



The Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™: Achieving Reading Fluency and Developing Self-esteem in Elementary School Students

By Mary Chipman, Parent Volunteer, and Nicole Roy, Resource Teacher
Lord Tennyson Elementary School, Vancouver, British Columbia

Editor's note: The evaluation of the Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™ can be read on p. 9 in this issue of the ACIE Newsletter. The Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™ materials are available to individual members of Canadian Parents for French (CPF) free of charge (except for cost recovery of DVD and mailing). Schools that implement the program must also be associate members of CPF. For more information, see www.cpf.ca/English/FAQ.

The advent of the knowledge economy and its ever-increasing reliance on the Internet and other media platforms has placed greater weight on attaining varied and sophisticated literacy skills. Nonetheless, achieving a firm foundation in basic literacy remains a challenge for many primary students, an issue that is even more problematic in immersion education.

In 1998, Nicole Roy, a resource teacher at Lord Tennyson Elementary, a French immersion school in Vancouver, Canada, already had established a successful drop-in literacy program run by parent volunteers, including Mary Chipman, to prepare Grade 3 students for the introduction of English-language curriculum in Grade 4. In our distinct capacities as a parent volunteer and a resource teacher, we were also involved with a research project run by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) called *Exploring Literacy: How Teachers and Parents Can Collaborate to Support Early Literacy* (BCTF, 1999). At a parent feedback session during the BCTF project's research phase, a participant spoke enthusiastically about Reading Circles and how primary students benefited academically and socially by working one-on-one with high school students and by practicing reading out loud in



Charlotte works with Kraig on reading strategies during a peer tutoring session at Lord Tennyson Elementary in Vancouver.

front of the reading circle (Duncan, 1999). Using this research as a springboard, we began a dialogue at Lord Tennyson about creating a support program that would improve the literacy skills of primary immersion students with minor reading difficulties.

During our discussions, an important observation of student academic performance mirrored one of the dominant outcomes of contemporary literacy research, namely, the importance of achieving grade level literacy by the end of Grade 3. In our French immersion program this issue has greater significance given the introduction of the dual language program, as well as a more demanding, content-rich curriculum, in Grade 4. Indeed, a leading cause of attrition from immersion comes from students experiencing reading difficulties and/or poor French oral skills in these pivotal grades. However, a lack of self-confidence and social skills, as well as low levels of concentration, have also been identified as reasons for transferring out of immersion. The general lack of specific support programs to aid students in difficulty also weakens the immersion experience (Obadia & Theriault, 1995).

These challenges are what motivated us to forge a partnership to develop the Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™. Not only did it succeed in turning the corner on reading for primary students with minor difficulties but, importantly, it also ignited an interest in books in the process. Other outcomes, which we did not anticipate, extended the reach of the program to touch the lives of its participants. The peer tutoring program increased the self-esteem of students, and promoted a spirit of leadership, caring, and volunteerism that resulted in a more cohesive and positive school community.

In 2005, Canadian Parents for French (CPF), an advocacy group for French language education, commissioned us to produce how-to manuals in English and French, and a companion instructional DVD for availability to schools nationwide. This article explains the program's key elements and benefits. Interested readers considering implementing peer tutoring in their schools can access these materials at <http://www.cpf.ca>. The Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™ has been researched by the University of British Columbia in two different studies: one quantitative, (Bournot-Trites, Lee, & Séror, 2003); and one qualitative (Bournot-Trites, 2004).

In the Canadian immersion classroom, students face the academic challenge that their second language learning is mostly confined to the hours spent in the classroom. Generally, few families speak the second language being studied by their children, with the result that there is less opportunity in the home to reinforce classroom-acquired language skills, either orally or through reading.

While primary students who are experiencing moderate to severe reading difficulties are given extra support by resource teachers, those with minor reading difficulties may not have any specific support outside the classroom. The Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™ was developed with these students in mind. The objective of the program is to raise their reading abilities to grade-level fluency through guided reading sessions with specially-trained intermediate students as tutors.

After seven years of implementing the program at Lord Tennyson, the advantages of this program can easily be seen. Primary students with minor reading difficulties receive specially-focused academic support and can achieve grade level fluency after 2-3 terms of peer tutoring. Their progress within the program is mirrored in the classroom, where the literacy achievement of the class as a whole improves as well. Readers may transfer aspects of their peer tutoring experience to their class. Typically, the top readers intuitively share their own reading strategies with others during group or buddy reading. However, near fluent readers, having learnt a set of reading strategies in the peer tutoring program, may also contribute to the literacy achievement of the class by sharing or reinforcing these techniques when paired with readers with more significant reading difficulties. This exchange of reading practices contributes to the momentum toward literacy. Over time, classes become more 'homogeneous' in terms of reading ability, with the result that they progress in a more dynamic fashion.

The Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™ contains key elements that make it a distinctive and effective mechanism to improve literacy which, ultimately, also succeeds in acknowledging all members of the

school community and positively reinforcing their relationship with each other and the school at large.

Forging Partnerships

Schools embarking on the program must embrace the concept as a partnership with parents, show flexibility and adapt as needed to support the initiative. The core team (the teacher and parent coordinators) is responsible for organizing the program and ideally should have the vision and passion to do this over the long-term. The two coordinators continually act as equal and respectful partners in their own distinct capacities. The teacher absorbs additional responsibilities and tasks, and should feel comfortable doing so over time. The parent supports the education of all participating students and the work of the teachers, while exercising discretion and respecting the school culture. Ongoing open communication amongst all stakeholders is essential for a long-lasting, successful program.

The school administrator ensures that the peer tutoring program meets the goals of the school. Intermediate and primary teachers also should approve the program's objectives and methodology, as well as accept the possible additional work and changes to classroom routine that may result. The parent body also has a role to play, in lending support through the funding of books and materials, as well as contributing volunteers to help organize and run the program.

Promoting Reading

The essential thrust of the peer tutoring program is to promote the love of reading. Working with slightly older peers outside the classroom in comfortable surroundings makes reading special. Having a wide selection of appealing, well-designed and colourful books that are different from classroom and library collections reinforces the quality of the experience. A special effort is made to select books ranging from absurd stories to interesting science or sports books that appeal particularly to boys. Periodically enhancing the collection ensures not only a plentiful supply in each reading level, but helps make it fresh and exciting for the readers and tutors. The combination of working with peers who themselves clearly enjoy the experience, and having access to compelling books makes reading fun, even for the reluctant reader.

Including Peer Tutors

Peer tutors are indispensable to the program. Averaging 3-4 years older than the readers, tutors bring enthusiasm, empathy and a non-judgmental attitude to draw out and encourage their younger counterparts to improve their reading. The difference in age is not the significant factor in the tutor-reader relationship; rather it is the difference in their literacy levels. Trained tutors have to have enough language ability to correct and instruct their readers using the program's strategies. Peer tutors are not expected to be perfect; indeed, in an immersion set-

ting, it is accepted that they may occasionally need to seek the help of the teacher coordinator and/or parent volunteers to clarify and explain vocabulary or points of grammar. Incidentally, this can be viewed as a teachable moment, as seeing tutors ask for help gives readers “permission” to make mistakes and learn from them.

The special value of tutors lies in the casual relationship and gentle guidance they offer their readers. Readers feel less inhibited reading out loud with their tutors, precisely because they are not formal teachers. The tutors are selected, amongst other criteria, for their capacity to be understanding; in fact, they may have had similar reading difficulties in the past. This allows them the opportunity to offer readers support and share techniques they have used to overcome reading difficulties.

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Involving Parent Volunteers

The principle of involving parents in multiple ways is key to the success and the unique nature of the program. At the most active level is the parent coordinator, part of the core team, who helps organize and implement the program three times a year. The parent coordinator also recruits interested parent volunteers from the school community and helps train them to assist in the program. Parents of tutors and readers have a valuable role to play as well, by providing support and encouragement to their children. As previously mentioned, the school’s parent body may also contribute financially to the program’s acquisition of books and necessary materials.

What parental involvement achieves is the reinforcement of the relationship between home and school. Parents are seen actively supporting and helping organize a school-based program, which, as studies have shown, improves their children’s academic performance. Additionally, parent volunteers may use the strategies taught in the program when reading with their own children. Such a transfer of strategies to the home fosters family literacy in that program participants, parents, tutors and readers alike, enthusiastically engage in reading activities in the home, reinforcing what is learnt at school.

Emphasizing Social Responsibility/Leadership

Social responsibility and leadership form essential aspects of the social development curriculum for intermediate students in British Columbia. Children are eager to have an active role in their community, yet are rarely called upon to do so in an academic setting. Participating in the peer tutoring program allows tutors to contribute to the school community in a vital way. Through their readers’ progress, tutors can see the positive influence they have, and this success inspires them to

continue giving back to society. Having opportunities to develop their leadership skills prepares intermediate students for the transition to high school and the growing demands of the adult world. Tutoring often becomes a vocation for these students, with many of them helping younger siblings at home, tutoring privately, and/or continuing the practice later on at high school by joining similar programs.

Supporting Volunteerism

This spirit of leadership dovetails with the principle of volunteerism in the program, which is exemplified by the efforts of participating tutors and parents. Intermediate students are keen to take on increased school responsibilities and, consequently, form a hitherto untapped resource for volunteers. Seeing tutors actively engaged in the program inspires readers to emulate them in the future. The magic of the program is that over the years, readers become tutors, proud, eager and able to help others achieve the literacy success they themselves did: indeed, that is the true accomplishment of the program.

The program's parent volunteers are also role-models, not only for their own children, but for all students who see them involved to such a significant degree in a school-based program. This exposure to volunteering hopefully lays the foundation for students to follow this valuable practice in the future.

Benefits

The program has positive results for all participants. Readers most clearly benefit by showing improvement in various aspects of literacy: reading proficiency, reading mechanics (decoding), comprehension and increased concentration while reading. Their attitude to reading and the pleasure they derive from it are enhanced as well. Consequently, their confidence in mastering literacy and the enjoyment they have reading contribute to their greater attachment to the immersion program in particular, and school in general.

Parents of readers also benefit from the program. Emotionally they are comforted by the knowledge that the school is addressing the needs of their children. Once they see their children progress academically with the aid of peer tutoring, they are also more likely to keep them in immersion. As readers become tutors, their parents see the positive change in their roles, and are proud of their academic success and social development.

Tutors gain organizational, teaching and leadership skills. Socially and emotionally tutors make gains in self-confidence and in their sense of importance in their own community. Beyond this, tutors themselves show some improvement in their own literacy skills. It is one thing to understand academic material; it is quite another having to teach it. Explaining vocabulary and grammar forces tutors to learn the material—even if it is at a lower grade level than their own—in a more profound and complex manner. Tutors also display a greater enjoyment of reading and tend to read more frequently. The oral skills of tutors also

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improve by having to converse casually with younger peers. For tutors, getting some experience teaching also has the somewhat unexpected benefit of their acquiring an appreciation of teachers and the demands of their profession.

Parent volunteers emerge from the program with a greater awareness of how their school works, and their children's routine and place in it. Most importantly, as program participants, they feel a particular sense of belonging to the school.

Teachers of readers are gratified with their students' enhanced literacy skills, pleasure in reading, and improved attitude towards school. Similarly, teachers of tutors appreciate their students becoming more responsible, organized, and adept at teaching, all of which transfers positively to their classroom work.

Resource teachers may benefit as well in the long run, by having fewer students requiring their services. Near fluent readers fall in the "grey zone," and, in these primary years, may either overcome their reading obstacles and improve to grade level fluency or, conversely, may encounter increased difficulty reading and require formal remediation. Making peer tutoring available to these "grey zone" students may give them the extra boost needed at this crucial time in their literacy development to achieve fluency. Additionally, peer tutoring can be offered to those students leaving remediation as an additional support in their transition to grade-level reading fluency.

For the school, the tutoring program can become an accepted and welcome part of its culture. Participants in this program are all recognized at a year-end school assembly, which highlights the profile and community awareness of the program. Students entering the intermediate years look forward to the opportunity and challenge of tutoring. Siblings of tutors and readers know about the program and flow into it, either as participants or supportive observers. Readers enjoy the short break with classroom routine to connect with a "cool," older peer. The subtext of this is that the program is a fundamentally positive experience, as evidenced by the desire of most readers to become tutors in the future.

This cross-grade relationship of tutors and readers has other advantages that extend beyond the program. Encouraged to chat with their readers throughout the tutoring session, tutors develop a caring relationship with their younger peers. On the playground and in other aspects of school life, tutors will look out for their readers and happily interact with them. The self-esteem of both tutors and readers is strengthened by this special relationship: tutors gain confidence in their new skills and in the knowledge that they have helped others; while readers gain confidence in their improved reading abilities and in their enhanced relationship with their older peers. Indeed, the interaction between readers and tutors outside the program could be viewed as an effective anti-bullying mechanism.

Over the long term, the power of the program lies in its emotional impact on its participants—staff, parents and students—who come

together, united in their desire to promote the love of reading. Parents feel they are contributing in a meaningful way to support the work of teachers and, consequently, feel a greater attachment to and appreciation of their children's school. For its part, the staff may find that there is more awareness and understanding of their classroom situation. Peer tutoring has the potential to bolster the reading and communication abilities of their students, skills which enrich their intellectual and personal lives. Giving students additional responsibilities through tutoring demonstrates that the school respects them and welcomes the contributions they can make to improve school life. The students, in turn, respect the school more for acknowledging them in this special way.

Running the Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™ for so many years has been a most gratifying and, in some ways, surprising experience for us both. There is nothing more exciting than witnessing the transformation of struggling readers to fluent ones, and seeing the doors to academic success and social fulfillment open for both primary and intermediate participants. We have found that fostering the idea of service to the community builds a more congenial and positive school atmosphere. It is our hope that students who have experienced such a community feel in their elementary school may carry that attitude of inclusion and influence to the high school level, and, hopefully, as adults committed to making positive contributions to society.

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Key Points to Consider for Implementation of the Peer Tutoring Literacy Program™

- ☛ Set aside 30 minutes twice a week
- ☛ Recruit tutors from grade 5
- ☛ Recommend candidates for tutoring from grade 2
- ☛ Decide which classes will participate
- ☛ Change lesson plans so tutors and readers are not missing silent reading time

Likely tutoring candidates are identified by the classroom teacher and/or other teachers who can attest to the candidates':

- Interest in the tutoring program
- Willingness to commit to 8 or 10 weeks of tutoring, twice a week
- Regular attendance and punctuality
- Ability to work independently
- Organizational skills (homework and projects completed on time)
- Good work habits
- Patience, empathy and ease of relations with younger children
- Maturity and leadership qualities
- Ability to handle discipline issues

Teachers should choose readers who can benefit from the tutoring program to become fluent readers and who exhibit the following characteristics:

- Are nearly independent readers without major decoding difficulties
- Could have had previous remedial help with reading, but will not receive tutoring and remedial support at the same time
- Are eager to learn
- Have regular attendance and are punctual
- Are comfortable being taught by older students
- Have good work habits and a positive attitude

Sample Budget:

Books	\$500.00
Pencils, stickers, charts, etc.	\$50.00
Boxes for materials	\$50.00
Presents, lunches, rewards, etc.	\$100.00
Boxes/rolling stands	\$500.00
TOTAL	\$1,200.00

Adapted from Keith, J. & Bernier, R. (2005). Canadian Parents for French, New Brunswick Branch, Position Paper, Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick. Retrieved October 10, 2006 from www.cpfnb.com.