

Improving Reading Comprehension and Social Studies Knowledge in Middle School

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Study Background and Purpose

Content area teachers in secondary schools focus on improving their students' overall subject area knowledge, but for students to access this knowledge, they must have strong reading comprehension skills. Teaching content knowledge while also teaching reading comprehension skills at the secondary level presents a unique challenge. What is the most efficient way to integrate comprehension instruction into content area classes without sacrificing instructional time?

Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text (PACT) uses the content within texts as the tool for instruction. This approach allows students to engage with the course content while building reading comprehension skills (Kintsch, 1974, 1998; Symons, Snyder, Cariglia-Bull, & Pressley, 1989; van den Broek, Young, Tzeng, & Linderholm, 1998).

The research team worked closely with 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

Design

In this randomized controlled trial, 419 students were randomly assigned to 12 participating teachers' social studies classes. Then, each teacher's classes were randomly assigned to either the treatment (PACT) or comparison (business as usual) condition. Across the 27 social studies classes, 16 were treatment classes and 11 were comparison classes. In both conditions, teachers taught the same social studies content. Only the PACT classes received the PACT instructional practices.

Students in the treatment classes received PACT instruction in three 10-day cycles aligned to the district curriculum map. In total, teachers implemented 30 sessions of the intervention, each taking 6 to 8 weeks. In the comparison classes, students worked at the same pace and received the same content using the district-approved curriculum (without PACT practices).

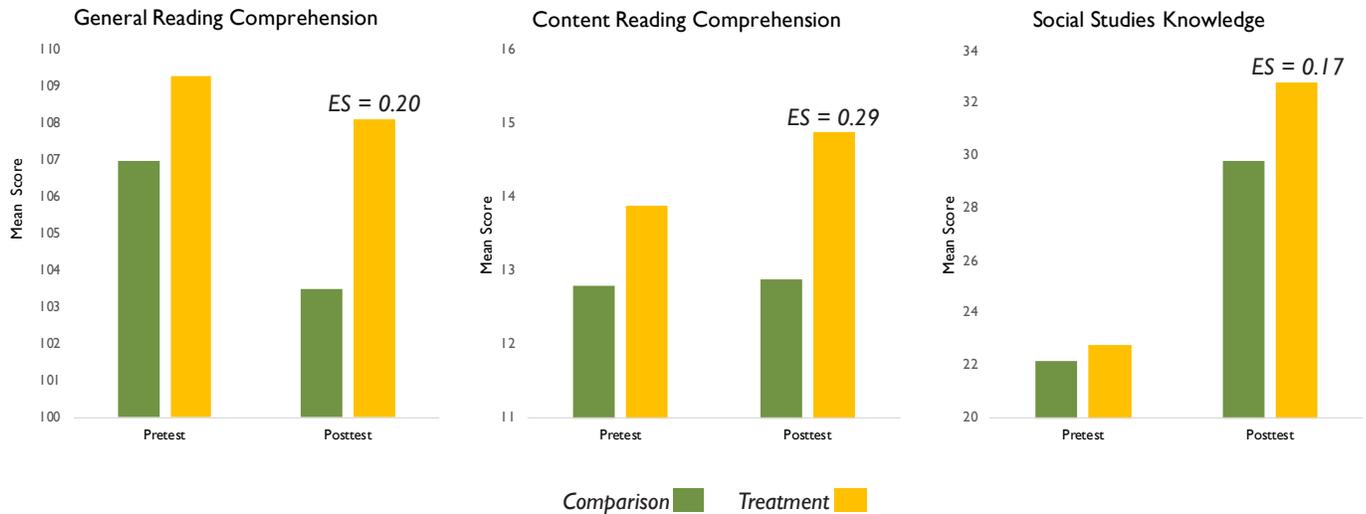
Measurement

Researchers measured students' general reading comprehension, social studies knowledge, and content reading comprehension.

Results

The PACT treatment group outperformed the comparison group on all three measures—general reading comprehension, content reading comprehension, and social studies knowledge. 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

- Classroom teachers can deliver reading comprehension instruction along with content instruction.
- Strong instruction in key vocabulary allows for greater understanding of content.
- PACT's team-based learning approaches increase student engagement.
- Using PACT is an effective way to meet the Common Core State Standards on comprehending expository texts.
- Teachers report that PACT is a feasible approach to implement in the classroom.
- Training time for a teacher to use PACT is only 6 to 8 hours.

References

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