarten and first grade classroom teachers, they said they loved the cross-age tutoring, especially since it worked so well with breakfast and the students were always very excited. They did comment on a disconnect between what skills were being addressed in the classroom and what was being worked on with tutoring. This was in part because another teacher was in charge of the tutoring. They suggested increased collaboration if this program was done again and a wish to somehow have tutors during their normal reading time.

**Discussion on use of Third Graders as Tutors**

The only data collected on this question is observational data. Observations reveal that third graders can be effective tutors, but they do require teacher support. They did well when there was constant monitoring and the instructor could be consulted for assistance when problems arose. The students also didn’t do any lesson planning. They were old enough to take a reading strategy from a lesson taught and figure out how to apply it to a book and teach it, but even that was with intensive support from a teacher when needed. This study provides no information/evidence that third graders would be able to come up with lessons and tutor a student independently as some programs suggest or require tutors to be able to do. Tutors also did not provide sufficient feedback without specific prompts.

The third graders who struggled the most worked with kindergartners instead of first graders. This was done intentionally because working with students who were already confident in their reading and closer to the tutors’ reading level could damage the
tutors’ self-esteem. However, all the kindergartners were much lower in their reading ability, and the third graders were easily above their level. The third graders who were lowest in reading were able to give better feedback to the tutees at times because their own struggle has helped them be more understanding and aware of the application of strategies.

**The impact of tutoring on students who struggle behaviorally**

The five students who struggled behaviorally and were on point sheets lost fewer points when they were tutors. Two students didn’t lose a point the entire eight weeks. The third student lost a point in the area of “on task” in the Title I Resource room for being silly and distracting. This only happened once during the eight weeks. The fourth student didn’t lose any points in the classroom or tutoring location, but lost them in the hallway transition between the two places. This happened three times out of the 72 times that students were in the hallways during the eight weeks. He lost three points in the category of “respectful” and one point for “following directions.” He loved tutoring and didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize being involved, but the transition time was too much. The fifth student seemed to enjoy tutoring, but he choose not to participate some days. He was dealing with a lot of things at home and often came to tutoring with his mind already on those things. He lost points on the days he choose not to participate. When he did participate, he never lost a point for inappropriate behavior.

These five students were extremely respectful when tutoring and enjoyed taking on the role as the teacher. They thrived under the tutees’ attention and were the best at keeping their tutees engaged. They spent more time picking out books than others to
make sure their tutees would like them and added more expression. The instructor only had to remind them once or twice about their point sheet on days that they weren’t tutoring to remind them they had to be good role-models for the younger students. This was an amazing experience for these students who often don’t get positive attention.

**Discussion**

The results of this research indicate that tutoring younger students may affect a third grader’s reading skills and perception of themselves as readers in several positive ways. Their ability to add expression to their reading and apply the reading strategy of asking/answering questions increased. The classes that received more consistent tutoring saw higher increases than those that did not. Overall, the participants really seemed enjoy the tutoring program and didn’t want it end. With the intensive support that the third graders received, they were very capable of being tutors. Tutors benefited greatly from modeling and instant feedback while both practicing and after each tutoring session.

It was a little surprising how few points were lost by the students who struggled behaviorally enough to be on point charts. They really took pride in being a tutor and didn’t want to jeopardize it. The tutoring experience did not raise their test scores more than the other students, but the observations and interviews showed that these students received a boost of self-confidence and self-esteem.

These findings are important because the reading scores at this school are very low and it is a high poverty school district. Although other programs could be implemented to raise reading scores, cross-age tutoring provides the boost in students’ perceptions of themselves. This improved perception and need to be a good role model as a tutor may have long term positive effects. By having to teach a skill, the tutor
demonstrates that they know that skill at a higher level. By having a tutor, tutees get the instant feedback they need. They also get the positive attention that many of the students in our school lack (and then act up to get). By implementing cross-age tutoring more, our discipline referrals should go down and our reading scores should go up. All this for just a fraction of the cost of most reading programs. I would like to do further research that studies if that is actually the case for our school.

There are some changes that should be made if the cross-age tutoring program is implemented in the future. Although it worked that the tutoring was done during breakfast, this created a time constraint so tutees didn’t get to read as much as they should have and tutees were not as consistent (if their class was running late that day). It also created a bit of a chaotic, loud environment with the open area of the cafeteria.

In conclusion, research and this study show that cross-age tutoring helps students grow as readers and increase their self-confidence. This study shows that students who struggle behaviorally did very well as tutors. It also shows that third graders can be tutors if they have sufficient support. Cross-age tutoring is a cost effective program that any school can implement that will help all participants.
References


Sutherland, K.S. & Snyder, A. (2007). Effects of reciprocal peer tutoring and self-graphing on reading fluency and classroom behavior of middle school students with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 15*(2), 103-118.


Appendix

Tutoring questionnaire (first 10 questions are for before tutoring, all are for after)

Reading is fun

- Always
- Almost Always
- Sometimes
- Never

I think reading is hard.

- Always
- Almost Always
- Sometimes
- Never

If I start reading a book, I finish the book.

- Always
- Almost Always
- Sometimes
- Never

It takes me a long time to read a book.

- Always
- Almost Always
- Sometimes
- Never

I like reading this much:

- I love reading
- I like it most of the time
- I like it a little
- I don't like reading
I like reading with younger children

- Often
- Sometimes
- Never
- I've never read with younger children

I think:

- I'm an awesome reader
- I'm a good reader
- I'm an ok reader
- I'm not a good reader
- I'm a bad reader
- Other: ___________

I know how to help younger students when they read

- Yes
- No
- Only after training
- Sometimes

I think I can ask 'good' questions when reading to others

- Yes, they aren't just right there questions
- Sometimes
- Depends on the book
- I'm still working on it

I add more expression and try to read smoothly when reading aloud

- Just when I'm reading to others
- All the time when I read aloud (or in my head)
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
How did you feel about tutoring?

- [ ] Loved it!
- [ ] It was okay
- [ ] Didn't really like it
- [ ] Hated it

My favorite part of tutoring was....

My least favorite part of tutoring was....

I liked reading to my partner

- [ ] more than just reading to myself
- [ ] the same as when I read to myself
- [ ] I prefer to read to myself

Do you feel like you became a better reader because of tutoring?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Not sure
How did reading to the little kids help you?

Select all that apply

- [ ] Made me feel good about my reading
- [ ] Helped me add expression
- [ ] Helped me ask questions
- [ ] Helped me learn how to assist them with their reading
- [ ] Helped me make a new friend
- [ ] Helped my reading improve
- [ ] Challenged me to read new books
- [ ] Other: 

I got to read with the same person...

- [ ] Every time
- [ ] Sometimes
- [ ] Never

Did you want to read to the same person?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Didn't care

I'd like to keep tutoring in the future

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Depends (tell me why)

Finish this statement: Reading with younger students....
Summary of Tutoring Questionnaire

Reading is fun

- Always: 3 (21.4%)
- Almost Always: 3 (21.4%)
- Sometimes: 7 (50%)
- Never: 1 (7.1%)

I think reading is hard.

- Always: 1 (7.1%)
- Almost Always: 2 (14.3%)
- Sometimes: 10 (71.4%)
- Never: 1 (7.1%)

If I start reading a book, I finish the book.

- Always: 1 (7.1%)
- Almost Always: 6 (42.9%)
- Sometimes: 6 (42.9%)
- Never: 1 (7.1%)
It takes me a long time to read a book.

- Always   2 14.3%
- Almost Always  4 28.6%
- Sometimes   7 50%
- Never       1 7.1%

I like reading this much:

- I love reading  5 35.7%
- I like it most of the time  5 35.7%
- I like it a little  1 7.1%
- I don't like reading  3 21.4%

I like reading with younger children

- Often   4 28.6%
- Sometimes  6 42.9%
- Never    2 14.3%

I've never read with younger children  2 14.3%
I think:

I’m an awesome reader 4 28.6%
I’m a good reader 4 28.6%
I’m an ok reader 3 21.4%
I’m not a good reader 0 0%
I’m a bad reader 2 14.3%
Other 1 7.1%

I know how to help younger students when they read

Yes 11 78.6%
No 1 7.1%
Only after training 0 0%
Sometimes 2 14.3%

I think I can ask ‘good’ questions when reading to others

Yes, they aren’t just right there questions 3 21.4%
Sometimes 5 35.7%
Depends on the book 4 28.6%
I’m still working on it 2 14.3%
I add more expression and try to read smoothly when reading aloud

Just when I'm reading to others 2 14.3%
All the time when I read aloud (or in my head) 6 42.9%
Sometimes 4 28.6%
Rarely 0 0%
Never 2 14.3%

How did you feel about tutoring?

Loved it! 5 35.7%
It was okay 8 57.1%
Didn't really like it 1 7.1%
Hated it 0 0%

My favorite part of tutoring was....

left blank
reading
Helping
reading to the kids, everything, nothing to say no about
Read with Jaxon
helping the kids and helping them read better
reading and everything else
Seeing the kids read
reading to the kindergartners and first graders
the games
we made games and practiced together

My least favorite part of tutoring was....

left blank
nothing
Explaining
Nothing
Is when I have to go
when they did not pay attention
it was loud
reading
I liked all the things
being tired

I liked reading to my partner
more than just reading to myself 4 28.6%
the same as when I read to myself 3 21.4%
I prefer to read to myself 7 50%

Do you feel like you became a better reader because of tutoring?
Yes 6 42.9%
No 1 7.1%
Not sure 7 50%

How did reading to the little kids help you?

- Made me feel good about my reading 9 64.3%
- Helped me add expression 6 42.9%
- Helped me ask questions 6 42.9%
- Helped me learn how to assist them with their reading 4 28.6%
- Helped me make a new friend 4 28.6%
- Helped my reading improve 6 42.9%
- Challenged me to read new books 5 35.7%
- Other 1 7.1%

I got to read with the same person...

- Everytime 5 35.7%
- Sometimes 9 64.3%
- Never 0 0%

Did you want to read to the same person?

- Yes 7 50%
- No 2 14.3%
- Didn't care 5 35.7%
I'd like to keep tutoring in the future

Yes  10
No  3
Depends (tell me why) 1

Finish this statement: Reading with younger students....

is fun
is fun.
left blank
Is fun and I want to keep reading
is fun!! ;)
it helped me read to myself
is fun because you can read to all of the students