

<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/pe.2023.16.02>

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Contact: malgorzata.slawinska@uwm.edu.pl**How to cite [jak cytować]:** Sławińska, M. (2023). Peer Learning As One of the Pathways to Educational Equity. *Podstawy Edukacji. Equal opportunities for all or fair chances to all in education*, 16, 13–24.

Peer Learning As One of the Pathways to Educational Equity

Abstract

This article discusses peer learning as a strategy that promotes equity in institutionalized education. Peer learning is a process where students learn from their peers during formal and informal interactions without significant intervention from the teacher. Three types of peer learning were discussed: peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and collaborative learning. The key elements of each type of peer learning were identified, and their role in equalizing educational opportunities was analyzed. In this context, peer learning promotes student participation and engagement, and it improves the academic performance of all students in a diverse classroom.

Keywords: peer learning; inclusive education; peer tutoring; cooperative learning; collaborative learning.

The concept and types of peer learning

Peer learning is a concept that is rarely encountered in Polish scientific literature. This approach has been defined in English-language studies as “the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher” (Boud, Cohen, Sampson, 1999), and it involves various types of educational practices in the social context. Students can enter into both formal and informal interactions, and

mutual help and support in the learning process come from participants who are not professional teachers (Topping, 2005). Formal peer learning strategies are intentionally introduced by teachers who divide students into groups and provide pedagogical instructions to promote group interaction and communication. Informal peer learning takes place when the learning process is initiated by students without the teacher's support and when groups and educational scenarios arise spontaneously. In peer learning, peers do not have to be the same age. Peers are students with the same social status, belong to the same peer group or classroom, and are not formal teachers or experts (Boud, 2013; Falchicov, 2001). Peers can have similar or different experiences but do not exercise formal authority over others by their position or responsibilities (Boud, 2013).

Peer learning is not a homogeneous concept. Based on the participants' characteristics and the goal and type of interactions, William Damon and Erin Phelps (1989) identified three main approaches to peer learning: peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and peer collaboration. Each approach has numerous variants. Peer tutoring usually involves one-on-one interactions between persons with different skill levels, where one participant acts as a tutor, and the other assumes the tutee role. In turn, cooperative learning and peer collaboration involve work in small groups of students who have similar competencies and shared goals. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in educational and research practice, Damon and Phelps distinguished between these modalities based on the degree of peer equality, reciprocity, and the extent to which the interactions between group members have a formal structure (Damon, Phelps, 1989). In cooperative learning, students usually work individually on a complex task assigned to a pair or a group of students. These interactions have a high potential for mutuality, depending on the applied cooperation method (work division and reward structure), and the learning environment is generally highly structured by the teacher. In turn, peer collaboration/collaborative learning involves group problem-solving, which requires coordinated effort and allows students greater freedom in choosing learning techniques. This form of peer learning can foster interactions that are high in mutuality, but the achievement of this goal is influenced by social and psychological factors (Topping, Buchs, Duran, van Keer, 2017; Dillenbourg, 1999). According to Theodore Panitz, both strategies are shaped by various mechanisms, but cooperative learning focuses more on the teacher, whereas collaborative learning focuses more on the student (Panitz, 1999). These observations suggest that the difference between these mutual peer learning approaches is elusive.

The original classification of peer learning strategies was proposed by Anna Izabela Brzezińska, who distinguished between learning FROM peers, learning with the HELP of peers, and learning TOGETHER with peers. Learning from peers occurs when the student works on the assigned task but can observe colleagues

working on the same task. Learning with the help of peers corresponds to the peer tutoring concept described by Damon and Phelps, where a peer who is more skilled or experienced in a given topic acts as a tutor, a guide, and a helper. Tutors and tutees can swap roles depending on the type of skills required in the task and the areas in which they have expertise. Learning together with peers is similar to cooperative and collaborative learning in the classification proposed by Damon and Phelps. Students learn with peers by working on a task in small teams. Examples of this peer learning strategy include doing homework and preparing for academic olympiads, tests, or mock exams (Brzezińska, Jabłoński, Ziółkowska, 2014).

Researchers rely on various theories to identify the processes that occur during peer learning. However, the mechanisms underpinning peer learning are usually described using the classical theories of cognitive development proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky (and their respective followers). These theories represent a constructivist approach to teaching/learning, where the main emphasis is on learning through discovery, and knowledge acquisition is regarded as a social activity (De Lisi, Golbeck, 1999). Piaget and Vygotsky also recognized that peers mediate the learning process. Piaget emphasized the significance of cooperative social exchange between partners with similar competence levels. In contrast, Vygotsky accentuated the importance of interactions with more competent partners (as cited in Topping et al., 2017).

Different students – different teaching/learning strategies

Teachers face the challenge of working with students from different environments and cultural backgrounds and with different dispositional traits, capabilities, and learning styles. The awareness that diversity in the classroom is an indispensable and fundamental part of the teaching/learning process is the pillar of the Diversity Pedagogy Theory, which examines the relationship between culture, cognition, teaching, and learning. Teachers acquire cultural competence and become inclusive teachers by getting to know their students and assuming responsibility for fostering a supportive emotional, cultural, and learning environment in diverse classrooms (Sheets, 2009). The peer learning strategies discussed in this article can offer an alternative to conventional methods of organizing the teaching/learning process in the classroom, which are lecture-based, centred on the curriculum, involve frontal instruction, and where the teacher plays the dominant role. Traditional methods of instruction can be effective (Christodoulou, 2013; Abah, 2020; Schwerdt, Wuppermann, 2011; Leddo, Boddu, Krishnamurthy, Yuan, Chippala, 2017), but they generally attract criticism. Polish research on conventional methods of instruction in institutionalized education (Bałachowicz, 2009; Bochno, 2004; Dąbrowski, 2009; Klus-Stańska,

2000; Kalinowska, 2010; Sadoń-Osowiecka, 2009) revealed that these methods are ineffective or even harmful. According to Dorota Klus-Stańska, conventional teaching methods prevent students from manifesting their identity and achieving their full intellectual and social potential (Klus-Stańska, 2012). Given the current definition of inclusive education, schools should be reformed to respond positively to diverse student needs and recognize individual differences as factors that enhance the educational process rather than problems that need to be solved (Miles, Ainscow, 2011). According to Mel Ainscow, instead of pathologizing educational difficulties and treating them as problems that are inherently linked with the students, an inclusive educational system should offer more constructive approaches to dealing with diversity in the classroom and should promote strategies that encourage student presence, participation, and achievement, in particular among students who are at risk of marginalization, exclusion, and poor academic performance (Ainscow, 2005). Teachers who are familiar with peer learning strategies and are willing to apply them in practice can thus challenge traditional methods of instruction, at least in areas where these methods are particularly ineffective.

Peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and collaborative learning as inclusive practices

An educational system is inclusive when “students of all abilities learn together in the same classroom environment” (D’Addio, April, Endrizzi, Stipanovic, 2020, p. 12). According to Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir and Eddy Óskarsdóttir (2016, p. 4), inclusive education is a “process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion”. The discussed approaches to peer learning play a unique role in encouraging active student participation in educational processes and achieving educational goals, which, in addition to presence and acceptance, is the crucial prerequisite for inclusiveness in education (Council of Europe, 2021). This article analyzes how peer learning can improve the educational opportunities for all students in a formal setting.

As previously mentioned, peer tutoring occurs when a more competent peer tutor manages the interaction and teaches a less competent peer. This interaction resembles the traditional student/teacher relationship because knowledge or skills are not distributed equally between the participants. It appears that mutuality, one of the critical traits of peer learning, tends to be low in such interactions. However, a peer tutor assumes the teacher’s role only temporarily, and he or she does not have the experience, authority, or knowledge of a professional teacher. Therefore, the tutor’s status is closer to the tutee’s status due to similarities in age, level of cognitive and emotional development, language,

and experience, which provide a point of reference in the learning process. According to Brzezińska, due to significant differences in competence levels, a professional teacher may be less able to help a student in a way that does not limit the student's independence. A student is thus more likely to turn for assistance to a peer whose intellectual advantage is only somewhat more significant and often applies to a given problem or a narrow set of skills (Brzezińska, 2005). Students whom peers teach as part of a program developed by a professional teacher may experience discomfort because they find it difficult to follow the instructions given by a peer (rather than a competent adult) (Fisher, Frey, 2019). Researchers have reported such concerns, but most studies have shown that tutor/tutee relationships usually generate positive results and that both parties remain equal partners in the social and emotional domain, although they temporarily assume the roles of a teacher and a student (Good, Brophy, 1997; Topping, Ehly, 2009). The explanations provided by peers in the classroom may be easier to understand than those given by professional teachers, and the learning process is more personalized and, consequently, more effective (Topping et al., 2017). Tutees receive support from peer tutors who focus on the tutees' needs and provide specific instructions needed at a given moment. Therefore, peer tutoring promotes the participation and engagement of students who find it difficult to follow a professional teacher's lecture-based style of instruction and do not understand the task or its context. As a result, peer tutoring increases opportunities for success in selected areas of the learning process. Peer tutoring delivers apparent benefits for tutees but also creates cognitive and social challenges for tutors, enabling them to understand better and optimize their learning (Topping et al., 2017). During interactions with less competent peers, tutors who are well prepared for their role restructure the existing knowledge through reorganization (Topping, Ehly, 2009; Galbraith, Winterbottom, 2011) and improve their metacognition (Galbraith, Winterbottom, 2011; Roscoe, Chi, 2004; Hill, Greive, 2011).

The fact that peer tutors and tutees can swap roles (although not in all programs) has significant implications for improving educational equity. Reciprocal tutoring is an attractive option for the participants due to its novelty, and the realization that every student can assume a tutor's role boosts self-esteem (Topping, 1996). Review articles have demonstrated that peer tutoring is also effective in improving academic performance and social skills, including in students with disabilities and at risk of disability, students with learning and behavioural problems, minority students who experience problems due to their ethnic or racial background, and students in complex social situations at different levels of education and various types of schools (Utley, Mortweet, Greenwood, 1997; Bowman-Perrott, Davis, Vannest, Williams, 2013; Leung, 2015; Moeyaert, Klingbeil, Rodabaugh, Turan, 2021). During regular interventions, non-disabled students who tutor disabled students can also develop empathic communication

skills, change their negative perceptions of disability and overcome prejudices, which can significantly improve their social relationships in the future (Johnson, 2016). In addition, high-needs and at-risk students rely on the tutor's support and can become tutors themselves (Osguthorpe, Scruggs, 1986; Spencer, Balboni, 2003; Shamir, Lazerovitz, 2007). Peer tutoring does not always produce the anticipated results. Its effectiveness can be undermined when the partners are not well matched in age, personality traits, level of competence, social bonds (Topping, 2009), or the type of performed tasks (Tudge, Rogoff, 1995).

Cooperative and collaborative learning are even more equitable because they are based on the fundamental assumption that the participants are equal (Topping et al., 2017). According to Robert E. Slavin, "all cooperative learning methods share the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own" (2016, p. 396). All cooperative learning methods have three standard components: team rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success. By applying cooperative learning techniques, students working in groups win certificates and team rewards if they achieve above a designated criterion. Individual accountability implies that team success is determined by the contributions made by each team member. To achieve success, team members explain concepts to one another, help one another practice, and make sure that all team members have studied independently and are ready for the test that will be taken without teammate help. Equal opportunities for success imply that students contribute to their teams by improving their past performance. As a result, high, average, and low achievers are equally motivated to do their best, which ensures that the contributions made by all team members will be valued (Slavin, 2016).

Cooperative learning requires personal involvement, positive relationships between group members, and the ability to build individual competencies which determine a team's success. Cooperation is valuable in itself because it is not only a way to learn (learning through cooperation) but also a part of the content to be learned (learning to cooperate) (Jacobs, 2004). According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2017), cooperative learning in groups promotes empathy, honesty, and support for other group members, which builds social bonds and satisfactory relationships based on cooperation. A literature review indicates that cooperative learning is more effective than competitive and individualistic learning at all levels of education (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, Skon, 1981; Johnson, Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, 2002). Cooperative learning enhances motivation, socialization, and personal development and builds positive peer relations (Roseth, Johnson, Johnson, 2008). This learning approach also benefits students with difficulties (McMaster, Fuchs, 2002).

Collaborative learning is a similar category of group interactions. According to Jeff Golub (1988), the main feature of collaborative learning is the task struc-

ture that enables students to talk because much of the learning occurs during student talk. Students are more likely to reflect on and explore new ideas when they are not directly supervised by a professional teacher (Boud et al., 1999). The teacher's role is to divide students into groups so that all students have equal opportunities to participate and achieve success. Group learning should be organized to ensure students with lower academic achievement can present their potential (McAuliffe, Dembo, 1994). Some structured collaborative learning programs create such opportunities, including Aronson's jigsaw technique (1978), which places considerable emphasis on cooperation and shared responsibility of all group members. To address and support diversity in the classroom, the teacher should adapt the educational program, type of classroom activities, the classroom setting, teaching materials, and the applied assessment techniques and procedures to the student's potential and perspectives resulting from racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity (Gay, Kirkland, 2003).

Both cooperative and collaborative learning contribute to a democratic school culture. Students who collaborate learn to recognize different points of view and are more likely to undertake negotiations and resolve conflict as they work within diverse contexts. Developing interpersonal relationships in cooperative classrooms increases student participation and engagement and decreases exclusion (Ferguson-Patric, 2012). Similarly to tutoring, cooperative learning and collaborative learning have limitations – cooperation involves more than students working together in groups. The teacher should skillfully divide students into groups and structure the interactions between group participants to stimulate real-world cooperation (Topping et al., 2017).

Conclusions

Peer learning is not an isolated practice but a set of strategies that promote learning through peer interaction. Although all types of peer learning have weaknesses and do not always bring the expected results, research indicates that peer learning promotes equity in education. Peer learning minimizes the superior role of the teacher in the teaching/learning processes, increases student activity and engagement, and encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. Cooperative learning programs should be tailored to the student's potential and enable students to achieve their own, often diverse goals. Cooperative learning is also instrumental in building friendships and strong personal ties, improving the general classroom atmosphere. Teachers searching for the most effective and attractive teaching/learning methods can rely on peer learning to foster students' development and their own professional development.

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Rówieśnicze uczenie się jako jedna z dróg do równości w edukacji

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest prezentacja *peer learning* jako strategii wspierającej równościowe podejście w edukacji instytucjonalnej. *Peer learning* obejmuje procesy uczenia się rówieśników wzajemnie od siebie, w toku interakcji formalnych i nieformalnych, bez znaczącej interwencji nauczyciela. Omówiono w artykule trzy odmiany *peer learningu*: *peer tutoring*, *cooperative learning* i *collaborative learning*, wskazując na ich zasadnicze elementy i znaczenie dla wyrównywania szans edukacyjnych uczniów. Do najważniejszych atutów *peer learning* w tym zakresie należy poszerzanie partycypacji i zwiększanie zaangażowania oraz podnoszenie osiągnięć wszystkich uczniów w zróżnicowanej klasie.

Słowa kluczowe: rówieśnicze uczenie się; edukacja włączająca; tutoring rówieśniczy; uczenie się oparte na współpracy; współpraca.