

Improving Reading Comprehension and Social Studies Knowledge Among Middle School Students With Disabilities

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Study Background and Purpose

Students in secondary social studies classrooms are academically diverse. It is common for students with high-incidence disabilities (i.e., learning disabilities, other health impairments, behavior disorders) to be included in the general classroom, often without support from a special education teacher. This academic diversity presents a challenge for teachers when using text to teach social studies content.

Research suggests that the social studies classroom is a promising area to improve reading outcomes for students with disabilities (Lee & Spratley, 2010; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief School Officers, 2010; Scruggs, 2012). Many reading interventions using social studies content have had a large, positive effect on content and comprehension outcomes among students with learning disabilities.

Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text (PACT) serves the dual purpose of improving middle school students' content area knowledge and reading comprehension of social studies text.

The research team worked closely with secondary social studies teachers for 2 years to design the evidence-based PACT components:

- **Comprehension Canopy:** An engaging springboard into the lesson
- **Essential Words:** Key vocabulary related to the unit
- **Knowledge Acquisition:** Text-based instruction and reading
- **Team-Based Learning:** Comprehension checks
- **Knowledge Application:** Content knowledge applied to a novel, engaging activity

In two prior randomized controlled trials, PACT was proven to be effective for a broad sample of students (Vaughn et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., 2015). It is important to know whether PACT is also effective for students with disabilities who are included in social studies classes. The purpose of this study was to examine PACT efficacy for students with disabilities who were included in the two previous randomized controlled trials.

Method and Measures

This study represents a secondary analysis of data collected across two prior randomized controlled trials (Vaughn et al., 2013; 2015). In those studies, a total of 19 teachers participated. Each teacher's classes were randomly assigned to either the treatment (PACT) or comparison (business as usual) condition. This means that teachers used the PACT instructional practices in some classes (treatment) but not others (business as usual). In total, across the 55 social studies classes, 31 were treatment classes and 24 were comparison classes. In both conditions, teachers taught the same social studies content. Only the PACT classes received the PACT instructional practices. A total of 130 students with disabilities were included in this study, most of whom were identified with a learning disability or language impairment.

Before the start of the school year, teachers participated in a 1-day (8-hour) professional development workshop covering the intervention implementation, the individual PACT components, and study design features related to maintaining a “firewall” between treatment and comparison conditions (because teach-

ers would lead both PACT and comparison classes). Teachers were also provided in-class coaching in their treatment classes.

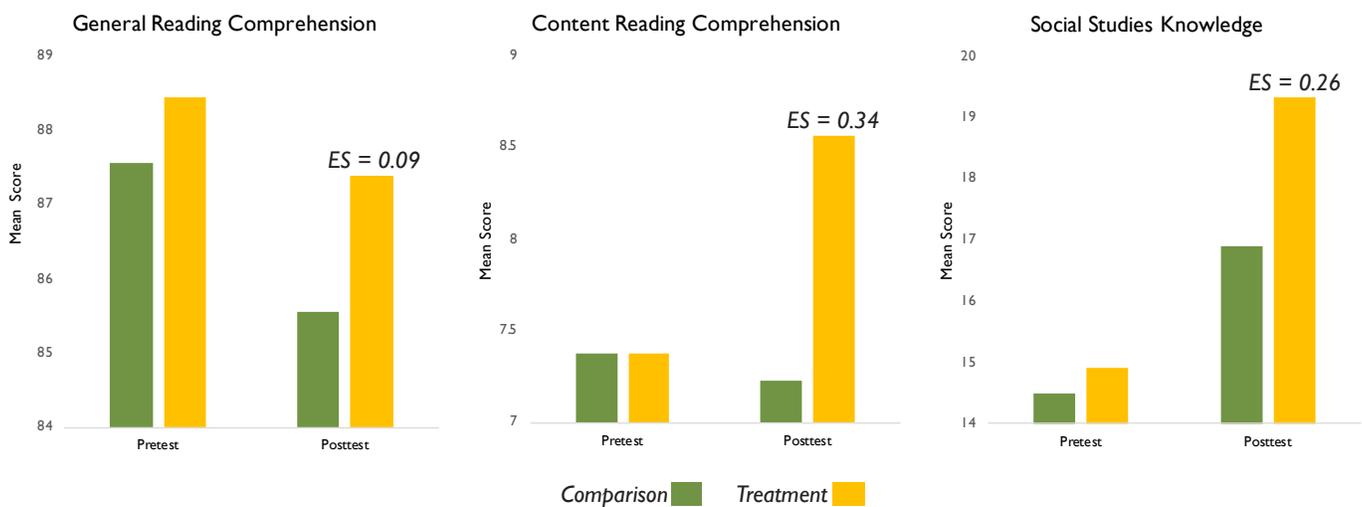
Students in the treatment classes received three PACT instructional units in 10-day cycles that aligned with the district curriculum map. Teachers received semi-scripted lesson plans and a daily schedule identifying the components to be delivered on each day. In total, teachers implemented 30 sessions of the intervention, taking between 6 and 10 weeks. In the comparison classes, students worked at the same pace and received the same content using a district-approved curriculum and state-developed scope and sequence (without PACT practices).

The study used three measures for pretests and posttests:

- Gates-MacGinitie Reading Comprehension Subtest: A standardized measure of general reading comprehension
- ASK Reading Comprehension: A content reading comprehension assessment on topics from the intervention
- ASK Content Knowledge: A researcher-developed measure of the social studies knowledge from the PACT intervention

Results

The PACT treatment group outperformed the comparison group on both measures of social studies at posttest. The findings demonstrate support for PACT in improving both knowledge acquisition and reading comprehension within content area instruction among students with disabilities served in the general education social studies classroom. These group differences were statistically significant. This means that the group differences were not due to chance. Instead, they were due to the PACT instructional practices.



Implications for Practice

- Social studies teachers can meet the needs of students with disabilities by using the PACT intervention.
- PACT can improve content knowledge and reading comprehension in social studies for students with disabilities.
- Using PACT is an effective way to meet the Common Core State Standards that focus on learning content from expository texts.

- Teachers reported that PACT is a feasible approach to implement in the classroom.
- PACT allows the integration of lecture-style teaching (preferred by many social studies teachers) along with PACT activities. Findings suggest that by increasing emerging pedagogies in the classroom, students have improved outcomes.
- Training time for a teacher to use PACT is only 1 professional development day.
- Students enjoy the team-learning components of PACT, which creates a more interactive classroom.

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