

Middle School Reading Comprehension and Content Learning Intervention for Below-Average Readers

Swanson, E., Wanzek, J., Vaughn, S., Fall, A.-M., Roberts, G., Hall, C., & Miller, V. L. (2017). Middle school reading comprehension and content learning intervention for below-average readers. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 33(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2015.1072068>

Study Background and Purpose

Middle school content area teachers face a significant curriculum challenge with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The standards require that teachers broaden the lens to include reading expository texts and improving comprehension in social studies. To accomplish this goal requires increased emphasis on improving students' understanding and learning from complex texts.

When teachers are asked why more text reading instruction is not incorporated into social studies content, they often cite low-quality writing in textbooks and students' inability to read (Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1991).

To meet this challenge, **Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text (PACT)** was designed to improve middle school students' content area knowledge and 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

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of PACT for students with reading difficulties when delivered across an entire year, compared to the typical 12 to 20 weeks from previous studies (see Vaughn et al., 2013; 2015; 2017).

Method and Measures

A total of three teachers and 78 students who scored below average on the state standardized assessment for seventh grade participated in this randomized controlled trial. Students were randomly assigned to either a PACT social studies class (45 students) or a business-as-usual social studies class (33 students). The teacher who taught the PACT social studies class (treatment) had experience in delivering the PACT components. The other two teachers taught business-as-usual (comparison) classes. Students across all classes learned the same social studies content following the same state-developed social studies standards and scope and sequence. Only students in the PACT class received the PACT instructional practices.

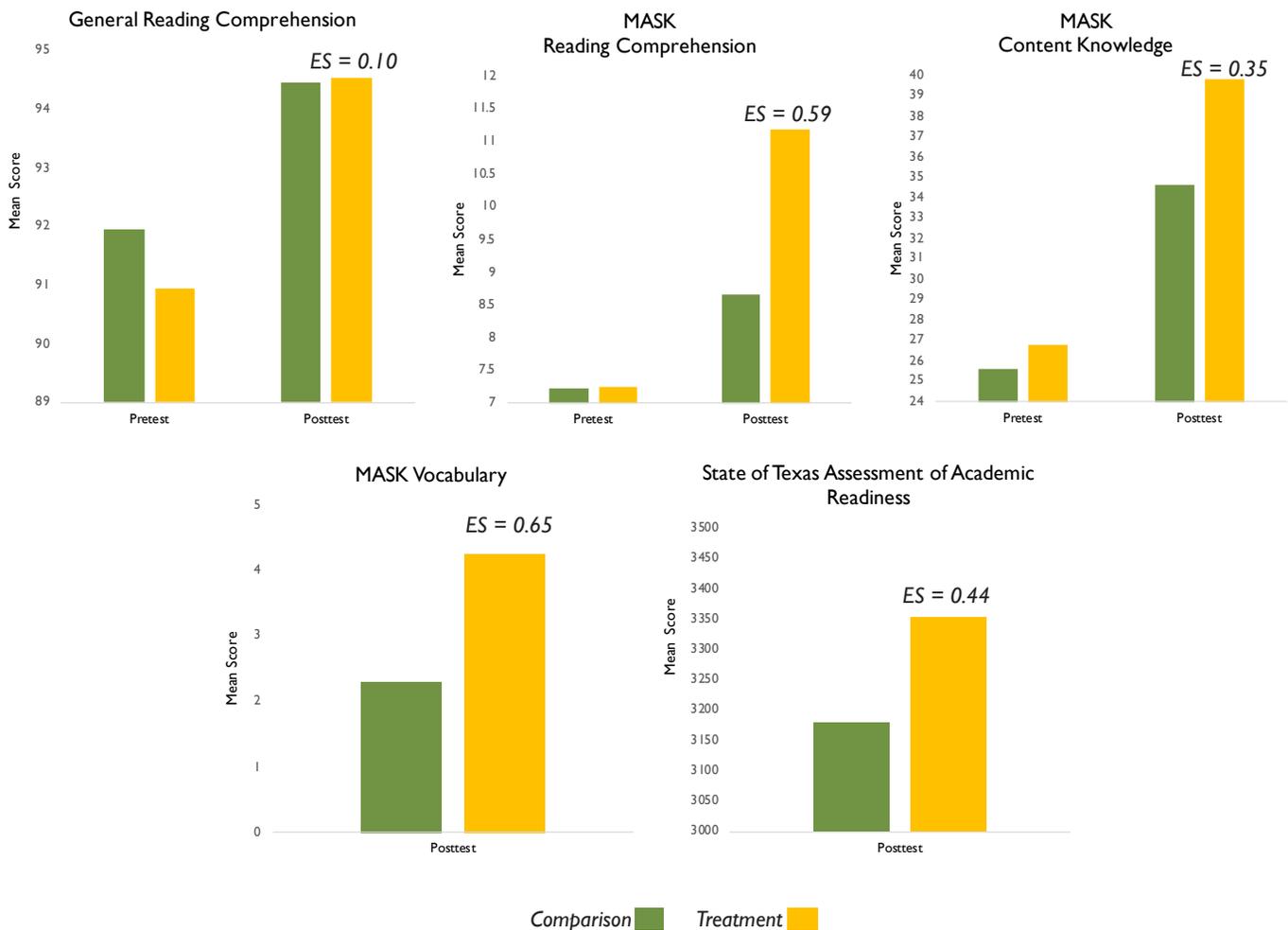
Before the school year, the PACT teacher attended a 6-hour refresher training on PACT and received coaching once per week throughout the school year. The year before, this teacher received 10 hours of PACT professional development, taught the PACT intervention for 30 days, and received coaching support.

To assess students' academic performance, the research team administered the following assessments before and after treatment:

- Gates-MacGinitie Reading Comprehension Subtest: A standardized measure of general reading comprehension
- Modified Assessment of Social Studies Knowledge (MASK)—Reading Comprehension, Content Knowledge, and Vocabulary Subtests: A multiple-choice assessment of reading comprehension, content knowledge, and vocabulary
- State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness: An accountability assessment related to various content areas

Results

Students in the treatment condition scored higher than students in the comparison condition on measures of knowledge acquisition, content reading comprehension, and vocabulary recall. 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

- Reading content-specific text in each class while using comprehension practices can dramatically improve the reading comprehension of students over time.
- Teachers can significantly improve reading outcomes for students who struggle with reading at the Tier I level through PACT.
- Social studies can be an avenue for effective reading instruction for struggling readers.
- Schools can use PACT as universal Tier I instruction for social studies classrooms to meet the needs of struggling readers (this study), students with disabilities (Swanson et al., 2015), students without disabilities (Vaughn et al., 2013; 2015; 2017) and English learners (Wanzek et al., 2016).
- 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.
- Training time for a teacher to use PACT is only 1 professional development day.
- Students enjoy the team-learning components of PACT, which create a more interactive classroom.

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