

Is Classwide Peer Tutoring an Effective Strategy for Special Education Students?

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### Abstract

Classwide peer tutoring (CWPT) is a strategy that involves short sessions multiple times a week where students work in pairs. Each student takes on the role of both tutor and tutee during the session and points are earned for correct answers and following procedure. This paper examines the effectiveness of CWPT for the whole class from an academic and social perspective.

Highlights of the benefits for various special needs and how to apply the strategy across multiple subjects is also included. CWPT has much research to support its effectiveness for all students. It is an excellent option for schools to accommodate for the needs of special education students when developing a full SPED program is not possible. It works well for schools that have a small staff, low budget, limited or no special education program, and little time for teacher training and program implementation.

### Is Classwide Peer Tutoring an Effective Strategy for Special Education Students?

Many programs and strategies implemented to help special education students cost schools a great sum of money and require multiple professionals to teach, organize, and supervise. However, there is a strategy that is proven to be effective for many types of learning that costs little to nothing to implement and lets the students become the teachers. Classwide peer tutoring (CWPT) is a viable, cost-effective, self-supporting strategy that can be adapted for use in any school for all subjects.

#### **What is Classwide Peer Tutoring?**

CWPT has four main components: highly structured teaching procedure, competing teams, daily points with public display, and direct practice of skills (Block & Oberweiser, 1995). In this strategy, students work in pairs with a highly scripted lesson plan in the roles of tutor and tutee. It fits well with practicing vocabulary, spelling, math facts, reading, content knowledge, and physical education skills. It should be used to practice words and skills that have already been taught in a way for students of all abilities to participate and improve.

Teachers begin by creating a lesson plan for students to follow that contains a script for the tutor and examples of feedback to give to the tutee for correct or incorrect answers. Tutors correct tutees when something is done incorrectly and then give an opportunity for the tutee to try again after being corrected. Students are put into pairs, which are typically changed each week. Sessions typically last about twenty minutes, which include ten minutes with one student acting as a tutor and the other student acting as a tutee. Then, the roles switch for the second half of the session (Greenwood, 2001).

Teachers need to model, practice, and give feedback, especially in the beginning so that students follow the procedure correctly. During a session, the tutor should give points for

answers and the teacher should be walking around awarding additional points to groups following the correct procedure. Pre-tests and post-tests can be administered to track the progress of the students (Greenwood, 2001).

### **Is CWPT Effective?**

CWPT has been proven to be effective for various age group, special needs, and subjects. It is effective because of these important qualities that are built into the strategy: one-on-one work, immediate error correction, fast pace, multiple opportunities to respond, teacher and learner roles, written and oral responses, inclusion, and addressing of social and academic needs (Greenwood, 2001).

Students learn better when they are actively engaged. A teacher cannot address the individual needs of each student at one time, so the one-on-one time helps make instruction more effective. Students are able to keep on track because the sessions are short and at a fast pace. If there are any misunderstandings or mistakes, they can be quickly fixed because feedback is given right away with correction from the tutor.

Students get to become “prosumers,” producers and consumers of education, through being in the role of both tutor and tutee (Bond & Castagnera, 2006). When students are in the role of teaching something, they learn the material in a new, deeper way as they have to first understand the content before they are able to teach and help someone else.

CWPT can also be effective for improving the social atmosphere of the classroom. Students practice giving helpful feedback, get to work together with new partners, and take turns being the teacher and the student. This can help improve how students interact with each other as they learn to cooperate and see that everyone can teach to and learn from one another, rather than thinking only those with special needs require help (Bowman-Perrott, 2007).

Two studies surveyed students and teachers on their feelings about CWPT. Both students and teachers rated the experience positively (Greenwood, 2001) (Taylor & Alber, 2003). When students enjoy a strategy, the results are more effective. When teachers have a positive view towards a strategy, they will be more enthusiastic about implementing and improving on it and making sure that it is successful.

CWPT can become ineffective because of certain factors, including: reduced time in tutoring sessions, unchallenging material, and low quality tutoring (Greenwood, 2001). In Greenwood's (2001) research with English language learners, he found that students who had multiple absences or classrooms that had sessions fewer than three times per week did not see positive results from CWPT. This strategy has to be consistently used so that students become comfortable with the procedure and get repeated practice of the material in order for it to become automatic. When students do not have sessions at least three times a week or miss out on lessons from absences, the effectiveness becomes much lower.

If material fails to challenge students, it will not help them improve. If sessions are used to complete "easy" tasks and do not increase in difficulty as students progress, then they will only be able to master the simple material and not progress to a new level. Students will also become bored and disengaged if the sessions are too easy for them. In order to keep a fast, active pace, students need to be challenged, while also working at a level that is within reach.

In CWPT, the only professional is the teacher who models beforehand and observes during sessions. Students act as the tutors, so they may provide low quality tutoring if they are not provided with the correct training and materials. Teachers need to have students working with material that has already been taught so that they have a base level of knowledge. Next, students need to see a model of how to conduct a tutoring sessions and how to be a good tutee.

As students begin their first sessions, the teacher needs to be close in order to provide feedback on how students are doing. While in the sessions, a script should be provided so that students know what to say to their tutees. Strict adherence to the scripts and the procedures of proper feedback must be followed in order to have effective tutoring sessions (Greenwood, 2001).

### **How Effective is CWPT for Students with Special Needs?**

CWPT is a great strategy to pair high performing students with low performing students. Because sessions are scripted and designed by the classroom teacher, students of all abilities can participate. There has been much research to prove the effectiveness of CWPT for students with special needs. This strategy has many aspects that can be utilized to address the specific needs of various disabilities. With the rise of inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom, it is important that a strategy can be implemented that can involve the entire class as the best way to meet the needs of all students at the same time.

#### **Students with ADHD**

Harlacher, Roberts, & Merrell (2006) researched and compiled a list of classwide interventions that are effective for students with ADHD. They recommend the use of CWPT because it is cost effective and involves all students.

Students with ADHD struggle with keeping engaged. The short sessions and high engagement of CWPT work well with the needs of students with ADHD because it increases their time on task. What these students can miss out on in the whole class instruction can be reinforced in the tutoring sessions to ensure that students understand. CWPT has also shown to have a significant increase in on-task behavior and academic performance for students with ADHD (Harlacher, Roberts, & Merrell, 2006).

#### **Students with EBD**

Students are not trained in handling behavioral issues, so using CWPT with students who have emotional or behavioral disorders may be difficult. Bowman-Perrot (2007) studied the effectiveness of CWPT with classes of students at a school for students with EBD. Multiple classes were used that included a control, classes using CWPT, and classes using CWPT combined with Classwide Self-Management (CWSM). CWSM is a self-assessment of classroom behaviors paired with feedback and positive reinforcement of desired behaviors. Results showed moderate success in the classes using CWPT alone, but the ones that combined CWPT with CWSM showed more success (Bowman-Perrot, 2007).

The study was successful in showing many positive effects for difficulties that EBD students face. Students with EBD practiced giving positive feedback, working cooperatively, and accepting peer correction, thereby improving social interactions with classmates (Bowman-Perrot, 2007). Bowman-Perrot (2007) found that the students in the study were able to continue to use appropriate praise and feedback in their interactions outside of the CWPT sessions. Social interaction is the area that students with EBD struggle with the most because classmates usually have a negative view of them based on their behavior in the classroom. Teaching behavior and social skills can be difficult to do in the classroom among students who already have learned these skills, so CWPT can be a great way for students with EBD to work on this skill.

### **Students with Learning Disabilities**

Students with learning disabilities usually struggle with one specific area, such as math or reading. Because the issue is specific, CWPT fits well to help these students because they get to practice the essential skill(s) in an active way with immediate feedback, get extra opportunities to see the material, are able to remain in the general education classroom, and get to interact with the material in a different way by being a tutee and a tutor.

Taylor and Alber (2003) studied how CWPT affected students who had learning disabilities in the area of spelling. Their baseline data was collected from having students complete work in a basal spelling series. The testing of CWPT involved spelling practice sessions of twenty minutes, three times a week. There was a significant improvement in the number of words the students could spell after doing CWPT versus the baseline data.

### **Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

It is becoming more common for students with Autism to be included in the general classroom (Ayvazo & Ward, 2010). When they are not fully included, they are usually together with the class for classes such as physical education. Ayvazo & Ward (2010) researched how CWPT would work in a physical education class with students who have Autism. They found that the use of CWPT increased the engagement of students with autism from a previous level of little to no engagement with material and peers. As with students who have EBD, social interaction can be difficult for students with Autism. CWPT has been shown to increase engagement as well as providing an opportunity to develop social skills.

### **Students who are English Language Learners**

Students who are English language learners typically face issues with low vocabulary knowledge, spelling errors, and difficulty with reading and writing. All of these weaknesses can be addressed in CWPT sessions. Partners can work on identifying vocabulary together using flashcards, practice spelling words with one student speaking while the other writes, and practice reading and writing together (Greenwood, 2001). When ELL students are able to interact with classmates, they are able to improve English skills by using the active processes of writing and speaking more often than they do when in a whole class setting. In a whole group, especially in the general classroom, ELL students can easily remain quiet and disengaged while the other



students participate. CWPT sessions allow them to not only work with a partner, but be confident in a tutor role which will help increase their confidence in using English.

### **How Can CWPT Be Implemented Across Various Subjects?**

CWPT is not only effective for vocabulary and spelling, but can be adapted to fit into any subject. It has been researched for use in the core subjects, adapted for teaching skills in physical education classes, and tested for content area subjects to develop greater interaction with content.

#### **Language Arts**

CWPT can be used as intervention for various areas in language arts. For example, in Taylor and Alber's (2003) study, students worked on spelling skills by doing ten minutes with the tutor saying a word and then the tutee spelling it orally. If the student was correct, he would get two points. If not, the tutor spelled it orally for the student. Then the tutee would write it three times while saying it out loud.

Flashcards could be used with a picture or vocabulary word on one side and examples and/or a definition on the backside. Students could follow a similar procedure of looking at the flashcard and providing a definition or example and getting points of correct. If incorrect, the tutor can give an answer and the tutee can try again.

Students can also practice oral reading and reading comprehension by taking time to read out loud while the other student can listen and correct any oral miscues noticed. Students could also practice asking comprehension questions that could be answered orally or on paper, depending on what level the students are at and what skills need to be practiced.

#### **Mathematics**

It is simple to implement CWPT for multiplication facts for grades five and below. A study done on the effectiveness of CWPT for multiplication facts showed positive results

(Hawkins et al., 2009). In this situation students would take turns showing flashcards to each other, but this differs from the typical exchange that is often seen in classrooms because the session is scripted to include feedback and correction.

CWPT can still be utilized in middle and high school math classrooms once students have already mastered math facts. Allsopp (1997) conducted a study in middle school algebra classrooms to test the effectiveness of CWPT with problem solving skills. In tutoring sessions, the tutor walked the tutee through the problem solving steps of division equations and word problems. As students learned the procedure, the tutee can try to describe the steps, with the tutor giving feedback and correction along the way.

### **Science and Social Studies**

Bannister (2008) studied how to use CWPT in content areas such as science and social studies. His subjects were in middle school. He designed the tutoring sessions to include first a brief vocabulary flashcard exercise, next, an oral reading of the text selection, and ending with comprehension questions. This allows students to cover the vocabulary and text again and check that what was read was comprehended.

Science and social studies texts are read for a different purpose than books read for entertainment. Students need to comprehend a concept and remember details, so more than one reading will be necessary. With CWPT, students will get to first see the material in a whole group setting, and then again in the tutoring session, thus increasing their comprehension and the amount of details remembered from the text.

### **Physical Education**

Block and Oberweiser (1995) tested CWPT in a physical education class. They found that physical educators don't feel prepared to teach diverse learners, despite physical education being

one of the classes that students with special needs are put into to have time with the general education students. In the state of Virginia, only nine out of one hundred four physical education teachers had training in adaptive physical education (Block and Oberweiser, 1995).

The procedure to adapt CWPT for use in physical education would be to adapt the skill to fit the many levels of the students. The teacher would begin with demonstrating the skills. Then, one group models in front of the whole class. Next, the groups are formed and students practice for a brief amount of time. Students are brought back together to go over the procedure and then go off once again while the teacher walks around and observes. Students are equipped with a clipboard that contains a checklist of things to look for when a student is performing the skill, a picture if appropriate, and feedback cues. Checklists can be modified for various skills (Block and Oberweiser, 1995).

In this study, students completed a jumping roping unit. A student with special needs had the accommodation of having to jump over a jump rope on the ground, rather than the typical jump rope movement. CWPT in physical education allows all students to be engaged and receive feedback on skills because the physical education teacher cannot watch and provide feedback to all students performing a skill at the same time (Block and Oberweiser, 1995).

### **What Are the Benefits of Using CWPT in a Lutheran School?**

The majority of Lutheran schools do not have access to nor can support a complete special education program. Many can receive support with limited services from a nearby public school, however, many of the special needs of students are not able to be met sufficiently in a Lutheran school. CWPT is an option that can currently work in any Lutheran school. Teachers will need to put in a reasonable amount of work in to start the setup, but there is no need for extra personnel, funding, or many hours and sessions of training.

Bowmann-Perrot's study (2007) showed that CWPT is still effective in small class sizes, despite there being fewer combinations of partners available. The majority of Lutheran schools have small class sizes, so that will make a difference in the number of partner combinations. While students could potentially get bored with seeing the same partners again, because it changes each week, it should not be a large issue.

Block and Oberwiser (1995) noted that the initial startup does take some time from the teacher, but once the program has been established, it is easy to adjust week to week. Teachers can be trained on how to implement CWPT in one workshop, ideally in the summer or the end of the school year so that time is available to prepare for the next year. Since Lutheran schools lack the resources in special education that public schools have, it is very important that a solution can be found that will take minimal additional teacher preparation, little cost, and include the whole class since extra adults are not readily available.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, classwide peer tutoring has shown to be effective in keeping students on task, improving social interactions and engagement, and retention of the material studied for students of various abilities and needs in the general education classroom. It is a minimal training, no cost, inclusive option that involves students of all levels and abilities. It can be easily built into the general education classroom lessons to accommodate for special needs without taking away teacher time from the whole class to work with a small group. It also has positive effects on the social atmosphere of the classroom, which is one of the weakest areas for students with special needs. It is a viable option for use in Lutheran schools which do not have access to the same special education resources as public schools.

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